

# Short Stories: Analyzing Preservice Language Teachers' Narratives

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Short story analysis is a technique in which extracts from qualitative data such as interviews and diary entries are examined for their narrative elements (people, place, time) and then connected to increasingly larger scales of context. I argue that this technique can positively inform research and teaching involving preservice language teachers because it encourages participants to systematically reflect on experience and what makes it meaningful. I exemplify the analysis by applying it to extracts from interviews with two preservice teachers about a teaching practicum, which demonstrates how contextual issues related to language learning and teaching can impact the everyday lives of prospective teachers. I conclude by discussing some of the implications of this approach for research and teaching involving preservice language teachers.

ショートストーリー分析は、インタビューや日記などから抽出した質的データの中のナラティブな要素（人、場所、時間）を調べ、それを徐々に、より大きな広がりのある文脈へと結び付ける分析方法である。この方法では、調査の参加者に自分の体験がどういう意義をもつか系統だった振り返りをさせることができるので、特に言語教師を目指している学生に関わる研究や教育には有用であると思われる。分析方法を例示するために2人の教職課程在籍の学生へのインタビューから実習科目についての抜粋を分析し、結果として、語学学習と教育に関する課題が将来の教師の日常生活にどのような影響を与えるかを示すことができた。最後に、言語教師を目指している学生についての研究と教育に対するこのアプローチの示唆を示して結論とした。

For several years I have been teaching an EFL methods course for university students as part of the requirements for an English teacher's license. Teaching this course has been a challenge, as it typically involves large enrollments and students with diverse career orientations and varying levels of proficiency and motivations for language learning. Underlying these facts is the issue of how to stimulate students to think and talk in meaningful ways about language learning and teaching. At the same time, I have also acquired an interest in narrative inquiry, particularly as an avenue of insight into the experiences of preservice teachers (PSTs) as they prepare for careers in education (Clements, 2019, 2020). This has inspired me to look for ways of bringing narrative inquiry into the classroom, particularly as a heuristic that stimulates me and my students to reflect on language learning and teaching identities.

Here I describe a technique from narrative inquiry (short story analysis) that has the potential to inform research and teaching and apply it to extracts from interviews with two PSTs about a teaching practicum. Short story analysis derives from Barkhuizen's (2008, 2016) work on language teacher identities and is a situated approach that takes the brief and often open-ended narratives that arise when PSTs discuss their experiences and connects those narratives to broader contexts. While my primary purpose is to demonstrate the technique, I also aim to explore the possibilities of using narrative inquiry in methods courses like the one described above.

## Short Stories

Narrative inquiry offers various tools that can be used in research and teaching involving preservice language teachers. Researchers have employed these tools to examine identity development (Rugen, 2008) along with related issues of emotions (Bloomfield, 2010; Yuan & Lee, 2016) and agency (Kayi-Aydar, 2015). At the same time, the sharing of stories has been recognized as a powerful means of promoting reflective growth among inservice and preservice language teachers (Johnson & Golombek, 2011). This dual role in teaching and research is particularly relevant to teacher education as it encourages virtuous cycles of meaning-making among teachers and students—a process that Barkhuizen (2011) calls “narrative knowledging” (p. 393).

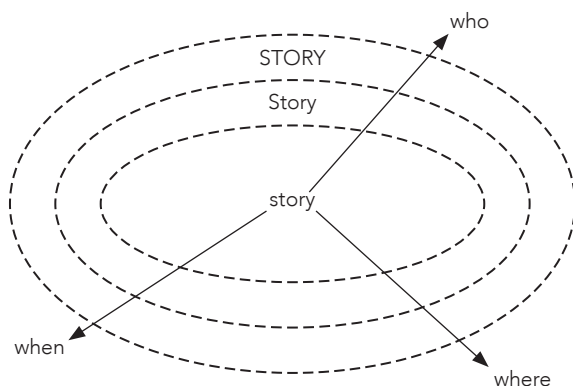
Short story analysis was developed by Barkhuizen (2008, 2016) in his work with language teachers in South Africa and New Zealand. It is an example of what Polkinghorne (1995) referred to as *narrative analysis* (as opposed to *analysis of narratives*). Specifically, the teacher educator/researcher examines texts not necessarily intended as stories, such as interviews, reflective assignments, and observation notes, for their narrative elements. This involves asking questions based on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimensions of narrative inquiry: people (*who* participates), place (*where* events occur), and time (*when* they happen). As Barkhuizen (2016) points out, other questions (such as *what* happens) are not ignored but instead are considered in con-

nection with the three dimensions. The form of a story, such as its language and rhetorical organization, is not ignored either, although that is not the primary focus.

These content questions are examined in relation to three “scales of context” (see Figure 1) that overlap and mutually inform one another (Barkhuizen, 2016, p. 661). The focus of the first level (*story*) is the immediate thoughts and emotions of the participants and their interactions within contexts that are comparatively limited in space and time. For PSTs completing a practicum, this might include their interactions in school settings with children, with teachers who act as mentors, and with other PSTs. It also might include short-term needs and background experiences such as the preparation they have had for the practicum and the practical details of completing and receiving credit for it. The second level (*Story*) zooms out to the institutional settings and longer time scales surrounding and influencing these thoughts and interactions, including guidelines and decisions that affect working environments. For PSTs, this may refer to school and departmental policies about textbooks and materials, language of instruction, and university requirements for graduation and licensure. It could also encompass school and university communities and PSTs’ personal histories and short-term career plans. The third level (*STORY*) zooms further out to the sociopolitical context of institutional and community settings, including governmental policies, cultural discourses, national histories, and how these bear on PSTs’ learning/teaching identities and long-term career goals. Barkhuizen (2008, 2016) suggests that as one moves from *story* to *STORY*, teachers (in this case, preservice language teachers) have less power and control, and therefore less ability to effect change.

Figure 1

Short story scales of context (adapted from Barkhuizen, 2016, p. 664).



## Examples

The examples presented here have been chosen because they deal in turn with the language *learner* and *teacher* identities of two PSTs planning to become English teachers after graduation from university. Both extracts are from interviews I conducted during a study of three PSTs’ experiences of a teaching practicum that they completed during their final year of university (Clements, 2020). Besides interviewing the participants before and after the practicum, I observed them teaching a class and had them complete a written narrative about their overall impressions of the experience. Participants provided written informed consent prior to the study and institutional clearance was granted by my university.

Before considering these extracts, I want to emphasize the coconstructed nature of the interviews. The two participants, Kei and Connor (both pseudonyms chosen by the participants), were not simply speaking freely about their experiences but were responding to my questions, meaning that my own perspective and agenda—particularly my goal of eliciting narrative accounts of their practicum experiences—were implicated in their responses from the outset. The short story analysis that I apply here adds a further layer of meaning, especially as these interviews were not originally conducted with this analysis in mind. I have removed backchannels, false starts, and disfluencies, except those that bear directly on the analysis, and have separated the text into lines according to idea units, which Gee (1996) defines as chunks of meaning that are distinguished from surrounding discourse mainly by phonological features such as intonation and pauses. Following Gee’s transcription conventions, idea units are on separate lines without punctuation or capitalization.

## The Teacher Everyone Hates

The first example is from my pre-practicum interview with Kei and occurred during a series of questions that I asked about her language learning history. This brief story is suggestive of her identity as a language learner in that she discusses the English classes that she had in high school, in particular those with the teacher that she liked most.

1. PC: did you enjoy English class in high school
2. K: uh like it depends on what which teacher going to teach English
3. because mm like I liked the teacher everyone like every other student hates
4. PC: oh really

5. K: yeah because like they said like
6. they won't uh she w- the teacher she won't exp-
7. she didn't explain in Japanese very much and she used
8. she tries to speak English but she actually wasn't really good
9. like she's always saying you know you know you know.

At the first level (*story*), Kei puts herself at the center of the narrative by suggesting that her enjoyment of English is closely related to how she feels about the person teaching it (the teacher that the other students “hate”). This distinguishes her from the other students, who themselves are distinguished from the teacher, a point reinforced by Kei's use of pronouns (“I,” “they,” and “she”). Place (*where*) is only directly mentioned in my initial question and is mainly centered around the classroom. Kei's example of the teacher trying to use English (line 9) seems to take place in class in front of the other students, while the students' complaints about the teacher (lines 7-8) are likely voiced outside of class or at least away from the teacher. As for time (*when*), Kei continually shifts back and forth between present and past tense (“I liked the teacher...every other student hates”). While these might simply be performance errors, they also give the narrative a sense of moving in and out of the historical present, lending it immediacy and vividness. Overall, this story seems to suggest that for Kei, seeing herself as different from the other students around her is an important part of her self-image as a language learner.

Relevant aspects of place and people at the second level (*Story*) have mainly to do with the high school where the narrative unfolds. Kei went to an academic school that was well known in the local community for a special course of study whose students were regularly admitted to prestigious universities. While Kei herself was not in the special course, the school as a whole was strongly orientated towards students aiming to gain entrance to university, which I was well aware of when I interviewed Kei. In this context, Kei's story suggests that the teacher's use of English is problematic for the other students because she does not seem to be a very competent speaker and, more importantly, does not “explain in Japanese”—Kei initially uses “won't” (line 6), suggesting that the teacher is intentionally avoiding the L1. Kei thus implies that the other students are less supportive of or even hostile toward the teacher's attempts to use English communicatively, perhaps reflecting an attitude that learning to speak English is not as important as acquiring

knowledge for university entrance exams and other tests. At the same time, Kei seems to align herself with the teacher by presenting her as someone who made English class enjoyable for Kei herself (but not for the other students), while still acknowledging the teacher's shortcomings (line 8). Kei thus portrays herself as less concerned with “exam English” and more interested in communication.

At the third level (*STORY*), Kei's narrative reflects a broader disconnect between Ministry of Education guidelines about the use of English in class to create a communicative environment and the local realities of exams that focus mainly on decontextualized grammar, vocabulary, and reading. Researchers have documented the varied responses and confusion expressed by teachers in balancing these issues (e.g., Glasgow, 2012; Saito, 2017) and, to a lesser extent, student attitudes (Rapley, 2010). The specific implication of this story is that Kei is an exception because she appreciates teachers who try to use English, while other students react negatively out of a concern for short-term goals. This story also reflects Kei's long-term development as a learner and teacher in that she is speaking from her current perspective as a student in an education faculty where she has been completing coursework for an English teacher's license—coursework that tends to emphasize ministry guidelines and communicative approaches. Elsewhere in my interviews with her, Kei described herself as a pragmatic learner who did not want to study English for its own sake but instead “to learn anything through English.” This orientation extended to her approach to teaching during practicum in that she made use of authentic materials on several occasions (see Clements, 2020). Perhaps most tellingly, although Kei was planning to work as a teacher in Japan after graduation, her long-term plans were to eventually move overseas and work in a noneducational field. That is, her practical attitude toward English was paralleled by a practical attitude toward teaching as a means to an end.

### Why Am I So Scolded?

The second example consists of two extracts occurring several minutes apart during my interview with Connor after he had completed a 2-week practicum at an elementary school. Connor describes an interaction he had with his mentoring teacher while discussing his plans for a science lesson. Before these extracts, Connor mentioned being disciplined (“scolded”) by his supervisors for his behavior during practicum, and I prompted him to give an example, leading to the first exchange. Several minutes later (as indicated by the ellipsis),

when I asked Connor to describe his mentor, he said that his mentor was “kind” (“he tried to like care about me”) but also “strict” and able to exert discipline. At this point, the science class came up again (starting in line 7).

1. C: uh for example like I tried to make a plan of the class
2. and I was supposed to have a science class
3. and I was thinking about what I do there
4. but I don't really I didn't really know what I do
5. so the teacher was kind of angry and
6. you should you should [not] you should think about more [...]
7. uh so I talked about science
8. that time he got angry
9. PC: okay and how did you feel
10. C: uh so scared
11. PC: [laughs]
12. C: [laughs]
13. PC: alright so did you have the sense at all that getting angry was useful or not
14. C: uh I think it's okay but
15. I don't mm my major is not science so [laughs]
16. I kind of why I'm am I so scold.

The *story* elements consist of Connor and his mentoring teacher discussing lesson plans at school, most likely at a time and place separate from the classroom. Like Kei, Connor puts himself at the center of the narrative, though he focuses more on his feelings and reactions: “I didn't really know what I do,” “so scared,” “why I'm...so scold.” Here as well there is some shifting back and forth between present and past tense, but to very different effect. At first, Connor uses past tense to relate his difficulties in creating the lesson plan (“I *tried* to make a plan,” “I *was supposed* to have a science class”), then shifts briefly to present as the conflict becomes clear (“I *don't* really I *didn't* really know what I *do*”). He then uses direct speech and a modal to portray the teacher becoming angry (“you *should* think about more”), even changing his voice to imitate the teacher's tone. He remains in the present to describe his reaction, responding to my question about whether the incident was “useful” (line 13), starting with a vague acknowledgment (“it's okay”) and followed by a more explicit defense (“my major is not science so... why I'm am I so scold”). The way Connor describes this incident, shifting to historical present, using direct speech, and employing emotional language (“so scared,” “why...am I so scold”), suggests that his

response is related to the way he sees himself as a teacher—specifically that he is not an elementary school teacher who can naturally be expected to teach subjects outside his major (English).

At the *Story* level, this narrative is suggestive of the institutional roles set up by the teaching practicum and how these conflict with Connor's personal goals. As with the other PSTs that I interviewed (Clements, 2020), Connor describes his mentor in ways that suggest a parental role combining care and discipline. Mentors are expected to be supportive guides in shepherding PSTs through a 2- or 3-week practicum that is often quite stressful. However, they also evaluate PSTs' work and assign grades at the end. Connor thus seems to acknowledge that it is reasonable for his mentor to discipline him but suggests that this is not completely relevant to his (Connor's) academic background. Nor is it relevant to his career goals, as I knew from our pre-practicum interview. Prior to this practicum, Connor had already been working part-time for several years as an English instructor at a “cram school” (*juku*) and was planning to continue this full-time after graduation. Connor's reaction thus frames the issue of having to teach science with what he needs to do to complete his practicum as part of the requirements for a teacher's license—requirements that are not necessarily relevant to his short-term career plans, though they are necessary for graduation.

At the *STORY* level, Connor's statements about this incident, particularly as they relate to his intended career trajectory, resonate with a general awareness of the demands placed on public school teachers (see, e.g., *Kyodo News Plus*, 2018). When I asked Connor about why he had chosen to work at a cram school after graduation, he stated, “I don't want to take care of club activities,” referring to the notorious burdens that these place on public school teachers. Connor suggested that he wanted to focus mainly on teaching English, which he would be unable to do as a public school employee. A similar attitude was noted by Fujieda (2010), whose case-study participant Shinji had observed the other teachers at his practicum site devoting most of their energies to the “business” of education (such as talking with parents and attending meetings). This conflicted with Shinji's image of teaching, prompting him to suggest that working at a cram school was more suitable for him. Like Shinji, Connor was facing the realities of public school teaching, and he seemed to associate having to teach other subjects besides English with the extraneous duties (like “taking care of club activities”) that he had decided to opt out of.



## Implications

The analysis presented above is not intended as the last word on these two stories. My interpretations of these extracts via short story analysis may well differ from Connor's and Kei's interpretations, although they might also agree with what I say.<sup>1</sup> This openness to varied interpretations is, I would argue, exactly the point. Short story analysis is not so much a technique for understanding what happened as it is a process of making meaning (or narrative knowledging; Barkhuizen, 2011), in which the perspectives of different participants can be brought to bear on the data, often resulting in new interpretations. Moreover, meaning-making of this sort does not end with my interpretation but continues as the research is written up and presented to readers, who in turn make their own interpretations. I conclude with some of the implications of this for research and teaching.

From a research perspective, short story analysis is versatile and widely applicable. Barkhuizen (2016) emphasizes its utility in longitudinal investigations of identity development, as demonstrated in his own study, which spanned nearly 10 years. Here, I have instead used short stories to examine interview extracts recorded before and after a specific event (a teaching practicum). In both cases, however, the analysis provides a method for closely reading texts and then systematically connecting them to broader contexts, allowing researchers to explore the influences at work in teachers' everyday lives. Moreover, short story analysis, as with other forms of narrative analysis, can be applied to all kinds of texts, including interviews, journals, blog entries, and even visual media. More importantly, narrative research of this kind is comparatively straightforward and accessible in that it does not require a great deal of specialist knowledge (though more sophisticated analytical techniques can certainly be employed). This makes short story analysis relatively easy for researchers to use, whether they are involved in large-scale research projects or just interested in finding out more about their students' learning/teaching identities. It also makes it easier for those who contribute their stories (in this case, PSTs) to understand what the analyst has made of their experience and contribute their own responses, thus furthering the process of narrative knowledging.

Short story analysis offers numerous possibilities for teachers as well. Here I want to focus on its potential for informing EFL methods courses like the one described at the beginning of this article. Questions about narrative dimensions (people, place, time) at different scales of context (*story*, *Story*, *STORY*) can be introduced in a variety of

ways and focus on different teaching-related texts, whether they are spoken, written, visual, or some combination thereof. In my course, I have students complete a series of written assignments: a language-learning narrative, a teaching narrative, and a final reflective paper. As students write the two narratives, I ask them not to concern themselves with why the stories that they choose to tell are important, but to concentrate on recounting them as vividly as possible. After commenting briefly in ways that suggest some of the contextual issues, I have students practice short story analysis, first with a short text that everyone reads and then with each other's narratives. This is guided by specific and concrete questions that focus on the participants and their immediate actions, thoughts, and feelings (*story*), followed by more general and usually more challenging questions about the communities and norms involved (*Story*), and finally questions about government policies and general assumptions about language learning and education (*STORY*).

Throughout these activities, my role as the teacher is not to validate one particular interpretation over others but to push students to articulate their responses as clearly as they can. Then, for the final reflective paper, they take into account the feedback that they have received, noting points of agreement and disagreement, as well as questions and issues that have not been resolved, and develop their own conclusions about their learning/teaching identities. The underlying goal is to promote the process of meaning-making and provide spaces for what Johnson and Golombek (2016) refer to as responsive mediation, or intervention via feedback from the teacher and classmates that stimulates reflective growth.

To conclude, I have suggested in this article that short story analysis harnesses the potential of narrative inquiry for courses and programs involving preservice language teachers. It gives PSTs and their teacher-trainers a way of reflecting on their stories, thus encouraging positive forms of narrative knowledging. My hope is that researchers and practitioners will be inspired by short story analysis and the examples that I have presented to adapt the approach to their own contexts, to the particular students they work with, and the forms of storytelling that suit them best.

## Notes

1. In fact, I have sent the participants the extract and analysis of their interview to allow them to respond. As of this writing I have heard from Connor, who has expressed his agreement.

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## PanSIG 2022

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