

## CHAPTER 6

## Ethnographic Research

## WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

Because ethnographic approaches have gained wider acceptance in research in second language acquisition and teaching, there has been a great deal of discussion about what constitutes "real ethnography." The views of ethnography discussed in this chapter are drawn from work by scholars such as Agar (1980), Goetz & LeCompte (1984), Gumperz (1986), Heath (1982a), Hymes (1982), Jacob (1987), Rosaldo (1989), Saville-Troike (1989), Spindler and Spindler (1987), Spradley (1980), Watson-Gegeo (1988), and Wolcott (1988). There are

two general focuses of ethnographic study that are particularly relevant to the field of second language acquisition and teaching. These are educationally oriented ethnography (Spindler & Spindler, 1987; Wolcott, 1987) and the ethnography of communication (Heath, 1983; Hymes, 1972; Saville-Troike, 1989).

## The Ethnography of Schooling

Spindler, an anthropologist specializing in the ethnography of schooling, has defined *educational ethnography* as "the study of any or all educational processes, whether related to a 'school' or not" (1982, p. 2). He has defined *the ethnography of schooling* as the study of "educational and enculturative processes that are related to schools and intentional schooling," including aspects of school-related life such as peer groups (1982, p. 2). Because this research tradition informs us about both enculturation and acculturation processes, it is important for gaining a fuller understanding of all that is involved in learning an additional language and culture. It is also important in understanding ways to make educational experiences more culturally sensitive and appropriate.

## The Ethnography of Communication

The *ethnography of communication* combines anthropological and sociolinguistic perspectives to address the study of communicative behavior as it functions in the context of culture (Saville-Troike, 1989). Work in this field centers on what a speaker needs to know to communicate appropriately in a speech community and on how such knowledge is learned and used. By extension, it might inform us about what a writer needs to know to communicate appropriately and effectively in a discourse community. Analyses focus on the system of communicative events in a speech community and how social meaning is conveyed through these events. The products of such studies include ethnographic descriptions of how communication functions in diverse communities (Heath, 1983; Saville-Troike, 1989). As Saville-Troike (1989) stresses, ethnographers of communication base their work on the assumption that language must be viewed as a social phenomenon:

The ethnography of communication takes language first and foremost as a socially situated cultural form, while recognizing the necessity to analyze the code itself and the cognitive process of its speakers and hearers. To accept a lesser scope for linguistic description is to risk reducing it to triviality, and to deny any possibility of understanding how language lives in the minds and on the tongues of its users. (p. 3)

This field, initiated by Hymes, is important for second language studies because it not only defines what it is that learners must learn as they are socialized into a

new language and culture, but it also provides a way of relating second language acquisition (which can be viewed as L2 socialization) to acculturation.

The purpose of ethnographic research is to describe and interpret the cultural behavior, including communicative behavior, of a group. Ethnographic research may have many characteristics in common with nonethnographic case-study research, but the crucial differences lie in (1) the anthropological grounding and cultural emphasis in ethnographic work and in (2) the group focus. The ethnographer studies the cultural system of a group and provides a rich description and cultural interpretation of communicative and other behavior, attitudes, and values. Ethnographies, like case studies, may focus on particular cases or on a limited cultural setting, such as a classroom or a school. For a case study, the bounded system includes contexts that are relevant to the research questions, but not necessarily cultural contexts. However, for an ethnography, cultural context is crucial. For some researchers, cultural context may be defined as the school or "classroom culture," while for others, cultural context must extend into the home, community, and wider society. The other key difference lies in the ethnographer's focus on the cultural group rather than on the individual. While the goal of a case study may be to describe differences in the L2 writing development of two individuals (as in the Hudelson sample study in Chapter 4), the goal of an ethnographic study is cultural explanation. The shared values and behaviors of the group are of interest rather than differences in individuals due to factors such as personality, ability, or cognitive style.

Cultural anthropology is the mother discipline of ethnography (Heath, 1982a), although sociologists have made important contributions as well. Ethnography is considered the field arm of anthropology (Spindler, 1982, p. 2). Data-collection procedures, termed "fieldwork" by anthropologists, include watching and asking (observing and interviewing). Most often the ethnographer is a participant observer, an outsider who stays on the scene, perhaps as much as a year or more, to learn about the group. This might mean studying a far-off village somewhere or a different culture right at home. Unlike experimental research in which researchers manipulate conditions, ethnographers study phenomena in their natural state and as unobtrusively as possible. Ethnographers themselves are the major data-collection instruments. That is, they rely more on themselves than on tests and questionnaires, if these are used at all. Unlike survey and experimental researchers who specify research questions in advance, ethnographers develop and refine their questions as they learn in the field.

In summary, although other approaches to research may involve similar field techniques, many visits or long stays at the research site, and good descriptive accounts, they are not ethnographies unless they involve holistic study of cultural phenomena and cultural interpretation of behavior. Interestingly, many respected ethnographers are very cautious and selective about applying the terms "ethnographic" and "ethnography" to their own studies.

## DOING ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

In this section we will review some of the key issues involved in conducting ethnographic research. An understanding of these issues will help you define the nature of ethnographic research and better understand reports of such research. As there is controversy about what counts as ethnography or ethnographic (van Lier, 1988), we will address characteristics on which there is some consensus, centering our discussion around some criteria for good ethnography suggested by George and Louise Spindler (1987), which constitute an operational definition of anthropological ethnography applied to the study of education. We will also point out some of the controversies and alternative approaches. The topics we will address are research questions, the role of theory, ethnographic purpose, field techniques, contexts and holism, analysis, cultural interpretation, and the written ethnographic account.



## The Dynamic Nature of Research Questions

Ethnographic studies are guided by research questions, as are all studies. There are key differences, however, in the life of these questions between differing approaches to research. As in much case-study research, ethnographic research questions have a dynamic nature that contrasts sharply with the predetermined and fixed nature of questions in studies in the hypothetico-deductive paradigm. Researchers conducting correlational, quantitative survey, and experimental studies spell out their questions and hypotheses in detail in advance and carefully adhere to them throughout the study. They do modify and refine their questions, but primarily for subsequent studies.

Ethnographic researchers pose broad questions at the onset of the study, but they refine, refocus, and append them in the field as the study progresses. Why is this so? Some of the issues that are important to study, important because they will help answer the broad research questions, will only come to light in the field and could not have been foreseen. One purpose of initial fieldwork, then, is to develop more specific questions.

Hypotheses emerge *in situ*, as the study goes on in the setting selected for observation. Judgment on what may be significant to study in depth is deferred until the orienting phase of the field work has been completed (Spindler & Spindler, Criterion II, 1987, p. 19).

A defining characteristic of ethnography, then, is that questions and hypotheses emerge on site; they are not all spelled out in advance. This is also a characteristic of other case studies, but is essential for ethnographic research.

## The Role of Theory

If new and refined questions emerge as the study progresses, then what is the role of theory in guiding the study? As Watson-Gegeo (1988) explains in her discussion of ethnographic methodology, "The role of theory in guiding observation and interpretation in ethnography seems to be poorly understood outside anthropology. Ethnographers do not claim that they come to a situation like a 'blank slate,' with no preconceptions or guides for observation. Theory is important for helping ethnographers decide what kinds of evidence are likely to be significant in answering research questions posed at the beginning of the study and developed while in the field" (p. 579). Ethnographic researchers, then, are knowledgeable about the relevant theoretical literature before beginning a study.

We assume that the researcher will have searched the literature and defined the "problem" before beginning fieldwork, however much the problem may be modified, or even discarded, as field research proceeds (Spindler & Spindler, Criterion II, 1987, p. 19).

What kinds of theoretical literature are most relevant for ethnographic studies of second language and culture learning? Concepts and theories of social and cultural processes and structures are basic. These processes include language socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), inference in conversation and reading (Gumperz, 1982), and Bruner's notion of scaffolding (Cazden, 1988; Hawkins, 1988). Concepts of structure at various levels include cultural schemata and scripts for school (Floyd & Carrell, 1987; Saville-Troike & Kleifgen, 1986), participation structures in classroom and community (Philips, 1972, 1983), and classroom discourse structures (Cazden, 1988; Varonis & Gass, 1985). Common foci of analysis for communication are literacy events (Anderson, Teale, & Estrada, 1980; Heath, 1983, p. 386), literate behaviors (Vasquez, 1988), speech events (Hymes, 1972; Saville-Troike, 1989), lessons, conversational and written interactions, or texts. Notions of situational context based on the work of Halliday and Hasan (1985), Hymes (1972), and others are relevant. At a more detailed level, ethnographers may analyze specific communicative acts or speech acts, and lexico-grammatical features.

The most relevant theories of second language acquisition are those that address social and cultural processes, language attitudes, and social-psychological motivations (Schumann, 1986; Gardner, 1986; Saville-Troike, 1989; Spolsky, 1989). Also important are theories regarding relationships between cultural processes and L2 academic achievement (Ogbu, 1987; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Erickson, 1986). Theories of culture are basic to anthropologically oriented ethnographic research (see Shweder & LeVine, 1984, for a review). Spindler and Spindler, for example, propose a dynamic view of culture:

A transcultural, comparative perspective is present, though frequently as an unstated assumption. That is, cultural variation over time and space is considered a natural human condition. All cultures are seen as adaptations to the exigencies of human life and exhibit common as well as distinguishing features. (Criterion VII, 1987, p. 19)

For research on children, Schultz and Theophano (1987) caution against "adult-centric" notions of culture and emphasize the notion that children are culture transformers and creators (see also Rosaldo, 1989).

While theoretical notions help guide ethnographic inquiry, a goal of many ethnographers is to develop theory through the course of the research. How does this occur? As Watson-Gegeo explains, "The ethnographer shifts the focus of observation to include phenomena and interactions outside the scope suggested by prior theory, both to correct for what may be missing from or misleading in prior theory and to search for interactions, patterns of behavior, and other phenomena significant to and perhaps unique in the situation under study" (1988, p. 579).



### Ethnographic Purpose

The most important goal of ethnographic inquiry is to discover the insider's view of reality—the *emic* view. Emic refers to “culturally based perspectives, interpretations, and categories used by members of the group under study to conceptualize and encode knowledge and to guide their own behavior” (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 580). A basic but controversial assumption of ethnography is that it is indeed possible to see and understand the insider's view of reality.

The purpose of fieldwork, then, is to provide a comprehensive and accurate picture of a cultural setting and to explain the implicit cultural knowledge of the participants.

Sociocultural knowledge held by social participants makes social behavior and communication sensible. Therefore, a major part of the ethnographic task is to elicit that knowledge from informant-participants in as systematic a fashion as possible. (Spindler & Spindler, 1987, Criterion V, p. 19)

Some of the sociocultural knowledge affecting behavior and communication in any particular setting being studied is implicit or tacit, not known to some natives and known only ambiguously to others. A significant task of ethnography is therefore to make what is implicit and tacit to informants explicit. (Spindler & Spindler, 1987, Criterion VIII, p. 19)

By attending to actions and events in the ongoing flow of social discourse, the ethnographer attempts to construe what they mean to the participants (Geertz, 1973).

### Field Techniques: Watching and Asking

To accomplish these purposes, researchers rely primarily on participant observation and interviewing. They also gather various written and nonwritten resources.

The native view of reality is attended through inferences from observation and through the various forms of ethnographic inquiry (including interview and other eliciting procedures). (Spindler & Spindler, Criterion IV, 1987, p. 19)

A brief digression is needed here regarding the subjects of ethnographic study. The anthropological term “native” refers to the participants in the social setting being studied. We will use the term “participant” because it is neutral, without the pejorative connotations of “native.” Traditionally, anthropologists have gone as far away from home as possible to study a less “civilized” culture in an “exotic” (meaning unfamiliar, far-away) village. As Saville-Troike points out, “anthropology has reflected Western ethnocentric distinctions between conquered colonial (or internal neo-colonial) groups and their conquerors” (1989, p. 108). More recently, however, researchers have also studied cultural settings closer to

home, and minorities have studied other minorities or have studied their own culture, attempting to “make the familiar strange.” Still, with some exceptions (Saville-Troike, 1988a, 1988b, for example) there are few ethnographic studies of upper-class, immigrant L2 learners or of adult language learners who are temporary residents in a host country. Thus the reality of the “natives” or “participants” is usually that of a socially subordinate group.

**Participant Observation.** Participant observation is the ethnographic researcher's primary data-collection technique. To try to see reality from the participants' point of view requires that the researcher spend a great deal of time on-site. A few short visits are never adequate. For example, three two-day visits to a school over a year's time is not sufficient to develop a deep understanding of a situation from an insider's point of view. Nor does simply sending research assistants out to the site provide the researcher with firsthand understanding. Rather, a long-term stay is necessary.

Observation is prolonged and repetitive. Chains of events are observed more than once to establish the reliability of observations. (Spindler & Spindler, Criterion III, 1987, p. 19)

While most writers on ethnographic methodology agree that participant observation is almost always required, some consider participant observation the key feature of ethnographic inquiry. Hammersley, an educational sociologist, and Atkinson, a sociologist, in their book *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (1983), view ethnography not as a paradigm (that is, an alternative to experimental and other paradigms), but as one of the many research methods used by social scientists interested in educational phenomena. They point out that there are diverse ideas about the defining features of ethnography, but that, for them, ethnography is participant observation. Anthropological ethnographers tend to disagree, however, placing major emphasis not on data-collection techniques but on cultural and/or sociocultural interpretation.

Whether participant observation is the key feature of ethnography or simply a necessary but not a sufficient condition for quality ethnographic research, most agree that it is a crucial approach to data gathering. Saville-Troike (1989) points out, however, that while participant observation is generally required in studying communication, in some situations observation without participation is appropriate. It would often not be appropriate to participate, for example, in certain meetings or with children at play.

**Role Options and Conflicts.** Participant observation means that the ethnographer both observes and participates in the cultural setting. In what specific ways, however, can one both observe and participate at the same time in an L2 institutional setting? Clearly, the roles for participation may be somewhat limited



by situational constraints and by the researcher's characteristics and skills. One avenue is to work or volunteer as a part-time teacher, classroom aide, or tutor. A part-time role is more feasible than a full-time role because too much responsibility leaves too little time for watching, asking, and notetaking. Role options may be broader in some language institutes, however, and might involve functions such as advising, placement, assessment, supervision, or curriculum development that would provide normal, expected access to many situations. Wolcott (1988) distinguishes among being an *active participant*, a *privileged observer*, and a *limited observer*, urging researchers to be active participants rather than passive observers—the usual role for researchers in schools.

The language abilities of researchers are crucial in much L2 ethnographic research. The ethnographer must know the language of the group under study (Heath, 1982a). For example, to get the insider's view of how a child who does not yet speak English feels about learning a new language and culture requires that the researcher communicate with the child in his or her native language.

In reading ethnographic reports it is important to consider how the roles of participant and of observer are enacted and related and how they evolve over time. As readers, you should also consider whether the researcher had the language abilities to communicate fully with participants, and then think about how researcher roles and skills may have affected both what was observed and how observations were interpreted.

**Interviewing.** While ethnographic research is *naturalistic*, in that people and phenomena are studied in their naturally occurring environments, ethnographic field techniques go beyond observing to various kinds of interviewing. What counts as interviewing? Wolcott states: "I include as an interview activity anything that the fieldworker does that intrudes upon the natural setting and is done with the conscious intent of obtaining particular information directly from one's subjects" (1988, p. 194). Interviews may include key informant interviews, life history interviews, or expressive autobiographic interviews. They can range from structured and formal to informal.

A key informant is "an individual in whom one invests a disproportionate amount of time because that individual appears to be particularly well informed, articulate, approachable, or available" (Wolcott, 1988, p. 195). For example, in evaluating bilingual education programs we often found that project directors were excellent key informants because they not only knew the most about the project in its historical and present-day contexts but also were the most available for lengthy semiformal interviewing at the school district site and informal interviews over lunches and dinners. Most principals and superintendents were not good informants because they had little knowledge of the goals or practices of the bilingual programs.

What makes an interview ethnographic? The emic goals of the interview, rather than techniques, make it ethnographic. Spindler and Spindler explain how general interviewing strategies lead to emic goals.

Since the informant (any person being interviewed) is one who knows and who has the emic, native cultural knowledge the ethnographic interviewer must not predetermine responses by the kinds of questions asked. The management of the interview must be carried out so as to promote the unfolding of emic cultural knowledge in its most heuristic, natural form. This form will often be influenced by emotionally laden preoccupations that must be allowed expression. (Spindler & Spindler, Criterion IX, 1987, p. 19)

The specific techniques for interviewing must be developed as the ethnographer learns.

Instruments, codes, schedules, questionnaires, agenda for interviews, and so forth, should be generated *in situ* as a result of observation and ethnographic inquiry. (Spindler & Spindler, Criterion VI, 1987, p. 19)

Developing interview guides and other elicitation strategies, then, is a recursive process, proceeding along with ongoing fieldwork and data analysis.

**Written Resources.** Ethnographers also gather a variety of written materials or documents such as diaries, letters, or samples of students' writing. In L2 research these written sources can also include program proposals, planning documents, reports, curriculum materials, attendance records, and written information from parents. Assuring participants anonymity is an important ethical consideration in this process.

Although ethnographic approaches are categorized as qualitative research, this does not mean that quantitative data are not used or should not be used. Ethnographers gather primarily qualitative data, but may also find certain kinds of quantitative data useful in gaining a holistic understanding. In the studies reviewed in this chapter, you can see that researchers gathered test scores, community demographic data, and quantitative language-use data.

**Nonwritten Sources.** Ethnographers also gather nonwritten data of various types. Videotapes of classroom interaction, audiotapes of student and teacher language use, photos, artifacts (things), children's drawing and art, maps of the setting, and films are all used in L2 ethnographies.

Any form of technical device that will enable the ethnographer to collect more live data—immediate, natural, detailed behavior—will be used, such as cameras, audiotapes, and videotapes, and field-based instruments. (Spindler & Spindler, 1987, Criterion X, p. 20)

The great advantage of videotapes is that they reveal nonverbal aspects of communication, although it is important to consider that the camera operator's perspective may not coincide with the researcher's or participants' perspective



(Saville-Troike, 1989). The laptop computer is a more recent addition to the choices of field equipment (Fetterman, 1989).

**Multiple Ways of Finding Out.** The ethnographer never relies on only one means of gathering information. Rather, a variety of techniques are used in combination over a lengthy time period so that information obtained in different ways and from different sources can be compared. Researchers are then able to *triangulate*, that is, to bring together all the information that pertains to a research question. The value of triangulation is that it reduces observer or interviewer bias and enhances the validity and reliability (accuracy) of the information.

To conclude this section on field techniques, it is important to stress that using any or all of these techniques does not make a study ethnographic, nor does triangulation make a study ethnographic. Although fieldwork is the *sine qua non* of ethnography, "field techniques in-and-of-themselves cannot an ethnography make" (Wolcott, 1987, p. 38). It is important to distinguish between educational researchers who draw on ethnographic approaches in doing descriptive studies and researchers informed by anthropology who do ethnography in formal educational settings (Heath, 1982a; Wolcott, 1988, p. 202). The key difference is that the ethnographer attends to the broad cultural context in gathering information, interpreting, and reporting an account. What counts as "cultural context," however, can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

### Holism: Attending to Contexts

Ethnographers of many persuasions agree that attention to context is a crucial characteristic of good ethnographic inquiry.

Observations are contextualized, both in the immediate setting in which behavior is observed and in further contexts beyond that context, as relevant. (Spindler & Spindler, Criterion I, 1987, p. 18)

Differences of opinion arise, however, over the types of contexts that are relevant, their scope, and how "cultural" they are. At this point the distinction between macroethnographic and microethnographic research is important.

**Microethnographic** studies involve the analysis of small-scale events and processes such as dyadic communication in classroom lessons and in other communicative interactions (Au, 1980; Erickson, 1986). These are not considered true ethnographies by some scholars if they do not involve the study of broader cultural factors and interpretation in light of these factors (see Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, pp. 17, 23 for a discussion). Rather, in these studies the relevant contexts that help to interpret the meaning of the interactions are often

narrower. They might include, for example, other interactions during the same or related lessons (Enright, 1986), interactions in other subject areas (Hawkins, 1988; Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986), the "culture" of the classroom as a whole, other school programs, and the school or university culture.

**Macroethnographic** studies address larger-scale events and processes in relation to classroom communication and L2 learning, such as the culture of the home, the cultural values of the community, and political processes. For example, Philips' (1972, 1983) study of the Warm Springs Indians' interaction patterns is macroethnographic because she examined both school interactions and community interactions, showed how they differed, and explained Indian students' patterns of school participation in terms of cultural norms. The insights from this study ring true for readers from a variety of cultural backgrounds whose cultural norms for classroom participation differ from those in the culture in which they are studying. Another fine example is Heath's book-length study comparing the ways of talking at home and at school in two cultural communities (Heath, 1983).

Ethnographers continually attend to context. Whether context includes either the micro- or macrocontexts in which the interaction is embedded or both, accounting for (explaining) communicative interaction in classrooms requires linking its meaning or its implications to relevant contexts (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). Wolcott uses a photographic metaphor to help us envision how one attends to the object of investigation in its context: "One's focus moves constantly between figure and ground—like a zoom lens on a camera—to catch the fine detail of what individuals are doing and to keep a perspective on the context of that behavior" (1988, p. 203).

**The Diachronic Perspective.** At least three dimensions are involved in viewing research as micro or macro, however: space (the size and "geographic" location of units), causality (processes), and time. DeWalt and Pelto (1985) suggest that the concepts of micro and macro cannot be defined as absolute but have meaning only in terms of the interrelationships of the units, processes, and time frames under consideration. The time or *diachronic* dimension can be viewed in two ways. First, it can refer to the duration of fieldwork. Clearly, sufficient time in the field is necessary to observe substantial changes in L2 development or acculturation. Second, it can refer to historical context. Few studies in formal educational contexts, however, attend to the historical cultural context. Heath (1982a) suggests that ethnographers should draw on the anthropological tradition of ethnohistorical research to study the social past as well as the social present. The Gibson study (1987a, 1987b, 1988) reviewed below takes a dynamic view of culture, giving some attention to the historical context of the Asian Indian group she studied and making predictions about their future. Hornberger's (1987a, 1987b) work also has a diachronic dimension because it addresses how societal phenomena, such as language policies, change over time.



## Ethnographic Analysis

Four concepts are important in gaining a preliminary understanding of ethnographic analysis. Analysis is recursive, grounded in the data, comprehensive, and interpretive.

**Recursive.** We have seen that analysis is an ongoing process in ethnographic research. That is, only after researchers analyze information gathered in initial fieldwork do they make further decisions about what is important to investigate and develop additional field procedures to gather the information. Analysis, fieldwork, and writing are intertwined as the study progresses and becomes more focused.

**Grounded in the Data.** Unlike correlational studies in which the researcher analyzes data using predetermined categories, in ethnographic inquiry, each situation must be understood in its own terms (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 579). Analysis, therefore, requires developing categories and concepts that make sense and have functional relevance to the participants in the setting. These categories and concepts—developed inductively, in context, and from the ground up—are refined and used in analysis.

Ethnographers analyze data by looking for cultural and communicative patterns. "In essence, ethnography is the background tapestry—busily detailed, seemingly chaotic; however, upon closer look, it reveals patterns, and with repeated scrutiny, it may reveal yet other patterns (Heath, 1982a, p. 45). In Willett's study, for example, these patterns included interaction patterns, family cultural values, and linguistic production. Discovering these patterns and the relationships among them can lead to the development of grounded theory. Saville-Troike explains how grounded theory is developed. "The descriptive model which results from such analysis is then used to generate theoretical propositions that account for the data, or as a base against which to evaluate the adequacy of other theories. The theory then provides hypotheses to be tested against additional data collection and analysis" (1988b, p. 250).

**Comprehensive.** In evaluating ethnographic reports, it is important to look for evidence that the analysis of the data is comprehensive. As Watson-Gegeo points out:

One of the greatest weaknesses in many published studies is their reliance on a few anecdotes used to support the researcher's theoretical point of view or conclusions, but chosen by criteria usually not clarified for the reader. . . . When illustrative examples are presented in an ethnographic report, they should be the result of a systematic selection of representative examples, in which both variation and central tendency or typicality in the data are reflected. Anything less caricatures rather than characterizes what the ethnographer has observed and recorded. (1988, p. 585)

**From Description to Interpretation.** Many ethnographers agree that the most important characteristic of ethnography is its concern with cultural interpretation (Geertz, 1973; Wolcott, 1987, 1988, p. 218). "It is not ethnography unless it uses some model of social or cultural process in both the gathering and interpretation of data" (Spindler & Spindler, 1987, p. 2).

For example, the study of migrant education referred to elsewhere in this book (Chapters 2 and 8) shares certain characteristics with ethnographic research. We used most of the field techniques described here; we used both qualitative and quantitative methods, and we visited sites a number of times; important questions and hypotheses emerged as the study progressed; we attended to various levels of context, and triangulation was an important strategy in data collection and analysis. But this study was not ethnographic because evaluation, not cultural explanation, was its primary goal and researchers did not engage in long-term participant observation at the sites. Wolcott (1988) reminds us that "the essence of ethnography derives from its anthropological concern for cultural interpretation rather than for how one looks or even what one looks at" (p. 217).

Cultural interpretation involves "thick" rather than "thin description," according to Geertz (1973). *Thick description* requires interpreting the meaning that particular social actions and events have for the actors. Geertz's (1973) interpretation of a Balinese cock fight is a fine and classic example of thick description in anthropology. The Willett study (1987) provides a good example of cultural interpretation in an L2 classroom study because she explains the contrasting L2 learning patterns and interaction styles of the Brazilian and the Korean girls by linking them to cultural norms.

**Stereotyping or Generalizing?** As my students have read ethnographic accounts, some have objected strongly to cultural generalizations, suggesting that they are stereotypes. Where does one draw the line between appropriate cultural generalizing and stereotyping? One key to knowing just how much generalization is warranted lies in gathering a great deal of information and triangulating. Overgeneralization can also be avoided by sticking close to the data, by being tentative in making inferences about how culture is reflected in behavior (Wolcott, 1987), and by considering the research unfinished (Heath, 1983, p. 13; Rosaldo, 1989).