

6.3 Ethnography

A good starting point in our exploration of the specific qualitative methods of discovery is ethnography, because this approach embodies in many ways the essence of the qualitative inquiry. In fact, 'ethnography' has frequently been used as a synonym for 'qualitative research' and Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 1), for example, started their influential monograph on ethnography

by stating, 'For the purposes of this book we shall interpret the term "ethnography" in a liberal way, not worrying much about what does and does not count as examples of it'. They then added, 'the boundaries around ethnography are necessarily unclear. In particular, we would not want to make any hard-and-fast distinction between ethnography and other sorts of qualitative inquiry' (p. 2). We should note, however, Duff's (in press) warning that equating ethnography with qualitative research in general confuses the picture because certain qualitative methods, such as the case study, often display characteristics that are different from those of ethnography.

Originating in cultural anthropology, ethnographic research aims at describing and analysing the practices and beliefs of cultures. 'Culture' is not limited to ethnic groups but can be related to any 'bounded units' (Harklau 2005) such as organizations, programmes, and even distinct communities. Thus, we can talk about the ethnography of the language classroom, or the ethnographic analysis of specific schools, or other language learning contexts. The classic image of the ethnographer is a researcher who enters into the community and becomes immersed in its culture, for example, by living among 'natives' on a remote island for several years. For this reason, ethnography has been criticized in the past for representing a colonialist attitude, but since we are looking at the educational applications of the method, we do not have to review this debate here. Neither will we examine the current divide in various schools and styles of ethnographic theory, partly precipitated by postmodernism. (See Harklau 2005.)

The main goal of most ethnographic research is to provide a 'thick description' of the target culture, that is, a narrative that describes richly and in great detail the daily life of the community as well as the cultural meanings and beliefs the participants attach to their activities, events, and behaviours. For this purpose ethnography uses an eclectic range of data collection techniques, including participant and nonparticipant observation (see Section 8.2), interviewing (Section 6.4), and the ethnographer's own diary with field notes and journal entries (Section 6.9). These data sources are further supplemented by film or audio recordings as well as authentic documents and physical artefacts, and ethnographers may even use structured questionnaires that have been developed during the course of the fieldwork.

Applied linguistics as a field has an inherent interest in intercultural communication and therefore ethnographic research has been embraced by scholars who look at language learning as a profoundly social practice and see 'second language learning', 'second culture learning', and 'language socialization' as inextricably bound (for example, Roberts *et al.* 2001; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). In addition, because of the increasingly situated nature of much recent SLA research, ethnography has also been utilized for the contextualized analysis of classroom discourse and school learning (for example, Duff 2002; Rampton 1995; van Lier 1988; Watson-Gegeo 1997; for recent overviews, see Harklau 2005 and Toohey in press). Thus, as Duff (2002) summarizes, ethnography has been consistently gaining prominence

within applied linguistics since the appearance of Watson-Gegeo's (1988) influential article on the topic, and this importance is well reflected by the fact that the journal *TESOL Quarterly* has published separate '(Critical) Ethnography Guidelines' (Chapelle and Duff 2003) for its contributors. Toohey (in press) also confirms that the number of ethnographic language education studies has dramatically increased over the past ten years, with much of the work examining specific linkages among negotiations of identities, practices, and language learning both in local contexts and on a wider societal scale. (For details, see Section 6.7.3 discussing case studies, since case study research often utilizes ethnographic methodology.)

6.3.1 Main features of an ethnographic study

According to Harklau (2005), a hallmark of classic ethnographic research is that it involves firsthand 'participant observation' in a natural setting, and most studies that frame themselves as 'ethnographic' include some degree of this method. However, we saw that ethnographers also utilize several other data collection techniques and, in fact, Harklau points out that multiple data sources are usually considered desirable. So, if the method of data collection is not a key determinant of the ethnographic approach, what are the features that define it? The following three points are emphasized most frequently in the literature; they will need little elaboration here because they have been described earlier when discussing the qualitative approach in general. (See Section 2.3.2.)

- *Focusing on participant meaning* In ethnographic studies the participants' subjective interpretation of their own behaviours and customs is seen as crucial to understanding the specific culture. Therefore, a central aspect of ethnography is to find ways of looking at events through the eyes of an insider.
- *Prolonged engagement in the natural setting* The subtleties of the participants' meaning (and most often, multiple meanings) cannot be uncovered unless the researcher immerses him/herself in the culture and spends an extended period living there, observing the participants and collecting data. Therefore, a minimum stay of 6–12 months is usually recommended to achieve the necessary prolonged engagement.
- *Emergent nature* Because the ethnographer is entering a new culture, the exact focus of the research will evolve contextually and 'emerge' *in situ* only after some fieldwork has been done.

6.3.2 Main phases of an ethnographic study

An ethnographic study involves a complex process of 'getting in' and 'coming out' which can be described as a sequence of four relatively distinct phases (Morse and Richards 2002; see also Richards 2003):

- The first phase involves entering what is for the researcher a strange environment. The ethnographer needs to negotiate the entry with the gatekeepers and then find a way, reason, or adequate role for fitting in. In L2 research, gatekeepers are likely to be head teachers, school managers/principals, various education officials, who, as Richards (2003: 121) points out, all have 'their own particular axes to grind and territories to protect'. Therefore, this is a rather delicate phase; the researcher is understandably somewhat lost and does not understand the setting or the participants, as a consequence of which data collection in this phase largely involves 'mapping the terrain', deciding who's who and, in general, keeping a diary with field notes.
- The second phase is easier in many ways than the first because by now the ice has been broken and the researcher has become familiar with the participants and the routines in the setting. Nonparticipant observation is now in full swing and the critical task of finding key informants begins along with conducting initial interviews with them. At this stage the ethnographer also needs to start analysing the preliminary data to develop some initial ideas and concepts.
- The third phase is the most productive research phase. Acculturation has been completed and the researcher has been accepted and now feels 'at home' in the setting. This allows him/her to employ a variety of techniques to collect increasingly focused data, which is used to verify initial hypotheses and ideas and to develop broader theoretical concepts. Data analysis at this stage is characterized by 'progressive focusing', involving sifting, sorting, and reviewing the data (Cohen *et al.* 2000).
- The final phase is the necessary withdrawal. This may be an emotionally taxing closure phase evoking a feeling of loss, and the ethnographer needs to make sure that he/she disengages from the field in a way that brings as little disruption to the group or situation as possible. The focus is on data analysis and additional data is collected only to fill gaps, to resolve ambiguities, and to validate previous findings.

6.3.3 Strengths and weaknesses of ethnographic research

The ethnographic approach is particularly useful for exploring uncharted territories and understanding social processes from the participants' perspective. It is an excellent way of 'crossing cultures' and gaining insight into the

life of organizations, institutions and communities. In short, ethnography is ideal for generating initial hypotheses about something totally unknown. Hornberger (1994: 688) also highlights the capacity of ethnography to take a holistic view and focus on the whole picture that 'leaves nothing unaccounted for and that reveals the interrelatedness of all the component parts'. As she goes on to argue,

The value here is that the approach allows, indeed, it is the very essence of the approach to ensure, comparison and contrast between what people say and what people do in a given context and across contexts in order to arrive at a fuller representation of what is going on. It is not enough for ethnographers to ask teachers about their communicative approach to ESL teaching; they must also observe it in action. It is not enough to surmise that student participation patterns in class are different from those the children experience in home socialization; ethnographers seek to observe both contexts for themselves. It is by comparing and contrasting these dimensions that a realistic and multilayered description can begin to emerge. (pp. 688–9)

The main drawback of the approach is that the need for prolonged engagement with the participants in their natural setting requires an extensive time investment that few academic researchers can afford. Hornberger (1994) also mentions a further limitation, the 'insider/outsider dilemma', which concerns the difficulty of striking a balance between insider and outsider perspectives. As she argues, this tension surfaces in several guises (for example, in the extent of researcher participation versus nonparticipant observation and closeness versus detachment) and it is particularly acute in ethnographic research by teachers in their own classrooms and by minority researchers in their own communities. Widdowson (personal communication) adds that the insider/outsider dilemma is further manifested in reporting the research results to external audiences, because this process inherently involves presenting insider perspectives in outsider terms and this translation is likely to involve alterations.

Finally, Harklau (2005) draws attention to a peculiarity concerning ethnography in applied linguistics, namely that ethnographic work remains largely limited to white anglophone researchers in English-speaking countries, with English remaining the target language in the vast majority of studies. While this may indeed be true of the current practice, the situation is likely to change in the future because ethnographic research is in the process of gaining further ground in applied linguistics both in terms of scope and quantity. Furthermore, ethnography has also been playing an important role in influencing several aspects of qualitative research in general, producing various fruitful 'quasi-ethnographic' approaches.