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Ethnographic Research in English Language Teaching: Methods, Methodologies and Practical Applications

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Abstract

Ethnographic research is carried out in a natural setting, not in a laboratory. It entails close, in-person communication with participants. The ideas and behaviours of the participants are accurately reflected in ethnographic research. To construct ideas about local cultures, it collects unstructured data in an inductive, participatory, and repetitive manner using analytical techniques. Ethnography is a holistic qualitative approach to research developed by anthropologists in order to understand people within their social and cultural contexts. It requires that researchers be reflective about their impact on the research site and the cultural group. The goals of ethnographic research are to be emic, all-encompassing, contextualized, holistic, and to focus on examining the interactions between intricate parts. Ethnographies often involve the uses of observations, interviews, diaries, field notes and other methods of data collection. Triangulation of data is always at the heart of the ethnographic process. This paper discusses the fundamental philosophical bases, history, and theoretical bases of ethnographic research. The article also describes the primary methodologies, techniques and tools used in ethnographic research. In addition, the article presents an ethnographic research template which can be used by English teachers for classroom purposes.

Keywords: Emic perspectives, thick description, triangulation of data, participant observation, etic perspective

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Introduction

The common patterns of behaviour, beliefs, and language that emerge over time inside a culture-sharing community are described, analyzed, and interpreted using ethnographic designs in qualitative research. Culture plays a vital role and is always placed at the centre in ethnographic research. A culture is a way of life and related to human behaviour and belief. It embodies language, rituals, economic and political structures, life stages, interactions, and communication styles. "To understand the patterns of a culture sharing group, the ethnographer typically spends considerable time "in the field" interviewing, observing, and gathering documents about the group to understand their culture-sharing behaviors, beliefs, and language" (Creswell 462). Ethnography is a holistic qualitative research procedure developed by anthropologists in order to understand people within their social and cultural contexts. The most commonly used ethnographic research technique is 'participant observation' where researchers immerse themselves into the sociocultural lives of the people whom they are studying. LeCompte and Preissle suggest that "ethnographic research is a process involving methods of inquiry, an outcome and a resultant record of the inquiry. The intention of the research is to create as vivid a reconstruction as possible of the culture or groups being studied." (235)

Ethnographic study, which has its roots in cultural anthropology, strives to describe and examine the customs and beliefs of other cultures and civilizations. Dornyei argues that

> Culture is not limited to ethnic groups but can be related to any 'bounded units' such as organization, programmes and even distinct communities. Thus we can talk about the ethnography of the language classroom, or the ethnographic analysis of specific schools or the language learning contexts. (130)

The primary objective of most ethnographic research is to provide a "thick description" of the target culture, which is a narrative that richly describes the daily life of the community as well as the cultural meanings, and the beliefs the participants attach to their activities, events and beahviours (Dornyei 130). 'Holism' and 'thick' explanations are the two guiding concepts in ethnographic research. The behaviour of the individuals and/or groups under consideration, as well as the setting in which the behaviour happens, which has a significant impact on the behaviour, both must be taken into account in holistic research. According to Johnson, the purpose of ethnographic research is to "describe and interpret the cultural behaviour, including

communicative behaviour, of a group" (134). Ramanathan and Atkinson state that the aim of ethnography is "to give an emically oriented description of the cultural practices of individuals" (49). In other words, the research is conducted from the perspective of the participants using categories specific to a given group and cultural system. This approach to research includes the adoption of a grounded approach to data, the use of 'thick' explanation, and going beyond description to analysis, interpretation, and explanation (Nunan 57). That is, ethnography entails interpretation, analysis, and explanation - not just description. 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 often involve the use of observations, interviews, diaries, and other methods of data collection. They frequently entail triangulation of data (Mackey and Gass169).

One of the major concepts of ethnography outlined by Watson-Gegeo in her review article from 1988 is the emphasis on group behaviour and the cultural patterns that underlie such behaviour. The use of a comprehensive method to describe and explain a specific pattern in connection to a larger system of patterns is another crucial element of ethnographic research. As a result, ethnography can be thought of as a qualitative research technique that typically emphasizes the group rather than the individual; it emphasizes the significance of situating the study within the larger sociocultural context, and strives to present an emic perspective of the phenomena under investigation.

In a very wide range of second language research contexts, ethnographic approaches have been used. These contexts include ethnographies of schools and language programmes, personal accounts and narratives, or life histories of learning and teaching children (Duff; Pavlenko and Lantolf).

Theoretical Bases

Ethnographic research has been welcomed by academics who view language learning as a deeply social process and consider second language acquisition as acquiring a second culture since applied linguistics as a profession has a fundamental interest in cross-cultural communication. Additionally, ethnography has been used for the contextualized research of classroom discourse and classroom learning due to the increasingly placed character of much modern SLA (Dornyei 130).

The cultural and linguistic anthropology as well as some sociological subfields of the early twentieth century laid the foundation for ethnography as a research

methodology. More recently, educational researchers who are concerned about the school failure of particular groups have adopted ethnography (Harklau and Lazaraton).

While Western anthropology focused on studying far-off, 'foreign' cultures, sociologists who engaged in ethnography in the West starting in the early 20th century adapted anthropology's method of understanding culture 'from the inside' to intensive observation of everyday urban environments, frequently studying subcultures in economically and socially disadvantaged communities. Ethnographic techniques have been adopted by researchers in the more recent discipline of applied linguistics since the 1960s, influenced by Hymes's demand for an ethnography of communication (Hymes and Saville-Troike) and the growth of the broad subject of sociolinguistics. Studies that draw on the ethnography of communication have examined teacher-learner interactions in the classroom and the disparities between home and school literacies (Duff).

The "social turn" in language study, which has resulted in a desire to gain a thorough understanding of language learning and teaching events in the unique (and frequently unequal) social contexts in which they take place, has encouraged the use of ethnographic approaches (Starfield). More conventional approaches would not have been able to capture the views and ways in which people make meaning within the complex sociocultural environments they inhabit, but the combination of long-term observation and the gathering of many types of data allows for such understandings.

Since applied linguistics is almost by definition interdisciplinary, many of its practitioners are currently collaborating with experts in a variety of fields, including health, the workplace, various organizations, the justice system, and education broadly construed, to conduct ethnographic research on the communication practices at these locations.

Philosophical Bases

Individuals' actions and words in one situation may not reflect their true intentions in another due to a multitude of circumstances influencing their conduct. As such, a researcher has to live with subjects for a considerable amount of time in their typical social and physical contexts in order to completely comprehend people's behaviours, emotions, beliefs, and thought processes.

Since qualitative researchers try to understand or interpret occurrences in terms of the meanings individuals assign to them, ethnography belongs to the category of

"qualitative research," which studies objects in natural contexts (Denzin and Lincoln 3). However, as Watson-Gegeo (1988) noted, ethnography is not the same as qualitative research. Impressionistic descriptions, fixed category observations, short participation, or a study built around a few in-depth, semi-structured interviews shouldn't be regarded as ethnography or ethnographic (Lazaraton).

The main characteristics of a broadly defined ethnographic method, according to Hammersley include studying people's behaviour in naturalistic rather than experimental contexts, gathering information from a variety of sources primarily through "observation and/or relatively informal conversation," and gathering information that is not based on pre-set categories or explicit hypotheses but rather arises out of a general interest in a problem or issue. (2-3) A single place or group is often the subject of small-scale ethnographic study. Another distinguishing characteristic of ethnography is the researcher's persistent involvement in the research environment. To better comprehend the meaning-making (also known as "emic" or "insider perspectives") behaviours of the group of individuals they are studying, researchers are urged to get completely involved in their daily lives. Ideas are derived inductively from the facts as opposed to being tested against preconceived notions or assumptions (as in deductive research). This is not meant to imply that ethnography lacks theory; rather, it is viewed as hypothesis-generating, with theory emerging, which fosters the development of theorization and potential generalization (also known as "etic" or outsider viewpoints) as the investigation advances.

Critical Ethnography

By "examining their access to economic, political, and cultural resources," critical ethnographic researchers take into account the social location of the group they are studying (Carspecken, qtd. in Cohen et al. 204). They also intentionally use macro-perspectives, such as sociological theory, to analyze "micro" ethnographic data that they have gathered. As a result, the macro-theories may be contested, improved, or changed. Critical ethnographic research acknowledges the complex relationships between social structures and human agency. Carspecken (4) suggests several key premises of critical ethnography (qtd. in Cohen et al. 243) which are as follows:

> research and thinking are mediated by power relations; these power relations are socially and historically located; facts and values are inseparable; relationships between objects and concepts are fluid and mediated by the social relations of production; language is central to perception; certain groups in society exert more power than others; inequality and oppression

are inherent in capitalist relations of production and consumption; ideological domination is strongest when oppressed groups see their situation as inevitable, natural or necessary; forms of oppression mediate each other and must be considered together (e.g. race, gender, class).

Characteristics of Ethnography

Ethnographic studies often employ qualitative data and rely on participant interviews, photographs, documents, realia and other relevant sources in addition to direct observation of things like behaviour, language, and space utilization. However, ethnography is more than a collection of tools; it is a way of looking at human behaviour that aims to uncover and put together the opinions and values of participants.

The characteristics of ethnography include the use of participant and non-participant observation, a focus on natural settings, the use of the participants' subjective opinions and belief systems to structure the research, and the researcher's avoidance of manipulating the study variables (Nunan 55). In their 1988 paper, Watson-Gegeo and Ulichny outlined several fundamental tenets of ethnographic inquiry. These include using 'thick' explanation, adopting a grounded approach to facts, and moving past description to analyze, interpret, and explain. The principal characteristics (Nunan 56) of ethnographic research are recorded in table 1 below.

Table 1. Characteristics of Ethnographic Research

Characteristic	Gloss
Contextual	The research is carried out in the context in which the subjects normally live and work
Unobtrusive	The researcher avoids manipulating the phenomena under investigation
Longitudinal	The research is relatively long
Collaborative	The research involves the participation of stakeholders other than the researcher
Interpretative	The researcher carries out interpretative analyses of the data
Organic	There is interaction between questions/hypotheses and data collection/interpretation

Steps and the Research Process

An individual interested in doing an ethnographic study must first determine if he or she has the necessary time, resources, expertise, personal style, and dedication to carry out this type of research. As in narrative research in which "researchers

collect data about people's lives and construct meanings with the help of their experiences (Pandey 27), there are some steps which can be followed while adopting an ethnography as a design in ELT research. Gay, Mills and Airasian (378) outline a few fundamental procedures that might act as a roadmap while carrying out an ethnographic investigation.

1. Identify the purpose of the research study and frame it as a larger theoretical, policy, or practical problem.
2. Determine the research site and the sample for the study.
3. Secure permissions and negotiate entry to the research site.
4. Collect data including the use of participant observation, field notes, interviews, and the examination of artifacts such as school policy documents and attendance records.
5. Analyze data.
6. Write an ethnographic account that is usually a narrative capturing the social, cultural, and economic themes that emerge from the study.

Techniques and Tools

The techniques of observation through fieldwork, with participant observation (observation that involves interaction with those being studied) being frequently used, the keeping of field notes, formal and informal interviews of informants/ participants, typically using either audio or videotaping, and the collection of pertinent documents available at the site or archivally are all part of ethnographic research methods of data collection. These techniques enable triangulation and assist the researcher in providing the detailed description that is thought to be necessary for ethnographic research.

The researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection, as was already said, which is one of the distinctive characteristics of ethnographic research. A tremendous depth of insight is added by the researcher's increased awareness that results from "being present" in the environment. Participant observation and interviews are the cornerstones of the ethnographic methods which are covered in the following sections (Starfield).

Triangulation

In qualitative research circles, it is commonly acknowledged that researchers should not depend solely on one source of data, be it an observation, interview, or survey instrument. This is known as triangulation. Triangulation, or the use of many

instruments, is hence the strength of qualitative research. In order to acquire a more thorough grasp of the issue at hand and to cross-check data, triangulation is the employment of several procedures, data collection methods, and data sources. To ensure the validity of their data, qualitative researchers employ triangulation as a principal strategy. In ethnographic research, the investigator acts as the research tool, collecting data using a variety of techniques over an extended period of time and "ferreting out varying perspectives on complex issues and events." When collecting data for an ethnographic study, researchers must adhere to the triangulation idea (Gay, Mills and Airasian 383)

Participant Observation

The term "participant observer" refers to a researcher who actually takes part in the action being studied. Participant observation is done with at least two objectives in mind: first, to watch the events, people, and physical features of a scenario; second, to participate in activities that are appropriate for the situation at hand and that might yield meaningful data. The most commonly used ethnographic research technique is 'participant observation' where researchers immerse themselves into the sociocultural lives of the people whom they are studying. Gay, Mills and Airasian argue,

> The participant observer is fully immersed in the research setting to get close to those studied as a way of understanding what their experiences and activities mean to them. This immersion provides a window through which the researcher can see how participants in the study lead their lives as they carry out their daily activities. (383)

Additionally, it gives the researcher a chance to ascertain what and why participants find it relevant. Ethnographic researchers have several possibilities to actively engage and watch while they work, depending on the nature of the topic.

Field Notes

In the course of a study, field notes are collected, noted, and assembled on the spot. A researcher's understanding of the lives, people, and events that are the subject of their ethnographic study are documented in their field notes. Several insights into the nature and application of field notes in ethnographic research are offered by Emerson and others.

Ethnographic Interviews

Interviewing is a common research method, but ethnographic interviews are unique due to their length, frequency of contact. Interviews in ethnography are considered as a site of meaning construction and as a means of "producing" a text for interpretation. The essential elements of ethnographic interviews in Heyl's words (370) are listening skillfully and respectfully, forming an ethical relationship with the participants at every stage, becoming self-aware of one's part in the co-construction of meaning, understanding how the ongoing relationship and larger social context affect participants, processes, and outcomes, and realizing that "dialogue is discovery" and that only partial knowledge is possible (qtd. in Starfield). Researchers can examine phenomena that are not readily visible through interviews, such as learners' self-reported attitudes or perceptions. Furthermore, since interviews are interactive, researchers can ask follow-up questions to get more information if respondents' first responses are not clear-cut, comprehensive, relevant, or detailed enough.

Ethnography in English Language Teaching: Practical Applications

Ethnographic research is used to evaluate educational programmes and innovative processes. It is used to study classroom cultures to understand the experiences of students and teachers, and their relationships to one another, in different types of educational settings. Ethnographic research in ELT studies social and cultural lives in motion just as "Narrative inquiry studies teachers' lives in motion" (Pandey 32). Researchers using narrative inquiry in EFL describe the lives of individual participants, collect and tell stories about people's lives (Pandey 30) whereas ethnography is a holistic qualitative research procedure designed and developed to understand people within their social and cultural contexts.

While conducting research on second language writing classrooms, an ethnographer may set out to describe the patterns of teacher-student interaction and show how those patterns connect to the writing process. The researcher may, however, change the emphasis of the study and start focusing on the kinds of feedback that are offered by both instructors and students after several classroom observations, analyses of student essays, and interviews with both students and teachers.

Why, for instance, do certain heritage language learners perform badly while studying a foreign language in a structured classroom setting? In an effort to find material useful for answering the question, an anthropological approach to this issue may look at the background, the instructor and students' attitudes, the effect of the

home and social groups, and other factors. Participant observation, in which the researcher takes part in language lessons or attends social gatherings where the language is spoken in some form, may be employed if the researcher also has a heritage language background. Due to the fact that ethnographies frequently use a variety of data-collection techniques, including participant observations, open-ended interviews, and written outputs, ethnographic research may be able to offer a comprehensive, culturally grounded, and emic perspective of the phenomenon under study (Mackey and Gass 169).

The goal of an ethnographic study is to get an emic (insider) perspective, or a representation of the situation as seen by the participants themselves. An etic perspective, on the other hand, is the possibly objective but occasionally ignorant or incorrect viewpoint of an outsider. Ethnographic researcher often assumes the role of a "participant observer," joining and engaging with a group while they go about their normal lives. The goal of an ethnographer is to provide a "thick description" (Geertz 1973) – a description that captures not only visible features/events but also the meaning that these have for the real participants in the social setting (qtd. in Palfreyman 146). A key strength of the ethnographic perspective according to Palfreyman (157) is that

> it deals with every day, possibly situations, but takes nothing for granted. A researcher taking an ethnographic approach will not begin to observe an event such as a lesson (even her/his own lesson) with the assumption that they know what sort of lesson "should" take place, or that a student who is apparently inactive is "doing nothing", rather, they will wait and observe, looking out for unexpected occurrences (or non-occurrences) which reveal assumptions made by the teacher and the students. These rich points may be further investigated using more observation and other techniques like interviews.

Ethnography may be conducted with comparatively less resources than certain other research methodologies and is highly akin to daily life and work. The key prerequisites are time, patience, an open mind, and the capacity to pay attention, observe, and think. Although ethnography focuses on situations rather than language per se, it may be used to study how language functions in certain activities or circumstances.

An ethnographic investigation may be conducted on a very little scale. A teacher could, for instance, examine how students and the instructor approach an activity,

how they respond to it, how they discuss it afterwards, and how they attempt to replicate or avoid it in the future. An intriguing incident or observation might serve as the basis for the research; for instance, you might discover that certain students shy away from taking part in activities. The next step in an ethnographic approach would be to investigate why, for instance, students avoid certain tasks and the means by which they accomplish; so how they view these activities; and how they understand their own position inside and maybe outside of the classroom (Palfreyman).

The goal is not just to record the specifics of what you see in a given context; it is also to generate hypotheses and ideas to explain what is going on beneath the surface; it is also to generate hypothetical ideas and constantly compare them with new or existing evidence, from observation, interviews, or other sources. Some find that underlining points in hard copy notes with different colours make it easier to identify themes that appear in their data; others type up their notes and other data on a computer so they can quickly search through it for keywords and easily insert their own comments and questions, or even use specialized software such as NVivo, Atlas.ti, or Transana to help them analyze the data.

Classroom Ethnography: A Research Template

A classroom ethnography consists of participant observation of one particular class, and includes descriptions of pedagogy, student-teacher interactions, teaching-learning materials, physical environment, student and teacher behaviours, an interview with the teacher to discuss teaching philosophy and how the teacher implements his or her beliefs in his or her teaching, and interviews with a few students regarding their experience learning in that particular classroom. As a student-teacher, one will be in the unique position of being able to practise ethnographic research skills while engaging in one's teaching practicum.

Table 2. A Research Template

Name:		
Section	Information	Questions to consider
1. Focus		1. Describe the focus of your study: *What are you going to study? etc.*
2. Physical structure		2. Describe the physical structure of the situation, e.g. Classroom
3. People		3. Describe your research participants. *Who are you observing?*
4. Activities		4. Describe the activities that take place in your chosen setting. *What are the various people doing?* *How do they treat one another?*
5. Conversations		5. Describe typical topics of conversation. *What do people talk about? What exchanges?* *Initiations, discourses, teacher discourses, student discourses, T-S exchanges, etc.*
6. Ambiance		6. Describe the ambiance of the setting. *What does it feel like to be in the classroom space?* *Relaxed, tense, welcoming, unwelcoming?* *What is the décor like?* *How are shelves, tables etc. arranged? Crowded?* *Spacious? Clean? Dirty, etc.*
7. Participant Perspective I		7. Interview some students in the class.
8. Participant Perspective II		8. Interview the teacher-participant(s).
9. Time		9. Describe the time period you observed the situation as a participant. *When did you observe?* *How long time did you spend observing?*
10. Main findings		10. Organize and summarize your findings. *What were your principle findings?*
11. Analysis		11. Discuss what you learned about the situation. *What did you learn about this situation and what it is like to participate in it as the teacher or as a student?*
12. Conclusions		12. Write a one-page, single-spaced summary about what you learned and its significance to you. *What was significant about the situation?* *Why do you think the feature(s) are significant?*

Conclusions

ELT practitioners use an ethnographic approach as they believe that writing, reading, speaking, listening, and language learning are primarily shaped by the social contexts in which they take place and they are interested in learning about the meanings that participants in these processes bring to the communicative events in which they engage. Ethnography remains a widespread methodology for research in language education research as well as in many other disciplines**.** Conducting ethnographic research is labour-intensive and it demands time, resources, and energy. Ethnographic research is in-depth, immersive and prolonged study of a community or a group.

Ethnography is currently one of the major approaches to research on second language learning and teaching. It is a holistic qualitative approach to research developed by anthropologists in order to understand people within their social and cultural contexts. Ethnographic study aims to characterize, examine, and understand a group's culture throughout time in terms of the common behaviours, beliefs, and language of the group. A culture is a set of common attitudes, values, ideas, customs, and beliefs of a group. Ethnographic research employs ethnographic instruments, such participant observation, in-depth interviews, diaries, field notes and other means of data collection to tap into participants' perspectives. The use of these multiple methods helps the researcher provide the thick description considered essential for ethnographic research and enable triangulation, which is vital for holistic approach. An ethnographic study should always use an ethnographic approach, which consists of a reflective methodology and an emic perspective.

When describing a specific pattern in connection to a larger system of patterns, ethnographic research adopts a holistic approach. Therefore, ethnography can be thought of as a qualitative research technique that typically concentrates on the group as opposed to the individual. This method seeks to provide an emic viewpoint on the phenomenon being studied.

Ethnography, like other approaches, has in recent years taken a critical turn. In order to examine how power might influence social and linguistic opportunities for various individuals, critical ethnography focuses ethnography's attention on underlying social patterns.

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