

## INVESTIGATING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' NARRATIVES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESSES AT A BRAZILIAN UNIVERSITY: TENSIONS AND EXPECTATIONS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** The learning of a foreign language in Brazil poses several challenges to researchers interested in students' narratives and language learning processes. This paper analyzes how undergraduate Letters students describe their experiences as learners, starting with an overview of the theoretical standpoint of narrative studies. The methodological approach involved a qualitative study of 23 narratives by students from a Brazilian public university in Mato Grosso State. Research questions were the following: How do pre-service teachers describe their experiences as foreign language learners? In what ways these experiences influence their style of teaching? Analysis results show a negative impact on students' motivation as well as conflicting emotions regarding university language courses and their training as future English teachers.

Keywords: Narratives, Foreign language, undergraduate letters students.

## INVESTIGANDO NARRATIVAS DE ESTUDANTES DE GRADUAÇÃO E SEU PROCESSO DE APRENDIZAGEM DE LÍNGUAS EM UMA UNIVERSIDADE BRASILEIRA: TENSÕES E EXPECTATIVAS NA FORMAÇÃO DE PROFESSORES

**Resumo:** A aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira no Brasil coloca vários desafios para pesquisadores interessados em narrativas dos alunos e os processos de aprendizagem de línguas. Este artigo analisa como alunos da graduação do curso de Letras descrevem suas experiências como alunos, começando com uma visão geral do ponto de vista teórico dos estudos narrativos. A abordagem metodológica envolve um estudo qualitativo de 23 narrativas de estudantes de uma universidade pública brasileira em Mato Grosso. As questões de pesquisa foram as seguintes: Como os professores pré-serviço descrevem suas experiências como aprendizes de língua estrangeira? De que forma essas experiências pode influenciar o seu estilo de ensino? Os resultados da análise mostram um impacto negativo sobre a motivação dos alunos, bem como emoções conflitantes sobre cursos de línguas da universidade e sua formação como futuros professores de Inglês.

Palavras-chave: narrativas, língua estrangeira, letras estudantes de graduação.

### Introduction

Researchers have long shown there is good reason for concern about teacher education in our globalized society (ASSIS-PETERSON & SILVA, 2011, MELLO, 2004). These studies have taken in consideration how teacher education is accentuated by a hegemonic discourse that seeks to legitimize non-learning Foreign Language in Brazil. Thus, this mainstream view tends to be shown

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as naturally efficient Private Language Institute and how the learning of Language in public school is fragile.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the use of narratives as a research instrument and an approach to language teaching and learning in Brazil and throughout the world. Narrative research, according to Telles (2002), has been present in the North American educational context since the 1970s and 1980s. Telles (2002) claims that, due to its historical qualities and its potential to characterize human experience, narrative research is becoming growingly prominent in a number of different fields such as “the theory of literature, history, anthropology, theater, film, theology, philosophy, linguistics and education.”

Within the educational context, research carried out by Clandinin and Connelly (1990, 2000) have been benchmarks for a number of Brazilian studies (BARCELOS, 2006; MELLO, 2004; TELLES, 2002). Recently in Brazil, such growing interest could be seen in the project developed by Professor Vera Menezes de Oliveira Paiva<sup>2</sup> which involves researchers from several Brazilian and international universities, a project that brings together English language teacher narratives into a single database. Along the same lines, narrative research has also been gaining prominence in research on the training of foreign language teachers, focusing on their beliefs (VIEIRA-ABRAHÃO, 2002; SILVA, 2010), teacher training course syllabuses (MELLO, 2004), and language learning processes (LIMA, 2010; ROMERO, 2010).

In the field of teacher training, narrative research, according to Assis-Peterson & SILVA (2011), may provide tools to help pre-service teachers understand how their previous experiences may reflect their beliefs on what it means to be a teacher. Assis-Peterson & SILVA (2011) claim that pre-service teachers have already developed an understanding of what it means to be a good teacher and learner and have also internalized the type of teacher they would like to be. From this point of view, the present work is based on the assumption that the practical knowledge of pre-service teachers carries with it their own perceptions of the world, which originate in their sociocultural background (BORTONI-RICARDO, 2008).

This may be one of the reasons why some pre-service teachers fail to learn in teacher training courses: the confrontation of their personal past experiences with present reality. By investigating learners’ experiences, the present study aims to contribute with results which may help shape the different aspects of pre-service teachers’ learning in a more effective way.

In order to carry out this research, pre-service teachers’ narratives were analyzed based on the following question: How do pre-service teachers describe their experiences as foreign language learners at university?

To address this issue, the article is organized as follows. Firstly, it provides a brief outline of how narratives have been researched in English Language Teaching (ELT). Secondly, it describes the methodological approach, the context of the investigation, and data analysis. Finally, it offers a discussion on the data and the implications of understanding students’ narratives within their

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2 <<http://www.veramenezes.com/amfale.htm>>.

process of learning a foreign language in Brazil.

## 1. Narratives and ELT

According to Beattie (2000), narratives show the unique ways each of us deals with our dilemmas and challenges. They represent reference points on which we reflect our experiences and rebuild them based on new perceptions and experiences. Thus, we build up and give meaning to things by means of the stories we tell and share with others.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the term “experiences” is key to narrative research, especially so because narrating is not only a type of experience but also a form of writing and thinking about the experiences we have. To these authors, experience happens through narratives. However, narration would also be a means to understand experiences.

For Dewey (1938), who originally discussed experiences, teaching and learning are continuous processes of experience reconstruction. Experience is not a mental state, but the interaction and adaptation of individuals to their environment through the use of principles of continuity and interaction. The former deals with the link between past and future experiences, since learning is a reflection of the continuities we establish within our experience. The latter refers to the transaction between the individual and the environment. The principle of interaction, similarly to the principle of continuity, involves the reciprocal influence of all elements involved. In other words, when interacting with others and with the environment, the individual is not only moulding but is also being moulded by this interaction (ELDRIDGE, 1998).

This notion seems to be in tune with the field of foreign language teacher training. Johnson and Golombek (2002), for example, state that narrative research allows teachers to organize and articulate their knowledge and beliefs about teaching, thus revealing the experiences which guide their work. And so their narratives may expose their struggles, frustrations, successes, and failures as learners within their particular contexts and experiences.

Barcelos (2006) has also investigated the relationship between students’ learning experiences and beliefs about the best place to learn English through narratives. Her results reveal a dichotomy as regards studying English in a public school or in a private language school. The former is considered an unsuitable place in which to learn a foreign language, warranting negative accounts by students. The latter is seen as an environment which promotes effective foreign language learning. However, some learners have stated that, despite the adverse learning conditions found in public schools, they became more responsible as far as their learning process was concerned. Barcelos (2006) stresses the need for greater discussion about language learning in those scenarios.

Assis-Peterson and Silva (2011) carried out a qualitative study based on a teacher's narratives. Her accounts were filled with images of chairs, teachers, blackboards, and text-based translations, hence conveying a traditional setting. The participant attended meaningful classes at a teacher training course at university and in a private language course. However, as a public school teacher, she complained about her level of English, wishing she could speak it fluently in order to communicate with her students effectively. Findings suggest that, in broad terms, teachers require more suitable working conditions, and in strict terms, that their teaching skills

need to be improved.

Similarly, Mota (2010) carried out her research on narratives with the aim of critically interpreting an English teacher's process of learning a foreign language. The researcher pointed out categories which influenced teacher learning, such as family perception about foreign languages, school routine, and English teaching, as well as the importance of language learning strategies in foreign language learning. She concluded that personal narratives are incredible vehicles for the professional training and intercultural development of language teachers.

In summary, recent research in the field of ELT has shown that lived experiences can provide insights into rich and useful stories for educators. However, students who are interested in enrolling in teacher training programs often bear negative attitudes toward public schools in terms of learning and teaching a foreign language. This view minimizes the role of the school environment and does not take into account the possibility of reviewing language education policies in Brazil. The next section presents this study's theoretical-methodological perspective for working with narratives in the language classroom.

## **2. Interpretative research**

The interpretative research perspective was chosen due to its relativistic epistemological view of the subject, which does not overlook heterogeneity. This approach regards human language phenomena on constitutive cultural grounds. It also enables us to perceive the texture of meanings which are present in students' narratives in relation to their language learning processes.

This study is based on some of the principles of interpretative or naturalistic research, insofar as the natural context and the participants involved are relevant for understanding what happens at the moment interlocutors communicate. In other words, naturalistic research is committed to the study of recurrent activities in natural environments as opposed to activities handled by the researcher as an experiment.

Erickson (1986, 1990) uses the word "interpretative" because he considers it to be a more inclusive term than others like "ethnography", "case study", or "life history". It also prevents such approaches from being defined as essentially non-quantitative. The key point in this approach is the human significance of social life, as well as its elucidation and exposition to the researcher. From this standpoint, the interpretative approach has proved to be the most appropriate for studies which perceive reality not as a fact but as an interpretation of the speech of the various participants involved in the environment being investigated.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) state that research guided by this theoretical concept is a representation of written culture, a transformation of social events into inscriptions. Therefore, the present work is a description of the reading of events which will take place in students' narratives like a *bricoleur* (AGAR, 1996; DENZIN; LINCOLN, 1998). It gathers fragments of representations which fit the specificities of a complex sociocultural situation, forming an emerging interpretative construction which changes and incorporates new forms as the investigation progresses.

## 2.1 The context

The corpus consists of 23 narratives collected from English language undergraduates who attend a teacher training program at a public Brazilian university. Foreign language proficiency levels varied from basic to intermediate. Volunteers were asked to write their own learning narratives.

## 2.2 Data analysis

Narratives were analyzed according to naturalistic research parameters (ERICKSON, 1986, 1990). Firstly, the data was carefully read through and participants' narratives were then jotted down in short sentences, key ideas, and concepts; particular attention was given to the words actually used. Secondly, the data was codified according to significant units and to participants' statements on their language learning experiences. During this stage of analysis, several themes were grouped into different categories, which were repeatedly reviewed.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Frustration in English language learning

Data analysis revealed that the majority of students' narratives express a deep frustration with learning a foreign language in the school environment. Students admitted that the lack of results in second language acquisition led to lack of motivation, as can be seen in the following excerpts:

However, since the early years when I had contact with English at school, it also began frustrations about learning it. First, the teachers with whom I had English language lessons they didn't encourage students to study the language and taught mechanics classes, using only the textbook, so that English was taught only by repetitive writing exercises (Narrative 1).

Time passed and soon the teaching of English was becoming something quite boring. The verb "to be" looked like a torment. I have never understood its purpose. Not even the reason for its existence. All years always were the same in relation to English (Narrative 2).

I have contacted with English since I joined in the early grades and in high school, my literacy was given at a private institution where I studied from 1st to 4th grade and English as a foreign language in the curriculum. The teaching of foreign language was "symbolic", in other words, it was not meaningful, we learned some loose and decontextualized words. From the 5th grade, I started studying in a public school and the reality of teaching English had not changed, the teaching still being decontextualized until the end of high school (Narrative 3).

In the first excerpt, the pre-service teacher expresses his/her frustration with the school: "However, since the early years when I had contact with English at school, it also began frustrations about learning it". He/she suggests his/her language learning involved artificial and repetitive exercises solely based on textbooks, all of which had failed to provide the language

structures he/she needed. He/she claims that teachers had not supported his/her need to learn another language: "First, the teachers with whom I had English language lessons they didn't encourage students to study the language and taught mechanics classes, using only the textbook, so that English was taught only by repetitive writing exercises".

Unfortunately, the experience described by this student is far from unusual. The second narrative also refers to a negative environment for English language teaching represented by the focus on grammatical topic "to be": "The verb 'to be' looked like a torment. I have never understood its purpose". This type of teaching is based on sameness. There is no purpose to it and there are no chances of changing the school setting: "Not even the reason for its existence. All years always were the same in relation to English".

In the third excerpt, the participant also states that the school did not prepare him/her enough for developing his/her learning in a meaningful way. It is noteworthy, however, that such monotonous teaching can be found in private schools as well: "the teaching of foreign language was 'symbolic', in other words, it was not meaningful, we learned some loose and decontextualized words". Unlike findings presented in other studies (BARCELOS, 2006), here the public school is not the only place where foreign language teaching is ineffective. The participant concludes that there are no differences between ordinary public and private schools in relation to teaching English, and seriously questions the school's ability in that regard: "[...] I started studying in a public school and the reality of teaching English had not changed, the teaching still being decontextualized until the end of high school".

The narratives presented above can certainly help improve teacher education. Understanding the concepts involved is essential for critical teacher training.

## **Final remarks**

This paper presented narratives by English language undergraduates on their experiences as learners at university. The data covers 23 narratives and the analysis is grounded on the concepts of "experience" and "language learning narrative". Excerpts reveal that students' narratives attempted to capture their perceptions about their learning processes and the way these may impact on their teaching style. In each of these cases, there was a contradictory trend ranging from disappointments to positive experiences. Students described their frustration with English language teaching in Brazil, still largely focused on repetitive and artificial exercises.

Given that this interpretative research included only 23 narratives in the data analysis, it may be problematic to provide fully generalizable conclusions. This particular group of participants may not reflect other professional contexts. However, this research may provide some insights into my own practices as a language teacher. For instance, students' previous experiences as language learners should be taken into account, as well as their beliefs about learning and teaching and their frustrations. Failing to do so may be one of the reasons why many undergraduates fail their courses or feel insecure about their own learning of English.

Teacher training in Brazilian universities is, generally, strictly content-focused and disregarding of students' learning experiences. They probably do not even have much chance to

perceive language as a cultural experience. There is a great focus on linguistic competence rather than on learning awareness of an educational setting. This view of teaching seems to be so firmly rooted that it is very hard to oppose it. All components of curriculum design should be consistently reformulated to include a genuine appreciation of students' experiences. Without constant and appropriate discussions in ELT programmes, it will be difficult for future teachers to successfully deal with their students' cultural artifacts in the classroom.

This work indicates the importance of the study of narrative for language teacher education. The construction of a new narrative agenda can move our educational system to create necessary tensions in the hegemonic view about their learning in Brazil. In this sense, an educated critical view seems to be an effective instrument for creating a new experience inside our classroom, which is of great concern for teacher education.

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