

Karlsson, Leena. 2008. Turning the Kaleidoscope - (E)FL Educational Experience and Inquiry as Auto/biography. PhD thesis, University of Helsinki.

Abstract

This book is a study into teaching, counselling and research on the two. My quest has been to find a pedagogically-motivated way of researching learning and teaching interaction and, in particular, counselling, in an autonomous language learning environment. I have tried to develop a method that would make room for lived experience, meaning-making and narrating, because in my view these all characterise learning encounters between language learners and counsellors, and learners and their peers. Lived experience as a source of meaning, telling and co-telling become especially significant when we try to listen to the diverse personal and academic voices of the past as expressed in autobiographical narratives. I have aimed at researching various ALMS¹ dialogues, and autobiographical narratives within the dialogues, in a way that shows respect to the participants, and that is relevant, reflective and most importantly, self-reflexive. I have been interested in autobiographical telling in EFL/FLE, both in students' first-person written texts on their language learning histories and the sharing of stories between learners and a counsellor.

I have turned to narrative inquiry in my quest and written the thesis as an experiential narrative. In particular, I have studied learners and counsellors in the one and the same story, as characters in one narrative. This is an attempt to avoid them appearing as separate, often anecdotal stories told by the other participant, retrospectively. Through narrative, I have shed light on the subjective dimensions of language learning and experience and come closer to understanding the emotional aspects of learning encounters. I have questioned and rejected a distanced and objective approach to describing learning and teaching/counselling. I have argued for a holistic and experiential approach to EFL/FLE encounters where there is a need to see emotion and cognition as intertwined and thus to appreciate learners' and counsellors' emotionally-charged experiences as integral to their identities. I have also argued for a way of describing EFL/FLE encounters as they are situated in history, time, autobiography, and a learning context.

I have turned my gaze on various constellations of lived experience: the data has been 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. Data collection has not been seen as an unproblematic occasion, or innocent practice. The complexity and integrity of the research process is defended. Research writing itself cannot be separated from narrative field work and analysing and interpreting the data.

Identity and writing as inquiry, and the deeply narrative and autobiographical nature of the EF/FL teaching/counselling/researching has come to the fore in this research. Research writing as a relational activity and its implications for situated ways of knowing and knowledge have become important foci of the research. I have also focussed on the context-bound and local teacher knowledge and ways of knowing about being a teacher. Additionally, I have argued for personal ways of knowing about foreign languages and learning languages. I discuss research as auto/biography: as a counsellor-researcher I am using my own life and EFL experience to understand and interpret the stories of the research participants. The supposedly static binaries of learner/teacher, and also learner autonomy/teacher autonomy are thus brought under discussion. I have highlighted the infinite variability and everchanging nature of EFL encounters, but the book is also of relevance to FLE in general.

¹ Autonomous Learning Module, University of Helsinki Language Centre English course and programme.