

Research in the Language Classroom^x

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3 = Regularly This is something that I did four or five times this week in this class.

In presenting a grammar teaching point for the first time I:

1. presented the teaching point both orally and with visual aids.
2. used pictures and diagrams to convey the meaning of the teaching point.
3. presented the teaching point indirectly in the context of spoken language, but did not formally teach it.
4. presented the teaching point indirectly in the context of written language, but did not formally teach it.
5. presented the teaching point indirectly in the context of spoken language and pointed it out to the students.
6. presented the teaching point indirectly in the context of written language and pointed it out to the students.
7. presented the teaching point using only the target language.
8. reviewed with the students relevant, previously-presented grammatical structures.
9. gave the students several examples of the teaching point, and guided them in discovering the grammatical rule.
10. gave the students several examples of the teaching point, before supplying them with the grammatical rule.
11. translated examples of the teaching point to be certain that the students understood.
12. assisted the students in participating in a target language conversation, then drew the teaching point from the language that the students themselves had generated.
13. spoke only in the target language, but modified the structure, vocabulary, and speed so that the students could understand easily.
14. did not focus on grammar in the teaching of language.
15. based new teaching points on previously-presented grammatical structure.
16. gave only one example of the teaching point and did it orally.
17. embedded the teaching point in a command designed to elicit a non-verbal response from the students.
18. relied on gestures and mime to convey the meaning of the teaching point.
19. drew the teaching point from dialogue that the students had memorised.
20. explained the teaching point in English.
21. conducted oral drills on the teaching point before presenting it formally.
22. wrote the grammatical rule on the board/overhead before beginning to explain it.
23. gave the students the general grammatical rule, then wrote examples of the rule on the board/overhead.
24. allowed students to look at the explanation in their textbooks while I was presenting the teaching point.
25. had the students read a grammar explanation in their texts before I presented it in class.

Ethnography: Bandaid, Bandwagon, or Contraband?

Leo van Lier

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Introduction

Much has been written in recent years about ethnography and its actual or potential uses in education. Rather than reviewing the theoretical arguments and describing the methodological options in detail I refer the reader to some of the key surveys (Cazden 1985, Erickson 1985, Hymes 1981, Watson-Gegeo 1988).¹

In this paper I first want to place ethnography in the context of scientific enquiry in general and then focus on its current status in SLA research. Finally I will speculate on various ways in which the application of ethnography can be fruitful in teaching praxis, teacher development, and the language learning process. Overall, then, I aim to present a top-down dissection of ethnography, from its theoretical underpinnings to its practical uses for the classroom teacher and learner.

Ways of doing scientific research

Just the place for a Shark! I have said it twice:

That alone should encourage the crew.

Just the place for a Shark! I have said it thrice:

What I tell you three times is true.

(Lewis Carroll: *The Hunting of the Shark*)

It is useful to discuss choices in the way empirical research is conducted in terms of two parameters: the degree to which the researcher *intervenes* in the environment, and the degree to which phenomena are *selected* (or isolated) from the context in which they occur. The intersection of these two parameters creates four semantic spaces, as illustrated in Fig. 1, and briefly described on page 34.

¹ For two book-length introductions to ethnography, see Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, Saville-Troike 1982; for edited collections of papers illustrating ethnographic work in schools and classrooms, see Adelman 1981, Gilmore and Glatthorn 1982, Trubea, Guttnie and Au 1981, Trubea 1987.

Measuring	+	Structured	Controlling
	↑ selectivity	Experiments Quasi-experiments	Controlled
Surveys 'Coding' 'Systematic' observation	-	Intervention →	+
Observation Case study Protocols Stories Diaries		Action research Interviewing Elicitation	
Watching	-		Asking/Doing

Fig. 1 Types of research. From van Lier 1988: 57.

I Measuring

One selects certain features, operationally defines them, and quantifies their occurrence, in order to establish a relationship between features, or between features and other things, such as educational outcomes.

II Controlling

One controls significant variables in the environment in order to study selected features in that environment. If features cannot be directly controlled, they can be statistically neutralised by means of randomisation. Once all variables are under control, or are randomised, true experiments can be conducted. A lesser degree of control, partly compensated for by means of statistical tests, leads to various kinds of compromise designs, commonly referred to as quasi-experimental studies.

III Watching

One observes and documents whatever happens in an environment without interfering with that environment. One may progressively focus on selected features in the environment, and thus move from III to I. Quantification may be used, but it is seen as no more than one tool among many, and not inherently superior to any other way of analysing data.

IV Asking/doing

One investigates certain problem areas by probing, trying out minor changes, asking for participants' views and concerns, and so on. After a while it may be possible to pinpoint the problem so precisely that a

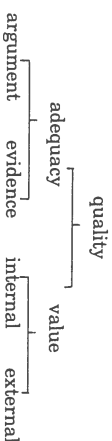
controlled environment can be created in order to conduct an experiment, thus moving from IV to II. On the other hand, increased understanding through interpretation can also make experimentation unnecessary.

Clearly, most research does not fall neatly into one of the four boxes created here. Rather, the researcher combines different features according to a particular *research design* or just in response to problems and possibilities, constraints and resources, since research is in practice 'messy' rather than 'neat'. However, researchers tend to have certain preferences which are in part based on assumptions of value, quality and truth. For example, one of the most prominent assumptions among researchers is that the ultimate aim of research is to find laws of cause and effect (so-called 'natural laws'). In this view, truth (that which has been proven without doubt to accord with facts) is causal truth, and the value of a particular research effort increases as it comes closer to establishing causal relationships. The quality of research is measured in terms of adherence to methods which promote the search for causal truth. Thus, a range of assumptions which are tacitly accepted by a vast majority of producers and consumers of research, is based on a particular definition of truth as *that which expresses a causal law*.

We must not forget another assumption inherent in the above classification, namely that research must essentially be empirical. This view does not take into account the potential fruitfulness of more speculative forms of enquiry, such as the hypothetico-deductive method of research. In particular, scientists are increasingly aware that in scientific discovery interpretation and experimentation go hand in hand. Pamstaking empirical studies are most fruitful and cumulative when they are steered by theoretical positions which suggest that a certain direction is a useful one. In that sense, therefore, theory, which is always in part speculative and intuitive, guides both interpretive and normative enquiry.

In order to understand the discussions between ethnographers and cause/effect researchers, it is necessary to explore the notions of truth and understanding, cause and effect, however philosophical and abstract these notions may seem. Failing to do so places all arguments on a superficial and trivial plane. In the next section, therefore, I will look at the notion of *research quality*² in terms of the basic ideas of truth and

² The concept of *quality* as a superordinate concept is crucial. It encompasses both reliability and validity. However, since these latter terms are associated with experimental and statistical norms, I prefer to use the terms *adequacy* (of argumentation and evidence) and *value* (within a theory, ie internal, and to human affairs in general, ie external), as shown in the diagram below (see Raveit 1971).



understanding. I do not presume to have any superior knowledge of these matters, but I do stress that it is essential that we think about them and discuss them intensely.

Truth and causality

We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. (Wittgenstein 1961: 73)

Much of classroom research is based on a belief that everything that happens has a cause. One of the things that happens in the world is that people learn second languages. The belief in causes asserts that this event-series, whenever it occurs, is caused by a set of conditions. If we can find out what these conditions are, then we can place people who want to or need to learn second languages in these conditions, and the desired result will occur.

The belief that everything that happens has a cause is known as the Causal Principle. To paraphrase Hospers (1967: 308), the Causal Principle states that for every event in the universe there is a set of conditions such that if the conditions, C, are all fulfilled, the event, E, invariably occurs (or, in a weaker version, E 'will probably occur').

But what if the Causal Principle is false? Or if L2 development is only partly caused by antecedent conditions? In these cases, very clearly, research based on causal models of science is certainly incomplete and possibly misguided. We will need to look for other ways of studying L2 learning, ways which are not based on a piecemeal sifting through all the conditions which may be relevant, but which simply try to understand the circumstances in which complex processes take place.

Supporters of the Causal Principle will object that there is no reason to believe that L2 learning does not fall under the domain of causal events, and that in fact we cannot know this until we have proved it. This is true, but of course the same reasoning would require that the causality of events can also be disproved, and this can never be done. If we find causes, then indeed the Causal Principle is proved. However, if we don't find causes, the Principle is *not disproved*. We may say, for example, that there are causes but that we haven't been able to find them yet. Or we may say that the causal conditions are so complex that it will take a very long time to find them. So, although the principle of causality must be confirmed by empirical evidence, there is no empirical evidence which requires us to abandon it (thus, causal studies fail the 'falsifiability requirement' of Popper, see eg Phillips 1987).

If it is assumed *a priori* that L2 learning is caused by certain *sufficient* conditions, the researcher's job is to circumscribe those conditions so that, wherever they obtain, the occurrence of L2 learning can be accurately *predicted*. This is an extremely complex task at best, but it may also be an imperfect and insufficient route to knowledge and understanding. This

can be illustrated by taking a very straightforward and simple class of events: trees blowing down. It is clear that not every time the wind blows against a tree, that tree will fall down. When we study the phenomenon, we must add qualifications and amendments which are endless: the wind must blow hard enough, the tree must be fragile enough, the roots must grip the soil insufficiently, the soil must be loose enough, etc. In addition, we must take into account the position of the tree among buildings, other trees, and so on. It would probably be impossible to lay down all the conditions which would ensure a guaranteed tree-falling-down event. So, even if we are able to say: 'The wind caused that tree to fall down', we are still not able to specify exactly what it will take for another tree, say the orange tree in the back yard, to fall down.

It is obvious that L2 learning is an event which is vastly more complex than a tree blowing down. It is therefore hard to see how a listing of conditions and a demonstration of their causal relevance to L2 learning can ever add up to an accumulation of understanding about L2 learning which is sufficiently predictive. And if L2 learning is not straightforwardly causal (in a linear sense), the search for causal truth will be even less profitable.

But there are other possibilities for researching an understanding of L2 learning, which do not depend exclusively on establishing cause-effect relationships.

For example, Bann and Peters (1965: 29) point out that we need to know the rules of chess in order to understand the *point* of a chessplayer's move. They go on to argue that human actions are not due to causes but to reasons. Causes are antecedent conditions, but reasons require rules, norms, and standards. The attempt to find causes for human actions will necessarily leave us forever unsatisfied because 'we should be looking not in the realm of causes but in the realm of reasons' (Hospers 1967: 342). Human knowledge (and why not include second language development?) is, in the words of Kant 'a compound of that which we receive through impressions, and that which the faculty of cognition supplies from itself' (1934: 25).

Further, Bateson (1979) suggests that learning is a stochastic process. He describes a stochastic process as one in which a random series of events interacts with a selective process. The notion of randomness in biological processes is also described in convincing terms in Lorenz 1987.³

Lastly, the notion of linear (unidirectional) causality (ie, the causation of an event by an antecedent event), has been challenged repeatedly, eg by Bertrand Russell in 1921 and, more recently, by Bandura in his

3 Whether or not randomness actually exists in the universe is an issue of debate among theoretical physicists. However, whether or not randomness exists among particles or in space, may not matter when discussing life forms. Indeed, it is quite possible that one of the defining differences between life and non-life is that, in the former, randomness occurs. To assume that the same laws that apply to inorganic matter must also apply to organisms is undoubtedly reductionist.

proposal of *reciprocal determinism* (1978) and Lincoln and Guba's (1985) notion of *mutual shaping*.⁴

If it is true that significant doubt can be cast upon the notion that L2 learning is caused directly by certain conditions, then the axiomatic primacy of the causal paradigm of scientific explanation is brought into question. Its explanatory power will be further diminished if the contention is true that causes, if shown to exist, add nothing but relatively trivial information to our quest for an understanding of language learning. Most of our efforts at doing experiments and quasi-experiments, with all the attempted controls of variables and randomisations of treatment, may be doomed to failure (especially given the complexity of language learning processes).⁵

As a result, it is arguable that statistical measurement, resting as it does on laborious efforts of inching towards a notion of causality or, as a way stage, a demonstrated or *probable* association between two variables, may be no more than an elaborate hoax played on us by our own deterministic minds.

There is no time here to discuss the issue of *cause* versus *reason*, or the parallel debate of *determinism* versus *free will* (Lehrer 1965; Minsky 1985; Russell 1921). I will just simply argue that a simple causal view is inappropriate in classroom research for one very uncontroversial reason, namely, that *teaching does not cause learning*. Many times learning takes place without teaching, and, perhaps equally often, the teaching event is not followed by a learning event. Many years ago, von Humboldt stated that teaching language was not possible, one could only create the conditions for learning to be possible. Lest the attentive reader reply that 'teaching is no more than creating the conditions that cause learning', von Humboldt's conditions are clearly *enabling*, not *determining* conditions. In the final analysis, I suppose, even the most ideal external conditions might fail if the learner-internal conditions (including the will to learn) were not propitious.

Current practices in L2 classroom research

We turn to using quantities when we can't compare the qualities of things. (Minsky 1985: 284)

The predominant view of scientific progress in L2 classroom research, as in other domains, is that understanding is only achieved when the causes

4 In 1963, Konrad Lorenz wrote the following:

'In an organism... there are, so to speak, no single and straight causal chains, but an all but inextricable network of causal relationships in which, to make matters worse, the effect usually exerts an influence backwards on its cause.' (p. 11)

5 Of course, experimentation may be of immense practical utility when a straightforward link between two phenomena can be established, such as eg between smoking and cancer. It is very doubtful that such simple 'necessary connections' can be conceived to exist in learning, unless we revert to an extreme form of behaviourism.

of effects are known. Thus, in an important paper Long (1984) states matter-of-factly that 'a causal relationship must be established between program X and ESL development' (p. 410). On one particular aspect of the classroom, Chaudron (1986: 713) says that 'questioning would not be of great interest unless we believed that it contributed in a causal, quantitatively verifiable way to L2 production and development.'

Within the parameters of a causal view of teaching and learning, researchers have examined a number of conditions in order to gauge their effect on L2 development. Long (1985) studied input modifications by comparing comprehension on two lectures, one of which was especially adapted for ESL learners. Pica, Young and Dougherty (1987) compared the amount of comprehensible input available in tasks with or without the possibility of interacting. Brook (1986) looked at the effect of display and referential questions on learner responses. The particular findings are irrelevant here, but what all these studies have in common is that one or a small set of classroom actions is selected in accordance with some theoretical or methodological assumption of relevance, and an attempt is made, largely through quantification, to measure the effect of this condition on L2 learning.

Features selected for attention include referential and display questions, wait time, various kinds of negotiation moves (requests for clarification, repetitions, confirmation checks, etc), self-repair and other-repair, features of simplified discourse, etc. The reasons for the selection of these features vary enormously. Some are hunches or ideas, while others are derived from certain theoretical or methodological positions (eg, the assumption that negotiation of information promotes comprehensible input — and hence second language acquisition — and that certain behaviours, such as requesting clarification, are instances of negotiation). Once these features are selected, they are either manipulated (ie, controlled, eg, by training some teachers to produce many of them) and then counted, or they are just counted. The quantified features are then compared to some product measure, eg language output, comprehension on a task, etc. If a statistical relationship can be established between a feature and a measure, this indicates that differences in the product are (partly) 'accounted for' by differences in the process.

Authors of causally oriented studies frequently conclude their discussions using strong terms from normative science ('show', 'demonstrate', 'find', 'establish', — but always just short of 'prove', of course) mixed with extremely hedged statements ('appears to contribute', 'some aspects of performance', 'may be due to') and this results in a perplexing blend of boldness and modesty. By contrast, in a very thought-provoking paper, Long (1985: 388) gives us perhaps the boldest statement in the entire literature, when he claims 'the existence of an indirect causal relationship between linguistic and conversational adjustments and SLA'. The relationship is 'indirect' because, if it is shown (as Long did), that the adjustments promote comprehension, and if it is shown

(actually, it is *assumed*) that comprehensible input promotes acquisition, then it follows that the adjustments promote acquisition. Several objections can be raised against such argumentation, one of them being that 'promoting' something is not equivalent to 'causing' something.

The process-product orientation exemplified in the above-mentioned studies appears to be dominant (especially in the USA), but it is of course not the only way to do research, nor is it the only way to do process-product research.⁶

Case study (Ellis 1984, Felix 1981), descriptive research (van Lier 1988), process research (Mitchell 1985), action research (Nixon 1981), ethnography (Watson-Gegeo 1988) and classroom discourse analysis (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975) are all different ways of studying classroom realities, and need not be concerned with the establishment of correlations or statistical significance. Rather, these varied approaches have focused on finding out what it is that teachers and learners actually do, and on creating plausible bases for well-founded judgments regarding the quality of what is done. As a next step, several researchers have begun to look at ways in which improvements in the things that are done can be achieved. Note that, in order to do these things, it is not necessary to take a causal view of actions in a classroom. It is sufficient to say that the people involved can make an effort to create optimum conditions so that learners can get on with the business of learning in the best way that they see fit, and can help each other in the process. This approach to research can be called *interventionist*, in opposition to causally oriented research (with its preferences for controlling and selecting variables) which is often referred to as *normative*. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to a description of ethnography as a principled way of doing interpretive research.

The principles of ethnography

They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;

They pursued it with forks and hope;

They threatened it with life with a railway-share;

They charmed it with smiles and soap.

(Lewis Carroll: *The Hunting of the Snark*)

Much more has been written about what ethnographers do than about what ethnography is. As regards the latter question, a dictionary definition will suffice: 'ethnography is the description of the races of

6 In Long's recommendations for process-product research (1984), the process-end of the research is conducted through ethnographic study (eg, participant observation, or at least the gathering of contextualised data). In practice, at least thus far, the process-end cuts significant corners by simply coding and counting the features that are considered to be relevant. This etic approach makes process-product research incompatible with ethnography and actually trivialises Long's very useful recommendations.

mankind' (Longman Modern English Dictionary). As regards the former question, the emphasis on the activities of ethnographers (in this sense, anthropologists doing descriptive field work) should be no surprise, given that they traditionally engage in a wide variety of rather unpredictable work. The classic anecdote is the one attributed to Kroeber who, upon being asked what to do by a prospective field worker, took the fattest tome off his shelf and said: 'Go forth and do likewise' (see Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 27). Traditionally, ethnography has been a craft that was learned on the job. Malinowski (1967) and Bateson (1958), among others, provide insightful descriptions of the insecurities and frustrations of the job and emphasise that, during their first attempts at field work, their failures were perhaps as significant as their successes. Serendipity and hindsight tend to play a large part initially, but the craft is perfected by doing, and a period of apprenticed experience is one of the most important assets an ethnographer can have.

This heuristic quality of ethnography makes it an inherently insecure pursuit, since there are no firm external rules and guidelines for proper scientific conduct. The worker in the field is essentially alone, and inevitably learns as much from opportunities missed, false leads too strenuously pursued, and insights by-passed in inexplicable ways, as from routine description and categorisation.

Gradually, ethnography has expanded its sphere of application from field work among unknown ethnic groups to the investigation of groups of people (however identified) in industrialised countries and urban settings, and from there has moved beyond urban anthropology into the social sciences, and finally into education, where at times the classroom is treated as an identifiable group with its own cultural characteristics. This expansion of the scope of ethnography has resulted in its adoption as a method of doing research by educational and linguistic researchers with no formal anthropological training or extensive experience of field work in exotic settings. This development gives rise to the two main criticisms that can justifiably be levelled against ethnography in education:

- (i) ethnography, not being an established scientific discipline with clearly defined parameters of scientific conduct, lacks the rigour required in terms of reliability and validity to be a valid alternative to standard research designs which emphasises statistical tests of significance and strict requirements of control of variables;
- (ii) ethnography is being conducted in an irresponsible fashion by people who are not suitably trained in it, and thus becomes a euphemism for anecdotal reports of subjective observational activities (Rist 1980). The only qualification required to be an ethnographer appears to be a dislike for statistical methods.

These criticisms need to be addressed in a fundamental way if we seek to define the potential role and value of ethnography in second language

education. If we fail to address them we may contribute to an unnecessary polarisation of research interests and a consequent trivialisation of the problems that face the profession of language education, and education in general.

The charge of lack of scientific rigour in ethnography can be refuted if we consider that one research method cannot discredit another research method simply because the latter does not adhere to the rules of conduct of the former. The blacksmith cannot criticise the carpenter for not heating the piece of wood over a fire. However, the carpenter must demonstrate a principled control over the materials used. In the case of ethnography, we need to establish the principles of conduct an ethnographer must adhere to in an uncompromising fashion. These principles must then be related to the goals of the task at hand.

It is clear that ethnography entered educational research because of widespread dissatisfaction with predominant measurement-oriented research modelled on the exact sciences. What, then, does ethnography have to offer that exact science cannot deliver? To answer this question we will discuss the two basic principles that are generally agreed to underly ethnographic enquiry:

- (i) an *emic* viewpoint
- (ii) a *holistic* treatment of cultural facts or, in other words, a concern with context.

Both these principles can be seen to be a result of the ethnographer's refusal to control the environment or to isolate features for specific scrutiny and quantification on the basis of pre-established criteria or vested interests. However, as an observer the ethnographer is of necessity selective in his/her observations, intrusive by virtue of his/her presence, and predisposed to interpret happenings in a certain way by virtue of training, beliefs, assumptions and theoretical persuasions. These are irksome hindrances in the ethnographer's desire to do interpretive science, and much of the methodological literature (see eg Garfinkel's arguments for ethnomethodology, 1967) addresses proposals to overcome them. Let me briefly discuss the two basic principles of ethnography and show how an adherence to them will influence research on second language classrooms.

The emic principle

The term *emic* stands in contrast to the term *etic*. Both terms are from Pike (1964), and are clippings from the words *phonemic* and *phonetic*. *Phonemic* is an adjective pertaining to the sound system, the rules of sounds and their combinations, of one particular language. For instance, / and r are different phonemes in English (compare the words *lot* and *rot*) but not in Japanese, where they are *allophones* of one another and do not change meaning. These are phonemic observations. Phonetically, however, we can describe / and r in terms of articulation, voicing, retroflexity, or laterality, regardless of how these sounds happen to be

used in any particular language. The notions retroflex, lateral, voiced, and so on, are describable without focusing on any particular language.

The *etic* is therefore that which describes or generalises without regard to any particular context. *Etic* descriptors are tools for investigators. Often they are classificatory grids, technical descriptions, etc. Examples include, in addition to the International Phonetic Alphabet, ways of charting kinship terminology, basic parts-of-speech distinctions, universals of grammar and pragmatics, and so on.

Emic characteristics, on the other hand, refer to the rules, concepts, beliefs and meanings of the people themselves, functioning within their own group.

It would appear, superficially speaking, that the *emic* and the *etic* are conflicting tendencies in ethnographic work, and to some extent this is true. For instance, a classroom researcher who employs an *etic* checklist such as Flanders's FIAC schedule, will find it hard to reconcile this with the participants' own views of what happens in the lesson (see Delamont 1976).

On the other hand, *etic* and *emic* considerations can also be complementary, especially when *etic* stands for *tools* and *skills*, and for whatever it is that is hypothesised as being *universal* (the phonetic specification of speech sounds, certain syntactic and morphological processes, features of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1978), and so on). Working with both *emic* and *etic* categories, the ethnographer continually walks a fine line between naive observation and externally imposed interpretation. However, this is perfectly acceptable, so long as the researcher remains aware of and committed to the requirement to analyse all observations and scrutinise all interpretations and inferences rigorously. In order to resolve *emic-etic* conflicts, it is necessary to adhere to the second basic principle of ethnography: the *holistic* principle.

The holistic principle

Very often when we look at something that is happening (anything, anywhere), this event only makes sense when we see it in connection to its surroundings. Let us say that we see someone standing on a street corner, screaming and shouting and waving his fists in the air. At first it might appear to us that another poor deranged person is venting his frustration at all and everything. However, if we see a car all smashed up by the side of the road, and another damaged car just speeding off round the corner, then we suspect that there may have been a hit-and-run accident. Acts of screaming and shouting can therefore be understood only if we know the context of their occurrence. We have to bear this in mind if we want to compare big cities, say, London and New York, in terms of the screaming and shouting that goes on in them. Counting all the screams and shouts on an average day, and finding that there are half a million of them in New York, and only a quarter of a million in London, does not get us very far in *understanding* the two cities, and *judging* them according to frustration level, number of deranged pedestrians, and

so on. Indeed, basing ourselves merely on quantity of screams and shouts, we may well draw very erroneous conclusions. It may for example turn out that fifteen per cent of the screams and shouts in New York are aimed at attracting the attention of taxi drivers, and another fifteen per cent just hailing acquaintances across the street. At which point do vocal emissions become screams and shouts? When do they signal frustration? Does acoustic amplitude co-vary with strength of emotion? And so on, and so forth.

It is unfortunately the case that most of the so-called process-product research in second-language classrooms referred to above is rather similar to the scream-and-shout counting just mentioned. The focus in such studies is more on correctly identifying a certain class of behaviours (say, repetitions), and obtaining a high inter-coder reliability, than on examining the behaviours in their context in order to find out what they mean, why they occur when they occur, and the range of functions they may fulfil. This leads to much counting for the sake of counting, and the researcher comes to be in danger of resembling that famous character from Sesame Street, Count Dracula, who spends his entire life compulsively counting everything in sight.

A unitary view of ethnographic research

Scientists in all walks of life need to conform to certain standards by which the peer group evaluates them. This is no different in ethnographic research. I have earlier pointed out that one of the problems of an ethnographic approach to classroom research is that this research often has to be done by people with no formal training in ethnography. People inclined to do ethnography may therefore have no clear idea as to what would count as 'good' or 'bad' ethnography. Although this problem also exists in normative types of research, workers in the latter tradition have the advantage that most graduate degree programmes have substantial components of quantitative research design and statistics training, whereas training in ethnography is rarely available.⁷

Moreover, it appears that ethnography is a craft learned by doing and by example, so that it is difficult to become a skilled ethnographer just by taking courses in it.

There is thus a danger that we will see a significant amount of bad ethnography before classroom researchers reach a consensus about how to judge the quality of an ethnographic study. This would not matter a great deal (if we assume that even bad ethnography helps to establish guidelines for proper scientific conduct) were it not that funding agencies, journals, employers, and so on, tend to emphasise cost-effectiveness rather than exploration for the sake of scientific advancement, and it

⁷ There are exceptions to this, of course. There are several universities which offer excellent cross-disciplinary courses preparing students for doing educational ethnography (see, eg, Levine et al. 1980). Eventually, such expertise will become more available to L2 classroom research than it is at present.

would thus be very easy for ethnography to become discredited and to fall into disrepute.⁸

It is therefore important for the language teaching profession, not just for proponents of interpretive research, but equally for normative researchers (who need a counterbalance to their proposed findings), to make an effort to put ethnography on the map. To do this, several different things need to be borne in mind.

1. First, every study needs to be scrutinised for its adherence to the *emic and holistic principles* outlined above.

2. Secondly, the notion of *context* needs to be examined in great detail, and the role of context in interpretation must be made explicit. It must be remembered that the context is potentially as wide as the whole world: a line must be drawn somewhere. Whether context is seen as primarily the context of interaction (micro-context) or the context of the classroom in society (macro-context), clear indications must be given as to the *relevance* of using contextual features. There can of course be too much, as well as too little, examination of context. Occam's razor, or the law of parsimony, applies here as it does elsewhere.⁹

3. Thirdly, ethnographic research must be *open*, that is, it must examine and report its own processes of inferring and reasoning, so that its procedures can be profitably discussed. The opposite of this requirement of openness or transparency would be the opacity which characterises some normative research, where it may for example be unclear why certain — but not other — statistical tests were applied, variables controlled, hypotheses formulated, and so on.

4. Fourthly, analysis must be either *broad* (longitudinal) or *deep* (micro-ethnographic). Critics of unsatisfactory 'ethnography' (eg Rist 1980) often complain of a tendency to do 'Blitzkrieg ethnography', quick in-and-out raids on classrooms or schools, in order to get some data, and write a paper or thesis. This criticism is no doubt very valid. However, we must not make the mistake of assuming that all ethnographic work must be longitudinal. Much painstaking analysis of minute pieces of data is also required (see van Lier 1988, Erickson 1981, Sacks 1972, for examples of micro-ethnography or conversation analysis), so that length of time spent in a research site alone does not determine quality. Ethnography requires intensive immersion in the data, whether this is the daily language use of an entire culture, or one small story told by a child.

One thing is relatively clear. It is very difficult to conduct a responsible ethnographic study in the limited timespan usually allowed in the cycle of

⁸ Lewin's action research, first proposed in the 40s, is a case of a very useful research tool which never became popular at the time due to the enormous prestige of psychometric methods; now it is enjoying a very belated comeback (see Sanford 1981, van Lier and Bailey 1989).

⁹ For a principled and well-argued approach to examining data in context, see Mehan 1979. Erickson and Shultz 1981 is also very insightful. The first study seriously tackling the concept of context in SLA is Selinker and Douglas 1985.

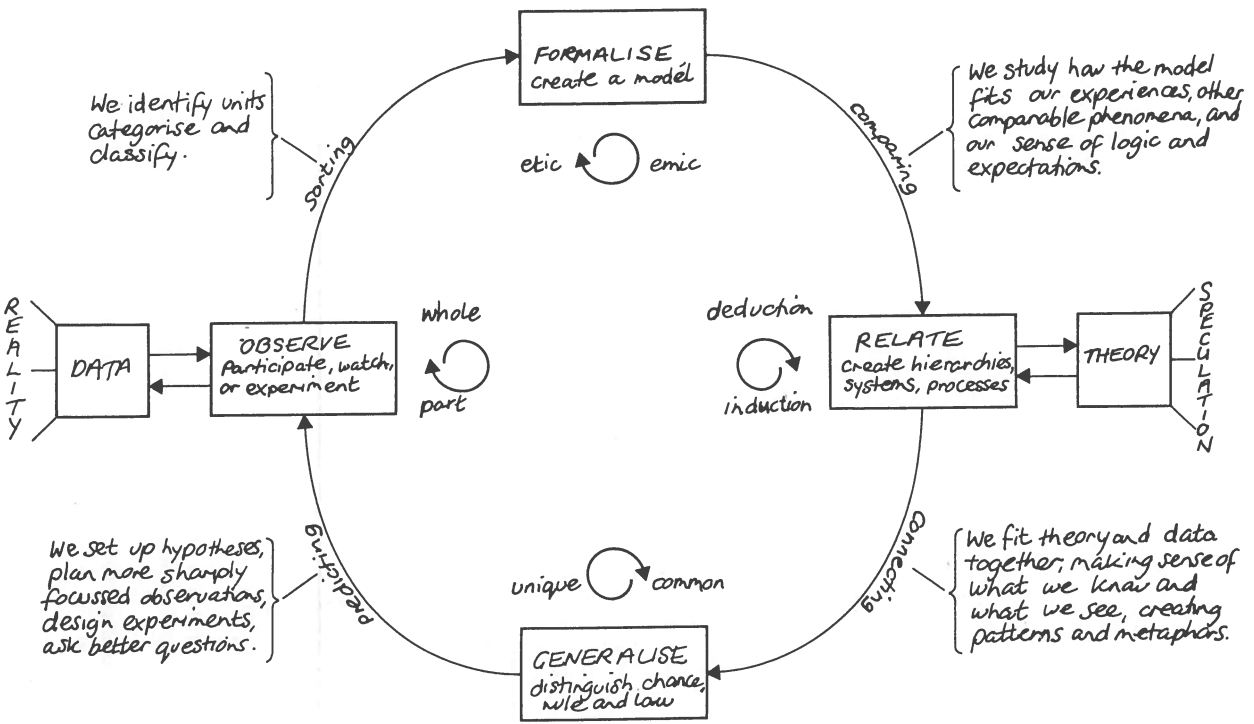


Fig.2 Cycles of research

conference presentations: a brief treatment period, a testing session, a twenty-page write-up, all probably wrapped up in about three to six months from start to finish. Ethnography is not conducted that quickly. If it needs to be fitted into the conference cycle, we will get a great many 'preliminary ethnographies' which lack depth and probably do not deserve to be called ethnographic research. A good ethnographer will never claim to have found sufficient or even adequate clues to knowledge about the people studied. Every insight generates further questions, and every question suggests further avenues for exploration.

Ethnography is thus a cyclical enterprise. While it is clearly data-based and data-oriented (ie, empirical), it also draws on and fuels theories and speculative assumptions. The diagram above shows how the cycle of activities in ethnography can be conceptualised. It is important to realise that we do not start in any particular place (eg, at the data-end); rather, we are already *in* the cycle, as members of society, we merely sharpen our vision as we continue to progress.

Applications of ethnography in second language classrooms

I said it in Hebrew - I said it in Dutch -
 I said it in German and Greek:
 But I wholly forgot (and it vexes me much)
 That English is what you speak!
 Lewis Carroll: *The Hunting of the Snark*

Given the current popularity of educational ethnography, it is surprising how little ethnographic work has been conducted in L2 classrooms. We know very little of what we really mean by 'instructed L2 situations', or 'classroom interaction'. Only very recently the L2 profession has begun to examine the general educational tradition in ethnography, and to take tentative steps towards applying some of the insights and experience gained there to the language classroom. This in spite of a veritable chorus of calls for more information about the context of language learning, and the nature of interlingual interaction, from almost all researchers. Quite obviously, the profession has a number of things to learn. We do not seem to be comfortable sailing between the Scylla and Charybdis of the following extreme positions regarding ethnography:

- (a) anyone can do it, all you have to do is watch and see what you can see;
- (b) you need to be at least as well trained in ethnography as normative researchers are in statistics and research design, otherwise they will just ridicule your efforts.

Basically, this is a credentialling problem: who decides that a researcher can call him/herself an ethnographer, or that a piece of work can be called ethnographic? I believe that the profession as a whole has not decided what the appropriate criteria might be, in the way that at

least a reasonable consensus exists for the judging of normative work. It is my hope that the four requirements described above will help in building such a consensus.

We can also learn from the pioneering work of some second language researchers to search for fruitful directions in second language classroom research (for more detailed discussions, see Mitchell 1985, van Lier 1988). One of the earliest exploratory studies in second-language classroom interaction was conducted by Dick Allwright (1980), who used a recorded and transcribed second-language lesson to describe patterns of participation, in the process developing useful insights into the turn-taking system. Particularly innovative, and characteristic of an ethnographic (emic) approach was his decision not to distinguish *a priori* between teacher and student roles, but rather to allow patterns of control and initiative to emerge from the data. This stands in contrast to the approach of eg Sinclair and Brazil (1982), and Mchoul (1978), who assume characteristic teacher and pupil roles as givens, and thus illustrate an *etic-before-emic* approach. Allwright also demonstrates the fruitfulness of justifying inferences in terms of their 'plausibility', an approach recommended by Erickson (1985), and also visible in Kumaravivelu's (1988) study of 'learning opportunities' based on a micro-ethnographic analysis of video-taped classroom data.

In addition to micro-ethnographic analysis of transcribed data, the use of diaries as data can be very fruitful. In second-language settings diary studies have been conducted by eg Schumann and Schumann (1977), Bailey (1983; see also Bailey and Ochsner 1983) and Schmidt and Frota (1986). Such studies are particularly useful for the description of individual cognitive and affective factors accompanying the learning process. Expanding somewhat, the use of techniques to elicit introspective and retrospective data is rapidly becoming a field of substantial interest, after early pioneering work of Hosenfeld (1979), Cavalcanti (1982) and Mann (1982; see also a recent collection edited by Faerch and Kasper 1987).

Another way to approach ethnographic study is through an examination of the basic underlying concepts. Thus, Selinker and Douglas (1985) attempted to find out what we mean by the notion of 'context', by examining in detail tutoring sessions which differed in topic and participants' background knowledge.

These are useful and promising beginnings. However, work approaching the sophistication of some of the best work in general education, such as Mehan (1979), Hymes et al. (1981), Heath (1983), and studies reported in Trubea et al. (1981) and Trubea (1987) still needs to be done in SLA (see van Lier (1988) for an exploration of the parameters of ethnographic work in L2 classrooms).

A look into the future

Is ethnography only exploratory? Or is it also theory building and theory

testing? In the former case, ethnography serves as preparatory ground-clearing for causal research, in the latter case its methods carry ethnography all the way to a full understanding of social issues. There are those who take one or the other position (see Hammersley and Atkinson 1982 for a detailed discussion). It is in the interest of our profession to pursue both options, and at all times to maintain a conversation between normative and interpretive kinds of research, without assuming that differences are trivial. They are not, but in studying the differences a greater depth of understanding may be reached.

There are a number of practical areas of concern in which the use of ethnographic methods in research can be of assistance. For example, the role of evaluation in a learner/learning-centred curriculum (as advocated eg in Candlin 1987) can be fruitfully explored through a longitudinal programme of ethnographic monitoring (see Hymes 1981).

A related area is programme evaluation. Boretta, studying the effect of the Bangalore Project (see Prabhhu 1987), illustrated an unusual aspect of ethnographic procedures: the use of historical data or documents, complemented with interviews. From this analysis, the notion of 'ownership' has emerged as a powerful determining factor in the teachers' application of Dr Prabhhu's principles.

The curriculum itself can also profit from ethnographic research. Watson-Gegeo, by comparing learning in school to learning in the community, proposed innovative changes in the curriculum in order to make school culturally compatible with society (see the Kamelamaha project, and the use of similar procedures in the Solomon Islands; Watson-Gegeo, 1988). In a similar way, Heath (1983) suggests ways of curriculum renewal through a detailed comparison of questioning at home and in school.

A crucial way in which ethnography differs from normative research is that, if it is done right, it actively encourages the participation of teachers and learners. Currently there is much discussion about action research, and the empowerment of teachers, teachers 'helping themselves' to research, and related sentiments. At the same time many researchers emphasise the need for case studies (Yin 1984), which involve longer-term collection of data and much detail of description (see eg Schmidt and Frota 1986), and which allow for a finer-grained examination of context than is possible in the process-product research. In a practical sense, ethnographic research can help solve immediate problems, such as those inherent in the employment of foreign teaching assistants (FTAs) in tertiary education. For example, Bailey (1985) uses extensive data collection and analysis to provide a useful categorisation of types of teaching which can be helpful in in-service training. Also in the context of FTAs' classroom work, Rounds (1987) examines the functions and uses of silence in mathematics lectures.

Finally, several curriculum theorists advocate using ethnography as part of a task-based curriculum, that is, designing tasks which encourage

learners to use the methods of ethnography to discover significant aspects of target language use (Heath 1986).

It is important to pursue controlled studies of the process-product type. However, it is also essential that, if only in order to safeguard against the potential triviality and misinterpretation that accompanies all piecemeal empiricism, ethnographic studies are conducted which examine all actions and interactions in classrooms within their context, both wide and narrow. Only in this way can research on classroom language learning move forward: each research type, normative and interpretive, serves as a safeguard against misinterpretations and false directions in the other. Rather than saying that the two types of research are combinable (and perhaps implying that the differences are minor), therefore, we regard them as alternative ways of knowing, both of which are necessary to arrive at a better understanding of the reality of the language classroom. This is the sense in which Smith and Heshusius (1986) speak of a 'conversation' between the two approaches to science, a conversation which we must make the effort to preserve, but which is 'closed down' if it is assumed that the differences between them are minimal.

It is possible that interpretive and normative research programmes will sometimes provide the same sorts of findings. It is more likely, however, that they will yield different kinds of information, information that may either be compatible, or contradictory. Whichever way things turn out, a diversity of research programmes is essential to promote an enrichment of theoretical and professional knowledge.

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