

Positioning Analysis and Small Stories of English Language and Employability

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There has been a surge of interest in the narrative construction of identities in social research. Much of this research focuses on interview narratives or “big stories” that are produced by engaging in reflection, therefore termed “Sunday performances”. However, identity is an ongoing performance constructed in moment-to-moment interactions or “small stories”. Drawing on Bamberg’s Narrative Positioning Analysis, this study examines construction of identities in a small story produced within a research interview conducted by the researcher with an English-medium undergraduate student as part of a larger research project. In the small story under analysis, the student voices her concerns and fears about the difficulty of accessing opportunities for internship, which is a compulsory requirement for completion of the degree programme, and by employing positioning analysis, this paper shows how an individual’s personal problems are situated within wider social processes. It illustrates that identities constructed in the local level of interaction are linked to ideologies and wider discourses about English language and employability, and provides insights into processes that are implicated in the experiences of undergraduate students with low English proficiency. This paper also shows how interlocutors align with and also counter these ideologies and wider discourses. Findings suggest that interpretation of interlocutors’ positioning should be based on close analysis of discourse at the level of local interaction as well as understanding of larger discourses underlying unequal relations of power. This study contributes to the growing field of narrative research that occupies a middle ground between the approaches that are exclusively focused on the local interaction and those on macro social processes in understanding identity construction and negotiation.

Keywords: Narrative; Small stories; Identity; Positioning analysis; English language learning

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