Stories as Data: Integrating Established Narrative Elicitation Practices into Field Linguistics Training

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.102000025

Received: 16 October 2026; Accepted: 21 October 2026; Published: 19 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Narrative elicitation is a vital method in documentary linguistics, providing connected discourse that complements direct grammatical elicitation while preserving oral traditions and cultural knowledge (Himmelmann, 1998, 2006; Woodbury, 2011). This paper examines the methodological value of narrative collection and demonstrates how it can be systematically integrated into field linguistics pedagogy (Bowern, 2015; Chelliah, 2001). Drawing on documentary fieldwork from Gaddi, Kullui, Chitkuli Kinnauri, and Spiti (Mehta, 2023, 2024), it illustrates how varied narrative genres and contextualized elicitation tasks generate comparable speech data across diverse grammatical systems (Dahl, 1985). The paper outlines the practical progression from audio capture and collaborative translation to time-aligned, multi-tier annotation and text-driven analysis. Translating these field practices into a structured pedagogical model, it presents a modular syllabus sequence accompanied by continuous assessment criteria, dynamic consent protocols, and archival standards (UNESCO, 2003). Ultimately, the paper shows how adding structured narrative modules to existing field methods coursework prepares students to connect grammatical analysis with ethical, community-centered documentation practices.

Keywords: Documentary Linguistics; Field linguistics; Narrative Elicitation; Language Documentation; Oral Traditions.

INTRODUCTION

Language documentation records primary speech events alongside grammatical description. The resulting materials including, audio-video recordings, lexicons, and annotated texts, are intended to serve speech communities, educators, and future researchers (Himmelmann, 1998, 2006; Woodbury, 2011). Text collection and direct elicitation are complementary rather than competing methodologies. Running texts show how grammatical categories behave in continuous discourse, while direct elicitation allows researchers to isolate rare forms, confirm morphological paradigms, and check negative data that seldom appear in recorded speech (Bowern, 2015; Chelliah, 2001).

Narrative elicitation is an established method in field linguistics and discourse analysis. Researchers have long gathered folktales, personal accounts, work descriptions, and picture-prompted retellings to examine morphosyntax and information structure. As Ward (2021) shows in an ethnographic study of Amdo Tibetan children's stories, narrative tasks are shaped directly by the social dynamics of the room and the family members present.

For field methods instructors, the central task is determining how to integrate these narrative techniques systematically into student training. This paper attempts to outline a practical approach for teaching narrative elicitation in field methods classes. Grounding the discussion in documentation practices from lesser-documented Himalayan languages alongside field methods pedagogy, this paper presents a modular framework covering task design, assessment criteria, and logistical considerations.

2. Narrative Texts in Documentary Fieldwork

Documentary projects require a range of speech styles. Recorded narratives offer evidence for many linguistic features at once, such as noun and verb morphology, complex clauses, reference tracking, tense-aspect systems, focus, and pragmatic choices.

At the same time, stories do not represent every domain of a language. Different genres involve different registers, participant structures, and performance norms. A corpus consisting only of stories will usually underrepresent everyday conversation, questions, commands, greetings, and specialized technical vocabularies (Bowern, 2015). Narrative collection must therefore fit into a broader documentation plan.

Chelliah (2001) notes that fieldworkers should move back and forth between text collection and elicitation. Relying only on texts leaves gaps in paradigms, while relying only on elicitation produces artificial sentences that may not reflect normal speech. This balance is useful for teaching. Students can examine a transcribed text to find a recurring construction, and then use targeted questions to determine its exact grammatical rules. Conversely, when students elicit a paradigm, they can search running texts to see how those forms actually behave across clause boundaries.

3. Narrative Genres and Their Analytic Affordances

Documentary fieldwork encompasses a wide spectrum of text types. Rather than treating all continuous speech as a single category of spontaneous data, fieldworkers distinguish the interactional conditions, cultural norms, and structural yields associated with different narrative genres.

3.1 Oral Art, Folk Narratives, and Mythic Texts

Traditional performances such as origin legends, folktales, ritual chants, and epic songs preserve formal registers and culturally grounded verbal art. Syntactically and discursively, these genres frequently showcase complex clause combining, fixed narrative formulas, evidential particles, and archaic morphosyntactic patterns that have dropped out of daily speech. At the same time, traditional stories carry community protocols. Some narratives are often public, while others are restricted along lines of gender, age, clan lineage, or sacred ritual seasons. Instructors must remind students that knowing a story exists does not mean a fieldworker has the right to record or archive it, but only with prior permission from all authorities involved can these be recorded.

3.2 Personal Narratives and Oral Histories

First-person accounts of life events, migration histories, schooling, marriage, and village development capture vernacular speech across generations. These texts provide fertile ground for analyzing first-person stance, epistemic markers, tense-aspect-mood shifts, reported speech, and conversational code-switching. However, personal accounts are co-constructed speech events, i.e., they are shaped by the researcher's questions, the presence of onlookers, and the speaker's comfort with the recording device. While they offer more spontaneous speech rhythms than sentence translation, they remain situated interactions influenced by the interview context.

3.3 Procedural and Explanatory Discourse

Procedural accounts describe how specific tasks are performed—such as preparing local dishes, weaving carpets, building shelters, herding livestock, or conducting ceremonies. In fieldwork training, procedural tasks are especially reliable because chronological sequences naturally elicit temporal connectors (*first*, *then*, *afterwards*), imperative and hortative morphology, conditional structures, and specialized ethnobiological or craft vocabularies. These descriptions preserve traditional ecological and material knowledge alongside linguistic data. Fieldworkers must verify beforehand that the technical, botanical, or medicinal practices described are appropriate for public documentation and do not compromise proprietary local knowledge.

3.4 Conversational and Contemporary Narratives

Conversational and everyday discourse includes casual dialogues, local news, debates, jokes, and contemporary retellings. These texts display interactive linguistic phenomena, i.e., conversational turn-taking, question-and-answer pairs, backchanneling, particles of agreement or disagreement, hesitation strategies, and prosodic contours. Because unstructured conversation can be intimidating for beginning field students to transcribe, short, topic-guided dialogues provide a practical entry point into multi-party recording and analysis.

3.5 Stimulus-Based Narrative Elicitation

Visual and video-based stimuli allow researchers to gather comparable narrative corpora across different consultants, dialects, and related languages.

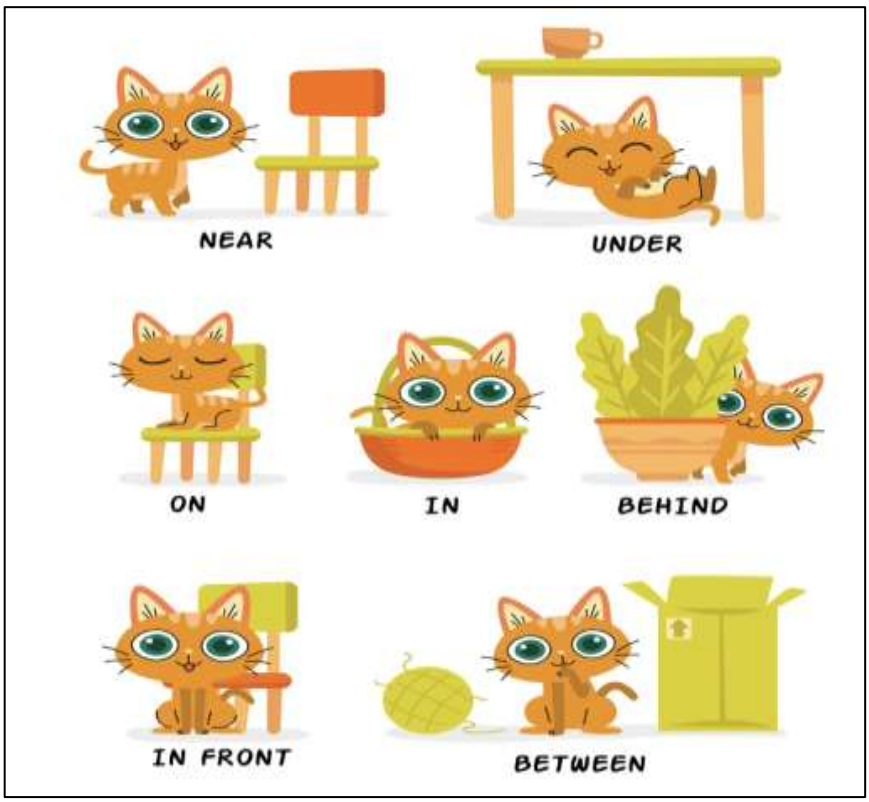


Figure 1: Visual card "Where is the Cat?"[1]

For instance, a simple visual card depicting a cat situated around furniture (*near*, *under*, *in front of*, or *between* objects) allows fieldworkers to elicit an entire set of adpositions or locative case in a language merely by asking the speaker to describe where the cat is located in each scene.

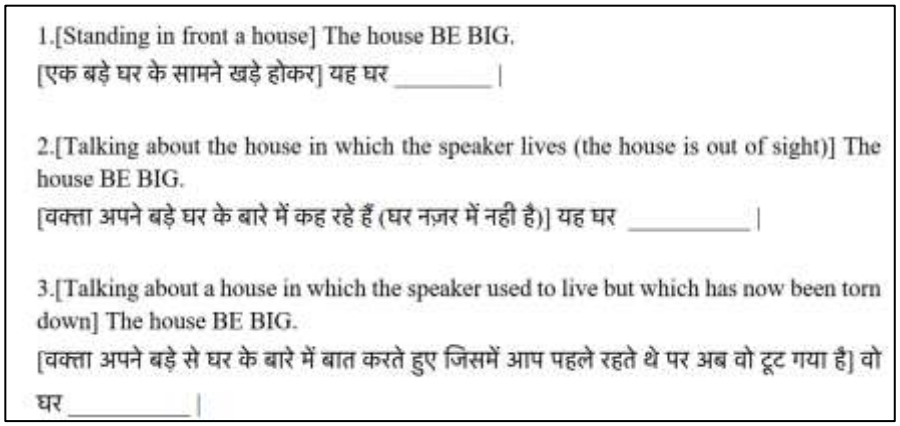
Classic standardized instruments include Mayer's (1969) wordless picture book *Frog, Where Are You?*, Chafe's (1980) *The Pear Film*, and the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN). Complementing these are custom storyboards and visual stimulus cards designed to target specific spatial configurations (e.g., *under*, *between*, *behind*) or motion events without relying on translation from a contact language.

[1] Illustration adapted from "Prepositions of Place with Cat" by Nadya So (Vector stock illustration). "Prepositions of Place with Cat" https://www.magnific.com/free-vector/englishprepositions_11523250.htm#fromView=keyword&page=1&position=1&uuid=b4406d12-ed7c-460f-9f3b0de41eb3c4d4&track=ais_hybrid&query=Prepositions+cat. Retrieved on 21st August 2026

However, such stimuli cannot simply be used off the shelf without considering the local context. Because instruments like the *Frog Story* and the *Pear Film* reflect Western material culture and environments, they can be foreign to speakers in rural or indigenous communities. In fieldwork training, students must understand that visual materials need to be adapted to the everyday practices, livelihoods, and physical surroundings of the speech community. For example, rather than using pictures of unfamiliar fruits, pets, or household items, prompts should feature local livestock, indigenous crops, domestic tools, or daily village activities. When the images align with consultants' lived reality, speakers engage naturally with the task instead of struggling to interpret unfamiliar scenes, yielding far more representative and fluent discourse.

4. A Fieldwork Example: Contextualized TAM Elicitation

My documentation of Gaddi, Kullui, Chitkuli Kinnauri, and Spiti shows another example of how structured tasks can produce connected speech for grammatical study. The instrument developed in Mehta (2024) adapts Dahl's (1985) typological tense–aspect–mood (TAM) questionnaire. Target verbs are embedded in base, uninflected forms within a narrative contextualized in English and Hindi. By systematically varying temporal, aspectual, and modal conditions across identical lexical bases, the scenarios prompt inflectional choices within discourse-like environments rather than relying on decontextualized translation pairs.


1.[Standing in front a house] The house BE BIG.
[एक बड़े घर के सामने खड़े होकर] यह घर _____ |

2.[Talking about the house in which the speaker lives (the house is out of sight)] The house BE BIG.
[वक्ता अपने बड़े घर के बारे में कह रहे हैं (घर नज़र में नही है)] यह घर _____ |

3.[Talking about a house in which the speaker used to live but which has now been torn down] The house BE BIG.
[वक्ता अपने बड़े से घर के बारे में बात करते हुए जिसमें आप पहले रहते थे पर अब वो टूट गया है] वो घर _____ |

Figure 2: A screenshot of the first three questions from the TAM Questionnaire (Mehta 2024: 288)

Figure 2 illustrates how the adapted questionnaire holds the proposition BE BIG. Across the three items, shifting from immediate visual presence (item 1) to an out-of-sight residence (item 2) and a torn-down house (item 3) systematically tests, for instance, for visual evidentials, nonvisual present copulas, and discontinued past markers. Leaving the target predicate blank encourages consultants to supply natural inflections within a defined communicative setting rather than relying on direct word-for-word translation.

To capture connected discourse under controlled parameters, the instrument incorporates a standardized event sequence: a man walks through a forest, steps on a snake, is bitten, throws a stone at it, and the snake dies. This underlying event sequence is systematically framed across varying temporal and interpretive vectors, including recent past (*just now*), remote past (*yesterday*, *childhood*), habitual routines, and reported/narrated events. Holding the propositional content constant allows researchers and students to isolate the precise morphological shifts triggered by changes in tense, aspect, and evidentiality across genealogically diverse languages.

As documented in Mehta (2024), this elicitation method clearly reveals how verbal systems differ across languages. For instance, examples (1), (2), and (3) show that Spiti is morphologically tenseless, relying instead on aspect, evidentials, mood, and pragmatic context to convey time. In contrast, examples (4) and (5) from Chitkuli Kinnauri show a more complex past tense system with two distinct markers, i.e., a dedicated hodiernal

past *-gja* for events that occurred earlier the same day, alongside a regular past tense marker *-o* used in other contexts.[2]

(1)	*dʰəŋ*	*tʃʰu*	*ʈʰʋenmo*	*ʈʰək*
	yesterday	water.N	hot.ADJ	T.EVI

'Yesterday water was hot' (statement based on touch)
(Mehta 2024: 153)

(2)	*ŋaŋmu*	*tʃʰu*	*ʈʰʋenmo*	*joŋ-ak¬*
	tomorrow	water.N	hot.ADJ	become.V-POT.3SG

'Tomorrow water maybe be hot'
(Mehta 2023: 18)

(3)	*tʃʰu*	*ʈʰʋenmo*	*ʈʰək*
	water.N	hot.ADJ	T.EVI

'Water is hot' (statement based on touch)
(Mehta 2024: 153)

(4)	*ramm-is*	*am*	*kəʈe-o*
	ram.3M.SG-ERG	mango.N	cut.V-PST

'Ram cut the mango'
(Mehta 2024: 77)

(5)	*əgər*	*aɳɛ*	*bənnu-gja-ma,*	*bə*	*to*
	if	he.3M.SG	come.INF-H.PST-COND	come.V	be.3SG

'If he could, he would have come' (Talking in the party that has just started)
(Mehta 2024: 78)

5. From Narrative Collection to Linguistic Analysis

Turning a recorded narrative into usable linguistic material requires a systematic approach to translation, annotation, and analysis. In field training, this progression can be structured across four interconnected stages.

5.1 Preparation and Task Framing

Before recording, students formulate specific research questions and design open-ended prompts or visual tasks that avoid pre-seeding or influencing the target grammatical forms. Ethical preparation centers on dynamic consent where students negotiate permissions for audio or video recording, discuss intellectual property, and establish how materials will be shared or archived. Alongside consent, students log basic metadata such as speaker profiles, dialect background, recording location, and equipment used, using tools like SayMore to ensure long-term findability.

5.2 Recording the Narrative and Securing the Translation

In the recording session, students first capture the uninterrupted narrative, allowing the speaker to tell the story, explain the procedure, or describe the stimulus without premature interruptions. They document the interactional

[2] In (1) and (3), the evidential particle *ʈʰək* is identical in both past and present contexts. The use of the evidential, the adverbs *dʰəŋ*, *ŋaŋmu* in (1) and (2) and the general context work together in conveying the time reference in Spiti. Chitkuli Kinnauri, on the other hand, marks tense morphologically. In addition to a general past suffix *-o* in (4), the use of the dedicated hodiernal past suffix *-gja* in (5) for events that took place earlier on the same day can also be observed.

environment in their field notes, i.e., who was in the room, seating arrangements, prompting language, and the consultant's apparent level of comfort, noting how the observer's presence may influence speech style.

Crucially, recording the story is incomplete without a dedicated translation and review session. Immediately after recording, or in a scheduled follow-up, students work side-by-side with the consultant to review the playback line by line. The fieldworker plays back short audio segments, asking the consultant to repeat unclear phrases, explain archaic or idiomatic vocabulary, and provide free translations into the contact language. This collaborative review clarifies homophones, identifies dialect variants, and unpacks pragmatic nuances that the researcher would otherwise misinterpret.

5.3 Time-Aligned Transcription, Glossing, and Software Processing

Once the original recording and field translations are documented, students turn the audio into structured data. In ELAN, students segment speech into time-aligned units linked to the acoustic signal, setting up synchronized tiers for transcription, morphemic glosses, and free translation following the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Unclear vowel qualities, pitch contours, or tone distinctions can be inspected acoustically in Praat, while audio noise reduction is handled in Audacity. Lexical items extracted during transcription are imported into FieldWorks Language Explorer (FLEx) to build a cumulative dictionary and track inflectional classes.

5.4 Inductive Analysis and Targeted Follow-up

Working from their glossed texts and translation notes, students identify recurring morphological markers, syntactic patterns, or discourse strategies. Because a single narrative cannot confirm whether a missing construction is ungrammatical or simply absent from that specific story, students use their text-based observations to design targeted follow-up elicitation questionnaires. This step illustrates the essential loop of field linguistics, i.e., the recorded story reveals how forms function in continuous discourse, while direct elicitation systematically tests paradigm boundaries, distribution, and negative data.

6. Proposed training module and assessment

The following six-session module outlines a practical sequence for field methods classes. It is intended as a syllabus template that instructors can adapt to their semester schedules, student numbers, and consultant access.

6.1 Module sequence

Session 1 — Data Types, Narrative Genres and Research Goals: Students compare multiple narrative genres including traditional folktales, personal life histories, and procedural accounts alongside elicited paradigms to evaluate the distinct linguistic information and discourse structures each genre yields. The session establishes the complementary roles of continuous narrative and targeted elicitation in documentary fieldwork.

Session 2 — Task Design and Stimulus-Based Elicitation: Students design narrative prompts across two approaches: open-ended situational cues for spontaneous discourse, and controlled stimulus-based instruments (such as wordless storyboards, sequential visual cards, and culturally adapted vignettes). They evaluate how to tailor stimuli to local community practices while preventing translation calques and lexical pre-seeding.

Session 3 — Ethics, Consent, and Recording Practices: Students practice obtaining informed consent, preparing metadata sheets, and setting up recording equipment. They discuss the distinction between consent to participate, permission to record, and permission to archive or share materials, with particular attention to culturally sensitive, restricted, or private knowledge.

Session 4 — Transcription and Annotation: Students import a short recording into ELAN and practice time-aligned transcription, segmentation, morpheme-level glossing, and translation. Students create interlinear glossed text using the Leipzig Glossing Rules, making sure to flag inaudible speech, note alternative meanings, and record their transcription conventions.

Session 5 — Identifying Linguistic Patterns and Designing Follow-up Elicitation: Students identify a grammatical or discourse pattern in their annotated text and formulate a preliminary hypothesis about its distribution or function. They then design five targeted follow-up elicitation questions to test paradigm gaps, distribution, or negative evidence.

Session 6 — Data Organization, Documentation, and Archiving: Students organize their recordings, metadata, transcription files, annotations, and analytical notes into a structured documentation package. They provide a description of the materials, their relationships, relevant access conditions, and the limitations of the dataset. Decisions concerning archiving and sharing are made in accordance with participant consent and applicable community agreements.

6.2 Assessment dimensions

As part of continuous classroom assessment, students record a short in-class narrative, which they process into a fully transcribed and glossed submission. Evaluation balances active participation across all sessions, particularly in discussions of prompt design, ethics, and stimulus adaptation with the technical and analytical rigor of the final deliverable. Instructors assess whether the narrative was elicited neutrally without pre-seeding target forms, whether time-aligned ELAN annotations adhere to the Leipzig Glossing Rules without artificially standardizing speech, and how effectively the student uses textual observations to build targeted follow-up elicitation questions. Where live consultant recording is unfeasible, these same assessment criteria are applied using open-access collections from online repositories.

6.3 Institutional and Practical Constraints

Instructors must set clear rules for student fieldwork. A classroom assignment does not give students permission to publish recordings or upload them to public websites. All work with community members must follow institutional ethics guidelines and local agreements. Instructors must state at the beginning whether student files will be stored in a private departmental archive, used only for grading, or deleted after the course ends.

7. Ethics, ownership, and access

Fieldwork ethics involves more than having a consultant sign an institutional consent form. Researchers must agree with speakers on who can listen to recordings, who can read transcripts, and where materials will be kept. Narratives frequently touch on family histories, local customs, and religious practices that carry community restrictions. In many cases, the appropriate choice is to restrict an audio file, omit personal names, or store only the metadata.

Speakers and communities must have the final say on access tiers, i.e., fully open, restricted to community members, or embargoed. The fact that an online archive can host files publicly does not mean those files should be made public. International agreements such as UNESCO's (2003) *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* emphasize community ownership and cultural transmission. While these conventions do not describe linguistic fieldwork methods directly, they provide an essential ethical baseline, i.e., fieldworkers must support community rights rather than treat recorded stories solely as data for outside research.

8. Scope and Limitations

This paper is based on my documentary fieldwork in Himachal Pradesh and general linguistic literature. It does not report a survey of university syllabi or a measured study of student performance. The training sequence and rubrics are proposed models.

Similarly, the linguistic examples in Section 4 illustrate how contextualized prompts function in practice; they are not intended as full grammatical descriptions of the languages discussed (see Mehta, 2024 for complete analyses). Future work could evaluate this module in university courses, gather feedback from students and speakers, and examine how specific narrative tasks support different analytical topics.

CONCLUSION

Narrative elicitation is an established part of documentary linguistics, serving as a necessary complement to paradigm elicitation and conversation recording. In training, its value is not in replacing direct elicitation or claiming an uncritical standard of "authenticity," but in giving students a reliable way to work with continuous speech throughout the documentary process.

By learning to distinguish genres, take account of the recording environment, apply consistent glossing, and respect community access rights, students learn to handle connected texts methodically. The framework presented here links task design, transcription, and grammatical analysis, helping students treat the original recordings not just as sources of grammatical evidence, but as situated communicative events that require careful linguistic and ethical work.

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