

6.2. GATHERING QUALITATIVE DATA

As noted earlier, a wide variety of different techniques are used in the collection of qualitative data. As with all methods, the advantages and disadvantages of each technique should be taken into consideration when deciding how to address a specific research question. Here we present an overview of some of the most commonly used qualitative data collection methods, including:

- Ethnographies
- Interviews
- Diaries/journals
- Case studies
- Observational techniques

As discussed earlier, because there is little general agreement in the field about what constitutes qualitative research, some of the data collection techniques we discuss in this chapter are associated with more “descriptive” than truly “qualitative” methods by some researchers. For example, Brown (2003) categorized interviews and questionnaires as part of survey-based research, a distinct category from qualitative and quantitative research, which he referred to as “interpretive and statistical methods.” Also, given that some of the data collection methods described here are associated with particular contexts or overlap with each other, some are also described in other chapters in this text. For example, diaries and journals are also discussed in chapter 7 on second language classroom research contexts, with examples from teachers and learners. Each approach and method can be seen as contributing its own piece of the puzzle in qualitative researchers’ attempts to obtain rich, detailed, participant-oriented pictures of the phenomena under study.

6.2.1. Ethnographies

Although there has been much recent debate concerning the nature of ethnography, it can be said from a second language research perspective that ethnographic research aims “to describe and interpret the cultural behavior, including communicative behavior, of a group” (Johnson, 1992, p. 134) as well as “to give an emically oriented description of the cultural practices of individuals” (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999, p. 49), or, in other words, to

carry out research from the participants' point of view, using categories relevant to a particular group and cultural system.

This focus on group behavior and the cultural patterns underlying that behavior is one of the key principles of ethnography identified by Watson-Gegeo in her (1988) review article. Another important principle of ethnographic research is the holistic approach taken to describing and explaining a particular pattern in relation to a whole system of patterns. Hence, ethnography can be viewed as a qualitative research method that generally focuses on the group rather than on the individual, stresses the importance of situating the study within the larger sociocultural context, and strives to present an emic perspective of the phenomena under investigation, with the categories and codes for analysis being derived from the data themselves rather than being imposed from the outside.

Ethnographic approaches have been used in a very broad range of second language research contexts, ranging from ethnographies of schools and language programs to personal accounts and narratives or life histories of learning and teaching (e.g., Duff, 2002; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), home-school discontinuities among Native American children (e.g., Macias, 1987; Philips, 1972, 1983), bilingual language use outside educational settings (Goldstein, 1997), cultural and ideological processes in first and second language learning (King, 2000), and research on specific aspects of the L2 process, such as second language writing in different cultural contexts (e.g., Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995; Carson & Nelson, 1996). However, as Johnson (1992) noted, one of the main uses of ethnographic research in the second language context "has been to inform us about the ways that students' cultural experiences in home and community compare with the culture of the schools, universities, and communities where they study, and the implications of these differences for second language and culture learning" (p. 135).

A well-known piece of research of this nature, an ethnography of first language communication, was carried out by Shirley Brice Heath (1983), who spent a decade living in what she described as two working class communities in the Carolinas; in her terms, one black community, Trackton, and one white community, Roadville. Using data from these working-class communities, as well as middle-class school-oriented black and white families in the town, Heath's research focused on how the children in her study learned to use language, how their uses of language were related to their literacy, and how their use of language in the home interacted with how they used print. She showed how the different ways of

learning language interacted with the children's integration into academic life. The working-class communities held different expectations and different usage patterns, as well as different attitudes to the mainstream families and schools in terms of uses of language, including what Heath referred to as "ritualized uses of language," such as the assignment of labels to objects, response to questions whose answers were already known to the questioner (often known as display questions), and recitation of discrete points of factual material separated from context. In summary, the language and literacy practices of middle-class families mirrored expectations in the school. These differences in home language and literacy practices had implications for academic success.

The goal of such research is to be emic, detailed, holistic, and situated in context with a focus on exploring how complex factors interact. Ethnographies can profitably make use of methods specifically designed to tap into participants' perspectives and, as such, they often involve or are overlapped with the use of observations, interviews, diaries, and other means of data collection that are discussed in more detail later in this chapter. They also generally involve triangulation of data, which is also discussed later in this chapter.

6.2.1.1. Advantages

One advantage of using an ethnographic approach is that the research questions employed in these studies can be dynamic, subject to constant revision, and refined as the research continues to uncover new knowledge. For example, an ethnographer studying second language writing classrooms may enter the research process with the aim of describing the patterns of interaction between teachers and students and illustrating how those patterns are related to the writing process. However, over the course of many classroom observations, analyses of student essays, and interviews with both students and teachers, the researcher may alter the focus of the study and begin concentrating on the types of feedback that are provided by both teachers and students. Ethnographic approaches are particularly valuable when not enough is known about the context or situation to establish narrowly defined questions or develop formal hypotheses. For example, why does a particular group of heritage language learners do poorly when learning in formally instructed foreign language classroom settings? An ethnographic approach to this question could examine the context, the attitude of the teacher and the students, the influence of home and social

groups, and so on in an attempt to uncover information relevant to addressing the question. If the researcher shares the heritage language background, participant observation could be used; that is, the researcher might be able to participate in the language classes or share social occasions in which the language is used in some way. Because ethnographies typically employ multiple methods for gathering data, such as participant observations and open-ended interviews as well as written products, ethnographic research may be able to provide an holistic, culturally grounded, and emic perspective of the phenomena under investigation.

6.2.1.2. Caveats

In embarking on an ethnographic study, researchers need to be aware of some potential challenges and sensitive issues. First of all, ethnographies involve intensive research over an extended period of time. They require a commitment to long-term data collection, detailed and continuous record keeping, and repeated and careful analysis of data obtained from multiple sources. It is also important for the researcher to realize that ethnographic approaches to research may create potential conflicts between the researcher's roles as an observer and a participant. If the researcher participates in an event he or she is observing, this may leave little time for the carefully detailed field notes that ethnographies may require. This can be rectified to a certain extent by audio and video tape recording. However, and more seriously, the researcher's participation may change the nature of the event (see also the discussion on observations in sec. 6.2.4). Researchers thus need to be aware of how they can supplement and triangulate ethnographic data obtained through participant observation, and they must carefully consider how their dual roles might influence the data collected.

In addition to these practical concerns, there are theoretical issues that the researcher should take into consideration. First of all, it has been argued that an ethnographer's focus on describing a culture is problematic, because "there is no such thing as a social group that is not constantly destabilized by both outside influences and personal idiosyncrasy and agency" (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999, p. 45). In its strong form, this criticism implies that any attempt to describe a group is to some extent misguided on the part of the ethnographer. A second theoretical concern about ethnographies concerns the act of writing up the research. Because research reports adhere to certain (culturally influenced) standards of writing, the otherwise accurate picture an ethnographer has recorded may come out skewed. In other words, the

very act of transcribing the events that were observed may inevitably entail a misrepresentation of them. Finally, it is often difficult to generalize the findings of ethnographic research to other problems or settings because of the highly specific nature of such work.