

Learning the Principles of Narrative Frames: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

This study explored the strengths and weaknesses of using narrative frames when conducting qualitative research. The focus was on eliciting information regarding participants' (N = 11) beliefs as they entered a postgraduate program at a major university in Japan. The theoretical underpinnings of narrative frames are discussed, the specific narrative frame employed is introduced, lessons learned regarding the analytic approach are shared, and perceived strengths and weaknesses of using narrative frames are offered. As this was a pilot study, the focus was on the narrative frame itself. While the use of this narrative frame was useful for gathering data, it was found to be limiting in scope, and needs supplementation with other qualitative and quantitative data sources to reach its full potential as an investigative resource.

Keywords: Narrative Frame, Autonomy, Thematic Assessment

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Introduction

Narrative frames can succinctly be described as “a qualitative method of data collection using prompts to stimulate written expressions of ideas” (Barkhuizen, 2014). Interviewing participants to gather information and elicit detail is a highly involved and time-consuming activity, particularly when working with large groups. Narrative frames offer a more parsimonious method that can create instant physical data that is easy to input into an electronic format.

Orientation and Implementation

Because it is a type of knowledge that is created, Narrative Frames Analysis (NFA) falls under the constructivist paradigm of qualitative research. Under this view, the ontological orientation allows for multiple realities, and the epistemological orientation is focused on a co-construction of understanding between researchers and participants (Hatch, 2002). This allows a greater triangulation of data through prompts tailored to the research focus. By offering multiple opportunities for participants to expand upon their responses, researchers are able to perform a more informed analysis.

Although there is no spoken interview that is taking place in real time, the open-ended items can be seen as a dialogue between the researcher and the participant. Narrative inquirers control the creation of the narration, the audience it is directed towards, as well as the discourse of the society it is created within (Bochner, 2007). Bochner further describes the created narration as knowledge brought forward from the past as opposed to being knowledge related to the past (2007). Simply put, looking back at created narrations allows the reader a glimpse into the mind of the creators at that time, as opposed to a reflection back upon that time. The researcher guides the participant to answer openly without the type of constraints a multiple choice or Likert scale would create. Although the narrative is directed, the responses are completely open, revealing an immense amount of information about the writers and their intentions within their message (Chase, 2005).

During the analysis of these narrations, it is important for the researcher to maintain the correct perspective; while the causation of past actions may seem completely clear in retrospect, that cause might have been clouded at the time the narration was created. Another potential situation of concern is when current information might create a type of bias that did not exist during the time the narration was formed.

Narratives can be used to gather information regarding the activities and intentions of participants or, as with the current study, beliefs. A strong point of the narrative is its ability to capture the voice of participant, unfiltered or restrained with a series of pre-created answers to choose from, or having to choose upon a continuum where their perceptions lie in relation to a statement they may or may not agree with to begin with. With unrestrained freedom to use their own words, participants are able to convey themselves naturally through a written medium.

Current Study

The focus of the research was to use NFA to deconstruct the identities of postgraduate education students. This study was conducted using graduate students (n = 11) enrolled at university in Japan. The main focus was to gather information and decipher their

motivational constructs for joining, and to look for any commonalities or patterns. Also of interest was the efficacy of the implementation of narrations as a medium of gathering data for use in a qualitative study.

The purpose of the study was explained to the participants at the beginning of their program. The participants provided verbal and written consent for the use of their data in the study. Participants were given roughly 15 minutes to complete the narration, but in practice there was no time limit in place. Because the narration was not a test of ability, there would have been no purpose in limiting response time.

Of interest was not just the information gathered, but also the utility of the device itself; NFA is not as commonly employed as either an open-ended or a non-open-ended questionnaire. The narration was created with the aid of an outside qualitative researcher who very generously oversaw the creation of the narration. Prompts such as *First, I believe language education...* and *I decided to study in a graduate program because...* were used to elicit personal information that could be coalesced into a broader picture; of interest were any similarities or trends between items and participants.

Analytic Approach

After retrieving the data, all information was entered into a spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel with each frame separated sequentially into columns and participants into rows then separately analyzed to triangulate the responses (Creswell, 2008). The reason for the initial individual analysis was an attempt to prevent any influence from one researcher to another at the interim stage (Clough, 2002).

Afterwards, the researcher engaged in confirmation checks with the participants. This was to ensure the accuracy of the reported data, to ask follow-up questions, and make revisions as needed.

Learner identity in the program showed that all of the participants considered themselves to be professional educators. All participants responded in a manner that demonstrated a self-representation as an educator. This identity was most commonly found to occur through noticing student needs, indicating a high degree of empathy on the part of the participants. For the purpose of anonymity, all participants have been given pseudo names. One participant, Arnold, stated “although competence in English is important for the growth of international business and relations particularly in Japan, English education is not taken very seriously here”. Arnold was very empathetic in his responses to his students’ need for English, and his perceived lack of competence in language education in Japan. This was unique, since Arnold was working in a private language school at the time, an industry that benefits the most from the lack of a comprehensive English language program in general education.

Tammy¹ described starting her career with the desire to know what language items students needed. Over time, the desire to know what was required for the curriculum became more pedagogically oriented, as she then wanted to know why the items were required. This ultimately led her to want to know how to assess which items were the most necessary. Another participant, Dave², explicitly stated a desire to “work hard towards filling the gaps

^{1, 2} Pseudonyms were used to anonymize the identities of the participants. should be used sparingly.

that current research does not report.” There was no mention of career advancement as one of the motivations for entering a postgraduate program. Overall, there was a very altruistic sense in the way identity and motivation were oriented in the participants.

Motivation for entering the degree program followed a similar thread among all participants: the motivation to improve research pedagogy and research acumen. These motivations were given in connection to the desire to perform better as an educator and to add knowledge to the field of second language acquisition to benefit other educators. In all participants, a similar linear trend was observed.

Participants entered the beginning of their career as a novice educator, then broadened their sense of the field, their contributions, and their functions as a second language acquisition teacher. Going through the process of completing a master’s degree helped them initiate a perpetuating process that created introspection, metacognitive pedagogical awareness, research interests, and a broader awareness of the field of language education. While these findings are not surprising, they are confirmatory of the expectation that postgraduate students in education would be motivated towards self-improvement. It would be incorrect to generalize these findings to all language teachers; however, the NFA retrieved exploratory and detailed information from which more specific research could be conducted.

The information and conclusions in the pilot study were insightful, but not unexpected. There is very little assistance from the government or places of employment for postgraduate education in Japan. Applicants willing to commit to a five to seven year terminal degree program and incur expenses which might not guarantee future career advancement are most likely highly intrinsically motivated. On the other hand, the origin and drive within each individual can only be fleshed out through qualitative research. NFA was highly efficacious in this domain.

Limitations

The narrative in the study was meant to cover a very wide topic among an extremely diverse crowd of only 11 people. Had the participant numbers been higher, it is possible that more pronounced and definite patterns would have emerged, just as in any other study.

Narrative Frames Analysis

The greatest strength of NFA is its ability to collect a large amount of data from many participants in a short time and with considerably less necessary resources than in-person interviews. The open-ended nature of the stems within the narration allowed participants to respond with a wider range of answers than would be possible in a multiple-choice style questionnaire. The narration itself prompted answers related to the theme of the research, allowing for a smooth stream of information related to all areas of interest.

However, some weaknesses of the narration were observed while analyzing the data. One area of concern in this study was the lack of theoretical premise, which made it unclear where conceptual categories come from and how they related to each other. This was a flaw that is attributable to the design of the study more than it is to any idiosyncratic feature of the NFA. Looking back through responses showed some gaps between concepts, or sections that demanded more depth than there actually was to the participant response. Career is not acknowledged; rather, only answers relevant to research interest are relevant.

One solution could be for participants to write down that they simply do not have an answer. It would be easy to write I am interested most in researching... nothing as a response to one of the prompts. Students in a graduate program might avoid acknowledging in writing a lack of interest in scholarly work. Regardless of the setting, situation, or context of the narration, participants might feel pressed to give more information than what might actually be pertinent to them. This could lead to erroneous answers written just to satisfy the perceived requirement of filling in all information. During the analysis, the researcher noted that many first responses garnered detailed responses, but a request for second responses such as *also*, *I... often* received much less output, and sometimes gave the appearance of a forced response.

In the creation and analysis of narrative frames for qualitative research, there is a lack of established procedure. Working without a framework or accepted form of standard measurement is difficult and time consuming during the creation process, but particularly troublesome while analyzing data. During the final stages of analysis, the researcher often attempted to parse out meaning through interpretation, particularly when interpreting intentions. This led to a process of attempting to understand how the narratives were interpreted by the writer. Absent any other data (such as a follow-up interview), the NFA results can be difficult to interpret.

Related to the previous point of a lack of framework for analysis, there was a tendency to over-rely on repeated instances. Although the same type of narration might be given multiple times, it does not make it important, only ubiquitous. Without being able to ask the participants follow-up questions to explicate upon the message, it would be very easy to miss important information that was related less often.

One critical point that was raised during the analysis process was the focus on in the text, when what was omitted might have been equally or more important. While the format of the narrative was less rigid than other standardized testing practices, it was rigid in its own way nonetheless. Without the interaction of an interview, the opportunity to redirect the questions based on the answers received was removed, and participants were forced to fit their answers to the prompts given.

Further Studies

Below are some suggestions for improvement in any future studies using NFA to research the same topic.

As this study illustrates, conducting a pilot study of the narrative tool after creation is necessary. Any gaps that appear trying to analyze the data may be addressed, and the instrument can be changed. Passages that produce ambiguous or off-topic answers can be re-written or removed.

Narrowing the theoretical focus of the narration to more specific themes might yield greater results. A narration that covers all aspects of one area will reveal richer data and provide deeper insights by having more diverse items that relate to the same topic.

In addition, a future study should expand the number of participants (e.g., 30). This would permit generalizability to apply in other contexts. Also, larger number of responses should provide unambiguous patterns and trends, if they exist.

Finally, conducting more follow-up interviews with participants after the narrative has been administered and analyzed would be beneficial to the study. This is perhaps the most difficult of all the suggestions, because it implies a prompt turn-around time between administration, classification, and analysis. However, this is a critical addition, as it removes the largest weakness from the NFA in its present form: a lack of clarification with the participants. This does not mean that a full interview necessarily needs to be conducted. The interview could focus on just particular points with a few select people, or in the form of a response group using key sections that need greater elaboration. It could also be an excellent time for participants to respond to and give feedback on researcher findings from the study.

Conclusion

The participants in the study offered key information related to the topic of interest, but also on the efficacy and implementation of NFA. The participants involved were found to be highly motivated educators that saw a postgraduate program as a chance for self-improvement, ultimately increasing their skills as instructors in the real world. Most were observed to have been highly affected during the completion of their graduate degree and by their experience working in the classroom.

Although narratives offer an alternative means to retrieve open information related to a particular topic from participants, there are weaknesses that need to be addressed if a more comprehensive picture is to be offered. The utility of such a device though, is in its ability to be administered to large numbers of participants in very little time. Including a narrative component with quantitative data could be viewed as a highly practical means of doing mixed-methods research in the future.

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