

# “It’s impossible that there’s no connection” Autobiographical Reasoning in the Language-Learning Histories of EFL Student Teachers

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Article abstract

Despite the growing interest in language learning histories, autobiographical reasoning, a central concept in narrative psychology, has rarely appeared in second language acquisition research, despite the fact that autobiographical reasoning has been found to be central to identity formation, correlating with resilience, motivation, and well-being. This article conducts a narrative analysis of the language learning histories of two English as a foreign language (EFL) student teachers, focusing on three qualities of their autobiographical reasoning: integration, valence, and vividness. It shows how differences in their autobiographical reasoning correlate with differences in their motivation and confidence. It also argues that production of language learning histories can contribute to the development of more confident and motivated learners and teachers.

## **“It’s impossible that there’s no connection”: Autobiographical Reasoning in the Language- Learning Histories of EFL Student Teachers**

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Despite the growing interest in language learning histories, autobiographical reasoning, a central concept in narrative psychology, has rarely appeared in second language acquisition research, despite the fact that autobiographical reasoning has been found to be central to identity formation, correlating with resilience, motivation, and well-being. This article conducts a narrative analysis of the language learning histories of two English as a foreign language (EFL) student teachers, focusing on three qualities of their autobiographical reasoning: integration, valence, and vividness. It shows how differences in their autobiographical reasoning correlate with differences in their motivation and confidence. It also argues that production of language learning histories can contribute to the development of more confident and motivated learners and teachers.

### **Keywords**

narrative analysis, autobiographical reasoning, second language acquisition, preservice language teacher identity

Second language acquisition research in recent years has been dominated by a focus on the complex identity of the language learner (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Mercer & Williams, 2014). Language learning issues such as motivation, internalization, and autonomy are now seen as dependent on the changing cognitive, affective, physical, and social aspects of language learners’ identities. In accordance with the general “narrative turn” characterizing social sciences in the past few decades (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013, p. 1), the concept of autobiographical language learning histories (Oxford, 1995) has been found to be a valuable source of information in the exploration of language learner identities. In the case of language learning histories of successful language learners, such narratives may aid in revealing some

of the inner processes which lead to a motivated, confident, and successful language learner and user (Mercer, 2011a). Furthermore, as the narration of one's "story" is in itself an integral part of the ongoing creation of one's self-identity (Bruner, 1987; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Giddens, 1991), and as the self-investigation involved can lead to change and transformation (Clandinin & Huber, 2010), the telling of language learning histories can become a valuable pedagogical tool, and lessons learnt from successful language learning histories can help suggest effective ways for struggling learners to empower themselves through a reinterpretation of their history of language learning.

This paper explores the language learning histories of two successful language learners who were, at the time at which they were interviewed, studying English Language Teaching at two academic teacher-training colleges. The narrative arcs of the stories are similar. Both students tell "redemptive" tales, to use McAdams' (2006) term. Both trace a transition from early alienation from English as a school subject, to a current commitment to advancement in the language, thus achieving both a professional and a personal goal. Both students exhibit qualities which help explain the redemptive pattern, most notably a move from a passive to an active, agentic approach and a growth mindset (Ryan & Mercer, 2012). The factual and stylistic differences which exist between the stories remind us that the redemptive path and language learning success can be achieved in differing biographical and psychological circumstances.

While acknowledging the basic thematic similarities, this article also focuses on a significant difference between the narratives: the dissimilarity in the processes of autobiographical reasoning, the finding of causal links between past and present, displayed in the two narratives. Psychologists researching narrative identity have argued that the quality of autobiographical reasoning is linked to the narrator's level of well-being (Adler, Lodi-Smith, Phillippe, & Houle, 2016; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011). In the context of learning language histories, the differences in the autobiographical reasoning, I argue, may similarly be connected with the differences between the two students' levels of commitment and assurance regarding the English language teaching path they have chosen. While the connection to English is rooted in poignant childhood experiences, the students display a different level of willingness to engage with the sometimes painful past, to point to self-defining memories, and to draw causal links with present realities. These differences in degree of integration, vividness, and type of valence

correlate to the degree to which each student has benefitted from her learning process, the depth of the redemptive experience, and the level of commitment which each feels towards her chosen profession. Since narrative identity is dynamic, this finding can have significant pedagogical implications. Creating awareness of the beneficial aspects of positive, integrated, and vivid autobiographical reasoning can change the ways in which students interpret their language learning histories and result in their becoming more confident and motivated learners. Incorporated into teacher-training programs, such an invitation to examine and re-examine their past experiences can help nurture future language teachers' openness and sensitivity to the experiences of their future students (Estefan, Caine, & Clandinin, 2016), and encourage them on their path to success.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Language Learning Histories and the Learner's Identity**

The focus on the complex, situated identity of the learner as the key to understanding motivation, investment, and success is shared by many strands of current second language acquisition, including those informed by complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Mercer 2011b; Mercer & Williams, 2014), poststructuralism (Norton, 2014; Pavlenko, 2002), and psychological approaches focusing on "the affective and symbolic aspects of language" (Kramsch, 2009; Ros i Solé & Fenoulhet, 2013, p. 258). For all these approaches, language learning histories are a fruitful source of information. First, autobiographical stories invite the disclosure of both social and emotional experiences (Benson & Nunan, 2005; Chik & Breidbach, 2011). Second, stories speak of time and change, revealing the inherent dynamism of language learning. Third, stories have been found to reflect and fashion their tellers' sense of self, so that a language learner not only describes but also creates her language learning experience in the narration of her tale.

This last insight is part of the investigation in recent years of the concept of narrative identity. Sociologists such as Giddens (1991), Bauman (2001), and Riessman (1993, 2008), and psychologists such as McAdams (1993, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013), Bruner (1987, 1991), and Polkinghorne (1988, 1990) have argued that our self-identity, or self-reflexive understanding of ourselves (Giddens, 1991), is created by the stories we weave out of our memories. Bruner (1987) claims that

“we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (p. 15). While acknowledging that in the postmodern world a “wild mix of cultural narratives and discourses determines a person’s identity from one moment to the next” (McAdams, 2001, p. 115), McAdams speaks of “the naturally integrative power of narrative” (p. 116) in creating a dynamic, yet coherent, sense of self. Casting oneself as the agentic hero or the helpless victim of one’s tale not only reflects but also affects the teller’s self-identity as fundamentally active or passive (Polkinghorne, 1996; Riessman, 2002). Such perceptions are very relevant to second language acquisition, where such aspects of identity have long been seen as central to learning success (McCombs & Marzano, 1990). The “L2 narrative identity,” defined by Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) as “the specific aspect of an individual’s ongoing internal narrative that relates to learning and using a second/foreign language,” is thus both at the core of the language learner’s learning process, and “drives and regulates change”(pp. 202-203). A language learning history is thus a deeply revealing source of knowledge for the understanding of a learner’s reality, identity, and success.

### **Autobiographical Reasoning**

Many studies in recent years make use of narrative research to explore the multifaceted experience of language learning (e.g., Tashma Baum, 2014, 2015; Coffey, 2013; Kalaja, Menezes, & Barcelos, 2008; Kramsch, 2009; Mercer, 2013; Norton, 2013; Nunan & Choi, 2010; Pavlenko, 2001, 2003, 2007; Tse, 2000). Despite the general surge of interest in narrative inquiry, autobiographical reasoning has received very little scholarly attention in second language acquisition.<sup>1</sup> Autobiographical reasoning has been defined as the “activity of creating relations between different parts of one’s past, present, and future life and one’s personality and development” (Habermas, 2011). First meaningfully formulated in adolescence, it has been found to be crucial to one’s sense of coherent identity (Freeman, 2010; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Köber, 2015). People who look back at their life using autobiographical reasoning which is integrated, cohesive, and positive, have been found to be more motivated and confident, and to derive more

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<sup>1</sup>One notable exception is Hiver and Whitehead (2018). This article focuses, however, on autobiographical reasoning used to analyze contemporary events, and not on autobiographical reasoning in language learning histories.

meaning from their life (Blagov & Singer, 2004; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011).

Three of the categories used in autobiographical reasoning analysis—integration, valence, and vividness—are central in distinguishing more from less meaningful types of autobiographical reasoning. Each denotes a different quality in the recollection of experience. The first of these is investigated in Blagov and Singer's (2004) seminal work on self-defining memories, where they distinguish between "integrative" and "nonintegrative" memories. The former are defined as "narratives in which individuals take the additional step of explicitly ascribing meaning to their memories by relating them to lessons about the self, important relationships, or life in general" (p. 486). The "identity salience" (Cox & McAdams, 2019) of such memories means that they have a powerful effect on well-being and on motivation: "Linking memories to abstract self knowledge through meaning making creates a positive feedback loop that gives additional cognitive, affective, and motivational value to the memory and powerfully reinforces relevant goals" (Blagov & Singer, 2004, p. 486).

For such an effect to be beneficial, the valence of the reasoning is crucial. Negatively-valenced autobiographical reasoning focuses on the detrimental effects of past events, and has been found to be harmful (Bonanno, 2013; Greenhoot & McLean, 2013; Lilgendahl et al., 2013; McLean & Mansfield, 2011), whereas positively-valenced autobiographical reasoning, which interprets past events as having beneficial effects, has been linked with well-being (Banks & Salmon, 2013; Cox et al., 2019; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Waters, 2014). The tendency to describe events as leading one from difficulties to success, telling "stories of upward mobility, liberation, recovery, atonement, and self-actualization" (Bauer et al., 2008, p. 96), is termed *redemptive* reasoning by McAdams (2006). Within redemptive reasoning, the most beneficial has been found to be the "active analysis" (Pals, 2006, p. 194) of negative events, which focuses on difficult experiences as the *source* of insight, motivation and ultimate success: "Growth is the result of a two-step process of 1) acknowledging the impact of a negative event and openly exploring its meaning and potential to change the self, and 2) coming to a sense of positive resolution." (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011, p. 394). Such reasoning has been termed "the springboard effect" by Pals (2006), and has been found to correlate with increased well-being, openness, self-efficacy, and resilience (Helson, 1992; King, 2001; Tedeschi et al., 1998).

A third key component of meaningful autobiographical reasoning is the vividness of the memories described. The vividness of a memory concerns the extent to which it provides a richness and specificity of detail, attendant emotional content, and a sense of presence, usually conveyed by the use of present tense verbs (Blagov & Singer, 2004; Cox & McAdams, 2019; Habermas & Diel, 2013). According to D'Argembeau and Van der Linden (2008), “[a] memory that is experienced as containing highly detailed sensory, contextual, and emotional features will provide more information to exemplify, contextualize, and ground core beliefs about the self” (p. 535). Vivid recollections tend to also be more integrative. Memories in language learning histories which are detailed, emotional and dramatic, which contain explicit references and are strongly valenced, are key to the construction of the language learner’s identity.

### **Research Questions and Methodology**

Based on this theoretical framework, some expectations regarding the character of the autobiographical reasoning in the language learning histories of self-motivated and successful language learners can be formed. My research questions were as follows:

1. To what extent are the language learning memories linked by the narrator with her sense of self?
2. To what extent are the causal links drawn between past memories and present realities positive, and is there any transformative autobiographical reasoning?
3. To what extent are the scenes within causal links vivid?
4. To what extent do the integration (as examined in question no. 1), valence (as examined in question no. 2), and vividness (as examined in question no. 3) connect with the level of the narrator’s present-day confidence in her professional choices?

Interviews were given by two teacher-trainees, Orly and Sari (both pseudonyms), who, at the time of the research, were studying for an English language teaching certificate in two teacher-training colleges in the south of Israel. Their stories were two out of a series of 19 in-depth interviews conducted as part of a research project exploring the meaning of English for EFL student-teachers (Tashma Baum, 2014). The students whose narratives are analyzed here were in their mid-twenties, and had

worked in non-academic jobs before entering college. Orly knew me as a lecturer prior to the interview, while Sari had not met me previously. Each student was interviewed once. The length of the interviews depended on the student's responsiveness, Orly's taking 71 minutes, and Sari's 41 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew, the participants' native language, to facilitate recollection and maximize vividness (Pavlenko, 2013). I invited the students to think back over their life story and identify and describe encounters with the language, using open questions in an informal interview guide (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed, and translated into English by me. The interviewees gave their informed consent to the research, and their anonymity was assured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying data from the texts prior to publication. While maintaining objectivity in qualitative research is difficult, and perhaps impossible, I believe that the organized mode of analysis (below), the use of triangulation in comparing my findings with evidence from the different strands of the academic literature, and my prolonged engagement in the field will not only make the research trustworthy but also allow some transferability (Bell, 2011; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In order to analyze the character of the autobiographical reasoning within the two narratives, I first identified all the causal connections made within each text, using Lilgendahl and McAdams' (2011) definition of a unit of autobiographical reasoning as one in which the narrator uses "explicit causal language to connect the past experience to an impact on the self" (p. 401). I marked all verbs used to denote causality in the text and then examined each autobiographical reasoning unit according to three categories: integration, valence, and vividness. Narrative research considers not only thematic content, but also the formal elements of the narrative (Barkhuizen, 2011; Riessman, 2008; Pavlenko, 2007), and in the case of this research, the focus on integration, valence, and vividness meant attention to thematic content in my examination of integration and valence, and to lexical qualities in my examination of vividness. For integration, following Blagov and Singer (2004), I distinguished between cases in which the narrator tied the language encounter to her identity—an integrative event—and cases in which the encounter was linked only to its effect on a language skill—a nonintegrative event. In the category of valence, following Lilgendahl and McAdams (2011), I distinguished between negative (a negative event leading to negative results), simple positive (a positive event leading to positive results), and positive-



transformative (a negative event leading to positive results, a “springboard” event) (Pals, 2006). For vividness, I focused on the stylistic features of the text, examining the specificity and amount of detail and imagery, the prevalence of affect words, and the use of present tense verbs (Cox & McAdams, 2019).

I looked at each language learning history separately and reached conclusions regarding the characteristics of the autobiographical reasoning in each one. I then returned to the texts and collected all utterances representing the interviewee’s attitude towards her professional plans, and inferred each student’s level of professional confidence and enthusiasm from her own words. Following this, I considered the quality of the autobiographical reasoning alongside the level of professional well-being expressed, and found correlations between them. Finally, concurring with Blagov and Singer’s (2004) claim that “studying the intrapersonal trends and interpersonal differences in the proposed dimensions of self-defining memories ... may also lead to insights about what constitutes a well-developed life story that promotes psychological growth” (p. 506), I followed the separate examination of each language learning history with a comparison between them. The awareness of interpersonal similarities and differences between Orly’s and Sari’s accounts sharpened my awareness of the possible link between their autobiographical reasoning and their well-being. The rest of the article will discuss my findings and conclusions, and what I believe are their pedagogical implications.

### **Orly’s Story**

Throughout her interview, Orly displays confidence regarding her choices and goals, and an unmistakable love for her chosen subject. She claims that “I didn’t fully understand where the root [of this feeling] was, but I knew that I really really loved the English language, that it is a language which is dear to my heart.” With such assertions, it might be assumed that Orly had always nursed the dream of becoming an English teacher, and yet this is not the case. In fact, Orly describes the moment in which she chose her major as purely spontaneous:

Nothing, there was no sign before that this was what was going to happen. I just knew I wanted to study Education and then I understood that it divides into disciplines ... and then when I saw the English, I said that’s it, and it was clear to me that that’s it.

Orly then reveals that the epiphanic “that’s it” moment has its roots in poignant childhood experiences. At the heart of her love of English, she says, are a pair of childhood friends. Her account of the friendship contains a series of vivid and integrative memories, of which this is the earliest:

I had a pair of neighbors, a boy and a girl.... They were a very very special family. Rich in money but also rich in content, and I absorbed so much from them.... A wonderful family.... I saw their mother as a second mother to me, really.... They were younger than me, but they were brilliant.... [The mother] was an educationalist and the father an engineer ... so I never felt that I was cleverer, or knew more. Quite the opposite, as embarrassing as it is to say.... I’ll never forget that in the second grade they bought [the son] an Apple computer, small and black with tiny keys, before the modern kind with the picture of an apple.... So, I sit with him together, and we press *a*, and to see the *a* on the screen, it was—it’s unbelievable.

English here is firmly linked with the memory of Orly’s next door neighbors, her best friends, but also described as superior to her in nearly every respect: although younger, they are smarter, more technologically savvy, richer, better educated, and part of a traditional and academically-educated family unit described as “wonderful.” (Orly’s own parents were divorced, and neither parent had studied beyond secondary school.) The earliest encounter with English—in the form of the lowercase *a*—is detailed and emotional. Details such as the time, the shape and size of the computer, and the dramatic vocabulary create the sense of “re-living,” to use Cox & McAdams’ term (2019, p. 129). This sense reaches a peak as the narrative switches to the present tense: “So I sit with him together, and we press *a*” and ends with the unequivocally-emotional and positive “it’s unbelievable.”

When she was in the fourth grade, Orly’s neighbors left for two years to the US:

Now for us it was a crisis, it was a tragedy, like siblings being separated.... They travelled all over the U.S., even Hawaii, and Walt Disney. And they would send me video cassettes and would record themselves on video.... I couldn’t send them anything back

because I didn't have a video recorder.... And this thing really influenced me. They were such good friends and they became something so far, in America, and they would talk between themselves in English on the cassette, and now I remember how much it affected me and how I wanted to be a part of it. I found out about Walt Disney and about many things to do with America, and English became my favorite language.... it really raised my spirits—that I have friends in America, and I correspond with them.

When the neighbors return, the glamour only grows:

They returned to their flat and our friendship returned to be like siblings, as if never separated from the womb. But they already had their American thing, the English sometimes at home and ... games like G. I. Joe ... and robots and all the dolls and things that were totally American.... He came back with a giant military headquarters in English, full of soldiers in English and the names were in English, and sometimes a command in English would be said.... He came back with books in English.... I couldn't read them, but it's something that really touched me.... They really inserted this culture deep inside me.

America is marked here as a favored country, and the neighbors are enhanced by the American wonders they bring back with them, all described in vivid detail. The unusual images “a giant military headquarters in English” and “soldiers in English,” show how the language itself becomes an essential part even of objects which have no linguistic properties. The memories are not only vivid, but deeply integrative, as Orly draws a clear causal connection between the language, which has become firmly associated with fun (the toys), power (the fortress), learning (the books), and technology (the computer), and her developing identity: “This thing really influenced me.”

Clearly, there are also dark sides to this childhood experience. The separation from her friends is described by Orly as a “crisis” and a “tragedy.” Her subordinate position in the relationship which meant so much to her is clear, and she describes it as “embarrassing.” The simile “like siblings” is repeated three times in the narrative, but the neighbors clearly remain superior. The story's use of the active vs. the passive voice is also striking: The neighbors travel, write, teach, videotape themselves

and send Orly parcels, while she is the admiring onlooker and recipient, who “couldn’t do the same” because she lacks the means. She “absorbs” (the verb is repeated twice) the language; the culture is “inserted” into her. In Orly’s narrative, the dangers of dependence and self-marginalization are clear.

However, a closer look at the development which Orly charts in her narrative reveals that the process she describes is actually one of redemption. Her autobiographical reasoning is not only positively valenced, but even positive-transformative, as negative memories are shown to be springboards to success. Rather than choosing a path of self-debasement and passivity, Orly describes her experience as emotionally empowering: “it really raised my spirits—that I have friends in America, and I correspond with them.” The separation also awakens within Orly an active determination to widen her linguistic and cultural horizons and acquire the powerful tool she has encountered. Her dreams of participation (“how I longed to be a part of it”) result in the decision to actively “find out about Walt Disney and become interested in things to do with America.” The neighbors’ sojourn in the U.S. thus creates the perfect conditions for what Pavlenko and Norton (2007) have called an “imagined community,” identification with which “might have just as much impact on our current identities and learning as direct involvement in communities of our everyday life” (Anderson, 1991, p. 590; see also Kanno & Norton, 2003).

Orly continues to tell of her uninspiring years at school, maintaining this positive identification; while she is an unenthusiastic student of the language as a school subject, she remains a steadfast member of the imagined community created by English language media, which is remembered with a clearly integrative, positive and vivid autobiographical reasoning:

The English culture, with the songs—the Beatles and Sting and other artists ... TV series which I loved ... were always American.... Today I already have a different understanding.... But when I look back at what influenced me ... then as a teenager, that was my judgement, and of course it empowered the language and made it something you want to come nearer to.

The detailed list, the repeated use of affect words like “loved,” and the cognitive engagement, all mark these memories as key instances of positive integrative autobiographical reasoning. As for the less pleasant

side of her language learning experience, the study of English at school, Orly tackles these memories with a transformative reasoning which turns them into a central element within the redemptive arc:

I have very sharp criticism regarding the way I was taught: the lack of insistence on speaking and grammar ... only practising for exams.... So ... [another reason for choosing to become an English teacher was] the desire to change something in the education system regarding English studies, as a girl who loved English and didn't receive what she needed.

Again, we have a clear instance of the springboard effect, as negative past experiences are consciously linked to a positive outcome, and personal distress leads to compassion, generativity, and a strong sense of purpose (Pals, 2006).

In the course of Orly's language learning history, the narrative moves from passivity to agency, and from pain to fulfilment. Orly's account of her current profession as an English teacher is one of confidence, initiative, and satisfaction. She describes her use of American media offerings to make her lessons enjoyable, based on her belief that "if you teach the students to love [English] ... then you've done a great deal." Orly's childhood experience of autonomous learning, based on attraction to English-language culture, has become her model for teaching, and agency—which she recognizes as having deep causal roots in her past—has become a hallmark of her teacher identity. Her investment has made her, by her own account, a successful, appreciated teacher, despite her novice position: "In the staffroom they're already saying 'you're staying with us now, that's it, you're with us now.'"

Finally, a marked quality of Orly's narrative is that she foregrounds the fact that she is using the interview situation as an opportunity to analyze her life history, claiming that "this interview is also a way of organizing things for myself." She often inserts self-reflective comments showing her construction and appreciation of causality even as she speaks, as in "and now I remember how much it affected me" and in moments of conclusion:

So it's certain that although when I made the choice of English it wasn't conscious, I'm sure that this influenced me somehow to love the language and love this thing called America.... These are the things that came to my mind over Saturday [the day before the

interview].... So, to summarize it for you.... When I remember [all these things] I say to myself that it's impossible that there's no connection.

In other words, the active approach which Orly displays in her story and in the classroom, is also manifested in the interview situation. As discourse markers such as “so, to summarize” emphasize, she takes upon herself here the role of organizing and summarizing her experiences. The interview situation has encouraged Orly to fashion a rich causal narrative, a language learning history which bolsters and strengthens her self-identity, promotes her well-being, and encourages her on her path. A sign of the integrative, meaningful nature of the memories she chose to present is her repeated use of words indicating cognitive processing (Park, 2010) such as *organize*, *remember*, and *summarize*. But perhaps the clearest lexical indicator of the strength of Orly's autobiographical reasoning is her repeated use of the verb *to influence* (*lehashpia*) in order to link past to present—24 times in all. In the connections she draws between potentially humiliating and confidence-threatening experiences in childhood and active, happy professional outcomes, Orly's narration of her story seems not only to reflect but also, in itself, to strengthen a confident and motivated self-identity.

### Sari's Story

Sari also opens her narrative with a claim that her choice of majoring in English was spontaneous:

I had a meeting with the head of the college here ... and he simply recommended English.... If he had suggested Math, for example, I'd have said no, not in your dreams, but English is a subject that I'm attached to.

As we've seen, Orly had claimed her choice was the result of a “love” she did not fully understand; here it is “attachment.” And as with Orly, Sari's language learning history explores the causes of this life-changing attachment, although there are some differences. Throughout her story, Sari's narrative style is different from Orly's. Her interview is notably shorter—40 minutes long as opposed to Orly's 70 minutes—due to Sari's generally shorter answers. Whereas Orly's narrative includes many long and elaborate descriptions, Sari's supplies fewer details, although there

are a few vivid scenes. The type of integration and valence are also, I would argue, different. Nonetheless, Sari's story also charts a redemptive path, as the experience of English intertwines with events moving from a broken home, to a boarding school, a foster family on a kibbutz, and finally the teacher-training college.

Sari was taken out of her house at a young age and sent to an ultra-Orthodox boarding school, where she began learning English in the fourth grade. In the interview, she claimed to barely remember her studies there, only mentioning that it was very crowded, and the level of education was low. This changes when Sari comes to describe the very different world of the kibbutz, a communal agricultural village, to which she was transferred by the welfare authorities when she was in the sixth grade. This place, and its connection with English, are described very vividly:

You see the views, the grass, I couldn't believe it. Doors are left open—kibbutz! Lots of people walking barefoot, saying hello to you and they don't know you.... I got a bike, I didn't need to tie it up.... It was great.

There was a family there who invited me on Saturdays and in the middle of the week, and there was this group ... they were really nice ... that came from abroad to volunteer in the kibbutz for a while, and one stayed with my family, and because they were American, my family would talk with them fluently in English. It was amazing. And I would listen, and I'd understand, but in terms of speaking, I was in shock—you have something to aspire to! So, if I think about it, it could be ... that from there I had a source to draw English from, the speaking.

Like Orly, Sari's love of English seems based on its association with a beloved place where it was spoken and admiration for its speakers, who again are regarded as positive, loving, close to her, but not her own, remaining an object of desire. Sari calls the family that invites her for meals "my family," although that is not precisely the case. English thus again acquires a powerful, poignant, emotional resonance, further strengthened by the language used. The emotional tone is kept up in the positive adjectives: *nice*, *amazing*. Present tense verbs are also used, in combination with the detailed descriptions: "You see the views, the grass .... Doors are left open....," creating a scene of relived experience (Cox &

McAdams, 2019) and contributing to the vividness of the scene, marking its importance within the language learning history.

It is worth noting, however, that Sari limits the significance of this memory. Unlike Orly, who speaks of the deep influence of her English-speaking friends on her identity and love of the language, Sari's passage concludes with: "From there I had a source to draw English from, the speaking." The memory is firmly linked with the improvement in oral proficiency, and not explicitly associated with identity development. In other words, the autobiographical reasoning is less integrative. In other cases, as well, Sari tends to limit the causal connections she makes to the effect of her experiences on her language proficiency, rather than on her identity as a whole. This is the case when she describes the English language media to which she was exposed at the kibbutz: "There was a time when yes, I listened to songs, not any particular singer, but I listened, and it helped me." This account lacks specificity and vividness. In a manner recalling her description of the Saturday dinners, Sari steers away from causally connecting her experience with feelings and self. She prefers a weaker tie, linking events solely with her improved linguistic skills.

In addition to its lower level of integration, Sari's autobiographical reasoning also limits itself to positive processing of positive events, and avoids negative experiences. An example can be seen in the passage above, where Sari provides no negatively-valenced reflections on her time as a foster child at the Kibbutz. The resistance to exploring unpleasant memories is also clear in Sari's account of her formal English education. On the one hand, she speaks warmly of an English summer camp which "really helped me improve my English," and of her English studies at the college, where she is a hard-working student with a growth mindset: "English isn't an easy subject, but I'm enjoying myself... English is hard, but possible!" On the other hand, she claims not to remember her years at the crowded boarding school, and is also reluctant to speak about the rest of her school studies:

I don't remember my childhood, in terms of education. I don't remember it. Junior High? I also don't have many memories.... I remember High School better, not a very pleasant experience, let's put it that way.

Sari generalizes here and avoids delving into painful memories. Blagov and Singer (2004) observe that "defensive efforts to protect the self from



emotional threat initiate these control processes [i.e. overgeneralization] to curtail the search for specific memories” (p. 505). Research has indeed found that negatively valenced processing of negative events can be harmful to well-being, so the dangers are real, and avoidance should be respected (Bonanno, 2013; Greenhoot & McLean, 2013; McLean & Mansfield, 2011; Pasupathi et. al., 2009). At the same time, avoidance also denies the possibility of positive-transformative reasoning and the great psychological benefits which it can bring: self-confidence, self-growth, and a stronger sense of meaning and purpose in life (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011).

The sense that in Sari’s narrative the autobiographical reasoning is less integrative is strengthened by a linguistic analysis of the words used in the text. First, there is the matter of the word count. As Cox and McAdams (2019) say, “The simple measure of word count could indicate greater cognitive processing as verbal elaboration reflects the conceptual complexity with which the memory is stored, recalled, and reconstructed in story form” (pp. 132-133). Sari’s interview totaled 4470 words, a little less than half as long as Orly’s, which was 9384 words, as a result of her shorter responses, a fact which in itself can thus indicate less cognitive engagement. An examination of cognitive processing words dealing with causality also yields interesting results. While it has been argued that such an analysis is not very useful in capturing broad narrative arcs such as redemption, it has been found to be useful in distinguishing levels of cognitive engagement (Adler et al., 2016; Cox & McAdams, 2019; Weston et al., 2016). While words and phrases denoting causality<sup>2</sup> made up 0.74% of Orly’s words in total, Sari’s made up 0.58%. And while Orly used conjugations of the verb *to influence* (*lehashpia*) 24 times in her interview, Sari did not use the verb once. Instead, Sari employed *helped* (*azar*) 4 times, a word Orly never used. A closer examination reveals that Orly tends to use *influenced* in connection with her identity, as in “this really influenced me”; Sari, on the other hand, always uses *helped* in connection with her proficiency, as in “that really helped me improve the English.” Finally, Sari often responds with “I don’t know” and “I don’t remember” to questions regarding past events and their possible significance, the prevalence of these two phrases being five times that of similar phrases in Orly’s interview. These linguistic differences all add to

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<sup>2</sup> The words *azar*, *biglal*, *ki*, *mitoch*, *misham*, and various conjugations of the verb *lehashpia* were searched for.

the impression that Sari is more reluctant to openly explore her past and actively analyze it.

Finally, keeping in mind the link found between integrative and transformative autobiographical reasoning and greater motivation and life satisfaction, it is interesting to see that, unlike Orly's clear and enthusiastic vision of her professional goals, Sari displays lower levels of self-confidence and motivation regarding her chosen profession. She does not speak of her own accord about her future career plans, like Orly does, and in answer to a direct question, claims to find the idea of teaching "stressful." While Orly has clear ideas about her future, Sari is very uncertain: "One moment I want this, then that, this, that, I don't know. I think in the end I'll just go where they need me."

### Discussion

As we have seen, both Orly's and Sari's narratives display a language learning redemptive arc, presenting learning trajectories which move from passivity and ignorance to agency and knowledge. Both reveal the role of positive autobiographical reasoning for the development of the agentic learner, overcoming a potentially self-degrading initial linguistic encounter and using it as impetus to master the language as a tool of self-empowerment. At the same time, there are also noticeable differences in the autobiographical reasoning of the two stories. Orly's is more integrative: she links the experiences to her identity, while Sari connects them to her growing proficiency. In terms of valence, Orly's autobiographical reasoning is transformative, as she explicitly points out negative experiences as leading her to present triumphs. Sari, on the contrary, does not causally link negative and positive. Orly's memories—positive and negative—are detailed and vivid, while Sari refers to negative events in vague, general terms. Finally, both students display a different level of confidence and enthusiasm regarding their chosen profession. This suggests that Orly's passion for and commitment to teaching may be connected to the fact that she regards it, through transformative autobiographical reasoning, as an answer to a sometimes-painful past; Sari's uncertainties, on the other hand, may have to do with the fact that she draws no causal links between her past and her chosen profession, never explicitly rooting her decision in previous experience.

A few caveats need to be kept in mind. Naturally, there is a limit to the conclusions which may be drawn based on the two narratives and the autobiographical reasoning displayed in them. Innumerable factors,

both psychological and social, are involved in the formation of a person's reality, and its analysis will therefore always be, at the most, partial. Moreover, the use of interviews as the basis of analysis has its drawbacks. First, the problem of interviewer effect (Adler et. al., 2017, Pavlenko, 2007), particularly the danger that the redemptive pattern of the two language learning histories may have been affected by the students' awareness that I was a college lecturer, and therefore a desire to enhance their represented identities as successful English language teaching students and/or gratify me with stories of academic success. This may especially be the case with Orly, as she had studied with me a year before the interview. A second problem with the use of interviews is that this method may not be equally suited to all respondents. A more extraverted personality may find it easier to explore her history in depth in the context of an interview than a more introverted one. As Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) claim, "Extraverts are found to be more fluent than introverts ... and particularly in formal situations or in environments characterized by interpersonal stress" (p. 30). Interestingly, in the course of the interview, Orly claimed that speaking was her favorite English activity, while Sari claimed the same for writing. This raises the possibility that a written format may have been more suitable for Sari's language learning history (see also Dewaele, 2012; Loehken, 2015). Finally, when memories are especially painful, refraining from autobiographical reasoning might be more beneficial than courting the risk of negative autobiographical reasoning; if so, perhaps Sari's reluctance to delve into some of her memories was well-justified, and actually more conducive to her well-being.

Keeping these caveats in mind, I would argue that the narratives of Orly and Sari still make a strong case for focusing on autobiographical reasoning as part of the analysis of language learning histories, a focus which is valuable not only academically, but also pedagogically. Encouraging learners to compose and narrate their linguistic autobiographies and, in particular, encouraging their development of transformative reasoning, can strengthen motivation and enhance the quality of learning. It is worth noting that, in both cases, the interview process was experienced as positive. Initially claiming that they didn't know the reasons for their attachment to English, in both interviews the students remarked on the value of the process they had gone through and the insights they had gained. As Davies and Harré (1990) put it, "conceptions people have about themselves are disjointed until and unless they are located in a story" (p. 59). The telling of the language learning

history can result in a clearer sense of one's identity as language learner and teacher. Moreover, a learner who understands the power of analyzing the past can gain a deeper sense of control over her learning trajectory, promoting motivation and self-regulated learning (Mercer, 2013).

As these learners become teachers, the benefits can be great. Professional identity cannot be separated from personal identity (Estefan et al., 2016), and a teacher's self-identity is a crucial part of her pedagogy (Morgan, 2004; Palmer, 2007; Varghese et al., 2005). Teachers who have been encouraged, as part of their professional education, to explore their past language learning experiences can thus become more open to the experiences of their students and introduce them to new and beneficial ways of understanding their own language learning identity. I therefore believe that an invitation to this exploration should be an essential part of English language teacher training, helping students not only make the foreign language their own, but also become successful and confident educators and language teachers.

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