

Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development

Publisher: Universidad Nacional de Colombia (Sede Bogotá). Facultad de Ciencias Humanas. Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras. Grupo de Investigación PROFILE. Bogotá, Colombia. Carrera 30 No. 45-03. Edificio 229. Phone: (57) 601 3165000 Ext. 16780 - Email: rprofile_fchbog@unal.edu.co, mlcardenasb@unal.edu.co

ISSN printed: 1657-0790

ISSN online: 2256-5760

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Ethnography in Foreign Language Teaching

Etnografía en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras

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The aim of the present article is to describe ethnography as a qualitative approach frequently applied in foreign language acquisition research (Pollard, 1985; Smith, 1992; Robinson-Stuart and Nocon, 1996). Reviews of two studies having used ethnographic techniques are presented in the paper to highlight the theoretical background for such an investigative method. The first study discusses issues about participant observation, while the second depicts the language learner in the role of the ethnographer. The paper also tries to throw light on the various tasks of the ethnographer as well as the values (emic and holistic view) and limitations (the insider/outsider dilemma) of ethnography.

Key words: Culture, Ethnography, Ethnographer, Qualitative Research-Techniques, Participant Observation

El objetivo de este artículo es describir la etnografía como un método cualitativo que es utilizado frecuentemente en la investigación de la adquisición de una lengua extranjera (Pollard, 1985; Smith, 1992; Robinson-Stuart and Nocon, 1996). En el documento se presentan reseñas de dos estudios que implementaron técnicas etnográficas, con el propósito de resaltar los antecedentes históricos de este tipo de método de investigación. El primer estudio trata acerca de temas relacionados con la observación de los participantes, mientras que el segundo estudio presenta al aprendiz de lengua en el rol de etnógrafo. El documento también da varias pautas sobre las tareas del etnógrafo, así como los valores (el punto de vista émico y holístico) y las limitaciones (el dilema interno y externo) de la etnografía.

Palabras claves: Cultura, Etnografía, Etnógrafo, Técnicas Investigación Cualitativa, Observación Participativa

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I. INTRODUCTION

Without being aware of it, every person is an ethnographer in that he or she tries to make sense of the environment surrounding him or her “through observation, listening and eventually talking” (Barro, Jordan and Roberts, 1998, p. 76). People learn how to behave or what to say in different situations and how to act within their own social milieu. This is very close to the tasks of ethnography, with the difference that ethnography is “the study of ‘other’ people and the social and cultural patterns that give meaning to their lives” (Ibid.). Ethnography is tightly linked with culture because the main purport of ethnography is to describe it (Spradley and McCurdy, 1972, in Hornberger, 1994).

Ethnography is a research approach widely used in foreign language investigations (see, for example, Pollard, 1985; Smith, 1992; Robinson-Stuart and Nocon, 1996). The present paper discusses issues regarding ethnography as an important tool in foreign language teaching and acquisition research. It also aims at emphasizing the crucial role of this technique by reviewing two recent studies that have used ethnographic research techniques.

2. ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE TASKS OF THE ETHNOGRAPHER

2.1 What is Ethnography?

Before making an attempt to define ethnography as a research approach, one should look at the definition of culture because the target of ethnographic investigations is the description of culture.

Geertz (1975) defines culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings, embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life” (pp. 89; cited in Byram, 1989, p. 60). According to Valette (1986), this “historically transmitted pattern of meanings” consists of two major constituents. The first component is what she calls “anthropological or social culture: the attitudes, customs and daily activities of a people, their ways of thinking, their values, their frames of reference” (p. 179). Valette describes the second component of culture as “the history of civilisation”. She states that the first component’s framework is formed by the second component itself, which symbolises the heritage of a nation and “as such must be appreciated by the students who wish to understand the new target culture” (Valette, 1986, p. 179).

In order to obtain information on the culture of this or that people, one can make use of an anthropological method which can prove to be of help in this intention. This descriptive technique is ethnography. It is a qualitative type of research that makes use of non-quantitative techniques (e.g. open-ended interviews) and/or naturalistic data (e.g. diary studies, participant observation, etc.) (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Nunan, 1991).

It is a common view (considered to be a major problem by quantitative researchers) that qualitative studies (ethnographic ones, too) do not result in “hard”, replicable and generalisable data as do quantitative studies.

An answer to this criticism is the view of Davis (1995), who believes that “just as with experimental or statistical research designs, each and every legitimate qualitative method is dependent on particular conceptual and methodological procedures to ensure credibility, dependability, and transferability” (p. 432).

In Robinson’s view (1985), “ethnography is a method of describing a culture or situation from the ‘emic’ or native’s point of view, i.e. from the point of view of the cultural actor” (p. 73). Therefore, the ethnographer (i.e. the person carrying out an ethnographic research) is present in the daily lives of people either explicitly or implicitly “for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, in fact collecting whatever data is available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; cited in Wallace, 1991, p. 76).

Sperber (1985) thinks that ethnography as an anthropological approach to culture “answers the legitimate curiosity as to what it is like to belong to another culture” (p. 10). He believes that ethnography is a “curiosity” which focuses on how facts are experienced by the individual and which requires interpretations of these facts rather than only their descriptions.

What is more, Byram (1989), in his comparison of reading an ethnographic account and reading a critical analysis of a novel or a film, argues it is descriptions, photographs and films by which the writer of the ethnographic account tries to make the reader understand the object described.

2.2 The Tasks of the Ethnographer

It has been mentioned that the ethnographer is the participant of the culture he attempts to depict and that he describes it from the insider’s perspective at an emic level. He has to explain and “interpret the significance of particular phenomena as they operate within the semantic system of a particular culture at the emic level” (Guthrie and Hall, 1981, in Byram, 1989, p.66). Thus, the tasks of the ethnographer are to participate in a culture and observe it, then interpret what he has seen or heard or experienced. One may criticise this kind of observation as being subjective. Robinson (1985) responds to this criticism by saying that “to the extent that the ethnographer loses objectivity and interprets things from the native’s point of view, we are getting an inside, emic account of culture” (p. 74) which is the aim of those interested in ethnographic accounts.

3. ETHNOGRAPHY IN PEDAGOGY: A REVIEW OF TWO STUDIES

3.1. The Teacher in the Role of Ethnographer

Pollard (1985) reports of a teacher-ethnographer who conducted an ethnographic study of his own school while teaching full-time teacher at the same institution. The account aims at giving a thorough description of what it means to be a participant-observer, and what opportunities and difficulties a teacher-ethnographer has when trying to fulfil the duties of the teacher and of the researcher.

The research method applied in this study was that of participant observation. It was evident from the circumstances that the investigator could easily function as a participant because of his teaching position. He also had to fulfil the role of the "observer" (Pollard, 1985). When doing so, it was essential to avoid "going native", which meant that while the investigator got very much involved in the whole research and identified himself with its participants, he did not manage to meet the requirements of the investigation itself.

Before the investigation began, permission from the head teacher, who was very supportive throughout the research, was obtained. The attitudes of the teachers and children regarding the study were similar to that of the head teacher i.e. both teachers and children were helpful and willing to participate, although some teachers had fears when being interviewed. They were afraid because they thought the head teacher would not like their answers about the school and the administration of the school, even when they were told that the interviews were anonymous.

Some major difficulties emerged while teaching full-time and conducting the research at the same time. One of these was time. Although the researcher had easy access to classrooms for observation, his biggest problem was that during teaching time he himself was fulfilling his teacher role. This he thought to be the origin of a "considerable methodological weakness", because, for some parts of the research, he had to depend solely on data from interviews (Pollard, 1985).

Data were collected from seventy-five Caucasian children and fifteen children of Asian parentage via one and a half hour long interviews during dinner breaks. During the data collection procedure, the researcher was helped by children who volunteered to play the part of 'interviewers' and be the member of the Moorside Investigation Department (MID) (the study was conducted at Moorside Middle School, England, between 1976-1978). The reason for having children interviewers help in collecting the data was that the respondents would answer questions like What do you think of your school? or Who is your favourite teacher? more sincerely from children interviewers (i.e. their peers) than from a person who is a teacher at the institution where they studied (Pollard, 1985).

The conclusion Pollard draws is that to carry out a study in which the researcher is a full participant-observer is exhausting and difficult, but at the same time it is "fascinating and rewarding to identify patterns in the data" (Pollard, 1985, p.105) and to arrive at an in-depth understanding of events and surroundings in which the researcher participates.

3.2. The Language Learner in the Role of Ethnographer

The second study introduced in this section is about second culture acquisition and the use of ethnographic interviewing techniques in the language learning process "to promote positive attitudes towards the speakers of the language studied" (Robinson-Stuart and Nocon, 1996, p. 431). The study was conducted at San Diego State University,

San Diego, USA, in a multinational and multicultural area, where knowledge of a language other than English was a useful tool in understanding cross-cultural interactions.

The participants were twenty-four students in a third semester university Spanish class (Robinson-Stuart and Nocon, 1996). The subjects' task comprised of conducting interviews with a native Spanish speaker (these usually were Mexican friends or acquaintances of the students living in the San Diego area). The writing up of the findings was the students' term assignment. They were pre-trained in order to be able to conduct an interview involving the ethnographic technique of active listening (Robinson-Stuart and Nocon, 1996).

Concerning this interviewing technique, one must bear in mind that the questions in an ethnographic interview are open ones. There is no pre-composed interview protocol. The questions are "built upon the utterances of the interviewee ... The interviewer must continually listen to and interact with what the speaker has said" (Robinson-Stuart and Nocon, 1996, p. 436). After each answer of the interviewee, the interviewer has to probe by asking the question What do you mean? (Ibid.).

Before students carried out their tasks, they were pre-surveyed, and after they had done the practical part of their assignment, they were also post-surveyed. To be able to compare pre- and post-survey results, the subjects were given codes. This was also useful for preserving anonymity. In these surveys, students were asked questions like Why did you begin to study

Spanish?, Do you have Mexican friends? or How would you describe your goal in your study of Spanish?, etc.

There was a separate post-survey in which the researchers wanted to know how the subjects perceived the task of doing an ethnographic interview and whether their attitude towards the Spanish language and the Mexican people living in San Diego changed because they had undergone such a task.

The findings proved that a positive change occurred in the students' attitudes towards the speakers of the target language and their culture, and what is more interesting, greater desire emerged to learn the target language itself.

Another important conclusion was that by taking part in the ethnography project, students acquired the life skill of active listening, which can make communication between various cultures better and make understanding of the other culture easier (Robinson-Stuart and Nocon, 1996).

4. THE VALUE AND LIMITATIONS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

So far it has been shown how ethnography works in real life situations in educational contexts and what responsibilities the ethnographer has. This section intends to show the value and limitations of ethnography as a research approach.

In Hornberger's (1994) opinion, "the value of ethnography lies in its holistic and emic view" (p. 688). The holistic view is

associated with the objective of the ethnographer, which is to create a full picture of the culture or event he is observing and analysing, "a picture that leaves nothing unaccounted for and that reveals the interrelatedness of all the component parts" (Ibid). What is appreciated here is that the approach provides the opportunity to compare and contrast what actors of the given culture say and do in order to receive a whole, detailed and realistic description and interpretation of the processes within that culture (Hornberger, 1994).

The emic view implies the intention of the ethnographer to show the point of view of the insider, the cultural actor. He tries to depict the thoughts, feelings, experiences of the members of the given culture. The value in this perspective is "the potential for new, unexpected, and unpredictable understandings to emerge" (Hornberger, 1994, p. 689).

One of the most obvious limitations of ethnographic studies is the insider/outsider dilemma (Hornberger, 1994) i.e. how the two perspectives can be balanced. Hornberger mentions several dimensions as part of the dilemma e.g. being too familiar with the culture under examination may cause distortion in interpretation, while the insider explanation and understanding may be inhibited by the ethnographer's being a total stranger to the culture.

Another issue that is raised by Byram (1989) when discussing the value and limitations of ethnographic research is that of representativeness in ethnographic studies. He states that ethnographers do not

select their subjects applying statistical sampling; therefore, their informants cannot be representative of the population. In contrast, Boster claims that "individuals' acquired cultural competence is a version of society's shared culture" (Byram, 1989, p. 118). If so, then the informants in an ethnographic account can be considered representatives of their own culture.

5. SUMMARY

The present paper has intended to throw light on what ethnography as a research approach in the educational context means. It is "the study of the 'other' people and the social and cultural patterns that give meanings to their lives" (Barro, et al., 1998). The main task of the ethnographer is to explain these social and cultural patterns to those who have never experienced them (Byram, 1989).

The paper has given summaries of two ethnographic studies. In one of them, the purpose was to show the problems the participant-observer has to face when carrying out such a research type. The other summary was an account of a study, the findings of which showed a positive change in the subjects' attitudes towards members of another culture.

The value and limitations of ethnographic research were also described in the paper, the main value being in its emic and holistic view, while a major limitation being the insider/outsider dilemma.

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