



Revisiting narrative frames: An instrument for investigating language teaching and learning



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 May 2014

Received in revised form 20 July 2014

Accepted 8 September 2014

Available online 28 September 2014

Keywords:

Narrative frames

Research methodology

Data collection

Language teaching

Language learning

ABSTRACT

This article revisits the use of narrative frames as a research instrument first proposed in a 2008 *System* article. It starts by describing what narrative frames are and considering the significance of narrative in research on language teaching and learning. It then re-examines the strengths and limitations of narrative frames discussed in the original article. Following a summary of recent narrative frames research, an example of a frame used in an ongoing research project is presented and its use illustrated. Finally, to reinforce the basic narrative frames tenets, ten essential features of narrative frames to be conscious of when designing and using frames are noted. Finally, suggestions for ways in which narrative frames can be used in future research are made.

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1. Introduction

A colleague and I introduced narrative frames as a research instrument in a 2008 *System* article (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). In the article we described what narrative frames are, explained their purpose, discussed their strengths and limitations as a research tool, and demonstrated their use with reference to data collected during a series of professional development workshops for college English teachers in China. Using the same data set generated by the frames we later analyzed the instructional practices of the teachers (Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009) and I investigated further their experiences of research engagement in their working contexts (Barkhuizen, 2009). Since then I have continued to use narrative frames in my research (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2011), and they have also been used by other researchers in a variety of ways to explore a range of different topics. This is encouraging, since we ended our 2008 article by saying: “We hope that this article will engender further exploration of the construction and use of narrative frames” (p. 384).

Without exception, these researchers claim in their research reports that narrative frames have been useful, serving their research purposes by gathering easily analyzable data and generating relevant insights into the topic of their investigation. Furthermore, some of the researchers have made advances in both the design and use of frames; combining them effectively with other methods, for example. However, in reading the reports it appears to me that not all have been faithful to the spirit (i.e., reflecting the concept of narrative) and practical utilization (i.e., design and application) of narrative frames. Based on these publications and on my own further narrative frames research experience, in this article I revisit some of the original tenets of narrative frames put forth in the 2008 article. What I have to say is not meant as a criticism of recent narrative frames research, but rather a getting back on track of some of the conceptualizations and practices associated with narrative frames. I

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believe doing so is timely, especially if narrative frames are going to be employed even more widely in research on language teaching and learning, as it appears they might very well do.

I start by describing what narrative frames are and considering the significance of narrative in research on language teaching and learning. I then re-examine the strengths and limitations of narrative frames discussed in the original article. Following a summary of recent narrative frames research, I present an example of a narrative frame I have used in an ongoing research project and illustrate how data generated by the frame might be analyzed. Finally, to reinforce the basic narrative frames tenets, I note ten essential features of narrative frames to be conscious of when designing and using frames. I also suggest some ways in which narrative frames can be used in future research.

2. What are narrative frames?

A narrative frame is “a written story template consisting of a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying lengths. It is structured as a story in skeletal form. The aim is for participants to produce a coherent story by filling in the spaces according to their own experiences and their reflections on these” (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 402). Stories represent the meanings storytellers make of their experiences. In telling stories people make sense of the events in the lives they have lived or they imagine living. In the re-telling they shape and re-shape those experiences. Narrative inquiry as an approach to research aims to understand these experiences from the perspective of those who experience them. Barkhuizen and Wette's (2008) article provides a brief overview of the rationale for narrative inquiry in the field of teacher education, and more recent work has located narrative more widely in both language teaching and language learning research (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2011, 2013; Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014).

What we see from this literature is that narrative research varies considerably in its methodological approaches to investigating language teaching and learning; from broad thematic analyses of extensive written data (e.g. teacher journals) to detailed conversation analyses of short excerpts of interview data (e.g. small story analysis; see Norton & Early, 2011). Approaches to analysis also vary according to the attention paid to the *form* of narratives, their *content*, and both the local and wider socio-political *context* of their construction. Narrative frames elicit content that relates to the researcher's research question. The responses from one respondent may not generate a lot of content, but a well-designed frame will ensure that the content is at least relevant, and when combined with the responses of other respondents will produce substantially more content. The structure of the frame enables respondents to construct their telling in narrative form, with the meaning making that allows, and the outcome offers the researcher a coherent snapshot of a written reflection of experience in narrative form. In sum, from the respondents' perspective, the frames “provide guidance and support in terms of both the structure and content of what is to be written. From the researcher's perspective the frames ensure that the content will be more or less what is expected (and required to address the research aims) and that it will be delivered in narrative form” (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008, p. 376). As far as possible, the design of the frame should embed contextual cues to enrich the spatiotemporal dimensions of the narrative (see below), and in addition it is up to the researcher to consider macro socio-political contexts during the process of analysis (Pavlenko, 2007).

The strengths and limitations of narrative frames were summarized in Barkhuizen and Wette (2008, pp. 381–383), but it is worth repeating and elaborating on them here. Readers at this stage might like to refer to Appendix A to see an example of a frame. Firstly, the strengths:

1. The narrative frames enable respondents to write narratively by scaffolding them through the specially designed narrative structure. For people who are not familiar or comfortable with writing about their personal experiences (what form? what style? what level of intimacy?) the frame ‘walks them through’ the self-reflective writing. Frames require reflection on experience, and their design should enable this.
2. The design of the frames ensures (or it should) that researchers obtain the information they want in order to achieve the aims of their study. However, there is still some flexibility in what the respondents actually write. The flexibility is guaranteed by the blank spaces, but it is the researcher who is responsible for making sure that the frame's design generates content (experience and reflection on that experience) that is directly relevant to the topic of the research.
3. The spatial and structural restrictions do allow the narrators to tell their stories of experience; not long, detailed stories, but nevertheless storied snapshots of the respondents' life which, together with stories of other participants in similar contexts, is informative and relevant for the researcher.
4. The structured nature of the data makes for easier analysis. Typically, a thematic analysis (Barkhuizen et al., 2014) is carried out on the frames, and much of the categorizing of the data into themes is already achieved because of the structure of the frame; i.e., certain themes will be guaranteed because the prompt in the frame will elicit them as responses.
5. The frames limit the quantity of data that is collected; the sample of respondents can be relatively large, therefore. The researcher can determine upfront how much data will be collected through the way the frame is designed (e.g., the number of responses required and their length) and also by the number of participants it is distributed to.
6. Frames serve an exploratory purpose. They are useful for entry into a new or unfamiliar research context (regional, social, cultural, educational, etc.) where they can provide an introduction to that context. As a preliminary instrument for data collection they become especially useful when combined (possibly later) with other methods, such as interviews and field observations. This is perhaps the main strength of narrative frames. We never claimed in our original article (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008) that narrative frames should be the only data collection instrument used for a project, or

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