

Narrative Inquiry as a Viable Method in Language Teaching Research: A Short Analytical Study

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Abstract

This paper portrays my personal experience articulating narrative inquiry as a viable research approach to language pedagogy. It brings a personal nostalgia to the epistemic understanding of narrative inquiry. For this, I employed a qualitative research approach in my paper. For the successful accomplishment of the paper, I employed secondary sources; particularly data collected from research articles, books, dissertations, different websites and reports related to narrative research, etc. Within the qualitative continuum, I used the document analysis method and connected it with my own research experiences of using secondary sources of data in narrative research. More specifically, it explored how the research's paradigm was undergoing to bring the narratives as information to systematize the random experiences in research. In particular, this paper offers a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space as a way to explore the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of narrative inquiry. Furthermore, narrative inquiry research paves the way to understanding what researchers know and what they believed about their research practices. The core process of narrative research is to systematize its design and set its conceptual framework. The principal attraction of narrative as a method is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways. It shows that researchers must learn to assume possible research procedures linearly to address their actions and performance. Moreover, narrative inquiry as a method serves as a pioneering foundation to replicate human experiences and establish itself as a prior research method in educational research.

Keywords: narrative, inquiry, stories, teacher, teaching

Introduction

Prologue

My childhood began in a village. I was born into a Brahmin family. There was no high school for secondary education nearby. I was housed with two elder sisters with whom I used to go to school. We had to walk for about 2 hours every morning and evening. A small group of students would go to school together to pursue secondary education. I completed up to grade

eight from the very school. Fortunately, we migrated to a town called Itahari, flat land of Terai located in Sunsari district, in province no 1. I joined school there and completed my schooling. After five years, I graduated from the very town.

By that time, I had already collected the experience of teaching in a private school. I dreamed of earning my master's degree from Tribhuvan University. Then, I came to Kathmandu in 2009. I enrolled at the Department of English Education and completed my master's degree. I was supposed to update myself in different assets of my theoretical understanding for practical classroom teaching. Luckily, I got ample opportunities to teach in some of the private campuses in Kathmandu. As I was trying to theorize the dogma into praxis practically in my classroom, after a year, my passion for pursuing M. Phil evolved in my brain. As a result, I enrolled at Kathmandu University School of Education as an M. Phil practitioner in English Language Education (ELE). Then, I began exploring various educational horizons from different vantage points where I envisaged narrative inquiry as a powerful tool to review someone's ways of knowing in learning. In the course of my pursuit, I realized narrative inquiry had been put much attention to, which was considered a way to carry out research. I explored further and learnt that narrative inquiry was 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 (Ma & Ren, 2012). Therefore, I made narrative inquiry as a tool to accomplish the research.

Given the frame of narrative inquiry, I accomplished my M. Phil's dissertation and learnt that narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and social interaction with milieus (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry has been considered one of the viable methods to bring out human experiences in the form of a story. Traditionally, it was believed that research must be quantifiable and it should verify or falsify a body of knowledge. As time passed by, the definition of teaching, learning, pedagogy and research has been fairly changed. We have experienced a paradigm shift in our research methodology, materials management and pedagogies.

The prime purpose of the study is to analyze the practice of narrative inquiry as a research method in qualitative research under the interpretive research paradigm. More specifically, this paper aims at advocating how narrative inquiry was not just retelling the stories rather it was a tool to accomplish qualitative research. Besides that, this paper also tries to bridge the gap between the two contrary schools of thought and explore reality. One school of thought advocates that teachers' holistic development is possible only when they involve themselves in different teachers' developing strategies such as workshops, seminars, training, conferences and so on (Henningson-Yousif, & Aasen, 2015). The other schools of thought

especially Richards (2002) advocate that teachers' development can be achieved through narrative inquiry (teachers' stories) themselves. I also re-conceptualized the idea of what if teachers started exploring their stories. Being closer to Clandinin (2006) I denoted that, "Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p.23). Slowly and gradually, I geared down my research study and was destined to explore the possibilities of narrative inquiry in educational research. I envisaged how researching experiences of teachers could be replicated through their stories.

Background of the Study

We appreciate if narratives are constructed through the story schema and reflection. We bring innovation to our pedagogies by reflecting on ourselves. In doing so, we practice narrative research which has been a research methodology that is growing in acceptance and practice in such disciplines as nursing, medicine, and law, and especially organizational studies, therapy in health fields, social work, counselling, psychotherapy, and teaching (Clandinin, 2006, pp. xi-xii) to aware and educate teachers about the ways of doing their research (Ma & Ren, 2012) and to aware students in their learning.

Yet, how we reflect on and how we make sense of our experiences are often achieved through the stories we tell. The narrative has been constructed as a mode of thinking (Bruner, 1996), and is particularly valuable for representing the richness of human experience. Through narratives, human beings play an active role in constructing their own lives (Johnson & Golombek, 2002), attempting to explore a sense of experience via systematizing their experiences in a sequence (Sarbin, 1986) and by collecting the self as constituted as a story (Bakhtin, 1981). Thus, I began exploring much about narrative and forms of narrative. I learned various theoretical underpinnings and philosophical notions about narrative research.

Moreover, I learned how the research would be carried out systematically since my belief about research was narrowed. Then I learned different practical skills for conducting different types of research studies. I developed familiarity with research paradigms e.g., positivistic, non-positivistic and post-positivistic research, etc. I reshaped my understanding of qualitative, quantitative and mixed method approaches. I also revisited various practices of research and concluded that there were still several ways of researching and bridging the gaps.

I believe that inquiring is to explore the stories and inform other people, events and inventions happening around them. It helps us to reflect on human stories of experience. Clandinin and Connelly's (1990) claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms, who individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of stories, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. Therefore, I tried to analyze whether the narrative inquiry is just retelling the stories or a hands-on research

approach in research academia. To substantiate this ideology, I verified collecting various types of research on it.

For Webster and Mertova (2007), it is a new research approach to use stories of human experience in teaching and learning research since it occupies a central position in teacher education as both a method in and an object of inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Teachers' own experience with this approach is one of fascination and inquiry, offering manageable and holistic views of human complexity that seems to have escaped the burrowing and narrowing nature of other research traditions. Thus, the narrative is well-suited to addressing the complexities and subtleties of human experience in teaching and learning.

The teacher's narrative in the form of a vignette provides how teachers in different parts of the world have applied the activities in their classroom that they gained in their entire professional life. The teachers teach in the way they are not supposed to just because of the skills they have or have not learned. The teachers' self-esteem, passion, devotion, and dedication are the key success to lower down frustration and upgrading opportunities and aspirations because teachers' hope, desire and personal/professional background facilitate their students to be the best kind of teachers that they can be (Underhill, 1986). Furthermore, I am closer to Webster and Mertova, (2007) who mention that narrative inquiry is an almost interesting approach to exploring the hidden realities that people have. According to them, every teacher has his/her tales to share about the things that happen around their surroundings. Therefore, teachers' stories are very much crucial for us to explore their professional/pedagogical journey to contribute to the field. Furthermore, there are certain common places of narrative inquiry that Connelly (2000) mentions as temporality, sociality and places since narrative exploration focuses on all aspects of stories.

Therefore, stories help to make sense of, evaluate, and integrate the tensions inherent in experience: the past with the present, the fictional with real, official with unofficial, personal with the professional, and the canonical with different and unexpected stories help us transform the present and shape the future of our students and ourselves so that it will be richer or better than the past (Dyson & Genishi, 1994 as cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 1). In addition, novice teachers can get benefit from those stories for their pedagogical attainment. Teaching learning activities are largely affected by the activities that the teachers and students perform in their language classroom. In other words, it depends on the investment (Henningson-Yousif and Aasen, 2015) done by both students and teachers.

Research Methods and Materials

I employed a qualitative research approach in my paper. For the successful accomplishment of the paper, I employed secondary sources; particularly I collected data from

research articles, books, dissertations, different websites and reports related to narrative research, etc. Within the qualitative continuum, I used the document analysis method and connected it with my own research experiences of using secondary sources of data. To be true, document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. For Bowen (2009) it is a form of qualitative research in which documents are analyzed and interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning to an assessment topic. Analyzing documents incorporates coding content into themes similar to how focus groups or interview transcripts are analyzed. Corbin and Strauss (2008) believed that documents in qualitative research are analyzed, examined and interpreted to explore meaning, obtain understanding and develop empirical knowledge. Therefore, I coded all the possible data in a column. I revisited all of them frequently, examined them from different perspectives and thematized them to assure that all the collected information had specific nature and that they had been analyzed and interpreted accordingly.

Results and Discussion

Narrative inquiry is to bring teachers' way of knowing into professional conversations to transform the understanding of language teachers and language teaching. As we know teachers' professional development is an innovative concept in the field of ELT in Nepal which is more than having sound knowledge and skills in the subject matter in their profession. Therefore, it has been noted that narrative inquiry causes professional development via acquiring or adopting new knowledge, expertise, and skills to change their educational practice. We have practised several theories, philosophies and approaches, activities and trends but we have never thought of our stories. It means we have never realized the supremacy of narrative inquiry. Indeed, we should think of our way of research, pedagogy and professionalism.

I adopted this method to reveal a multiplicity of selves or personas as they went about their lives. By this, I tried to construct knowledge based upon (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) the three-dimensional spaces of narrative inquiry i.e., interaction (personal and social), continuity (past, present, and future) and situation (place). I envisioned how teachers earned their professional dignity and experiences personally and socially, how their past was, what their present is and what they are longing for and whether their work matters.

Gaining significant insights from literature, and a decade-long prior experience of mine, as an EFL teacher assisted me to conceptualize five themes to discuss the relevancy of narrative research under a qualitative approach in the present trend of teacher education in Nepal. The following themes have been discussed further; they are: a) Narrative inquiry is to create a new sense of meaning, b) narrative inquiry is to organize, articulate and communicate explicitly c) narrative inquiry as a process of making teachers' ways of knowing public, d) narrative inquiry as a viable research method, and e) narrative inquiry as a systematic

exploration. These five themes are not the panacea but they are considerable components in practising narrative research to develop teachers' research skills for personal and social growth.

Narrative Inquiry is to Create a New Sense of Meaning

Narrative inquiry in the field of educational research has been one of the pioneering platforms to create a new sense of meaning. Reflecting on my own experiences in the field of teacher education in Nepal I advocate that teachers' dominant method in research should be a narrative inquiry which paves the way for generating a new sense of meaning in research. It creates a strong avenue for teachers' personal and professional development. Lyons and Labosky (2002) argue that narrative inquiry should be extended and concerned to create a new sense of meaning. They further concluded that narrative inquiry has the power to convince the researcher and help participants collaborate their ideas in a real sense through their cooperative sharing. Therefore, it is a way to understand the research pattern, articulate the trend and rethink the real practices of narrative research. This review indicates that if research practitioners in educational research bring their sequential information in the form of research data it is more than retelling the stories because it inculcates various assets of our understanding that fundamentally assist us in energizing our research trend, and tradition and help us co-construct a new body of knowledge and make the research reflective through the stories we experience.

Narrative inquiry has been considered one of the paramount sources for bridging the research gap in education. The recent trend of teachers' education and teachers' research should have a narrative perspective which provides the platforms for professional development via workshops, conferences, seminars, teacher support groups, journal writing, teaching portfolio, etc. Thus, the teacher's narrative in the form of a vignette provides how teachers in different parts of the world have applied the activities in their classroom that they gained in their entire professional life. Teachers teach in a way they should not just because of the skills they have or have not learned. We appreciate the process teachers follow in their classroom because teachers' personal background, socio-cultural exposure, and their experiences are grounded in their professional lives. Thus, teachers' careers, their hopes and dreams, their opportunities and aspirations, or the frustration of these things- are essential in creating a new sense of meaning.

Narrative Inquiry is to Organize, Articulate and Communicate Explicitly

Narrative inquiry does not only explore what teachers know but also explores what they need to know and practice. Teachers have plenty of experiences and experiments such as organizational skills, conceptual articulation, and communicative skills. Richards (2002) states that narrative inquiry explores teachers' stories and shares their ways of teaching and learning. Therefore, the narrative researcher should learn how to systematize and organize different forms of information in the research study since the narrative research practice is concerned to

explore researchers' involvement in the feelings and experiences of the participants in a social context. Moreover, the narrative tradition claims that narrative is well suited to explore their understanding, attitudes, beliefs, and values towards their profession through research. Clandinin and Connelly, (2000) conclude that 'Understanding ourselves and our worlds narratively, our attention is turned to how we are engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving our lives within particular social and cultural plotlines' (p.165).

It is mandatory to have multiple perspectives on the stories collected from the participants to share and make meaning in theorizing multiple notions. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) claim that "the focus of the narrative inquiry is not only on individuals' experiences but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (p. 43). Focusing on the social, cultural and institutional narratives of the practitioners, it is replicated that every narrative research should be done in an organized manner articulating the practices of academia explicitly.

Narrative Inquiry as a Process of Making Teachers' ways of Knowing Public

Narrative inquiries help to make prior sense in educational research. It gives an explicit process to capture, describe, evaluate, and integrate the tensions inherent in experiences in the form of research. It has reconceptualized the process of research and has made an explicit landmark to represent teacher, teaching, research and education. It has not only objected to orthodox research but also explored researchers' way of knowing the public. It has been a stepping stone for many different narrative inquirers who believe 'narrative helps us transform the present and shape the future for our students and ourselves so that it will be richer or better than the past' (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, pp. 242–243). As a teacher when we contribute to academia to establish the system of meaning-making it is public, therefore, everyone gets the opportunity to learn. However, those multiple understandings are difficult to interpret as they depend on other systems of meaning (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). However, narrative researches help every researcher generate a reflective or self-understanding of 'the other' in context.

Thus, their views, attitudes, and perceptions are subjective phenomena. The available experiences and stories are interpreted in terms of subjective judgment. The researchers' 'data' about his/her agenda is interpreted by connecting with the knowledge, experiences and expertise of the participants. Substantiating Munro (2007) it can be asserted that researchers' ideology contributes to exploring a new body of knowledge and that the expansion and appearance of narrative exploration are grounded on professional interaction, together casually and in a further arrangement in a prescribed layout and styles that inspires affirmative meeting points on schooling activities. Bruner (1991) further highlights "A narrative is a conventional form, transmitted culturally and constrained by each individual's level of mastery and by his conglomerate of prosthetic devices, colleagues, and mentors" (p. 4). Thus, he concludes that we teachers store invaluable information in our repertoire in the form of narrative- stories, excuses,

myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on and we represent this through narrative inquiry explicitly.

Narrative Inquiry as a Viable Research Method

Every research work has to be materialized properly. Narrative inquiry has been considered a viable research method in the contemporary trend of research under the interpretive research paradigm. The significant entity of narrative inquiry is largely influenced by how we teach and reflect. In other words, we examine how we carry out research and how we authenticate it from our perspectives. 'Narrative inquiry approach is broadly used across many disciplines such as psychology (Bruner, 1990, 1993), religion (Crites, 1971), history (Carr, 1986)' (as cited in Pohl, 2013, p. 3). The self-reflection of narrative practice is a deliberate, intentional process engaging several people, generally colleagues, directed to interrogating their professional experiences to understand some aspects of teaching and learning.

In narrative research, the researcher thrives to claim to underpin knowledge deriving from the complexities and subtleties of human life. Thus, it amalgamates the researcher's point of view on the one hand and asserts the ways to eradicate research problems, on the other hand, by analyzing different truths (Riessman, 2008). Besides that, narrative inquiry very often crashes upon how that carried out study is to be attributed. People question many times about its' ethicality. However, it depends on how succinctly the researcher has carried out research. Teachers' stories of inquiry represent the journey of 'how' they know as well as 'what' they know about their own experiences as learners while learning a language. Similarly, teachers' stories of inquiry focus on their evolving beliefs, and practices as they journey through various contexts, crossing boundaries of different countries, cultures and roles. Teachers' stories of inquiry stem from participation in collaborative professional communities, which enables them to learn about themselves as teachers, their students, and the value of being a part of a community of teachers.

Narrative Inquiry as a Systematic Exploration

Research in the 21st century has been transformed. The methodological shift has invited the researcher to think about how narrative patterns could be effective to systematize human experiences. Anderson-Patton and Bass (2002) believe that we teachers want to be good teachers and also, we want our students to learn better. For this, we need to share our understanding, stories and experiences with our students. Being closer to Richards (2002) it can be claimed that narrative inquiry is a systematic exploration that is conducted by teachers and for teachers through their own stories and language. Our practices entail that narrative inquiry carried out individually or collectively, tells the stories of teachers' overall enrichment of their practices. Thus, researchers describe how they address very basic issues in teaching such as

using literature in the ESL classroom, giving feedback on writing, the sequencing of classroom activities, conducting classroom discussions, teaching a basic writing class, negotiating the students-teacher roles, understanding students' perceptions of learning and lesson planning, etc.

Therefore, a rich and powerful set of teachers' narratives proves to be a valuable resource for language teachers and teachers' educators. It is because teachers' narrative is highly personal, highly contextualized and highly motivating. Elliott (2005) found that narrative inquiry helped people connect those events and stories in a meaningful manner whilst accomplishing their research. It offered insights into the world and/ or people's experience in to it. I thought, rethought and linked their experiences through their sharing to their pedagogies and learnt that narrative inquiry asserted a rich framework through which we investigated the ways EFL practitioners did their research (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative inquiry envisioned those human beings both lived and told stories about their living (Clandinin, 2006) outlines a paradigmatic analysis of narrative shared and hinted at the prior narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1998) of my participants.

However, the chunk of informative literature I analyze here has provided me with a strong background for further clarification about how narrative inquiry serves as a method in the qualitative approach. The learners' inner desires for learning and teachers' classroom practices are significant for the holistic development of both teachers and students. Therefore, teachers' faith, the willingness of changes, motivation and encouragement and sometimes strictness are crucial in teaching and learning activities which can be replicated through their stories. The fundamental notion of educational research and its connection with narrative inquiry solicits a prior ground for research in a broader sense. More specifically, narrative inquiry disseminates how teachers' stories give an immense idea to solve their classroom issues. That's why the narrative inquiry assist us to interlink all of the experiences with pedagogical research.

Conclusion

The majority of the researchers in the interpretive paradigm use narrative inquiry as a viable approach to collect stories which promote learning. People learn different things even by sharing their common happenings and experiences. It also provides an ample opportunity to practice their stories and then builds a strong understanding which ultimately helps in making reflection better and learning meaningful. Narrative inquiry reveals what teachers know, and also allows teachers to explore what they do not know and which may be a great contribution to all the researches.

The teachers' narrative helps us to recall, rethink, and reconstruct our ways of knowing about language teachers and language teaching. When we view it from a socially situated perspective, we realize that teachers are not only the possessor of knowledge but they are also

its creators. In addition to this, what teachers know and how they use their knowledge in classrooms are highly interpretative and contingent on knowledge of self, students, curricula and setting. The teachers' learning is understood as normative and lifelong built on and through experience in a social context. Therefore, my observation is how we reflect on the experience and how we make sense of our experience are often achieved through the stories we tell.

To sum up, narrative helps us to re-innovate, reinvent and scaffold our understanding in general and research in particular. It helps every novice researcher to employ newness in their classroom because it advocates the three notions of learning i.e., recovery of meaning, reconstruction of meaning and re-conceptualization of research. Therefore, this paper concludes that the narrative inquiry and exploration of teachers' hidden stories are the practices of classroom teaching and they are part of our lives. However, this paper does not claim that narrative inquiry is a panacea for changing the practice of positivistic research completely into the narrative form but it is a huge effort and practice in the world to claim that narrative inquiry can be a food of thought in the spectrum of qualitative research continuum.

Moreover, narrative experiences enable teachers to describe the complexities of their practice and process contextualizing their context into classroom teaching. Thus, narrative inquiries do not only analyze for simple answers or solution but also theorizes about their work as they organize, articulate and communicate what they have come to understand and act upon their real-life situation. Therefore, narrative inquiry ensures the teachers' ways of doing and students' ways of knowing comfortably.

The complex process of research is to determine its design and set its conceptual framework. The insights obtained from narrative forms of research indicate that researchers must learn to assume possible research skeletons linearly to address their actions and performance. Moreover, the insights gained from this study can encourage teacher educators to be sensitive to the range of experiences and emotions the researchers confront as they move from being a student to a teacher.

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