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Migrant and third-age language learners telling stories

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This article focuses on two very different categories of learners of other languages - migrant learners and third-age learners. It shows that, in both these cases, recounting the experience of language learning seems to yield benefits for the process, and the fact of this same outcome for two such different groups would appear to imply that, whatever the category of learners such benefits accrue.

Key words: *benefits, migrant, narrating, third-age, savouring*

1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the benefits evident for multilingual learners, indeed additional language learners generally, in telling stories about their lives in their target languages as well as in recounting and “savouring” – even in their mother tongues – the detail of their language learning experiences. It has to be acknowledged that the topics and manner of storytelling, as well as the stories themselves, may vary hugely. This may imply variation in

the quality and impact of the procedure from learner to learner. It should be noted that the present article is exclusively qualitative in nature, and, as one of its anonymous reviewers pointed out, is itself a kind of storytelling.

A number of recent publications and conference presentations have dealt directly and indirectly with the way in which this activity may impact positively on the affective and motivational aspects of learning. We shall look here first at some reports (e.g., Daniel, 2019; Sheekey, 2018) emanating from Dublin on migrants and refugees in an intercultural environment telling stories in their current target languages about their general experiences. We shall then cite some cases from Japan (cf. Matsumoto, 2019; Singleton & Záborská, 2020), where the focus is on third-age language learners narrating in their mother tongue the detail of their encounters with languages other than their first language. We shall consider what emerges from these various accounts regarding the effects of telling stories with regard to the morale and continuing language-learning endeavours of the informants in question.

2. DUBLIN STORIES

Let us begin, then, by looking at some interesting projects in Dublin in which migrants have been encouraged to talk about their everyday existence in Ireland in English, which is not their L1, and which they are working to acquire in order to succeed in making a life in Ireland. In Dublin, the recent developments in this area have been largely thanks to the work and influence of Peter Sheekey, Director of the Intercultural Language Service (ILS), which caters to the needs of “New-Irish” migrants and refugees.

Sheekey’s data collection for his Ph.D. thesis (Sheekey, 2015) took place in Tallaght, which is a district of Dublin in the south of the city where around 50% of the population are New-Irish, and which is characterized by the lowest socio-economic percentile and included among the ten most difficult places to live in Ireland (Standfirst, 2018). He used “narrative inquiry”, which involved learners in sharing and writing about the nature of their daily lives and experiences. This approach proved to be a great success! In his thesis Sheekey explored the benefits for New-Irish learners of English of engaging in story-telling about their new situation - both difficulties and achievements.

The following is what one of the participants, “Nika”, had to say in answer to the question “Was this a good way to learn English?”

“Yeah, I think it’s a good way cos you can ask your, your classmate, yeah. And you can ask a teacher, if you don’t know something. And you improve, you write your story and you know about you, yeah? Everything and when you know some new words, you associate this with your language words. And you can improve it cos it’s interesting to share your story with another people.” (Sheekey, 2015: 180).

In his subsequent role in ILS, Peter very successfully incorporated story-telling into the daily pedagogy offered by the Centre. ILS is situated in Ballybough, an area in Dublin’s tough inner city, which is socially and demographically similar to Tallaght. It has long been a socially and economically neglected district though there are now in train initiatives to address its many problems. Again, many New-Irish had their homes there or nearby.

Sheekey subsequently recruited a group of volunteers to work on intercultural storytelling. Participants were paired up after an initial meet-and-greet session, and once the pairs were established, they would take turns in asking about the other’s experiences while taking notes. Each week the story-telling pairs would be given a theme to work on in the form of a narrative frame - usually an A4 page with unfinished sentences or question. These frames provided a scaffold for writing, helping the story-tellers to co-write their stories around the themes. Sheekey (2018, p.53) comments as follows on the success of the project:

Our New-Irish learners had found a new social network, someone who listened attentively to their experiences, hopes and dreams, and some of the locals came back for subsequent storytelling cycles. Aside from the very positive impacts on English literacy for our learners, the process of telling, writing and publication of these stories has produced very beneficial washback into both the local communities, in terms of social cohesion, and into the heritage communities of the learners.

As for the storytellers themselves, “Cristina”, from Chile, had the following to say:

“I can’t forget the Storytelling Project and Intercultural Language project. These projects help me a lot to improve English, to integrate in the community, meet new people, and learn different culture. I am so happy and fortunate to have the chance to meet these people.

They demonstrate how we can make a difference in our community, country or even in the world.”

One of Sheekey’s successes, Nasouh Hossari, a Syrian, was actually featured in *The Irish Times* in 2021:

It was in the Ballybough centre that Hossari met Peter Sheekey – a man he says transformed his life in Ireland. Sheekey(is)founder of the Intercultural Language Service in Dublin, which supported people like Hossari through language training, social orientation and community-based, intercultural activities. (*The Irish Times*, May 19, 2021: 11)

“The centre had lots of students of many nationalities and lots of volunteers,” Hossari is quoted as saying. “Peter had made a course about storytelling – one person from Ireland and one student from another country would come together and speak about their culture, about everything... I started studying hard and it became really important. It was like therapy for me. I was able to meet lots of people, get to know the culture in Ireland and speak about how I felt.” (*ibid.*) Slowly but surely, Hossari became more comfortable speaking English and developed a fluency in a language he never could have imagined speaking a few years previously. His wife had learned basic English through her medical studies but Hossari spoke only Arabic and French before coming to Ireland. “In Warrenmount I learned some English words, but in Ballybough there was grammar, there were stories and conversations. I know at my age it’s difficult to learn fast, but I tried hard and was okay.” (*ibid.*)

When asked to sum up for a quotable quote about his remarkable work, Sheekey gave us the following:

Aside from the linguistic and social networks being built by learners at ILS (many middle-aged or near pensionable), our storytelling practices seek to humanise and dignify the shared lived experiences of our narrators across and between diverse communities, while also promoting social cohesion in communities under pressure. We see diversity as a golden opportunity, not a ‘challenge’.

Sheekey’s work inspired other storytelling-based undertakings in Dublin – notably under the auspices of the Migrant English Language, Literacy and Intercultural Education (MELLIE) programme at Dublin City Univer-

sity (DCU), Ireland's first University of Sanctuary. Some of such research (undertaken in the context of her own, now-completed doctoral work) is outlined by Julie Daniel (Daniel, 2019, 2022):

Through storytelling, the MELLIE project aims to develop sustainable language learning which will allow its asylum seeker and refugee participants to interact in a meaningful way with Irish society. Indeed, through shared contact, asylum seeker and refugee participants will improve their English, gain a better understanding of Irish culture in all its diversity, and potentially make new friends. (Daniel, 2019, p. 124)

In the first pilot study described by Daniel, volunteer participants from the university staff were paired with an equivalent number of asylum seekers and refugees from various countries recruited in the Mosney Direct Provision Centre, approximately 40 km north of DCU. Over six weeks all participants met on campus once a week for a 2-hour session during which they were placed in pairs and interviewed one another with the help of a set of guided questions. Each pair was given a notebook in which they could take notes while interviewing their partners and were then tasked with writing, using their notes, their partner's story, bringing it back the following week for discussion and edits. This first study was in general deemed successful by participants: 97.1 % thought it should run again and 94.3% stated that they would be willing to participate again. Regarding the improvement of language skills, however, reaction was mixed. Interestingly, a large majority of participants (91.4%) thought that the experience was too short.

Accordingly, it was decided that the subsequent study would have more of a language focus - including adequate language test tools at entry and exit levels - and that it would run for eleven weeks. These adjustments seemed to do the trick! When the evaluation for the second study was conducted, in answer to the question "Do you think your general level of English has improved?" the response was more favourable, with 16.7% strongly agreeing and 66.7% agreeing with the proposition. Results on the development of intercultural competence were also encouraging, with 38% of the respondents agreeing and 38% strongly agreeing with the statement "my cultural understanding about myself and others increased."

Daniel comments (2019: 130) in the following glowing terms on the success of her replication of Sheekey's approach.

In summary, feedback received... indicates both the linguistic and social usefulness of the MELLIE storytelling project, reinforcing Sheekey's conclusions in his doctoral thesis that narrative approaches break the isolation which some long-term migrants may face.

3. THIRD-AGE STORIES FROM JAPAN

The terms *third age*, *third ager*, *third-age language learner* have become increasingly common in recent years to refer to people in their "autumn years". Definitions of these terms are often linked to education in a broad sense, as the following quotations illustrate.

Anyone over the age of 65 or any retired person who is involved in the process of learning either in the various forms of adult education or in the broader sense of lifelong learning. (Findsen & Formosa, 2011)

Seniors who can find a purpose in life by going back in time and becoming learners once again. (Gabrys-Barker, 2018)

Note that when we think about age and ageing, we usually tend to think about the number of years of our life - chronological age. However, there are other dimensions of ageing - all very relevant in the present context: 1) biological ageing, or the physical changes we face with time, 2) psychological ageing, or the mental changes, in self-perception, in personality even, and 3) social ageing, or the crucial changes in our roles and relationships within the society or social group to which we belong - be it our family, our community, our workplace, our culture, or our society at large. In this context, the way in which the relevant society or culture perceives us, is crucial. The more positive the perceptions are, the easier it is to age successfully, so to speak, with understanding and with support. One of the meaningful goals of research concerning third-age learners is to add to such positive perceptions of such learners.

Lifelong learning in general is deeply rooted in Japanese culture. Many people in Japan in the later stages of their life pursue further learning activities. Traditional arts, such as *Sado*, conducting the Japanese tea ceremony, or *Ikebana*, flower arrangement, or *Shodo*, calligraphy, are popular, as are more recently available pursuits: the study of history, becoming adept at photography or painting, and so on. But there seems to be something particularly special, an extra layer, or layers rather, to foreign language learning.

How then is foreign language learning in the third age different from acquiring skills such as calligraphy and photography, for example? Let us, to some extent, explore this with a couple of quotes from interviews with third-age learners. The following accounts may begin to provide answers to this conundrum.

To the researcher's question: "Why do you study a foreign language", which in her case is English, one learner, Joy (age 69) responded,

"I love talking with various people and English enables me to do that. I like to imagine myself becoming fluent...(laughter)... English is a hobby for me, a hobby thanks to which I talk and learn things, too... different ways of thinking, you know? (*laughter*)... and you know what? {Yes?} With my Japanese classmates, when we speak in Japanese, we are careful about what we say, but when we talk in English, we open ourselves... there's this magic to English...we learn about each other, it makes us closer, more sincere... (*laughter*)... magic it is! (*laughter*)"

Joy (69)

To the same question Clair, Joy's classmate, replied:

"I don't have much excitement in my everyday life, so for me, coming to university every Friday is the time when I shine (*laughter*)... very exciting... it's as if I am a university student again! I'm not sure whether it's effective [language-wise], but I feel very good and happy. ... I really want these classes to continue. I will come even when I'll need a walking stick to get to class (*laughter*)"

Claire (71)

Both, Joy and Claire were regular participants for 3 and 5 years in open classes offered by a small women's college once a week, every semester, for a small fee. For Joy, English represents a tool with which to break the language barrier or perhaps the communication conventions her native language imposes on her. For Claire, coming to school is very meaningful, makes her feel young, visible, connected. Joy and Claire are both, let it be said, *conscious* of their inclinations!

"Do what you want to do... do what you wanted to do... so you won't regret. If you find out you can't do it, then you can give up ... then it's easier... but try!" Joy (69)

“Age is just a number saying how many years you’ve lived. When I look at myself my face and body, you know, I can see I got older, but it’s in my physical strength [fitness] that I feel my age the most. My willingness to do things, my curiosity, my thirst for knowledge, those have not changed. I haven’t felt any age barrier of the kind a way ‘I’m older, so... [I cannot]’” Claire (71)

What these third-age learners seem to be sharing is their ability to “savour” – to savour experiences and processes, to savour responses, and to savour beliefs! When talking to the researcher about their motivation, learning experiences and routines, these learners actually exuded joy, as if they were re-living particular moments. In other words, the storytelling about their foreign language learning seemed to be itself an aspect of the savouring.

Just as we can regulate negative experiences, for instance stress, by employing various coping mechanisms or strategies, we can also regulate positive experience. Savouring in positive psychology refers to our capacity to attend to, appreciate, and enhance positive experiences in one’s life (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). It has three temporal dimensions. Besides paying attention to the positive feelings that are occurring in the present, we can savour through reminiscence, when we remember the positive feelings from the past, or alternatively through imagining the positive feelings we will have in the future.

So, whether it is a case of the third-age learners savouring the foreign language learning process itself, or a case of their savouring that extra layer which a foreign language adds to inter-personal communication, it is clear that telling the story of the experiences associated with the foreign language – even using the medium of their L1 - has the capacity to induce the kind of pleasurable experience that will be likely to keep them motivated to continue their learning activity and to add to their overall sense of wellbeing.

3.1. An illustrative meeting (as related by Dorota)

What follows here is a short exploratory and explanatory narrative constructed after, first an incidental meeting of the researcher with a third-age person, followed then by several intentional meetings of the two.

March 26th, 2021. Today, my morning walk was around the Nijo Castle. I was observing fellow walkers, runners, passers-by, thinking about different fates and lives, imagining their life stories. There’s a

short camelia hedge between the castle's moat and the road. I like the soft cushiony surface of this little dirt path. I noticed a woman walking slowly, admiring the flowers in the hedge, picking some from the ground and putting them into a little canvas bag.

"Good morning"... "They're beautiful, all these flowers." I said as I passed by her.

"Yes, so beautiful! Look!" she answered, showing me a handful of camelias, she'd picked. "I put them into a bowl, into water. They last for a week or so, you know? Some people don't like them."

"Because of a bad omen?" I asked, assuming so since they're "fallen".

"Yes. Some think they're not good because they fell off [died] when still in full beauty. But isn't that the best way and time to go?" I nodded at the wisdom of this notion.

Becoming too frail and losing one's autonomy and independence is one of the biggest fears in life, in all its adult stages, but more so when the end is closer than farther. Hence *carpe diem!* Ms. Tsubaki is 87 years old. She told me, that because her hearing is very poor now, she can't watch TV, so she goes to bed early. As a result, she wakes up around 3 o'clock. Would you guess what she does before going on her morning walk around six? She studies English! And she goes to class twice a month, in one class she studies grammar, in another class, conversation! The conversation is difficult for her because of her poor hearing.

"But I get very good scores in grammar tests!" she shared with me with a proud smile on her face! She's been to America four times in her life, and was supposed to go last year, too, but the pandemic prevented her from taking the trip.

"And now I'm old!" she said, smiling again, a bit sadly.

Ms. Tsubaki thanked me saying,

"Such a lovely encounter with you! It gives me the strength to live."

"Oh, but that's so for me, too. Thank you!"

I almost hugged her. We shook hands in gloves though and parted! I hope I'll meet Ms. Tsubaki many times during my walks! ...to be continued

We did meet a couple of more times in the early morning, and Camellia, Ms. Tsubaki, invited me to her class taught by a volunteer

teacher, I think, who is a thirdager herself. The class meetings are held in a former elementary school, which was because of the lack of children in that area turned into a welfare centre for the elderly. However, another lockdown especially for such facilities was imposed and the classes were cancelled. But I hope that we will meet again, and she can be one my participants if she wishes so.

The above treatment of “savouring” has had reference to third-age learners, and whereas it may be especially beneficial for such older learners to enjoy the pleasure of speaking about their satisfactions with their learning experience, the benefits of such “savouring” are unlikely to be confined to any particular age-group, as the comments cited earlier in the paper make clear!

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We can conclude from the foregoing that storytelling may have a very positive role in the second language teaching/learning enterprise – whether the stories – about virtually any aspect of life - are recounted through the medium of the L2, or whether they are told through the L1 about the process of learning and using the L2. Probably the important condition is that the stories should deal with dimensions of life and of learning that are *significant for the storyteller*.

There is another discussion to be had concerning the effects of people telling stories about their problems with the learning process – their teacher, their materials, their difficulties...Whereas such complaining can hardly be equated with “savouring”, one might guess that telling such stories has better effects than not telling them! Better out than in!

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Migranti i osobe u trećoj dobi pričaju svoju priču o učenju jezika

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Fokus je u ovom članku na dvjema različitim kategorijama učenika jezika - migrantima i osobama u trećoj dobi. Kod obje skupine pokazuje se da prepričavanje vlastita iskustva učenja jezika pozitivno utječe na taj proces. Činjenica da postoji jednak ishod za dvije tako različite kategorije, potencijalno implicira da se isti pozitivan ishod može očekivati kod bilo koje kategorije učenika jezika.

Ključne riječi: *dobrobit, migrant, treća dob, prepričavanje, užitek*