

Narrative Self-Healing: Analysis of the Benefits of an Integrated Listening, Reading, and Writing Course for Chinese Colleges

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Abstract: This study is based on postmodern narrative therapy. The action research approach was adopted to explore the self-healing experience and the reflections of teaching and learning in an integrated listening, reading, and writing course for Chinese colleges. The objectives of this study were as follows: (1) to assist university students in narrative self-healing through this course; (2) to explore the reflections and insights of this teaching action research. This study was conducted at National Dong Hwa University (Taiwan, China) with its faculty members, research assistants, and 330 college students. The teaching plan was implemented in six classes over four semesters. This study found that human beings have the ability to heal themselves and that an integrated course covering reading narratives, listening to narratives, and writing trauma narratives can help college students heal themselves.

Keywords: Chinese college; Action research; Trauma writing; Narrative therapy; Teaching reform

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1. Introduction

The essence of Chinese college education is to help students learn to understand life, human nature, and the complex world within themselves through literature and ancient classics ^[1]. Such education also helps students develop their expertise in their respective fields through language education and enlightens them on how Chinese language courses can help them in their future ^[2]. The researcher advocates that a language should be spoken and used and that reading and writing should be acquired on the premise of being able to speak and use. Writing, in this study, refers to writing and narrative. Narrative refers to meaningful writing in which the writer's understanding, interpretation, and reflections are embedded in the text. Previous studies have found that Chinese college education is mainly based on cognitive learning, but there is less integrated teaching based on the narrative therapy theory.

National Dong Hwa University (Taiwan, China) actively promotes life education and uses the concepts of human and oneself, human and other, human and society, and human and nature in life education, together with practice, as the central axis of its Chinese college education curriculum. Practice refers to personal life history writing and creative writing. Reading texts allows one to review their life experiences, search for essential fragments that have been forgotten, and reconceptualize oneself. Therefore, this study

attempted to flip Chinese college education and used autobiographical writing as an innovative teaching practice to help students understand why they learn and write, thus enabling students to understand how language courses can help them.

The objectives of this study were as follows: (1) to assist college students in narrative self-healing through an integrated listening, reading, and writing course; (2) to explore the insights and reflections of this teaching action research on the integration of listening, reading, and writing.

Two questions were to be answered in this study.

- (1) Does the integrated listening, reading, and writing course help college students' narrative of self-healing?
- (2) What are the researcher's reflections and implications of the integrated listening, reading, and writing course?

2. Theoretical basis

Narrative therapy is a psychotherapeutic theory and practice based on postmodern narrative thinking, where the deconstruction and development of the narrative is the basis for psychotherapy. Narrative therapy emphasizes understanding how people narrate their knowledge; it is also a discipline that focuses on understanding how people describe their knowledge^[3], which looks at how problems affect people, and how they can use their long-standing issues to allow the creative use of language and storytelling to flourish. Why do people narrate? Clandinin and Connelly responded to that by saying, "Because of experience^[4]." Experience allows us to understand "why we say what we say." John Dewey argued that people and society coexist and that people are individuals and must be understood as individuals; however, they cannot be seen as individuals alone, as people are always in relationships and social situations, and experience makes people more aware of life in educational settings.

Therefore, this study is based on the postmodern narrative therapy theory of psychology, which beliefs in the ability of human beings to heal themselves. This therapy was applied to the teaching practice of the integrated listening, reading, and writing course at a Chinese college. Using anti-school bullying as a mediator, we attempted to make connections between reading, listening, and writing to the practice of narrative self-healing.

3. Research method

This study adopted the action research approach, and the teaching plan was implemented in 6 classes over four semesters for 330 college students. At the end of each semester, a self-compiled "Course Study Self-Awareness Scale" was used, comprising of 1 question on the theme unit "Interest Ranking List"; 5 questions in a semi-structured questionnaire; and 10–12 questions using a five-point Likert scale. Qualitative and quantitative research data were collected simultaneously.

3.1. Research participants

This study involved the "Chinese Proficiency and Conservation" course at National Dong Hwa University (Taiwan, China). The teachers, teaching assistants (TA), and 330 college students were included as research participants. The action research was consciously planned, and the course and teaching plan were explained by the researcher in the first week. The TA and the entire class were invited to participate in this study and asked to sign the "Students' Participation in Research and Parents' Informed Consent Form"; however, those who had reached the age of 20 were allowed to sign following informed consent.

3.2. Course implementation

Course: "Chinese Proficiency and Conservation"; theme unit: "Childhood Memories"; introductory article: Yu-Hsiang Hao Hot Springs Wash Our Grief Away – Reminiscence of Lost Water and Space – Prologue

^[5]; course introduction: in-depth exploration from self-portrait to trauma writing; course objective: trauma writing of self-narrative healing; practice: autobiography writing.

- (1) The researcher first explained the course objective. Then, the students read Yu-Hsiang Hao's self-narrative autobiography. The story began with the life of a 6-year-old girl, and the students were guided to ponder about the meaning of the interweaving of time and space as well as how the space shapes the image and meaning of home. At this point of time, the expressions seen on most students seemed to show that they had fallen into the artistic conception formed by the writing. The students attempted to understand the text according to their own life experiences and applied their own unique interpretation of the text in their hearts and minds.
- (2) The researcher advocated anti-school bullying by first echoing the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and promoting friendly schools. The researcher linked the text narratives by narrating the life story of the 6-year-old girl – a school-bullying case. During the teacher's self-narrative, most students had different facial expressions triggered by their childhood memories, which resonated with reading and listening to the narrative. Students who were more emotional already had red teary eyes at this point of time and casted sympathetic looks at the teacher. Since the teacher is the researcher ^[6], while teaching perceptually, the teacher should still maintain the rationality of a researcher and attempt to prevent emotional breakdown among students. As the story must end with positivity, there was a 10-minute break to ease the students' emotions caused by the self-narrative.
- (3) The students were asked to conceive and prepare their trauma writing after the break. Each student was handed a piece of paper, specially designed by the teacher. It was a warm light yellow loose-leaf paper with three cute bears printed on it, as it was intended to soothe the mood ripples of the students. At the same time, the researcher also hoped that the students could narrate in a quiet, peaceful, soothing, and uninterrupted environment.

Several instructions were given to the students for trauma writing.

- (A) This is a postmodern narrative therapy in psychology.
 - (B) It is intended to heal the traumatized mind through writing and speaking, wherein the reader should only read, whereas the listener should listen without adding any personal opinions or views.
 - (C) You can refer to the writer's writing.
 - (D) You can rewrite the story.
 - (E) It does not matter if you are not ready at the moment.
 - (F) You can write about any personal trauma at your will.
 - (G) You can write anything or whatever you wish to express at the moment.
 - (H) There is no restriction to the writing style; it can be a prose or novel.
- (4) The students fully understood that the environment for trauma writing was safe and quiet, in which their writing would only be read by the teacher. The teacher also repeatedly reminded the students that if they did not want to engage in the activity at the moment, they would not be forced to do it. Moreover, they were given the freedom to write anything they wanted even things that made them feel happy or pleased, not necessarily pertaining to trauma. They could also write just to express their inner feelings. Additionally, the writing style was not restricted.

3.3. Action-reflection process

The researcher practiced the "teacher being a researcher" teaching innovation, and the teaching practice of each course was a continuous reflection, expressing the spiral of self-reflexive cycles in the action-reflection process ^[7,8], as shown in **Figure 1**.

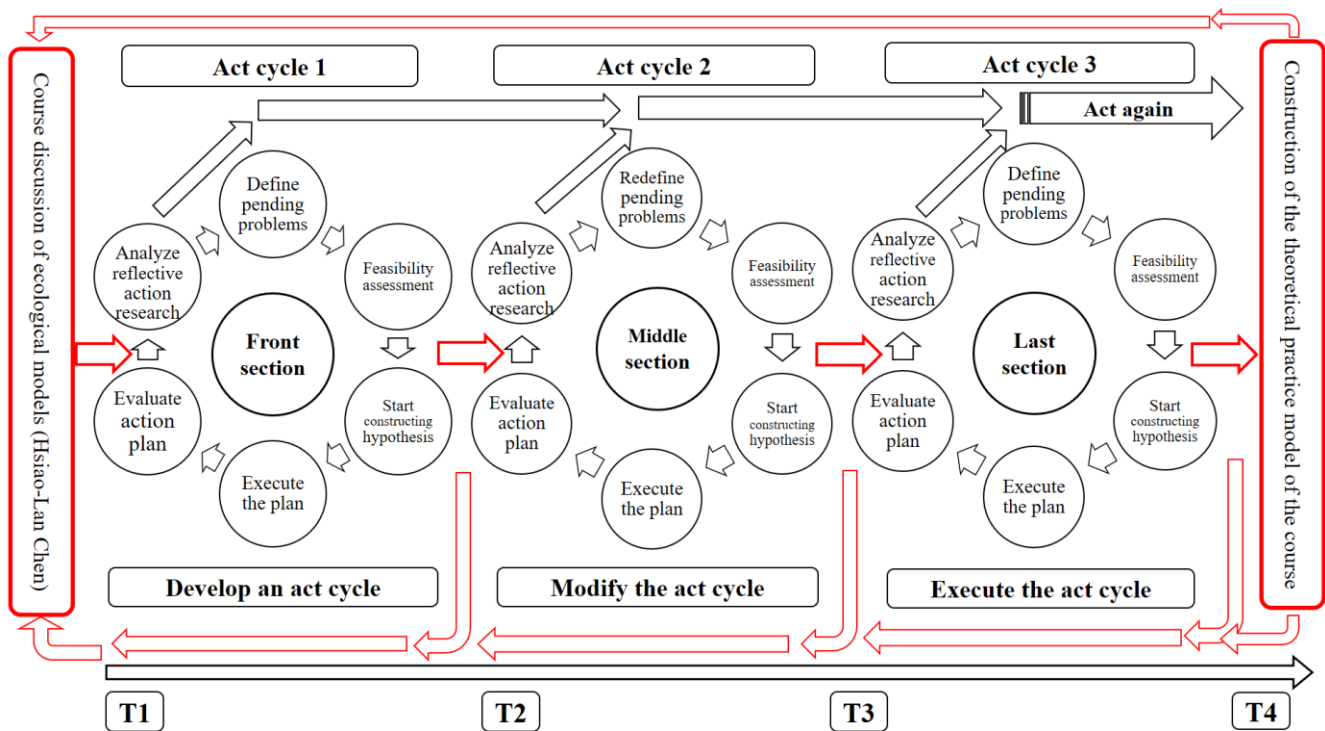


Figure 1. Action-reflection process [8]

Action research is not just a study of teaching as an action; simply put, it must include the practices of teaching and learning, as well as the action-reflection of the teacher. The researcher practiced teaching innovation based on the action-reflection process (Figure 1), which has six steps (defining the problem to be solved, assessing feasibility, constructing hypotheses, executing the plan, evaluating the action plan, and analyzing and reflecting on the research action), in order to obtain the results of the teaching practice and use them as a reference for revising the following action research.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Guided narratives for text reading

At the USR Intercollegiate Conference, Psychologist L, a professor from the Department of Counseling and Clinical Studies at National Dong Hwa University, mentioned that language is essential, and many people are unable to write about their trauma in words. Those seen in clinical settings tend to have trouble speaking and writing about their traumatic experiences. This statement inspired the researcher and led to this teaching plan's design.

By writing about trauma, writers reveal themselves and heal themselves. The researcher understood that writers could narrate and heal themselves through self-narrative. The selected text is a suitable text for reading. The "Prologue" can provide readers with a basic understanding of the selected text and the writer's intention and life management.

Literature reflects the reality of life, literature soothes the heart, and literary education has a specific function in educating and healing the heart. Therefore, people can read literature to heal their minds and bodies. From another perspective, when the reader becomes the narrator or writer to narrate or write their own life story, the whole narrative or story-telling journey is already a journey of self-healing for the narrator or writer.

4.2. Inspiring narratives of life story

Postmodern narrative therapy in psychology is based on narrative research, which refers to the methodology used by researchers to allow participants to share their life experiences in a story-like manner to understand how different individuals experience the world around them^[4]. The teacher's self-narrative was used as an inspirational guide for the life story, and the students were guided to read the textual narrative and listen to the self-narrative in order to enter the world of the self calmly and soothingly, construct a dialogue with their childhood selves, as well as to prepare for the entire narrative self-healing process.

As a teacher, the researcher narrated her childhood life story, which was based on the theme "Childhood Memories" and advocated against school bullying. Trauma is the path to awakening, and when we dissolve our trauma, we discover the missing parts of ourselves, which make us feel whole and complete^[9].

The teacher's self-narrative and the writer's protagonist are both six-year-old girls. The writer dissolved her trauma through textual narrative, whereas the teacher who self-narrated her life story allowed her trauma to gradually dissolve itself through action research, thus helping herself and her students to dissolve their trauma and reconstruct the notions of "I am I" and "I am here." According to Isak Dinesen, "If we turn grief into a story, then all grief is bearable."

4.3. Trauma writing of self-healing narratives

After the guided text reading narrative and the teacher's inspiring narrative of her life story, she invited her students to write about their traumas. The process of guidance, inspiration, and writing of the narrative text was intended to heal their wounds, dissolve past traumas, further understand themselves, and see themselves again.

The process of writing about trauma involves self-disclosure, which requires a lot of courage. The method of narrating or writing involves self-pulling and self-reflection, which would help the narrator or writer gradually move toward positive mental activity. When reading the students' writings, the teacher felt the brokenness and resilience of many lives, their bravery, and their trust in the teacher. Of all assignments, trauma writing is the most serious yet touching and heartfelt assignment for the students. However, the contents cannot be disclosed due to the ethics of academic research and commitment to the students.

In the PowerPoint presentation, the teacher described the action plan and asserted that autobiographical trauma writing could rewrite life stories and deconstruct life traumas. A person's state of mind will flow from time to time, and students may not be able to perceive their true feelings at that moment. Therefore, the action plan was intended to inspire and guide students to have more courage in the face of trauma in the future and mobilize their ability of narrative self-healing, becoming their spiritual therapists.

5. Conclusion and reflection

5.1. Conclusion

The integrated listening, reading, and writing course comprised of reading the writer's self-narrative text, listening to the teacher's self-narrative, and writing trauma-related life stories. The researcher thus constructed a triple narrative text from the action plan. The triple narrative text referred to a course design that integrated listening, reading, and writing, including reading narratives, listening to narratives, and writing trauma narratives. The triple narrative text is the researcher's innovative approach to teaching and learning, as well as a flipped classroom for Chinese college education.

The narrative texts were intertwined with and inspired by each other, guiding students to write their life stories. The researcher intended to exchange stories for stories, trading her self-narrative for the students' trauma writing and leading them on a narrative self-healing journey. In this action plan, students were asked to fill out the "Course Study Self-Awareness Scale" at the end of each of the four semesters, in which the "Childhood Memories" unit ranked 4th, 2nd, 2nd, and 5th, respectively, in the Interest Ranking List. The

researcher also considered the qualitative feedback from the students' learning. Overall, it seems that the action plan of the integrated listening, reading, and writing course has indeed achieved the learning objectives of narrative self-healing.

However, it is important to re-emphasize that narrative therapy is about empathizing with how people talk about themselves, including both spoken and non-spoken disclosures. Therefore, the results of this study should not be viewed entirely in quantitative terms. We are most grateful to the 330 college students in this study for agreeing to participate and for their selfless contribution of their life stories, in which the narratives and stories of the participants have made a significant contribution to this study.

5.2. Reflection

Based on the discussion above, the reflection process of this study was based on the action-reflection process (**Figure 1**), in which the researcher began by identifying and defining the problem to be solved. The researcher then assessed the feasibility of the teaching plan, conducted hypothesizing and planning, and implemented the plan while observing and evaluating the plan. Finally, the feedback from students' learning self-awareness was summarized to analyze and reflect on the entire action plan. The completion of Action Cycle 1 follows the development of the action plan; Action Cycle 2 follows after the revision of the action plan, followed by the initiation of Action Cycle 3. The spiral of self-reflexive cycles continues from T1 to T4, thus constructing a theoretical practice model.

The researcher applied narrative therapy to herself and a Chinese college education through the action plan of the integrated listening, reading, and writing course. Narrative therapy is similar to the "Hero's Journey" proposed by the mythologist Campbell in three acts: departure → enlightenment → return. The researcher echoed the basic narrative pattern of Campbell's "Hero's Journey," where a hero ventured from the ordinary world into an extraordinary world, gained mythical powers, achieved a decisive victory, and returned from this mysterious adventure with certain powers, and then, shared the benefits with his fellow man^[10]. Campbell's "Hero's Journey" and its transformation process correspond to the researcher's action plan of the integrated listening, reading, and writing course.

Self-narrative requires self-disclosure; hence, it also requires courage; completing a self-narrative is like completing a "Hero's Journey," meaning a journey of self-completion that empowers one to face the many challenges of the real world after enhancing one's own capacity.

The most significant limitation of this study is that it was not possible to use scientific data to empirically prove the real benefits of narrative self-healing; instead, only the feelings of students were known either directly or indirectly from their sharing of self-awareness and fragments, creating a one-sided learning feedback. The contents of the students' trauma writings cannot be made public without their consent. Although a great deal of content analysis cannot be cross-checked, which is a limitation, it is a protection measure for each participant in this study.

Some of the suggestions include the moderate addition of positive energy during the action plan, which should also be flexibly adjusted depending on the situation in the field so as to avoid excessive pessimism or gloominess in the atmosphere or an emotional breakdown among the research participants. After all, protecting the research participants is the responsibility and obligation that should and must be fulfilled by the researcher, as well as a performance guarantee to the research participants.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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