When the Researched Becomes a Researcher in Narrative Inquiry
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Abstract
This paper explores the dynamics of conducting a narrative inquiry when the participant takes on the role of co-researcher. The study reported here is part of an ongoing life history research project investigating how foreign language learners can attain advanced levels of oral proficiency without studying or living in a target language environment. As a variation on the data collection procedures of conducting interviews from which stories are crafted, the researcher carrying out the larger study invited the participant to write his own English language learning history and take on the role of co-researcher. In this dual role, the “participant-researcher” wrote his language learning history, kept a journal in which he noted his reactions and insights regarding the writing and research process, and, through dialogue with the other researcher, engaged in co-constructing an interpretation of the data. In this paper the authors outline the background to the current project, describe the procedures they followed, and discuss the methodological issues they encountered when the researched became a co-researcher.

Introduction
This morning the front page of the English language edition of a leading Japanese newspaper was almost exclusively devoted to the coverage of two alarming events: the world’s latest natural disaster and its newest armed conflict. However, at the bottom of the page in the right hand corner was a small item announcing major changes to the layout and content of the newspaper—the stated aim being to better “inform and intrigue” readers. Interestingly, one of the proposed features which the editors felt would “intrigue” readers was a series of interviews with prominent public figures focusing on how they acquired their English language skills.

This anecdote does not so much highlight a growing interest among the general public in learning English as it draws attention to the wakening realization that there is value in knowing how successful learners have gone about doing it. Herein lies the essence of narrative inquiry in language learning. Having people tell their story of how they learned English cannot only reveal a number of helpful learning strategies but analysis of the story can provide insights into sociocultural and cognitive aspects of the language learning process. In this paper we take a look at the inner workings of the method of narrative inquiry by exploring what can happen when a language learner tells his story and at the same time assumes the role of researcher.

In order to investigate what happens when the researched becomes the researcher, we draw on a number of stories. First, we set the scene by telling the story of how the project came about and how it situates itself in the area of narrative inquiry. This is followed by an account of how we carried out the research. Then, we move to the central focus of this paper and tell a story that rarely gets told, i.e., what it is like to be a participant in a narrative inquiry. However, this story has a special twist because the participant is also a co-researcher, enabling us to consider how this affects the dynamics of the research situation.

Background
At the heart of any narrative inquiry is a story. Narrative inquiry involves eliciting and documenting human experience in the form of a story. While collecting or retelling a story is not research, it can become research when the story is interpreted from the perspective of a body of literature, and this process yields implications for practice, future research, and/or theory building (Murray, 2009). Within narrative inquiry, stories can take many forms; for example, biography, autobiography, oral history, life history, case study, and ethnography. We position the work we are doing here as life history research.

What distinguishes life history from other forms of narrative inquiry is not always immediately obvious. Nonetheless, life history research does have several defining
characteristics. In the first place, life histories tend to focus on a prolonged period in the life of the participant; whereas a narrative might explore an event at one point or period in time. Life histories do not necessarily explore all aspects of a person’s life as readers often hope a biography or autobiography will do; instead, life histories can concentrate on one aspect. For example, in this study we are interested in exploring how the narrator learned English as a foreign language. In addition, life history research explores the story in relation to the broader contexts of which the participant is a part; i.e., culture, family, school, religion, history, etc. (Cole & Knowles, 2001). When considered together these features can distinguish life histories from other forms of narrative inquiry.

The project reported on here is part of a larger, ongoing inquiry in which Garold has been collecting the stories of people who have learned to speak English without having studied or resided outside of their mother tongue milieu. The main study, which up until now has focussed on Japanese learning English in Japan, has employed the following methods and procedures:

1. Interview the participant;
2. Transcribe the interview and make a list of questions for a second interview;
3. Interview the participant a second time;
4. Configure the participant’s words from the interviews into a story;
5. Elicit the participant’s reaction to the story and incorporate the feedback; and
6. Carry out a thematic content analysis.

In order to prepare conference presentations and articles for publication, Garold asks a question of the data and then carries out a thematic trans-story analysis. This process has yielded papers exploring a number of areas in the field of language education, such as the learning strategies self-directed learners employ (Murray, 2003), the role of pop culture (Murray, 2008), and learners’ engagement in communities of practice (Murray, 2009). In one exception, a paper examining identity and motivation, a young Japanese woman, who was doing graduate work in language education, wrote her own story and took on the role of co-researcher (Murray & Kojima, 2007). In this case, the participant-researcher reveals how the offer to be a co-researcher changed her perceptions of the research context and enabled her to be more forthcoming in terms of the type and amount of information she provided. This particular project further explores the dynamics of a life history research context in which the participant becomes co-researcher, and this time elicits the story of someone learning English in a different linguistic and cultural context.

The current project

In order to be eligible to participate in the ongoing research project, there are two basic requirements. Learners must have attained high levels of oral proficiency and have done so in their home country. In other words, they must not have studied overseas or resided in geographical locations where English is used to carry out the business of everyday life. Reza, who learned English in Tehran, fulfilled both of these requirements. In fact, at the language education conference in Turkey where Reza and Garold met, Reza’s English language use prompted one attendee to ask him if he was from the United States, had studied there, or had been brought up there. Later, when Garold discovered that the answer to these questions was no, he invited Reza to participate as a co-researcher in a life history project.

Basically, Garold asked Reza to write how he had learnt English in Iran. In contrast to the methods and procedures of the main study, these are the steps we followed in carrying out this project as co-researchers:

1. Reza wrote his language learning history.
2. Garold did an initial thematic content analysis.
3. Garold asked Reza questions arising from this analysis.
4. Garold and Reza both did content analyses.
5. Reza sent Garold his analysis which Garold incorporated into his.
6. Garold sent Reza his analysis.
7. Reza sent Garold a further analysis in response.

After Reza wrote his story and Garold began an analysis, the procedures transformed into a dialogic process in which Reza and Garold carried out the analysis by exchanging ideas and providing feedback to each other via e-mail. At the time of the writing of this paper, the analysis is ongoing.

Methodological issues

As we carry out this project, we have been encountering several methodological issues.

No prescribed method

There is no one-way to do life history research (Cole & Knowles, 2001). In our case the first steps were obvious. Reza had to write his story. Then Garold read it and began a thematic content analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; for a detailed description of the steps followed see Murray, 2009). After Reza completed his initial analysis, we then exchanged these documents. With this exchange we opened up a dialogue; however, from this point on, the procedures were not so obvious. It seemed, that with each e-mail exchange, we were negotiating how we would proceed, feeling our way along. Perhaps this was in large measure due to the fact that, because we had only met briefly at the conference, we had not had time to fully establish the rapport deemed so essential in carrying out life history research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Janesick, 2000; Kouritzin, 2000).

Engaging in this process of dialogic analysis and negotiation of procedures requires a tolerance for ambiguity, a degree of trust in your co-researcher, and an awareness of the power issues that lie beneath the surface in any research situation. For Garold, there was the sense of proceeding cautiously. After all, through his analysis of the story, he was interpreting Reza’s life. What if Reza were to disagree or, worse yet, feel offended? A worst case scenario would be that Reza might not feel comfortable enough to say so if either were the case. Moreover, as the experienced life history researcher who initiated and guided the project, Garold was aware that he might have positioned himself as being in control, which could inhibit Reza from offering suggestions on procedures and other information beneficial to the study. Fortunately, we were able to discuss this issue, albeit by e-mail initially, which is not always the best means for discussing topics which could have emotional undercurrents. As it turned out, Reza did not feel pressured and felt that Garold’s version of the analysis provided a new perspective for him to consider.

A related issue is the emergent nature of the methodology and procedures. Because there is no recipe to follow, this can lead to a feeling of ambiguity. However, this sense of “making it up as you go along” may well characterize all life history projects. Commenting on the analysis phase, a seasoned life history researcher has this to say:

In many ways this is the truly creative part of the work. It entails brooding and reflecting upon mounds of data for long periods of time until it “makes sense” and “feels right,” and key ideas and themes flow from it. It is also the hardest process to describe: the standard technique is to read and make notes, leave and ponder, reread without notes, make new notes, match notes up, ponder, reread and so on.
(Plummer, 1983, p. 99)

While Plummer’s comments will no doubt resonate with established life history researchers, those who are new to this form of inquiry, and participant-researchers in particular, may not feel very reassured. Nonetheless, two things are clear—the process which Plummer describes will require a commitment in terms of time and a certain familiarity with academic literature.
Familiarity with the literature

When analyzing life histories, it is generally accepted that researchers have to start with the story, see what it tells them, and then go to the literature. Ideally, in order to participate fully in the analysis, the participant-researcher should be familiar with the literature—in this case—on language education and SLA. Most language learners will not have this knowledge. Therefore, this can potentially limit the number of people who can participate as co-researchers.

However, there are other aspects to this issue to consider. Discussing what he calls “folk pedagogy”, Bruner (1996) contends that we all have an understanding of how learning takes place or how we learn. In other words, there is the potential for all learners to bring insights or fresh perspectives to the interpretation of their language learning history. When, on the other hand, the co-researcher has a broad knowledge of the literature, as someone like Reza who is a doctoral candidate in applied linguistics would, he or she is almost certain to bring perspectives to bear on the analysis that the other researcher has not considered. In these instances, it is important for both researchers to keep an open mind and be prepared to explore what may well be a whole new body of literature. Working with someone coming from a different theoretical or research background can increase the likelihood of this kind of collaboration engendering a significant turning point in a researcher’s work. In life history research, when the researcher enters into a dialogue with the participant, regardless of the extent of his or her knowledge of the literature, there is the potential for a richer and co-constructed analysis.

Co-constructed story

A salient feature of life history research is that “as researchers we are participants in the creation of the data” (Tierney, 2000, p. 543). In the literature on narrative inquiry it is not uncommon to find references to the “co-constructed” nature of stories. Researchers carrying out narrative inquiries generally concur with Riessman (2008, p. 50) who writes that “through our presence, and by listening and questioning in particular ways, we critically shape the stories participants choose to tell”. While we agree with these comments, we feel the construction metaphor does not accurately capture the dynamic nature of the story-telling and may in fact do a disservice to narrative inquiry and researchers. In the first place, the idea of co-constructedness applies to stories in a variety of circumstances ranging from law courts to coffee shops. Riessman (2008, p. 31) makes this point by quoting psychologist Phillida Salmon who reminds us that “all narratives are, in a fundamental sense, co-constructed. The audience, whether physically present or not, exerts a crucial influence on what can and cannot be said, how things should be expressed, what can be taken for granted, what needs explaining, and so on”. Furthermore, the construction metaphor implies intentionality on the part of the life history researcher that is misleading. Rather than setting out to construct or create a story with the participant, it is the life history researcher's intention to listen to the story as it is told. Nonetheless, we are mindful of the researcher's influence and take heed when researchers like Brockmeier and Harré (2001) caution against the belief that there is a story waiting to be told “prior to the narrative process and absent from its analytical re-construction”. The lesson we draw is that life history researchers have to be mindful of their potential to shape the story that is being told and careful not to influence the participant's narration any more than can be helped.

To illustrate this point, in this study Reza wrote his story and sent to Garold in three parts over a period of six weeks. As soon as Garold got the first part, he began to analyse it and made a list of questions. However, Garold had to be careful to keep his questions and comments to himself until Reza had finished his story; otherwise, he would have risked influencing what Reza wrote. As it was, Reza’s reflection on Garold’s questions and his engagement with the literature during the analysis process changed his understanding of his story.
Reflecting on the experience of writing his language learning history, Reza had this to say:

There are times you feel, after you review the literature, that this was also what you did; or, that you have missed out on telling something, so you might go back to the story and add something. Some might think you are now adding things to impress people or fit the theory, but that is not true. Apart from the ethical issues which prohibit you from doing so, then it is not your story. This is not a fiction. The researcher could ask questions and the researched answers them. That’s what happens.

Reza’s comments provide an example of Brockmeier and Harré’s (2001) concept of analytical re-construction, i.e., that through the analysis process the story changes shape. However, Reza is not suggesting that the original story is less valid or true, rather he is illustrating how engagement as a co-researcher enables the narrator to recount what might be viewed as a more complete story. Reviewing the literature after he had written the story helped REZA recognize or recall aspects of his story that had not immediately come to mind. This phenomenon is not uncommon in autobiographical writing. Freeman and Brockmeier (2001) discuss how the vantage point of the present enables the narrator to confer meaning on an event that he or she would not have been aware of at the time of its occurrence. They cite Weintraub (1975, p. 826) who concludes “it is thus with all historical understanding”. As Reza points out, this is not fictionalizing the story, but rather rounding it out. He also suggests that this process can be facilitated by the researcher asking questions.

While the researcher’s thinking can reshape the story once it has been told, perhaps the researcher’s influence is more strongly felt before and during the telling. Commenting on this aspect of the experience, Reza wrote,

Garold provided me with guidelines, but I never felt it was bossed around. I never felt I was doing something I disliked or thought I should be doing differently. Several times I was asked whether I should be doing things differently. At first, when I wanted to write the story, I thought I should be doing it perfectly, but Garold reminded me that “perfection was the enemy of good”.

Participants will often want guidelines. For example, in telling any story it is often difficult to know where to begin. Similarly, like Reza, as they are telling the story, participants may seek direction, affirmation, confirmation, or even validation. For his part, Garold felt that, by holding back so as not to influence the story being told, he might be depriving Reza of the support or encouragement he needed as he told his story. The researcher also has a responsibility to support and encourage the narrator.

Here again, the metaphor of co-construction, which has a slightly negative nuance through its association to fabrication, may do a disservice to both the researcher and the participant. Should the researcher be overly cautious, this can create a distance between the researcher and the participant, thus inhibiting the role of the researcher as one who can offer affirmation and validation. Through the process of eliciting the story, the researcher has a positive role to play. Were it not for the act of elicitation on the part of the researcher, the story might never be told. Secondly, it is possible that no importance would be attributed to the story. In this sense, the researcher can affirm and validate the participant’s experience. As Kouritzin (2000) points out, being listened to and listening to oneself tell one’s story can be a positive and possibly transforming experience. By listening, probing at appropriate times to express interest or to enhance his or her understanding, and by inviting the participant to jointly engage in the research process, the researcher can both validate the participant’s experience and facilitate the emergence of a more complete story.
Disclosure

When researchers ask participants how they learned English, they might have a tendency to think that the question is fairly innocuous. They might reasonably expect an answer in the form of a list of learning activities and strategies within a chronological frame. In fact, the response can be quite surprising. People often open up, share emotions, and reveal things they might find embarrassing to see in print later.

In a written reflection on the experience of documenting his language learning history, Reza had this to say about disclosure:

There were really times I felt I should not be saying anything, believing I would be ridiculing either myself or even those who are or were related to me but then I thought that I was doing a research and that I should be sharing my fears as a learner with those who are going to read my story and at the same time talk about the underlying aspects of my language learning.

The whole research and story-telling was emergent and made me feel I needed to share more of my learning with the readers. Besides, I had this ambivalent feeling of working as a co-researcher, so any time I wished to reserve an argument, my co-researcher aspect seemed to be trying to build a rapport with the participant Reza, encouraging him to open up. Of course, there were times Reza the researched wished to keep things to himself and no matter how hard Reza the researcher tried to get deeper into things, he was unsuccessful.

There are several points which arise from these comments. In the first place, there is sense of self-protection which requires the participant to hold back. Secondly, Reza suggests that what he is holding back has deep-seated emotional ties. He speaks of “sharing his fears”. Thirdly, Reza indicates that he has a sense of responsibility toward his audience, confirming the earlier discussion of the role of the audience, even though absent, in the telling of the story, and suggesting the presence of what Bruner (2001) calls a “narratorial consciousness”. Reza’s subsequent comments suggest that taking on the role of researcher invoked this consciousness.

Furthermore, he implies that this narratorial consciousness, which includes his sense of responsibility to share pertinent aspects of his experience with the audience, was enhanced by the emergent methodology and the part he played in the process as participant turned researcher.

Perhaps more salient than evidence of his narratorial consciousness is the inner discussion engendered by taking on the dual identities of participant and researcher. While increased awareness of the researcher/subject duality has given rise to discussions of intersubjectivity in the research literature, Reza seems to be experiencing intrasubjectivity as the dual identities of participant and researcher exert their influence over the decisions he needs to make concerning disclosure. He concludes his comments by admitting that it was Reza the Participant, governed by the need for self-protection, who won out in the end.

For researchers there are three points to take note of in this discussion. First, there is the reminder that stories are partial. People do not reveal all. Secondly, as researchers we need to create an atmosphere from the outset in which participants feel comfortable to open up. Kouritzin (2000, p. 19) says that “the relationship between the researcher and researched in life histories is intimate”. While on the surface the use of the word “intimate” may seem to overstate the case, research reports show there is a tendency for participants to reveal highly personal and emotional aspects of their experience. Thirdly, when participants do open up, researchers need to take every possible precaution to protect their privacy and vulnerability. In this case, there is the suggestion that engaging as a researcher led the participant to be more forthcoming that he otherwise might have been.
Exploration of self

When participants are forthcoming and share private aspects of their experience, such as emotions, and especially fears, they are providing researchers with glimpses of the self. This suggests that the methodology of life history research is well-suited for the exploration of issues pertaining to identity and self. Recently, in the field of applied linguistics and more specifically language education there has been an expanding interest in these issues. For example, Dörnyei has proposed the L2 Motivational Self System (2009), Van Lier (2004) has called for an ecological approach which implicates an exploration of the self in relation to the environment. Diane Larsen-Freeman’s (2008) suggestion that learners and learning be studied from the perspective of complexity theory implies documenting the self across time and the changes that are incurred. These lines of inquiry require methods that are well-suited to the study of self.

The American cognitive psychologist, Jerome Bruner and other scholars tell us that the self is constructed through narrative. Bruner writes, “It is through narrative that we create and re-create our selfhood…self is a product of our telling and not some essence to be delved for in the recesses of subjectivity” (Bruner, 2002, p. 86). If we accept Bruner’s argument, it seems reasonable to assume that in the stories we elicit from others there will be traces of their sense of self. In his narrative, Reza reveals aspects of his self and the changes it underwent as he traces his language learning trajectory from a point at the end of grade ten, when he had failed an important English examination, to the present day in which he is a competent English-speaker. In this case, narrative inquiry has demonstrated that it can be a way of documenting change over time as well as the relationship of the learner to the environment, which also changes over time.

Participant’s commitment

Before we conclude there is one more methodological caveat that needs to be addressed, and that is the relationship of the participant-researcher to the work. Writing about the experience, Reza said, “This type of research is worth doing. Although when I embarked on this project, it did not seem to me to be very worthwhile to the addressees, as I was going through, I felt it was.” One of the longstanding issues of life history research is that people have difficulty seeing its value and narrative researchers do not “promise immediate practical benefits” (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Reza would question whether this type of research was worth doing and what the benefits might be for the participants.

For learners agreeing to participate in a life history project, the benefits are not always obvious at the outset. This form of inquiry is very time consuming under any circumstances, and engaging as a participant-researcher makes it more so. Writing a language learning history takes a lot of time and effort. Once the story is written, the analysis process starts. Analysis involves not only the time necessary to code and categorize the data, but the search for patterns and theme requires careful consideration. As Plummer (1983) suggests, pondering over the data takes time. Researchers need time to think. In addition, analysis will require returning to the literature, as researchers seek to clarify their understanding. Why would anyone be willing to undertake a project of this scope? In Reza’s case, he has been a language learner and educator for most of his life. As a tertiary level instructor currently doing graduate work, he has an interest in practice, theory and research. For individuals to engage in narrative inquiries as participant-researchers, there have to be perceivable benefits; otherwise, not many will be willing to make the commitment required of a participant-researcher.

The study we have been doing suggests that the benefits of embarking on a research project both as a participant and a researcher can be three-fold. Firstly, the experience enables the participant-researcher to focus on what he or she has been through while trying to learn a language. As researcher, the learner is now trying to carry out an in-depth analysis of his or her own language learning—which he or she may previously neglected to do. This could help elucidate the hidden or “dark points” of one’s language learning. The insights which this process yields can enhance the participant-researcher’s understanding of self as a language learner, and,
as Kouritzin (2000) suggests, perhaps even lead to a transformative experience. Another upside of this combined role is that one could receive feedback on the language learning process from different people. Normally, people do not share their language learning history with others and, if they do, they might not be able to do so with experts. However, in this case the story can be shared with a large audience possessing a range of expertise. Finally, if participant-researchers are language educators, there is the additional benefit that this experience could serve to refresh their knowledge of the field by requiring them to become familiar a wide body of literature as they look for commonalities with the extant models of language learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what have we learned so far from doing this narrative inquiry, in which the participant became the researcher? First of all, for participants, writing their story and later engaging in the analysis process can be demanding and time consuming; therefore, there has to be some perceivable benefit for them. For researchers, when participant-researchers have knowledge of the academic literature, there is the potential for an expanded range of insights. On the other hand, most learners will not be familiar with this literature. Secondly, methods and procedures are emergent which makes space for creativity and innovation. In this study the participant-researcher reported that the emergent state of the study seemed to reinforce and support his storytelling, encouraging him to be more forthcoming with information. However, emergence involves a form of negotiation of methods and procedures which can be messy and fraught with communication problems. Researchers may need a high tolerance for ambiguity. Thirdly, when participants engage as researchers there is the possibility they will tell a more complete or fully-rounded story. On the other hand, there is the possibility of some inner discomfort for participant-researchers who may be caught between the two identities as they debate to what extent personal and private aspects of the experience should be revealed. Fourthly, there are going to be issues surrounding disclosure. However, this point applies to all forms of narrative inquiry whether the participant is a co-researcher or not. Given the intensely personal nature of narrative inquiry, it is understandable that there will be issues surrounding disclosure which will require vigilance and sensitivity on the part of the researcher at all phases of the project. Finally, this study has reaffirmed one of the main benefits of life history research—its potential to reveal aspects of the self in relation to the line of inquiry.

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