

Working with language learner histories from three perspectives: Teachers, learners and researchers

Sarah Mercer

University of Graz, Austria

sarah.mercer@uni-graz.at

Abstract

Recent developments in SLA, such as learner-centredness, social constructivism, the postmethod era, and complexity perspectives, have highlighted the need for more localized, situated understandings of teaching and learning and greater recognition of learner individuality and diversity. In this article, I suggest an effective way of meeting these needs is to employ learner histories. This powerful form of writing allows learners to use their L2 to engage in authentic, personally meaningful communication with others about their identities, experiences, perceptions and emotions related to their language learning histories. As a text type, they are able to facilitate a more holistic perspective of the learner's life and reveal the unique interconnections that an individual makes across various domains. They also enable the situated, contextualised and dynamic nature of their learning experiences to become apparent and provide learners with a genuine, motivating purpose for writing. Exploring data generated in Austria with tertiary-level EFL learners, I seek to illustrate some of the rich potential of these text types from three perspectives, namely, those of the teacher, learner and researcher.

Keywords: learner histories, narratives, autobiographies, complexity, agency

Working with Learner Histories

Within SLA there has been a growing acknowledgement of the potential of narratives, in particular *autobiographies*, as a useful reflective tool and a rich source of data. Given their potential for providing “a window into people’s beliefs and experiences” (Bell, 2002, p. 209), they have been found to be particularly suitable for investigating second language learners’ identities, beliefs, affective factors and individual differences (Benson & Nunan, 2005; Kalaja, Menezes, & Barcelos, 2008; Norton, 2000; Oxford, 1996; Pavlenko, 2001; Tse, 2000).

Autobiographies are considered a form of narrative in which the narrator describes their own life retrospectively from their first-person point of view (cf. Löschnigg, 2005). Other related terms include *learning histories*, *life stories*, *personal narratives* and *memoirs*. Autobiographical research refers to “a broad approach to research that focuses on the analysis and description of social phenomena as they are experienced within the context of individual lives” (Benson, 2005, p. 4). I have chosen to employ the term *language learner histories* (LLHs) in line with the rationale put forward by Oxford (1995), who defines these as “self-report-based, introspective research narratives written by students about their own language learning. In language learning histories as a form of research, students thoughtfully take a second look at their own past learning experiences” (p. 582). I have chosen not to employ the alternative term *language learning careers* suggested by Benson (2011), as in my cultural context I fear that learners might interpret this in a way which would unduly stress their more recent years of education given that many learners here attend “professional” schools with a specific career focus. I would also be concerned about the danger of eliciting a potentially curriculum vitae style response to the guidelines.

However, I have embraced Benson’s (2011) understanding of these texts which he defines as conveying “the sense that a language learner makes of experiences that might otherwise remain incoherent, by construing them, first, as experiences of language learning and second, as being sequentially and meaningfully interrelated” (p. 551). This definition enables us to accept that texts are constructed and not a factual record of a history, but to still recognise their value in facilitating an insight into how learners conceptualise themselves, their experiences and the process of language learning. As Benson argues, “there is no reason to suppose that LLHs understood here as stories told by learners, tell one any less about this reality than other kinds of data.” They represent “crafted constructions of themselves and their life experiences” (Leppänen & Kalaja, 2002, p. 201). However, the point of the story is what it tells us about the learner’s thinking and their interpretation of their experience of the language learning process. As Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, and Adair (2010) argue, “what matters

in narratives in not simply whether they correspond to reality or not, but how they *function*, both for the narrators themselves and in relation to the social settings in which the lives are narrated" (p. 12) [emphasis original].

In this article, I wish to examine narrative texts generated with tertiary-level EFL learners, in order to illustrate the potential insights offered by these texts from three different perspectives: the teacher, learner and researcher. In choosing to separate the three perspectives, I do not wish to give the impression that these represent three distinct, discrete categories. Rather each has slightly different interests, drives and needs implying a different focus when working with the texts. However, all three also share core commonalities such as a mutual concern with enhancing the quality of and potential for learning and, thus, there is also considerable overlap in terms of the potentials for each, as shown in Figure 1. Before turning to examine the actual data generated in this study, I will begin by considering what we already know about these three perspectives in relation to LLHs from the literature.

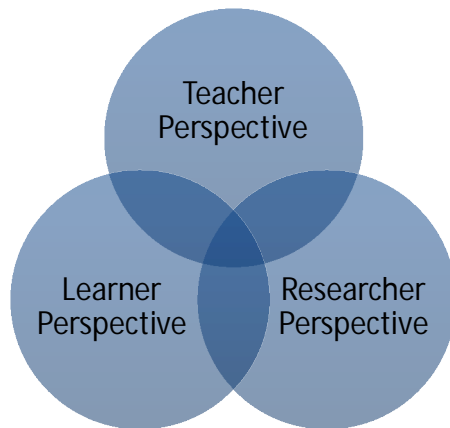


Figure 1 The overlap of the teacher, learner and researcher perspectives on LLHs

From the Teacher Perspective

Language learning as a process involves more than merely linguistic, structural and cognitive factors. As Hanauer (2012, pp. 105-106) points out, it crucially involves learners who are holistic living, thinking, experiencing and feeling human beings. As such, successful teaching involves not only an understanding of the linguistic and cognitive needs of our learners, but it requires a respectful appreciation of their emotional and social needs as individuals. Inspired by learner-centred and humanistic principles, Nunan (2013) argues that if we truly wish to engage in more learner-centred approaches to language teaching, then it is essential that we incorporate learners' views into both

planning and implementation of teaching approaches and strategies. This means that rather than mechanistically imposing a curriculum designed to teach the “monolithic prototypical faceless learner” (Dewaele, 2005, p. 367), we establish the “real” subjective needs and wants of our specific individual learners (cf. Nunan, 1990). One effective way of doing this is by enabling them to tell their own stories about language learning and engage in what Hanauer (2012) has termed “meaningful literacy.”

Language learning histories are a form of writing which can reveal valuable insights about our learners’ needs, motivations, beliefs, goals and strategies, thereby helping us to respect learner individual differences in our planning and lesson design. The texts also allow for authentic, meaningful communication between teacher and learner. It can convey a respect and genuine interest on the part of the teacher in the learners as individuals, which can thereby enhance the teacher/learner relationship. As Nunan explains (2013, p. 212), we need to be able to understand our learners beyond simply the language they use. We need to listen carefully to what they tell us and LLHs are ideally suited to providing teachers “with insights into the complex relationships between planning, teaching and learning” (Nunan, 2013, p. 212). Language learning histories therefore have considerable practical value as a pedagogical tool and as a vital component in lesson planning.

From the Learner Perspective

As a pedagogical tool, LLHs enable learners to practise their English in authentic communicative tasks that are personally relevant and meaningful and thereby motivating. A key benefit for learners in writing their LLHs is that this can help foster their metacognitive awareness both of language learning per se and of themselves as learners. As Hanauer (2012) explains, the texts can generate “a reflective process that leads to a deepened appreciation and understanding of personal experience” (p. 108). Such awareness can be empowering for learners as a vital ingredient in autonomy-inspired approaches to teaching and learning (see, e.g., Cotterall, 2000; Kohonen, 2000). It can promote learner motivation and willingness to engage in self-regulated behaviours by helping learners contemplate their progress in language learning and their own role as agents in this development.

Enhanced personal metacognition can also specifically help learners in constructing their identities as L2 learners and users and in contemplating future goals. In the current dominant model of L2 motivation, Dörnyei (2005) outlines a motivational framework centring on current, ideal and future understandings of ourselves as language learners and/or users. The so-called “L2 self

system of motivation" (Dörnyei, 2005) proposes that perceived discrepancies between our current selves and possible future or idealised selves can drive learner motivation. Thus, learners need to have a realistic sense of self in the present and a clearly developed vision of themselves in the future. In addition, in order to be effective, these selves must also be accompanied by an enabling sense of agency and a metacognitive knowledge of strategies for achieving the goals. As such, LLHs can serve a vital role in helping learners to envision their futures and set goals based on their current perceptions of themselves and their contextual affordances as well as their interpretation of their pasts. They can also facilitate learner reflection on the steps necessary to achieve these goals in terms of strategic behaviours and personal agency (cf. Ryan & Irie, in press).

Finally, although LLHs traditionally represent a personal form of interaction between teacher and learner, if learners were happy to do so, there is great potential for learning by facilitating the exchange of learner histories between learners who can learn from each other and see for themselves the diverse ways of experiencing language learning (see also Chik & Breidbach, 2011). As Pavlenko (2007) points out, autobiographies have considerable reflective value for both writers and readers who can be encouraged to "imagine alternative ways of being in the world" (p. 180). It can be important for learners to discuss their LLHs to "open up pathways of thinking" and avoid the risk of their stories becoming "frozen" and thereby a static way of thinking and behaving (Menezes, Barcelos, & Kalaja, 2006, p. 229).

From the Researcher Perspective

Language learning histories also have important implications for the learner's role in the research process and they potentially can provide learners' with a voice. The texts can powerfully connect learners and researchers and ensure that the language learning process is understood from the perspective of the learners. Their use can be empowering for the learner and invites them to take on a more collaborative role in which they are not merely the "subjects" of research but viewed more as co-constructors of knowledge and understandings.

Essentially, there are different approaches in research using narrative materials. As Barkhuizen (2011) states, "narrative research means different things to different researchers" (p. 409). For example, LLHs can be analysed as texts in terms of content, discourse or narrative structures. Crucially, narratives enable the perspective of the storyteller to become visible and can reveal underlying schemas and beliefs based on which a narrative is constructed (cf. Pavlenko, 2002). As with all forms of self-report data, narratives have been criticised for issues of distortion of memory and "truth." Amongst others,

Pavlenko (2002) warns against treating narratives as factual data and subjecting them to simple content analysis. Essentially, it is not the main purpose of working with such texts to seek to gain a “factual” account of the past but rather it is the learners’ interpretation and “construction” of their narrative that is useful in understanding their perspective, not the factual accuracy of their reports. As Bell (2002, p. 209) points out, working with narratives means recognising that the consciously told stories may rest on deeper, more underlying stories of which the teller may even be unaware.

As a research tool, LLHs are especially well suited to revealing the dynamics and complexity of language learning and for exploring learner diversity (Nunan & Benson, 2005). The complexity inherent in LLHs has been highlighted by Nunan and Benson (2005), who note how the texts display the strongly interrelated nature of various psychological and social variables with each other but also “with the learners’ larger life circumstances and goals” (p. 156). Importantly, LLHs can provide teachers with “glimpses of learners’ English worlds beyond the classrooms” (Chik & Breidbach, 2011, p. 158), allowing us to better understand them as holistic beings leading rich lives and experiencing their foreign languages beyond the bounds of the classroom. In terms of contextualised data, Polkinghorne (1995) argues that narrative is “the linguistic form uniquely suited for displaying human existence as situated action” (p. 5). Language learning histories reveal how learning is a fundamentally situated process interconnected with cultures, contexts and social settings. In terms of their temporality, Nunan and Benson (2005, pp. 155-156) highlight the inherently dynamic nature of the texts which reveal the changes over time in the learner’s development. As a text type, they imply a process-oriented view of learners and their development. Clandinin and Connelly (2000, Chapter 5) astutely note that when learners write their LLHs, they are still in the midst of continuing to live them. They thus stress the need to write about learners “becoming” given their ongoing narrative history and continuous movement forward into their continually emerging futures, rather than as “being.”

Recently, several researchers in SLA have become interested in complexity perspectives on language learning processes and, indeed, language learners themselves (see, e.g., Dörnyei, 2011; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Mercer, 2011a, 2011b). Such perspectives are marked by an interest in the complex, non-linear dynamic interaction of multiple components including contexts within a unified system. Clearly, there are parallels in the insights narratives can offer such as revealing some of the complex interrelations between multiple components in a learner’s psychology and development, their dynamism, situatedness as well as the uniqueness and potentially unpredictable nature of individual lives (Menezes, 2008; Randall, 2007). Indeed, Benson and

Nunan (2005) conclude that learner “complexity is particularly brought out through investigation of learners’ stories of their experiences” (p. 156). As such, narratives represent a valuable form of qualitative data which can challenge simplistic, reductionist, abstracted, static, linear thinking about language learning processes and learners themselves.

Current Data Set

In order to explore the potential of LLH from these three perspectives with real data, first-year university students in a general English language course at a university in Austria were asked to write their LLHs. To support the writing of the texts, the learners were provided with open guidelines including an outline with suggestions of possible content (see the Appendix). Although the focus was on language learning, the learners were also explicitly encouraged to report holistically on anything else they felt to be relevant.

In terms of ethics, learners had to complete the texts for homework as part of the course content, but it was stressed that they did not have to share them for research purposes if they did not wish to. In the guidelines, the basic purpose of the study was outlined and it was explained that, “there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ versions; all your stories are interesting in their individuality.” Learners were also assured anonymity. Consequently, all the names of individuals as well as places names in the texts have been changed to protect learners’ identities. Learners were also asked to provide explicit consent of their agreement to use the text for research purposes.

In line with some of the underlying principles of exploratory practice (Allwright, 2003), it has been a concern of mine that not only should I profit from the data collected as a researcher, but the learners should as far as realistically possible also benefit from the experience so that they are not merely “used” for researcher gains. Thus, the data were generated with both a research and pedagogical purpose in mind. In my role as their teacher, I was keen to have them write the texts at the outset of their classes with me to help me to get to know them better as individuals and understand their beliefs, sense of agency and use of strategies. As both teacher and researcher, I was especially interested in understanding how learners position themselves as agents within their constructed LLHs. In my role as researcher, I wanted to explore the complexity, dynamism and holistic situatedness of learners’ stories. For the learners themselves, the texts were intended to trigger reflection and serve an awareness-raising function about themselves and their approaches to language learning.

One potential limitation of working with such narratives is that learners can have different degrees of “self-literacy” (cf. Randall, 2007, p. 379) and some are better able than others to reflect on and write about themselves and their experiences than others. However, it is hoped that all the learners will nevertheless benefit from the writing task and the data generated will still be rich given the breadth and diversity of learners involved.

Data Collection Context and Participants

The LLHs were used with early-stage students who have recently transitioned to university. In order to choose their course of studies, the learners are likely to have reflected on themselves as language learners and thus may find it easier to write about themselves. During periods of transition, learners’ sense of self tends to be in flux (e.g., Jackson, 2003; Silverthorn, Dubois, & Crombie, 2005) and therefore it is an ideal time to explore the ongoing dynamism of their identity construction. From the learner perspective, it is important that they take stock and reflect on their LLHs to date as they commence a new stage in their language learning lives within a new context. Such metacognitive knowledge about themselves and their identities as learners will be crucial as they face the different demands, expectations and challenges of the university language learning context. As their teacher, confronted with wide diversity in my learners’ needs, goals and competencies (there are no national standardised school-leaving exams in Austria and anyone with a school-leaving certificate can study at university), I find it extremely helpful to get to know about my learners, their histories, beliefs and self-related perceptions at the start of their university careers to help guide my instructional decisions and practices.

In one of the initial general English language courses, students were asked to write their LLH as their first compulsory homework task; however, whether they chose to share their text for this project was a voluntary decision as outlined explicitly in the consent form attached to the guidelines. In one parallel class taught by a colleague, the return rate was low with only 5 of the texts originating from her group of 26 students. In my own classes, the return rate was high and all the remaining 51 texts came from my two parallel classes. In total, 56 LLHs were received (48 female, 8 male), which varied in length from a minimum of just under 2 pages (as suggested by the guidelines) to the longest being approximately 4 pages in length. All the students in this context have an advanced level of proficiency (B2/C1 in the European Common Framework of Reference) and are capable of expressing themselves well and comprehensively in English.

Analysis

All the LLHs were coded in line with a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) approach to data analysis using the data management software Atlas.ti. The data were initially coded line-by-line and then repeatedly re-coded until “saturation.” As Pavleko (2007, p. 167) points out, as a researcher I cannot “step out of myself” during the data analysis; however, by attending to all the details and by keeping the codes close to the actual data and using several in vivo codes in my initial waves of coding, I hope to have been able to retain an open mind to emergent and possibly unexpected themes. The supercodes and memos generated during the coding process were then re-examined in line with the three perspectives which are the focus of this paper; the teacher, learner and researcher perspectives. However, it must be noted that in terms of the focus of the thematic analysis, I have naturally been guided by my own conceptual lens and areas of interest as a teacher and researcher, as will become explicitly apparent in the results discussed below and many other additional ways of working with these data are possible.

In addition to the line-by-line micro-level of coding, each narrative was coded holistically in order to generate a “condensed narrative” (Nunan, 2013) of the main themes and style of each individual text. This was recorded in a memo attached to each primary document. Each narrative as a whole could then be examined for salient themes, notable absences, cases of uniqueness, and patterns of narrative style.

Findings

The most striking dimension of working with the autobiographies is the diversity in the texts. Despite all the learners being provided with the same guidelines and being in the same learning context, the content, style, format and focus of the texts varied considerably. Not only did the learners focus on and report different unique experiences, but they also differed in terms of the writing styles, despite all being recognisably autobiographical narratives. Thus, within the constraints of language, discourse, genre and contexts, the learner as narrator made individual choices where to begin and end the narrative, how to sequence and sustain the narrative, what to focus on, how much descriptive detail to provide and to what extent to simply report or also evaluate and interpret events (cf. Leppänen & Kalaja, 2002). Although the majority of the learners were from the same cultural context (only two are identifiable from the texts as visiting students), their uniqueness as individuals overrode any potential uniformity implied by the shared cultural context highlighting

the personal nature of the texts and their ability to allow the individual's voice to be heard (cf. Leppänen & Kalaja, 2002).

In the thematic analysis of the LLHs, multiple other dimensions of learner difference and diversity were revealed. The purpose of this article is to explore and illustrate with data the potential insights of these texts from the three different perspectives. For the analysis, the scope of what to choose to focus on is considerable as these texts contain a wealth of situated, detailed data. However, I have been guided in my focus on all three perspectives by my personal beliefs of the importance of learner psychology in language learning (Mercer, Ryan, & Williams, 2012). As such, the analysis represents a personal choice of overall perspective and is by no means meant to be considered exhaustive, as the potential offered by the texts stretches well beyond what it is possible to discuss in this one article. To facilitate the presentation and discussion of the data, I have selected a particular emphasis for each of the three perspectives; however, it should be noted that all of the insights are relevant for all three perspectives and are highly interrelated.

From the Teacher Perspective

Firstly, as their teacher, I am keen to get to know my group of learners as individuals and to understand their personal drives, needs, beliefs, self-concepts and goals. Each of the stories is a rich source of information in this respect. Each LLH is unique and reveals the diversity in the group of learners I am working with. The texts offer valuable insights into the personally meaningful connections and experiences learners have with respect to the language, such as the learner whose father's language learning history as an immigrant inspired her own (#19) or the learner who was raised bilingually but who feels she falls short of her idea of a native-speaker model (#5). Through writing these LLHs, learners are able to express core elements of their language learning selves and, as their teacher, they help me to better comprehend and empathise with them as unique, holistic individuals.

The LLHs also provide an insight into specific aspects of the learners' perception of themselves as language learners. My own professional interests centre on learners' self-beliefs and their sense of agency (Mercer, 2011a, 2011b). I consider these to play a central role in language learning and to be of direct relevance for teaching and learning. As van Lier (2008, p. 163) explains, successful language learning crucially depends on the activity and initiative of the learner. In order to become active and engaged as a learner, the individual has to hold a "personal sense of agency – a belief that their behaviour can make a difference to their learning in that setting" (Mercer, 2012, p. 41).

Key factors contributing to a learner's sense of agency are their self beliefs and their degree of positivity. In order for learners to become active agents in their learning processes, learners need to feel confident and comfortable in using and working in all areas of the language. The guidelines in this study explicitly prompted learners to reflect on this and all the texts contain reference to learners' perceived strengths and weaknesses. Given that most of these learners are advanced learners who have chosen to study English at university, it is unsurprising that the majority hold overall positive self beliefs in respect to themselves as language learners. However, all of the learners also indicate areas where they feel less confident and, in some cases, even experience feelings of anxiety as in the case of this female learner (#29):

One of my weaknesses is definitely speaking English. Most of the time I am afraid of making grammatical mistakes, pronouncing a word wrong or what people might think of my speaking skills.

Understanding learners' fears and concerns is vital for me as a teacher and helps me to understand the domains in which learners feel they need more support. Ideally, we want our learners to hold positive, but realistic, self-beliefs. However, to develop more positive views of themselves as language learners and thereby reduce their anxiety, the learners fundamentally also need to believe that their competences and abilities can be developed and in this respect the constructs of agency and mindsets are crucial.

Mindsets refer to the implicit, and therefore difficult to consciously articulate, beliefs that we all hold about the malleability of certain human traits, such as language learning abilities (cf. Dweck, 2006; Mercer & Ryan, 2010). There are two core mindsets, growth or fixed, which can be thought of as stretching on a continuum. A growth mindset reflects an underlying belief that one's abilities can be developed and enhanced through hard work and strategic behaviours. In contrast, a fixed mindset centres on the beliefs that one's abilities are fixed and immutable. Such entity theories of abilities can be extremely limiting and can lead to helplessness when learners face difficulties or challenges as they believe change in their fundamental abilities to be out of their control (Dweck, 2006).

Mindsets are intricately bound up with learners' sense of agency but they are often hard to discern in data as they are rarely expressed explicitly given their "implicit" nature. As narratives allow "deeply hidden assumptions to surface" (Bell, 2002, p. 209), the texts are ideal at revealing beliefs that learners themselves may not be conscious of such as mindsets. The LLHs show how the learner positions themselves in the story of their language learning, as an active agent or merely as a respondent to circumstance and external factors. Each text

essentially contains a discourse of personal agency as expressed through their choice of language and voice, attributions and beliefs about the nature of the language learning process (cf. Murphey & Carpenter, 2008), and this discourse is also indicative of the interconnected underlying framework of mindset beliefs.

Perhaps one of the most obvious expressions of learner agency concern learners' attributions for their perceived successes and failures. These are the reasons learners ascribe their successes or failures to. These may not be the "true" reasons, but they reflect what the learner believes to be the cause (Hsieh, 2012, p. 91). It is known that if learners attribute their perceived successes as being internally attributed and within their own control, such as the amount of effort expended or the types of strategies used, they are likely to engage in these or similar actions again in the future. However, if a learner attributes their success to a factor perceived as being out of their control, the learner will not feel able to influence the outcome and thus engender the same success again in the future. Clearly, if a learner believes that success is due to a natural talent for languages that they are simply born with and cannot change (an attribution associated with fixed mindsets), then they will be unlikely to believe that there is anything they can actively do to influence future outcomes. Consider, for example, the different attributions made by the following two learners:

First, a very important strength that made me achieve quite a lot in language learning is my hard work and my power of endurance. One day I realized that I really spend a lot of time with learning languages. When I was in school I spent a lot more time studying for languages than others did. (#38)

My teacher, who I had these first two years, was probably a little at fault too, because she could not stand me throughout all the years until my graduation. (#41)

The first learner attributes her success to her hard work over extended periods of time and clearly this would be a worthy approach to continue with in the future. The second learner attributes her perceived lack of success in part to the fact her teacher who she felt disliked her. Such external attributions are problematic given that the outcomes lie out of her control and are not something she feels able to influence.

An indication of a growth mindset can be when learners describe strategies they have used and believe to have been effective. This indicates a willingness to engage in conscious effort to improve their skills and suggests that the learner believes that improving their abilities is within their control. This female learner (#16), for example, writes about her specific strategies for learning vocabulary:

When I have to learn vocabulary I like to learn through writing and repetition. In other words, I repeatedly write the new words down in order to remember them. I also tend to mark the most important words or facts with colours to aid my memory.

Learners also expressed a range of other beliefs about language learning which could perhaps be conceptualised as being facilitative or limiting in respect to the learner's sense of agency. One of the most frequently expressed beliefs, for example, concerned learners' beliefs about the power of a stay abroad to enhance their language skills. In analysing the LLHs, a great number of the learners make reference to the perceived importance of such an experience, irrespective of whether they themselves had had such an experience or not. A crucial difference in the writing about this is in where the learners assign agency in such a context. Some learners write in such a way that it is apparent that the success of such a stay lies in the actual practice of the language afforded by such a stay and the learner's own autonomous behaviours. See, for example, extracts from the following learner:

In my opinion, those vacations made more impact on my English skills and helped my confidence in talking English more than my last four years at school . . . During those visits, I was exclusively using the English language . . . I was his permanent accompanist, because he took me with him wherever he was going, which made me talk to the people he was talking to as well. (Male #56)

More worryingly, a small number of learners refer only to the stay abroad itself, rather than to any purposeful behaviours or practice on their part. Consider, for example, the abridged excerpts from a female learner (#7) who writes about the key role in her LLH of a trip abroad:

The turning point in my language learner history took place when I was fourteen and my mum decided to invite my pen pal Sally to visit us in Austria . . . Together with a friend of mine and Sally I spent an awesome summer in Austria. Sally did not learn German in school and in order to communicate we had to speak English. After we had such a wonderful time in Austria Sally's parents decided that we should come to the States and spend another summer there . . . it actually was one of the best experiences we have ever had. We spent three months living together with Sally and her family and saw the most important parts and monuments of Dallas. Besides all the beautiful and exciting places we have seen my friend and I did not even recognize that our English improved every day.

Whilst such descriptions of a stay abroad are encouraging in terms of the positive affect towards the language gained from the experience, they do raise questions for me about whether individuals such as this learner may be attrib-

uting too great a proportion of their linguistic gains to the context itself or effortless acquisition processes, especially as her text contains no other expressions of language use or specific strategic behaviours on her part in respect to the stay abroad. As Ryan and Mercer (2011, p. 174) caution, if learners are to feel agentic and empowered to take autonomous control of their learning and continue making advanced level progress once they have returned from such a context, the agent of success stemming from a stay abroad needs to be the individual learner themselves. For learners' long-term development, it may be more advantageous to appreciate that part of the linguistic benefits of a stay abroad stem from the hours of practice the stay affords, rather than perceived effortless acquisition of the language.

Summarising, to help me as a teacher to understand whether a particular learner is tending towards expressions of self-directed personal agency and growth mindsets or fixed mindsets involving more limited control and personal agency, I have drawn up a table of markers that have emerged from my analysis of these texts. It is not meant to be construed as a dichotomy but as a continuum. Obviously, learners can lie between the two and their stories may contain elements of both. However, these markers help me to gain an impression of the degree of agency a learner is portraying in their narratives and the position that they assign themselves in the development of their LLH. Essentially, these expressions of voice and agency in the texts help to reveal learners' underlying framework of mindset beliefs and attributions which can be vitally important to their future and ongoing approaches to language learning and their willingness to engage in self-regulated learning.

Table 1 Markers of high and low agency in the LLHs

Markers of high agency/growth mindsets	Markers of low agency/fixed mindsets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Controllable attributions • Growth mindset beliefs • Facilitative agency beliefs • Reference to specific strategies • Consistent use of the <i>I</i> pronoun in respect to behaviours and practice • Dynamism associated with learner as agent of change • Marked reference to effort, conscious strategy use, hard work, practice, improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-controllable attributions • Fixed mindset beliefs • Limiting agency beliefs • Limited or no reference to strategies • Reference to acquisition without or with minimum use of the <i>I</i> pronoun • Dynamism associated with time, others or contexts as agents of change • Marked reference to effortless acquisition, speed, ease of learning, intuitive, unconscious learning, natural talent

From the Learner Perspective

As above, the learners too can benefit from a metacognitive understanding of their own beliefs about themselves and language learning as a process, their sense of agency, and their use of strategies. In my own teaching, LLHs have served as useful springboards for explicit, guided in-class discussions of beliefs about and approaches to language learning. Fundamentally, the underlying rationale for the learners is that writing the texts should facilitate enhanced metacognition about themselves as language learners through processes of self-recognition (cf. McAdams, 1993). Indeed, a small number made explicit reference to this in their texts:

This record and self-reflection on my language learning history led me to think about the origins of my interest in the English language and it has given me some important clues about me as learner and may explain why I tend to prefer to consolidate some language competencies more intensively than others. (Female #42)

One of the important characteristic features of LLHs is their ability to show how learners make meaning of their lives and construct coherence “by finding connections or relating past experiences to the present and future” (Ford, 2012, p. 30). Whilst all aspects of this temporal interconnectivity in the narratives can be useful for learners and teachers, the future visions of these learners in relation to their goals are especially important in learners’ ongoing and long-term development beyond the bounds of my course, and it is these I will focus on in this analysis.

Interestingly, some of the learners express primarily or even only short-term goals such as passing a test or getting a good grade in a course. There is a concern that focusing only on such goals may reflect certain extrinsic motivations and more performance-oriented goals in which the focus is on the outcome and “performance,” rather than on growth and learning gains (see Woodrow, 2012), again paralleling some of the findings in respect to fixed mindsets. For example:

To be honest, my goals for this semester are basically just to get my exams done with good marks and trying to keep up with my standard. (Female #15)

In contrast, other learners describe more clearly visions of a future self expressed with a more long-term perspective in which the emphasis is on improving their abilities, again reflective of a growth mindset. As Woodrow (2006, 2012) explains, such “mastery”- or “learning”-oriented goals are typical-

ly associated with higher levels of self-efficacy, a wider use of metacognitive strategies and generally more positively adaptive learning behaviours:

I just want to improve my skills to a certain expertise so that I have the feeling of being able to use the language under all conditions and in every circumstance. In addition, learning is a lifelong process, so there is no stage where I will be finished with learning. For my long-term plans I wish to be able to teach students in an interesting and entertaining way by being kind, disciplined and supportive at the same time. I know that this needs a lot of practise, but that's exactly what I'm going to do! (Female #39)

Holding growth-inspired goals and clearly expressed future visions of the self are important ingredients for long-term motivation and effective self-regulated learning behaviours. In this respect, LLHs can play an important role in supporting learners in critically reflecting on their future goals and contemplating the steps to realising them.

From the Researcher Perspective

Currently, there is increased interest in SLA in respect to complexity perspectives on language learning processes and language learners themselves. Such complexity perspectives are inherently marked by an interest in the complex interaction of multiple components within a system and its diverse dynamics across time. They tend to be concerned with organic, holistic models which incorporate context into the system and reject linear cause-and-effect patterns. Instead the emphasis is on processes of emergence by which the whole is appreciated as being greater than the sum of its component parts. As the analysis so far has shown, LLHs effectively show how key aspects of learner psychology are highly interrelated such as learners' sense of self, agency, attributions, beliefs, mindsets, strategy use and goals. Given that learners can hold seemingly contradictory beliefs, an understanding of the overall interconnections in a learner's psychology is more meaningful than an isolated, fragmented view of separate aspects of their psychology.

Perhaps one of the key characteristics of complex dynamic systems is their dynamism. It is important to stress that dynamism implies also stability, different degrees of dynamism, dynamism in different directions such as both forward progress and backward regression, and gradual as well as sudden change. Others have already noted the rich insights in terms of dynamics provided by LLHs (e.g., Benson & Nunan, 2005), and these texts too contain a vast number of instances of dynamism that can be of interest to researchers. Given the longer timeframe that the texts cover, short-term, micro-level dynamics of the moment are less visible, even though learners do show some awareness of these dynamics too. For example:

There are periods when I am really motivated to improve myself but then there are also weeks in which I am not in the mood for studying. (Female #32)

In terms of the main dynamics evinced in these texts, I noted three key types of dynamics: gradual, temporal dynamics across the progression of time, situated dynamics of perceived change across both social and physical contexts, and, finally, causal dynamics referring to more dramatic changes believed by learners to have been caused by particular events or experiences. Firstly, in instances of the temporal dynamics, learners did not necessarily attribute change to any specific agent but rather referred to the natural progression of time and the accompanying changes or relative stability they perceive:

After some time I got more and more interested in foreign languages and especially in the English Language . . . The time passed and I decided to study English in order to become a teacher. At first I had to get used to university but then everything worked out fine. (Female #7)

In terms of the situational dynamics, learners showed a remarkable awareness of the dynamics of their self perceptions across contexts. For example, this female learner (#35) describes how her perception of her spoken English changes depending on her interactional partner:

I'm not shy to talk to people in a foreign language, though I know that I make many mistakes when talking. Of course, it always makes me nervous if I'm aware of that my conversation partner examines my English skills, as in the case when I talk to English teachers. In such situations, it's normal that I make more mistakes than usual and that I lose my fluency, because I think too much in how to express myself.

A particular form of situational dynamics evident in these texts is the change in learners' self perceptions as they go through the transition from high school to the university context. Given the absence to date of standardised school-leaving exams in this setting, students are often unaware of the different levels of proficiency across schooling contexts and the change in frames of reference on commencing at university can be a stressful experience. This female learner (#36) illustrates clearly the challenges to learners' self-concept during the transition in this educational context:

I have to say that I always enjoyed talking in English at school. This has changed at university. The reason for this is the high language level that many students have. A lot have already been abroad and speak perfectly English. Next to them I often feel stupid and embarrassed when I make a mistake.

Finally, in terms of causal dynamics, learners also refer to specific events, experiences or people which they perceive as having caused a more sudden or marked change possibly in their attitudes, motivation or way of approaching the language. For example, several learners believed that a stay abroad represented a crucial turning point in their LLHs. This female learner's description illustrates this kind of perceived change:

Although I hated English at school, my point of view changed when I first spend a week in London in 2003. That was the point, when I first realized that I was not only learning English to be graded good by this horrible teacher, but that I could gain personally from learning such a beautiful, important and wide spread language. During these holidays I discovered my passion for the English language. (Female #30)

These data therefore suggest that there are different types of dynamics and stabilities within a learner's history related to both contexts (physical and social) and the progression of time. They also show the potential for growth and change in all our learners, which presents an essentially optimistic view of learning. In line with complexity thinking, the texts show how learners are complex individuals whose self perceptions are composed of multiple interconnected factors which can be differently dynamic across time and settings. As such, the texts caution strongly against static views of learners and their psychology.

Discussion

The LLHs discussed in this article were generated with advanced, tertiary-level learners but potentially such narratives can be used in varied forms with a range of learner ages and levels of proficiency. Considering the types of extended written narratives generated in this study, two issues need further discussion. Firstly, the quality of the texts varied in terms of the depth of reflection, length and overall degree of engagement with the task. The guidelines in this study were relatively open, but it is possible that more structured questions might help focus some of the learners and provide scaffolding for the reflective process. Secondly, the return rate differed across the two groups, which was perhaps in part due to the different ways in which the narratives were incorporated and embedded in the teaching in the different classes. However, it is important to find ways to help all of our learners feel that writing their LLHs is beneficial for them, interesting, and relevant for their development as language learners. One step can be to ensure that there is an explicit discussion between teachers and learners about the nature of the task, its purpose and relevance for both teacher and learner. It may also be helpful to encourage alternative forms of expression and reflection to accommodate different learner types and

preferred forms of communication, especially for those who perhaps do not enjoy extended writing. Thus, it may be worth considering the merits of alternative forms of narrative, as reflected in the “new cultures of learning” (Thomas & Seeley Brown, 2011). Recently, for example, I have started working with learners telling their histories through multimodal formats such as blogs, vlogs and digital presentations (Mercer, 2013), as well as through songs and drama (Mercer & Nunan, 2013). Allowing learners to select and choose their preferred form of expression may enhance response rates and depth of engagement. Indeed, initial work with multimedia formats and media indicate promising directions for the future of the field of narrative in SLA for all three perspectives (see also Chik & Breidbach, 2011; Menezes, 2008). However, it is perhaps interesting to note that, even when given the choice, many of my students still select to write more traditional LLHs as a form of extended, personalised writing in English.

A related potential issue that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been addressed is how to work with learners who may not wish to share their personal stories. I have to admit to never having been confronted by such a learner so far, but perhaps we need to be careful and considerate that we cannot and should not insist on learners sharing their stories if they do not wish to do so (Alan Waters, personal communication). As such, our planning as researchers and teachers needs to allow scope for learners *not* to write their LLHs, if they would rather not and to offer alternatives for storytelling using their imagination. As work by Egan (2005) suggests, there is great learning potential in storytelling of all kinds. Perhaps engaging learners in imagining the language learning life history of an ideal learner may provide equally rich insights for the teachers, researchers and learners through guided discussions.

As a research tool, these data reveal the depth of insights about learners that can be gained from an analysis of LLHs. In particular, I was keen to consider aspects of learner psychology, which is an area of personal interest, and examine with actual data the potential these texts offer for extending our understandings in this respect. The subsequent analysis showed how the LLHs can reveal the interconnections between various aspects of an individual's psychology including deeper frameworks of beliefs, as well as its different forms of dynamism across time and place. Given the contemporary interest in complexity and ecological perspectives on learners, these texts do indeed appear to represent a rich source of data for more holistic, situated views of unique individual learners.

Conclusions

In this article, I have tried to show how LLHs can be useful from three different perspectives by considering both the literature and exploring actual data

collected with advanced level EFL learners in Austria. It has been shown how the texts offer deep insights into learners' psychological thinking and can serve as a useful tool both for teachers and learners in bringing to the surface beliefs and agentic thinking which may be facilitative or hindering for learners' ongoing and future learning. They enable us to better understand the complex, unique individuals we work with and their dynamic experiences of progress and change. Importantly, they can help us to "reconcile the gap that almost inevitably seems to exist between the researcher, teacher and the learner" (Nunan, 2013, p. 212). They offer a way of humanising teaching and researching and of ensuring that learners are integrated in both undertakings as collaborators whose perspectives are respected and valued. Together the insights they generate have the potential to be enlightening and beneficial for three of the major stakeholders in language learning: the teachers, learners and researchers.

References

- Allwright, D. (2003). Exploratory practice: Rethinking practitioner research in language teaching. *Language Teaching Research*, 7(2), 113-141. doi:10.1191/1362168803lr1180a
- Barkhuizen, G. (2011). Narrative knowledging in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 45(3), 391-414. doi:10.5054/tq.2011.261888
- Bell, J. S. (2002). Narrative inquiry: More than just telling stories. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(2), 207-213. doi:10.2307/3588331
- Benson, P. (2005). (Auto)biography and learner diversity. In P. Benson & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Learners' stories: Difference and diversity in language learning* (pp. 4-21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Benson, P. (2011). Language learning careers as an object of narrative research in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 45(3), 545-553. doi:10.5054/tq.2010.256793
- Benson, P., & Nunan, D. (Eds.). (2005). *Learners' stories: Difference and diversity in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Charmaz, K. C. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- Chik, A., & Breidbach, S. (2011). Identity, motivation and autonomy: A tale of two cities. In G. Murray, X. Gao, & T. Lamb (Eds.), *Identity, motivation and autonomy in language learning* (pp. 145-159). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2004). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Cotterall, S. (2000). Promoting learner autonomy through the curriculum: Principles for designing language courses. *ELT Journal*, 54(2), 109-117. doi:10.1093/elt/54.2.109
- Dewaele, J. (2005). Investigating the psychological and emotional dimensions in instructed language learning: Obstacles and possibilities. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89(3), 367-380. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4781.2005.00311.x
- Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2009). *The psychology of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2011). Researching complex dynamic systems: 'Retrospective qualitative modelling' in the language classroom. *Language Teaching, FirstView*, 1-12. doi:10.1017/S0261444811000516
- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.
- Egan, K. (2010). *An imaginative approach to teaching* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

- Ford, K. (2011). Taking a narrative turn: Possibilities, challenges and potential outcomes. *OnCue Journal*, 6(1), 23-36.
- Goodson, I. F., Biesta, G., Tedder, M., & Adair, N. (2010). *Narrative learning*. London: Routledge.
- Hanauer, D. I. (2012). Meaningful literacy: Writing poetry in the language classroom. *Language Teaching*, 45(1), 105-115. doi:10.1017/S0261444810000522
- Hsieh, P.-H. (2012). Attribution: Looking back and ahead at the 'why' theory. In S. Mercer, S. Ryan, & M. Williams (Eds.), *Psychology for language learning: Insights from research, theory and practice* (pp. 90-102). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jackson, C. (2003). Transitions into Higher Education: Gendered implications for academic self-concept. *Oxford Review of Education*, 29(3), 331-346. doi:10.1080/03054980307448
- Kalaja, P., Menezes, V., & Barcelos, A. M. F. (Eds.). (2008). *Narratives of learning and teaching EFL* (1st ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kohonen, V. (2000). Student reflection in portfolio assessment: Making language learning more visible. *Babylonia*, 1, 13-16.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., & Cameron, L. (2008). *Complex systems and applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leppänen, S., & Kalaja, P. (2002). Autobiographies as constructions of EFL learner identities and experiences. In E. Kärkkäinen, J. Haines, & T. Lauttamus (Eds.), *Studia Linguistica Et Litteraria Septentrionalia. Studies Presented to Heikki Nyssönen*. (pp. 189-203). Oulu: University of Oulu.
- Löschnigg, M. (2005). Autobiography. In D. Herman, M. Jahn, & M.-L. Ryan (Eds.), *The Routledge encyclopaedia of narrative theory* (pp. 34-36). London: Routledge.
- McAdams, D. P. (1997). *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Menezes, V. (2008). Multimedia language learning histories. In P. Kalaja, V. Menezes, & A. M. F. Barcelos (Eds.), *Narratives of learning and teaching EFL* (pp. 199-213). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Menezes, V., Barcelos, A. M. F., & Kalaja, P. (2008). Narrativising learning and teaching EFL: Concluding remarks. In P. Kalaja, V. Menezes, & A. M. F. Barcelos (Eds.), *Narratives of learning and teaching EFL* (pp. 217-232). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mercer, S. (2011a). Language learner self-concept: Complexity, continuity and change. *System*, 39(3), 335-346. doi:10.1016/j.system.2011.07.006
- Mercer, S. (2011b). Understanding learner agency as a complex dynamic system. *System*, 39(4), 427-436. doi:10.1016/j.system.2011.08.001

- Mercer, S. (2012). The complexity of learner agency. *Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 6(2), 41-59.
- Mercer, S. (2013). *Re-imagining the self as a network of relationships*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Mercer, S., & Nunan, D. (2013, April). *Language learning histories in teaching, learning and research*. Paper presented at IATEFL Liverpool 2013.
- Mercer, S., & Ryan, S. (2010). A mindset for EFL: Learners' beliefs about the role of natural talent. *ELT Journal*, 64(4), 436-444. doi:10.1093/elt/ccp083
- Mercer, S., Ryan, S., & Williams, M. (Eds.) (2012). *Psychology for language learning: Insights from research, theory and practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Murphey, T., & Carpenter, C. (2008). The seeds of agency in language learning histories. In P. Kalaja, V. Menezes, & A. M. F. Barcelos (Eds.), *Narratives of learning and teaching EFL* (pp. 17-34). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change* (1st ed.). Harlow: Longman.
- Nunan, D. (1990). Using learner data in curriculum development. *English for Specific Purposes*, 9(1), 17-32. doi:10.1016/0889-4906(90)90026-9
- Nunan, D. (2013). *Learner-centred English language education: The selected works of David Nunan* (pp. 204-215). New York: Routledge.
- Oxford, R. L. (1995). When emotion meets (meta)cognition in language learning histories. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 23(7), 581-594. doi:10.1016/0883-0355(96)80438-1
- Pavlenko, A. (2001). Language learning memoirs as a gendered genre. *Applied Linguistics*, 22(2), 213-240. doi:10.1093/applin/22.2.213
- Pavlenko, A. (2002). Narrative study: Whose story is it, anyway? *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(2), 213-218. doi:10.2307/3588332
- Pavlenko, A. (2007). Autobiographic narratives as data in Applied Linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, 28(2), 163-188. doi:10.1093/applin/amm008
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 5-23. doi:10.1080/0951839950080103
- Randall, W. L. (2007). Narrative and chaos acknowledging the novelty of lives-in-time. *Interchange*, 38(4), 367-389. doi:10.1007/s10780-007-9037-9
- Ryan, S., & Irie, K. (in press). Imagined and possible selves: The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. In S. Mercer & M. Williams (Eds.), *Multiple perspectives on the self in SLA*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Ryan, S., & Mercer, S. (2011). Natural talent, natural acquisition and abroad: Learner attributions of agency in language learning. In G. Murray, X. Gao,

- & T. Lamb (Eds.), *Identity, motivation and autonomy in language learning* (pp. 160-176). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Silverthorn, N., Dubois, D. L., & Crombie, G. (2005). Self-perceptions of ability and achievement across the high school transition: Investigation of a state-trait model. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 73*(3), 191-218. doi:10.3200/JEXE.73.3.191-218
- Thomas, D., & Seely Brown, J. (2011). *A new culture of learning: Cultivating the imagination for a world of change*. Createspace.
- Tse, L. (2000). Student perceptions of foreign language study: A qualitative analysis of foreign language autobiographies. *The Modern Language Journal, 84*(1), 69-84. doi:10.2307/330450
- van Lier, L. (2008). Agency in the classroom. In J. P. Lantolf & M. E. Poehner (Eds.), *Sociocultural theory and the teaching of second languages* (pp. 163-86). London: Equinox.
- Woodrow, L. (2012). Goal orientations: Three perspectives on motivation goal orientations. In S. Mercer, S. Ryan, & M. Williams (Eds.), *Psychology for language learning: Insights from research, theory and practice* (pp. 188-202). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

APPENDIX

An extract regarding the content of the language learning histories from
the guidelines and consent form

You should begin by describing how you see yourself as a language learner, considering, for example, your strengths, weaknesses, style preferences, habits, likes and dislikes, to help us to get a sense of who you are as a language learner. Then you should write about your language learning life history from the point where you first developed an interest in languages or started to learn a language to the point in your language learning where you are now. Although the focus is on your language learning experiences, in particular English, you may wish to mention other experiences which you think have played an important role in your development too. Try to be as descriptive and detailed as possible about key events or people who have been important to you, rather than just writing a superficial chronology. Finally, you should write about your specific goals for this semester and your long- and short-term plans for the future. In this way, the text will cover your past, present and future. Naturally, you can add any other comments, observations or reflections of your language learning development.