

## Ethical concerns in practising and researching (E)FL<sup>1</sup>

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When I started my doctoral work I was concerned about what I have called in my thesis ‘hardened stories’ (a description borrowed from Carola Conle (2000)). These were stories and images of language teachers and learners I had come across in my daily life as a teacher and a counsellor, as a reader of newspapers, Internet discussions and fiction, but also as a reader of research literature, and as a listener at conference and seminar presentations. According to Conle, a story becomes hardened when it is detached from its experiential moorings and made to serve a new teller’s purpose without acknowledgement of her meaning-making process. Stories have an attraction and appeal but they are also dangerous just because we are so used to encountering them: even the hardened ones are often a part of learners’ and teachers’ daily lives and (separate) discussions.

The world of learning and teaching in general is often storied in such a way as to give teachers a very particular place of power over other influences and motivational factors. At least in Finland, learning foreign languages seems to have been inscribed as an emotionally-fraught chapter in many young people’s educational autobiographies and teachers often figure as the main characters in their stories. I strongly felt that there was a lack of texts that would put the two characters in the same story and would show the interdependence of experiences and the mutual shaping of stories. Early on in the inquiry I recognised the central role of my own educational and life experiences and autobiography in how and why my data and documents appeared the way they did to me. Self-reflexivity became the guiding principle for the inquiry.

In my thesis, I approach the practice and research of (E)FL as auto/biography (Stanley 1992/1995): I use my own life and (E)FL experience to understand and interpret the stories of the research participants even though I was not involved in their course work. I also advance the idea of learner/teacher stories as relational and occurring through dialogue, that is, dialogue with ourselves, with our colleagues, with our learners, and with research texts. I take narrative to be human interaction in

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<sup>1</sup> This summary is based on my doctoral thesis (Karlsson, L. 2008. *Turning the Kaleidoscope: (E)FL Educational Experience and Inquiry as Auto/biography*. Language Centre Publications 1. University of Helsinki Language Centre (<https://oa.doria.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/42707/turningt.pdf?sequence=1>)] and the lectio praecursoria that I gave in its public defence in December 2008.

relationships (Riessman and Quienney 2005), thus placing stories between people. Moreover, I consider the experiential nature of telling as a focal element in stories (Fludernik 1996). All of these conceptualisations mean that narrative has a multidimensionality and openness which make a definite ending problematic, if not unnecessary.

I carried out my inquiry as participatory research so it was research with, not on, learners and counsellors. The aim was to empower, respect, and give a voice to them as knowledgeable and active participants. This was, however, not easy or straightforward. A good intention is not enough to guarantee that a voice is given or taken in research: empowering research participants is not an innocent practice and can and should be questioned at all stages of the research process in a truly self-reflexive way. As a narrative educational inquirer, a teacher-researcher, I saw it as my duty to consider my ethical principles over and over again: they had to be contextual considerations, not only abstract principles. Our teaching offers us rich material for stories but the way we use the materials is always selective. We should avoid describing classroom and other learning stories stereotypically. This should become our main concern: as researchers, we are the new teller, and stories made to suit our new purpose are a potential hazard. Reflexivity gave me reason to pose the key question: Whose story is this anyway? Who has the right to tell whose story?

All the way through the thesis process I was concerned about consent, confidentiality, representation and participation. Jo Reger (2001: 9) writes: "I was too visible, an ethically challenged contaminant that had no right to be in this space". A fear of this kind of a researcher's taint was probably one of the reasons why I chose to collect my data on a course taught by another counsellor, not my own course. Obviously, as an ethical solution it was justifiable because teachers are always the ones who have the power and the participating students' reaction was that it was better this way. At the beginning the students and the counsellor gave their consent to the full use of the videos, and of the written and sound-recorded documents. Yet, as narrative inquiry is contingent and unfolding, my text and my thinking were in progress all the time. For example, the eight learning histories or educational auto/biographies in the thesis were read and approved of by the students before the thesis was examined. But I gave presentations and wrote other texts arising from the thesis which were yet other interpretations, in which I put bits of data from the thesis into a different context. This meant creating other, new experiential narratives. Consent is therefore an ongoing and open-ended process.

In the thesis I turned my gaze on various constellations of lived experience: the data was collected from various occasions and settings during one course and consists of videotaped group and individual counselling sessions, biographic narrative interviews, open-ended personally-inspired reflection texts written by the students about their histories, and student logs and diaries. I did not take data collection to be

an unproblematic occasion or innocent practice either. The way the data was collected touched upon ethical issues such as the ownership of the learning documents, my purposes as a researcher in using them, and very importantly, the fact that I transcribed all of the texts in a certain selective way and translated some of them from Finnish. All of this made the data even less innocent and impartial. Because my quest was for a pedagogically motivated way of researching I did not approach, for example, the reflection texts on learning histories primarily as interesting data but as a learning tool. The texts in question are used on the course in order to promote an autobiographical reflexive approach to language learning (Jaatinen 2003) and they are a part of the interaction between learner and counsellor: learners write and tell and counsellors read and co-tell. I made every effort in the thesis not to trivialise their telling.

Because lived experience is evoked in stories, in the telling and in the listening, my entire research hinged on listening to stories. I aimed at being an ethical listener in the research interviews: it was important to appreciate the participants' experiences as they were (Hyvärinen and Löyttyniemi 2005). Not only my listening but also the restorying was a matter of confidentiality and representation. Although I as the researcher was able to stop time and make repeated readings of the research material, I had no right to use a superior voice over all the others when restorying: I had no right to conclude from and control what the characters in the thesis stories said. I wanted to write the thesis text without forcing it to go in a certain direction, towards a certain conclusion.

Carola Conle's has repeatedly (see for example Conle 2000 and 2006) written about the contextual nature of stories and the importance of preserving their "experiential moorings" when restorying. I have taken her warnings about sending off "one-liners" or "hardened stories" seriously and tried to make sure that the context was always given or created for each story. The explanations presented in the thesis are contextually related. My research was done on a Helsinki University English course, what we call ALMS (autonomous learning modules)<sup>2</sup>. These explanations are not recipes or quick fixes for others to use.

Writing formed the very core of the thesis, and the research process. Writing, not as a "gift" for the academic community (cf. Saarnivaara, Vainikkala and van Delft 2004), but as a struggle and a true learning process and a method that made it possible to think 'with' stories, not exclusively 'about' stories (cf. Morris 2002). This implies a need to think of the readers as well. Kenneth Gergen (2007) suggests that the way we choose to write as scholars establishes a particular relationship between writers and readers. The writing in the thesis was never meant to be impersonal with a single expert addressing an anonymous readership. I believe that educational writing at

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.helsinki.fi/kksc/alms/index.html>

large should help create vicarious experiences by capturing some of the emotional and experiential aspects of what the writer is describing. First person narratives can have the power to, as Gergen puts it, “diminish the boundary between author and reader”. They invite the reader to “think with the writer”. In the context of learner/teacher autonomy in particular, it is important not to position oneself as a superior. I feel that this is less likely to happen when the very writing aims at speaking from experience.

The whole process of telling a narrative history of experience is extremely complex and yet I became convinced that the integrity of the research process is a necessary goal. My starting point was the conviction that theory informs method; hence method is not separate from how we conceptualize the phenomenon, how we know and how we work with the knowledge. Research writing itself cannot be separated from narrative field work and analysing and interpreting the data. It was the actual writing that helped me partially clarify the emotionally-charged quality of learning and teaching encounters and how to deal with this in research. I look upon teaching, counselling and research as lived experience. The emotional context and the many emotional aspects involved in the practice of all three should not be hidden away. Storytelling helped me interrogate my emotions at various points in the research process. I tried to include, not delete, these emotions in the stories told and I ended up writing about some of the emotionally-charged research relationships in the text. I looked for a way to write about emotions in a way that would not be controlling and felt that I could only aim at *describing* learning and research encounters in which emotions have caused participants to react and act in various ways.

All of the above ethical duties and dilemmas face us when talking to colleagues, presenting our research in conferences and workshops, and writing articles and book chapters for publication: showing and using student generated material should always be done with great caution and sensitiveness. Permission to use the materials is not enough: the contexts in which the texts were written need to be considered and our own purposes and motivations in using and showing the texts need to be revealed as well. Every new occasion makes the ethics even more important. The language we use for talking and writing about our research participants, our students or our colleagues should reflect our appreciation of them: to me, for example, the supposedly objective term ‘informant’ is NOT an appropriate term to describe a student telling me about her learning experiences.

Bochner and Ellis (2003, 155-156) suggest the following ethical assumptions for autoethnography, narrative ethnography, co-constructed narratives, personal narratives, research memoirs, and interactive interviews:

1. The researcher is seen as part of the research data.

2. A research text is always composed by a particular somebody somewhere.
3. Research involves the emotionality and subjectivity of both researchers and participants.
4. The research relationship between researchers and participants should be democratic; at the very least; researchers should show concern for their obligations to the people they study and write about.
5. What researchers write, create, and/or perform should be written, created and/or performed for participants as much as about them; researchers and participants should be accountable for each other; researchers' voices should not dominate the voices of participants.
6. Research should focus on what could be, not just about what has been.
7. Researchers should conceive of their readers and/or audiences as co-participants, rather than spectators, and should think with them not just about them.

All of these assumptions were my guidelines when researching. My thesis represents a modest attempt to tell a story about learning/teaching/counselling/researching in an ethically sustainable way.

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