

## 5. Narrative Research: Contributions and Frame within Postmodern, Critical and Decolonial Perspectives

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### Introduction

Narratives have accompanied individuals for a long time in history as part of their daily lives. However, it has been until recent decades that narratives have provided new spaces for researching, while opening opportunities to alternative interpretations of different phenomena in areas such as education, psychology or cultural-social studies. Nevertheless, narratives are so embedded in the daily life of subjects that it is difficult to grasp what they intend to tell us about reality. This means that, within a single personal narrative there are many elements about the subject's understanding of reality, all of them interconnected. Chase's (2018) account of the inquiry within the critical viewpoint, problematizes this aspect by discussing two aspects of embodiment. On one hand, Sparkes & Smith (cited in Chase, 2017) refer to narratives as an embodied social process characterised by the empathy among those who listen or watch. Without being essentialist, those who engage in narratives research need to avoid disingenuous or dry relations with their participants to have real respect for the other. In other words, when carrying out narrative research, researchers become an integral part of the participant's narrative, not an outsider. On the other hand, the embodiment of narratives has recently been studied from the performances that people do when narrating. Riessman (2012 cited in Chase, 2017), highlighted the externalization of emotions/feelings of narratives through non-verbal communication and dialogues among members of a community. Embodied performances of narratives encourage researchers to observe not only the narratives themselves but also

actions that subjects can do while narrating. For example, in the ELT field, we can find interesting narratives of English Language Teacher Educators (ELTEs) when professors sit around and work on curriculum development or construction. While working on the outline of the curriculum, ELTEs may engage on dialogues about complementary aspects of the curriculum that may not be included in the formal document.

Furthermore, Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik (2014) identified two major areas that have used narratives in their research works. On one hand, psychology sees and works with narratives to gain insights on how individuals organize their experiences. Also, narratives help to understand the construction of identities in terms of the subjects' self-representation and to the others. On the other hand, sociological studies have used narratives to explore the multiplicity of voices that might have been covered by official or hegemonic academic discourses. Social studies have made visible and heard other voices about the reality that might have been discredited by the lacking the scientific rigour and universality of the modern thought.

Therefore, narratives in research have the potential to understand not only the subjective, particular and situated experiences of subjects, in this case, ELTEs, but also can contribute to identifying external elements that exert an influence, either positively or negatively, on the construction of identities. The challenge for the researcher on using narratives lies on the epistemological positioning from which narratives are understood. Currently, we can identify three major fields of work using narratives as a research tool: poststructuralism, decolonial projects and critical theories. This paper aims to explore the conceptualization and use of narratives within these current epistemological perspectives, by examining the work of representative authors in each one. Also, I will discuss how the previous perspectives on narratives can guide research on English Language Teacher Educators' subject constitution.

In the following section of this paper, I will examine how narrative is understood from the point of view of the three current epistemological, philosophical and social perspectives above, poststructuralism, decolonial projects and critical theories. What is the role of narrative in research? What are its main characteristics? What are its contributions to research? These questions will lead the ongoing discussion about the use of narrative as a research tool and its conceptualization to implement narratives that tackle the subject constitution of English Language Teacher Educators in Colombia.

## A New Definition for the Self: A Postmodern Construction of Narrative

Casey's (1995) influential paper was one of the first attempts to conceptualize narrative research in the field of education. From a postmodern positioning, this author characterizes the use of narrative as something inherent to the human life, as the best strategy that individuals have to both make meaning of their lives and organise their experiences through language. In terms of research, Casey (1995) calls our attention to the wide diversity of approaches and definitions of narratives that have emerged from different areas of knowledge, all of them shifting and taking distance from a positivist stance of research and moving towards a more interpretative posture. Moreover, this turn to narratives has represented a change in the issues of research in social, educational, cultural or psychological studies since narratives provide researchers with the chance to recognise the social forces that are shaping the current society and culture (Freeman, 2015). It is through narratives that researchers can get access to the actual influences of historical events in our current society, while at the same time expose, denounce or identify situations of dispossession, commodification or annihilation. However, narratives present an interesting, yet unfinished, discussion. According to Casey (1995), seeing narrative as an essential human activity will require from the researcher to have a clear and supported vision of the speaker's self. It is commonly accepted that personal narratives are the main way used by subjects to construct their identities by positioning the self as similar to or different from other, the self as acting on and by the world, or the self as changing (or not) over the times (Bamberg cited in Chase, 2017). This discussion has been challenged by Bhatia (2002), who proposes another focus of the study of narratives moving away from the self and reaching to the influences that contexts have in the production of narrative identities. For this author, the conflicting cultural, institutional and historical contexts fold and unfold in narratives allowing researchers to observe narrative's connections to specific cultural practices and/or events.

At this point, I can perceive that the movement towards narratives in research, as described by Casey (1995), settles its ground in a poststructural stance; my view comes from realizing the prevalence given within this stance to the self and to understand the narratives; at the same time, we can elucidate elements of both critical and decolonial perspectives when the authors point to the way how alternative social and cultural issues have been included to the discussion about narratives. As far as it was discussed above, narratives

focused on the self and its construction have moved towards a new direction by embracing cultural, political and social perspectives to the analysis.

By the same token, Clandinin & Huber (2010) stated that narrative inquiry is a recent development in the field of qualitative and social research, highlighting that it has postmodern and constructionist characteristics. As Casey previously mentioned, Clandinin & Huber (2010) also considered that the main objective of narrative research is to allow researchers to have access to, and I quote, “the complexity of the relational composition of people’s lived experiences”. In this view, narratives are considered as the way or *portal* that individuals use to gain access, interpret and organise their world while making it meaningful. As it can be appreciated, Casey (1995) and Clandinin & Huber (2010) share the idea that narrative research provides researchers new elements to access aspects of the subject’s inner understanding of the world, by means of exploring their experiences through the stories or narratives they tell. Also, it can be seen that, although the use of narratives by human beings has been present for a long time in our history, the use of narratives as a source of research is new, thus reaffirming their postmodern characteristics.

Moreover, Clandinin & Huber (2010) provided a conceptual framework in which three common factors are described to be essential when undertaking a narrative research project. First, there is temporality. From a philosophical perspective, the lives of subjects are situated in the past, present and future, which means that experiences are always in a state of transition. Narrative research may attend to this fluidity in time, places and things when tackling narratives in research. Second, there is sociality. Both personal and social conditions of the researcher and participant are taken into consideration within the narratives. The researcher looks to the inner aspects that the subject narrates in his/her story, for example, feelings, desires or moral positioning. Also, the researcher may attend to the milieu where the narrative takes place focusing on cultural, social, institutional and linguistic, among other aspects. Third, there is place. A place is conceived as the physical and topological terrain in which narratives, participants and researchers are unfolding the stories. This conceptualization of place as an influential aspect of the narratives is shared by a decolonial positioning of territory. To this respect, Comboni & Suarez (2015), from a decolonial perspective, call our attention to the crucial role that territory has in the process of research. Here, we can appreciate a resonance between these two perspectives; that is because the concept of territory developed from a decolonial thought takes the physical space as an influential aspect in the construction of the identities of the subjects. It

is in the territory where subjects first start to attach themselves and start a process of identification both physical and symbolic. This attachment will then be expressed through narratives that will unveil the way subjects construct themselves as such.

## The Critical Narrative Research: A Claim for Social Justice in Education

So far, I have discussed some aspects of how the postmodern perspective sees and works narratives as a research tool. However, the evolution of narrative research has had a steady pace making the field more mature and complex (Chase, 2018). Following this assumption, I will go on to discuss a contemporary, yet more recent, perspective of narrative research called Critical Narrative Research.

While working and reading different authors of both decolonial and critical perspectives and the use they make of narratives, I have acknowledged the complexity of the unfolding of narratives within each perspective. There are no clear-cut differences but rather an overlapping of ideas, positionings and research experiences using narratives, which have taken me to look carefully at how narrative is conceived. Gill (2014), maps out the field of critical narrative by focusing on Freirean ideas of education as well as reflecting upon the real sense of learning in our current days. I consider this position as a landmark, since this author not only provides examples of critical narratives in education but also provides interesting epistemological stances to conceptualize narratives within the critical paradigm. As with the postmodern perspective, critical researchers pay special attention to the self and reflect upon it to discuss the real objective of education. The self is perceived from four aspects: moral, social, narrative and autonomous. The moral aspect of the self is seen as a cornerstone for Gill's positioning, as it answers the question of how we should live our lives as fulfilled humans. The moral aspect of the self establishes that there is an inner sense of the good in humans that is translated into education in terms of which elements are to be studied within the curriculum of schools so that to provide students, children, teenagers or adults the opportunities to become subjects who are free of, or at least aware of, possible subjugation practices. The social aspect of the self is described as the external forces that contribute to the individual's sense of him/herself concerning others. The social aspect connects both, the inner

and external aspects of the self, by means of revealing those influences from the society, culture or politics that either hinder or contribute to develop the self. The narrative aspect illustrates people's journeys through life. Narratives are seen as central in the organization of the experiences as a continuum that is both coherent and non-chronological. The final aspect is the agency of subjects, understood as the autonomy that people have to become actors rather than reproducers in the construction of meaning.

The conceptualization of the self in the critical narrative, although connected to the self, challenges the postmodern view regarding the endless exercise of deconstructing the identities of individuals. For critical thinkers using narratives, such as Gill (2014) or O'Loughlin (2016), the self that is situated in the education field seeks to act towards the good understanding because of the commitment that subjects have to be fully humans. Here, it seems to me that critical narratives working on the self take distance from those postmodern ideas of the self as something unfinished, always fluid and immersed in everlasting relations of power that change according to the social contexts. The reason for adopting the concept of the self in this moral way, lies in the objective that education has according to critical theory. Erikson (cited in Gill, 2014), defines self as follows: "a forever to-be-revised sense of reality within social reality". This idea suggests that the construction of the self is not done by the age nor inherently given through living experiences; rather the self is constructed through a constant effort for searching such fulfilment in life.

Therefore, learning is not conceived as the acquisition of knowledge or employment skills that only transforms people into objects of the economic system or instruments to fulfil specific actions from the government and state. In coherence with its discourse, critical theory defines learning as a mutual endeavour between teachers and students focused on the construction of a fulfilled human being (Gill, 2014). It is through narratives that teachers and students can overcome the constraints that inert curricula many times offer. Narratives play two crucial roles at this point. On the one hand, the educational benefit of narratives is that they provide to teachers and students with alternative strategies to help students in their life's journeys by using the skill of questioning that narratives can unfold. On the other hand, narratives have become a highly influential and vital research methodology as well as a tool to unveil not only conscious but also unconscious aspects of the subjectivities of both teachers and students (O'Loughlin, 2016).

The unconscious aspect cited by this author, is similar to Freire's (1969) *generative themes* regarding how teacher education programs have been focused on providing teachers with tools to work on the cognitive development

of students and content delivery strategies/techniques, which leads teachers to conceive education as a mere academic/ cognitive action. According to O'Loughlin (2016), the unconscious is directly connected to the students' lives since they always bring pieces of the community's traditional and evolving knowledge that is overlooked in the curriculum design. It is through narratives that teachers and researchers can work on what the construction of grounded curriculum design is, when they explore the life stories of students, colleagues and society where education takes place. It is in narratives that students construct their subjectivities in particular ways, thus contextualizing such construction within specific social, cultural, political and special contexts; it is also through narratives that researchers and teachers can uncover dormant subjectivities while engaging in possible subaltern identifications.

An important reflection that highlights a clear characteristic of critical narrative research is posed in the following question: how are students portrayed in education, especially in teacher education programs? From a critical perspective, the narratives of students have been normalized in such terms that they are defined with clear-cut characteristics of the ideal student. Thus, the discourse of homogenization takes into account children and teenagers within teacher education programs but fails to address the actual variety of subjectivities present in every single student. Therefore, critical narrative research takes narratives as a resource to provoke reflection about different aspects that have been either silenced or normalized in education. It is more connected to the lives of teachers and students through constructing the curriculum based on the current and local issues of the community and students' lives. Narratives, within this perspective, are focused on the construction of subjectivities for both teachers and students, which ought not to be subjected to standards or sterile curricula but rather are able to critique and recognise the different elements that co-opt their lives.

## The Decolonial Project: Narratives of Silenced Voices

While critical narratives are focused on denouncing social injustice in education systems, decolonial narratives place their main focus on the epistemic decentring of the world, in search for alternative geopolitic, non-European knowledge perspectives. Before starting our discussion on the role of narratives within the decolonial project, I would like to point out two differences about the concepts of postcoloniality and decoloniality



that may be useful to understand the evolution of these perspectives. For Bhabra (2014), although both movements are characterised by emerging from diasporic authors, their reflection focus may differ in two aspects. Postcolonial authors focus their studies on the colonial discourse and the cultural agency of subjects (Castro-Gomez & Grosfoguel, 2007), whereas decolonial authors call the attention to the ways how, from a Eurocentric vision of the world, other contemporary epistemes were and have been silenced and disregarded. On the other hand, both perspectives have seen its birth from different geographical locations which in turn has influenced the differences regarding their main focus. Whilst decolonial authors have been located mainly in South America, postcolonial writers have come from the Middle East and South Asia. Nevertheless, both decolonial and postcolonial perspectives and authors have been interested in challenging the European and North American hegemonic traditions in the academic, economic, cultural, social and political fields, using situating narratives from local contexts at places of distinction, places of recognition to reveal the many struggles that minority groups have endured through history.

Decolonial narratives have paid attention to an epistemic otherness where different interstices between those local, situated and overlooked forms of knowledge, being and power, interact with colonial ways of subordination. Narratives in the decolonial perspective fight for building self-determination from a world and subjectivity that have been fragmented (Smith cited in Whitlock (2015). Following Ramallo (2017), decolonial narratives allow the subjects to communicate their ways of experiencing, feeling and participating, that is, their ways of being in this world, using other alternatives while *playing with the languages*. Thus, decolonial narratives use local histories told by local people about their local contexts to make visible what has been ignored by hegemonic forms of narratives. It is from these subaltern narratives that other meaningful ways of narrating emerge inviting other subjects to see what each culture understands by narrating. Therefore, there are multiple and varied ways of decolonial narratives, and trying to explain all of them will overpass the scope of this paper. Meanwhile, I would like to pinpoint one of those forms of subaltern narratives which has been widely explored is the *testimonio* (testimony). Although the testimony has been used in different research and disciplinary perspectives (psychology, anthropology and even medicine), it is in the decolonial project where it has gained more momentum so as to dismantle the univocity of registers that was established by a rational, Western and positivist way of knowledge production. It is in the *testimonio* where the subject abandons his/her status as an object of study to embrace the position of knowledge producer, that is to say, the narrating subject is



not circumscribed to a predetermined framework of interpretation from an outsider view (the researcher), but rather the subject her/himself is sharing new insights about a local situation, which provides complementary forms of understanding. Through narratives, people recall those cultural phenomena from both individual and social memory that have been extinguished in time, while at the same time narratives become embodied stories since they also are performed by those who narrate them.

Another of the most relevant forms of narratives in the decolonial project has been the autobiographies. However, this form of narrating has been *whitened* in terms that it has been used to construct a homogeneous idea of selfhood characterised by being rational, male-oriented and *racially white* (Chakrabarty, 2000). Anderson (cited in Whitelock, 2015), points out that this *whitening* and rationalism of autobiographies reproduce the idea of a universal human nature. Decolonial authors Grosfoguel (2006) and Walsh (2013), call our attention to the way how Western visions of the world have silenced in many aspects indigenous or natives' ways of knowing, by means of imposing a rational, universal and authoritarian view of the subject, knowledge, life, and religion among others. Thus, other types of narratives coming from other race groups, rather than white ones, have been silenced and ignored and in this way created a subject that is unified, exalted and characterised by Westerns (American or European) visions of the world. It is here where the decolonial projects emerge as the movement that pursues not only to rescue but also to make visible, to reclaim, to make sound those overlooked narratives that testimonies come to be.

An additional, yet highly relevant, characteristic of the decolonial narratives, is the recognition of the *other*. The use of narratives as testimonies in the decolonial perspective is characterised not only by paying special attention to the self of those minority groups, but also by the strong and active resistance to Western discourses on modernity and homogenization. In hegemonic groups, the self is seen as individual rather than collective, as rational rather than socially constructed, as colonial rather than intercultural. For Quijano (2007), the decolonial movement reflects, discusses and confronts different ways of colonization in terms of political and economic aspects. Also, the domination carried out by the modernity/coloniality perspective takes place through knowledge colonization. It is here where narratives as a way of collectively and individually constructing the self, are seen as the main way to liberation as well as to exposure of the subtle mechanisms imposed by hegemonic discourses.

Therefore, the emerging of the *other* in narratives means the recognition of alternative, multiple and complex ways of enunciation that transform narratives by the inclusion of new dialogues about the past, while at the same time “contest modernity through the establishment of other historical sites” (Bhaba cited in Bhambra, 2014). At this point, we can appreciate an important difference between postmodern and decolonial perspectives related to the recognition of the epistemic violence exercised by hegemonic traditions. Spivak (cited in Bhambra, 2014) points out to the lack of discussion, reflection and activism from postmodern authors in denouncing the epistemic domination by ignoring the question of ideology.

Another difference of the decolonial narrative research compared with the postmodern and the critical, is that the decolonial, which attempts to construct or reclaim a self that has been silenced, subjugated or erased from history, also allows and encourages the narrators to perform their testimonies. According to Young (2003), testimonies are dynamic and interactive so as to they are appealing to the person or people who see and listen to the testimony. We can see that this embodiment, provided by testimonies, suggests that the self and its construction is problematic, complex, varied and heterogeneous. One may say that testimonies take the autobiographies to a more real, personal, vivid and attractive level since, for the most part, they do not intent to just narrate a life story but also explicitly look for an audience to be attentive and empathetic.

After discussing the main elements of narratives in the postmodern, critical and decolonial perspectives, I have come to realize that these points of view, although paying attention to different aspects of the culture, society and self, have also captured the complexity where individuals are immersed, depicting scenarios that may complement each other in their reflections. As an example, I can extract from postmodern narratives the importance of the self and its narrative/discursive construction, as well as a clear notion of how the subject is immersed within a highly complex matrix of relations to the point that the most powerful tool at hand for an individual to think his/her reality is the narration, here understood as the construction of a life story mainly conformed by discursive elements. This understanding of the self is complemented by both the critical and decolonial narratives. For the critical narratives, the self is central to the construction of a fully-humanized subject taking this as the main goal of the education. In the critical theory, narratives constitute both the path to construct situated curricula and to provide students and teachers with opportunities to build subaltern subjectivities. As for the decolonial

perspectives, narratives have evolved to take the form of testimonies, among others, as an alternative way of autobiographies that have been whitened. Decolonial narratives have included the performance aspect of the narration into it, thus making the testimonies and other types of narratives more dynamic, fluid, expressive and more connected to the self of either the individual or collective subject. Figure 5.1 below shows the main aspects discussed so far.

**Figure 5.1**

*Narrative Research Perspectives*



Source: Own

Figure 5.1 depicts how each narrative perspective above discussed, tackle the three pivotal questions of the role, the characteristics and the research implications that narratives take. So far, I have identified the following key topics of discussion within each perspective: the self in the postmodern narrative; education in the critical narrative; and performance in the decolonial narrative. On my view, in spite of the continuities that interconnect and complement these perspectives, discontinuities also exist, which guide and make the narrative unique in each area. For example, narratives take a more performative role for the decolonial approach, whereas for the critical, they are an instrument to unveil the homogenization practices exerted over teachers and students.

## Narrative Inquiry in ELT to Study ELTE Subject Constitution

The distinctions above have given me insights to shed light on my study about English Language Teacher Educators (ELTE) and the ways they have been constituted as subjects. Inspired by the use of narratives and its potential to let ELTEs narrate their stories, I wonder: how do ELTEs make sense of their experiences? How can researchers access to ELTEs' narratives to untangle their subject constitution? An attempt to situate the work on narratives within the perspectives above mentioned, should take me to explore even further the use of narratives in the ELT field so that to start developing a plausible research process that uses ELTEs' narratives to unveil how they have become teachers of teachers.

Jerome Bruner (cited in Barkhuizen, 2014) suggested that there are two ways of organizing experiences: arguments and stories. On one hand, arguments (paradigmatic) try to convince of their truth through the use of mechanisms that most of the times are rational and empirical. On the other hand, stories (narrative) try to convince of their connections to life through verisimilitude. The use of narratives in research dismantles the idea that research only favours the creation of arguments over stories. Moreover, it has been seen that sometimes the results of paradigmatic research fail to create convincing arguments linked to reality due to the absence of the life-likeness that stories have. As explained earlier in this paper, narratives have taken a relevant place in research due to its focus on researching areas where the person's understanding of the situation is more important while at the same time the

most plausible way to gaining insights about the research situation. One of those areas should be the constitution of subject, more specifically, the constitution of the subject called English Language Teacher Educator (ELTE). Generally, the constitution of subjects has been studied following Foucault's archaeology work, as discussed by Mendez (2017; 2012) and Nuñez, (2007). Researchers around the globe have used the toolbox provided by Foucault to explore the different ways how subjects are constituted as such within our current historical moment, unveiling the relations of power, knowledge and resistance that go through those subjects and affect their construction of identity.

However, using narratives to understand the constitution of ELTE subjects at our local Colombian context through the examination of narratives, may shed light about the different power relationships where teachers of teachers are immersed, and the different resistance or subjugating practices exercised by and on them. The use of narratives may also provide new ways of identifying aspects of the subject constitution, such as the subject's internal struggles to become an ELTE and the external forces trying to subjugate them, now seen from the perspective of the own subject.

Although most of the work done on the topic of subject constitution has favoured archaeological procedures (i.e. tracing back specific documents such as archives to understand the present) evidence suggests as above discussed that ELTEs can unveil aspects historically situated about themselves and how some forces have affected them, by participating on studies focused on understanding how they come to be who they are as teachers of teachers. In my view, there is complementarity of visions of the external and inner forces that influence the ELTEs in Colombia.

## Conclusion

At this point, it is undetermined what ELTEs can narrate about their constitution as teachers of teachers. Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik (2014) have identified three major characteristics of narratives in English Language Teaching and Learning (ELT&L), which in my view might be strongly related to the postmodern, critical and decolonial perspectives. First, many ELT narratives are personal and take the form of autobiographies. As discussed earlier, decolonial narratives have evolved from autobiographies to testimonies, often times including a performative component into the narration. Also,

decolonial narratives reveal a fragmented and/or silenced vision of the world. I consider that narratives, seen as ELTEs autobiographies, have the potential to allow the researcher to uncover aspects of pedagogical, methodological, political, academic or personal aspects that have been kept hidden while appreciating the way the narration is being told. Second, ELT narratives go around teaching and learning experiences based on the teller's imagined or real day-to-day life. Similar to critical narratives, the educational aspect of narratives is present in both. ELTEs may centre their narratives on the main goal that the education process, specifically learning a foreign language, should have. Although it is still uncertain if there may be critical aspects of education in the narratives of ELTEs, such as, denouncing social injustice situations and contexts, I expect that ELTEs narratives would reveal aspects about the reasons why learning a foreign language can be either positive or not-so-positive, which in turns will lead me to the moral and ethical aspects of this activity. The last aspect is the relations that narratives have with the narrator's identities. From a postmodern perspective, narratives construct the self while making meaning of the experiences lived by the subject. In the case of ELTEs, their narratives may also reveal how they perceive their roles as the individuals who are in charge of the formation of the new generation of English language teachers in our local context.

To summarize, there is a multiplicity of voices brought in narratives that should provide opportunities for marginalized groups to be heard (Casey, 1995). It is in their narratives that subjects situate themselves within the world, a culture and a society. As it was explored in this paper, narratives can serve for different purposes, each one implicating a researcher's epistemological positioning towards the conception of the subject's self and his/her use of the narrative. Thus, the narrative can be either an instrument of research or the same research process itself. Important, though, is to keep in mind that narratives are not the actual representation or the objectivation of the reality; instead, narrating is a personal, temporal and situated oral, written or non-discursive expression of the narrator about his/her life experiences. Exploring ELTEs' narratives is expected to uncover different characteristics of their subject constitution in terms of their complex relations with pedagogy, policies, economic, historical and contextual aspects, while, more importantly, should help understanding how they come to be who they are as teachers of teachers.

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