

Where fiction becomes reality: A narrative of language learning motivation

Lou Harvey (doctoral researcher, The University of Manchester)

This paper draws on data from my PhD, a narrative study of eight UK-based university students' motivation for learning English. I will focus on the narrative of one student, Emma, to illustrate how her motivation was shaped by her perception of a shift in the English language from 'fictional', in her home country of Italy, to 'real', when she came to the UK. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism (1981, 1986), I illustrate how the narrative concept can contribute to an understanding of Emma's language learning experience and the way in which she interprets this experience. Bakhtin's conception of the author is of a narrative consciousness, entering into active dialogue with the specific others of whom and with whom they speak, creating narrative in a multi-voiced process of meaning-making. I thus suggest that Emma's language learning story represents a move from understanding English as a monologic subject to be studied and lacking communicative context, to dialogic, requiring agentive response to and engagement with other voices; engagement through which Emma is constantly re-storying her identity as a language learner. I argue that this view represents an important move in language learning motivation research; whereas the aim of much past research has been to uncover generalisable rules to explain how context affects motivation, a narrative approach can illuminate ways in which motivation may be socially negotiated and constructed. I also demonstrate the applicability of Bakhtin's ideas for narrative research, in particular to afford insights into the relationship between telling and living.