Analyzing Storytelling In TESOL Interview Research

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Autobiographic research interviews have become an accepted and valued method of qualitative inquiry in TESOL and applied linguistics more broadly. In recent discussions surrounding the epistemological treatment of autobiographic stories, TESOL researchers have increasingly called for more attention to the ways in which stories are embedded in interaction and thus are bound up with the social contexts of their production. This paper advances these efforts by demonstrating an empirically grounded approach to storytelling as interaction. Drawing on the research tradition on storytelling in conversation analysis, the article offers a sample analysis of a story produced in an L2 English interview with an adult immigrant in the United States. By engaging sequential conversation analysis, membership categorization analysis, and occasioned semantics, it examines the interactional practices through which the storyteller and story recipient launch, produce, and end the telling of a story that furthers the purpose of the autobiographic interview. By following closely the participants’ coordinated actions as they unfold in time, we trace how the parties accomplish the storytelling as an intelligible and meaningful activity through sequence organization and turn design. We conclude with recommendations for extending storytelling research in TESOL to meet the evolving needs and interests of the field.

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Stories are “about”—have to do with—the people who are telling them and hearing them.

(Sacks 1992, p. 768)

Autobiographical research has gained traction over the past 20 years in TESOL and related fields and has become an accepted and valued method of qualitative inquiry (for historical overviews, see Barkhuizen, 2011; Pavlenko, 2007). Because personal stories organize experience in a tellable and understandable format, they promise access to localized ways of knowing, being, and becoming in the world (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Over a decade ago, TESOL Quarterly devoted its section on research issues to the topic “Narrative Research in TESOL” (Bell, 2002; Pavlenko, 2002). Both contributors, Jill Bell and Aneta Pavlenko, emphasized the epistemological status of stories as sense-making practices, as representations and constructions of events in the lives of tellers and their communities. For Bell, narrative constitutes a powerful means of ethnographic inquiry that elicits the conscious representation of a speaker’s beliefs and assumptions, usually unconsciously held, yet lying beneath the surface. Discussing narrative study, Pavlenko (2002) commented on the complex ways in which personal narratives are co-constructed through “multiple sociocultural, sociohistorical, and rhetorical influences” (p. 217). Together, these perspectives highlighted the benefits of autobiographical research in TESOL and the need to attend more closely to the processes and practices of story co-construction as well as re-construction.

Extending the epistemological treatment of autobiographical stories, TESOL and second language researchers have begun to give more recognition to the ways in which stories are embedded in the local contexts of their production. Recent efforts to build links between narrative epistemologies and research practices (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2011; Miller, 2011; Prior, 2011, 2014) show signs that storytelling research in TESOL is coming into its own as a discipline. For example, in the 2011 special issue of this journal devoted to narrative research in TESOL, Gary Barkhuizen, the special issue editor, and contributors highlighted the influence of researcher, interviewer, narrator, and audience on the “activity of meaning making, learning, and knowledge construction that takes place at all stages of a narrative research project” (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 395).

A direction within narrative analysis that has gained particular currency in TESOL is small story research, an approach that focuses on the often brief and fragmented narrative productions that contingently emerge in everyday talk (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Barkhuizen, 2011). Although small story research proposes to set itself apart from the investigation of “big stories”—the canonical Labovian
narrative format (Labov, 1972) privileged in life story research—
anthropological and sociological investigations of storytelling in natural
interaction go back several decades (e.g., Bauman, 1986; C. Goodwin,
1984; M. H. Goodwin, 1982; Jefferson, 1978; Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, &
Smith, 1989; Sacks, 1972). In light of these longstanding research
traditions, it is not clear what might establish small stories as a distinct
analytical object that eluded prior detection. Furthermore, it remains
to be demonstrated that the researcher-stipulated distinction between
big stories and small stories is relevant for storytellers and story recipi-
ents in any form of interaction in which storytellings emerge. In con-
trast, the emic perspective adopted in this article requires that analytic
claims be grounded in the participants’ observable relevancies. The
study therefore aligns itself with an ethnomethodological perspective
on storytelling rather than with the small story framework.

SOME KEY ISSUES FOR STORYTELLING RESEARCH IN
TESOL

The recognition by TESOL scholars that stories need to be analyzed
with reference to the context and medium through which they get
told has been an important step toward achieving greater researcher
reflexivity and methodological and analytical rigor. Nevertheless, there
remain a number of key issues that must be addressed if scholarship
on autobiographic storytelling in TESOL is to further mature to meet
the evolving needs and interests of the field. To clarify, the following
remarks (and the rest of the article) consider only stories told in social
interaction.

1. Thematic and content analysis, the styles of analysis that domi-
nate research on autobiographic storytelling in TESOL, do not
elucidate the temporal and sequential nature of story construc-
tion in social interaction.

2. Though much attention has been given to the story tellers and
how their experiences, perceptions, and sociolinguistic competen-
cies (Koven, 2007; Pavlenko, 2006) are made relevant and, in turn, shape the production of their stories, the roles and con-
tributions of story recipients have largely been ignored. If we are
to treat stories as interactional accomplishments, we must inves-
tigate how both production and understanding are achieved in
and through the telling.

3. An emphasis on stories in interaction, although a necessary
counterbalance to the realist treatment of stories as discrete
analytical objects or windows into experience, leaves uncovered
the ways in which stories work as interaction, that is, as an inter-ac-tionally constituted and organized activity.

4. In order for us as researchers to understand storytelling, we must focus attention on the practices by which the participants make their activity understandable to themselves and to each other as they produce it. Although autobiographic stories have been utilized as rich resources for understanding the lived realities of groups and individuals, a detailed analysis of how these stories take shape in the course of their production offers insight into the co-participants’ interactional realities.

5. A view of storytelling as situated social interaction, and an analytical approach that shows in detail how participants jointly accomplish the activity, also benefits English language education in ways that have barely begun to be considered in TESOL contexts (but see, e.g., Hellermann, 2008; Wong & Waring, 2010).

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the discursive-interactional resources and practices through which the participants in autobiographical interviews jointly produce stories as storytellers and story recipients. We begin by locating our analysis in conversation-analytic research on storytelling inside and outside of research interviews, and we point to some key analytical resources. The centerpiece of the article is a sample analysis of one storytelling episode extracted from a large corpus of research interviews. The analysis reveals interactional methods that are specific for storytellings in research interviews as well as generic resources and practices through which storytelling in conversation is accomplished. In the discussion, we consider how a conversation-analytic approach to storytelling can inform TESOL research methodology and educational practice. We conclude by recommending that storytelling research in TESOL move beyond interview settings so that it can more fully represent the wide range of storytelling contexts and practices.

**STORYTELLING AND INTERVIEWS AS SOCIAL INTERACTION**

Narrative-based studies frequently examine stories produced in a particular interactional activity: the research interview. They focus on stories in interaction. In this section, we turn to a research tradition that investigates storytelling inside and outside of interviews as social interaction. Because we are particularly concerned with storytelling in interviews, we also outline briefly a perspective of interviews as social
interaction and the consequences of such a view for the analysis of interview data.

**Storytelling as a Topic in Conversation Analysis**

As a ubiquitous interactional practice, storytelling has been a key research topic in conversation analysis (CA) from the inception of the field. CA’s distinctive approach to storytelling, originally developed by Harvey Sacks in his 1964–1972 lectures (Sacks, 1992) and seminal publications by Sacks (e.g., 1974, 1986) and Gail Jefferson (e.g., 1978, 1984), brought attention to the ways in which stories are locally occasioned through the preceding talk, recipient-designed, jointly accomplished by tellers and recipients, and interactionally consequential. Later work has further elaborated the earlier analyses and documented a wide range of storytelling practices and resources, including co-tellings, recipient (dis)alignment and (dis)affiliation, embodied action and multimodality, and affect construction (for concise summaries, see Liddicoat, 2011; Mandelbaum, 2013; Sidnell, 2010; Wong & Waring, 2010). Although CA research on storytelling concurs with narrative inquiry regarding the epistemological status of stories as packages of knowledge and experience, CA has brought to light the important role of storytelling as doing social actions such as accounting, complaining, blaming, and justifying, and constructing identities and social relationships in the here-and-now of the ongoing talk.

In keeping with CA’s overall analytical focus on the generic methods by which participants in interaction produce and understand intelligible actions in a locally sensitive manner, CA places emphasis on the recurrent practices of storytelling as a social activity. Storytelling is part and parcel of participants’ interactional competence, visible in their engagements in storytellings as tellers and recipients. Researchers studying the development of second language (L2) speakers’ interactional competencies have begun to examine how L2 speakers change their participation in storytellings as tellers and recipients over time (Hellermann, 2008; Ishida, 2011; Lee & Hellermann, 2014).

CA’s concern with storytelling as an interactional accomplishment avoids subjugating the how of storytelling to the what, that is, the topical content and its connections with larger discourses, ideologies, and other researcher-stipulated macrosociological layers of interpretation. Whether we are primarily interested in the content of the stories or in the interactional conditions and methods of their production, there is no way to get at the former without consideration of the latter. Stories in talk can be apprehended only through the ways they are told. As
has been firmly established by CA research as well as more recent narrative research in other discourse-analytical traditions (e.g., De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012), systematic analytical consideration of the discursive practices of storytellings enables researchers to surpass commonsensical glossing and the strategy of taking isolated bits of what tellers say as evidence of theoretical concepts.

Complementing sequential CA, membership categorization analysis (MCA) addresses the topical content of storytellings. MCA explicates how social members generate and use categories referring to persons, how such categorizations are occasioned, and what consequences they have for the participants (Sacks, 1992; Stokoe, 2012). In TESOL, paired categories such as $L1$ speaker–$L2$ speaker, student–teacher, woman–man, and so on are routinely used as analysts’ resources, without giving attention to how such categories are treated by the research participants themselves and whether indeed they have any relevance for the participants at all. MCA insists that categories must be treated as participants’ resources and topics for analysis at particular moments in the interaction. Membership categorization is accomplished by using reference terms and by doing, displaying, or describing activities, actions, knowledge, attributes, rights, and obligations associated with a particular category. Because categorizations in talk are contingent and interactionally generated, they are inextricably bound with the sequential organization of talk (Hester & Eglin, 1997; Hester & Hester, 2012).

Recent developments in CA and MCA have drawn analytic attention to the linguistic format of turns and alternative formulations of categories and descriptions more broadly. The nexus of grammar and interaction is the topic of interactional linguistics, a research direction that examines how generic interactional problems are solved with the resources of specific languages (Fox, Thompson, Ford, & Couper-Kuhlen, 2013; Mazeland, 2013). MCA has been extended into a research direction called *occasioned semantics* (Bilmes, 2011), the study of how meaningful expressions are used on specific occasions of talk and what participants accomplish with them.

For TESOL researchers, close attention to the construction of storytellings through the sequential organization of the talk, the mobilization of categories, and other semiotic resources brings specific rewards because such an analysis shows in detail the interactional competencies through which L2 users participate in storytelling activities.

**Storytelling in Interviews**

In the tradition of CA, storytelling is examined as it emerges in ordinary everyday activities rather than in talk arranged for research
purposes, such as the various types of research interview. But when research interviews are understood as a type of institutional talk, their examination falls under the purview of CA’s extensive institutional talk program (e.g., Heritage & Clayman, 2010). Research interviews share the generic interactional organization of all interviews, that is, the question-answer sequence by which the interviewer asks questions and the interviewee gives answers. Stories as responses to interviewer questions are prevalent in many types of interview-structured institutional talk, including employment interviews, medical consultations, psychotherapy, police interrogations, media interviews, oral proficiency interviews, and others (e.g., Peräkylä, Antaki, Vehviläinen, & Leudar, 2008; Prior, 2011, 2014; Roulston, 2013; Stokoe & Edwards, 2006).

As interview researchers from across the social sciences have shown, conceptualizing interviews as situated sociointeractional activities rather than as unproblematic instruments for data collection opens up the view on how participants collaborate in producing the topical content of the interview, how they align themselves to the activity, and how they jointly construct identities, relationships, stances—and stories (Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Rapley, 2012; Roulston, 2010). Recent contributions to the methodology of qualitative interview research in applied linguistics demonstrate how the analytic treatment of interviews as social practice (De Fina & Perrino, 2011; Prior, 2011, 2014; Talmy, 2010) puts interview research in our field on a rigorous empirical footing and thereby enables accountable research outcomes and rich resources for interviewer training (Talmy & Richards, 2011). One important finding from research on the telling of stories in autobiographical interviews with multilingual speakers is that “the same” story told at different times in a series of research interviews (Prior, 2011) or delivered in different languages (Koven, 2002) exhibits marked differences between versions and generates specific interactional consequences.

STORYTELLING IN TESOL RESEARCH INTERVIEWS: DATA AND METHOD

The data for this article are drawn from a corpus of autobiographic interviews carried out by the second coauthor with adult immigrants over a 5-year period. These interviews were initially conducted for the purpose of exploring participants’ sociolinguistic trajectories, narrative sensemaking, and experiences with transnational identity and belong-
ing. Audio-recorded interviews and informal conversations were conducted primarily in English, the participants’ second or third language.

As a constitutive organizational pattern of autobiographic interviews, the interviewer asks a question about some topic or event in the respondent’s life, and the respondent answers with a relevant story. Whether self- or other-initiated, stories are the predominant form of telling in the autobiographic interviews in the corpus. For this article, we selected one story for a sample analysis. It is representative of the types of story and the discursive practices employed by tellers and recipients in the corpus. It allows us to show how the teller deploys generic, context-free interactional and rhetorical resources in context-specific ways to bring off a particular story, fitted to the local context and the story recipient. Moreover, attention to the discursive practices of story construction makes visible how participants establish the nexus between societal structures and categories and the here-and-now of the interview interaction.

We selected the particular exhibit for two reasons: It includes different types of story wrapped into a single narrative, and it illustrates the rich repertoire of storytelling practices observable in the collection. Although more detailed than standard analyses of stories in interviews that have been published in TESOL Quarterly, the analysis remains necessarily selective. Closer inspection of other aspects of the talk would yield deeper, and perhaps different, insights. The reader is invited to critically co-analyze the data excerpt.

**SAMPLE ANALYSIS**

The exhibit (Excerpt 1) is from an interview with “John,” a former refugee from Vietnam. John had resided in the United States for about 20 years at the time of the interview. The excerpt is situated in a series of stories in which John speaks of his early experiences in California and his struggles to fit in with the unfamiliar U.S. society. At the beginning of the excerpt, John talks about how people would single him out because of his accent. Thus, the issue of accent becomes an occasion for the upcoming story.

**Excerpt 1** (J = John, I = Interviewer; see the Appendix for a list of transcription conventions)
J: when you hear- when your accent I guess some
people like, (1.2) oh, where you from right
away.

I: can you think of experiences? ((trails off))

J: the experience? uh: (1.9) uh:: (1.4) oh like
high school? maybe high school-I got picked-
(1.7) 'is that (like) [I-'

I: [you got picked on?

J: I got picked on by the 'merican kid?

I: 'why'

J: becau I guess they think I'm different=

=so:: (1.4) ev'ry- ev'ry pee ee ((PE: physical
education)) class they have this: this:

(1.4) ah:: 'merican boy keep >pick on me,
pick on me<, try to make trouble with
me.

(1.4)
an: one day (0.7) >'I didn't say nothin, I
keep walkin whatever and they pick on me, I
keep walkin and then< (.)
one day, I turn aroun? an I say .hh

IYA:---------:

((makes kung-fu attack pose with hands
outstretched))

I: heh heh heh

J: I know, jus (.). >BUT I DIDN'T KNOW
ANYTH(H)ING ABOUT IT< (.). about uh kung-

fu [or taekwondo (.). nothing.=

I: [uhuh

J: =I just did that.

I: uhuh

J: an' he say >OKAY- OKAY- OKAY<- (.). 'okay (.).

I leave you alone. >I not teasing you

no more.<

I: >eh eh eh eh eh<

J: 'leave you- (.). 'an' (.). so he (.). THOUGHT I-

(.). an I say OH:: so it WORK(h)i(h)n(h)g

I: [HA HA HA

J: [ha ha ha

J: AND FROM THAT ON HE NEVER PICK ON ME AGAIN.=

J: =how was that?£
Overall the story is organized into three consecutive types of action sequence, a preface sequence (1–13), a telling sequence (14–41), and a response sequence (42–56; Sacks, 1974). In the preface sequence, the participants collaborate in launching the story. The most extended sequence, the telling sequence, comprises the teller’s portrayals of the conflict (14–22) and the story climax, which in turn is composed of the reversing action (23–33) and its consequences for the story characters (34–42). In the response sequence, the teller solicits responses from the story recipient, and the participants collaboratively bring the storytelling to a close (42–56). The “distinguishable subcomponents of the story” (C. Goodwin, 1984, p. 225) are not only serially ordered but make up a cohesively related sequence of sequences (Schegloff, 2007). They are methodically produced by the participants and are, first and foremost, interactionally real for them, as we show below. At the same time, the participants’ visible orientations to the story components provide researchers with a rational way to structure the analysis.

As we examine in some detail, the actions in the story world are described as a sequence of temporally structured events (14–18, 20–26, 34–36, 42–43, 47–48, 56), whereas the discursive methods through which the events are constructed provide the teller’s stance on the events. The remaining lines in the transcript are occupied by two further constitutive components of the storytelling that require analytic attention. One of these is the participation of the interlocutor as story recipient. His contributions are crucial for getting the story under way (5, 10, 12), maintaining and showing understanding of the telling as it progresses (19, 27, 31, 33, 37, 41), and bringing it to an end (44, 46, 49, 52, 55, 57). The other component is the teller’s psychological commentaries (13, 28–30, 32, 38–39, 43, 45, 48, 50).
that make epistemic, attitudinal, cognitive, and affective attributions to the characters in the story world, supply motives and consequences to their actions, and assess the displaced events in the here-and-now. They are the discursive glue that link the story events together to a cohesive whole and give meaning to the story as a narrative that is at the same time profoundly moral and highly entertaining.

The Preface Sequence

**Sequence organization.** In ordinary conversation, when a speaker’s present turn can be heard to be complete, speaker change becomes possible. A feature of extended tellings such as stories is that they require floor space for a multi-unit turn. Suspending speaker change and launching the story is a collaborative process that can be initiated either by the prospective teller or a recipient. In interviews, stories are typically solicited by the interviewer as story recipient, as in Excerpt 1a.

**Excerpt 1a**

01 J: when you hear- when your accent I guess some
02 people like, (1.2) oh:. where you from right
03 away.
04 (0.5)
05 → I: can you think of experiences?{(voice trails)}
06 (0.8)
07 J: the experience? uh: (1.9) uh:. (1.4) oh like
08 high school? maybe high school-I got picked-
09 (1.7) 'is that (like)[I-'
10 I: [you got picked on?
11 → J: I got picked on by the 'merican kid?
12 I: 'why'
13 J: becau I guess they think I'm different?=

In response to John’s reenactment of how people generally react to his accent (1–3), the interviewer asks for specific instances: can you think of experiences? (5). This request solicits a story that is topically cohesive with the preceding talk and orients to the fundamental rationale of narrative interviews, which is to collect documentary evidence for larger conceptual themes such as immigrants facing mistreatment because of their accent. The story solicitation projects the telling of a story as a relevant response. With the request, the interviewer makes available to John the space needed for an
extended telling, describes its topical scope, and aligns himself as a story recipient.

John’s response to the story solicitation, I got picked on by the ‘merican kid? (11), is displaced from the interviewer’s request by several lines of transcript. The intervening space (6–10) is occupied by an insert sequence (Schegloff, 2007), composed of John’s search for a fitting story. The search process is indicated by a gap of silence, repetition of the operative word experience with rising intonation, and a series of filled and unfilled pauses, while the resolution to the search is displayed with an oh token that marks a change of epistemic state (Heritage, 1984). Again, the resolution is produced in two steps. In the first, John proposes “high school” as a story setting, in the second, a fitting event that took place in that setting: I got picked— (8). High school locates the upcoming story at a particular life stage and in a particular institutional setting. Inferences associated with the reference term “high school” inform the story recipient’s understanding of the story (Sacks, 1986). However, John abandons the utterance in progress by requesting confirmation (is that (like) I?) that the topic is relevant to the interviewer’s solicitation. By offering a possible hearing of the incomplete utterance (you got picked on?), the interviewer implicitly ratifies John’s topic proposal. This hearing is more plausible than such alternatives as “you got picked as a member of some team or group,” which John then might have had to confirm or repair. John in turn confirms the interviewer’s hearing by repeating I got picked on and further expands the description. With this turn, John reaffirms his discourse identity (Zimmerman, 1998) of storyteller and provides an initial characterization of the story (Sacks, 1974, 1992). The story preface closes the insert sequence and provides the response to the interviewer’s solicitation.

Although the interactional floor has now been cleared for the telling of the story, the next turn is not the beginning of the story but instead initiates another preliminary sequence (12–13) in which the participants collaboratively reinforce the tellability of the projected story.

As we have seen, even though autobiographic interviews are designed to elicit respondents’ stories, getting a story off the ground still requires complex interactional work. In the preceding section, we have focused on the sequential structure of the preface sequence. In the next section, we examine how the story preface and its expansion are formulated.

**Formulating the preface sequence.** We noted that one purpose of a story preface is to provide recipients with an initial characterization of the type of story that is to come. To understand how storytellers use the story preface to accomplish this task, we need to scrutinize in some detail how it is put together.
The story preface *I got picked on by the merican kid?* projects a particular kind of story through its footing, formulation with lexicogrammatical resources, and membership categorization. With the turn-initial first person singular pronoun *I,* John takes up the composite identities as animator (teller), author (source), principle (the social identity category from which he speaks), and figure (protagonist) of the story (Goffman, 1981). Through this production format, he locates the story in his personal experience and reflexively constructs himself as the epistemic owner of the story. As grammatical subject in the passive construction, *I* is established as the topic of the utterance and as patient in terms of its case role. Connected through the verbal component *got picked on,* *I* is set in opposition to the noun in the prepositional phrase *by the merican kid?*, the new information in the information structure and agent in the case structure of the utterance (Table 1).

### TABLE 1
Nominal Components in “*I got picked on by the merican kid?*”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic constituent</th>
<th><em>I</em></th>
<th><em>by the merican kid?</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case role</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Prepositional phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information structure</td>
<td>Patient</td>
<td>Agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Given</td>
<td>New</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the verb component *got picked on,* the teller makes two lexicogrammatical selections. *Get*-passives are frequently selected over *be*-passives (e.g., “*I was picked on*”) as stance markers in “adversative contexts” (Carter & McCarthy, 1999, p. 49). Here John’s use of the *get*-passive can be heard to accentuate his view of the described action as transgressive. The phrasal verb *pick on* implicitly contrasts with alternative verbs that also denote disaffiliative interpersonal action and that John did not select, such as *make fun of, tease, mock, bully,* or *attack.* These verbs can be located on a scale (Figure 1) from less to more severe. A particular selection derives its meanings in part from its location on the scale (Bilmes, 2011).

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1 In a 1.5-million-word sample of the CANCODE corpus, Carter and McCarthy (1999) found that of 139 instances of the examined *get*-passives, 124 referred to “a state of affairs that is signalled contextually by the conversational participants as unfortunate, undesirable, or at least problematic” (p. 49). Wanner (2009) notes that *get*-passives are commonly used to refer to “impactful bodily contact” (p. 109) and to represent the speaker as victim.

2 Although it is possible to analyze word selection based on linguistic conventions (and this particular scale was confirmed through an informal survey of first language and second language users), the critical issue is how speakers, in situ, select and manage alternatives and their implicational meanings.
By noting the vertical, or paradigmatic, selections of lexical resources and their horizontal, or syntagmatic, combination, we can partially describe how participants locally produce their story as a version designed for the particular occasion and particular recipient(s) (Potter, 1996). These fundamentally structuralist descriptions are necessary for an accountable analysis of the semiotic resources that participants engage in storytelling. In the context of the preceding talk, the juxtaposition of I with 'merican (kid) sets up the contrast categories immigrant and native to the community and by implication invokes the contrast pair outsider–insider in the collection member status in the community. By describing the American with the life-stage category kid and the action of pick on, John attributes to that person a category-resonant action that reflexively invokes the asymmetrical contrast pair of school bully–victim. Finally, by associating the contrast pair immigrant/outside–native to the community/insider with victim–bully, John enables the inference that the bullying is perpetrated not only on him as an immigrant/outsider but because he is an immigrant/outsider. Figure 2 depicts the category work accomplished in the story preface.

“I got picked on by the ’merican kid?”

In his answer to R’s account solicitation ‘why’ (Bolden & Robinson, 2011) in line 12, John goes on record with this inference: becau I guess they think I’m different? By using the pronoun they rather than he, John extends his account to the entire social group of which the ’merican kid is a member. In this way he portrays the bullying as grounded in community sentiment rather than in the perpetrator’s
personal aversion and reflexively constructs the ‘American kid as representative of that community. With the epistemic stance markers (e.g., Jaffe, 2009) I guess and they think, John formulates his account as tentative and subjective. In addition, the final rise constructs his explanation as suggestive rather than definite, as a falling intonation contour would. Through the combination of lexical and prosodic stance markers, the account comes off as a possible commonsensical explanation that John has no particular affective investment in at the present time. The cluster of stance markers thus protects John from coming across as resentful.

The story preface sets up the telling as a type of complaint story (Günthner, 1997), a tale of “transgression and misconduct” (Drew, 1998) inflicted on the teller, the protagonist in the story world, by a third party who is not present in the here-and-now of the talk. In contrast to many complaint stories told in ordinary conversation (e.g., Drew, 1998; Holt, 2000), the story recipient does not know the antagonist in the story world, and the related event is not a recent occurrence but allegedly took place many years before the current talk. With his fairly detached manner of delivery so far, John seems to be orienting to these circumstances. Finally, through his responses you got picked on?, produced with a sharp final rise, and the account-soliciting why, the interviewer aligns himself not just as a story recipient but specifically as recipient of a complaint story.

The Telling Sequence: The Conflict

Excerpt 1b

14 =so:: (1.4) ev’ry- ev’ry pee ee (physical
15 education)) class they have this: this::
16 (1.4) ah:: ‘merican boy keep >pick on
17 me, pick on me<, try to make trouble with
18 me.
19 (1.4)
20 an:’ one day (0.7) >’I didn’t say nothin’,
21 keep walkin’ whatever and they pick on me,
22 keep walkin’ and then’< (.)

With the discourse marker so::, John marks a shift from prefacing the story to the pending telling of the story proper (Bolden, 2009). Narrowing his description from high school to PE class, John makes

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3 Consider such alternative formulations as becau I’m different, becau they think I’m different, and I guess becau I’m different.
inferable a “gym class narrative” trope commonly associated—at least in the United States—with verbal and physical bullying. Thus John is recipient-designing the setting formulation by treating “PE class” as an inference-rich membership category. The repeated use of the determiner ev’ry and the prosodic emphasis project an event that is recurrent and therefore carries more weight than a single occurrence. In his search for a reference term that describes the agent of the projected action, John settles on ‘merican boy, not ‘merican kid as before. The recategorization makes the antagonist’s gender (as a male bully) relevant and can be heard to upgrade the severity of the hostile conduct.

With the description of the American boy’s adversarial action keep >pick on me, pick on me<, try to make trouble with me (16–18), John repeats the critical conflict from the story preface. However, unlike in the preface, the antagonist is now formulated as the subject, topic, and agent of an utterance formatted with active voice syntax. The shift in grammatical voice enables a more detailed formulation of the verbal component. Through various devices, the American boy’s action is described as habitual and annoying: the aspectual verb keep, the repetition of pick on me, the alternative but non-equivalent description try to make trouble with me, which ascribes intentionality, the emphasis on the semantically critical lexical items pick and trouble, and the rhythmic pacing of the utterance.

The end of the conflict description and start of the story climax is marked by an intervening 1.4-second pause. At this point, there is an opportunity for the story recipient to display some response to the telling thus far. By passing up a response, the recipient orients to the incompleteness of the story and the maintenance of the current participation structure. With the conventional rhetorical device an: one day, John both announces the climax of the story and retrospectively frames his description of the setting, antagonist, and conflict as background to a specific event in time. However rather than proceeding to the climax, John self-interrupts with a parenthetical insertion (C. Goodwin, 1984), set off by pauses at either end and produced with lower volume and at higher speed >'I didn’t say nothin, I keep walkin whatever and they pick on me, I keep walkin and then’< (20–22). Reverting to the conflict situation, the parenthetical insert highlights for the recipient the contrast between the aggressive actions perpetrated against John and his refusal to respond in kind (I didn’t say nothin), minding his own business and not letting himself be provoked (I keep walkin whatever). Rhetorically, the scene is constructed through the iconic representation of the characters’ ordered actions and
reactions (Figure 3) as regular occurrences rather than as a one-time episode.

The American boy/his ingroup ('they')

keep >pick on me. pick on me,
try to make trouble with me.

they pick on me

John ('I')

I didn’t say nothin’,
I keep walkin’ whatever

I keep walkin’

FIGURE 3. Story characters’ ordered action.

Through the complex combination of discursive practices, John enables contrasting inferences to the antagonists’ and protagonist’s moral character: The American boy and his group come off as habitual bullies, whereas John portrays himself as calm, controlled, and unaggressive.

The Climax: Representing the Reversing Action

Excerpt 1c

23 and then’< (. ) one day, I turn aroun’?
24 an’ I say. hh IYA: ........................
25 ((J makes kung-fu attack pose with arms and
26 hands outstretched))
27 I: heh heh heh
28 J: $I know, jus’ (. ) >BUT I DIDN’T KNOW
29 ANYTH(H)ING ABOUT IT<£ (. ) about uh
30 kung-fu [or taekwondo(. ) nothing.=
31 I: [uhuh
32 J: =I just did that.
33 I: uhuh

After drawing out the critical features of the conflict situation, John resumes the climax with the temporal expressions and then ’< (. ) one day. Through its vocal format, and then’< is produced as the final element of the parenthetical insert and thereby works as a pivot (Schegloff, 1979) connecting the background and the climax components. With I turn aroun?, John not only describes his physical behavior. By formulating an iconic movement, John announces to the story recipient that he is about to confront his antagonist in the story world and that his action marks a reversal of circumstances, the critical
turning point of the story. Prefaced with the quotative I say, which projects a verbal rather than a nonverbal performance and therefore gives no clue to the upcoming action, John then enacts a kung fu attack pose together with a war cry.

By shifting his style of representation from description to a highly animated performance, John dramatically indexes the transformative character of this action. In conversational storytelling, alternating from describing to performing an action is a common practice for constructing the story climax (Bauman, 1986; Holt, 2000). As a mode of representation, performance not only portrays a story event more vividly, it also places the story recipient as witness to the enacted scene and enables him to evaluate the event independently. The interviewer responds with laughter (27) and so treats John’s unexpected performance as amusing. Shifting footing again to his discourse identity as co-participant in the ongoing talk, John affiliates himself with the interviewer’s understanding through the epistemic response marker I know, produced with a smile voice. At this point, the participants have jointly transformed the story genre from a complaint story to an amusing story.

Still with a smile voice, and emphasized prosodically with increased volume and verbally with an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986), John then adds the punchline of the story, BUT I DIDN’T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT IT, followed by a specification of two well-known martial arts forms, kung fu and taekwondo. With this commentary on his embodied action, John provides the story recipient with a critical piece of information that his antagonist in the story world did not have and that frames John’s “warrior” action as deceit (Rae & Kerby, 2007). He then works up the punchline further by repeating the extreme case formulation nothing, which completes his list and gets particular weight by being added after a micropause and placed in turn-final position. With the claim I just did that (32), John characterizes the ruse as an act of unpremeditated retaliation. Further, by avowing that he did not know Asian martial arts but was faking the skill, John works up two contrasting identities: At the time of the telling, he disavows the cultural identity of the stereotypical “Asian” man who is skilled in martial arts as a category-bound predicate, whereas in the story world, in interaction with the American boy, he trades precisely on that stereotype.

On the telling of deceit stories, Rae and Kerby (2007) observe that “in representing some reported action as clever or devious, speakers have the task of designing a report such that that action is intelligible
to their audience without making it so obvious that its cleverness is lost” (p. 192). By shifting the telling from representing the action in the story world to commenting on it, and by positioning the commentary after the portrayed action, John successfully accomplishes this challenging project.

The Climax: Consequences of the Reversing Action

Excerpt 1d

34 J: an he say >OKAY- OKAY- OKAY-< (. ) 'okay (. )
35 I leave you alone. >I not teasing you
36 no more.'<
37 I: >eh eh eh eh<
38 J: ’leave you- (. ) fan’ (. ) so he (. ) THOUGHT I-
39 (. ) an I say OH:: so it WORK(h)i(h)n(h)gf
40 I: [HA HA HA
41 I: [ha ha ha
42 J: *AND FROM THAT ON HE NEVER PICK ON ME AGAIN*-

Moving on to the effect of his action, John again does not describe the American boy’s reaction but performs it through the use of direct reported speech (DRS). DRS enables the teller to construct immediacy, authenticity, and dramatic effects (Holt & Clift, 2007); it at once represents the event as an objective fact and constructs the teller’s stance toward it (Edwards, 2003). By enacting a character’s utterance, the teller constructs a version of not only what was said but how it was produced through prosody, voice quality, body movement, and linguistic selections. With the complex interplay of such devices, the teller guides the recipient’s judgment of the character and their action implicitly, without any overt commentary, while at the same time enabling the recipient to draw his own conclusions from the performed representation.

As Rae and Kerby (2007) note, “a frequently occurring context for the presentation of DRS is the representation of an action to which the repeated talk is responsive” (p. 181). John’s change of footing through animating the American boy starts with having the boy back down as his first response to the perceived kung fu threat, constructed through the repeated OKAY tokens and their production with higher volume and accelerated speed (34). The backdown is followed by the boy’s promises to stop the bullying I leave you alone. >I not teasing you no more.’<. By describing the American boy as immediately backing down, John portrays his antagonist as pusillanimous and easy to deceive. It is noteworthy that the boy’s promises formulate his transgressive action differently from before. When speaking as teller of the story and protagonist in the story world, John uses the verbs pick on
and make trouble with to describe the American boy’s actions. But when animating the American boy, John uses the verbs leave alone and tease. As we argued above, on a scale of more or less aggressive actions, teasing is morally less reprehensible than picking on somebody. The lexical reformulation rhetorically downgrades the boy’s transgressive actions. Through his choice of adversative action verbs, John displays his sensitivity to how speakers will formulate their own actions and protect their claims to moral character.

Following the interviewer’s laughter response to John’s enactment of the boy’s retreat (37), John reformulates through several practices the successful outcome of the confrontation and what makes the story amusing. With a series of fragments, he specifies the critical utterance components ‘leave you- (. ) tan’ (. ) so he ( . ) THOUGHT I-. The fragment ‘leave you- partially repeats the represented talk attributed to the boy, while so he ( . ) THOUGHT I- constructs a chain of inferences: the boy’s inference from the kung fu pose that John was a dangerous fighter, and John’s inference from the boy’s retreat that the boy backed down because of that inference. With the prosodic marking of THOUGHT, John generates the implication that the boy’s understanding of John’s kung fu action diverged from what the action factually was and therefore enabled the deceit to be successful. Using the device of represented thought, John animates himself as a character in the story with a surprise assessment of his success (an I say OH:: so it WORK(h)i(h)n(h)gf). With the ensuing overlapping laughter, the storyteller and recipient jointly treat the protagonist’s successful deceit as hilarious. The display of a shared stance toward the deceit is followed by John’s description of the long-term consequences of the deception in the story world.

The upshot of the story, marked with the temporal preface AND FROM THAT ON, describes that John’s antagonist indeed stopped the bullying. Intensified with the extreme case formulation NEVER and produced with higher volume and a smile voice, John’s upshot formulation exhibits a stance of amused satisfaction at having outsmarted his opponent. The change of fortune that John describes in the story climax is reflexively constituted through a transformation of category incumbencies and reversal of asymmetries: The American boy falls from bully to loser; John, the immigrant, rises from victim to dangerous fighter. This version of the story represents the belief of John’s antagonist, and it explains why John prevails from the antagonist’s perspective (Figure 4).

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5 Throughout the corpus, participants regularly use the quotative I say or I said as a preface to both represented thought and represented talk.
It is John’s avowal that he is not a martial art practitioner but resorted to the risky deception of pretending to be one that makes his narrative an amusing deceit story rather than a serious tale of suffering and prevailing (Figure 5). With the upshot formulation, the story has recognizably come to an end, but the storytelling has not. The work of completing the storytelling gets done in the response sequence.

FIGURE 4. Categories formulating John as a “dangerous fighter.”

FIGURE 5. Categories through which John produces an amusing story.
The Response Sequence

Excerpt 1e

43 J: how was that?
44 I: wow
45 J: I know. I just like so mad I just did that.
46 I: mm
47 J: (random) li' that, IYA::: fI make like
48 bruce lee, so fun[ny].
49 I: ['that’s funny']
50 J: 'eh heh heh ((high-pitched)) fI know I never
51 thought of that I thought it was so funny.
52 mm
53 I: but I didn’t realize that he was so scare
54 J: after that.
55 I: mm
56 J: he left me alone
57 (1.9)
58 I: so who was your favorite teacher

During the telling sequence, the recipient’s participation has been limited to affiliative laughter and continuers. Following the upshot formulation, John expressly solicits a response from the story recipient, how was that? Through its linguistic form as a rhetorical question and production with a continued smile voice and emphasis on the anaphoric pronoun that, the response solicit displays a self-congratulatory stance and thereby shows what kind of response John expects (Koshik, 2005). The interviewer’s response wow (44) is treated by John in his next turn (45) as an affiliative assessment (I know). Despite John’s unproblematic alignment, we note that wow is normatively used as a response cry (Goffman, 1978); that is, a vocalization that constructs its speaker’s reaction to some event as spontaneous and unpremeditated. A solicited response cry, to use a contradiction in terms, therefore loses some of its punch, compared to a propositional assessment such as “(oh that was) amazing.”

In the following talk, John pursues further, possibly stronger, and more elaborate recipient responses. Mandelbaum (2013) notes that “producing further talk by reference to the story, or recycling elements of the story, ‘recompletes’ it, making available another opportunity for recipients to respond to it after initial lack of uptake” (p. 505). As one method of response pursuit, John makes explicit affective claims and attributions: I just like so mad I just did that (45), fI never thought of that I thought it was so funny.f (50–51), but I didn’t realize that he was so scare after that (53–54). Although the affect formulations are upgraded (so, just, never) and
produced in a spirited voice, they do not get more than quiet acknowledgments with *mm*, “a weak token that disaligns from current talk” (Gardner, 2001, p. 152). Even the animated reenactment of the IYA:: cry (47) and the following hilarious commentary I make like Bruce Lee and repeated assessment so funny, said in a smile voice, get a downgraded second assessment⁶ ‘that’s funny’ in response. After John recycles the story upshot yet another time he left me alone (56), the story recipient forgoes a response entirely. The recipient thus resists the teller’s invitation to join him in an extended display of celebratory stance. His resistance contrasts notably with his earlier affiliative alignments during the telling sequence. This observation raises the question of whether the recipient is inconsistent in his assessment of the story.

We do not think that this is the case. In fact, the superficial inconsistency evaporates as soon as we examine the participants’ actions not just as co-constitutive of their discourse identities as story recipient and storyteller but also of their situated identities (Zimmerman, 1998) as interviewer and interviewee in an autobiographical interview. In the preface sequence, we saw that the participants oriented to the articulation of their institutional and discourse identities by soliciting and searching for a story that was topically fitted to the interview agenda. In the telling sequence, the interviewer not only aligned himself as a story recipient but actively supported the progression of the story through affiliative stance marking. When the story has ended, it is the interviewer’s task to move the storytelling to completion so that he can proceed to the next item on the interview agenda.

Two techniques for closing down a conversational topic are not to contribute relevant substantive talk and limit responses to weak acknowledgment tokens that show no further engagement in the topic. After John describes the enduring psychological effect of his kung fu action on the American boy (he was so scare after that) and reformulates the behavioral outcome in the boy’s words (he left me alone), he relinquishes the turn without further talk, and the interviewer provides no response. With the ensuing silence, the participants collaboratively show that the telling has reached possible completion. The next turn (58) is taken by the interviewer, who no longer assumes the discourse identity of story recipient but moves the interview along by asking a question unrelated to the topic of the story. With this action, the interviewer treats the storytelling as completed.

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⁶ The second assessment is noticeably weaker than the first. It is composed of the same assessment term rather than a stronger item, the upgrading *so* is dropped, and the utterance is said quietly. Through these practices, the response conveys weak agreement, and as such is not especially affiliative.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TESOL

In this article we have sought to advance autobiographical research in TESOL by demonstrating an empirically grounded approach to storytelling as interaction. Drawing on the research tradition on storytelling in conversation analysis, we examined the semiotic resources and interactional practices through which storytellers and story recipients launch, produce, and end the telling of a cohesive story that furthers the purpose of the autobiographic interview. By following closely the participants’ coordinated actions as they unfold in time, we traced how the parties accomplish storytelling as an intelligible and meaningful activity through sequence organization and turn design.

Through their interactional work, the participants construct identities at different levels of social organization: the situated identities of interviewer and interviewee, the discourse identities of storyteller and story recipient, and the situation-transcendent (“transportable”) identities (Zimmerman, 1998) of immigrant, nonnative speaker, and “Asian” man. With a range of categorization practices, the teller’s incumbencies in these macrosocial categories are made relevant for the characters in the story world and the participants in the storytelling. The teller, and to some extent the recipient, also makes epistemic and affective stances visible through descriptions, performance, and formulations, drawing on such semiotic resources as embodied action, prosody, laughter, lexical and grammatical selections, and represented talk. These discursive practices enable participants to represent the social context and the psychological context of their talk as matters that concern them, first and foremost, but that at the same time become available to the analyst as overhearer.

Research on multilingual speakers’ life histories often emphasizes the need to give voice to the participants. The autobiographical interview offers an organizational format to achieve this goal. But giving participants the structural opportunity to “tell their story” does not answer the critical question why we, as overhearing researchers, hear the story as we do, nor what the interviewer’s hand is in shaping—not to say coauthoring—the participant’s voice (for a recent critique of voice in qualitative research, see Jackson & Mazzei, 2009). As our sample analysis illustrates, the conceptual and methodological resources of conversation analysis, membership categorization analysis, and occasioned semantics enable TESOL researchers to give analytic attention to the discursive practices through which voice is co-produced.

The interactional methods through which the participants in the analyzed data excerpt accomplish storytelling are generic, that is, the
practices are available to all interactionally competent speakers. At the same time, John’s story is quite distinctive in that it straddles story genres, starting as a complaint story and shifting to an amusing deceit story. Its concise and effective telling shows John as a highly accomplished teller. This observation invites us to briefly extend the discussion from research methodology to multilingual development and educational practice. Earlier in this article we referred to Pavlenko’s (2006) proposal that language educators need to recognize and support multilingual speakers’ narrative competence. In conversation-analytic perspective, storytelling competence is integral to participants’ interactional competencies, the competencies through which participants make sense of each other’s talk and produce talk in intelligible ways. An emerging line of research examines multilingual speakers’ storytelling practices, how such competencies develop over time, and how they can be enhanced through pedagogic intervention. For example, Hellermann (2008) documents how novice L2 speakers’ participation in storytellings developed in peer activities in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms over time. Lee and Hellermann (2014) show how students in an ESL setting accomplished story-prefacing and how students in an English as a foreign language (EFL) setting managed topic shifts as their linguistic resources expanded. Holmes and Marra (2011) describe how migrants used narratives in workplace settings with varying success and identified entry points for pedagogic support. Ko, Schallert, and Walters (2003) examined the impact of teacher intervention and teller and audience conduct on how ESL students’ repeated storytellings improved. In the first study that focuses on changes in the story recipient’s participation practices, Ishida (2011) traced how an L2 speaker of Japanese during study abroad in Japan aligned as a recipient to her host mother’s storytellings more effectively over time. Lastly, Wong and Waring (2010) propose a range of applications of conversation-analytic research on storytelling to pedagogical practice in EFL and ESL settings.

In comparison to the large TESOL literature on narratives in qualitative research interviews, the literature on storytelling as an interactional competence is very small, but the examined storytelling contexts range from ESL and EFL classrooms to ordinary conversation in the home and in the workplace. As conversation-analytic research on storytelling in a wide range of settings documents, storytellers show sensitivity in their storytelling practices to the story recipient and to the activity that occasions the storytelling, and for which the telling has consequences. When we consider that storytellings are inescapably recipient designed and context sensitive, the dominance of qualitative research interviews as a site for storytelling in TESOL becomes problematic. Surely, TESOL and applied linguistics more broadly share other social sciences’
pennant for the qualitative interview as the research method of choice when the investigative interest centers on participants’ stories as packages of experience and knowledge. But people tell stories anywhere in social life. The interactional circumstances change from occasion to occasion, and so do the manners of the telling and what the participants achieve through it. TESOL research on storytelling will gain considerable further strength if it engages more rigorously with narrative production and reception in qualitative interviews while expanding the scope of storytelling research to include ordinary conversation and a wider range of institutional settings. By representing the diversity of language experience across all arenas of social life, research on storytelling in TESOL will advance fuller appreciation and understanding of storytelling as a central human activity.

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REFERENCES


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APPENDIX

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS (BASED ON JEFFERSON, 2004)

[ ] Point of overlap onset
= No break or gap in speech (latched speech), or continuation of the same
turn by the same speaker even though the turn is broken up in the
transcript
(0.5) Silence measured in tenths of seconds
( ) A brief pause of about one tenth of a second
: Prolongation of the immediately prior sound; the longer the colon row,
the longer the prolongation
↑ A shift into especially high pitch in the next sound
· Falling intonation
? Rising intonation
, Slightly rising/continuing intonation
WORD Especially loud sounds compared to the surrounding talk
"word" Especially quiet sounds compared to the surrounding talk
£word£ Produced with “smile” voice
word Emphasized segment
(word) Transcriber’s best guess of the words or speaker
word- A cut-off sound
>word< Increased speed compared to the surrounding talk
.hh Audible inbreath
(h) Plosiveness, often associated with laughter, crying, breathlessness, etc.
((description)) Transcriber’s description
→ Right-pointing arrow indicates a line of special interest