

6.2.4. Observations

As Mason (1996) noted, observation usually refers to “methods of generating data which involve the researcher immersing [him or herself] in a research setting, and systematically observing dimensions of that setting, interactions, relationships, actions, events, and so on, within it” (p. 60). When collecting data using observational techniques, researchers aim to provide careful descriptions of learners’ activities without unduly influencing the events in which the learners are engaged. The data are often collected through some combination of field notes (which can involve detailed impressions of the researcher’s intuitions, impressions, and even questions as they emerge) and audio or visual recordings (which allow the researcher to analyze language use in greater depth later and to involve outside researchers in the consideration of the data). In second language research, observations have been used in a wide variety of studies, ranging from naturalistic studies to the rather more common classroom observations that are discussed at length in chapter 7.

Different types of observations can be identified, depending on their degree of structure. In highly structured observations, the researcher often utilizes a detailed checklist or rating scale. In a complex L2 environment such as the language school, workplace, or community, a structured observation can facilitate the recording of details such as when, where, and how often certain types of phenomena occur, allowing the researcher to compare behaviors across research contexts in a principled manner. In less structured observations, the researcher may rely on field notes for detailed descriptions of the phenomena being observed, or transcripts of tapes of those events.

6.2.4.1. Advantages

Observations are useful in that they provide the researcher with the opportunity to collect large amounts of rich data on the participants’ behavior

and actions within a particular context. Over time and repeated observations, the researcher can gain a deeper and more multilayered understanding of the participants and their context.

6.2.4.2. Caveats

Observations typically do not allow the researcher access to the participants' motivation for their behaviors and actions. For this reason, observations may be most useful when combined with one or more of the other methods discussed in this book (see sec. 6.3.2 on triangulation). However, perhaps the most serious concern is the "observer's paradox" (Labov, 1972). This refers to the fact that although the goal of most observational research is to collect data as unobtrusively as possible, the presence of an observer can influence the linguistic behavior of those being observed. There is also some possibility of the Hawthorne effect (discussed in chaps. 4 and 7), which may occur when learners perform better due to positive feelings at being included in a study. Simply put, if learners realize that they are under observation, their performances might improve because of the fact of that observation.

To minimize these threats, researchers should consider the ways in which they may influence an L2 setting and take steps to mitigate the effect of their presence. For example, if the goal of a study involves observing the use of a second language among immigrants in their workplace, researchers may try to blend into the background of the workplace to make the participants more accustomed to their presence. Another less obtrusive option is participant observation, by which researchers are members of the group they are observing. They play a dual role of observing while fully participating in activities with other group members. Although participant observation can limit the effects of the observer's paradox, it can also be difficult to both observe and participate, as discussed previously. Participant observation is generally most feasible in adult learning contexts where the researcher can easily blend in—for example, in conversation or language exchange clubs. Ethical issues related to participant observations also need to be considered. It is important to keep issues related to partial and full disclosure of the goals of a study in mind, as discussed in chapter 2.