Personal and Collective Narrative Meaning Making in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract
Personal narratives are among the dominant forms of folklore. Through these stories, we make individual meaning and negotiate collective meanings simultaneously. Such a pervasive narrative practice should find a prominent role in FL teaching and learning. In order to feel a foreign language, we must first of all feel it as a genuine means of personal expression, somehow filtering our L1 selves through the new words, thus beginning a process whereby the new language becomes part of who we are. Low proficiency sometimes prevents students from feeling entitled to engage in such a process, but the benefits of narrating do not depend solely on linguistic correctness. This paper asserts the importance of employing personal narratives with university trainee primary teachers (who will be called on to teach English as well as all other subjects), with a view to encouraging them to use English in the process of narrative meaning making. Narratives collected from individual trainee teachers will be analysed, as well as collective co-narrations, with a view to discussing the ways narrative can be employed. The result is a collective narrative woven through individual stories negotiated in performance during classroom interaction. This narrative practice can represent a most effective source of motivation during training and serve as a tool for developing a sense of authenticity when teaching the language in the future.

Keywords: EFL learning, personal narratives, meaning making

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Introduction

McAdams asserts that "people living in modern societies provide their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalised and evolving narratives of the self" (McAdams 2001: 100). If "identity is a life story" (ibidem), then reporting on important parts of one's life must be essential in the EFL classroom, in order for the foreign language to become part of who we are and affect our identity: telling stories allows speakers to feel they can exist in a language other than their own.

Personal narratives have always had a prominent role in the language classroom (Barkhuizen 2014; Castañeda 2013; Masoni 2018). Every day, the outside is brought inside in the shape of personal accounts and opinions that often do not get voiced in institutional settings, such as schools, in the language of instruction. Regardless of proficiency limitation, students often find themselves having a greater voice in the foreign language than in their own. The students who took part in the meetings I refer to in the second part of this article agreed that this had been the first occasion for them to voice certain views in the university environment. The EFL classroom appears to grant enhanced storytelling rights. Yet, how far that voice reaches, how it is heard and how much transformative power it is allowed to exert constitute another matter, which will be discussed in what follows.

Writing about ESL students, Norton points out that:

> the lived experiences and identities of language learners need to be incorporated into the formal curriculum" in order to "help language learners bridge the gap between their learning of the target language in the language classroom and their opportunities to practice it in the wider community (Norton 2000: 145).

For ESL students this means trying to equip them with the language they need to interact in the workplace, for example (Sauvé 2002). On the contrary, for EFL students, there might not be an immediate application outside the classroom walls, but telling personal stories might be the only means through which they begin to establish a relationship with the foreign language. And if narrative is an "inescapable mode of thought" we need to allow room for it in the EFL classroom (Hymes 1996: 114).

Hymes, although not writing specifically on the subject of language learning, voiced the need to give students "turns at narrative", to "allow them to bring the outside culture inside" (1996: 116). He continues:

> Students may come from homes in which narrative is an important way of communicating knowledge. They may take part in peer groups in which experience and insight is shared through exchange of narrative. A classroom that excludes narrative may be attempting to teach them both new subject matter and a new mode of learning, perhaps without fully realizing it (Hymes 1996: 115).

Working with personal narratives means putting the learner in a situation where he is the leading expert on a subject he knows inside out, and thereby feels free to concentrate solely on how to express his knowledge. In the EFL classroom, this

means filtering the L1 culture through the foreign language, which is the first stage of language learning, before we move on to learning about the target language speaker. Personal narratives and histories shared in the ESL multicultural classroom are often the only chance immigrant students have to voice their past in an empathic atmosphere (Nicholas et al. 2011) and tell their life histories. However, although much research reports that the use of personal narratives improves students' motivation in the language classroom (Nicholas et al. 2011), other studies reveal that it can have the opposite effect when used in de-contextualised ways. Eliciting stories is not enough to create a class that is willing to share as much as to listen: some students might not be interested in hearing the stories of others. Norton refers to this absent audience as non-participation (Norton 2001). Consider what she says:

> [The] method did not take into account that the learners may have little investment in one another's presentations. While the teacher might have considered her teaching methods student-centred and the students partners in learning, the approach could be regarded as little more than transmission teaching in a multicultural guise. Such disconnected exchanges in the classroom give listeners few entry points for discussion and critique. Mai had no investment in her fellow student's description of his home country in Europe; she had no stake in learning about life in India. […] Mai wanted the opportunity to practice English in the ESL classroom; she did not want to be a passive recipient of another student's exotic stories. […] [I]ncorporating student experiences into the classroom should be a more complicated process than commodifying multicultural histories in the form of student presentations (Norton 2000: 144).

The lack of entry points for the audience is experienced when narratives do not rely on common ground. Kim et al. (2014) report having found low levels of interest in storytelling, because students sometimes think of storytelling as a mere exercise in taking turns sharing completely decontextualized fragments of experience or personal opinions. Such are the results when we deprive personal narratives of their primary, real-life functions. Folklorist and personal-narrative scholar Stahl states that, when telling a personal narrative, "the storyteller hopes to create a feeling of intimacy between self and listener" and that "the personal narrative makes a gesture toward intimacy" (Stahl 1985: 48). If we adopt this view, we readily understand how a disconnected use of personal narratives completely defeats their nature. This is often the case when we ask students to improvise personal narratives based on textbook cues.

I argue that the narratives we elicit should be pre-existing and well-rehearsed in the learner's mind. Personal narratives have to be there already, before we try to elicit them. In other words, the stories that work are the ones that the learner has already been forming in his or her mother tongue: stories waiting to be voiced, but already well formed. Besides, personal narratives need the right context, as they seek to share the teller's inner life with people who are assumed to have the power to understand it: this means its use must be based on common ground (Stahl 1985).

If we wish to avoid the sense of disconnection we often experience in the EFL classroom, motivate students to talk, and give them the entry points that Norton talks about, we need to tap into a sense of community (that is, a shared body of knowledge,

beliefs and ideas). This is what Wajnryb means by 'storied classroom'. She speaks of the need to "draw on the 'storied' lives of individuals and also seek to establish patterns of commonality among students so as to build up a 'group' memory of engaging enterprises that will be remembered long after the last lesson has ended" (2003: 17). Common ground, however, is not enough to provide entry points. The will to listen and possibly step into another person's narration comes also from a sense of entitlement (Shuman 1986) towards the story of the other: this happens when that story has a resonance that goes beyond the experience of the speaker, and acquires a sort of collective value that comes from sharing views as well as experiences. The personal narrative is a form of folklore because it contains "shared 'embedded' values", and as such, it belongs to everyone and provides entry points for all (Stahl 1985: 47).

Indeed, we cannot elicit narratives just to assess the linguistic level of the students, thus collecting isolated speeches that no one listens to. As Sauvé states, we cannot treat the sharing of stories simply as a "teaching technique, because to do so is to trivialise the relationship we have with our stories. Storytelling is more a natural sharing that comes out of the relationship we cultivate with the learners and among learners " (Sauvé 2002: 91). This echoes what Stahl observes about personal narratives reflecting the 'private' folklore of a person, which is only "selectively [and I would add 'spontaneously'] shared" (Stahl 1985: 47), when we feel in the presence of someone who is a potential listener.

But what do we do with the stories we are told in the EFL classroom? What do we do with the content of these stories? McDowell speaks of "performative efficacy, that is, the notion that expressive culture performances have the capacity to shape attitude and action and thereby transform perceived realities" (McDowell 2018: 1). Do we grant them this transformative power?

It seems to me that the issue of how stories are received is essential to how narrative can help language acquisition and even more how it can help people exist in a foreign language. This calls for reflection on a deeper issue: how narrative is treated in our society at large, and its "differential distribution" in society (Hymes 1996: 114). Dell Hymes explained this in clear terms, which apply also to narrative in the language classroom. Consider what he said:

> We tend to depreciate narrative as a form of knowledge, and personal narrative particularly, in contrast to other forms of discourse considered scholarly, scientific, technical, or the like. This seems to me part of a general predisposition in our culture to dichotomize forms and functions of language use, and to treat one side of the dichotomy as superior, the other side as something to be disdained, discouraged, diagnosed as evidence or cause of subordinate status. Different dichotomies tend to be conflated, so that standard: non-standard, written: spoken, abstract: concrete, context-independent: context-free, technical/formal: narrative tend to be equated (Hymes 1996: 112).

Narrative rights imply that what is told will be taken and transformed into some collective property that can be used to make sense of other situations or, in the school context, contribute to the advancement of knowledge (see Wajnryb). Consider what

Cazden says about evening classes at Harvard. Here, "contributions to class discussion based on narratives of personal experience" did "get the floor", contrary to what happened in the daytime classes, where students reported that "when someone, even an undergraduate, raises a question that is based on what some authority says, Prof X says 'That's a great question!', expands on it, and incorporates it into her following comments. But when people like me talk from our personal experience, our ideas are not acknowledged" (Cazden in Hymes 1996:111).

Indeed, the EFL classroom may appear to have a lot in common with the Harvard evening class: anecdotes are accepted and even elicited. But this does not mean granting storytelling rights, because these depend also on how the story is received and what is done with it. Indeed, what Cazden describes is a situation where, not only is narrative accepted in the classroom, but it is also used to create new knowledge, "acknowledged by the professor", and thus used to meet the curricular objectives that Wajnryb (2003) discusses and which, Sauvé (2002) warns, should take into account not only language practice and learning, but also and foremost, pedagogical matters and the creation of a conducive community for learning, where exchanging and sharing is sought.

This deeper understanding of storytelling rights should inform narrative practice in the EFL classroom, as it has the power to create community and can have great effects on students' willingness to engage with speaking and listening. Students need to feel that something is being done with their stories, that the function of a story is fulfilled.

The first place where we need to make sure students experience the transformative power of their narratives is the performance, which should become co-performance. A story that is listened to, picked up and reused to tell new stories has already played its main role.

Then there is another level, the institutional one, where teachers also need to decide what kind of feedback they can give. At times, it is hard to do something with narratives. In contexts where students share traumatic experiences, for example (which is often the case both in the second and foreign language classroom, where students may feel empowered to express what often goes unexpressed in their native tongues), teachers struggle to know where to put boundaries and to respond to certain stories, to the point that Nicholas et al. argue that teachers should be "prepared to make follow-up referrals to health professionals" (2011: 254). But in a context where narratives are shared in a group, and considered of interest to all its members, responsibility for giving feedback to the story will be equally shared.

Feedback to the content of the story, as well as its form, is fundamental for learning to happen. The speakers must feel that their narratives can make a contribution – either in the 'here and now' of the performance, by the listeners who actively and sincerely engage with the stories and contribute to them; or in the 'then and there', where the narrative is perceived as a tool that can transform the future.

The Group: performance and responses

The students in the group were volunteers and this was not a curricular activity. Out of the nearly three hundred fourth-year students on the course, only seven enrolled on

this group (all females). Their proficiency ranged from A2+ to B2+. One student had taken part in an Erasmus trip, and another had had foreign flatmates: they were therefore more used to speaking English conversationally. The other students rarely had occasions to speak English and they welcomed the meetings as an opportunity to converse. Only one person attended the first meeting, six attended the second and four attended the third. What follows, is based mostly on the second and third meetings.

Two weeks after the last meeting, I sent a questionnaire to all participants. Only four people, the ones who had been present at both the second and third sessions, handed in the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 34 questions, in Italian (responses included here are my translations), with which students had to declare agreement on a scale from 1 to 5. In addition to these, there were two open questions and room to expand in 5 out of the 34 questions. The questions aimed to gather an impression of the relationships established with the other members of the group, of experiences of commonality and sharing, of their feelings towards speaking the foreign language, and their perceptions of the relevance and interest of the subject. Also, at the end of the second meeting, the students were asked to write a short diary entry, in English, on the day, so that I could give them some language feedback.

Initially, their motivations ranged from the need to practice spoken language to an individual interest in personal narratives. As it turned out, they knew each other only in passing, and they had never shared stories before amongst themselves, not even in their L1. But they had a lot in common, as they were attending the fourth year of a five-year degree program to become primary teachers, a course which occupies most of their lives with its heavy load of lessons, studying and teacher training in schools.

For this reason, the first and second meetings started with one simple question: "Why did you enrol on this course?" This was the only question I asked. From then on, I took part in the conversation only to encourage them to interact with one another or share fragments of my own experience. The students were told I would be recording part of the conversations and were always made aware of the tape-recorder being switched on. In what follows I will refer to six students and call them with progressive letters of the alphabet for reasons of privacy.

The initial question elicited narratives of genuine passion for their future job. One student had known that she wanted to be a teacher from a very early age (when she played 'school' with her little sister), two others reported having to fight to secure their right to enrol, a fourth realised only with time that this was her calling ("I rethought my life and discovered that I liked teaching and kids").

The narratives were very effective and clear, despite some linguistic limitations, and they disclosed much personal folklore. Interestingly, lower proficiency led one student to make more frequent use of direct speech (as reported speech in the past tense could be sometimes harder to phrase) and this device gave the stories a special narrative depth, as the teller recounted "a conversation, embodied and re-enacted through the use of constructed speech" (Shuman 2015: 40). The use of constructed dialogue, that is, dialogue reported or put together for the performance, makes the story vibrant and easier to follow. It also disclosed more private folklore, because it re-enacted the world of the speaker. As Stahl notes, "the higher the percentage of 'private' folklore embedded in a story, the more likely the creation of intimacy is a

major motivation for the storytelling" (1985: 48). These moments contributed greatly to a sense of community among the students. Sharing of private folklore also extended to other themes recurrent in the students' narratives, such as being discouraged from enrolling, and the fact that, in more than one case, the wish to be a teacher arose from negative past classroom experiences. This led to sharing of intimate aspirations, such as the need to apply more humanity to their future teaching and help children to blossom in ways that they themselves had not been allowed to. Most of these themes were conveyed through effective re-enactment of those experiences, especially in terms of feelings.

Each teller felt supported from the beginning of the story (this was confirmed by the questionnaires): the other students always listened attentively, nodded, and provided reinforcement with body language. In the questionnaire, they all declared that the subject had been of great interest to them, and that they had welcomed an occasion to share things that mattered to them in an institutional, yet relaxed setting (which they had never had the chance to do in their L1 during their years of study). The passion felt for the subject led the students to look for all possible expressive strategies to make themselves understood, and although two of them reported feeling that they had not succeeded in doing so in the questionnaire, from an external point of view, their narratives were all effective. They hardly made use of interlanguage, and only in the initial stages did they ask for my help to refine their words. After a while, as will be shown, they began to help one another also in linguistic terms.

As they discovered things in common, the students were able to share entitlement to telling the story of the others and to add their voice into other colleagues' narratives. Consider the following example, which shows where students have identified and used entry points. C has just spoken about her negative experience with maths in high school. E spontaneously follows up:

> *E: I had basically the same experience. For example during high school I started to hate maths, ...and I can say this was because of my teacher. Now that I'm studying teaching I can say she was a bad teacher. And I won't do the same, I don't want my students in the future will to feel the same and start feeling something...that is actually not bad, I mean physics is not bad, maths is not bad. And I don't want that they start to hate it because someone is trying to teach in a bad way.*

> *F: I think, when she spoke, I was in the last year of high school, I had a bad experience with the mathematics teacher. During the exam, the final exam, I said to myself, "I never ...make…I never…never…non farò mai* [lit., I will never do].

> *Licia: I will never…*

> *F: I will never make a scientific subject!*

> *E: About what you were saying, and maybe it's the same thing also for you (talking to C)…this bad relationship with maths and science, I don't know if you felt the same...*

C: No, I liked… during high school I liked to study scientific subjects…ehm…

E: But? (Laughter)
[General laughter]
C:[laughter] …but! The problem for me was I had difficulties, because for me maths was… [laughter]

E: Hard! Hard to understand.

C: Sì, yes, hard to understand, because, I don't know, I don't know why.

E [to C]: How do you feel about the idea of teaching maths or science?
[General nervous laughter]

E: Last year I went to Erasmus for the first time and […]
[Here C interrupts E to ask about her experience]

E.: But I was talking with a friend there and she was really good at maths, but for example she said she tried to teach maths, and she had some problems. "How is it possible that they don't understand what I say, it is so clear", she said. But for me it was easier trying to think like a child. So maybe it can actually be a motivation for us.

This exchange is of interest in many ways. Even if only three students spoke, the others participated in the performance through sympathetic laughter and nodding. E prompts C with English words and not only does C readily weave them into her speech, she also uses them to reflect upon her experience ("*yes, hard to understand, because, I don't know, I don't know why*"). F reinforces the shared narrative with her own parallel experience and every individual story becomes a thread in a collective one, as they all admitted having had difficulties with how this subject had been explained to them. The students used the past (negative experiences at school) to find the inner motivation to cope with the present (the heavy course load) and imagine the future by contrast (the need to be a different kind of teacher). These narratives are similar to life stories we tell in order to "create meaning and purpose in our lives" (McAdams 2006: 1372), but they also possess added value: their shared entitlement due to the fact that they tell a common story. Such narratives confer a sense of continuity on the individual self, while at the same time allowing the members of the group to rely on one another's experiences in order to accommodate change and foresee ways of coping with the future.

Consider what E says in the end: her story reinforces the group's sense of purpose, by conferring a positive meaning on their past efforts, which she now recasts as the source of a special ability (thinking like children do) that will enable them to be the innovative and caring teachers they wish to be. She does all this by bringing into the picture the experience she gained through English as an international language. This is also the first instance of the shift from "I" to "us". As the story is now obviously shared, E feels she can use her own personal experience to create meaning and purpose for all of them as a group/category.

Interestingly, the story in the story reported by E was immediately picked up and re-elaborated by F in her written piece, which proves that E made good use of it:

> *F: The best thing that rose was that these difficulties with scientific subjects can become an opportunity for us: maybe we'll be best teachers in these subjects because we'll engage more and we'll find way to explain hard concepts to kids (original English).*

As the students shared more information, another major theme emerged and caused a distinct shift from individual to collective narratives. It turned out that their ongoing attempt to forge their identity as student teachers, thus conferring sense upon their choice, relied in part on constructing a response/reaction to the public opinion that surrounded them, an opinion characterised by a number of false conjectures summed up in E's diary entry from the second meeting:

> *E: When someone asks me "what are you studying?" and I answer "I'm studying to become a teacher", they say, "Oh, nice, but I can't understand why they oblige you to study so many years". This makes me feel very angry. [...] Many people think that to be a good teacher means to be a good mother and you don't need to study so much. [...] "I know deep in my heart why I'm studying in this university, and the reason is that here they are teaching me to create new good citizens who respect themselves and who respect the planet where we are living in."*

These words, elicited by something A had brought up, echo the voices of all the girls in the group: they all confirmed that this is the public view of the course, which they reported having been nicknamed 'scienze delle merendine', lit. "Science of the afternoon snacks" (instead of Scienze della Formazione Primaria, lit. Primary Education Science), which incorporates the beliefs that teaching children does not require any particular knowledge and that the course is easy.

The story the students wove together was more than just a mere report of misconceptions people have about the course. The resulting narrative was constructed by contrasting the external voices with their own voices, as a sort of imagined dialogue, where they could represent themselves on their own terms (Lindahl 2019): the emic perspective was being voiced in contrast with the outside culture and individual strategies of response were somehow being compared among the members of the group. This collective narrative spoke of negotiation of relationships, between the outside culture and the inside practice, and it spoke of power relationships too, by contrasting the small esteem in which they feel politicians hold them, with the infinite importance of their role as educators of the future generations.

Implications for EFL learning

Although further analysis of these conversations is required and would unearth much more data, my preliminary examination reveals how much these students were able to achieve, in terms of commonality and sharing of ideas, through a foreign language. This complexity of content was conveyed through a foreign language they do not feel comfortable with. They were able to listen and interact one each other, and it was English they used to voice their collective response to the public opinion in an official setting.

Even if two of them rated their linguistic performance as low, they were still satisfied with the quality of their narrative. While character traits certainly affected responses to the questionnaire (for example, it was modesty or shyness, more than actual lack of proficiency, that led some of the students to underrate their performances and achievements), there was a number of questions they all agreed upon.

Importantly, they all declared that talking about things that matter makes it easier to speak English and motivates them to speak the foreign language. They all said it is most important to have an occasion to talk about these things among course mates and with members of staff, so that their voice can be heard and also so that they can learn to talk amongst themselves (which will be at the heart of their future relationship with colleagues). The workshop also brought about hope of learning: A declared that "Now I know that if I keep on trying, I will succeed, despite my difficulties".

A simple question that allowed students to describe themselves on their own terms, acted as an engine for six hours of conversation (second and third meetings). During these hours, commonality was soon established, listening was never an issue, and spontaneous interaction and collaboration through the foreign language were achieved naturally. The students all reported being very interested in the subject and in need of more such occasions, in order to feel less 'isolated', realise that they all have similar problems, learn to talk to each other. This was certainly compelling input (Krashen 2014). The subject gave them the drive to interrupt, add and expand: this meant using the foreign language in an authentic communicative context, where English could provide the only possible voice (given that they had never been granted a chance to talk about such matters in their L1).

Interestingly, two students reported having felt transformed by their new voice, and feeling that the 'foreign' language had allowed them to construct new meaning compared to their Italian voice. Consider these two comments:

> C: "Come to think about it, I have a feeling that when I speak Italian, in *informal contexts*, for example with friends and students on my course, I discuss issues more generically, less in depth, and avoiding more refined terms and turns of phrase that might explain things more effectively" (my translation)

> D: "When I talk *freely* in Italian, I realise that I often follow pre-fabricated schemes of thought, and very often I speak exactly like my [name omitted]. Talking in English makes me feel free, it helps me say what I really feel, without feeling obliged to agree with one or another, which is what I usually do. I think it's kind of magic, it helps me discover my individuality" (my translation)

These comments constitute an extremely important achievement from the point of view of the construction of identity in the foreign language: through the foreign language, C and D found a different voice and possibly experienced an enhanced feeling of authenticity.

On the one hand, this situation pushed students to refine their expressive skills, in order to do justice to their stories, while on the other it allowed them to experiment freely with the language, in an environment that was perceived as "empathic".

According to C, during our meetings the difference between students and teachers had disappeared to the extent that she "no longer cared about making a bad impression because of possible grammar mistakes". These are important achievements, brought about by a question that prompted a narrative they had longed to tell in an institutional setting.

The question then is: what are the narratives that learners are longing to tell and hear? And what are the ones they are waiting to construct through the collaboration of a community of equals?

Despite the limited scale of this narrative exercise, the data appears to suggest that teachers need to unearth the narratives learners have been waiting to tell for a long time. This requires a knowledge of the context, but most of all it requires teachers to take a step back and ask broad questions that allow students, as if they were interviewing each other (Lindahl 2019), to unearth common concerns and interests and come up with their own meaningful questions.

Conclusions

A language that grants a new voice and, most of all, genuine narrative rights (i.e., the opportunity to tell a story that was waiting to be told and to see the change that story can bring), becomes less foreign. The students provided a great many constructive suggestions about the course and most of them were 'heard' by the tutor and referred to those who had the power to provide change. Some changes will happen. In this group, the narrative function was not excluded: on the contrary, it was promoted, regardless of linguistic accuracy, as a way of conferring meaning on what they said, and not so much on how they said it.

But what conferred the most transformative power on these narrative was the group performance, where individual voices were woven into a collective narrative.
All the students felt a common story was being woven and here is how C summed it up:

> *A story which describes the students of this Primary Education course in the midst of a public opinion that underestimates them, the awareness of the importance of their formative role and of the emotional influence they potentially bear on the lives of young children, negative past experiences, the heavy load of work and study, the juggling that comes from having to reconcile work, study and family… At times it seemed like a difficult and sad story, but we also talked about all the beauty in this: the nice experiences during placements, the empathic lecturers, our common will to bring positive change to the school system through a more inclusive approach to teaching, the passion we share for teaching (my translation).*

This common narrative proves that the 'narrative function' was included in this particular use of narrative and that meaning making was reached thanks to this inclusion.

Providing students with opportunities to 'use' English as an alternative means of expression – that is, the possibility of constructing meaning that matters – has the potential to transform their relationship with the language. As future teachers of EFL

(among other subjects), it is important that they in the first place believe that using this language makes sense and that a feeling of authenticity can be experienced when speaking a language other than our own, regardless of the linguistic problems one might still experience.

The students in this group challenged themselves to engage with this language on a very personal level and as a result achieved a degree of narrative and interactive complexity often lacking in conversations in the L1.

Further research on how narrative meaning making correlates with levels of proficiency, context for telling and choice of narrative input by teachers, might help us make an increasingly more effective and emotionally conducive use of personal narratives in the EFL classroom (Moskowitz 1978).

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