Overview

Research on individual differences in second language acquisition (SLA) aims to explore what might be contributing to variations in language learners’ learning attainment, and identify the extent of the variation that can be accounted for by particular individual difference variables (e.g., Dörnyei, 2014). In light of this orientation, research in this area has been dominated by psychometric measurement and quantitative analysis, which has helped us to develop sophisticated understandings of the interactions between various individual difference variables such as aptitude, learning beliefs, language learning strategies, motivation, working memory, and language learning achievement. Recent studies in the field have also used alternative measurement techniques, such as the idiodynamic approach that relies on computer software to collect language learners’ “moment-by-moment ratings” through self-reporting (e.g., Boudreau et al., 2018, p. 157). While the latter can be used with a small number of participants and may better capture individual participants’ variations, the use of questionnaires usually involves a large number of participants and, consequently, individuality is often lost in numerical calculations and statistical procedures (e.g., Benson & Cooker, 2013). As a result, the statistical abstraction of individuals has been problematized by researchers who argue in favor of the need to use different methods in exploring individual differences holistically (e.g., Benson & Cooker, 2013; Ushioda, 2009).

Methodological choices in any research study are more than decisions made at the technical level, as they are often associated with epistemological and theoretical orientations that fundamentally shape related research activities. SLA research has traditionally relied on a cognitive paradigm that conceptualizes language learning as something that takes place in individual language learners’ minds/brains, although the brain could also be seen as situated in a social context (e.g., Atkinson, 2011). However, over the last few decades a number of paradigm shifts in SLA have compelled researchers to recognize the significance of contextual mediation for language learners’ cognitive processing, and appreciate that individuals’ cognition is profoundly interrelated with social and contextual processes (e.g., Atkinson, 2011; Block, 2003; Douglas Fir Group, 2016). As a result, individual differences can no longer be simply accounted for by what is involved in cognitive processing, since individual learners’ cognition is recognized to be profoundly mediated by contextual conditions and sociocultural processes.

Some of the alternative approaches to SLA named by Atkinson (2011) (e.g., sociocultural and complex dynamic system theory) require researchers to pay close attention to both what language learners do and why they do what they do in the language learning process. This requirement
prompts the deployment of methodological tools other than psychometric measurement in individual differences research. Narratives, which are conceptualized “as text/artefact, method of analysis, or both” (Barkhuizen, 2014, p. 450), have emerged to be either a stand-alone method of inquiry or a significant component of mixed- or multi-methods research on individual differences in SLA. The coming sections present how narratives have been used in studies on individual differences in SLA, before drawing on evolving understandings of narrative to discuss how the use of narratives could be refined to enhance our understanding of individual differences in the future.

Technical Features

The use of narratives in SLA research has been informed by developments in a variety of other disciplines, including psychology, sociolinguistics, and sociology. The notion of narrative “resists straightforward and agreed-upon definitions and conceptualizations” (De Fina, 2012, p. 1). In general terms, narratives can be conceptualized and used for research in two ways, namely the traditional canonical approach and the social interactional approach (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008). The canonical approach, also known as the “big story” approach, regards narratives as a means for research participants to recount past events, and uses narratives as “heuristics for the inquiry into … how tellers make sense of themselves in light of these past events” (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 378). Meanwhile, the social interactional approach, also known as the “small story” approach, highlights the emergent nature of narrative and recognizes it as “a joint venture and the outcome of negotiation between interlocutors” (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 381). Different conceptualizations of narrative require researchers to adopt different methods to collect and analyze data. For instance, the social interactional approach to narrative focuses on “the discursive construction of small stories extracted from recorded conversational data” with help from conversation analysis methods (Barkhuizen, 2014, p. 450; also see Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008).

In the context of SLA, the use of narratives so far has been more in line with the traditional canonical paradigm, with relevant studies often involving the analysis of learner-related narratives collected and generated through a variety of means such as interviews, diaries, and (auto-)biographical writings. Narratives, in most individual differences research, may refer to the data that researchers collect through, or which are generated from, a variety of methods for investigating individual language learners’ “subject reality (i.e., findings on how ‘things’ or events were experienced by the respondents) [and] life reality (i.e., findings on how ‘things’ are or were” (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 165).

In the last two decades, researchers have also contended that it is necessary to recognize the methods used to collect and generate narratives, such as interviews and (auto)biographical writing, as social practice (e.g., Pavlenko, 2007; Talmy, 2010; Talmy & Richards, 2011). This means that these methods to generate narratives are not only the means for researchers to access information related to what is being researched but they should also be recognized as sites or processes where narratives are co-constructed by researchers and research participants. For this reason, it has also become necessary for researchers to pay close attention to their text reality (i.e., how language learners construct their experiences in the research process) so that they understand how language learners’ experiences can be used to make sense of a particular individual difference construct. Regardless of the approaches to theorizing narrative, the use of narratives in individual differences research involves the collection, construction, and analysis of narratives related to language learning, which will be elaborated below (Table 26.1).

As can be seen in the Table 26.1, narratives in many individual difference studies are collected by the use of methods such as “life history, language learning history, language learning experience, language biography, autobiography, and autoethnography” (Benson, 2014, p. 156, italics in the original; see also Barkhuizen, 2014). The narrative data collected through the use of these methods include
### Table 26.1 The Use of Narrative Methods in Individual Differences Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Theorizing Narratives (De Fina, 2012)</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canonical approach or the “big story” approach</td>
<td>Social interactional approach or the “small story” approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Narratives as the participants’ recounts of past events</td>
<td>Narrative as social practice, the importance of narrating</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection and Construction**

- Data collected or generated through “autobiographical records or reflection, published memoirs, written language learning histories, or interviews” (Benson, 2014, p. 157), and narrative frames (Barkhuizen, 2017)
- Corroborated with data collected from other means (e.g., observation)
- Collected together with other forms of data (e.g., visual) (Besser & Chik, 2014)
- Narratives constructed: life history, language learning history, language learning experience, language biography, autobiography, and autoethnography (Benson, 2014, p. 156), and multimodal narratives (Besser & Chik, 2014)

**Data Analysis**

- **Narrative of analysis**
  - “Narrative research activities of (co)constructing narratives, analyzing narratives, reporting the findings, and reading/watching/listening to research reports” (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 395)
  - Generate narratives to achieve narrative knowing (Barkhuizen, 2011, 2014)
- **Content/thematic analysis (paradigmatic analysis):**
  - “Produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the database” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5)
  - “Produce explanatory stories” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5) related to research participants’ (“big stories”) subject and life realities (Pavlenko, 2007)
- **Analysis of narrative**
  - Social interactional approach to data analysis: focus on the act of narrating
  - Analyze the context and form of narrative (De Fina, 2012; Talmy, 2010)
  - “Focus on discourse of narratives and their meanings in local contexts of interaction” (Benson, 2018, p. 598)
  - Microethnographic discourse analysis (Erickson, 2004)
  - Achieve “the discursive construction of small stories” (Barkhuizen, 2014, p. 450)
  - Deepened understanding of narrating as social practice
“autobiographical records or reflection, published memoirs, written language learning histories, or interviews” (Benson, 2014, p. 157). While most of these narratives are generated through the use of language learners’ autobiographical writings, constructed accounts of learning through diaries, or interview data on language learning (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2014; Benson, 2018), narratives on language learning can be also corroborated by data collected through other means, such as observation. For instance, De Costa (2015) collected data from his research participants through individual and group interviews as well as observation, in order to understand their experience of anxiety. Meanwhile, researchers like Barkhuizen (2017) have designed and refined instruments such as narrative frames to capture a variety of experiences from a large number of participants, while visual data (e.g., photographs) have been collected together with data from narrative sources in order to construct multimodal narratives of language learning for analysis (e.g., Besser & Chik, 2014). Some of the studies that collected a variety of data to construct or generate narratives have also been longitudinal, as researchers are often interested in identifying the dynamic nature of individual difference constructs as experienced by language learners over a period of time.

The analysis of narratives in individual differences research can be largely classified into two approaches, namely narrative of analysis and analysis of narratives (Benson, 2014; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative of analysis involves the analysis of a variety of data that may not be limited to narratives, in order to generate narratives and gain an understanding of what is being researched. Such analysis may be captured by the notion of “narrative knowledging”, or “the meaning making … or knowledge construction that takes place during the narrative research activities” (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 395). In individual differences research, the use of narratives is often approached as the analysis of narratives, which involves the analysis of narratives collected and/or generated in the research process.

Analysis of narratives is conducted through paradigmatic analytic procedures, such as content and thematic analysis, in order to “produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the database” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5; Pavlenko, 2007; Talmy, 2010). Paradigmatic analysis may follow the procedures commonly used in recursive thematic analysis, including familiarization with the data, “generating initial codes”, “searching for themes”, “reviewing themes”, and “defining and naming themes” before writing up the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Paradigmatic analysis may also start with the concepts (or themes) associated with existing theory (e.g., sociocultural theory) to examine the narrative data in a top–down, deductive manner. It may follow the analytic procedures of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to identify concepts or themes inductively in the data. Alternatively, paradigmatic analysis may involve both deductive and inductive processes, through which researchers repeatedly go back and forth between data and theory in an iterative manner. Through these paradigmatic analytic procedures, researchers aim to “gather events and happenings” to “produce explanatory stories” from diverse sources of data throughout the analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). Such analysis may help to reveal how individual differences variables (e.g., language learning strategies and learning motivation) unfold in the narratives collected and generated from language learners, but it also suffers from a few significant limitations. Pavlenko (2007) highlights that analysis of narratives, if it suffers from limitations such as the “absence of a theoretical framework and a clear methodological procedure”, may “result in a laundry list of observations, factors, or categories” and fail to gain insights into the dynamic and situated nature of individual differences factors (p. 167). The reliance on language learners’ narratives as “objective accounts of events, processes, or psychological states” is also highly problematic because narratives are constructions of what might have happened during collaborative negotiations between two interlocutors (Benson, 2018, p. 598). While this critical awareness implies the need to interpret language learners’ narratives by closely examining other data (e.g., from observation), it also requires researchers to attend to both the contextual conditions (e.g., macro and micro contexts) surrounding the generation of narratives and the textual features within the narratives themselves. Consequently, the analysis of narra-
Narrative Methods

tives may involve the “analysis of the narrative content, context, and form” (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 174). When analyzing content, researchers should not just depend on the frequency of what appears in the narratives, but also need to pay attention to what is missing. Multiple levels of contexts (e.g., macro, meso, and micro) should be also thoroughly considered when analyzing the context of narratives, while how language learners narrate their language learning can be analyzed in terms of its form by focusing “more on the discourse of narratives and, in particular, their meanings in local contexts of interaction” (Benson, 2018, p. 598). This shift from narratives to narrating indicates a critical awareness that methods of data collection such as interviews and autobiographical writing are social practices (e.g., De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Pavlenko, 2007; Talmy, 2010, Talmy & Richards, 2011). It also acknowledges the need to adopt a more socially interactive approach to the use of narratives in deepening our understanding of individual differences through research (e.g., conversation analysis in Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; microethnographic discourse analysis in De Costa, 2015), a point that will be taken up later when reviewing the relevant studies and making suggestions for the use of narratives in individual differences research.

Contributions to ID Research

As mentioned earlier, the paradigm shift in SLA has motivated researchers to use narratives to take up the empirical challenge to capture and critically interpret nuanced accounts of individual differences variables and their mediation of language learners’ learning. In particular, the use of narratives helps researchers to be much more aware of the circumstances within which language learners learn languages, and to acknowledge the fact that not all language learners have the same resources that they can invest in the learning of a language (e.g., Douglas Fir Group, 2016). This means that variations in individual language learners’ achievements may be profoundly mediated by their access to the contextual resources that have been allocated to them as a result of unequal power relations (if they happen to belong to socio-politically disadvantaged groups, for example; e.g., Ortega, 2019).

Meanwhile, individual difference variables such as motivation and beliefs may emerge from the interplay between individuals’ volition/cognition and their sociocultural conditions. With this critical awareness, the use of narratives enables researchers to interrogate the mediation of macro and micro contextual processes on individual learners to achieve a better understanding of why language learners adopt particular beliefs or strategies, and how these mediate their language learning progress. It also helps researchers to make sense of why language learners have particular emotional, cognitive, and metacognitive experiences, and how these contribute to variation in their learning achievements.

In the following section, I will examine sample studies that use narrative methods to interpret individual differences within theoretical perspectives other than cognitive ones, such as sociocultural theory and complex dynamic system theory (CDST; e.g., Atkinson, 2011). These studies cover traditional individual difference variables including language learning strategies, motivation, anxiety, beliefs, and willingness to communicate (WTC), embodying attempts by researchers to use narrative methods to enhance our understanding of individual difference factors in second language learning. As will be seen, these individual difference variables are dynamic and susceptible to change (e.g., Benson & Gao, 2008; Dörnyei, 2009). The review does not cover individual difference variables such as age and personality, which are relatively stable; researchers have made fewer efforts to explore these using narrative methods.

Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies are defined as “specific plans or steps, either observable … or unobservable” by which language learners attempt to enhance their language learning (Oxford, 2003,
Such strategies are seen as an important learner variable that contributes to language learning achievement. A popular belief in the association between language learning strategy use and language learning achievement has motivated researchers to invest efforts in identifying strategic solutions for struggling language learners. However, in the last decade, language learning strategy research has been criticized for being atheoretical, and for the suspicion that major survey instruments such as Oxford’s (1990) strategy inventory for language learning may have psychometric shortcomings (e.g., Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmidt, 2006). The use of a language learning strategy instrument in research may reinforce the notion that language learners’ strategy use is static, while in reality strategic language learners often adopt different strategies in response to emerging learning situations (Gao, 2007). It is not just their reported frequency of particular strategy use but their well-coordinated use of related strategies that matters in the learning process, which requires researchers to explore language learners’ recounts of their strategy use. Consequently, narratives were collected to capture language learners’ recounts of language learning analysis in language learning strategy research.

As an example, Gao (2006) conducted interviews with Chinese students in a British university to find out how their strategy use shifted after their arrival in the UK from mainland China. Drawing on sociocultural approaches to language learning, the study attempted to find out why Chinese learners adopted different sets of strategies in mainland China and in the UK. Their narratives, collected through semi-structured interviews, revealed that the participants’ strategy use was subject to the mediation of powerful discourses and available learning resources, which were made accessible by various social agents who often turned out to be “significant others” such as teachers and parents. For instance, the participants’ preference for memorization strategies was found to be associated with popular discourses on memorization and vocabulary retention, as well as limited access to learning resources that would enable them to try other strategies. Likewise, their use of social strategies upon arrival in the UK was made possible by their access to international students with whom they needed to socialize in English. Gao (2006) highlights that language learners’ strategy use is a dynamic phenomenon emerging from the interaction between language learners and their contextual conditions (also see an account of language learners’ self-regulated strategy use in Hu & Gao, 2018).

In language learning strategy studies such as Gao (2006), narratives collected through the use of interviews help to capture the process as experienced by language learners and document the learners’ own explanations and reasons for their learning efforts. Therefore, they enable researchers to identify unique features of individual learners’ strategy use, and to understand why particular learners use specific strategies. The narratives often cover a long time span of language learning, and for this reason they can also help researchers to explore the developmental process of the learners’ strategy use without relying on longitudinal methods. In addition, narratives are powerful in constructing the developmental process of strategic language learning as experienced by the learners, thereby highlighting the individuality of strategy use as an individual difference variable that accounts for variations in language learning. However, the use of narratives in language learning strategy research has been largely underpinned by an assumption that narratives are data revealing language learners’ subjective and life reality (Pavlenko, 2007). Despite the fact that studies often deploy theoretical frameworks and clear methodological procedures in analysis, the use of narratives is reductive, since researchers in studies such as Gao (2006) and Hu and Gao (2018) have not critically considered how narration and constructive negotiations in the research interview process might have transformed what was actually experienced by language learners.

**Motivation**

Motivation is probably one of the most explored variables accounting for differences in individual learners’ learning achievements (e.g., Boo, Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2015).
Theorized in a variety of ways, language learning motivation has been mainly examined through the use of questionnaires. For instance, motivation has long been conceptualized in terms of dichotomies, such as integrative (e.g., sense of belonging to the target language speakers’ community) versus instrumental (e.g., learning the language for employment) motivations (e.g., Boo et al., 2015). It has also been theorized using self-determination theory on a continuum from intrinsic (the source of motivation being within the learner and the learning) to extrinsic (the source of motivation being outside the learning) (e.g., Sugita-McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Both approaches have enabled researchers to implement large-scale surveys to identify patterns in the aggregate and profiles of language learners at the group level. One recent attempt to theorize motivation has been to regard language learners’ motivational selves as an integrated, interactive system that consists of an ideal self, ought-to self, and L2 learning experience (e.g., Dörnyei, 2009). Nevertheless, such a theorization still requires methodological tools for researchers to identify and explore what motivates the language learners.

The use of narratives enables researchers to examine how language learners derive their motivation to learn languages from their cognitions and perceptions about what these languages can do for them and what they can achieve through SLA. A language learner’s motivation, either integrative or instrumental, is closely associated with perceptions of whether the learning of a particular language will help them to become a member of the target language speakers’ community or to find a financially rewarding job. Focusing on the learner’s learning narratives, researchers may recognize that the learner’s perceptions are socially and culturally constructed, which may or may not be substantiated by what they actually experience in the language learning process. As an example, the target language speakers’ community, as envisaged by the language learners, may be a fanciful homogenous community, whereas the reality might consist of different social groups with quite different language use and practices. The learner’s acquisition of language forms associated with their imagined target language speakers’ community may not help them to access and acquire membership of the community they encounter in real life (e.g., Norton, 2013). Like financial investors, language learners need to accommodate risks and accept uncertain returns from the efforts they invest in the learning of a target language. In other words, narratives help researchers to understand language learners’ motivated language learning processes in unique ways, as illustrated by Lanvers (2016), Thompson and Vasquez (2015), and Papi and Hiver (2020).

Lanvers (2016) drew on focus group interviews with adult language learners and adolescent school language learners to investigate the limitations of Dörnyei’s (2009) motivational self-system. Emerging from the interactions within groups of individual language learners were three distinct learner profiles in terms of motivation: “other-motivated”, “self-motivated”, and “amotivated” learners (Lanvers, 2016, p. 87). In line with Higgins’ (1987) self-discrepancy theory, the gap between “other/ought” and “actual/own” generates strong motivational forces underlying adolescent language learners’ learning (ibid., p. 89). Some learners may have become more self-motivated and independent, which may represent a possible direction in which other-motivated language learners could develop. These findings suggest a developmental approach to theorizing language learning motivation that addresses the limitations of Dörnyei’s (2009) motivational self-system. They also highlight the significance of contextual conditions in mediating language learners’ motivation.

Thompson and Vasquez (2015) also relied on the use of narrative interviews to analyze and identify the motivational profiles of eight non-native language teachers who had spent time abroad before the study. They focused on three teachers and their aspirations to be “teachers of language” or “teachers of literature” when interpreting narratives obtained through interviews. The analysis identified that the participants’ motivational profiles were closely associated with the learners’ immediate social context. Although the language learners’ motivational self-system helped to explain some of the data, it did not allow the authors to make sense of all the data they had acquired. For instance, the theory does not suggest that the discrepancy between “I” and “other” can significantly mediate students’ learning outcomes, but the interview narratives...
suggested that “there can be an ‘other’ dimension in the ideal L2 self (the construct with a focus on ‘I’), and an ‘I’ dimension in the ought-to L2 self (the construct with a focus on ‘other’)” (Thompson & Vasquez, 2015, p. 170). These findings relate to the advancement of theorizing motivation within context or “through a small lens” (Ushioda, 2016, p. 564) and CDST in SLA (e.g., Papi & Hiver, 2020).

Contextualizing language learning motivation within CDST, Papi and Hiver (2020) used retrospective interviews to collect and interpret six Iranian graduates’ narratives related to key stages in their histories of learning English, in order to identify their shifting motivational trajectories. Informed by Higgins’ (2014) framework of motivation (i.e. value, control, and truth effectiveness), they capture the changes in the participants’ language learning motivational trajectories that “arise from adaptive interactions between system components (value, truth, and control) and environmental conditions (i.e., learning contexts), capturing the emerging patterns of variation and stability at different stages of individuals’ L2 learning” (Papi & Hiver, 2020, p. 224). These findings illustrate how language learning motivation can be theorized and understood as a complex, emergent system from interactions between language learners and contexts. The use of novel theorizations of motivation and narratives opens up more directions for research to investigate, capture, and understand language learners’ motivational developments as complex interactive systems.

Despite the fact that the use of narratives has enriched the theorization of language learning motivation with novel insights (e.g., Lanvers, 2016; Papi & Hiver, 2020; Thompson & Vasquez, 2015), it must be also noted that the use of narratives has limitations, just as with their use in other individual differences research. Papi and Hiver (2020) are critically aware that “elicited narrative accounts are imaginative reconstructions of past events and anticipations of future ones”, and they contend that adopting longitudinal designs in future research may help to address this limitation (p. 227). Researchers also need to be aware that narrating and the relevant methods to generate narratives (e.g., retrospective interviews) are all social practices. It may be equally important to explore how narratives emerge from the process of data collection (e.g., conducting retrospective interviews) when the relevant narratives are analyzed to understand the participants’ subject and life reality (Pavlenko, 2007). Having said this, the theorization of language learning in terms of CDST and the use of narratives (Papi & Hiver, 2020) are seen as critical in capturing the complexity of conditions within which these individual difference variables operate in studies on other individual difference variables, such as willingness to communicate.

**Willingness to Communicate (WTC)**

Willingness to communicate, defined as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a specific time with a specific person or persons, using an L2” (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998, p. 547), is used to understand language learners’ struggles and efforts in initiating and maintaining the use of an L2, so that their use of an L2 can be enhanced to facilitate their language development. Individual differences research has debated whether WTC should be conceptualized as a stable, trait-like variable that can help to explain variations in language learners’ communication behaviors and language development, or as a dynamic phenomenon emerging from language learners’ interactions with various psychological and contextual factors. The use of narratives helps researchers to situate the exploration of WTC within particular contexts and conceptualize it as a dynamic system (e.g., Peng, 2012; Reinders & Wattana, 2015; Yashima, MacIntyre, & Ikeda, 2018).

As an example, Peng (2012) highlights the fluid nature of culture and contends that an ecological approach should be adopted to understand Chinese students’ WTC. This ecological approach recognizes the “dynamic interaction between human beings and the environment” underpinning language learners’ WTC, and conceptualizes the context surrounding language learners in terms of
Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) nested multiple-layered ecosystems, consisting of a “micro, meso, eso and macrosystem” (Peng, 2012, p. 205). To understand language learners’ WTC in a Chinese university, Peng conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with five participants and collected other data through learning journals and observations to corroborate the interview data. The analysis of narratives relied on both Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) nested ecosystems and an inductive thematization with a focus on the micro system for the participants—that is, individual learners and the classrooms. The interview data and journal entries generated rich insights into how individual factors (e.g., learner beliefs and motivation) “synergistically interacted with” contextual factors such as “classroom atmosphere, which refers to the mood, emotions, or climate sensed and shared by the class group” in shaping the participants’ WTC (Peng, 2012, p. 208).

A thematic analysis of the language learners’ narratives helps researchers to make sense of the different layers of the ecosystem for language learning as experienced by language learners. In light of ecological theory, the analysis revealed how different issues such as the imposition of high-stakes examinations (i.e., college English tests) at the macro contextual level might have contributed to the participants’ (lack of) WTC. Therefore, language teachers could learn to empathize with language learners who feel stressed about taking high-stakes examinations and could prompt their students to critically reflect on whether passing examinations should be the ultimate goal of language learning. In addition, it is also important for researchers to be aware that language learners’ narratives construct perceived realities at different layers of the ecosystem during the research process. It may be necessary for researchers to explore what was constructed by the learners’ narratives, as well as examine why and how particular narratives were constructed by the learners (e.g., De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Pavlenko, 2007; Talmy, 2010).

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Anxiety

The role of affect and emotion has been the subject of much recent attention in SLA research as researchers attempt to understand the “flesh-and-blood individuals who are doing the learning” (Kramsch, 2009, p. 2). In recent studies, affect and emotion have been theorized in terms of a variety of emotional experiences, such as desire and enjoyment. As a phenomenologically real construct, foreign language anxiety can be defined as language learners’ experience of “feeling tension and apprehension specifically associated with” language learning and use, which can facilitate or constrain their learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 284). Conceptualized as a trait feature (i.e., individual learners’ propensity for being anxious), it has been treated as a measurable individual difference variable by SLA researchers. Foreign language anxiety has also been theorized to be situation-specific. Researchers have explored the factors and processes that may contribute to learners’ foreign language anxiety, and how their levels of anxiety may be regulated to achieve maximum language learning outcomes. The use of narratives allows researchers to understand language learners’ anxiety within their broader cultural, political, and social contexts. As an example, De Costa (2015) proposes the social imaginary perspective as a lens through which to conceptualize language learning anxiety.

The social imaginary perspective enables researchers to appreciate that language learners may experience anxiety not necessarily because they do not have the relevant language skills for particular language tasks, but rather because they are made to feel their lack of adequate skills by a powerful social discourse favors the language skills of language users other than them. For instance, language learners who speak English with particular regional accents may have been led to believe that their English is inadequate in comparison with people from countries such as the UK or the USA. To understand the socio-political origins of foreign language anxiety, it is necessary for SLA researchers to understand it in dialogic and narrative ways. For this reason, De Costa collected a variety of data through different methods including observation and interviews, using individual and group interviews with language learners to generate data for analysis. A noticeable difference
in De Costa’s (2015) approach to analyzing narratives in comparison with the methods used in the individual differences studies reviewed so far has to do with the adoption of a microethnographic discourse analytic framework which is associated with the microanalysis of interaction and reflects an awareness that “the conduct of talk in local social interaction is profoundly influenced by processes that occur beyond the temporal and spatial horizon of the immediate occasion interaction” (Erickson, 2004, p. viii; also see De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Pavlenko, 2007; Talmy, 2010; Talmy & Richards, 2011).

In the analysis, De Costa (2015) paid close attention to his interaction with the participants, focusing on issues such as cues, boundary making, turn taking, and negotiation in the interview process. The analysis revealed that a particular participant’s (Daphne’s) foreign language anxiety could be understood with reference to “the scholar social imaginary”, i.e., the image of an academically successful student promulgated by the media and the government, a powerful sponsor of the media. This social imaginary profoundly mediated Daphne’s experience of anxiety when she was interacting with different social agents, including teachers and peers, in the process of language learning. Daphne felt overwhelmed by the expectations of academic success associated with this social imaginary, although this might also have compelled her to increase her efforts to achieve success in language learning and use.

In many senses, De Costa (2015) presents a good example for researchers who plan to adopt a social interactional approach to using narratives in exploring individual differences variables (e.g., Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008; De Fina, 2012). He strengthened the collection of narratives with observations in capturing the learner’s subject and life reality, and he also bolstered the rigor of analysis by focusing on the emergence of narrative in a dialogic, interactive process between the researcher and the research participants (e.g., Pavlenko, 2007).

Beliefs

Language learners’ beliefs about language learning refer to the preconceptions and mental representations that language learners have about learning (Amuzie & Winke, 2009). Like other individual difference variables, language learners’ beliefs can be conceptualized in a variety of ways, although researchers have argued that beliefs are “neither an ability nor a trait-like propensity for language learning” (De Costa, 2011, p. 347). In many SLA studies underpinned by cognitive psychology perspectives, language learners’ beliefs are seen as part of their metacognitive knowledge, which is constituted by relatively stable conceptions or misconceptions about language learning that might mediate learners’ approaches to learning (e.g., Horwitz, 1999). In recent studies, researchers have increasingly recognized that language learners’ beliefs are closely associated with their language learning experiences and contextual conditions (e.g., Amuzie & Winke, 2009; De Costa, 2011). Recognizing the context-dependent and situated nature of beliefs, recent studies have advanced a theorization of learner beliefs as “socially and discursively constructed” resources for language learners (Aro, 2012, p. 332), which encourages the use of narratives to gain insights into the role of beliefs in the process of language learning.

Focusing on language ideology and positioning in language learners’ belief discourses, De Costa collected a variety of data including observations, interviews, and artifacts to interpret immigrant learners’ language learning beliefs in Singapore. De Costa claimed that he used Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) grounded theory to analyze the data, although he could perhaps have reconsidered this presentation of grounded theory as his analytic method since he had clear foci when approaching the data for analysis. He describes how he took measures (e.g., writing down his preconceived assumptions) to prevent these assumptions from influencing the analysis when he was doing open coding before he organized and collapsed different codes into categories and developed conceptual links among different categories. In the analysis, he also used the microethnographic discourse
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analytic framework (Erickson, 2004) to attend to the emergence of narratives as mediated by the interaction between him and the research participants. Therefore, the results show that it is necessary for researchers to take a contextual approach to theorizing learner beliefs so that the complexity and dynamism of learner beliefs can be fully appreciated. They also show that language learners’ beliefs are “discursively constructed through” their “negotiation with the various social actors” in their learning environment (De Costa, 2011, p. 356). This finding calls for further research into the dialogic nature of learner beliefs.

Aro (2012) primarily relied on interviews to explore the role of authoritative voices among young Finnish learners of English. In this inquiry, the researcher interviewed the participants three times, at the ages of seven, nine, and eleven, to identify shifting “voices” in the participants’ beliefs. Although the description of his analysis could be enhanced by an illustrative example of exactly how it was conducted, Aro (2012) paid attention to “the polyphony in the learners’ answer” (p. 335) or the text reality of language learners’ narratives (Pavlenko, 2007) in analysis. Consequently, the analysis revealed that the participants’ beliefs about learning English were dominated by “voices of society”, which were “slogans, or cultural truths … that are frequently repeated and privileged in Finnish society”, such as “everyone in Finland knows English” (Aro, 2012, p. 335). The data suggest that the participants increasingly put forward their own views and experiences about language learning instead of repeating what was promoted by others in their society. The use of narratives has enabled researchers to identify how language learners might appropriate discourses about language learning from others to form part of their own language learning beliefs. A close ongoing engagement with language learners’ beliefs over time may help language teachers to identify how language learners developed beliefs through interaction with others in a given context and how their beliefs may have shifted, so they can develop pedagogical strategies to best support language learners’ belief development for effective and autonomous language learning.

Future Directions

As illustrated by the above-mentioned studies that use narratives to explore individual difference variables, the use of narratives has empowered researchers to adopt theoretical perspectives alternative to the cognitive psychology paradigm in SLA research and explore the dynamic, situated, and context-dependent nature of individual difference variables. Narrative-related methods help researchers to present enriched, humanistic accounts of individual differences in language learning and thereby avoid reducing individual language learners to their characteristics related to language learning (e.g., motivational or emotional traits; e.g., Benson & Cooker, 2013). The use of narratives in research does not necessarily establish statistically robust cause-effect relations that could help to explain the variations in individual language learners’ learning achievements, but it does reveal how differently individual language learners experience the learning of languages and why they engage in particular learning efforts. As individual-based methods, the use of narratives also helps to reveal how a variety of person-related factors and context-related processes interact with each other in mediating the process of language learning towards unpredictable outcomes. Consequently, narrative methods will continue to play a significant role in enriching our understanding of individual differences in language learning research, both as stand-alone methods and as a crucial component of mixed- or multi-methods designs.

The use of narrative methods in individual differences research, whether as a stand-alone or as part of mixed- or multi-methods designs, requires further sophistication than the designs and theorization that have been commonly used so far. Calls for researchers to recognize narratives as social practice are not new (e.g., De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Pavlenko, 2007; Talmy, 2010), but it is still quite common for narratives to be used to capture individual language learners’ subjective and life reality. Although the actual use of narratives is determined by the nature of research questions and researchers’ epistemological positions, it has become necessary for researchers to focus on nar-
rating, and the socio-interactive processes from which narratives emerge, when using narratives to explore individual difference variables in research. Supplementing with observation data may not be sufficient to help researchers to address the nature of narratives as language learners’ interpretive constructions of what happened, and it certainly cannot help researchers to write off their own role in the co-construction of narratives that result from an interactive, dialogic process between themselves and the language learners taking part in their research (e.g., De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Talmy, 2010). Adopting analytical approaches, such as microethnographic discourse analysis, may help researchers to recognize that a critical examination of the act of narrating itself may reveal critical insights and allow us to understand the subtleties of how individual difference variables operate to mediate language learners’ language learning and use, as can be seen in studies such as those by De Costa (2011, 2015) and Aro (2012).

Further, the significance of “narrative knowledging” or “the meaning making, learning, or knowledge construction” in the narrative-related research process pushes researchers to critically reflect on their roles in individual differences research (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 395). In mixed- or multi-methods studies, relevant findings that resulted from the statistical analysis of quantifiable data (e.g., Likert-scale questionnaire responses) can be triangulated with the explanatory results generated by conducting content analyses of a large amount of narratives (e.g., through keyword search and identification). The use of narratives also helps researchers to illustrate notions that previously were statistical abstractions with individual language learners’ voices, while thematic and narrative analyses of language learners’ narrative accounts help to advance the retheorization of individual difference variables such as language learning strategies and motivation (see Gao, 2006; Hu & Gao, 2018; Lanvers, 2016; Thompson & Vásquez, 2015; Papi & Hiver, 2020). However, the retheorization of research constructs has also drawn attention to the role of researchers in co-constructing narratives about language learning with language learners. Engaging research participants (and potential readers) with narrative constructions of what was researched is a process of narrative knowledging, which helps researchers and research participants to deepen, share, and promote their understanding of the research issue (Barkhuizen, 2011, 2014). In narrative knowledging, researchers explore “their epistemological and methodological selves to achieve a coherent holistic understanding of research issues” (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 410, italics in the original). Through narrative knowledging, researchers are more likely to transform relevant findings on individual differences into practical insights to inform the development of effective pedagogical practice supporting individual language learners, who also contribute to the process of narrative co-construction.

Finally, the use of narratives in individual differences research will become diversified in the future with the use of innovative methods to elicit narratives from language learners (e.g., De Costa, 2015; Peng, 2012). As an example, visual methods may be used together with interviews to generate narratives in exploring young language learners’ experiences. In these studies, young language learners may be asked to draw a picture about themselves as language learners and are then encouraged to tell stories about themselves based on the drawing. The combined use of narrating and visual methods will facilitate in-depth engagement with relevant issues or constructs (e.g., Besser & Chik, 2014). In addition, technological development will enable researchers to collect narratives from language learners through the internet. Although the use of online methods may pose new ethical challenges for researchers, the convenience and ease of collecting data online may be irresistible, particularly in light of shrinking investment in language learning research funding (e.g., Gao & Tao, 2016). The content analysis of narratives may also be facilitated by advances in the technology associated with corpus analysis and data mining methods. One might wonder whether or not artificial intelligence could be used to automate the analysis of a large number of language learners’ narratives and identify common themes and narrative structures. It may also help to transcribe narratives in a way that enables researchers to analyze them in terms of their content, context, and form (e.g., Pavlenko, 2007). If this happens, the use of narratives will help us to appreciate language learners’ individual differences in a less time-consuming way.
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