A Narrator of Stories Shares His Own:
An Interview with Gary Barkhuizen

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Gary Barkhuizen has spent much of his life as a qualitative researcher in applied linguistics narrating stories. He has published numerous books and articles on the use of narrative inquiry as a research tool in this profession.[2] After obtaining a Master of Applied Linguistics at Essex University and a second Master of Education, and then a Doctor of Education at Columbia University, Gary returned to his home in South Africa where he worked as an English teacher at Mmabatho High School, and then as a professor in the Department of English Language and Linguistics at Rhodes University in South Africa. From there, he moved to his current position as a professor at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. Growing up in South Africa, Gary speaks what he refers to as a "non-standard dialect" of Afrikaans, and admits to knowing a few words of Setswana and Xhosa as well. It is not surprising then, that with such a rich language environment in his childhood he would develop an interest in studying linguistics. When Gary participated in the VI International Qualitative Research Conference in Applied Linguistics in English Language Teaching at the Universidad de Guanajuato, Guanajuato, Mexico, in July, 2016, he agreed to share his own story, and generously spent over an hour talking about his life and travels as a narrative inquiry researcher. Over lunch, we had the following conversation, which has been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Amanda: *Gary, how did you get into English language teaching?*

Gary: Well, it was interesting. I'm originally from South Africa. I don't know if you know that. From the Eastern Cape, a place called East London. I went to school there, and then I went to Rhodes University in a place called Grahamstown. I wanted to become a school teacher, and started with English literature and psychology as my majors. Then I took a couple of linguistics courses and really found them interesting. So, I stayed on an extra year and did a graduate qualification in, I suppose, "linguistic-y" type things. But also at that stage, English second language teaching was becoming theoretically quite relevant in universities around the country. There had always been English second language teaching, but we started engaging with the theory and with the literature much more. And the university where I was offered it as a graduate qualification in ELT. They started this, well, you could call it an honors graduate program in English language teaching. I thought that would be interesting, and I took some courses in that, and some in historical linguistics and Anglo-Saxon literature. A weird combination.

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[2] Where Gary Barkhuizen's published works are referred to in this interview, specific references are included.

At that stage, I realized I didn't really want to become a schoolteacher. And also at that stage, I wanted to travel. I just felt I had been in South Africa all of my life, and I wanted to travel. So I applied for a scholarship to do my master's in the UK, and I was lucky enough to get the scholarship. So, I went to Essex University and did a Master in Applied Linguistics there, and traveled a lot while I was there as well.

I came back to South Africa after that and did a further teaching diploma, and then applied for a Fulbright scholarship. That's what brought me to the States, to Columbia University in New York. When I was there, I did quite a bit of teaching. I worked at the Fashion Institute of Technology. It's an institute, part of the State University of New York system, and they have a community college for English teaching. I taught there for a couple of years, and I also taught in the master's program at Columbia where I was a doctoral student.

Amanda: *What was your PhD research?*

Gary: I did a study of a first-year high school ESL teacher. Just the one teacher. I looked at the first six weeks of her teaching career, and I did basically classroom observation and interviews. I wanted to get that sort of initial impact of starting a teaching career as an ESL teacher in a high school. That was my research question: What were her initial experiences as an ESL teacher in high school? Fortunately, she allowed me to go into her class to work with her. So, it was six weeks of a number of observations over that time, interviews after each observation, and then pre-observation interviews, post interviews. I was focusing on the interaction and how she coped as a first-year teacher in her new job… in her new everything. It was fascinating. It was a really nice study.

Amanda: *Did you do that research as narrative inquiry?*

Gary: I had never heard of narrative inquiry at that stage, but yeah, in effect I was doing that.

Amanda: *How did you get interested in narrative inquiry?*

Gary: I've always been a qualitative researcher. I've done some quantitative work, some mixed method research in the past. In South Africa, for example, just after apartheid ended, the institutions became integrated, racially integrated as well as linguistically integrated. Another part of my academic life is sociolinguistics so I worked with a colleague there and we did research on multilingualism in an army camp and also in a prison. We looked at the implementation of the new language policy that the country had developed, and we also looked at the use of the various official languages in those institutions—the army camp and the prison—focusing specifically on the languages of that region and how they were used. For example, English was supposed to be the language of communication in institutions, and on one level it was, sort of left over from apartheid days. It was also very Afrikaans. And then on the ground, a lot of the soldiers, for example, were all Xhosa-speaking, so they would talk to each other in Xhosa all the time. Well, of course they would. But the instruction was in English. The manuals, stuff they read was all in English. We collected so much data it was fantastic. Some of it was quite quantitative. We had a questionnaire—we wanted to count the number of languages. A lot of that stuff was asking about the soldiers, their experiences of using various languages. We just called it quantitative data collection, and qualitative analysis.

Then when I got to New Zealand, I was to do a project that connected my new "New Zealandness" to my "South Africanness." I did a study on the Afrikaans-speaking immigrants in New Zealand, people from South Africa who spoke Afrikaans who were living in New Zealand. I did an amazing study and published a few articles[3] on it where I was looking at language maintenance of Afrikaans, looking at identity, and how these immigrants…how they sorted out their identities in relation to the languages they used, the language they tried to maintain. I crossed the whole country, north to south. Visited all different cities. I would go into the homes of these people, and we'd have lunch or coffee, and I'd interview them. I had long interviews, and they'd be filled with stories. There were just these amazing stories, and at that point I thought, "There is something narrative going on here." I didn't know much about narrative inquiry, but I thought, "I'm going to start reading a little bit about it." I found that when I was looking at that data, what I was really doing was narrative inquiry—without knowing I was doing it.

I started reading up on all of the theory on narrative inquiry, from mainly general education. That's where there's a lot of literature that relates to what we do. So, I just read more and more literature, and was trying to apply it to the data I had. Then I started writing about it because I felt that by writing about it, it helped me make sense of why it was narrative. Even though I had read… I mean I'd read enough, but not everything. I started dabbling, I like to say. I started dabbling with narrative, still playing around a little bit with it, looking at how I could collect narrative, how I could analyze data. And then I was looking at the way other people were doing it, trying to apply some of that, but trying some new things myself. For example—I've heard people at the conference talking about it—I invented something called a narrative frame. A colleague and I went to China for a couple of weeks on a teaching professional development program. There were over 200 teachers there, in this massive place where this thing was happening. I said to her, "Wouldn't it be fascinating to find out a little bit more about these college English teachers, how they operate, what they do, and so on?" So, I devised this series of four narrative frames, basically a template of sentence starters that you would fill in based on your experiences.[4] Those sorts of things we experimented with.

I just did an article on short stories,[5] and together with another colleague, I put a couple of books together.[6] We wrote a book on an introduction to narrative inquiry.[7] I had a special issue of *TESOL Quarterly*[8] on narrative research, which was an interesting experience because I had a few attempts to get that as a special issue. I think some of the people on the Editorial Board thought it wasn't quite time yet. But Suresh Canagarajah was the Editor at the time, and he encouraged me to submit a proposal the following year.

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[3] Barkhuizen, G. (2013). Maintenance, identity and social inclusion narratives of an Afrikaans speaker living in New Zealand. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language,* 2013 (222), 77-100. doi: 10.1515/ijsl-2013-0033

[4] Barkhuizen, G., & Wette, R. (2008). Narrative frames for investigating the experiences of language teachers. *System,* 36 (3), 372-387. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2008.02.002

[5] Barkhuizen, G. (2016). A short story approach to analyzing teacher (imagined) identities over time. *TESOL Quarterly*, 50 (3), 655-683. doi: 10.1002/tesq.311

[6] Barkhuizen, G.P. (Ed.) (2013). *Narrative research in applied linguistics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[7] Barkhuizen, G., Benson, P., & Chik, A. (2014). *Narrative inquiry in language teaching and learning research*. New York: Routledge.

[8] Barkhuizen, G. (Ed.) (2011). Narrative research in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly, Special-Topic Issue*, 45 (3), 391-414. doi: 10.5054/tq.2011.261888

It still didn't get accepted, so I thought, "Oh, well. Forget it!" But he said, "Come on, try it one more time." And in my last proposal I said, "This is the third time I'm applying to get this proposal accepted." So, I started applying narrative to TESOL, and it just took off from there I guess.

Amanda: *One of the things you've written about is the variety of ways to do narrative inquiry research. Can you describe how you would position yourself within that large area?*

Gary: As I say, initially I was drawing on the literature from general education, and so when I started looking at my data for those earliest projects, particularly for the one on Afrikaans-speakers, I approached it quite conservatively. I was using Clandinin and Connelly's approach of the three dimensions, you know: time, space, and sociality. So I approached it quite conservatively, and I published one or two things where I just referred to that work. Essentially I was looking at short illustrative excerpts that I would use in my discussion of the findings, but referring to those excerpts, trying to tie them together to tell the big story of what I was looking at. So that's a fairly traditional way of doing that, and that was fine. But I felt then I wasn't somehow paying close enough attention to the actual text.

So, I started looking at the work that the sociolinguists were doing, like Anna De Fina and others. Basically, work on small stories. I started looking at how I could actually analyze the text as narrative. It turned out what I was doing was moving more away from so-called narrative inquiry into what some people call narrative study, which is studying narrative itself as form rather than using narrative as a means to explore a particular phenomenon. That was fine, but I feel more comfortable doing narrative inquiry where I'm interested in what people say, not so much how they say it, but what they say and what they're telling. Being aware, of course, that they're representing their experiences, while they're not the actual experiences. So, I find myself in the middle of that. I do feel that you need to pay attention to the text itself, but my own approach is not to study the text as text, but to study the text either for what it tells us about the experiences of the narrator, or how the text serves as social practice, how the text is embedded in other social practices.

I work mainly with interviews is what I do. Other people work with more natural data, or something they find on Facebook or social media. I think that's the way perhaps in applied linguistics and TESOL we should be moving, looking at different types of narratives, some kinds of multi-modal narratives. I think if we look at advances in technology, there's so much potential. Again, you could look at how narratives are structured in social media, for example, or how we could use narratives in social media to learn about the experiences of the people who are constructing those narratives. So, there's that little distinction that helps me situate myself as a narrative inquirer.

Amanda: *So, you're more at the end of looking at the message rather than the form?*

Gary: Yeah, but you can't not look at the structure of the message. You have to look at that. Some researchers, like Aneta Pavlenko who has written lots on narrative, feel that a content analysis in itself is hardly worth anything. That you need to place that content within a context. What I'm talking about is the three levels of story – from micro to mezzo to macro contexts – and that by looking at each of those levels, it more or less forces you to look at the broader discourses that are going on related to the topic you are examining,

while at the same time you focus on the language that's used. If it's an interview for example, or other semiotic resources that may be used, focusing on how those are constructed in order to learn more about the narrative experience, as opposed to focusing on the structure itself. Those are typically done by sociolinguists or people in linguistics,

Amanda: *Is it a way of looking at maybe what is unspoken, or emotion, or…?*

Gary: Absolutely. They've done really good work that's coming out on narrative and emotionality. The work of Matthew Prior for example. He's just got a recent book out looking at narrative and emotionality. Fantastic stuff. Very good.

Amanda: *It seems difficult, interpreting someone's emotions, emotions that you can't really see.*

Gary: So, what he does is focus more on the study of the form of narrative, on the discourse of narrative, and how the emotions are displayed in that discourse rather than what people are saying about their emotions. Some people would look at how, you know, teachers say, "Oh, I'm stressed," or "I'm anxious," or "I'm really pleased with that," and look at that as evidence of emotions. But that's what the teachers are telling you about their emotions, or what the learners are telling you about their emotions. Whereas, what Prior is doing is looking at how the emotions become evident in the narratives that are constructed. So there again, he's moving more towards those stories as interaction as opposed to stories in interaction. Good stuff.

Amanda: *You've talked a little bit about some of the changes you've seen happening in narrative inquiry, some directions like the use of social media. Where would you like to see this field of research go within the English language teaching profession?*

Gary: What I'm excited about is the relationship between narrative and identity, particularly teacher identity. There's been a lot of work on learner identity. There is Bonnie Norton's work for many years, and her work is also narrative in a sense, some of it is quite specifically narrative. More recently, there's been a lot of research on teacher identity. Also, some theorizing about teacher identity. This book I'm putting together on teacher identity, *Reflections on Language Teacher Identity Research*,[9] has 42 chapters and I've asked all the authors to look to the future and see what they think about teacher identity and research in the future, and to then list specific topics having to do with teacher identity, language teacher identity, and ways in which we can research those topics. I was amazed that so many of them said we should be doing narrative approaches or auto-ethnographic approaches. That may be because I'm the Editor of the book, I don't know, maybe because of my work in narrative, but there seemed to be a lot of confidence that narrative is a very powerful way of exploring things to do with teacher identity. They offered so many interesting topics of things that can be explored narratively on teacher identity, in relation to teacher beliefs for example, in relation to teacher emotions. I think with those authors, I'm seeing narrative go the way I would like to see it go, which is to start making connections through narrative of various things that we've been studying about teachers, and about teacher education, and about learning and learner education. You know, all the different topics on motivation, and teacher beliefs, and all those different things. You start looking at how narrative can maybe make connections with them. Narrative sometimes can be quite focused, and that's good because you get a real in-

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[9] Barkhuizen, G. (Ed.) (2017). *Reflections on language teacher identity research*. New York: Routledge.

depth knowledge of the particular topic that you're looking at, but it's also good to look at broader connections.

Amanda: *The big story?*

Gary: Yeah, the bigger story. But relating it to work that's already been done and also new work on the various topics that we look at. So, there is a group of researchers looking at using narrative to investigate teachers' beliefs and emotions, and connecting the conflicts of the emotion through narrative research. That's quite exciting, making connections with all these things that are so complex anyway. I think narrative enables you to try to make sense of it.

There's some exciting work coming out already. A lot of it is looking at the text and using semiotic resources, which could be diagrams and Facebook or Twitter comments and emoticons, and you name it. Looking at all of those and what they mean. But from a narrative inquiry perspective, using those various types of semiotic resources to explore the topic that you're exploring, rather than studying the language or the semiotic resources. I think with teachers, if we're looking at teacher beliefs, and teacher identity, and teacher emotions, and teacher development, I think that numerous other things could be used besides teacher journals and interviews.

Amanda: *How do you make the connection between information you have about a participant or a group of participants and the broader context? Because you have specific people in a specific context with their specific lives. How do you make the connections?*

Gary: That's really the job of the researcher. And that's a hard job because in most cases the participants won't make those connections for you. They'll talk about what's relevant to their lives, what's obvious to them, what's important to them, and so on. But the connections to the macro-context needs to be made by the researcher. So, we're looking at policy, we're looking at the practices of teacher education, we're looking at institutional practices. And so, those are the bigger connections. You need to make connections with the macro-context, and that's quite hard to do.

I get asked to review a lot of research on narrative for publication, and I see some things published which are very narrowly focused. People say, "It's only one participant, it means nothing." But one participant can tell you an enormous amount if you make those broader connections. Publishing is a whole other story with narrative because of some specific challenges to do with the publishing of narrative work. I think to get published in a reputable journal, you need to make those broader connections. Otherwise, you're just making a local, descriptive contribution, which could be really useful for that researcher or for that teacher or for that school. But if it's going to engage with an international audience where it can be transferred to other contexts, or where it advances the theory in some way, it needs to make contact with the bigger picture.

Amanda: *What would you recommend for future narrative inquiry researchers? What advice do you have?*

Gary: It's age-old advice: read about narrative and read examples of narrative research. Because it's difficult going into the field when you just know a little about it and you think that you're going to do it. So, reading lots of examples of studies that have used narrative. Some use the term really loosely, so it's hardly narrative at all but they're calling it narrative. And some are really hardline narrative. I think it's important to read, to look at

examples of published narrative research journals, and to talk with other people about the research you're doing. Don't feel isolated. Talk to other narrative researchers or even other researchers who are not doing narratives to get their perspective on what you're doing. And the other thing I think is interesting is to take chances with your narrative research. There is no formula you need to follow. There's no right way of doing it. So, try to be innovative, try to be a bit experimental with the way you go about using your data. I think that's important. Especially in TESOL and in applied linguistics. It's a new and growing area and it's a good opportunity for you to try out different things. Still be rigorous in your data collection and your data analysis, justify exactly why you are doing things. But try different things with narrative. Look at different ways of collecting stories, look at different ways of reporting your stories, bearing in mind that there are challenges out there. There are quite conservative people out there when it comes to publishing, and dissertation committees, and things like that. The worst thing is to get yourself locked into a study that you just hate, that's not compatible with who you are and what you like doing, especially if it's a long three-year, four-year PhD-type project. That's awful. But I think within our field at the moment, there's opportunity for us to do different things with narrative. It's exciting. It's a growing field. I'm obviously an advocate for it because it gives me so much satisfaction, and I think if you're talking to people and hearing their stories and having faith that their stories are making a contribution to an understanding of certain things, and you feel comfortable working that way, just go for it.

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Gary Barkhuizen continues to make extraordinary contributions to the field of narrative inquiry research related to applied linguistics and TESOL. His amazing generosity and encouragement of others interested in the field were exhibited throughout this interview. I would like to thank him for his time and patience in allowing me to carry out this interview for the MEXTESOL Journal readers, and his openness in sharing his life story as a narrative inquiry researcher. He is a true pioneer in the field, and I hope this interview has done justice to his infectious enthusiasm and passion for sharing other people's stories, as well as the evident joy in his life's work.