CHAPTER 1

Sociocultural Theory and Narrative

This book examines second language acquisition (SLA) and culture acquisition, but not in the usual sense where the lexical, grammatical, and semantic systems are learned or acquired. Rather, it is about the attempt to adapt the self into a new context and a new world. It is about the struggle for participation in a new social environment. Participation has emerged in the SLA literature as a metaphor for learning a new language. The background for this model stems from sociohistorical and social constructionist theories; participation in society as described by the individual's narrative can be interpreted as a metaphor for acquiring a new identity (Sfard, 1998; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000).

SLA and acculturation can be accurately described as participation and reconstruction of the self. It is more than the individual becoming a repository of new knowledge. Participation is more effective as a way to think about language socialization because it connotes interactive communication between the learner and the new community, the way it occurs in the real world. As a complement to the older acquisition metaphor, participation as expressed in the form of the narrative is particularly appropriate. The roots of this theory can be found in the writings of Vygotsky (1978) in his theory of language learning as social interaction, as inner speech converted into outer. Interaction comes to play

in Bakhtin's (1981) focus on identity in his discussion of the dialogic, the idea that a person can have different languages depending on the context, and that language, culture, and identity are fluid, dynamic processes.

Traditional scientific understanding has been based on the establishment of laws or patterns that exist across contexts, as a deductive system of reasoning that is rule-based and thus independent of the forces of the environment in which the phenomenon exists. While this is a valid paradigm of research, it is best complemented by narrative-based research, which like its linearly logical, mathematical counterpart, also addresses issues of validity and reliability. Furthermore, narrative-based research is more appropriate in studying human behaviors and activities because of the nature of the subject. To study human beings is in many ways more complex than studying phenomena in the physical world because a human being is more complicated than a rock or a kind of gas (Polkinghorne, 1998, p. 10).

At the heart of narrative research or anthropological inquiry rest the intention and the integrity of the researcher. This kind of investigation is not for everyone. Those who are uncomfortable with loose ends, with participation and interview as a kind of "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 2000), and the "holistic" view of things will not find themselves comfortable with narrative research. Those who need structure to be comfortable with research will find themselves better off using a more empirical or statistical method that has its roots in the traditional scientific method. Furthermore, it has long been a controversial fact for professionals in the scientific community that a form of research exists that relies on the personal factor in which the main form of research is socializing and the main instrument is the researcher. And yet in many ways, this form of research presents a "real picture of reality, of life as it exists in time and space" (Neisser, 1976, p. 2). And a careful researcher structures and triangulates the data so that this method has its own kind of rigor.

For research into acculturation and identity, the narrative form of research is an appropriate tool. To better understand this form of research, we shall first explore the writings of two researchers previously mentioned whose work has been essential in moving the importance of *context* to the center of concerns in acculturation research and second language acquisition: Lev Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin. In addition, the ideas of Jerome Bruner, who questioned empiricism as the only method of viewing phenomena, are all examined.

Lev Vygotsky (1978), influenced by Marxist theory, claimed that higher mental functioning stemmed from the individual's participation in society. He believed that in order to understand the individual, one must study the social context. Higher mental functions are social and reflect on the individual's social interaction. Even internal mental functions are the result on some level of social interaction. The clearest manifestation of this idea can be seen in the idea of the "zone of proximal development"; that is, in education, we should teach to the student's potential, not just the actual level in which the individual is functioning. This theory speaks to identity and interaction and moves language learning out of the abstract, isolated internal mental functioning into the real world of human communication (Wertsch, 1991, p. 28).

Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) gave new meaning to the act of communication by focusing on the dialogic aspect—that is, in any given text there is more than one voice. This makes a text not a passive receptacle, but a generator of meaning. Each text is subject to a continual stream of meanings, depending on who is creating it and who the reader or audience is. Any single text is subject to interpretation of the speaker and listener or reader and writer. An example of this theory can be seen in the responses to interviews in Carol Gilligan's book, *In a Different Voice* (1993), where the interviewer's questions are at times misinterpreted by the women interviewed. Gilligan claimed that women can see meaning in interview questions that men cannot. In this way, the dialogic aspect of text makes it open to more than one meaning or interpretation, all of which are culturally and socially influenced. Another example of finding different results due to differing interpretations can be seen in Margaret Donaldson's study (1978) of children's performances in Piagetian tasks in which children performed a task (let's allow the task be the text since these children do not read yet) successfully at an earlier stage than Piaget had found in the original study. She argued that in Piaget's study the children didn't really understand the task because when given a similar task in a more familiar context, they performed correctly. Similarly, children across cultures can interpret any given task differently. A good way to understand Bakhtin's point of view is to raise the question "Who is doing the talking?" and expect more than one answer to the question (Wertsch, 1991, p. 53).

Jerome Bruner (1991) felt that the perceptions people hold and the way they make sense of their worlds could not be a testable proposition, like that found in the empirical sciences. He was instrumental in introducing

narrative-based research into psychology. He posited that there was more than one way to order experience and construct reality. He was following the line of reasoning of George Mead (1977), who felt that people themselves played an active role in constructing their own lives and that their interpretations could be organized into a methodology. However, none of these pioneering thinkers were advocating one research method as better than another. As Polkinghorne, a professor of counseling and psychology, said:

> *I do not believe that the solutions to human problems will come from developing even more sophisticated creative applications of the natural science model, but by developing additional, complementary approaches that are especially sensitive to the unique characteristics of human existence (1988, p. x).*

To summarize then, narrative, especially first-person singular narrative, has been very much marginalized by the social sciences until recently because the social scientists have used the empirical scientific paradigm as a model. For many, the only way of knowing and research is extreme objectivity where the focus is on the observed, not the observer. There have been exceptions, such as the introspective case studies in SLA of Schumann and Schumann (1977). For the most part, however, linguistics has modeled itself after the rationalist epistemology and experimental methodology of the hard sciences.

I believe that first-person singular narrative voice provides a rich template through which to observe human interaction and behavior. Retroactive first-person narrative should be moved front and center, along with the empirical research that it complements. Authentic autobiography is a manifestation of this kind of knowledge. However, it is also true that narrative written in third person (or "close third" such as in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*), where the reader enters the writer's world, also can give an authentic picture of evolving identity in a multicultural world.

Poetry that gives a multi-faced reality of people who have changed contexts and identities is also included. There is, in fact, a continuum—from the artistic like poetry and fiction, to the more scientific ethnography in which to discover identity and shifting perspectives of the multi-cultural world, and we will explore these in this book.

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. What exactly is narrative-based research?
2. How does it differ from traditional scientific inquiry?
3. What researchers led the way to this kind of research?
4. Who should do narrative-based research, and who would be better off using the scientific method?
5. Why is narrative-based research particularly important in acculturation, second language, and identity research?
6. Write a brief summary of the preceding point of view.