

Hale, C. C., Xu, Q., Ling, W.Y., & Kim, J.H. (2025). Additional language learning and identity formation: A graduate research project using narrative inquiry. *Accents Asia*, 20(2), 1-11.
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Additional Language Learning and Identity Formation: A Graduate Research Project Using Narrative Inquiry

Chris Carl Hale¹

Queena Xu

Wing Yiu Ling

June Ha Kim

Akita International University

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of a graduate-level course project in which students were expected to employ ethnographic research methods. Using a semi-structured interview format, students created a video ethnography of a multilingual individual discussing how learning an additional language(s) informed and shaped their identity. An overview of the assignment will be provided, including sample discussion questions and rationale for using ethnography as a methodological approach in intercultural communication research projects. Also, three students who participated in the activity will present their own experiences interpreting and designing their individual projects. This paper is intended for curriculum designers interested in incorporating narrative-inquiry based projects into their linguistic ethnography, anthropology, sociolinguistics or similarly themed courses.

PROJECT ORIENTATION

Professor of the Course

The graduate-level research project is part of a course titled “Language, Culture and Identity” in the Akita International University Graduate School. The final project for the course challenges students to engage deeply with the intersection of language, identity, and narrative through a two-part endeavor: the creation of a Linguistic Ethnography Paper and a Language and Identity Profile Video. Central to this work is the methodology of narrative inquiry, a qualitative research approach that prioritizes the lived experiences of individuals, captured and recounted through their own words. Students conduct ethnographic interviews, allowing participants to articulate how language has shaped their identities, focusing on moments of transformation, challenge, and resilience. Through these narratives, student-researchers are expected to analyze and structure data to vividly illustrate participants’ experiences, while ensuring a coherent and compelling storyline that maintains the integrity of their interviewees’ voices. Critical to this project, then, is for students to understand narrative inquiry as an approach to data collection in ethnographic research.

¹ Chris Carl Hale is a professor in the Akita International University Graduate School of Global Communication. All co-authors were students in the program at time of publication.

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Narrative Inquiry as an Ethnographic Research Method

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method fundamentally dedicated to exploring human experiences through the lived or told stories of individuals or small groups to understand a particular phenomenon (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). It centers on how people interpret their experiences and the meanings they ascribe to their narratives, recognizing that humans are inherently storytellers who express identity, values, and cultural norms through their accounts (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013).

While distinct, narrative inquiry often significantly overlaps with ethnographic research (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Ethnography is a holistic qualitative approach focused on studying cultural systems through immersion and fieldwork (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Narrative inquiry provides a specific emphasis on personal tales and lived experiences within these cultural contexts, capturing the depth and complexity of human experiences that contribute to a rich understanding of human life (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Creswell, 2013). This relationship is synergistic: while ethnography provides the broad cultural canvas, narrative inquiry paints the intricate human details within it. This allows researchers to gain an insider's (emic) perspective on how individuals make sense of their cultural surroundings and how their experiences are shaped by them. Autoethnography, where a researcher uses self-reflection to connect personal experiences to broader social and cultural meanings, exemplifies this direct fusion (Clandinin, 2006).

Core Principles and Philosophical Foundations

The methodology of narrative inquiry is deeply rooted in the study of human experience as it is lived and recounted through stories, valuing the voices of everyday people as a legitimate source of knowledge (Polkinghorne, 1988). A central tenet, conceptualized by D. Jean Clandinin, a seminal figure in the field, is the "three-dimensional narrative inquiry space" (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Clandinin et al., 2007). This framework, drawing from John Dewey's pragmatic theory of experience, highlights:

- **Temporality:** The interactions of participants unfold over time, recognizing that past experiences inform and shape future ones (Creswell, 2013; Polkinghorne, 1988).
- **Sociality:** The social and emotional dynamics between researcher and participant, acknowledging that individual stories are influenced by broader social, cultural, and institutional narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988).
- **Place:** The physical location of the inquiry, which uniquely influences how a "life space" is perceived (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Clandinin et al., 2007).

Philosophically, narrative inquiry challenges traditional research paradigms by emphasizing the construction of meaning and the validity of multiple viewpoints. It posits that knowledge is built by individuals and groups, and reality can be perceived from various perspectives (Clandinin, 2006). Donald Polkinghorne (1988; 1995) viewed narrative as a fundamental way humans make sense of their experiences within social contexts. Similarly, Gubrium and Holstein (2009) underscored the importance of analyzing narratives to uncover their true meanings and interpreting them from diverse angles (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). This collective emphasis on individual meaning-making and subjective realities represents a significant epistemological shift,

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asserting the richness of subjective human knowledge as a primary source of understanding, moving beyond a singular, objective truth (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Methodology and Data Engagement

Data collection in narrative inquiry primarily involves gathering spoken or written stories and accounts of life experiences (Clandinin, 2006). Key techniques include:

- **Narrative Interviews:** These differ from structured interviews by prompting participants to recount their entire story about a specific aspect of their lives, often over multiple sessions, allowing for deeper exploration and clarification (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Sarantakos, 1998).
- **Personal Documents and Artifacts:** Researchers gather diaries, autobiographies, letters, photographs, and other memorable items that contribute to the narrative.¹
- **Observations and Fieldwork:** While not exclusive to narrative inquiry, observational data can provide essential context for understanding the stories collected.⁴

Analytical approaches focus on interpreting the structure, content, and meaning of stories within their social and cultural contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Labov, 1972). A core process is "emplotment" or narrative configuration, where events are organized into a temporal unity through a plot, thereby acquiring narrative meaning (Polkinghorne, 1995). This involves drawing diverse happenings into thematically unified processes (Polkinghorne, 1995). Unlike thematic analysis, which identifies patterns across data, narrative analysis delves deeper into individual stories, prioritizing their unique structure, style, and flow, and how they convey meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Labov, 1972). A distinctive feature is the collaborative nature of the process, where researchers often work with participants to code data and identify themes, allowing participants to refine or elaborate on their stories (Bruner, 1991; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Sarantakos, 1998). This collaborative engagement positions the researcher not merely as an analyst but as a co-constructor of meaning, actively shaping the final narrative. The process itself becomes a "lived experience" for both parties, reflecting their feelings and ethical dispositions (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin et al., 2006). Findings are often presented with an emphasis on literary writing, using plots, characters, and imagery to convey the complexity of human experience and foster empathy in the reader (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Bringing it Together for Students

This project, therefore, requires a foundational understanding of narrative inquiry, a methodology designed to explore questions related to how people construct and interpret their lives through stories. Through the 15-week course, students are introduced to the concepts of using narrative inquiry research as a method for capturing this intersection of language and identity. Key considerations covered in the course include the types of questions narrative inquiry addresses, such as how individuals navigate their identities in complex linguistic contexts, and the structure of a narrative inquiry study, which typically involves systematic data collection, coding, and thematic analysis. Students examine the advantages of this approach—such as its ability to provide rich, detailed insights into personal experiences—and adopt effective data collection methods like interviews and observation. Analytical techniques focus on

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identifying themes, patterns, and significant moments within the narrative while ensuring the research follows the strict ethical research protocols outlined by the university, such as providing a rationale for the research, as well as a detailed outline (see Appendix 1).

Working with spoken discourse introduces its own complexities, particularly regarding the structure of narrative interviews. Students learn to differentiate between structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interview formats, each offering varying degrees of flexibility and depth. For example, structured interviews follow a rigid question sequence, whereas unstructured ones allow the conversation to flow organically, offering richer narrative potential. Semi-structured interviews balance both approaches, enabling researchers to probe deeper while maintaining focus. A key theoretical concept to consider is the notion of “face” in interview settings, emphasizing how participants manage impressions, negotiate social identities, and respond to the interviewer’s perceived motivations. This perspective aligns with Cameron’s assertion (2001) that individuals always consider the interviewer’s intentions and the potential consequences of their responses, a dynamic that researchers must navigate thoughtfully.

The Language and Identity Profile Video component complements the paper by transforming research findings into a visual and compact (four-five minutes) narrative. This task challenges students to synthesize data creatively, selecting compelling excerpts from the interviewee’s video-recorded account to highlight the interplay between language and identity. The video serves as both a presentation of research findings and a reflective tool to engage broader audiences with the lived realities of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Ultimately, this research project provides students with a robust framework for investigating the profound ways language shapes individual and collective identities. By combining theoretical concepts with practical application, the project fosters critical thinking, methodological rigor, and creative expression. Students not only gain expertise in linguistic ethnography and narrative inquiry but also contribute meaningful insights into the complexities of human experience, bridging the gap between academia and real-world storytelling (see Appendix 2).

Graduate students embarking on this research project often find themselves navigating unfamiliar terrain, as concepts like linguistic ethnography, narrative inquiry, and the nuanced dynamics of interviews are typically new and abstract. The following sections of the paper aim to offer a detailed window into their journey, illustrating how students approached both the Linguistic Ethnography Paper and the Language and Identity Profile Video assignments. Through these explorations, student-researchers drew upon their learned theoretical ideas and gradually translated them into practical applications during interview settings. By engaging with these methodologies firsthand, they not only deepened their understanding of the complex relationship between language and identity but also developed the skills to use these abstract frameworks effectively in real-world research. The following details how three students in the course grappled with the assignment and ultimately found their inner researcher.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Queena Xu

My experience in this project was both informative and eye-opening, not only in regards to understanding my subject more, but also in understanding myself. The subject chosen for this narrative inquiry study, Ying, was a colleague of mine who shared a similar linguistic and cultural background. The knowledge and theories I learned in doing an ethnographic study with her led me to reflect on my own cultural experiences. The narrative inquiry consisted of an interview lasting about 30 minutes. The interview was then transcribed with an AI software and analyzed for salient themes. A second, follow-up interview was conducted when further questions that needed clarification were determined after the first round of transcription.

To briefly go over her language and cultural background, Ying self-identifies as a multilingual-multicultural person since she has been exposed to at least five different languages and dialects throughout her life. Although Ying was born in a rural part of China, her family moved to a larger city during her childhood, where a more dominant dialect of Chinese, namely Cantonese, was spoken. Even though she first learned the rural dialect, Hakka, as her first language, more exposure to Cantonese slowly caused her to lose her Hakka, limiting usage to family exclusively. Through the Chinese education system, she learned Mandarin Chinese, which then became her dominant language. Her father recognized her English skills and encouraged her to enroll in an international high school. Upon graduating high school, she went on to pursue an undergraduate degree in Canada, leading her to use English as her most dominant language. Whilst in Canada, she started to study Japanese and upon graduating, moved to Japan to pursue a Master's degree. Now employed in Japan, she uses Japanese as her most dominant language. With such a linguistically rich upbringing, I analyzed how her languages build and change her multilingual-multicultural identity.

Having grown up in a traditionally collectivist society (China), studied in individualist educational systems (international school and Canada), and now working in another collectivist society (Japan), the combination of these experiences have created conflicting multicultural identities within Ying. Markus and Kitayama's (1991) idea of independent and interdependent self-construals was largely used as a framework for analysis. In brief, an independent self-construal is one that takes influence from individualist societies—the self is at the core; all actions and decisions are formed with the self in mind. On the other hand, interdependent self-construals are based on collectivist values—where the self becomes secondary and the collective community becomes primary. Ying not only has knowledge of multiple languages but also embodies the values of each language, which often come into conflict as she switches back and forth between living in individualistic and collectivistic societies. For example, she understands the need to use formal Japanese in order to fit the interdependent self-construal of living in Japanese society. At the same time, she desperately hopes that her *kouhai* (subordinates or those who are younger) will use casual Japanese to create a more friendly atmosphere when chatting. This was due to the fact that she was educated in Canada, leading her to build an independent self-construal. The conflict here is that she understands the structure of hierarchy and formal speech in Japanese society, but at the same time wants to adopt the values of an individualist society because she has come to embody such a self-construal through her experiences. Additionally, Ying uses code switching extensively as a way to align with her interlocutor. Another framework of analysis

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used was Ochs' (1993) social constructivist theory, which states that one's identity is built through interaction. One of the ways in which she proves her identity is through the use of codeswitching. Throughout the interview, she codeswitches into Japanese knowing that I can understand her in Japanese. Gumperz (1982) notes that codeswitching is a communication feature that allows bilinguals to indicate membership into a group. In Ying's case, many of her codeswitches are not due to her lack of competence in English, but rather to reaffirm her identity as a member of Japanese society. I concluded that Ying's multilingual-multicultural identity requires constant reconfiguration with every linguistic encounter, whether she chooses to codeswitch or not is dependent on which self-construal she is displaying.

The process of discovering these theories as a framework to apply to Ying's linguistic background proved difficult in the beginning. Ying self-identifying as multilingual is understandable, however, I found it challenging to piece together what exactly made her self-identify as *multicultural*. Under Professor Hale's guidance, we found the conflict within Ying. From there, I discovered Markus and Kitayama's (1991) framework of the self-construals and pieced together how her self-construals conflicted with the societies she finds herself in. Additionally, taking into consideration the identity she forms with her use of codeswitching, I could build a clearer picture of how she forms her own multilingual-multicultural identity.

This project was a fantastic introduction to the field of ethnography, narrative inquiry, and analysis of quantitative data. I was able to build upon theories of language, culture, and identity discussed in class, as well as discover new theories more related to my subject. Completing this project has vastly contributed to my interest in further pursuing studies using ethnographic methods and analysis.

Wing Yiu Ling

Language and identity are tied together because we can identify ourselves and establish a sense of belonging with other members of a social community by the use of languages (Kramsch, 1998). This statement seems not difficult to understand, but as a person who has lived in the same country for most of her life, I could hardly imagine or understand the relationship between language and identity, both in theory or in real-life situations. This project allowed me to interview a person who has multiple language-learning experiences, and apply the theories that I have learned in class in the analysis, which greatly enhanced my understanding of the topic.

The subject, Lam, whom I interviewed, was my ex-colleague. I chose her to be my subject because I believed it would be easier for me to build trust and receive more honest responses if the subject was someone I am familiar with. Also, like me, she was born and raised in Hong Kong. We share the same cultural background and similar academic history. That would help me gain a deeper understanding of her experiences and enable me to analyze her story more accurately. She went to a local elementary school where Cantonese was the main language of instruction. Not until she entered an English secondary school did her English proficiency start to improve. When she entered university, she got the chance to learn Japanese. With this multilingual ability, she has stayed in different countries including Japan, the U.K., and Canada after university graduation and tried to search for a community in which to settle. Language is an important element for her to establish her identity in the community; it is also important in shaping her values and worldview because the language that she used to learn the Bible, English, means a lot to her. Learning the Bible in English enables her to understand abstract ideas such as

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love and evil differently from Chinese. As a result, she identifies more with the western teaching of love, which is beyond mere responsibility but also encompasses unconditional love. This led her to have a dream of becoming a chiropractor and serve the Hong Konger diaspora in Canada.

Throughout her journey of searching for a community and achieving her life goals, I analyzed the way she established her identity, how other members of the community perceive her identity, and how language influenced her values and worldview. The main theories that I used for analysis were Ochs' (1993) social identity constructivism and Sapir and Whorf's (1941) theory of linguistic relativity. Ochs (1993) suggested that people perform certain social acts and stances to establish social identity, while Sapir and Whorf (1941) propose that language shapes how we think and perceive the world.

From the interview, I discovered that Lam has been constructing her identity in different countries through working in local companies, making new friends, learning a new profession, and serving the local community. Although she tried very hard to gain recognition from the local community, she was not recognized as one of them by either the Japanese or the British. She was discriminated against as a foreigner in Japan or was ignored by the other students in the U.K.. However, when she decided to continue pursuing the life goal of serving others like Jesus Christ in Canada, she found the opportunity to serve the Hong Kong diaspora over there, who in turn recognized her new identity in Canada. While English played a crucial role in helping her learn values of life and enabled her to study and work in Canada, her mother tongue, Cantonese, continues to reinforce her identity as a Hong Konger. It is through Cantonese that she connects with and is accepted by the Hong Konger community in Canada.

In terms of challenges and takeaways from this project, I found that I initially struggled to guide my subject to elaborate on her experiences, which required me to conduct a follow-up interview. Additionally, I had difficulty identifying her struggles because I focused too heavily on how language shaped her identity and values. After consulting with the professor, I was able to see the struggles and challenges my subject faced and gained insights into how I should analyze her story. Through this project, I gained a deeper understanding of the connection between language, culture, and identity. I also reflected on my interview techniques and learned more about narrative inquiry as a research method.

June Ha Kim

As a second-generation Korean-American, I had very little thought to how my language learning journey defined both how I viewed myself and how others viewed me. When I enrolled in the course, I was curious to learn how language reflects, performs, and negotiates identity. This ethnographic project challenged me: through my interview and the process of writing the paper, I reflected deeply on my own sense of self. While I believed I was aware that my cultural background shaped my identity, I discovered through this project that all these elements are interconnected.

For this project, I interviewed a white South African, "Al," who was also working as an ALT in Japan, similar to myself. Al shared his rich but complex narrative about his upbringing, his personal history and relationship with his primary L1 (Afrikaans) and L2 (English), as well as how they shaped his sense of identity across different cultural environments. Despite English being the primary language he used growing up, he recognized early in his childhood how to use language to "perform" a specific identity, to "sound smarter" than others, by taking advantage of

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English as the prestige language. This reflects Deborah Cameron's (2001) assertion that language can be a tool for constructing identity. Furthermore, as he grew older, he learned to embrace his Afrikaans identity, stating that expressing himself in the language helped him connect to his home identity, particularly while he lived in Japan. These statements stirred up memories of myself, and I reflected on my own use of my L1 and L2s from childhood to adulthood and how I used them to construct my own identity as Korean-American.

This helped me understand how narrative inquiry, with its focus on "temporality, sociality, and place" (Clandinin, 2006), was the ideal fit for this project. It provided a glimpse into Al's life through his experiences. I could understand his journey through his early upbringing learning Afrikaans, English, and later Xhosa, through his school life, and eventually into his ALT life in Japan. I could see how his identities shifted across these stages as he recounted his language journey, from an idealized view of English tied to a "smarter" personality, to a more symbolic and intentional use of Afrikaans to perform his public identity. This echoed Elinor Ochs' (2008) in how he leveraged English to shape his performative language identity, using it as a tool used to construct that identity.

This project also helped me rethink language as fixed or stable. I used to think of my L1 and L2s as separate linguistic systems, contained within its own grammar and culture. I now understand them more as fluid: as they are overlapping identity resources that I draw from depending on the context. As D.E. Polkinghorne (1995) posited, our stories are not just reflections of our identities as they occurred. They are also the means by which we make sense of our lives. In my own case, even code switching is not simply functional. As Gumperz (1982) observed, it can serve as a conversational strategy to express social meanings, signal group membership, and shape how I relate to others. Al also mirrors this in his use of language using it both as a practical tool and to perform identity in different contexts and environments.

The narrative inquiry nature of this project showed me the value of listening not just to *what* people say, but also *how* they live their lives through language. While Al's journey was shaped by political events such as Apartheid, migration, linguistic hierarchies, and professional roles, mine was shaped by diaspora, ambiguity in my self-identity, and cultural expectations. Despite these differences, how we continue to shape our identities through our cultural background and the languages we use is still unfolding.

CONCLUSION

This graduate research project, centered on narrative inquiry and linguistic ethnography, illuminated the complex and evolving relationship between language and identity. Grounded in a 15-week course that emphasized both theoretical frameworks and practical application, the project required students to conduct ethnographic interviews and produce a Language and Identity Profile Video, bridging academic research with personal storytelling. Each student-researcher's work reflects a unique methodological engagement and personal transformation, collectively demonstrating the power of language in shaping self-perception and social belonging. Collectively, the ethnographies outlined above not only achieved the course's academic goals but exceeded them in offering intimate, nuanced, and ethically responsible portraits of identity formation. Each student demonstrated the methodological rigor required to conduct narrative inquiry, while also embracing the vulnerability and reflexivity essential to this qualitative approach. The dual outputs—the paper and the video—enabled the students to blend

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analytical depth with creative storytelling, reaching both scholarly and broader audiences. Ultimately, this project empowered the student-researchers to move from theoretical understanding to embodied insight, capturing the deeply human experience of “becoming” through language.

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Appendix 1

Ethical Review Board document with project outline

3 Type of research	<input type="checkbox"/> Own research <input type="checkbox"/> Doctorate research <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Class-related research <input type="checkbox"/> Contracted research <input type="checkbox"/> Collaborative research <input type="checkbox"/> Other [_____]
4. Location	Various contexts with prior approval
5. Duration (DD/MM/YY)	13/11/2024 – 22/12/2024
6. Funding source	<input type="checkbox"/> Faculty Research Fund <input type="checkbox"/> President Project Research Fund <input type="checkbox"/> KAKENHI <input type="checkbox"/> Other [_____]
7. Objective	(1) Provide an opportunity for graduate students (Research collaborators) to conduct single case-study interviews of individual participants (2) to analyze the interview data using concepts covered in the course; (3) create a 3–5-minute video profile of the participant, (4) write a brief analytic paper using narrative inquiry methodology.
8. Outline	(1) From the 8 th week of class, students begin looking for possible interview participants to explore their stories of how language has impacted and interacted with their identity development (2) Collaborators (graduate students) share their data collection plan with the primary researcher (Prof. Hale) (3) If the research questions are adequate and conform to ethical data collection practices, the collaborators are given permission to seek participant approval (verbal and written) (4) From the 10 th week of class, students will conduct a video-recorded interview of the agreeing participant (5) From the 12 th week of class, students construct a narrative inquiry based on the participant's video recorded data. (6) On the final meeting of class, students give a presentation of their video and submit their final narrative inquiry paper.

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Appendix 2

Ethical Review Board document with expected student outcomes

9. Expected outcomes and effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Students will gain experience collecting and analyzing ethnographic data and creating an ethnographic analysis if a single case study (2) Students will gain an appreciation for research methods and intricacies of how language impacts identity (3) Students will participate in an academic presentation of their own research at AIU
10. Method for dissemination of outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Give an academic presentation to classmates and the AIU community (2) For exceptionally strong student work, there may be opportunities to publish their research in inter-cultural-oriented academic outlets