

Representations of language learning: from talking about a school subject to talking about *authentic* contexts

Simon Coffey

King's College University of London

Abstract

In this article I examine how the 'learning' of modern languages (in this case mainly French, though also Russian) is constructed differently as, on one hand, a *school subject*, and, on the other hand, an integral element of interacting in 'authentic', or naturalistic, settings. Narrative analysis of participants' life stories reveals how the two experiences of learning are constructed differently. Furthermore, I argue that defining *authenticity* only as communication in naturalistic settings can be simplistic given that authenticity denotes any experience which is motivated as genuine in a given context and valued for its own sake, including in the classroom. In the accounts discussed here, school learning is constructed as a pedagogic process dependent on being good at languages and having a good teacher whereas engaging in authentic settings is narrated as part of a wider life project of becoming cosmopolitan. The way the experience of language learning is reproduced through discourse has important implications on many levels: such an approach extends our understanding of the learning / acquisition distinction beyond blunt Krashenian terms to see that contexts of language learning are not static backdrops but are social networks which individuals reconfigure to make their own meaning. Individuals' personal reflections on learning are shaped through narrative resources, and these can inform and enrich the types of intercultural work which encourage personal investment through links with others (such as peer correspondents) and discussion of cultural representations.

Key words: Teaching and learning, autobiography, language-and-culture, pedagogy discourses.

Resumen

En este artículo examino cómo el aprendizaje de lenguas modernas (en este caso principalmente francés, aunque también ruso) se construye de modo diferente si es materia escolar o si es un elemento integral de interacción en contextos auténticos o naturales. El análisis narrativo de historias de vida revela como las dos experiencias de aprendizaje se construyen de modo diferente. Argumento, asimismo, que definir *autenticidad* sólo como comunicación en contextos naturales puede ser simplista dado que la autenticidad implica cualquier experiencia considerada como real en un contexto dado y valorada por sí misma, incluyendo la clase. En las muestras que aquí se tienen en cuenta, el aprendizaje escolar se construye como un proceso pedagógico que depende de ser bueno en lengua y tener un buen profesor, mientras que intervenir en contextos reales es narrado como parte de un proyecto de vida más amplio de convertirse en cosmopolita. El modo en que la experiencia de aprendizaje de lengua se reproduce a través del discurso tiene importantes implicaciones en muchos aspectos: ese enfoque amplía nuestra comprensión de la distinción de aprendizaje/adquisición más allá de los directos términos de Krashen para ver que los contextos de aprendizaje de lenguas no son situaciones estáticas sino redes sociales que las personas reconfiguran para darles su propio significado. Las reflexiones personales sobre el aprendizaje se moldean a través de los recursos narrativos y éstos pueden informar o enriquecer los tipos de trabajo intercultural que motivan la implicación personal a través de enlaces con otros y discusiones de representaciones culturales.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza y aprendizaje, autobiografía, lengua y cultura, discursos pedagógicos.

Background

Language learning covers a wide range of fields: it can be seen as a pedagogic enterprise, in which case the activity is structured by specific institutional practices, or as a necessity to meet particular communicative needs, in which case the activity is shaped by immediate needs as perceived by the individual. The well

documented history of communicative language teaching has attempted to bridge the gap between these two positions by preparing students in classroom contexts for real, future needs. Following Krashen's (1981) famous distinction between learning and acquisition, the term *acquisition* is usually used to describe the process of learning language when learners are situated in naturalistic (target language) contexts, although, as discussed by Block (2003), the terms learning and acquisition are often used interchangeably in the literature. The differences in the settings (classroom vs real-life contexts) have been framed according to the differing pedagogical criteria (Lightbown & Spada, 2006); differences in cognitive processing between conscious learning and sub-conscious acquisition (Krashen, 1981); and motivational variables (Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, 1985; Gardner et al, 2004). More recently, researchers have investigated the different emotional investments (Kinginger, 2004a, 2004b; Pavlenko, 2005, 2006) individuals report in different languages and how these affect field-specific use (Pavlenko & Dewaele, 2004) and even lead to language attrition in the individual (Schmid, 2002). The idea of *investment* in language learning (Norton, 1995, 2000) has allowed us to rethink learning as more than a functional skill but, rather, an identity project (Coffey & Street, 2008) through which learners, as actors, use language to take positions vis-à-vis other actors. As such interaction is inevitably embedded in social structures, language learning becomes a performative project in which learners negotiate locations of symbolic power. One way of seeing how these positions are taken is by analysing the ways learners talk about their experience of language learning. The study reported on here used learners' autobiographies to do this. The analysis of autobiographical data have been steadily gaining ground across the social sciences, including in applied linguistics where such data have been the subject of various treatments and research aims (an excellent review of these can be found in Pavlenko, 2005). The autobiographies presented here were collected with the aim of understanding why British native speakers pursue foreign language learning given that the dominance of English largely removes obvious instrumental needs. As discussed below, the way learning is framed by participants shifts from the mundane chronicling of language learning as a school subject to a narrative opening up of new vistas which are enmeshed with other emerging identities in professional and cultural worlds.

Analysis

The data are the written and oral accounts of two British adults talking about their experience of languages learning. Each of the participants cited has learnt at least one foreign language (mainly French, though both have some competence in other languages) through advanced study and 'travelling' / spending periods in a target language country¹. The interviews were carried out as part of a wider research project looking at both written and interview accounts, though, given space constraints, discussion of the analysis is restricted here to two 'telling cases' (Mitchell, 1984). Discourse analytic procedures of re-reading and sorting into thematic categories allowed me to separate different (temporal) episodes in each account. I then looked for themes across these episodes within each account, before contrasting and comparing across the accounts. Ways of talking about learning indifferent episodes are presented here using the interpretative repertoire metaphor first developed by Potter & Wetherell (1987). Silverman contrasts this approach with 'the conventional and popular code-and-retrieve approach' (Silverman, 2005: 197) employed by grounded theorists. Discourse

¹ At the time of the data collection Lucy was a 30 year-old graphics engineer and Glenda was a 40 year-old international youth volunteer programme manager. Both names are pseudonyms. Both participants are known personally to me and both agreed to their stories being used as data for publication.

analytic approaches – such as the one used here – seek to include in the analysis ‘close examination of actors’ use of language, seen through their choice of particular words, phrases and metaphors’ (Silverman, *ibid*).

During analysis I made notes on anything that I noticed that might be useful, that might prove to be a pattern, that might allow me to build up a characterization of the way stories are being told (as constitutive elements of the whole life story). Items that drew my attention were, in particular, single lexical features and how these related to narrative chunks (stories and episodes). These allowed me to make claims about the ways stories were brought told, both how places and people were drawn and how the teller (the participant) portrayed their own narrative identity within the portrayal of given contexts.

Given that both participants were asked, when initially approached, to talk about their *language learning* it is unsurprising that this was a focus of their response. It is worth noting that *my* reasons for using the term *learning* do not necessarily accord with *participants’* perception of the term. Furthermore, the accounts may well have been different if I had asked participants to write about their *experience of* foreign languages or their *contact with* foreign languages. Even the term ‘engagement’, which I have used in the analysis, may have brought into relief different elements in the life stories if this term had been made explicit to participants. The cue word ‘learning’, therefore, is a powerful constraint affecting the production of the accounts, restricting the possible repertoires out of which participants felt they could construct their accounts. Indeed, this observation can explain, in part, why the written accounts featured more reference to the formal learning environments of school and adult education.

During analysis I extracted from the accounts participants’ explicit references to ‘learning’ in a formal, institutionalised sense. The first section of the article shows how each participant represents learning in her written and interview accounts. In some instances representations – discursive enactment of the language learning project – are markedly different between the written and oral accounts, whereas in other cases there is reiteration of the way learning is represented through recurrent use of particular repertoires. The order of the participants presented here follows the order of the data collection (i.e. Lucy followed by Glenda).

In later sections I will show how certain themes relating to learning have emerged from the way learning is represented across the accounts, namely how participants narrate the influence of others (teachers, family, peers) in the learning project; how participants construct themselves as language learners, that is being a language learner (as distinctive from a non-language learner), including positioning oneself as a learner in different contexts (schoolgirl, family member, exotic traveller). Finally, I examine how learning in institutionalised formal contexts is constructed differently from learning in authentic (target language) contexts. Lucy, the first participant presented here, refers most positively to her experience of formal learning and there is a relative lack of focus on learning in informal contexts such as time spent abroad.

Representations of learning in Lucy’s accounts

Lucy expresses strong affect throughout her written account, associating childhood language learning with fond memories of family and friends. This is reiterated in the interview. She emphasises the structural ‘support’ of family, friends and school, almost eulogising an idyllic life. The language learning project is constituted of formal learning contexts in Lucy’s story, especially in her written account, more than in any other account. Of the six paragraphs of Lucy’s written account, which are chronologically arranged, the first five each intertwine memories of institutionalised learning with family memories of holidays, though even

boost this learning but the affective dimension is rooted in the institutionalized worlds of childhood (school and family relations).

Representations of learning in Glenda's accounts

With 1,788 words Glenda's written account is considerably longer than Lucy's (813 words). Unlike Lucy, who struggled to know what to write, Glenda did not ask for further detail about what was being requested. Glenda's written account is produced as a complete piece as if it were an assignment that had been thought through beforehand rather than written spontaneously. Such preparedness may suggest a greater reflexivity regarding the language learning project, reflecting a 'rehearsed' (Gee, 1991) narrative. There are 17 paragraphs which she distributes across the following four sub-headed sections:

1. First language learning experience 1974 age 10 - 1st year at Chorley Convent Grammar School
2. 1979 Sacred Heart Sixth form College and 'A' Levels aged 17
3. 1981 – 1991 (Glenda's 'travelling period' spent living in different countries)
4. Bournemouth Polytechnic and life abroad 1991 - 1995

Glenda's written version of her language learning project is markedly different in content from her interview account, the former includes details of her school career while the latter focuses almost exclusively on the experience of travelling. The 'travelling period' (1981-91) is covered only within a brief paragraph in the written account, though Glenda's stay in Russia is covered more extensively in the final section, whereas in the interview Glenda foregrounds her identity as cosmopolitan traveller and the personal transformation that this identity afforded. This different distribution can be explained (as well as by my cueing) by Glenda's decision to record formalised learning in the written account. As well as being the result of my prompts, this different version also results from Glenda's perception of the different medium-bound genre, that is, *writing* a record of language learning leads her to chronicle formal learning experience while *speaking* her story leads her to liven the account with more anecdotes and to significantly shift focus to engagement in authentic settings. Although the content of Glenda's written account is quite novelistic in its deployment of humorous asides to the reader, the *format* of the written account appears almost like a curriculum vitae in the way the division into temporal chunks follows institutionalised phases.

From the start Glenda portrays herself as a not-very-good student, stating that 'the bright ones were encouraged to study German and Latin and the not so linguistically gifted French and Spanish'. Self-deprecation with regard to her school learning runs throughout Glenda's life story (in both the written and oral accounts). School-based language learning is storied around feelings of (academic) inadequacy despite attending a selective 'grammar school'. She attributes passing her French exam to a trip to France which made learning French 'marginally more interesting' and after which she 'had managed to learn enough to get a C grade at 'O' Level without too much effort'.

Unlike some of the other participants in the study who employ terms such as grammar, drills, methods, target language, Glenda does not draw on an expert repertoire to describe her school learning; instead she constructs school as a world of teachers as comedic characters and her schoolgirl self as a hapless observer. Her French teacher is described as 'irritating' ('my main memory of them [teachers] was someone sticking chewing gum to our irritating teacher's chair') in comparison with the 'glamorous' image of the teacher another class had:

GLEND A a more stern but glamorous female teacher who was addressed ‘madame’ and who took her lessons in French. Though she terrified me I was a bit jealous too – our teacher hardly spoke French in the lessons

Her Spanish teacher – ‘one of the first male teachers in an all girls school’ – is criticised for enjoying ‘flirtations’ with some of the other girls and her negative experience of ‘A’ level French (which she failed ‘most abysmally’) is attributed in part to the ‘70 odd-year old retired nun teaching us and an emphasis on literature’.

Other participants also portray amusing images of different language teachers and the way these characters are storied provides an interesting insight into the world of school as it is reproduced in discourse. Teacher memories are considered in a later section.

That the final section of Glenda’s written account is, by far, the longest section of her account brings into relief the emphasis Glenda places on her language learning project as an adult experience (in contrast especially with Lucy). Glenda went to university at the age of 28. Still feeling inadequate as a language learner Glenda spent time in Brussels prior to the course ‘relearning’ her French. Here again she describes the influence of others and these others are caricatured in a similar way to her former schoolteachers: ‘I spent the summer in Brussels living with an elderly and eccentric French-speaking friend of my brother’s’ (lines 58-59). Glenda also starts to use language learner meta-talk to describe this phase of learning (‘comprehension exercises’) and when she started university (‘my writing and grammar skills’ ‘grammatical competence’) which signals a shift of repertoire. Although university is, like school, learning in a formal, institutionalised setting, adult Glenda positions herself as an adult developing skills whereas when describing school learning she preferred to position herself as a school child vis-à-vis teachers rather than as language learner.

Unlike French, Glenda’s learning of Russian is consistently framed positively. She describes how ‘learning Russian from scratch was a new start’ which put her ‘on the same level’ (line 75) / ‘level pegging’ (line 82) with peers. Although she describes the university teaching of Russian as ‘uninspiring’ she was motivated by the new opportunity and went to live in Moscow for a year after graduating, working as an English teacher for nine months and then enrolling on a language course for two further months. The period she spent in Moscow is described in greater detail than any other episode (lines 86-137). The weight given to this episode signals the value attributed by Glenda to the identity she constructs within the figured world of the ex-pat studying Russian in the authentic context of Moscow. This episode is also described in some detail in the interview section. The positive language Glenda uses to describe this period conveys a desired mode of learning i.e. as a lone enterprise. She enjoyed the immediacy of learning in a foreign language context but also enjoyed formal studying for the first time. Here that section (lines 94-126) is reproduced:

I studied Russian every afternoon in my room going through endless self teach grammar exercises and comprehension passages. I really loved this. I don’t think I have ever enjoyed language learning as much as I did at this point. I was in control and it was comforting locking myself away from the big scary city outside and the hectic coming and goings of the family. Out in the real world it was hard at first and frustrating not being able to understand the simplest conversations. I particularly hated the fact that the 16 year old teenage daughter of the family who I taught at school would seem to find my attempts at conversation dreary and laboured. Luckily my host mum loved to chat and I had a very good relationship with her ten-year-old daughter who enjoyed my company.

After a month or two I had the confidence to get out and explore Moscow. The positive reaction of local people to a foreigner speaking Russian was really rewarding and I loved being able to have simple conversations even if only passing a few words. Often I would meet some of the ex-pat community at weekends and go walking which provided a release from the pressure of trying to ‘be me’ in Russian. Towards the end of nine months however, I felt I had reached a point where I was able to be creative with language, making jokes and using vocabulary for effect.

(Glenda, written)

much spoken this proved difficult. However, despite the trauma I continued to write to her on my return home and she visited me the following year thus practising my written French skills and developing my vocabulary to a small degree. She never invited me back to France again so I lost interest and ended our pen friendship. However, I had managed to learn enough to get a C grade at 'O' Level without too much effort.

(Glenda, written)

Glenda's success in obtaining a pass at 'O' level is attributed therefore to her contact with her penpal rather than to any formal learning. Glenda begins her narrative thread as cosmopolitan traveller by describing her school exchange trip to France as great fun:

GLEND A I was completely overwhelmed by the experience. No, but I really settled into it and I had a great time, after a couple of- sort of the first week or so, just as anything, once you get used to the being in a different culture and I loved it.

COFFEY -you didn't feel homesick?

GLEND A -No, no not at all, sort of, after the first, sort of, probably week or ten days, erm, maximum, I just loved it, being in a new culture, sort of, meeting new people, having, you know, lots of activities around, things to do.

Participants like Lucy who were less negative about school learning make a connection, to varying degrees, to the notion of formal learning as preparation for putting into practice the language learnt once in an authentic native-speaker context. Lucy, who framed her school experience most positively of all participants, made the strongest connection between school learning and other influences, including spending time in France as an opportunity to consolidate learnt language:

This boosted my interest in French as I had already been lucky enough to spend numerous holidays in France where my parents actively encouraged us to use the few words we knew wherever possible. As children we spent a couple of summers being looked after by an 'au pair' and this fuelled our interest further and we were always keen to learn new words and discover new aspects of the French culture. ... I had an enormous love of the language and also felt as though learning French at University offered more opportunities. I really wanted to spend a year abroad and become as fluent as possible.

(Lucy, written)

Lucy's childhood sites of language learning are presented as a seamless world of support which includes family, friends, school and regular trips abroad. In Lucy's accounts learning in authentic contexts is valued as an opportunity to 'become as fluent as possible' (Lucy, written) but is not privileged over other learning opportunities as a life changing epiphany, in other words, while she acknowledges that language proficiency develops from being 'totally immersed in the language and the culture' (Lucy, written) there is not a sharp qualitative distinction between formal learning and acquisition in authentic contexts.

Whilst Glenda struggled with formal learning and only really saw the value of language learning once she began travelling, Lucy, conversely, found formal learning enjoyable and easy while living in France presented challenges:

LUCY I ... had a number of miserable experiences to be honest where I was ignored or spoken over or whatever, particularly in my year out in France the first few months were very tough.

Given that both participants attended similar schools (selective girls-only grammar schools) it is interesting to see how differently.

We can see from these descriptions that *learning* tends to be constructed as a formal, instituted process. The learning in social interaction with native speakers in target language settings is highly valued but in different ways. For Glenda such experience marks a series of turning points. In both cases, the personal experiences of *using* French in France is not framed as language *learning*. The notion of authenticity is interesting because the language learning project clearly goes beyond language use in target language settings and this emphasizes the social nature of learning. French (and other) language competence is not

only used to speak to French speakers but is a competence which continues to develop through practice and regular usage *where* the language learning project is integrated into worlds which are meaningful for the individual inasmuch as language competence allows participation in certain professional and cultural worlds (Coffey, in press). *Authentic* contexts, therefore, can mean *in situ* in a target language country, but can also be defined as using and developing language competence in the *authentic* context of professional or personal use. We might say that Lucy's learning of French at school and in highly-valued institutional contexts is authentic because the activity is authenticated as meaningful and worthwhile, whereas for Glenda authentic use is connected to her identity as cosmopolitan traveller engaging with native-speakers.

Concluding remarks

In this article we have seen how learning can be constructed differently through discourse. In the written accounts of their language learning autobiography participants focused more on formal, institutional contexts. In the interviews participants focused more on travel and other 'authentic' experiences of later life and these events were storied more as narrative anecdotes. What participants say about learning (which repertoire is used) at an informational / content level (focusing on lexis) can be contrasted with *how* certain episodes are framed in terms of narrative structure. Episodes of formal learning are expressed as chronicled events whereas episodes of time abroad are storied as narrative anecdotes. The term *learning* itself therefore is construed as a formal, institutional process in the accounts rather than developing competence through language use in naturalistic settings.

This difference has broader implications for the way language learning is framed: on the one hand learning can be described through teachers, pedagogic methods and school practices and on the other hand, it is an authentic social practice (though authentic does not necessarily mean naturalistic!). Unfortunately the latter, which appears to be valued as more meaningful and leading to more sustainable engagement with the language learning project, is not recognized as *learning*. This difference may be explained in terms of how the content is represented and which sites of identity are being referenced. Learning is narrated as a trajectory, beginning with school and leading to time abroad. Learners like Lucy who enjoy language learning may not necessarily come to see themselves as cosmopolitan travellers but may find authentic contexts for language use in a home setting (for instance Lucy says that she 'really like(s) seeing French films and get(s) good feeling when (she) see(s) films or television programmes, documentaries about France').

As autobiography is increasingly used to extend our understanding of the diversity of individual language use (now increasingly referred to as *plurilingualism*) it is important that autobiographical accounts are recognised as genre-bound products of particular interactional moments, rather than revelatory reports of lived realities. Participants construct accounts of their experience according to available narrative resources (interpretative repertoires). In terms of the learning / acquisition distinction, the ways learners talk about their experience can help us to understand what meaning language learning has for them.

References

- Block, D. 2003 *The Social Turn in Second Language Acquisition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Coffey, S. (forthcoming) Becoming a Francophile: Stories of Frenchness. *Language and Intercultural Communication*.
- Coffey, S. 2007. Discursive worlds of the language learner: A narrative analysis. *Revista Complutense de Educación* 18/2: 145-160.
- Coffey, S. & Street, B. 2008. Narrative and identity in the 'language learning project'. *Modern Language Journal* 92/3: 452-464.
- Dörnyei, Z. 2005. *The Psychology of the Language Learner*. Mahwah, N.J: Erlbaum.
- Gardner, R. C. 1985. *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Gardner, R. C., Masgoret, A.-M., Tennant, J. & Mihic, L. 2004. Integrative motivation: Changes during a year-long intermediate-level language course. *Language Learning*: 54/1: 1-34.
- Gee, J. P. 1991. Memory and myth: a perspective on narrative. In McCabe, A. & Petersen, C. (eds.) *Developing Narrative Structure*, pp. 1-25. London & NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Horton-Salway, M. 2001. The construction of M.E.: The discursive action model. In Wetherell, M., Taylor, S. & Yates, S. J. (eds.) *Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysts*. pp. 147-188. Milton Keynes, Bucks: The Open University.
- Kinginger, C. 2004a. Bilingualism and emotion in the autobiographical works of Nancy Huston. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 25/3: 159-178.
- Kinginger, C. 2004b. Alice doesn't live here anymore: Foreign language learning and identity construction. In Pavlenko, A. & Blackledge, A. (eds.) *Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts*. pp. 219-242.. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Krashen, S. 1981. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. 2006. *How Languages Are Learned*. 3rd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mitchell, C.J. 1984. Case Studies. In Ellen, R. F. (ed.) *Ethnographic Research: A Guide to General Conduct*. pp.237-41.. London: Academic Press.
- Norton (Pierce), B. 1995. Social identity, investment and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly* 29/1: 9-31.
- Norton, B. 2000. *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education.
- Pavlenko, A. 2005. *Emotions and Multilingualism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pavlenko, A. (ed.) 2006. *Bilingual Minds: Emotional Experiences, Expression and Representation*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Pavlenko, A., & Dewaele, J.M. (eds.) 2004.. Multilingualism and Emotions. *Special Issue. Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 25/1.
- Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. 1987. *Discourse and Social Psychology*. London: Sage.
- Schmid, M. S. 2002. *First Language Attrition, Use and Maintenance: The Case of German Jews in Anglophone Countries*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Silverman, D. 2005 [2000]. *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. London & Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Simon Coffey. Having been a language teacher for many years (in England and mainland Europe) Simon Coffey currently lectures at King's College London where he is PGCE Modern Languages course tutor and Programme Director of the BA Modern Languages with Education. His research interests include aspects of language pedagogy and the analysis of language learning autobiographies.