REPORTS AND REFLECTIONS

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TESOL, Teacher Identity, and the Need for "Small Story" Research

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◼ A cursory scan of *TESOL Quarterly* abstracts from recent decades reveals a growing interest in matters of identity—a trend that is paralleled in other social science disciplines (sociology, psychology, anthropology, etc.). And because of the close connection between identity and narrative (e.g., Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2008; De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2007a), it is no coincidence that many of those same disciplines have been simultaneously characterized as taking a "narrative turn." However, with respect to narrative-and-identity, the field of TESOL seems to be lagging a bit behind. For many of us in the field of TESOL, *narrative* has traditionally referred to a written text type, or a type of task that induces learners to produce past-tense verb forms. In comparison with other disciplines, we have been slower to associate narratives, especially narratives of personal experience, with an analytic method, tool, or object of inquiry. However, a growing number of publications about language learning and language teacher education (e.g., Bell, 2002; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Pavlenko, 2002, 2007; Tsui, 2007) have discussed or employed *narrative inquiry* as a type of qualitative research. A striking number of these rely on written narratives. Some examples include Casanave and Schecter's (1997) volume on language teacher autobiographies (comprised of personal essays) and Johnson and Golombek's (2002) volume of language teachers' written accounts of their professional experiences. More recently, Tsui (2007) used narrative inquiry to examine how her participant Minfang's identity evolved from "marginal EFL student" to "model CLT teacher," (p. 671) and the complex processes associated with the formation of professional identity.

Nevertheless, narrative research in TESOL still remains very much in its infancy. And the predominant mode of narrative research in TESOL—following the trend in educational research, as well as in other social sciences—has clearly been that of narrative inquiry, with its concomitant privileging of autobiographical *big stories*, or researcher-elicited narratives. In contrast, narrative *analysis*, with its focus on the specific details of *small stories* (i.e., stories told in everyday conversational contexts) remains much rarer in the field. There is no question that narrative inquiry, by contributing new insights and perspectives, has enriched the collective understanding of language teaching and learning. However, it is my position that—especially if we wish to take seriously the study of *situated* social identities of language teachers and learners—the time has come for the field to also recognize and value the potential that sociolinguistic small story narrative analysis can contribute to TESOL.

In order to contextualize this argument, I begin by briefly presenting the "three waves" of sociolinguistic narrative research (Georgakopoulou, 2007b). I then review the current big story/small story debate in narrative research and explain the difference in perspectives between narrative inquiry and narrative analysis. Next, I draw on a handful of existing narrative small story studies of English as a second language (ESL)/English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers, as well as of teachers in other settings, in order to highlight the sorts of contributions that such an approach can make to the field. Finally, I conclude by summarizing what a small story approach to the study of narrative-and-identity would mean for TESOL.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC NARRATIVE RESEARCH

Georgakopoulou (2007b) described three waves of sociolinguistic approaches to the study of narrative. The first wave began with narratives elicited by sociolinguistic interviewers intending to study phonological variation (perhaps the most famous of these were narratives elicited using the "danger of death" technique, in which speakers were believed to become so involved in recounting a near-death experience that their language use became largely unmonitored). From this sociolinguistic work in the 1960s emerged Labov's classic structural criteria, which continue to be highly influential when it comes to defining narratives: That is, a narrative consists of an abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result, and coda. Research that followed in this vein examined these features of narratives, and the data analyzed were nearly always stories told during sociolinguistic interviews.

The second wave of narrative research continued using Labov's descriptive framework for identifying narratives, but the focus began to shift away from narratives produced during research interviews, to those that were told in everyday conversational contexts. Georgakopoulou described this shift as a move away from the study of "narrative as text" to the study of "narratives in context." However, Georgakopoulou pointed out that, because the types of narratives that researchers were examining still tended to meet the classic Labovian structural criteria, any narratives which deviated from these criteria were regarded as atypical, anomalous, or aberrant. Around this time, a special issue of the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* (Bamberg, 1997) revisited Labov and Waltezky's seminal (1967) work on narrative and addressed numerous issues related to this prevailing model of narrative. A few years later, Ochs and Capps' (2001) *Living Narrative* made a valuable contribution by underscoring that the canonical Labovian narrative is only one type of story and that narratives of personal experience, in fact, vary along a continuum on five dimensions: tellership, tellability, embeddedness, linearity, and moral stance. One of the most important points made by Ochs and Capps is that, in terms of these five dimensions, most of the stories that we tell as we go about our day-to-day business (communicating with friends, family, colleagues, etc.) look quite different from those narratives that get told in a research context.

The third wave of sociolinguistic narrative research, *narrative-and-identity*, has come to fore in the 21st century. Bamberg (2007) described this new narrative turn as one which emphasizes narrative as social practice, with increasing analytic attention given to "the contexts in which narratives take place, what they consist of, their performances" (p. 165). In this wave of narrative research, the emphasis is not just on the construction (often co-construction) of identities in narrative practices and narrative performances, but there is also a growing awareness of a multitude of narrative genres, beyond the prototypical Labovian narrative.

BIG VERSUS SMALL STORIES

A recent debate among narrative researchers concerns differences between so-called big stories and small stories—and their implications for studying identity. Big stories are typically characterized as "the grander narratives we tell ourselves, the big retrospectives elicited from interviews" (Watson, 2007, p. 371). Certainly, the language learner and language teacher autobiographies, memoirs, and life histories referred to by Bell (2002) and Pavlenko (2002) in their articles in *TESOL Quarterly* belong in this big story category. Small stories, in contrast, are the "ephemeral narratives emerging in everyday, mundane contexts" (Watson, 2007,

p. 371). For language learners, language teachers, and language teacher educators, these may be narratives told in the classroom, in the break room, in a private office, or on the playground. Furthermore, Georgakopoulou (2007b) adds that small stories can be "tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events," and that they need not conform to the classic Labovian model of personal, past experience stories of nonshared events (p. 146).

Today, researchers working in both narrative inquiry and narrative analysis traditions share an interest in identity. However, a number of narrative scholars have argued that even though big stories ("derived from interviews, clinical encounters, autobiographical writing, and other such interrogative venues," Freeman, 2007, p. 155) have dominated much narrative inquiry research, it is time for narrative researchers to shift their attention to small stories, and that this is especially the case when the focus of investigation is on individuals' identities. Below I outline the main arguments advanced in favor of small stories.

Big Stories Are Far Less Frequent Than Small Stories

Proponents of the small story approach argue that we spend more of our time in small, rather than big, story mode. The majority of the stories that we, as humans, tell are small stories. Small story advocates point out that "with the exception of specific reflective occasions (writing an autobiography or responding to an in-depth life story interview)" we don't typically tell big stories; rather, we spend much more time in our daily lives telling small stories, which emerge from "everyday, non-interviewed life" (Freeman, 2007, p. 156). So, in some sense, big stories are simply not as representative of "who we are" in terms of quotidian realities.

Big Stories Are Too Coherent

Big stories are subject to "excessive ordering," "narrative smoothing," and are likely to produce overly "polished accounts of who we are" (Watson, 2007, p. 372). Indeed, *Life Stories* author Charlotte Linde's (1993) central argument is that such "life stories," or autobiographical narratives, are constructed in order to produce a sense of coherence out of what may otherwise seem like a jumble of random experiences. The problem with such accounts, critics pointed out, is that big story research "as a product of the reflective process [. . .] perpetuates an image of identity that is much 'larger', more continuous, and more stable than small stories would suggest" (Freeman, 2007, p. 159).

Context Tends To Get Erased in Reports Based on Interview Data

In reviewing some critiques of small story research, Freeman (2007) noted that big stories are the products of "an interactive situation (an interview dialogue, for instance) that is largely effaced in the telling" (p. 157), which becomes problematic when one considers that "identity is produced and reproduced in specific discursive situations" (p. 159). Consequently, narratives should not be treated as if they were "unmediated representations of social realities," but rather for the forms of social action that they are (Bamberg, 2007, p. 202). Above all, narrating is an activity that takes place between people, which means that audience design should be somehow accounted for in any analysis of narrative.

Interviews are never contextually neutral. Rather, they represent a specific type of sociocultural practice, and one in which participants' roles and relationships bear significantly on the narrative data they produce. In a recent article, Talmy (2010) made a very similar point. Although Talmy's scope is broader (i.e., all interview-based qualitative research in applied linguistics—not only those studies that examine narrative data), he called for greater reflexivity among qualitative researchers in accounting for the role of the interviewer in the process. As he explained, "Analyzing not only the *whats*, or the product of the interview, but also the *hows*, or the process involved in the coconstruction of meaning, has significant implications for data analysis" (p. 132). There is a serious need, Talmy argued, for researchers to be more explicit in accounting for "the role of the interviewer in occasioning interview answers" (p. 143).

Identity Is Always Situated

Identity is both contingent and relational. In other words, who we are as humans varies according to who we are talking to, where, and for what purposes. Thus, small stories illuminate how identities are constructed in situ and the various ways in which identities are performed in local, situated contexts. Small stories "are extremely valuable for showing how identity gets renegotiated and reconstructed in and through social interaction"; consequently, the image of self that is constructed in small stories, as opposed to big stories, "is more thoroughly moored in social life" (Freeman, 2007, p. 156).

NARRATIVE INQUIRY VERSUS NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The contrast between narrative inquiry and narrative analysis can be summed up in the following manner: Whereas narrative inquiry

researchers are interested in "the *what* [emphasis added] of narrative," narrative analysts "prioritize the *how* [emphasis added] of narrative telling" (Georgakopoulou, 2007b, p. 148). In other words, narrative inquiry scholars usually focus more on what the content of the narrative reveals about the self, whereas narrative analysts examine more closely the features of the discourse to identify facets of the self. A narrative analysis position is an especially critical one when it comes to research on identity, because "it is *in the details of talk* [emphasis added] (including storytellings) that identities can be inflected, reworked, and more or less variably and subtly invoked" (Georgakopoulou, 2007b, p. 149). This point is made even more strongly by Bamberg (2007), who argued that "When we study narratives, we are neither accessing speakers' past experiences nor their reflections on their past experiences . . . Rather we study talk" (p. 168–171) —or written texts, as has been the case in much TESOL narrative research. Critics of a traditional narrative inquiry approach share the conviction that, in studying identities, narratives should not be treated at face value, as some sort of "route into an interior authentic self" (Atkinson & Delamont, 2007, p. 197). In their provocatively titled chapter, "Rescuing narrative from qualitative research," Atkinson and Delamont (2007) were especially critical of research that treats narratives "as if they revealed a consistent and coherent representation of a reality that is independent of the accounts themselves" when, in fact, narratives actually "create the realities they purport to describe" (p. 198).

In sum, there are two interlinked issues at the core of the big versus small story debate and the difference between narrative inquiry and narrative analysis: (a) what counts as narrative data, and (b) what constitutes analysis.

EXAMPLES OF EXISTING RESEARCH

Within the field, some scholars have begun to approach narratives of teachers of ESL/EFL from a narrative analytic perspective. In this section, I highlight a few of these, which illustrate varied contexts, frameworks, and analytic foci—and which share in common a "small story" perspective.

Richards (1999), for example, investigated ESL teachers' narratives in a professional setting outside the classroom: a staffroom at a language school. Richards' data can be described as small stories, in that they emerged from teachers' casual chats that took place during work breaks. Richards found that, because teachers shared so many experiences and concerns, joint storytelling—which occurred frequently—served to reinforce personal and professional relationships and contributed to

the construction of a collaborative culture. The most common themes of teachers' stories included interactional problems with individual students or with a group of students. Implicit also in the stories that Richards analyzed were "assumptions about the qualities associated with effective language learning, the bounds of acceptable classroom behavior, and the legitimate concerns of a committed language teacher" (p. 170). Richards concluded by calling for further exploration of the roles and functions of "day to day professional stories."

In Vásquez (2007), I examined ESL teachers' narratives in a different professional setting: post-observation meetings between novice ESL teachers and their mentors. Once again, the small stories analyzed were not elicited; rather, they emerged in the ongoing flow of institutional discourse; they were worked up by speakers; and they were jointly produced and negotiated in the broader context of the mentoring conversations. Applying Ochs' and Capps' (2001) narrative dimensions, I found a variety of moral stances embedded in teachers' talk. I showed how novice teachers used language to position themselves within their narratives as variously reflective, certain, uncertain, and even doubtful— and how those positionings were, at times, co-constructed by the teachers' interlocutors. Like Richards (1999), I found that in their narratives, teachers often focused on interactional challenges they experienced with a particular student, or with a particular class. I concluded that, as TESOL teacher educators, we stand to learn a great deal by listening to teachers' small stories—about teachers' cognition, the ways they conceptualize their practice, their understandings of their roles and responsibilities, their decision-making, and their interpretations of the teaching or learning process.

Barkhuizen (2010) provides an example of a narrative analysis of a different type of small story. Focusing on one speaker's prospective (rather than retrospective) story, he examined the future-projected narrative of his participant, Sela, a preservice EFL teacher. Barkhuizen demonstrated how, through the details of her talk, this prospective teacher "positioned herself as complicit with a dominant English language teacher ideology, expressed particularly as an economic metaphor of investment, capitalization, and a better life" (p. 15). He argued that offering student teachers discursive spaces where they can imagine themselves as future professionals within a narrative genre— and all which that entails (participatory cotellership, etc.)—"allows them to evaluate and rethink their ideas about teaching and their imagined roles" (p. 15). Barkhuizen pointed out that this process is necessarily recursive, as speakers continue to reposition themselves and reimagine their identities with each new narrative telling.

Although not specifically from contexts of second language learning and teaching, two additional studies, drawn from other educational

contexts, are worth briefly reviewing here for insights that may also be applicable to this field.

Watson (2007), adopting a small story perspective, examined a recorded conversation between two student teachers about their teaching practicum. Using positioning analysis, Watson showed how the two teachers collaboratively constructed a narrative, within which it became possible to make claims about their identities and competencies as beginning teachers. Moreover, Watson's detailed analysis highlights that this jointly constructed narrative demonstrates a shared understand of key issues in teaching—including content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge as well as classroom management—in other words, dimensions of their professional identities as teachers. What this suggests for TESOL is that paying close analytic attention to the linguistic details found in narratives arising in daily conversations among teachers (or between learners) may shed light on how they construe themselves in their respective roles.

In another study, from a larger corpus of talk from a middle school language arts class, Juzwik (2004) examined how one teacher made use of narratives in the classroom. Juzwik's fine-grained analysis concentrates on one narrative, during a thematic unit on the Holocaust. Of particular interest is how the focal teacher was able to harness the poetic and rhetorical potential of the narrative, and to use it as a powerful didactic tool. Juzwik's work offers a number of implications for the uses of narrative discourse in teaching. She suggested that narrative can be a resource for communicating information which may feel more immediate to students (i.e., a type of "experience-near pedagogy"), and she concluded by calling for ethnographic work which examines students' responses to teacher narratives, as well as research examining the relationship between teachers' narrative performance and student learning outcomes.

Although their specific contexts of telling vary, what all of these studies share is a close focus on the linguistic detail of the narratives in their respective analyses. Furthermore, many of the stories examined were unelicited small stories, captured in the flow of some ongoing conversational activity. The main implication for TESOL, from the previous summary of studies, is to begin to consider a broader range of narrative data from various institutional settings, in order to discover how teachers and learners perform and (co-)construct their identities in particular ways across different contexts. Researcher-elicited big stories certainly have their place in the field; however, we as educators and researchers must be aware that they represent only one type of narrative genre. Thus, instead of concentrating exclusively on the grander life history narratives—or those elicited by interviews—narrative researchers in TESOL should be aware that stories surround us in virtually every realm of our professional activities: in our classrooms, in our offices, even in our hallways. Keeping in mind the limitations of big story

research, we may wish to consider what the smaller stories we find ourselves surrounded by every day can reveal about their speakers' identities, as well as how those identities are variably constructed in different narrative activities.

CONCLUSIONS

As language teachers and language learners, we *story* our lives in many different ways. And the particular forms that our stories take inevitably vary by the setting we are in, the other participants involved, our purpose(s) in telling the story, as well as the larger speech activities in which we are engaged. Narrative analysts are interested in how individuals construct, project, claim, negotiate, or resist various identities, and they closely examine speakers' discursive choices in order to do so. For TESOL teacher educators, such an approach may offer us glimpses into the processes of professional development as they unfold. (Although my focus in this article has been on teacher narratives, it is important to point out that the same potential exists for applying narrative analysis to study language learners' identities.) Narrative analysis sheds light not just on the lived experiences of individuals but also on how individuals use language to make sense of and shape their experiences. In paying close attention to the language used in narratives, narrative analysis can reveal a great deal about how we see ourselves and how we view ourselves with respect to others. Because language learning and language teaching are always a situated, relational process, such a perspective on on narrative in TESOL seems essential.

In the future, narrative researchers in TESOL are encouraged to not only consider a wider variety of narrative genres but also to emphasize the constitutive nature of discourse and to look more closely at how narratives are constructed, paying particular attention to the demands, constraints, and possibilities of the sociocultural contexts in which they are embedded. This new narrative turn will require a shift from "the precious *lived and told* [emphasis added] to the messier business of *living and telling* [emphasis added]" (Georgakopoulou, 2007b, p. 153).

THE AUTHOR

As an applied linguist with prior academic training in art history, Camilla Vásquez has had a long-standing interest in semiotic systems and the ways in which humans

construct meaning from texts, whether those texts are verbal, visual, or multimodal. Camilla first discovered narrative research while writing her dissertation, a discourse analytic study of ESL teacher and mentor interactions in post-observation meetings. Over the past 8 years, Camilla has continued to study narratives in several contexts. She finds narratives compelling, because they are ubiquitous, universal, multi-functional, as well as a powerful discursive device used by individuals to make sense of their realities. In addition, narrative analytic research, for her, represents an important interface between the social sciences and the humanities. At present, Camilla is an associate professor at the University of South Florida, where she teaches in the master of arts TESL/Applied Linguistics and doctoral SLA/IT programs, specializing in courses such as discourse analysis, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and qualitative research methods in applied linguistics. Camilla's research on language teachers, discourse, and identity has appeared in journals such as Narrative Inquiry, Discourse Studies, Research on Language and Social Interaction, and Teaching and Teacher Education. In her current research, Camilla is exploring narrative and identity in computer-mediated texts.

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Language Learning Careers as an Object of Narrative Research in TESOL

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■ One of the strengths of narrative research in TESOL is its potential to provide insight into long-term language learning experiences that cannot be investigated in real time (Benson, 2005; Kalaja, Menezes, & Barcelos, 2008; Kouritzin, 2000; Pavlenko, 2002). Reliance on retrospection, however, brings two problems to the table that are addressed in this article through the concept of *language learning careers.* The first problem is methodological and concerns the duration of experiences described in narrative data, which can be as short as a few minutes or as long as a lifetime. As shorter-term language learning experiences are necessarily contextualized by longer-term experiences, what analytical tools do we researchers have to articulate *part-whole* relationships in TESOL narrative research? The second problem concerns the status of first-person narratives as accounts of actual language learning processes. Narrative researchers are urged to avoid treating narratives as *factual*