

A Critical Reflection on Integrating Informational Technology Into EFL Curriculum: An EFL Teacher's Inquiry*

Jin-Shan Chen

Chihlee Institute of Technology, Taipei, Taiwan

This paper examines the reflective practices of integrating informational technology into English curriculum of an EFL (English as a foreign language) teacher in Taiwan over a decade. The teaching experiences have been reconstructed and represented through first person narrative inquiry, highlighting the conflicts the teacher encountered, the resolutions she came up with and the ways she repositioned herself and her teaching practices. The transformational processes of the teacher's teaching are roughly divided into three developmental stages. She called the first stage as "The transplanting operation stage". During this period, the computer technology served as visual aids and information resources for both learning and teaching in her English curriculum and she evaluated her teaching via pedagogical reflections mainly at technical and practical level. The second stage, "The reflective practicing stage", appears to be the transitional period, during which the teacher experienced tremendous changes in academic lives. In addition to regular course instruction, she was, from year to year, assigned to develop a series of campus-wide projects for extra-curricular learning enhancement, including the establishment of an online English forum and the construction of a college blog for the promotion of autonomous learning communities. Moving into the third stage, "The expansive learning stage", she was learning to re-examine English learning and teaching from a different perspective at multiple levels, with particular emphasis on the uniqueness of EFL context and its inevitable influences on the English learning and teaching activities and the necessity of crossing the regional, ethical, cultural and language boundaries of EFL learning through informational technology. This paper represents an EFL teacher's inquiry into the insights of computer- and/or Web- enhanced language learning and teaching in EFL context. Examples and critical evaluation of the productions and works of the teacher are provided.

Keywords: computer-assisted language learning, narrative inquiry, teacher inquiry, Web-enhanced language learning and teaching

Narrative Inquiry in Education

Narrative inquiry has emerged in qualitative research across disciplines in social science as a research approach to describe and understand human actions or social phenomena through telling and studying stories and narratives over the past two decades (Crossley, 2000; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 1993). Following this "narrative turn" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), a substantial body of second and foreign language teacher research has used for narrative inquiry in exploring a wide range of themes, such as teacher training (Dallmer, 2004; Dufficy, 1993),

* The first version of this paper was presented in the 2010 Asian Conference on Education (ACE), December 2, 2010, Osaka, Japan and included in the conference proceeding.

Jin-Shan Chen, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Applied English, Chihlee Institute of Technology.

teacher professional development (Chen, 2007; Conle, 2001; Gimbert, 2001; Tsui, 1996), teacher identity (Moran, 1996; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000; Tsui, 2007), teachers' knowledge (Almarza, 1996; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007; Nespor & Barylske, 1991; Zhao & Poulson, 2006), learning to teach (Knezevic & Scholl, 1996; Rust, 1999), teacher education (Bailey, 1996; Freidus, 2002) and others. Specifically, two significant books, *Teachers' Narrative Inquiry as Professional Development* edited by Johnson and Golombek (2002) and *Narrative Inquiry in Practice: Advancing the Knowledge of Teaching* edited by Lyons and LaBoskey (2002), collected highly personal, contextualized stories of teachers inquiring into their own experiences advocating teachers' narratives as a valuable resource for language teachers and teacher educators to understand teaching and learning (Beattie, 2000).

Although the term narrative has been defined in various ways in the literature with different focuses on social science, in general, narrative refers to "a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of plot" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). As a research approach, narrative inquiry provides valuable insights into the personal experiences and meaning, namely, how active agents have constructed events (Reissman, 1993), how people have configured their lived experiences through story-telling (Polkinghorne, 1995) and how human beings make sense of themselves in narrative ways of thinking (Bell, 2002; Crossley, 2000). In short, narrative inquiry is "a way of understanding experience, a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieu" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Narrative inquiry, as a mode of knowing and meaning construction in teaching, bears several distinguishing characteristics. First, it contains intentional reflective human actions. Second, it is socially and contextually situated. Third, it engages participants in interrogating aspects of teaching and learning by storing the experience. Fourth, it implicates the identities of those involved. Finally, it is toward constructing meaning and knowledge (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002).

Being an EFL (English as a foreign language) teacher over a decade, the author has been launching into critical inquiry into her practices of integrating informational technology into curriculum. In this paper, her teaching experiences with informational technology in EFL curriculum have been reconstructed and represented through first person narratives, highlighting the conflicts the author encountered, the resolutions she came up with and the ways she repositioned herself and her teaching practices. This paper represents an EFL teacher's inquiry into the insights of computer- and/or Web- enhanced language learning and teaching in EFL context. Examples and critical evaluation of the productions and works of the teacher are provided.

Attending to the Scenario: The College

As an EFL country, Taiwan has been influenced by the waves of globalization and the transformation in international communications. In recent years, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan has made a series of policies to encourage and require universities and colleges to enhance students' foreign language learning, especially English, through diverse campus-wide language learning programs and remedial education (Chao, 2005).

The educational institute where this research was carried out is a vocational college located in a metropolis where Taipei County government resides. One of the most influential factors in its geographic advantages is the availability of all types of public transport including numerous bus lines, a Mass Rapid Transit station and the joint station of Taiwan Railway and Taiwan High Speed Rail. For years, such ease in transportation and the reputation of the college amongst industries has helped to lessen the pressure of student recruitment that most

private vocational colleges or universities have to encounter. Because public transport infrastructure has made the college accessible to students who live far away, a certain number of students commute for an hour or two to the college by train every day. These students join another group of students, who live in the metropolitan areas and they form a quite heterogeneous student community, within which the lived experiences and financial supports from families of the students vary in a great deal.

While the quantity of students has never been a critical issue for discussion among faculties and staff, what most teachers are concerning is about the “quality” of the students. The denotation of so-called quality implies various types of worries of English teachers, concerning students’ learning attitudes, motivations and their levels of proficiency in English. There are always some teachers complaining about the poor performance of new students and a lack of positive attitude and motivation on the campus. Some teachers even claimed that things are getting worse year by year. Nevertheless, the real challenge that the teachers encounter is, in fact, the great diversity among students. As mentioned earlier, the students come to the college bearing quite different life experiences, value systems and expectations about college life. Some of them are from well-to-do backgrounds, some of them need to apply for tuition loans and some of them have to apply for part-time jobs to make money for paying their own living expenses and even share family expenses. In addition, the differences in the students’ educational backgrounds also increase the degree of the diversity of the students. The correlation of students’ previous academic experiences and their performances in the college may be roughly depicted in the shape of a pyramid.

On the top of the pyramid system stand the superior groups of English learners, who usually graduated from high schools and had better training in academic skills and usually have higher motivation and positive attitudes towards school life. In the middle of the pyramid structure are the groups of students who graduated from higher ranking vocational high schools and whose previous major subjects were either about English or business. At the bottom of the pyramid are the other groups of learners who graduated from lower-ranking private vocational high school and whose previous major subjects were in science and technology. The groups of students’ affective and cognitive capabilities of the lowest group in dealing with academic English learning seem relatively insufficient comparing with the other upper levels of students.

As a matter of fact, due to certain complex internal and external factors with which the college has been confronted, the population of the students at the bottom of the pyramid has been growing rapidly. This also leads to conflict and tension between teachers and students. As most English teachers believe more traditional ways of thinking and instructional approaches, how to deal with the increasing diversity of students, especially how to ensure effective learning and teaching in English curriculum, appears to be big challenges.

Telling the Stories: Computers in the Author’s Teaching

I (the author in the first person) have been teaching in a vocational college in northern Taiwan over a decade. Throughout this period of time, I have been witnessing and participating in the complex organizational changes of an educational institute, moving from a vocational junior college to a college of technology and now approaching to transforming itself into a university of technology. The teaching experiences I have gained at the college are fruitful, precious and unique. In particular, working with students from various divisions, including five-year and two-year junior college and four-year and two-year college, has led me to notice the multiplicities of learners’ characteristics, which, in turn, have constantly reminded myself about the necessity of delay judgment of students’ performance and learning, as well as the

importance of learner training. Depicting my teaching practices of all the years, I can roughly divide them up into three developmental stages—"The transplanting operation stage", "The reflective practice stage" and "The expanding learning stage".

The Transplanting Operation Stage

The first stage started in 1997 when I just returned to Taiwan from the United States with a Master's degree in TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages). I would like to call this stage "The transplanting operation stage". During this period, I was eagerly applying or transplanting whatever I had been taught in the USA in my teaching and to share my life experiences abroad with students. The course assigned to me at that time was mainly about sub-skill training, including basics of English listening and speaking, English conversation, vocabulary and reading, English writing and junior college English. My curriculum designs and lesson activities were mostly developed under the big umbrella term of CLT (communicative language teaching), covering the notions of functional/notional syllabus, process-oriented instruction, cooperative learning, task-based and participatory approach, with particular emphasis on key concepts, such as meaningful learning, learners' motivation, student-centeredness and strategy training. Classroom observations and some pedagogical research (as listed under publication in my curriculum vitae) indicated overall positive results of my teaching: Students were willing to come to the classes and they enjoyed the in-class activities, felt more confident in English learning and made some progress as well. My teaching skills progressed in multiple ways with a sufficient amount of opportunities to teach various types of classes and fully engage in curriculum/syllabus/lesson development, activity design, assessment/evaluation and classroom management.

During this stage, the informational technology, with the power of accessibility, availability and diversities, served as a resource in my curriculum to enhance students' self-regulated learning. I have developed a variety of Web Quests projects (March, 2003) since then. The advantages and strengths the Internet could offer to EFL learning and teaching are apparent. The characteristics of the cyberspace, such as sufficient amount of information, language inputs from a great range of variation, cross-disciplinary and content-based orientation and the sense of authenticity, are contributable to EFL learning and teaching. However, I encountered difficulties while I tried to monitor students' learning processes.

The Reflective Practicing Stage

The second stage, which can be called "The reflective practicing stage", began in the early 2000 around the time when the college transformed itself into an institute of technology. It was also about the same time when I started my doctoral study in TESOL at a national university in Taiwan. Influenced by the continuous waves of changes within the CIT (Chihlee Institute of Technology), I was led to teach professional courses, such as Theories of Language Acquisition, Methods and Materials in TESOL, Computer-Assisted Language Learning, as well as the usual language courses like English Public Speaking and English Reading and Writing. As I was receiving substantial academic training in the Ph.D. program, it became necessary to examine my teaching with more reflective and critical lenses from various perspectives—structural linguistics, cognitive psychology and social cultural factors. In addition to regular course instruction, from year to year, I was assigned by the CIT to develop a series of campus-wide projects for extra-curricular learning enhancement, including the establishment of an online English forum (E-dimension), the implementation of remedial English programs and the construction of a campus blog platform (Heart VJ) for the promotion of general education (as listed under MOE (Ministry of Education) Grant Project and College Grant Project in my Curriculum Vitae).

The concepts of language learning communities and the integration of innovative information technology, which I learned from the graduate programs in the United States and Taiwan respectively, governed my teaching practices and project implementations across disciplines, especially in English education and general education. The rewards to my hard work for these years were substantial and precious: newer and richer understandings of learning and teaching, deeper insights of how human functions and interacts within and across social groups. The iterative critical reflections which I have been engaged in as a habit now have given me insights into the uniqueness of our educational context and its inevitable influences on the learning and teaching activities as well as the necessity of integrating Web technology into curriculum to cross the regional, ethical, cultural and language boundaries of learning and development.

The Expanding Learning Stage

Bearing these new understandings, I moved into the current stage which I call “The expanding learning stage”. Theoretically, I am learning to re-examine learning and teaching from a different perspective with a macro-level analysis, concerning social cultural influences on learning and development. In practice, I am searching for opportunities for students to directly participate in the social activities of international knowledge/professional communities via the Internet as well as ways to facilitate autonomous learning across disciplines and professional domains. Informational technology functions as a means for EFL learners and teachers to link to worldwide communities of practice, where English is used. I further explored the concept of Web 2.0 and its possible implications in EFL educational context. In particular, how to help students empower themselves through the Internet as a platform to generate knowledge in a collaborative way has been the focus on my inquiry during this stage. Though there remains much to be done, I am confident that, in so doing, students and I will soon be experiencing another stage of transformation, turning myself and my students into really autonomous learners through the collaborative construction of various types of learning communities.

Reflections

Narrative allows researchers to understand experience, let researchers get the information that people do not consciously know. In education research, narrative inquiry empowers teachers by giving voice to what they know, enabling them to articulate how they know and to recognize the connections among their lived experience, practical knowledge and beliefs about teaching (Freeman, 1996). Reviewing my teaching experiences over the years helps me to get a deeper insight of my own beliefs and practices, possible hiding gaps between these two in EFL learning and teaching. After launching into this personal narrative reflection, I found an emerging theme throughout my teaching inquiry—transformation. I moved from teacher-centered to student-centered, instruction-oriented to learning-oriented, top-down to bottom-up, implications of theories to generation of theories in my teaching practices and classroom research. More importantly, as a teacher researcher, I have transformed my research perspectives from technical reflection to critical reflection and from descriptive to interpretive discussions.

According to Johnson and Golombeck (2002, p. 6), “Teachers’ stories of inquiry are not only about professional development; they are professional development”. Along with the journey of my own teaching reflection, I found myself experiencing the process of thinking and learning with doing inquiry. With this experience, I believe that narrative practices would help teachers to construct and reconstruct their personal practical knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) and generate new theories to fit in specific social contexts.

References

- Almarza, G. G. (1996). Student foreign language teacher's knowledge growth. In D. Freeman, & J. Richards (Eds.), *Teacher learning in language teaching* (pp. 50-78). N. Y.: Cambridge University.
- Bailey, F. (1996). The role of collaborative dialogue in teacher education. In D. Freeman, & J. Richards (Eds.), *Teacher learning in language teaching* (pp. 260-280). N. Y.: Cambridge University.
- Beattie, M. (2000). Narratives of professional learning: Becoming a teacher and learning to teach. *Journal of Educational Enquiry*, 1(2), 1-23.
- Bell, J. S. (2002). Narrative inquiry: More than just telling stories. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(2), 207-218.
- Chao, C. (2005). Encouraging self-regulated EFL learning in Taiwanese higher education: Activity types and analysis. *English Teaching & Learning*, 29(4), 1-20.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1996). Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes: Teacher stories, stories of teachers, school stories, stories of school. *Educational Researcher*, 25(3), 24-30.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. C. A.: John Wiley & Sons.
- Chen, J. (2007). A narrative inquiry to web-enhanced language learning autonomy through socio-cultural theory. Paper presented at the *Independent Learning Association Japan 2007 Conference*. Chiba, Japan.
- Conle, C. (2001). The rationality of narrative inquiry in research and professional development. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 24(1), 21-33.
- Crossley, M. (2000). *Introducing narrative psychology: Self, trauma and the construction of meaning*. P. A.: Open University Press.
- Dallmer, D. (2004). Collaborative relationships in teacher education: A personal narrative of conflicting roles. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 34(1), 29-44.
- Dufficy, P. J. (1993). The pedagogy of pre-service TESOL. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 19(1), 83-97.
- Elbaz-Luwisch, F. (2007). Studying teachers' lives and experience: Narrative inquiry into K-12 teaching. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 357-382). C. A.: Sage Publications.
- Freeman, D. (1996). The "unstudied problem": Research on teacher learning in language teaching. In D. Freeman, & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *Teacher learning in language teaching* (pp. 351-378). Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Freidus, H. (2002). Narrative research in teacher education: New questions, new practices. In N. Lyons, & V. K. Laboskey (Eds.), *Narrative inquiry in practice: Advancing the knowledge of teaching* (pp. 160-172). N. Y.: Teacher College, Columbia University.
- Gimbert, B. G. (2001). Learning to teach: The lived experience of being an intern in a professional developmental school. Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*. April 10-14, 2001, Seattle, W. A..
- Hatch, J., & Wisniewski, R. (1995). Life history and narrative: Questions, issues, and exemplar works. In J. Hatch, & R. Wisniewsky (Eds.), *Life history and narrative* (pp. 113-136). London: The Falmer Press.
- Johnson, K., & Golombek, P. (2002). *Teachers' narrative inquiry as professional development*. N. Y.: Cambridge University.
- Knezevic, A., & Scholl, M. (1996). Learning to teach together: Teaching to learn together. In D. Freeman, & J. Richards (Eds.) *Teacher learning in language teaching* (pp. 79-96). N. Y.: Cambridge University.
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. C. A.: Sage.
- Lyons, N., & LaBoskey, V. (2002). *Narrative inquiry in practice: Advancing the knowledge of teaching*. N. Y.: Teachers College.
- Moran, P. R. (1996). "I'm not typical": Stories of becoming a Spanish teacher. In D. Freeman, & J. Richards (Eds.), *Teacher learning in language teaching* (pp. 125-153). N. Y.: Cambridge University.
- March, T. (2003). The learning power of WebQuests. *Educational Leadership*, 61(4), 42-47.
- Nespor, J., & Barylske, J. (1991). Narrative discourse and teacher knowledge. *American Educational Research Journal*, 28(4), 805-823.
- Polkinghorne, D. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. In J. Hatch, & R. Wisniewsky (Eds.), *Life history and narrative* (pp. 5-24). London: The Falmer Press.
- Pinnegar, S., & Daynes, J. G. (2007). Locating narrative inquiry historically: Thematics in the turn to narrative. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 3-34). C. A.: Sage Publications.
- Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. C. A.: Sage Publication.

- Ritchie, J. S., & Wilson, D. E. (2000). *Teacher narrative as critical inquiry: Rewriting the script*. N. Y.: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Rust, F. O. (1999). Professional conversations: New teachers explore teaching through conversation, story, and narrative. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 19*, 367-380.
- Tsui, A. (1996). Learning how to teach ESL writing. In D. Freeman, & J. Richards (Eds.), *Teacher learning in language teaching* (pp. 97-119). N. Y.: Cambridge University.
- Tsui, A. (2007). Complexities of identity formation: A narrative inquiry of an EFL teacher. *TESOL Quarterly, 41*(4), 657-680.
- Zhao, H., & Poulson, L. (2006). A biographical narrative inquiry into teachers' knowledge: An intergenerational approach. *Asia Pacific Education Review, 7*(2), 123-132.