

2 (Auto)biography and learner diversity

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The term '(auto)biography' is used in this chapter to refer to a broad approach to research that focuses on the analysis and description of social phenomena as they are experienced within the context of individual lives.¹ This approach has been widely discussed and used in the field of education, mainly as a method of exploring teachers' lives (see Casanave and Schecter 1997, and Johnson and Golombek 2002, for examples from the field of second language teacher education). (...)

Note

1. The term '(auto)biography' here refers to both biography and autobiography. Other terms used in the literature include 'narrative research' (Polkinghorne 1988; Bruner 1990, 1991; Riessman 1993; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber 1998), 'narrative study of lives' (Josselson and Lieblich 1993), 'life history' (Bertaux 1981; Goodson and Sikes 2002), 'biography' (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf 2000; Roberts 2002; Goodley *et al.* 2004), 'autoethnography' (Ellis and Bochner 2000) and 'personal experience' (Clandinin and Connelly 1994). Roberts (2002) includes autobiography under the heading of biography. He also uses the term 'auto/biography' on occasion. I use the term '(auto)biography' to indicate that, in the context of second language learning research, the data are as a rule first-person (auto-biographical) accounts of experience that are analysed either by the subject of the research (autobiographically) or by another researcher (biographically).

(Auto)biographical research

The emphasis on the search for cognitive universals in SLA research has been at the centre of a number of recent critiques (Pennycook 1990; Rampton 1991, 1997; Block 1996b, 2003; Lantolf 1996; Firth and Wagner 1997; Tarone 1997; Ellis 1999; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000; Breen 2001; Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001; Norton and Toohey 2001). These critiques have also argued, from a variety of theoretical perspectives, for a greater emphasis on qualitative research directed at the holistic description of second language learning experiences and for a greater emphasis on the social, affective and conceptual dimensions of the learning process. In the context of these critiques, Norton and Toohey (2001, p. 310) refer to a relatively recent literature concerned 'not only with studying individuals acting on L2 input and producing L2 output, but also with studying how L2 learners are situated in specific social, historical, and cultural contexts and how learners resist or accept the positions those contexts offer them'.

In the following sections I will review two major strands within this literature. The first strand can be described as 'autobiographical' in the sense that it involves first-person analysis of experiences of second language learning by those who directly experience them. The second can be described as 'biographical' in the sense that it involves third-person analysis of the experiences of others.

Autobiographical research

Autobiographical research first appeared in the second language learning literature in the form of 'introspective diary studies' – a mode of research in which diaries or journals recorded over relatively long periods of time are analysed from a variety of perspectives (e.g., Schumann and Schumann 1977; Rivers 1979; Bailey 1980, 1983; Schumann 1980; Schmidt and Frota 1986; Jones 1994; Campbell 1996; Leung 2002). As Nunan (1992, p. 115) points out, this mode of research was initially seen as a means of gaining 'insights into the mental processes underlying observable behaviour'. It is now recognized, however, that the strength of diary studies lies more in the fact that researchers are able 'to tap into affective factors, language learning

strategies, and the learners' own perception' (Bailey and Nunan 1996, p. 197). Similarly, an emphasis on the close analysis of linguistic data in earlier studies (e.g., Schmidt and Frota 1986) has given way to a much greater emphasis on the social and psychological dimensions of language learning (e.g., Campbell 1996).

Although the number of published studies remains relatively small, introspective diary study has become an established research method informed by principles designed to increase reliability and validity (Bailey 1983, 1991; Bailey and Ochsner 1983). Paramount among these principles is an insistence that the data should be recorded concurrently with the learning. Adherence to this principle, however, usually means that researchers must decide to collect the data in advance and complete the data collection within a relatively short period of time. For this reason, published studies tend to cover periods of a year or less in which the researchers study a second language for the purposes of the research, or at least in the knowledge that research will be one of the outcomes.

In the light of this limitation, attention has shifted in recent years to recollection as a means of exploring longer-term experiences of language learning in more 'authentic' settings. Particular interest has been shown in language learning 'memoirs' from beyond the SLA literature, written both by second language researchers and others (e.g., Wierzbicka 1985; Hoffman 1989; Kaplan 1993; Lvovich 1997; Ogulnick 1998). From a conventional point of view, memoirs are something less than 'research'. Kaplan (1994), however, comments that she viewed writing her own memoir as an alternative to the research methods she had encountered in her reading of the SLA literature. Cameron (2000, p. 91) also argues that memoirs are worth studying because they particularly demonstrate 'the strength of feelings stirred up by language learning':

They make clear, for instance, that the acquisition of a new language raises questions of subjectivity and desire: the problems confronted by the learner are not just technical or mechanical ('how do I say X in this language?'), but involve complex issues of identity ('who am I when I speak this language?', or alternatively 'can I be "me" when I speak this language?')

Nevertheless memoirs retain a somewhat equivocal status as research and they have entered the SLA literature mainly as a source of data for third-person analysis in work on questions of identity in the memoirs of immigrants to North America (Morrow 1997; Pavlenko 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000; and Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001).

The most significant consequence of this interest in language learning memoirs, however, has been the emergence of autobiographical recollection within the second language teaching and learning literature itself.

Oxford and Green (1996), for example, have argued for the value of 'learning histories' as a source of data for discussion and reflection in the classroom (see also Aoki 2002; Horwitz *et al.* 1997, 2004), while others have viewed them as examples from which teachers and learners can acquire knowledge of the processes involved in successful learning. The aim of Belcher and Connor's (2001, p. 2) collection of individually and collaboratively produced language-learning autobiographies, for example, was mainly to help 'others to understand better how advanced second-language literacy can be achieved' (see also Stevick 1989; Murphey 1997, 1998a, 1998b; Ogulnick 2000). Recollection was also proposed as a research technique by Cohen and Scott (1996) and Oxford *et al.* (1996). At that time, however, they were unable to cite any published examples of its use. Autobiographical recollection has, however, recently been used by He (2002) to investigate learning strategies. It has also been used in research on second language literacy (Shen 1989; Bell 1995, 1997; Connor 1999), motivation (Lim 2002), autonomy and self-directed learning (Brown 2002; Benson, Chik and Lim 2003; Walker 2004), bilingual parenting (Fries 1998; Kouritzin 2000a), and the experiences of non-native speakers as learners and teachers (Lin *et al.* 2002; Sakui 2002). In these studies, the drawback of 'inevitable memory deterioration between the language learning experience and the research study' (Cohen and Scott 1996, p. 102) tends to be counterbalanced by the researchers' intimate knowledge of the contexts of their own learning and by the insights that are gained from a longer-term view of the learning process.

Biographical research

One of the chief limitations of autobiographical research lies in the fact that the researcher-subject must be able to write a publishable account of her or his own learning experiences. Biographical research thus opens up the possibility of exploring, albeit indirectly, the experiences of a much wider range of learners. As in the case of autobiographical research, in the following review I will make a broad distinction between studies based on concurrent data and studies based on recollection.

Biographical research in the field of second language learning can be traced back to a series of longitudinal case studies related to Schumann's (1978a, 1978b) pidginization hypothesis, or acculturation model (e.g., Cazden *et al.* 1975; Shapira 1978; Kessler and Idar 1979; Schmidt 1983). Although these studies were largely structured around the analysis of linguistic performance data, they differed from other case studies published at around the same time in the significant use they made of information about the subjects' life experiences. For example, in Schmidt's (1983)

three-year study of Wes – a Japanese artist who had acquired English with little formal instruction – the main source of data consisted of 21 hours of audio-taped speech. The analysis of this audio data is organized in terms of categories of grammatical, discourse and sociolinguistic competence, but Schmidt's (1983, p. 145) 'extensive but irregular field notes' also play a significant explanatory role throughout.

In more recent case studies – often described by their authors as 'ethnographic' – biographical data play a more prominent role, influencing both the degree of emphasis on linguistic developments and the structure of the published work (e.g., Gillette 1994; Polanyi 1995; McKay and Wong 1996; Lam 2000; Norton 2000, 2001; Toohey 2000; Teutsch-Dwyer 2001; Chen 2002; Newcombe 2002). Among these, Teutsch-Dwyer's (2001) study of the morphosyntactic development in the English of Karol – a Polish immigrant to the USA who had also acquired English with little formal instruction – is closest in conception to Schmidt's (1983) study of Wes. But the fact that Teutsch-Dwyer explains linguistic developments in Karol's English through the story of his immigration to the USA and his relationship with a female partner marks a significant difference between the two papers.

In other studies, linguistic developments are more broadly sketched out and sometimes constitute little more than a statement of the problem to be explored. Gillette (1994), for example, used proficiency assessments to identify three 'effective' and three 'ineffective' learners, but the bulk of her study is concerned with the exploration of relationships between life goals and strategy use based on ethnographic and biographical data. Similarly, Polanyi's (1995) study, based on narratives written by American study-abroad students in Russia, seeks to explain differences between male and female assessed proficiency gains, but the main focus of the paper falls upon an analysis of the gendered nature of the study-abroad experience for many female students.

In some recent studies, non-linguistic outcomes are the major focus of attention. Swain and Miccoli's (1994) study of an adult Japanese learner's participation in a course on collaborative learning, for example, is mainly concerned with the learner's affective development during the course, while Allen's (1996) study of an adult Libyan learner is concerned with the evolution of his beliefs about language learning during an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. Block's (1996a; 1998) case studies of language learning classrooms focus upon the learners' interpretations and evaluations of classroom events and processes rather than developments in their language proficiency. The language-based longitudinal case study of the late 1970s has thus evolved gradually into a more 'ethnographic' form, in which the description of language learning experiences and their non-linguistic outcomes plays an increasingly important role.

Biography properly speaking, however, has been the province of 'life history' research, which is usually based, in the context of second language learning, on recollective data collected either through interviews or in the form of written essays. Evans' (1988) book-length study of the experiences of university-level foreign language students and teachers in the UK appears to be the earliest example of life history interviewing in the field of second language learning. The aims of Evans' study – to 'understand the experience of a group and articulate it' (ibid., p. 1) – were relatively open-ended and the editors of this book adopted a similarly open-ended approach in research into the lifelong language learning experiences of university-level learners of English in Hong Kong (Benson and Nunan 2004). The objective in each case was to paint a contextually rich picture of the experience of learning, which took account of both the commonalities of the setting and the specificities of individual experiences of it.

Other life history studies have focused on specific questions concerned with affect and cognition (Oxford 1996), motivational development (Spolsky 2000), language loss among Asian-American immigrants (Hinton 2001), access to ESL classes for immigrant women in Canada (Kouritzin 2000c), language policy in China (Lam 2002) and multilingual identities of Asian learners of English (Kanno 2000, 2003; Benson, Chik and Lim 2003; Block 2002). Life histories, typically collected in the form of short essays, have also been used as a source of data for more abstract theoretical work (Schumann 1997; Tse 2000; Carter 2002). In Schumann's recent work, for example, 'linguistic autobiographies' written by his students form part of a data set (which also includes published introspective diary studies and language memoirs) supporting an explanation of variable success in second language learning in terms of 'preferences and aversions acquired in the lifetime of the individual' (1997, p. 36).

The rise of (auto)biographical research?

In this brief literature review I have extracted a relatively small number of studies from the many thousands that have been published in the field of second language learning over the past 25 years or so and brought them together under the heading of '(auto)biographical research'. In doing so, I am attempting to establish what Golden-Biddle and Locke (1997, p. 29) call a 'synthesized coherence' by claiming that these studies constitute a coherent body of work in spite of the fact that they are in many ways unrelated to each other. What is it, then, that ties these studies together and differentiates them from others, and what is it about them that justifies the use of the term '(auto)biographical'?

Reviews of the contents of the major journals in our field suggest that, although qualitative research remains a minority interest, it is nevertheless gaining ground (Lazaraton 2000; Gao, Li and Lu 2001). To describe the studies reviewed here as 'qualitative' would therefore be one way of separating them from the majority and, especially, from the bulk of studies in the SLA research tradition discussed earlier. Qualitative inquiry, however, covers a variety of approaches and the scope of the studies reviewed here can be further narrowed down by contrasting them with (a) qualitative studies of learning activities (such as think aloud studies of learners working on tasks of various kinds) and (b) qualitative studies of learning situations (such as observational studies or classroom ethnographies). In contrast to these types, the studies I am concerned with here are (a) based upon first-person accounts of relatively long-term processes of learning and (b) focused on learners and their experiences rather than the learning activities or situations in which they participate. Many of these studies are case studies of individual learners or, more narrowly, studies of the sense that is made of learning experiences as learners participate in a variety of activities and situations over relatively long periods of time.

A second way of identifying this body of work, however, would be to point to its connections to parallel work concerned with narratives of experience in other fields. As Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998, p. 3) show, narrative-based studies have flourished since the mid-1980s in a variety of fields, including psychology, gender studies, education, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, law and history. The influence of this work has, moreover, been such that some researchers have written of a 'biographical turn' in the social sciences (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf 2000; Roberts 2002), while the title of one book goes so far as to suggest that we are now living in a 'biographical age' (Goodley *et al.* 2004). According to Roberts (2002, p. 1), biographical research 'seeks to understand the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important, and how to provide interpretations of the accounts they give of their past, present and future'. This would also be an apt description of the research I have reviewed and, although it would probably be overstating the case to claim that second language learning research is also on the verge of an (auto)biographical 'turn', it is worth noting that several of the more recent studies make explicit reference to biographical research in the social sciences and that discussions of narrative and life history methods have begun to appear in the literature (Kouritzin 2000b; Bell 2002; Pavlenko 2002).

The term '(auto)biographical research' would seem to apply most appropriately, then, to recent studies in which there is an explicit attempt to collect and analyse learners' stories of learning experiences using methods and frameworks developed in the social sciences. When we look

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at earlier work such as the introspective diary studies and case studies of the late 1970s, however, we see very similar goals and methods at work. This suggests that the roots of current interest in (auto)biography as a research tool are partly indigenous and certainly deeper than they appear at first sight. It also points to a possible underlying shift in focus within the field from ‘the learner’ as an abstract, or universalized, construct to actual learners and their historically and contextually situated experiences of learning.