

Representation of Voice: A Narrative Inquiry of Indonesian EFL Learners in Poetry Writing Experience

Kadek Sonia Piscayanti¹, Januarius Mujiyanto¹, Issy Yuliasri¹ & Puji Astuti¹

¹ Language Education Postgraduate Programs (Doctoral), Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

Correspondence: Kadek Sonia Piscayanti, Language Education, Postgraduate Programs (Doctoral), Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Sekaran Gunung Pati Semarang 50229, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia. E-mail: piscayantisonia@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study was conducted to identify the students' voices and the challenges in writing the poetry from the narratives behind their poetry writing. Since the primary source of the study data was the students' narratives, this study was conducted by following the narrative inquiry method. Fifteen EFL learners who took poetry classes were taken as the study samples. The study data were collected from the students' poems, journals, and interviews. Those three different methods were applied to ensure the data validity and reliability. To identify the voices, the researchers interpreted the voices from the dictions that the students chose to write the poetry. Then, the researchers confirmed the voice's interpretation by comparing them with the students' journals and interview results. To identify the challenges, the researchers qualitatively analyzed the students' journals and the interview results using cross-case analysis. This study found that behind the narratives of learners, there are voices that have been unheard for years, the unspoken words that are kept for themselves. The voices are trauma, anxiety, and hope. The trauma includes the trauma of paranoia, bullying, and past life, and the anxiety includes anxiety of the past, present, and future. Meanwhile, the voice of hope covers optimism and enthusiasm. Besides, this study also identified that the students found some challenges in writing poetry, and they overcame those challenges by practicing more, reading more literature, finding new words, accepting more information, being more flexible, and being open to new contexts.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, voice, EFL poetry, writing experience, strategies

1. Introduction

Narrative is the story of human experience. Narrative inquiry is the way we make sense of the world through story. Polkinghorne (2005) stated that the subject of stories is human action. Here, stories are concerned with the efforts or actions taken to solve a problem, face life challenges, and overcome them. Shacklock and Thorp (2005) stated that narrative inquiry concerns the production, interpretation, and representation of the story of lived experience. Narrative inquiry was used to understand the stories and journeys of life. According to Savin-Baden and Niekerk, narrative inquiry is the approach to using stories as data. Using stories as data enables the researcher to investigate the feelings and emotions behind the story more deeply. Bignold and Su (2013) revealed that narrative inquiry is effective as a means of capturing multiple identities of research participants. The story behind narrative inquiry presents the real individuals' perspectives of the world. The voice they bring through the story is the meaning they construct themselves. They share their perspectives of the world through the stories. This is why their multiple identities are revealed through narrative inquiry.

According to Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021), narrative inquiry is significant as a methodology because it provides the presence of a human dimension. Behind every human dimension is a voice of identity built from experience. From the experience itself grows the human beings' identity through the choices of action she/he makes, from the unique perspective of the participants from which they grow as human beings. The voice is an individual expression from which their perspective of the world is heard. Voice is the meaning that resides in the individual and enables the individual to participate in the community (Britzman, in press), cited by Connely and Clandinin (1990). However, specifically in this context, voice is considered a 'growing' voice, a process of reflecting on the experience by making a new perspective on life. This goes along with the conception of voice presented by Snaza and Lensmire (2006), which states that voice is moving and changing, a voice of 'becoming.' This involves appropriating self and culture, where the self emerges through a new perspective of the world. They construct the meaning from their own perspectives, enriching the older perspectives.

In the context of language learning, it is very important that language learning happens where language learners themselves construct meaning. Hanauer (2012) proposed that learning a new language should be made meaningful. This would be achieved by giving the EFL learners the practice of expressing their voices and feelings through expressive writing. Poetry is the medium from which they can express their feelings and words. Chamchatsri (2013) argued that poetry writing is one of the most effective pedagogical approaches to literacy learning. In terms of EFL learning, poetry could be made best at facilitating their inner stories, the voice they represent for themselves. Hanauer (2012) earlier found that literacy learning could be more meaningful by hearing the life experiences of EFL learners through poetry writing. The poetry writing experience will stimulate their past stories, present, and future issues. It has many elements, including

lines, stanzas, rhyme, rhythm, and figurative language. Through its elements, poetry becomes the medium of voice. Byrne (2015) stated that poetry carries the deepest voice from which narrative is condensed and compacted. Each of the metaphors in poetry brings the voice of the poets: the fear, the challenge, the acceptance of life. Poetry is challenging since it needs mindfulness, sensitivity, and creativity all at once.

Research by Iida (2016) found that learners' identity is revealed through poetry writing. He proposed that poetry writing is a meaningful literacy program in the context of language learning. This goes along with the research finding by Shapiro (2001), who found that poetry and mindfulness are the perfect combinations of language learning since they create openness, peacefulness, productivity, and positivity. In Indonesian contexts, EFL poetry writing has been researched by some researchers, such as Fihtriani (2021) and Piscayanti (2021), who confirmed that EFL poetry writing is significant in raising and stimulating creativity and productivity. However, those researches do not reveal how the voices are built behind poetry writing and how the strategies were used to overcome the challenges of the process. Through the narrative, the voice of the poet is understood. By making meaning and sense, there is a better way to understand someone's life; in this context, it is the language learner's learning process. There is a way to understand language learning better. This present research explores the voices behind poetry writing and how the challenges in writing were solved. This research paid attention to two things: (1) What are the voices being represented in the EFL poetry using the narrative inquiry method and (2) How has narrative inquiry been employed to explore the challenge of EFL poetry writing?

This study is expected to have theoretical, methodological, and practical significance. In terms of theoretical significance, this study will show how EFL poetry research could be enriched by the research findings about the 'life-changing' voice of the poets, such as the trauma of paranoia, the trauma of bullying, trauma of past life, anxiety and hope. EFL poetry writing is a humanized way of learning a new language because they use their creativity and sensitivity in writing. Together with narrative inquiry, poetry writing becomes more personal and mindful since the voice is explored and examined deeply. From a methodological perspective, this study strengthens the methods of EFL poetry, learning that poetry could stimulate the narratives of the self, the process within the self that could speak louder than ever, and the language that is invented and created during the process. The presence of narrative inquiry could empower the process of acknowledging the self, overcoming the challenges, and creating new strategies in writing. In practical significance, this study is expected to give a richer and more real perspective on EFL poetry writing since the learners should create their own words, invent their metaphors, and make meaning of them.

2. Method

The method used here was a narrative inquiry to make meaning of the learners' experience. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative approach that delivers personal experience and present them narratively. It is the study of experience interpreted by and through stories of practice (Clarke, 2023). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated that narrative inquiry studies how humans experience the world. Moen (2006) supported this by defining narrative inquiry as focusing on the meanings and values individuals attach to their experience through the stories they share. The participants deliver their stories, recorded, analyzed, and cross-case analyzed; then, they are described, compared, and related (Bazeley, 2009) to gain a comprehensive analysis. The analysis was implemented to minimize the researcher's bias in interpreting the research result.

2.1 The Participants

The participants of this study were fifteen EFL learners from an Indonesian university who took poetry classes and wrote poetry as their assignment. The participants were selected from 15 EFL learners who joined poetry classes in the English Language Education program at an Indonesian university. The study samples were selected purposely using the saturated sampling technique, meaning that all fifteen students in the poetry class were taken as the study samples (Fraenkel et al., 2012). All names here are pseudonyms.

2.2 Research Instrument and Data Analysis

The study data were collected from the students' poems, journals, and interviews. Those three different methods were applied to ensure the data validity and reliability. In other words, the researcher used triangulation, i.e., applying different techniques to collect the same data to ensure the validity and reliability of the data (Miles et al., 2014). Thus, the research instruments used to collect the data were poetry, a mindful journal, and an interview guide. EFL poetry was the product of the poetry writing process. Mindful journals were the journals in which EFL learners kept stories and experiences behind their poetry, and the interview guide was the questions that guided the learners on how they wrote their poetry and how they overcame the challenges of poetry writing. Since, in this study, the researchers used semi-structured interviews, the researchers only listed the main questions in the interview guide, and detailed questions were asked by the researchers based on the answers of the study samples (Fraenkel et al., 2012). After the data had been gathered, the data were transcribed and interpreted based on the stories and experiences the participants wrote and shared. To identify the voices, the researchers interpreted the voices from the dictions that the students chose to write the poems. Then, the researchers confirmed the voice's interpretation by comparing them with the students' journals and interview results. To identify the challenges, the researchers qualitatively analyzed the students' journals and the interview results using cross-case analysis (Creswell, 1998) to find some similarities and differences among the narration and relate them with related literature. The narratives are written based on the theme found in the narration, such as similarities in the narration, and link them with related literature.

3. Results

3.1 The Voice from the Narrative Behind Poetry Writing

The first findings were answering the first research question. There were three voices in this first research question. First is the voice of trauma, which was classified as trauma of paranoia, trauma of bully, and trauma of past life. Second is the voice of anxiety, loneliness, and nothingness. Third is the voice of hope, optimism, and brighter life.

3.1.1 Voices of Trauma

3.1.1.1 Trauma of Paranoia

The trauma of paranoia is the source of pain in one of the participants' lives, Adi. He tried to get rid of the trauma. However, he can not escape unless he changes his perspective.

Trauma acceptance takes a long time to happen. Before acceptance happens, a person should be open to himself/herself. Openness is being honest, true, and humble about self. Poetry allows openness to happen since it expresses feelings and emotions that are unspoken and buried for years. The trauma can be felt and defined through Adi's poetry as follows.

Nightmare

I close my eyes

Only before the moment, I realise

That the old song brings grief cliché

I close my eyes

And here I kneel before my demon

Chained, never be like a free man

I close my eyes

Only to see my vision blurred by thousand deaths

Baffling and questioning my last breath

Based on the poetry and mindful journal he wrote, Adi had a paranoia about the clown. This paranoia has brought him the trauma of seeing people behind a mask as if they are clowns. The paranoia has made him feel unfree, chained, and never be free. The only thing he could do was close his eyes, imagining that there would be no more nightmares, although he never felt free. His insecurity could be overcome when he wrote poetry because when he wrote poetry, he could write his voice from the inside and make a choice by making peace with himself. By writing poetry, he could face himself, reflect on himself, and finally, accept that he must slowly change the paranoia by adapting new perspectives and welcoming new versions of self. The voice he wanted to share was the insecurity that finally became the way he could recover his newer version. As he stated,

Well, I say it's different... This "thing" is nothing but a creature that carries disturbing and awful horrors in its genes. Since the first time I saw it, I couldn't handle anything but dropping sweat and a fainting sensation.

Well, that's not the end... Even when that "thing" was gone, I had still to suffer with... PARANOIA Let me introduce you to Clown."

Clown may be entertaining and amusing to some people, but to Adi, this could make him suffer. However, through poetry writing, he slowly embraced himself and accepted himself. He is open about this paranoia and could make peace within himself.

Apart from Adi, there was also Wahyu, who had trauma from the bully. Wahyu was bullied at school, and she turned out to be vulnerable.

3.1.1.2 Trauma of Bully

Wahyu had a bad memory of being bullied. She was a victim of physical bullying. She could not cope with her feelings in the past, which brought her insecurity about her part of her body. Years after their childhood passed, she lived with the memory of the bully that she could hardly erase from her mind. Poetry enables her to make this voice represented and heard. She could finally face herself with more bravery. She tries to accept herself with her condition but makes herself more confident with her body, as she is aware of having a sweet smile. Her self-acceptance made her happier.

If only

If only I could turn back time,

I think I would be living in a clover.

If only I could redo that scene,

I think I would stand taller.

She realized that the moment of self-acceptance could change how she perceived the world. As she stated,

I once tried to remove the birthmark by applying natural ingredients known to remove it, but unfortunately, it got bigger. Anyway, now I am trying to just accept it. Along with that acceptance, I started to see that my worth is not specified on my birthmark, and I also realized that my smile is quite sweet, lol.

From this statement, we can feel her voice, that she heals herself from the bully. Wahyu was open about herself, allowing herself to be more grateful. She realizes she is worthy and her birthmark cannot stop her from being herself. By being free as herself, she could enjoy life more relaxed and calmly.

3.1.1.3 Trauma of Past Life

The next voice is the trauma of past life. Joan is a student from NTT. She is the one who feels lonely, under pressure, and unconfident. This is her poetry.

My Gloomy life

I'm not myself

I'm always ignored by anyone

Like a stone thrown to the bottom of the sea

Yeah I'm useless

I want to give up seeing this world

but he is always beside me and supports my every step to live

Am I a lucky kid to have power like you?

Yes, He is God

God, who always lightens my gloomy life

forgive me God

I will come back to you

Joan is an EFL learner from East Nusa Tenggara who moved to Bali to study. The first time, she felt very enthusiastic and excited about having a new chapter in her life. However, from time to time, the feeling changed, and she felt unwanted and lonely, as she felt nobody cared about her. Especially when she felt even her parents did not care about her. Her loneliness is so complex that she starts to get depressed. University life was not the life she wanted, and she became too lazy and unmotivated to study. Until then, she realized something was wrong and needed to be changed. She walked to the church and met her pastor, who advised her not to leave God. Finally, she was convinced that she must get closer to God and that God will always be with her. This made her feel alive again. And life started in the new chapter. From a gloomy life to an enlightened life. Her poetry clearly describes her gloomy life, as the title suggests. She could represent her voice through poetry, as she could embrace her life back after the struggle. Her openness allows her to embrace her life in ways she could never imagine. Her spirituality also strengthens after realizing her relationship with God is better. As she stated as follows,

I am an overseas child from NTT and came to Bali to study; at the beginning of college, I was excited, but in the future, I felt very lonely, and no one cared about me. I don't know why my thoughts are like that, but a feeling of loneliness always surrounds me. This happens because when I need happiness and support, my parents are not always there for me, so I think about not wanting to go to college and start being lazy by playing with phones and walking down the street. One day, I met someone in my church, namely the Pastor. He told me that I am not alone in this world; I have God who is always there to support me. I got excited again, prayed diligently, and finally, lived a good life.

By her narrative, we can understand that her enlightened life is one of the results of her reflection process. She feels that when her parents are not around, God is there. By having openness and a reflective side of self, language learners can be aware of their situations and wiser about their life choices.

3.1.2 Voices of Anxiety

Some of the poets bring the voice of anxiety, the feeling of being uncertain about life, about unexpected future, and unanticipated moments. Anxiety comes from some of the poets. Here are some of the voices of anxiety. This poetry is from Anastya.

Anastasya is a sensitive girl. Her memory of family brought her to anxiety about whether she had done enough for the loved ones. She felt anxiety about the past and now she still feels it and this could effect her future.

"Fall Down"

Dark

Not a single light enters my eyes

I can't see
Just cold
The wind blows my hair through every skin
This aisle is endless
I feel blue
Roses are no longer beautiful
Your beauty bleeds
I don't know where else I'm going
The ground I stepped on was like a rock
This road seems endless
Fall into the abyss of darkness
Don't fall
Free drift
No basis
I Feel Broken to pieces

From this poetry, it can be felt that the anxiety is still there. She could not feel free from the memory. This poetry represents the feeling of anxiety in the past, present, and affect her future. The feeling of being broken to pieces could bring her to low moments in life.

In the journal, she wrote as follows.

I think I could have made myself better then, but what I remember back is the loss of death, one of the things I hate and sadness when the person we love leaves us. I feel very sad remembering that; this is where the poetry comes from. I made the gong, which I did not finish on that day, but I could process it for a few days to complete it because when I remembered it, it was very sad for me.

This experience told us that she remembered about the loss of her loved one, and that she thought she could have made better in the past. She used the word 'gong' to symbolize surprise or gift for her loved one yet she did not complete it. She thought that if she could process it could be better for her.

The second poem is from Windi. Windi is an ambitious learner, he wanted everything to be as perfect as possible. However, sometimes he could not handle the pressure. The anxiety of the past, present, and future are felt. As he wrote,

Unhappy
It's just natural
Having a loaded burry task
Couldn't agree more with what's been in
Like everything looks arranged
Yet....
I have no clue to argue
Cause all has gone
Just a thing sticks around,
A sane mind.

In this poem, he was unsure about what happened. Because every clue was not there to guide or help, he had nothing to pursue because all had gone. He could have changed it, but he had no clue. What is left with him is just a sane mind. This represents that he wanted to solve everything with the only sane mind yet without clues.

3.1.3 Voice of Optimism

Some of the voices of optimism are coming from Emily, a learner from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). The followings are poetry from Emily, a voice of optimism and enthusiasm.

Manufui
How beautiful is your charm
The grass dances every time the wind blows

*The birds sing every day at dawn
 Waves of the sea
 The wind is blowing slowly
 Stand me on the beach
 Under the stretched sky
 Feel your beauty
 My village that I love
 Manufui my birthplace
 A thousand pleasures in it
 You are a gift from God
 I miss you....*

Manufui is a place in her homeland, the beach and the grass that beautify the site. Her village, her home, her dream about ideal home. There is a happiness, optimism and enthusiasm in the poetry. The praises about her home makes this poetry simple yet memorable and therefore it sparks the voice of optimism. We could feel the ambiance and the breeze through her poetry, the imagery that forms the voice of peace and hope.

This is her second poem.

My Diamond
*You are my sun in the darkness
 You are my smile in the sadness
 My love....
 If you knew
 My feelings were bumpy at that time
 I don't know the direction to walk
 I only cry
 Until my tears flood the earth
 How cruel life is
 But you came into my life
 And you heal everything*

In the context of the poetry, those poems represent the voice of optimism and hope for a better state of life. It can be seen from the words ‘beauty, gift, heal, life’. Those are the words of optimism. They are the symbol that life is in a positive state. ‘You heal everything’ is the statement of hope and optimism. Enthusiasm and hope can be felt also in the description of the baby such as ‘you are my sun in the darkness’, ‘you are my smile in the sadness’. In these simple lines, the feeling of hope can be felt.

3.2 Challenges and Strategies

The second finding of this research is the challenges and strategies EFL learners face. They felt that the challenges and strategies came at once. For Wahyu, the challenge in writing is finding the words that could represent her feelings. The exact word for the exact meaning of feeling is difficult to find. She knew the challenges were influential to the quality of the poetry. When she has no words to represent her voice, she must be mindful, practice, and read more. As she stated,

So, for me, the major challenge in writing poetry is finding the words that run together as a whole. I'm not quite good with words, and probably, my thoughts can not be easily put into words, so my strategy is to practice and read more.

As for Adi, the challenge in writing poetry was that a poet should take time wisely in writing poetry. Writing poetry can not be done in a rush. It should be written in a peaceful and mindful state. As he stated,

Wise man said. Do not rush things. Great things take time, and as a student, I believe I have served the deadlines that challenged me to write my poetry. So then I tried my best not to rush things, including this poetry, because I believe poetry is an art and should take time. Do not rush things.

Here, Adi wanted to say that timing is significant in writing, as he said he could not be rushed while writing. Poetry is an art that has to come with great minds and metaphors; therefore, it takes time. His strategy was to be mindful as he tried to read more, open to context, and more flexible as he found new words.

On the other hand, Joan has struggled with the process of writing since the depression she had become worse. She is struggling with

concentration and motivation to study. However, in a poetry class, Joan could control her emotions since there is a mindfulness session. Mindfulness can make peace, calmness, and relaxation. For her, the strategy to overcome this is to practice more with words in the mindful state, as she stated.

Mindfulness makes me more calm and relaxed, and I can write poetry better.

It is clear that despite the challenge, EFL learners always find ways or strategies to overcome the challenges. They try to solve their issues by making efforts that enable them to be more comfortable writing poetry. With the mindfulness process, being sensitive, having more perspectives, having flexibility and being in context makes the learner happier and calmer. In the state of peace and calm, poetry writing could happen more smoothly and meaningfully.

4. Discussion

From the findings above, in this context, EFL poetry writing and the narrative behind it is a way to express the voice of the EFL learners. They become open, sensitive, creative, and have new perspectives. In that sense, they can make their voice heard. According to Mills, poetry is the feeling of society by which the author's feelings are exposed and explored (Gustafson, 2005). Considering that view, poetry is the voice of society. Since it is a portrait of society's feelings, it represents society's real voice. According to Wittgenstein (1958) in his work Philosophical Investigation, "If you are seeing a thing, you are seeing identity too." In this context, poetry is identity because it carries the voice of the poet, the sun, which is reborn, the stories that have never been heard of.

Richardson (1997) stated that "the collective story gives voices to those who are silenced and marginalized and displays an individual story by narrating the experiences of the social category to which individuals belong." Voice is the heart of meaning inside every individual. Many things are formed in the context of voice, namely values, culture, interpretation, and perspective of the world. By EFL poetry and narratives, we understand that language learning happens with experience. Expressing feelings has made the experience meaningful and impactful for the learners as they 'experience' the language, not only 'memorize the language.'

According to Malcom Budd in Gibson (2015), "What matters in poetry is the imaginative experience you undergo in reading the poem, not merely the thoughts expressed by the words of the poem." It means that through poetry, we undergo experiences we never feel before, the sensation of new experience that shapes a new perspective of the world.

From the narrative explored in the findings, it can be connected that the voice they are presenting is born from openness, sensitivity, creativity, and new perspectives. By having openness and self-acceptance, language learners find it easier to be themselves, appreciate their own stories, and find their identity better. It goes with Carson (2006), who says mindfulness and self-acceptance are essential in learning. By having self-acceptance, language learners find it easier to be themselves, appreciate their own stories, and find their own identity better. The writing process involves mindfulness and has opened how the learners perceive themselves. It is also supported by Cotler (2017) in that mindfulness could make a better psychological state since it teaches emotional intelligence in deeper ways. It could stimulate the learners' openness, new perspectives, and context awareness and create a new art form.

In the context of strategies for overcoming challenges, some strategies are used in writing poetry, such as practicing more, reading more, being open to new ways of writing, renewing perspectives, being flexible to context, and being more mindful. Mindfulness is the key to gaining calm and peace of heart, therefore, writers must be alert and always mindful while writing. Skelly and Estrada-Chicon (2021) found that mindfulness is a coping strategy for EFL learning since it reduces stress and anxiety to maximize learning quality. Fallah (2019) found mindfulness could lower foreign language anxiety and maximize coping self-efficacy. This is a very good strategy in EFL poetry writing because it decreases the stress and the pressure while writing. It is also supported by Cotler (2017) in that mindfulness could make a better psychological state since it teaches emotional intelligence in deeper ways. Wang et al. (2017) stated that through mindfulness, awareness is stimulated; therefore, awakening happens. Without awareness, there is no awakening, without awakening, there is no learning process. Here, the learning process happens most truthfully. Language learning happens personally, contextually, and meaningfully.

5. Conclusion

From this research, it can be concluded that the voices of EFL learners are trauma of paranoia, trauma of bully, and trauma of past life. From these narratives, the EFL learners could write EFL poetry, which can be their voice of identity and their life choice that is growing and evolving. The challenges the EFL learners face are solved by their own strategy, such as being more mindful, open, and flexible. By acknowledging the narratives of the self, the challenges, and the strategies, EFL learners could be better at writing poetry.

This research needs to be developed to gain deeper insight into how poets' narrative drives them to write poetry and how poetry could be constructed as identity. Besides, deeper research could be done on a bigger scale and involve more participants; therefore, the results can give a bigger picture of the narratives of EFL learners in writing their poetry. It can also be followed by quantitative research to gain quantitative data for the study.

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Authors contributions

Kadek Sonia Piscayanti (Ph.D. candidate) was responsible for study design, data collection and analysis. Prof. Januarius Mujiyanto and Prof. Issy Yuliasri were responsible for drafting the manuscript and Dr. Puji was responsible to revise the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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