

# ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO EFL/ESL RESEARCH

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**Abstract:** This article shows that ethnography, as an approach, is a very useful tool to be applied in research attempting a good understanding of EFL/ESL classrooms. With reference to work done by anthropologists and classroom researchers, the present article argues that education, including EFL/ESL classrooms, can be well understood by using ethnographic approaches. This is done by elaborating the relevance of ethnography and the classroom context in the sense that ethnographic principles are applicable in describing and understanding the culture of a classroom, and EFL/ESL teaching in particular.

**Key words:** ethnography, education, EFL/ESL, classroom context

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan etnografik sangatlah memungkinkan untuk dipakai sebagai metode penelitian dalam kelas EFL maupun ESL. Dengan acuan pada beberapa hasil penelitian yang sudah dilakukan antropolog dan ahli peneliti kelas, artikel ini berpendapat bahwa pendekatan etnografik bisa digunakan untuk memahami pendidikan, termasuk kelas-kelas ESL maupun EFL. Hal ini bisa dilakukan melalui uraian dan penjelasan dari relevansi etnografik dan situasi kelas dengan memakai prinsip dasar etnografik dalam menguraikan dan memahami budaya dari suatu kelas dan proses pengajaran EFL/ESL secara umum.

**Kata-kat kunci:** etnografi, pendidikan, ESL/EFL, situasi kelas

Discussions and debates about the appropriateness of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach have increased since its introduction to the teaching of English in non-English speaking countries (e.g. Barkhuizen, 1998; Ellis, 1996; Hird, 1995; Halliday, 1994a, 1994b; Li, 1998; Orton, 1990; Ouyang, 2000; Swan, 1985a and 1985b, and Tickoo, 1995). Barkhuizen's (1998) findings suggest that some students may resist to participate "in communicative-type activities", and prefer "more 'traditional' classroom work" and that they feel learning English more if they learn more if teachers correct their mistakes. Ellis (1996) challenges the common view among

CLT proponents who believe that the approach is relevance to the teaching of ESL/ESL without being aware that it is a predominantly Western language teaching approach. He argues that cultural conflicts potentially emerge from the introduction of "Far Eastern cultures", especially Asian culture. Tickoo (1995: 261) argues that in the introduction of innovations to Asian TEFL one should understand the "differentness" in the context of the teaching of English which is characterises by classroom environment, source of the languages, teachers and students linguistic background, English learning purpose, learning setting, cultural and traditional

values, and the socio-linguistic context of English in a particular area. This differentness in understanding should lead to "either a major rethink of current practice" or "search for a possible alternative".

To search for a possible alternative, a thick description of what goes on in the classroom is important, so that adoption of hegemonic approaches like the ones developed in western world can be avoided. A thick description of the EFL/ESL classroom can be made by ways of ethnographic approach which can help investigate ESL/EFL education because it allows a holistic view of the educational context, including the classroom context.

### **ETHNOGRAPHY AS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Qualitative research is used as a general term for several research techniques sharing certain characteristics in relation to the type of data collected, data collection techniques and data sources, and the technique of data analysis. "The data collected has been termed soft, that is, rich in description of people, places, and conversations, and not easily handled by statistical procedures". It embodies the characteristics of the involvement of "participant observation and in-depth interviewing". In anthropology and sociology, *field research* is sometimes used interchangeably with qualitative research. In education, *naturalistic* is also used because a researcher collects data from the events naturally occur. Qualitative research is also often called ethnographic research (Bogdan and Biklen. 1982: 2-3). For Bogdan and Biklen, ethnography and qualitative research are two names of one thing. This is controversial to Hymes (1980: 89; 1996: 4) who explicitly states that "clearly not everything that is not those of research involving quantitative measurement should be considered *ethnography*". Similarly

Watson-Gegeo (1988) strongly believe that in spite of its qualitative-naturalistic feature, an ethnographic study is different from other qualitative research as it is "holistic" and consider the culture as "integral to the analysis". The question is "what makes ethnography distinct from other types of qualitative research?" or "what are the characteristic of ethnography?"

Bogdan and Biklen (1982: 27) contend that a study is qualitative or ethnographic if it has the following characteristics:

1. collecting data directly from the natural settings where "the researcher is the key instrument",
2. descriptive,
3. concerned with both process and not simply with outcomes or products,
4. inductive in data analysis, and
5. placing "meaning" as its essential concern.

Bogdan and Biklen include almost all characteristics of an ethnographic study. They take into consideration "natural settings" and "the researcher as the key instrument", which means direct involvement of the researcher through observation. They also stress that ethnography should be "descriptive" and be concerned with both "the process and products". Ethnography is a product, that is, a book contains description of something having been learned and interpreted, and at the same time a process, that is, a way of attempting a comprehensive understanding of a group of people (Agar 1980).

The term "process" suggests that there is a period of time involved in ethnographic research. It, however, does not directly indicate that the period should be long.

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) also list 5 characteristics of ethnography. They are:

- 1) It investigates small, relatively homogenous and geographically bounded study site.

- 2) It requires long-term residence of the researcher within the group under study.
- 3) It uses participant observation as the main data collection technique.
- 4) It involves the use of field notes.
- 5) It is interpretive, descriptive-explanatory.

In general, these characteristics are somewhat similar with the ones proposed by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) above. LeCompte and Preissle (1993), however, include another important characteristic, i.e. the requirement for long-term residence of the researcher. In addition, they also remind us about the important role of the field note in the process of data collection.

Holliday (1997), citing Spradley (1980), similarly, points out that "standard" ethnography would comprise:

- a) An extended study of a specified cultural environment. This could be almost everything - a community, a place of work, a small group of people, a set of documents, or even a single person or activity.
- b) An interpretive, qualitative approach where significant features of the culture are allowed to emerge. This involves direct observation of behaviour which is written up into an ethnographic record.
- c) The emergent significant features of the culture lead the researcher to focus in a particular direction and to develop categories which provide the structure for description and analysis.
- d) There is no claim to objectivity. There is simply a collection of illuminating instances which can contribute to the wider picture, the scientific rigour and system are in the discipline of researcher procedure which comprises tight rules concerning how the researcher relates to and writes about the research environment.

Holliday (1997) argues that a study can still be considered ethnographic although it only takes principle (b) and (d) as long as the researcher maintains constant involvement in the profession.

It is also important to mention what Agar (1980) says about the characteristics of ethnography. According to him (ibid: p194), besides descriptive, interpretive, there are three salient, main characteristics of an ethnographic study:

- 1) "Student-child-apprentice learning role". So, the researcher learns directly from the first hand source of data - from the group members of the society under study. This role implies that a researcher, in his/her attempt to gain comprehensive understanding of the society, acts like a student or a child. For example, s/he asks a lot of questions to the people around.
- 2) "First-hand data" because they are obtained directly from the group members. In addition to these, an ethnographic study involves;
- 3) "Direct, prolonged contact with the group member".

Agar (ibid) includes one of the very principle characteristics of ethnography in reference to the role of the ethnographer. And it is this role that is very specific in ethnography. "Student-child-apprentice learning role" means a lot to an ethnographer in the process of his or her inquiry. As a student, an ethnographer should learn directly from the first hand source of data - from the members of the group he or she is dealing with. An ethnographer, in his or her attempt to gain comprehensive understanding of the society, acts like a student or a child. An implication of this role, for example, is that an ethnographer is to ask a lot of questions - even the ones which sound silly to the informant - like a child. This role also requires him or her to undergo a learning process which is apprenticeship-based or learning by doing. In other words, an eth-

nographer knowledge or understanding of the society is gained through real life experiences.

Watson-Gegeo (1988) claims that there are four principles of ethnographic research:

- 1) Focus is on group's behaviours and cultural patterns in those behaviours.
- 2) Holistic, in the sense that none of the behaviours or aspect of the culture is taken for granted - all have to be described and explained in relation to all other parts.
- 3) Data collection starts with theoretical framework that helps focus attention on certain situation and research question. Theory is also important as it is helpful for the researcher to locate relevant data.
- 4) Ethnographic analysis studies use emic-etic principle (originally introduced by Pike 1964 in linguistics), that is participant-based perspective.

Principle 3 above is one of the principles rarely mentioned in the discussion of ethnography. It, however, is a core principle in an ethnographic research especially when one comes to the second stage of the research: topic-oriented stage, and more importantly, in the third stage: hypothesis-oriented. It is also obviously important in the field of applied ethnography.

According to Watson-Gegeo (1988) a long-term ethnographic project of a year or more usually involves three stages of work: "comprehensive, topic-oriented, and hypothesis-oriented" (cf. Hymes 1980). At the comprehensive stage the ethnographer focuses on the study of settings, observation of wider life of the target subjects for the mapping of the site, and interview on general aspect of the life of the target society. In this stage, the he or she uses triangulation technique by "putting together of information from different data sources and/or data collected through different research methods, such as participant-observation, interviewing, network mapping, and surveys is an important strategy for arriving at

valid findings in ethnographic work" (Watson-Gegeo citing Diesing, 1971).

At the second stage, topic-oriented stage, ethnographer focuses his or her observation according to the main topic of interest. He or she concentrates on "describing interactions and events as they occur in context, with the aim of generating focused research questions and/or hypothesis. At the Hypothesis-oriented stage, the ethnographer continues on doing focused observation in order to tests the hypothesis and answer research questions addressed at the previous stage, "through in-depth (often structured) interviews, continuous discourse analysis, and other forms of systematic analysis" (ibid).

## ETHNOGRAPHY AND EDUCATION

Despite a long and rich history of Ethnography – it started in ancient Mediterranean world from which Herodotus was one of the best known in the field – has become an area of interesting discussion in the field of education (Hymes, 1980:88; 1996: 3).

Ethnography can be used as an approach to a particular field of study such as education; hence, "educational ethnography which is used to describe educational settings and context" not particularly intended "to generate theory" but "to evaluate educational programs" (Holliday 1997). In this case, ethnography is only a tool used in the field of education. In other words, as Holliday (ibid) puts it, when "ethnography is attached to specific area of study" it would not be 'pure' - rather 'applied' ethnography - since such study is guided or preoccupied by certain issues within that field."

LeCompte and Preissle (1993), however, strongly believe that educational ethnography can also be a source of theory in education. They claim that "Educational Ethnography has been used to describe educational settings and contexts, to generate theory, and to evaluate educational programs".

By means of ethnography, "rich, descriptive data about the contexts, activities, and beliefs of participants in educational settings" could be gathered in order to produce a meaningful description of the classroom culture under investigation. This description which also includes explanation based on the interpretation made by the help of the researcher can produce a new theory, for example, on the pattern of interaction taking place in certain classroom contexts and its unique relationship to other social phenomena.

The popularity of ethnography in educational research has been described by Watson-Gegeo (1988) as follows,

Ethnography has been greeted with enthusiasm because of its promise for investigating issues difficult to address through experimental research, such as socio-cultural process in language learning, how institutional and societal pressures are played out in moment-to-moment classroom interaction, and how to gain a more holistic perspective on teacher-student interactions to aid teacher training and improve practice.

He (ibid) suggests that, in terms of teacher development, ethnography has two major practical contributions:

- 1) Ethnographic techniques of observation and interview can be applied in teacher supervision and feedback.
- 2) Ethnography helps teachers make a difference in their own classrooms.

In some situation, this depends upon the familiarity of the observer and readiness of the teacher with ethnographic principles. As pointed out previously, ethnographic observation has its own characteristics which might require the observer to be familiar with and be able to operate accordingly. This means that appropriate training is re-

quired. It is probably more contributive if observers and observees are of equal status in one way or another. In other words, observers are colleagues of the same status. This will be more advantageous in the sense that both the observer and observee will take the benefits from the observation. This also enables frequent discussion among them especially in informal contexts. In addition, ethnographic studies, for example, can help the teacher to understand the expectation brought by their students with them into the classroom: what they expect or do not expect their teachers do in classroom and in school environment, what types of interactions appropriate, etc.

By way of ethnography, every aspect of classroom culture is possible to understand. Therefore, Watson-Gegeo (1988) strongly supports the utilisation of ethnographic approach in the field of education, especially in the study of classroom culture because she believes that,

Classroom behaviour mystery can be unravelled using different research approach. More and more researchers believe the superiority of ethnographic approach in their efforts to understand what goes on in the classroom by the use of in-depth observations and interviews which are followed by qualitative analysis of the data.

The important point of the use of ethnography in the study of the classroom has been suggested by Hymes (1996: 8) who claims that ethnographic study of classroom should involve not only classroom observation but also observation of the behaviours and interaction mode of the participants (teacher and students) outside the classroom or other types of settings. Holliday (1994: 11) also argues that a significant understanding of classroom culture can be obtained only by looking into both inside- and outside-classroom culture because "much of what goes on within the classroom is influ-

enced by factors within the educational institution, the wider educational environment and the wider society." Teachers' and students' classroom activities and interactions, as Passasung (2003) studied are, to some extent, closely related to the wider culture.

### **ETHNOGRAPHY IN ESL/EFL EDUCATION**

Watson-Gegeo (1988) stresses the importance of ethnographic studies in understanding the complex issues of ESL classroom in order to improve the quality of classroom practices. Similarly, Locastro (1996) has considered the relevance of ethnography with the investigation of problematic issues of the classroom.

In the field of ESL, Watson-Gegeo (ibid) mentions at least 4 utilities of ethnography:

- 1) Through systematic documentation of teaching-learning interactions, it can help us understand L2 teaching and learning processes in real settings;
- 2) By means of ethnographic studies, one can see the important role of culture in L2 education, e.g. the roles, status, and of EFL teachers and expected relationship between students and teachers;
- 3) Ethnographic as an approach can help us understand that many Schemata are culture-based;
- 4) Similar to (1), ethnography can help us understand the "institutional context of schooling and societal pressure on teachers and students."

An ethnographic approach enables a researcher to be present in the real cultural context, and even to directly experience the culture in question. This is possible since, as Spradley and McCurdy (1972: 18) point out, "the ethnographer seeks to describe a culture using those criteria that his informants employ as they observe, interpret, and describe their own experiences during the

course of life." In this sense, the important point which is salient and unique in ethnographic research is the use of informants' viewpoints in the interpretation of their behaviours. In other words, ethnographer considers the owner of the behaviour as the one who know best, for instance, why they behave as such - interpretation is according to the informants. The presence of the researcher is important since in most cases informants, like other members of the group, take everything of their behaviours for granted. It is the job of the researcher to make everything meaningful for him or her.

Another superiority of ethnographic approach is its openness. In its attempt to reveal the "mystery" of a society's way of life it makes use of any available, relevant information no matter where or how this information has been found. It is very helpful for the people who want to utilise all available possibilities in their attempt to understand the society. As Hymes (1996: xii) points out,

Ethnographic inquiry is likely to show people doing the best they can with what they have to work with given what is possible and reasonable for them to believe to do. ... If one truly wants to know about a culture, a society, a way of life, one uses all there is to use. One does not refuse to know something because it is known in a certain way. Just so with schools and the educational configurations of neighbourhoods and communities. If we truly want to know them, we will welcome and use every approach that can contribute. Ethnography is indispensable and ... fundamental, but it is not the name of a methodological virgin undefiled. It can embrace anything useful so long as it can make the bed it lies in."

Ethnographic approach is also superior in the sense that it does not involve manipulation of settings. It takes them in the most natural condition and this allows access to

natural data. In these natural settings, an ethnographer is able to get access to real information he or she is looking for. Therefore, in the sense that "ethnographic research is a field research not a research carried out in a laboratory" researchers have a chance to "interact with people, watch what they do, listen to them talk, participate in their activities, and in that context describe their cultural knowledge" (Spradley and McCurdy 1972: 24).

By living within the society where the informants live, a researcher has more opportunities to "learn from and be taught by the native" and even goes beyond what he can observe to study the meaning of it (Spradley, 1979: 5). Being *a member of the community* provides a researcher with opportunities to live the life it lives, which in turn will enable him or her to interpret the experience according to the ways his or her informants interpret it. In other words, as Watson-Gegeo (1988), using Pike's terminologies, (1964) states that, ethnographic approach involves "etic-emic principles of analysis", that is the interpretation of cultural meanings from the viewpoints of the participants of a particular event. After all, this approach enables the searcher gather first-hand data through participant observation and interviews. As Duranti (1997:89 citing Malinowsky 1935, vol.2:3-4) points out,

The *observation* of a particular community is not attained from a distant and safe point but by being in the middle of things, that is, by *participating* in as many social events as possible. It is this often difficult but necessary combination of modalities of being with others and observing them that is referred to as *participant-observation*, a building stone of anthropology's contribution to our understanding of human cultures.

Through ethnographic studies, one can describe and explain the culture of a group

of people by inferring from what they say, the way they act and the tools they use (Spradley, 1979: 8).

## CONCLUSION

Ethnographic approach is relevant to be employed in the investigation of EFL/ESL education, and more particularly in the EFL/ESL classroom. An ethnographic study can be a rich source of information of an EFL/ESL classroom as it provides a thick description of its culture. Therefore, a number of researchers in the field have employed it for a better understanding of the nature of EFL/ESL teaching and learning. Falling into qualitative type, an ethnographic study make use of observation an informal interviews as its primary data collection techniques and employs on-going data interpretation as its main data analysis techniques.

Therefore, it is recommended that more and more researchers consider ethnographic approach in their efforts to describe classroom culture in general, and EFL/ESL culture in particular.

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