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The Archeology and Ideological Stances of Narratives in English Language Teaching Research

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Abstract

English Language teachers have been engaging in narrative analysis and using restorying as a technique to unravel their own and their peers previously storied learning-to-teach experiences, concepts, and self-understandings for about two decades now. One of the goals of narrative research in English Language Teaching (ELT) is to increase understanding of central issues related to teaching and learning through the telling and retelling of teachers' stories. Narrative research inquires into narratives made by the chosen participants. It utilizes story-telling as a way of communicating participants' realities to a larger audience. Narrative researchers collect data about people's lives and construct meanings with the help of their experiences. It is a methodology in which the researcher attempts to present the meanings of personal stories and events. Narratives can be good tools to understanding an individual's experiences and help ELT researchers to obtain an "insider view" on the issues of learning and teaching of English. Stories told by a participant also provide a deeper understanding of the issues that arise in the relationship between the participant and the researcher. The aim of this paper is to explore the history and the ideological stances of narrative inquiry, and revisit the growing popularity of narrative approach to ELT researches. This article discusses types, characteristics and techniques of narrative research in ELT along with the potential challenges of using narratives in ELT researches.

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Narratives in Narrative Inquiry

English teacher education is amazingly linked with teachers' lives, and their narratives play integral role in narrative research design. Narratives serve as tools to study participants' lives in motion in narrative inquiry. Narratives and teacher education are pieces of the same cloth. This approach to research utilizes story-telling as a way of communicating the participants' realities to a larger audience. People live and lead storied lives. They tell stories of those lives. Researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experiences. Clandinin and Connelly in their book *Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (2000) state that narrative inquiry captures personal and human dimensions of experience over time, and takes account of relationship between individual experience and cultural context. In an article in 1990 Clandinin and Connelly argue that in narrative research designs, researchers describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people's lives, and write narratives of individual experiences. In this method of inquiry, researchers give emphasis "not only on individuals' experiences but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin and Rosiek 42-43). According to Creswell, "as a distinct form of qualitative research, a narrative typically focuses on studying a single person, gathering data through the collection of stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences for the individual" (502). For Gay, Mills and Airasian, narrative research is "the study of how different humans experience the world around them; it involves a methodology that allows people to tell the stories of their 'storied lives'" (13). The researcher typically focuses on the individual chosen and gathers data by collecting stories about the person's life. The researcher and participant then construct a written account, known as a narrative, about the individual's experiences. It is through this narrative that the researcher constructs meanings. Since narrative research is collaborative, it is important for the researcher and participant to establish a trusting and respectful relationship. Another way to think of narrative research is that the narrative is the story of the phenomenon being investigated, and narrative is also the method of inquiry being used by the researcher. One of the goals of narrative research in ELT is to increase understanding of central issues related to teaching and learning through the telling and retelling of teachers' stories.

Narratives in educational and ELT research occupy a central space these days. Narrative Inquiry is an old practice but we consider it as a novel method in English language teaching research. Narratives are effective tools to unpack individuals' experiences. The idea of narrative inquiry is that stories are collected from individuals as a means to understanding experiences as told by them. According to Ehrlich, Flexner, Carruth, and Hawkins, the term "narrative" comes from the verb "to narrate" or "to tell (as a story) in detail" (qtd. in Creswell 502). While using narratives in research, we systematically gather, analyze, and represent people's stories as told by them. Stories are the basic means to understand the world and effective ways of making the sense of peoples' experiences. We make inquiry into narratives in narrative research. Narrative researchers collect data about people's lives and construct meanings with the help of their experiences.

The Archeology and the Narrative Process

Although narrative inquiry "has a long intellectual history both in and out of education" (Connelly and Clandinin 2), the term "narrative inquiry" was first used in the educational research field by Connelly and Clandinin in an article published in *Educational Researcher* (1990). Narrative inquiry is the interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analyzing stories of life experiences (e.g., life histories, narrative interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies) and reporting that kind of research (Schwandt 204). Narrative research is the study of the lives of individuals as told through the stories of their experiences, including a discussion of the meaning of those experiences for the individual.

Connelly and Clandinin in an article *Narrative Inquiry* published in 2006 claim that the stages of narrative inquiry involve the field, texts on field experience, and the research text which incorporates the field and the texts and represents those issues of social significance that justify the research. We use narratives as methodological tools in ELT research in several ways. Usually, the researcher either collects (a) stories as data and seeks to understand underlying themes from the stories, or (b) descriptions of events through interviews, journal entries, documents, artifacts, and observations, and it is important that there is evidence of triangulation of data sources (Stephenson and Harold 156). The researcher then synthesizes the data into narratives or stories where the outcome is a co-constructed narrative between researcher and participants. Narrative analysis is a collaborative process in which the researcher and participants co-construct meaning throughout the research process. The narrative research process is, therefore, highly personal as it

requires a very close relationship between the researcher and the participant which needs to be mutually constructed and allows each voice to be equally heard. The major steps we follow while adopting a narrative design could be listed as follows:

1. Identify the purpose of the research study, and identify a phenomenon to explore.

   The purpose of the study is to explore challenges Nepalese female English teachers face in their professional development.

2. Identify an individual (self or other) or individuals who can help you learn about the phenomenon.

   Three female teachers of three different community schools in Kathmandu will be selected purposively, and interviewed with semi-structured questions. They have been teaching English at secondary level for ten years.

3. Develop initial narrative research questions.

   I will explore the factors that hinder their professional development activities. Purposively selected participants will be asked questions such as: Have you ever attended any teacher professional development training? Have you taken part in workshops and seminars? Have you taken part in any national or international conferences? As an English language teacher how do you feel yourself in teaching profession? How do you manage your personal and professional life? What type of difficulties, being a female teacher, do you face in classrooms, offices? What are the factors that hinder your professional life?

4. Consider the researcher's role (e.g., entry to the research site, reciprocity, and ethics) and obtain necessary permissions.

   The researcher should seek permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), as well as any other permission required by the school. In addition, the researcher must ask teachers to sign an informed consent form.

5. Identify research design and develop data collection methods.

   A narrative researcher will utilize a variety of narrative research data collection techniques, such as interviewing and examining written and nonwritten sources of data.

6. Collaborate with the research participant(s) to construct/co-construct the narrative and to validate the accuracy of the story.

To validate the accuracy of the story, narrative research necessitates a relationship between the researcher and the participants more akin to a close friendship. Establish a relationship between researcher and participant that is mutually constructed and characterized by an equality of voice. The researcher and teachers will collaboratively participate in restorying the narrative and then validating the final written account (restorying - a writing process that involves synthesizing story elements).

7. Write the narrative account.

   The narrative research process is a highly personal, intimate approach to educational research that demands a high degree of caring and sensitivity on the part of the researcher.

Collecting Narratives: Types of Narrative Research

Casey in *The New Narrative Research in Education* (1996) opines that narrative research subsumes multiple forms. Before planning to conduct, a researcher needs to consider what type of narrative study to conduct. Narrative research has been a central method for a variety of research practices. For individuals planning a narrative study, each type of narrative provides a structure for conducting the study and ready references for how to conduct the project that faculty, journal reviewers, and book publishers will recognize. For those reading narrative studies, it is less important to know what type of narrative is being used and more important to recognize the essential characteristics of the types (Creswell 503). Researchers collect narratives through different means. Some major forms through which we gather narratives are presented in table 1.

Table 1 Types of Narrative Research Design

Types of Narrative Research Design (qtd. in Creswell 504)		
Autobiographies	Personal documents	Autoethnographies
Biographies	Documents of life	Ethnopsychologies
Life writing	Life stories and life histories	Person-centered ethnographies
Personal accounts	Oral histories	Popular memories
Personal narratives	Ethnohistories	Latin American testimonios
Narrative interviews	Ethnobiographies	Polish memoirs

English Language teaching researchers need to consider the following five questions in determining the types of research they are carrying out. The questions are: Who writes or records the story? How much of a life is recorded and presented? Who provides the story? Is a theoretical lens being used? Can narrative forms be used?

Ideological Stances and the Key Characteristics

Methodological and theoretical innovations in second language (L2) narrative research have yielded helpful insights into L2 learning and teaching over the past four decades. Reissman in *Narrative Analysis* (1993) views that narrative research has drawn attention since the 1980s, but only really gathered momentum since the early 1990s. Over the past two decades, narrative inquiry has become a common research design in several different fields including education, sociology, anthropology, history, women's studies, sociolinguistics, etc. There is increasing use of narratives in teacher professional development, teacher research and English education in general. It is only in the last 20 years that there has been interest in narrative inquiry in English language learning (ELL).

Researchers using narrative inquiry in EFL describe the lives of individual participants, collect and tell stories about people's lives. Narrative inquiry is much more than telling of stories. It entails telling and retelling of stories. The conceptualization of narrative inquiry Connelly and Clandinin developed in the education research comes from a Deweyan (1938) notion that life is education. Their interest, then, is in "lived experience - that is, in lives and how they are lived" (Clandinin and Connelly xxii). The following are the key characteristics of narrative design:

1. Individual experiences

The researcher often studies a single individual. Narrative researchers capture the experiences of one or more individuals. In addition to the study of an individual, the researcher is most interested in exploring the experiences of that individual.

2. Chronology of the experiences

Revealing a participant's past as well as the present and future is central feature in narrative research (Creswell 508). Narrative researchers analyze and report a chronology of an individual's experiences. When researchers focus on understanding these experiences, they elicit information about a participant's past, present, and future. Chronology in narrative designs means that the researcher analyzes and writes about an individual life using a time sequence or chronology of events. For

example, in a study about a teacher's use of ICT tools in ELT classrooms, the researcher would include information about the teacher's introduction to ICT tools, types of ICT tools teachers are using at present, challenges of using those ICT tools, difficulties they come across while using those ICT tools and future goals and aspirations. The story reported by the researcher would include a discussion about the sequence of events for the teacher.

3. Collecting individual stories

Narrative researchers place emphasis on collecting the stories told to them by individuals or gathered from a wide variety of field texts. These accounts might arise during informal group conversations or from one-on-one interviews. A story in narrative research is a first-person oral telling or retelling of an individual. Restorying is used as a technique for constructing the narrative account

4. Restorying

According to Creswell, restorying is "the process in which the researcher gathers stories, analyzes them for key elements of the story (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene), and then rewrites the story to place it in a chronological sequence" (509). Individuals share stories about their experiences with researchers but without attention to the real-time order of events.

5. Coding for themes

Narrative researchers code the data of the stories into themes or categories. The identification of themes helps the inquirer to understand the complexity of the story and individual experiences. The researcher identifies five to seven themes as all qualitative researchers do. After telling and retelling of the story the researcher presents the themes in passages.

6. Context or setting

Context plays the integral role to interpret the stories. Narrative entails understanding of experiences. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. In restorying, the researcher incorporates the time, place, plot and scene of participants' experiences or stories. The setting refers to the place where a story physically occurs. The setting in narrative research includes friends, family, workplace, home, social organization or school.

7. Collaborating with participants

Clandinin and Connelly in their book *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (2000) opine that the collaborative in narrative inquiry involves the researcher and the participants in the negotiation of the final text. Collaboration involves negotiating relationships between the researcher and the participant to lessen the potential gap between the narrative told and the narrative reported. Clandinin and Connelly further state that the collaboration incorporates explaining the purpose of inquiry to the participant, negotiating transitions from gathering data to writing the story, and arranging ways to intermingle with participants in a study.

The narrative research process is similar to the construction of a biography. Narrative researchers do not have direct access to observational data but must rely on primary data sources (the participant's recollections) and secondary sources (e.g., written documents by the participant). The data in narrative research are usually collected through interviews and written exchanges. Narrative research places considerable emphasis on the collaborative construction of the written accounts of the narratives.

Narrative Inquiry in ELT

In English Language Teaching (ELT) research narrative inquiry has emerged as a method through which teacher's knowledge and experiences can be analyzed**.** Regarding narrative inquiry in ELT, the book *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (2000) by Clandinin and Connelly presents that teacher's knowledge is largely structured through stories and that the story is epistemologically the most authentic way to understand teaching from the teacher's point of view. Teacher education is inextricably linked to teachers' lives, and their knowledge and professional competence. They are two leaves of the same tree. So, narrative inquiry and teachers' lives are interlinked. The stories made by English teachers help us to know who they are and how they became English teachers. The credit to spread the practices of narratives in teacher education goes to Clandinin and Connelly who introduced the concept in their groundbreaking article *Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry* (1990). Narrative inquiry studies teachers' lives in motion. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) in their article note that through telling and retelling, living and reliving teachers' own stories, teachers' lived experiences, including their knowledge and practices in educational reforms, can be interpreted and understood narratively. Teachers are the main agents of education. They involve

in debate, deliberation, and decision about what and how to teach through different community of practices and professional development activities.

With the help of narrative research in education, we can understand issues related to teaching and learning through the telling and retelling of teachers' stories. Narrative inquiry provides ELT researchers with an opportunity to validate the practitioner's voice in these important political and educational debates. The aim of narrative inquiry in ELL is

> to explore the way in which people understand who they are and how they come to know and learn English; how to teach English and English literature; how to teach other people how to teach English; professional learning; and leadership perspectives and practices in ELL (Stephenson and Harold 156).

We use narrative inquiry in English language and teaching in many ways. Firstly, it can be used as a methodological approach when there is an interest and appreciation of people's storied lives and the chronological or temporal nature of events of experiences. Second, there is an interest in process and change over time. Third, there is an interest in the social dimension, the self, representations of the self, the concept of reflexivity, and an awareness that the researcher is also the narrator (Stephenson and Harold 2015).

Why Narratives in ELT?

Narrative inquiry has become popular in ELT research these days. Although narrative inquiry has become more widely used, it is also seen as controversial within the research community and has been criticized in relation to issues of subjectivity, reliability, validity, and generalizability. However, essentially qualitative research prefers different terms to those used in quantitative research such as trustworthiness, credibility, verisimilitude, and authenticity. These issues along with ethical considerations are now addressed (Stephenson and Harold 156).

Narratives of experience are an effective means to structure beliefs and practices of English language learners and educators into meaningful units and to make sense of the behaviour of others (Stephenson and Harold 156). Narrative researchers collect and describe the stories and write narratives of experiences. Hearing the voices and stories of individuals in the context of their own lives researchers get deeper insights about the social and cultural contexts found within the field of English Language Learning (ELL), English language teacher education, and leadership in ELL.

Researchers use narrative inquiry in ELT research to describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people's lives, and write narratives about those experiences and the meanings of those experiences for the individual (Connelly and Clandinin). These stories not only capture the experiences of individuals but also empower the individual participants by allowing them a more legitimate and authentic voice. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience that allows the complexities, challenges, and ambiguities of our individual and collective life experiences to be linked to experiential inquiry.

Narrative inquiries are useful when we have participants willing to tell their stories and researchers want to report their stories. Personal experiences are vital to construct meanings in educational research and ELT research in particular as narratives offers practical, specific insights. By conducting narrative studies, researchers establish a close bond with the participants. This may help to remove the misconception in the field of education that research is distinct from practice and has little direct application. Additionally, for participants in a study, sharing their stories may make them feel that their stories are important and that they are heard. When they tell a story, it helps them understand topics that they need to process (McEwan and Egan). Telling stories is a natural part of life, and all individuals have stories about their experiences to tell others. In this way, narrative research captures an everyday, normal form of data that is familiar to individuals. Narrative research is a form of qualitative research with strong ties to literature, and it provides a qualitative approach in which you can write in a persuasive, literary form. It focuses on the microanalytic picture—individual stories—rather than the broader picture of cultural norms, as in ethnography, or abstract theories (Creswell 502).

Narrative Research Techniques in ELT

Narrative researchers employ several data collection techniques including restorying, oral history, examination of photographs, memory boxes, and other artifacts, storytelling, letter writing, and autobiographical and biographical writing. An oral history may be obtained by the researcher during a structured interview schedule with predetermined questions (and hence with the researcher's agenda clearly stated) or through an open-ended approach in which the researcher asks participants to tell their own stories in their own ways (Gay, Mills and Airasian 360). Teachers can collect the materials apart from the obvious curriculum materials; they often include cards from former students, newspaper clippings, yearbooks, photographs, and audio- and videotapes of student performances (Gay, Mills and Airasian 360-361). Narrative

research engages participants in storytelling. Teachers, by nature, are master storytellers, and many will happily share stories about their experiences in school as "competent narrators of their lives. Letter writing (or email exchange) is another way to engage participants in writing about their lived experiences and to engage the narrative researcher and participant in a dialogue (Gay, Mills and Airasian 361). Autobiographical and biographical writing engage participant's autobiographical or biographical writing. Similarly, a researcher can utilize many other narrative data sources that will contribute to the construction of the written narrative. For this purpose, documents such as lesson plans, parent newsletters, and personal philosophy statements can be exploited.

Issues in Narrative Research: The Challenge for Researchers

Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research. Coffey in *The Ethnographic Self* (1999) discuses that the issue of subjectivity has been raised in the educational research literature. It has been controversial in research community and has been attacked for its lack of rigor in the collection, construction, and analysis of data. Narrative inquiry is not suitable when we have large number of participants to include. It is not suitable for investigators who seek an easy and unobstructed view of subjects' lives. The researcher has to collect extensive information about the participant in order to fully understand the context of that individual. Therefore the analysis may be extremely slow and subjective. In addition, anonymity may become an issue as some participants do not want their anonymity protected as they want their stories to be shared.

Conclusions

Narrative inquiry entails understanding of participants' experiences. "An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people's lives, both individual and social" (Clandinin and Connelly 20). Narrative inquiry can be used as a methodology to describe the personal stories of teachers. Narratives as methods in ELT research are gaining momentum these days. With the help of narratives told by the participants, individual researcher can access rich layers of information that provide a more in-depth understanding of the participants' points of view. In this research design researchers seek for ways to understand, and then present real-life experiences through the stories of the research participants. The narrative approach allows for a rich description of these experiences

and an exploration of the meanings that the participants derive from their experiences. Narrative inquiry amplifies voices that may have otherwise remained silent. The knowledge gained can offer the reader a deeper understanding of the subject material and extra insight to apply the stories to their own context. It is a methodology in which the researcher attempts to record the meanings of personal stories and events. This article has outlined some of the key characteristics, strengths, and limitations of narrative inquiry as a research method. It has also highlighted how it might contribute to the ELL context. English language teaching practitioners have acknowledged that narrative inquiry is a method in English education which helps to respond to the changing needs of ELT research, and a new form of knowledge production in the postmodern world.

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