

NARRATIVES: PORTRAYING STUDENTS' IDENTITY AS WRITERS

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Abstract

The objective of this research study was to analyze B.A. students' writers' identity based on their narratives. The theory for this research was based on the poststructuralist perspective of identity and on theoretical concepts for personal narratives. For the methodology, the Case Study approach was taken into account. Students argued that a writer creates stories and contexts. Hence, students see themselves as apprentices that like to write, but not as writers. For the participants, there is a difference between a teacher that writes and a writer, and also none of the participants mentioned academic texts as writing. For them, writing is related to tales, poetry, and fiction.

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio fue el de analizar la identidad como escritores de estudiantes de licenciatura en idiomas con base en sus narrativas. Esta investigación tuvo como soporte teórico la perspectiva posestructuralista de identidad y teoría en relación con narrativas personales. En la metodología se tuvo en cuenta el enfoque de Estudio de Caso. Los participantes afirman que un escritor crea historias y contextos. Los estudiantes se ven como aprendices que les gusta escribir pero, no como escritores. Para los participantes existe una diferencia entre un profesor que escribe y un escritor. Ninguno de los participantes mencionó los textos académicos como escritura, para ellos la escritura se relaciona con cuentos, poemas o ficción.

Introduction

There is a strong connection between identity and language learning. Languages carry within ideologies and cultural and social issues that affect students' personality. From the poststructuralist dimension of identity, a person can perform multiple identities depending on the context in which they are immersed. Following the poststructuralist approach of identity, students studying languages are constantly displaying numerous identities. In a Languages B.A. program in a public university in Colombia, students are exposed to their classmates' identity, to their teacher's identity, and to the social context. In that sense, students' identities change like their ways of thinking. Besides, writing as a reflective process exhibits students' insights and identities that can be insinuated from their texts. Writing is a resource that can help to research students' identities in a learning environment.

The aim of this research study is to answer two questions: What do narratives reveal about students' identities as writers? And, how do students define writing according to their personal experience? During academic life, the participants of this research study were required to write a variety of texts: essays, reflective logs, and sometimes stories. Occasionally, these students were free to decide what to write. They showed reluctance to write academic texts, and thus, their papers mainly displayed personal events. That kind of written production was the motivation to carry out this research project. The inquiry to begin this study was related to why students wrote personal texts rather than academic papers, and also what students thought about themselves as writers.

For analyzing students' identity as writers, this research study was developed. The following sections will contain information about the problem that illustrates the origin of this study, and also, theoretical content about the poststructuralist perspective of identity proposed by Norton (1997) and theoretical aspects about personal narratives proposed by Pavlenko (2008). Furthermore, the subsequent sections relate to the research methodology that was applied, also to the findings, conclusions and the possible paths to follow for future research on identity and the writing field.

Literature Review

Identity

Identity is a topic that has many connotations. According to Duff (2012), identity traditionally “was understood in terms of one’s connection or identification with a particular social group, the emotional ties one has with that group, and the meanings that connection has for an individual” (p.12). Some people might feel that they are the same person wherever they are, but certainly each person has as many identities as contexts where they perform. The poststructuralist perspective implies that identity is socially constructed and changes overtime. According to Norton (1997), the term identity refers to “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (p. 410). From this perspective, a person is conditioned by the context to perform in a specific way in different settings impersonating multiple identities based on personal experiences and projecting a desirable identity towards the future.

Identity has to do with belonging to groups. When a person is accepted in a social group, they feel motivated and identified; that identification can turn into power or respect. Likewise, identity relates to the desire of people for belonging to a group; Norton (1997) claims there is a “desire for recognition, for affiliation and the desire for security and safety” (p. 410). People feel secure when they are in contact with whom they feel identified. Similarly, people might change their common behavior or way of thinking depending on the group that they belong. Identity works in a double way, such that an individual can affect the identity of a group, and a group can demand a specific identity from an individual.

Another dimension for identity is related to the concept of social identity. People are confined to living among others. Consequently, identities are molded according to social groups, their behavior, their ideologies, or their beliefs. Deaux (2001) proposes that social identification is developed while a person interacts with others. For the case of this research study, a languages student can display many identities. For example, a student can identify themselves as learner, tutor, teacher, reader, writer, presenter, etc. The previous identities are

socially constructed based on the academic context. Because society influences people, an individual student's identity changes over time alike their perceptions about others' identities.

As stated previously, people display different identities depending on the setting in which they are. Students are perceived as such while they are in academia, but at the same time, they are fathers, sisters, husbands, employees, workers, etc. Díaz (2013), argues that a pre-service teacher's identity is influenced by means of the day-to-day interactions that languages students experience in educational institutions. Each setting requires a specific identity in order to interact, and consequently, the same person is perceived differently by others. In the present research study, the main concern was to analyze students' identity as writers. From a personal point of view, this identity is built from their experience during their undergraduate program, from the interaction with teachers, and from the texts they read and wrote. In addition, this identity is also related to their personal lives and to the ideas and concepts they have been exposed to during their educational lives.

Commonly, people are affected by their desires or projections towards who they would like to be or how they would like to be perceived by others. In that sense, the identity as writers can be attached towards the authors that students have read or the kind of texts that they prefer. As a result, from what students like to read, it can be inferred what they would write. Pavlenko & Blackledge (2003) mentioned that identity "is a dialogic phenomenon, constantly open to construction and reevaluation within and through communicative interaction" (p. 1). With languages students, identity can be linked to their role as learners and how that experience is reflected in their lives.

For the present research study, identity is considered as an experiential process. People develop their identities according to the contexts in which they are immersed or according to the people with whom they interact. Languages students develop their identities in relation to their subjects, their affiliation to teachers, their preferences in terms of the topics studied, and for this specific case, they construct their identities in relation to the texts they have read, the texts they have written, or their own concepts for reading and writing. In the

following sections, the relationship that researchers have established between writing and identity will be illustrated.

Narratives

Every person's life is a story; every person lives incidents that are worthy of being heard. Narratives are essentially life experiences that can be shared orally or in writing. Narratives can be considered discourses, and consequently, carry an identity within. Any word or text involves conveying intentions, meanings, and points of view. In that sense, Castañeda (2008) implies that "discourses comprise ways of understanding the world, talking about it and – especially but not limited to – 'becoming and/or being' within it" (p. 114). Discourses, alike identity, mean the presence of a person in relation to specific contexts. The participants of this research study, demonstrated by means of their narratives, that they were part of academia, but also, that they did not think they were part of the writers' world.

As mentioned previously narratives and discourses can be similar. Pavlenko (2008), mentions that narratives are "all types of discourse in which event structured material is shared with readers or listeners, including fictional stories, personal narratives, accounts and recounts of events (real or imagined)" (p. 311). An interesting aspect that narratives imply is inquiry. Inquiries are the beginning of narratives. Questions allow the writer to reflect upon the answer, and because narratives are based on personal issues, honesty emerges on the paper. A narrator writes real life experiences and displays their own feelings. Narratives as a collection data instrument provide information from the perspective of the participants. According to Webster and Mertova (2007), as quoted by Rivas (2013), narratives "provide researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories" (p. 189). Narratives, as stories, help to research from the inner perspectives of the participants. Thus, the most appropriate way to establish students' writers' identities is by asking them to narrate how they see themselves as writers.

When writing narratives, students relate to meaningful aspects of their lives. People make sense of their lives by means of their experience. Bolívar (2002) cited by Rodríguez (2011) declared that “narratives are related to people’s narrations about their life stories, lived experiences, biography, and important episodes of their lives. From narratives, feelings, thoughts, motivations, desires, purposes emerge to make sense to these human affairs” (p. 40). The participants of this research study make sense of their role as writers the writing experience that they have.

Narratives can be classified into two categories: fictional narratives and personal narratives. Fictional narratives are stories about unreal events using prompts, pictures, or videos. Pavlenko (2008) states that personal narratives “can be elicited in experimental settings through key words, interview questions, or requests to tell particular types of stories, such as earliest memories, stories about holidays or car accidents, or stories about times when the speakers felt a particular emotion” (p. 318). The narratives implemented in this research study were personal narratives. Because the aim of this study was to reveal students’ identities as writers, the personal narratives provided a rich amount of data. Personal narratives accounted for experiences, memories, and sensations. For writing the narratives, students were inquired about their writing background and their affiliation towards those texts. Also, they wrote about the influence they had from other people to write, their motivations to write, and the kinds of texts they wrote. Finally, and more importantly, they wrote about how they saw themselves as writers. All the previous narratives were written according to the participants’ personal experiences.

Narratives as a reflective exercise make people analyze and make sense of their lives and roles in a society. The main issue to study in narratives is people’s experiences and how they create meaning from those experiences. Bruner (1990), as cited by Miyahara (2010) indicates that “in the experience – centered approach, narratives are the means of human sense-making: human beings create meaning from their experiences both individually and socially” (p. 6). Narratives are separated pieces of experiences. They reveal the insights of a person in relation to an issue that was lived in a specific moment in life. Those pieces of writing, when

connected, provide a full narration that can be understood as a unit. Writing narratives is not just writing about oneself, but also, how people provide meaning to the events narrated.

Methodology

This research study is rooted in qualitative research and on the case study approach. According to Gerring (2004), a case study is a study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of units. The narratives written by eighth semester students are the units to be analyzed. After analyzing each unit, the research established common characteristics among all texts. Specifically, this research study was based on the interpretive case study approach.

The research was carried out at a public university in Tunja, Boyacá, Colombia with students in the Modern Languages Spanish – English B.A. program. The participants are currently studying their eighth semester. They were between 20 and 30 years-old. They were six people, four men and two women. These students were selected because they were finishing their undergraduate studies. These students have studied over 80% of the syllabus of their undergraduate program; therefore, they have already been required to write different texts about many topics. That knowledge and their insights about being a writer are meaningful to develop this research.

To collect data, three instruments were applied. The triangulation of the data was done by means of narratives, interviews, and a focus group session. The narratives were written in English in order to accomplish the requirement of the English Literature course, which is to practice writing in the target language. The interview and the focus group sessions were applied in the mother language of the participants to avoid any kind of distortion in the data and to gain more spontaneity in the answers given by them.

Findings

The findings of this research determined two aspects: the students' identities as writers and their definition of writing. For characterizing students' identities as writers, it is necessary to know the concept they have for writer. In that sense, the

participants do not think that they can be considered writers. They mentioned that they prefer to keep their texts in secret because writers publish their texts and are criticized. Another aspect is that they feel comfortable writing about their experiences, as the following samples illustrates:

I as a writer? Mmm! I don't think of me as a writer, I never have done it. I think that I wouldn't be a "good" writer. In fact, if I write, I think that I will never show my writing to someone else.

How do you see yourself as a writer? I cannot answer this question because I do not know how will I am in the future in terms of writing something, in fact I have some doubts in relation with it; to be a writer it requires a lot of life experiences and own style, but I think it will be hard to achieve.

The participants of this research demonstrated that writing is creating narrations according to life experiences. In that sense, when they imply that a writer is a creator of stories, they are expressing the freedom to convey the ideas that they want and how they want:

I prefer to write personally, I mean to write about experiences, troubles, love, sadness and things like these. I have written a lot of papers which are about feelings and thing that I think when I can get asleep, and I realized that it is a good chance to produce writing.

The previous student validates the idea that he prefers to write about his life. Besides, when this student mentions the fact of producing writing, he means feelings that disturb him and that do not allow him to sleep can be an advantage to write and to discharge the mind and the body, to be distressed and rested. The preference for informal writing is also displayed in the following sample:

For sure, I prefer to write informal papers because I feel free. Informal is the way I can say what I feel, what I dream, what I think, and nobody has to support the theory about what I am.

The participants of this research study prefer to write freely. They create stories, build context, and imagine situations. Free writing allows them to evade the constraints that academic writing has. Their stories do not need corrections, there are no grades, there is no one to tell them if their texts are well written or not. That freedom is what they are looking for in their texts. That is the free writing they expect, writing without any imposition or rule—writing because they want to and not because they have to. Maybe this conflict is what makes them think that they are not writers.

I say that I do not consider myself a writer because when I write I do it for myself, I never write for someone else, actually I feel embarrassed showing my texts to someone, I mean what is it to be a writer? It is to show to the public my texts, that is what I think.

I see myself as a dreamer. I'm not that good in "fantastic" literature, but I love the stories in which I can connect the real world with my dreams. I think that I could be a good writer if I wanted.

According to the samples, a writer composes texts based on fantastic and fictional contexts. Also, in the previous excerpt, the participant does not assert that he is a writer; he argues that if he would like, he could be a great writer, but his idea of being a writer is attached to literature and fiction. Similarly, all the participants do not want to be attached to rules or parameters.

When you need to write, you just write freely, and not because you have to answer to a question or someone tells you: "write about this..." no, you write because you want to do it and need to do it.

On the other hand, students proposed their definition for writing. In the previous paragraphs, the concept of writer was already established and the reasons why the participants did not consider themselves as writers. Likewise, for the participants, the definition of writing is determined by their reading preferences. In general, the participants of the present research study agreed that writing is related to their life experiences and feelings. For the participants, it is relevant, meaningful, and helpful to discharge their feelings on a piece of paper. Students experience writing as a way to free their minds and body from negative situations, for example:

I write to feel free, writing is for releasing all the pain and suffering that is inside me, it is like a relieve.

Most of the time when I try to write is because I feel the necessity to express my feeling in that moment, I think that this is a good exercise to alleviate my heart and my thoughts and it helps to me to hide those bad events.

The participants stated that they like to write, but their writing is not subjected to parameters, rules, or grades. For the participants, writing is a process to release stress, anger, or sadness; that is their motivation to write. Also, for them, writing is freedom and isolation. They mentioned that writing was a way to escape from problems and negative feelings, as the following excerpt illustrates:

For me writing is like scaping where I can write whatever I want and eventually those texts are for me and if I want to tell something to someone, I tell it to myself.

Writing for the participants of this research is closely related to the same content that they read. They feel attracted to literature, and consequently, their thoughts about writing are linked to creation and personal feelings. Finally, for students, writing is more an experiential and sensory activity than a disciplined and organized work. Commonly, students are asked to write and actually do it, but they are not willing to correct or accept changes. They prefer to leave their texts the way they are. Maybe they believe that a writer has never corrected a text.

Conclusions

One of the conclusions extracted from this research study is that students do not consider themselves as writers. They believe that for being a writer it is necessary to read, and to believe in what they write. Also, for students, a writer creates stories, plots, and sceneries; students like to read literature and that type of reading has permeated their writing, despite they declared that when they write, they do not see themselves as writers.

Another conclusion is related to the definition that students have for writing. For the participants of this research study, writing means to narrate personal events. Writing allows students to analyze and reflect upon situations that happen daily. Students use writing to liberate themselves from negative feelings.

Another contribution that this research can provide is that the participants preferred to write without following any kind of parameters. They argued that writing should not be tied to structures, rules, or topics. Writing should be carried out whenever students would like to and about any topic they would like. For them, writing should not be imposed by means of topics, extension, or rules (such as APA). Thus, these pre-service teachers argued that when they teach writing, they direct their students towards writing exercises similar to the ones they have been doing. Students meant to teach writing by means of narrating stories or personal events.

From the teaching perspective, this research study provided two conclusions. One of them is related to the rapport between teacher and students. Identity is fixed to writing. Narratives reveal who the students are. Consequently, it is impossible not to feel affinity towards apprentices. Narratives are intimate, and teachers must be able to recognize that the points of view or critics must

be respected. In the narratives, students revealed their ideas, arguments, and desires, and this information was meaningful for the teacher. When the teacher knows their students, they can redesign classes and direct knowledge towards topics interesting to both the teacher and the students.

Another point that can be mentioned from the teaching perspective is that it is important to provide students with chances to explore their writing. Academic writing is included in the programs of the subjects of any languages program. Next to academic writing, teachers can incorporate other exercises, such as diaries, journals, or narratives. Also, it could be worth analyzing the inclusion of personal writing from basic language levels and in higher levels where the teacher can move towards academic writing. With personal writing, it is possible to teach grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary implicitly. Finally, identification is a key issue in writing. When students feel that the texts reflect themselves, they feel proud and comfortable with their product.

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