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In Between Languages Narrative Research into Learners' Language "Space"

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Abstract. Narrative has been one of the major concerns in social science research ever since the mid-twentieth century, and the area of second language acquisition (SLA) is no exception. Researchers have turned to the investigation of learner-produced narratives to extend the understanding of many key concepts in SLA theory. This type of research approach takes language learning beyond the acquisition/assimilation of linguistic structures and is meant to focus on learners as social selves actively involved in the construction of a linguistic identity. In this paper, I investigate how learners of English as a foreign language, whose first languages are Arabic, Chinese, French, Hindi, Hungarian, Kurdish, Parsi (Farsi), Romanian, Russian, and Spanish, narrate their own experiences of learning this language. This investigation is based on a dataset of language learning experience written accounts with reference to learner life events. In the analysis, I apply two analytical frameworks for the examination of the data: a) grounded theory procedures (Corbin and Strauss 2007), which are often employed with narrative data, and b) a "positioning approach to narratives" (Bamberg 1997) in order to detect the learners' positioning strategies in the hope of revealing their linguistic identity claims in relation to who they are and how they make sense of their language learning experience. Results show how the learners position themselves in relation to "the other" (teachers, family, fellow learners, and the researcher), to themselves as learners, and to the language they learn.

Keywords: narrative research, second language acquisition, language learning experience, positioning strategies

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1. Narratives in the literature

The study reported in this paper deals with the way two groups of learners of English "tell" about their language learning experiences in written narratives. This section includes a brief examination of *views on narratives* (or the lay term *stories*) and research work in this area of language study present in linguistic and sociolinguistic literature. It seems only natural to start this discussion with Labov's seminal work in the domain. Thus, as early as the late 1960s, the foundational article by Labov and Waletzky (1967) was one of the most important points of reference for narrative researchers. Their definition of narratives was "a technique of constructing narrative units which match the temporal sequence of [the] experience" (1967: 13). Much later on, Labov's (2013) theoretical approach to the area admits the existence of different kinds of narratives and encourages researchers to focus on the interactional context in which they take place. The author, however, takes into account mainly "oral" narratives and stresses the importance of such "stories" told in his interviews for the study of language variation. This time, he defines "story" as "one way of recounting a particular series of events that actually happened" (2013: 17).

This discussion of narratives in the literature continues with a focus on the work of other specialists who state that narratives are both sociolinguistic manifestations and discursive constructions of a wide range of social processes and that they have been the focus of analysis in such fields as linguistics, sociolinguistics, or discourse. For example, Bamberg (1997: 335) gives two possible interpretations of the term *narrative*. First, he examines narratives (mainly those relating personal experiences) as "representations of something that once happened and what this past happening meant (or 'now' means) to the narrator". Second, the author focuses on the actual performing of the narrative, which he calls the "act of telling – or 'representing' at a particular occasion in the form of a particular story – to intervene, so to speak, between the actual experience and the story" (1997: 335). This is how the author appears to give "life" to the action of telling the story.

Furthermore, Coffey (2007: 148) discusses the position of the individual *story teller* in relation with the story and states that "[n]arratives allow an individual to make sense of their own past, present and (predicted or imagined) future". Next, he adds that "continuity is a key feature of narrative[s]". Coffey also adopts Bruner's (1987: 31) view expressed in an article entitled "Life as narrative" that "a life as led is inseparable from a life as told" and claims that people can make sense of their lives "through narrative patterns". This seems to be what the learners involved in the study discussed here "tell" about their "life with English".

The current "fascination" (in the literature) with narratives appears to be in fact a "rediscovery". Here, mention need be made of the work of Oxford et al. (2015:

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101) who show that a "[n]arrative or story is a framework by which humans make their existence meaningful". They stress the attribute that narratives have in terms of giving life a sense and contend that "[s]tories identify, unify, give meaning to [life]. Just as music is noise that makes sense, a painting is color that makes sense, so a story is life that makes sense".

The concept of narratives as *texts* is also present in the work of Schiffrin (2009) and Georgakopoulou (2011) among others. Schiffrin treats narratives as texts somewhat similar to description or argumentation and, in a way, dismisses the idea that there would be drastic differences among these types of texts because "[d]escriptions that appear within a narrative can simultaneously delimit the scope of possible actions" and "[a]rgumentation can also intersect with narrative, as when the complicating action and evaluation of a narrative support or challenge a contestable position" (2009: 422). Georgakopoulou (2011: 196) focuses on the "what" of narrative texts and argues that they "discursively construct and evaluate experience; they encode the storytellers' selection and interpretation of what happened, their feelings, attitudes, and emotional interest in the tale, telling, and/or audience". The analysis of the data in this study (see sections 3.1 and 3.2) shows this type of "what" in the corpus it is based on.

Another important perspective from which narratives are examined in the literature is that of their being opportunities for "tellers" to assemble elements of their *identity* in their "stories". For example, Bamberg's (1997: 337) narrative positioning theory envisages the way narrators "position themselves to themselves" and construct "a (local) answer to the question: 'Who am I?'" as an instantiation of their identity. In a similar line of thought, Schiffrin (2009: 423) puts forward the idea of a "two-plane" identity in that "narrative provides opportunities to display, perform, and construct self/other identity on two planes: one projected through storytelling performance and the other through the story world".

A further issue that needs to be approached at this point is that of the presence of narrative research in language teaching and learning (LTL). This is briefly discussed here since it is directly related to the study this paper focuses on. Narrative research in LTL, therefore, deals with the "stories" teachers and learners tell (or are prompted by researchers to tell) about their lived or desired experiences with the teaching or learning of languages. In the area of LTL, the earliest attempts at narrative research were learner or teacher diary studies, which, although not reported as narratives, were actually autobiographical and foreshadowed later research explicitly defined as narrative. An important example is Bailey's (1983) work which provides considerable theoretical information in relation to the topic (anxiety in L2 learning) and is methodologically ground-breaking because the author is among the first to have used diaries as research instruments. Another example of use of narrative accounts in the study of language learning is that of Oxford (1990). She contends that by writing introspective language learning histories

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(LLHs) learners become aware of their learning processes and their feelings related to both language learning and language use in various contexts. In the 2000s, the area of LTL brought into the limelight even more narrative studies which focus on either language learning or language teaching. Thus, learners' experience with languages was investigated by Benson et al. (2013), who conducted a study whose informants were students from Hong Kong studying abroad. The authors relied on the analysis of interview data collected both before and after the study-abroad experience as well as on multimodal blogs kept during the learners' overseas visit. Their findings illustrate various dimensions of L2 identity development in study-abroad contexts. A language teacher's identity, on the other hand, was examined by Barkhuizen (2016: 655) in a longitudinal study which dealt with "the imagined identities of a preservice English teacher in New Zealand and compared these with the identities she negotiated in her teacher education and then teaching practice nearly nine years later". This researcher relied on a large dataset consisting of transcribed conversations and interviews with his respondent, written narratives, and multimodal digital stories and offered several suggestions on the use of narrative data analysis in teacher reflection and research.

In the light of these views on narratives (or stories) in the literature reviewed above, the study presented in this paper aims to examine written narrative texts and focuses on defining the identity of the story tellers in order to find answers to the following questions: (1) What are the elements which identify participants as learners of English? and (2) How do participants position themselves in relation to the "characters" in their narratives, to their "audience", and to themselves?

2. This study: Participants and corpus

Ten Romanian students enrolled on an English-based Linguistic Studies for Intercultural Communication MA programme, and ten foreign students studying Romanian as a Foreign Language (RFL) took part in this study. Their names (see below) are pseudonyms; they were all known personally to the researcher, and they all agreed to their stories being used as data for publication. These participants' first languages (L1s) are (in alphabetical order): Arabic, Chinese, French, Hindi, Hungarian, Kurdish, Parsi (Farsi), Romanian, Russian, and Spanish. The Romanian participants' pseudonyms are: Becky, Andy, Chris, Cas, Julie, Lauren, Larry, Joan, Rose, and Steve. All of them were first-year Intercultural Studies MA students, native speakers of Romanian or Hungarian. The foreign participants – hereafter called "Non-Romanian" – and their nationalities were: Wendy (Chinese), Guy (Ecuadorian), James (French), Fred (Finnish of Kurdish descent), Rick (Indian), Ron (Iranian), Anna, Angie, and Lenny (Russian), and Mary (Syrian).

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The data corpus that the study relies on consists of twenty elicited narratives ranging in length between 129 and 1,178 words. The participants were instructed to write their own stories about their learning of English and to use the title: "My life with English". The style or the length of the narratives was not specified. The language of these narratives is therefore English and their total number of words is 17,041.

3. Data Analysis: Two approaches

For reasons of both validity and reliability of analysis, this process was approached from two perspectives. Within the first analytical approach, the twenty learner narratives were analysed using grounded theory procedures (Corbin and Strauss 2007), which are often employed with narrative data. In these procedures, the theory (the interpretation) emerged directly from – was "grounded" in – the data rather than being established in advance. The researcher was aware of herself as instrument for interpretation. Throughout the three stages (open, axial, and selective coding), classifications were refined using the constant comparison technique. The validity of emergent themes was constantly checked by comparing them with the original narratives.

The second analytical approach was based on Bamberg's *narrative positioning* (1997: 336) theory, which he used in the analysis of spoken data (or oral narratives). In the author's work, positioning is "a discursive practice whereby selves are located [in narratives] as observably and intersubjectively coherent participants". He considers that the process of positioning takes place at "three different levels", which he formulates as "three different positioning questions". These questions are:

1. How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the reported events?

2. How does the speaker position him- or herself to the audience?

3. How do narrators position themselves to themselves? (1997: 337; italics in the original)

After the preliminary analysis of the data (see below) and for the purposes of his study, Bamberg's theoretical analytical framework was adapted for use with written narratives, and his questions were turned into the following statements: (1) Narrators as learners positioned in relation to teachers and others (family, friends, etc.); (2) Narrators as learners positioned in relation to the "audience" (here, the researcher); and (3) Narrators as learners positioned in relation to themselves as individuals attempting to answer the question: "Who am I?".

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3.1. Data analysis: First approach

As already mentioned, the preliminary analysis of the data was based on grounded theory procedures. Thus, stage one of the analysis – *open coding* – led to the identification and rough categorization of a large number of themes. At this stage of data interpretation, the emerging themes were coded: a. learner: positive/negative characteristics; b. family/other involvement with learners' study of English; c. early-age/kindergarten study of English; d. English in school; e. Positive/negative views of teachers; and f. positive/negative views of teaching.

Stage two – *axial coding* – allows the themes to emerge more definitively and to be more thoroughly organized. According to Creswell (2007), at this point, the specific themes are condensed into broader themes which are supported by examples. Silverman (2000: 144) describes this stage as one which is "an attempt to 'saturate' [the] categories [identified at 'open coding'] with many appropriate cases in order to demonstrate their relevance". In this study, the axial coding stage involved a constant comparison of the aforementioned categories with the narratives themselves, which led to the identification of two major themes and a number of subthemes in the data. The major themes are: (1) The learner: success and/or difficulties in learning (with eight subthemes) and (2) Learners' views of teachers and/or teaching (with two subthemes).

Next in this section, I discuss and exemplify the first major theme: *The learner: success and/or difficulties in learning English*. For reasons of space in this paper, I list the eight subthemes and only exemplify and discuss two of them below. The subthemes in this category are: a. Passion for foreign languages/motivated learner; b. Awareness of the importance of EFL for an individual's education; c. Awareness of the status of English in the world; d. English as means to meet new people and new cultures; e. Determination to take advantage of opportunities to learn; f. Focus on language skills rather than various language areas; g. Acknowledgement of support from family/other; h. Difficulties with learning/using English. The examples from the data start with the pseudonym of the respondent followed by (R) for the Romanian participants in the study and (NR, i.e. non-Romanian) for the foreign students studying Romanian as a foreign language. The narratives were not amended to "disguise" faulty use of grammar or vocabulary by the respondents because the focus in this study is not on language accuracy. The two subthemes I now exemplify and discuss are: "Focus on language skills rather than various language areas" and "Difficulties with learning/using English".

Examples (1) and (2) below show that both Larry (the Romanian respondent) and Fred (a native speaker of Kurdish – in his own words, Kurmanji) pay a lot of attention to their abilities of using English. If with Larry we can detect satisfaction about the two productive skills and one receptive skill, with Fred, the focus is on his real-life spoken communication.

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(1) Larry (R): I now notice that there was a massive inconsistency in terms of skills acquisition: albeit my listening and writing skills improved constantly throughout the years; Nevertheless, I am grateful that, during university, I had (and still have) the opportunity to practice my speaking skills. After all, practice makes perfect!
(2) Fred (NR): In 2013, i moved to live in Finland. People there they speak English as well and you can speak English wherever you go, so i started to speak english and it was to hard to me at the begining but day by day it was getting better.

The second subtheme I discuss here is "Difficulties with learning/using English". I first examine this from the perspective of the Romanian participants in my study. For them, the difficulties are related mainly to the learning of grammar and vocabulary and the development of language skills, and some of them blame this on poor teaching (the case of Andy below). Example (3) below shows Joan's worries about her ability to produce language, and she even finds a cause of her problems in her personality features. Andy (example (4)), on the other hand, blames her problems with reading and writing on poor teaching.

(3) Joan (R): I couldn't learn English and that was a big problem. I know that I have problems when I have to speak or write in English because I didn't practice it. I am shy and I am afraid to speak in public, because I am afraid of people's reaction and I know I don't speak English very well.
(4) Andy (R): My first memory of trying to become a reader and a writer in English was a fail with that teacher. I am pretty sure that I would not have learned anything of what I was supposed to know until the 8th grade if I would have continued to learn English with her. I changed my school for this reason.

In the case of the non-Romanian participants, the difficulties with learning or using English are located mainly in language production skills. In example (5) below, Anna finds fault with her writing and relates it to her lack of knowledge of vocabulary and connectives, and Lenny (example (6)) blames his lack of speaking abilities on classroom practices in his country.

(5) Anna (NR): In writing, the flow between sentences aren't good and I'm still using basic vocabularies.
(6) Lenny (NR): However, one of main of our problems in Russia is – we do not have a speech practice as well, interactive tasks to talk with your classmates etc.

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An interesting way of finding the cause of lack of ability to speak English is present in example (7) below. Wendy finds it easy to read and write in English, but when it comes to speaking she has problems, whose cause, for her, are the differences between the two "language systems".

(7) Wendy (NR): For Chinese students, we found it a little bit harder for us to speak English than reading or writting it and that is maybe because the Chinese language system is totally different from the English language system.

The second major theme identified in the data at the axial coding stage is "Learners' views of teachers", and its two subthemes are: a. Positive views of teachers and teaching and b. Negative views of teachers and teaching. The positive views of teachers and teaching expressed by both Romanian and foreign participants are mainly related to teacher characteristics such as age, personality, and teaching skills. In examples (8) and (9) below, both respondents focus on teachers' skills, i.e. Becky is grateful for her teacher's help with language skills, and Wendy focuses on teachers' efforts for students' accurate use of language in the classroom. The nice "touch" in relation to the positive attitude to teachers is visible in Becky's candid description of her teacher and the students' relationship with this teacher.

(8) Becky (R): she was so young and sweet, it was like every child learned English for her sake. During the high school, my English teacher was definitely my favorite one, because she really had great teaching skills and she helped me improve my English skills on all aspects.
(9) Wendy (NR): This is especially true if you study in an English language class, teachers want to hear your mistakes, so they can correct them for you.

The "Negative views of teachers and teaching" sub-theme was identified in the narratives of both Romanian and non-Romanian respondents. These views are mainly related to teachers' lack of language knowledge and poor teaching skills. In examples (10) and (11) below, Becky and Angie appear to show their dissatisfaction with their teachers. Becky blames her teacher for her poor teaching methods and faulty language use. Angie is even more drastic in her accusations because she claims that her teacher's behaviour and classroom techniques led her to a completely negative attitude towards the language.

(10) Becky (R): She had no idea what she was teaching. She simply asked us every class to open our books, to read a text or something and then translated it. That was all. She did not teach us vocabulary or grammar. Not to mention the fact that she had the worst pronunciation.

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(11) Angie (NR): (…) my future English teacher. Neither her strict appearance, nor her loud voice made me in any way less scared. I do remember it too well. How we had 60 seconds to write down the English alphabet, how I boned up on huge texts about English culture and traditions. I literally hated the language with my all might. This torture continued for more than three years but then something changed…

The final stage of the analysis, *selective coding*, is meant to lead to the identification of one theme as the most important and encompassing (Corbin and Strauss 2007). In other words, the themes/categories resulted from the previous stage of the analysis are developed into "more general analytic frameworks with relevance outside the setting" (Silverman 2000: 144). In this study, the one "encompassing" theme is: "Learners of English actively involved in their learning and use of this language". The "relevance outside the setting" that Silverman postulates is understood here as external validity of the analysis and its results. This may be so because the "active involvement" in the study of English is documented in the literature as a general characteristic of successful learners and users of language (see, for example, Oxford 1990), and the participants in this study can be described as successful since they report constant improvement of their knowledge and ability to use this language in real life.

3.2. Data analysis: Second approach

The second perspective from which the data in this study were examined is Bamberg's (1997) narrative positioning (see section 3). As already mentioned, this author's positioning questions were turned into statements which guided this second approach to data analysis.

First, the examination of the data from the perspective of how the respondents are *Narrators as learners positioned in relation to teachers and others (family, friends, etc.)* resulted in finding out that the "learner narrator" is not in control of the outcome of his/her actions and cannot be responsible for their choice of language to study or how to study it because the data show that: a. decisions about the study of English in school or in non-institutionalized contexts were mainly made by parents and b. decisions about what and how to teach are made by teachers/education authorities. Examples (12) and (13) below clearly show that those who made the decision about the choice of English as foreign language to be studied in both institutionalized settings (Andy's case) and outside the classroom (Ron's case) were made by parents or older siblings.

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(12) Andy (R): My mother always wanted for my brother and me to learn English. (…) Thanks to my mother that paid a lot for that private school for us to learn English.
(13) Ron (NR): But luckily, with the help of my dad and my bigger sister, I solved this problem. I had 7 hours of training each day with my father and sister. In general my educational life has been so hard and tough.

Examples (14) and (15) below show that in institutionalized settings decisions about the teaching of English were made by teachers (Julie's case) and education authorities (Guy's case).

(14) Julie (R): Classes generally followed an established pattern: checking homework or doing some sort of revision and then moving on to the new lesson. All new words were written on the blackboard and translated into Romanian.
(15) Guy (NR): Teachers give their explanation in both languages [Spanish and English] in class following the books proposed by the government and international institutions.

The second positioning statement: *Narrators as learners positioned in relation to the "audience" (here, the researcher)* is specific to this study and, in two ways, different from Bamberg's (1997) because here the narratives are written and the "audience" is the researcher. Moreover, this positioning is not as visible and easy to analyse as in the analysis of oral narratives (e.g. interviews) because learner narrators do not address the "reader" (researcher in this case) directly. However, those instances in which respondents use the verb "remember" (or words to that effect) were coded as "positioning to the audience" because it was at the researcher's request that the narrators reminisced about their experiences with learning English. In examples (16) and (17) below, both Julie and Anna seem to address the researcher when complying with the request to write about their school days or the effort they put into learning English.

(16) Julie (R): To this day I can still remember the cover of my first coursebook.
(17) Anna (NR): Now, when I look back when I remember those days where I used to struggle to pronounce words and to frame right sentences makes me feel happy because I didn't give up.

Finally, the third positioning statement*: Narrators as learners positioned in relation to themselves as individuals attempting to answer the question: "Who am I?"* helped here to conclude that these learner narrators tend to understand themselves as: a. motivated for the study of English; b. aware of what learning

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as a process consists of; c. aware of both their strengths and their need of improvement. In examples (18) and (19) below, both Anna and Andy appear to be highly motivated learners because of future opportunities that mastery of this language can unlock.

(18) Anna (NR): I decided to continue my education in English because I think that studying in English will give me more opportunities to participate in the world community in the future.
(19) Andy (R): After I finished high school I was wondering where I could go further to University to study what I liked most, English; I knew I would keep learning languages because this is what I liked most.

That Becky and Angie are aware of what learning as a process consists of is clear from examples (20) and (21) below since both respondents state that language learning is "a continuous process".

(20) Becky (R): (…) learning is a continuous process that never ends and we always have to improve ourselves and give our best in everything that we do.
(21) Angie (NR): It seems to me that learning any language (even your mother tongue) is a continuous lifetime process.

In this study, all participants show they are aware of both their strengths and their need of improvement when it comes to both the learning and the use of English. What Chris and Anna write about in the two examples below – (22) and (23) – is characteristic of all the other subjects, and, besides writing about their success with the learning or use of English, they all use either "improve" or "improvement" to state that their way forward involves effort in this direction.

(22) Chris (R): I always felt like I was born with knowledge of English, and it is somewhat true! I do realize at this point that there is a lot of room for improvement.
(23) Anna (NR): I can see my progress. However, I still have a lot of space to improve.

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4. Conclusions

In this paper, I have shown how the participants in the study construct their learning of English and their own identity as learners and users of this language. They seem to be learners of English actively involved in their "story" with this language because they are highly motivated learners who are aware of the importance of EFL for their education and future life. Moreover, their awareness of the status of English in the world leads them to consider it a means for them to meet new people and become acquainted with new cultures. The analysis also showed that the respondents are determined to take advantage of opportunities to learn and that they focus on the improvement of language skills rather than on various language areas. In their efforts to continue to learn English, these learners take advantage of support from the members of their family or teachers. On a less positive note, the participants also admit they have difficulties with learning or using English and claim that the cause of these difficulties is either poor teaching or personal lack of practice. In relation to this last finding, these learners show they have both positive and negative views of teachers and teaching.

The second perspective from which the data were examined – learner narrative positioning – consistently confirms the findings summarized above and gives the study its internal validity. Thus, the narrators as learners positioned in relation to teachers and others (family, friends, etc.) do not appear to be in control of the outcome of their actions and cannot be held responsible because some of the decisions about the study of English, at earlier stages of learning, did not belong to them. When they are positioned in relation to the "audience" (here, the researcher), they do not address the "reader" directly except for instances of the type "I remember", which demonstrates that their narrative is meant to both answer the researcher's request and to position themselves in relation to her. Lastly in this line of argument, these learner narrators positioned in relation to themselves as individuals tend to understand themselves as interested in the study of English, aware of what learning a language as a process consists of and aware of both their strengths and their need of improvement. And, finally, the participants in this study appear to "inhabit" a bilingual/multilingual "space" and to be "inhabited" by linguistic and cultural values of the languages they "possess". Therefore, they seem to acquire an identity "with a twist"!

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