

Microethnographical Methods in the Language Classroom

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Chang, Sunmee. 2003. Microethnographical Methods in the Language Classroom. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 11(4), 143-161. This article is to present some basic concepts of ethnography and microethnography which are not familiar to Korean contexts, but getting popular globally in the field of research in language learning classroom. This paper begins with the concepts clarification of ethnography and varied one, microethnography. Focusing on microethnography as an applicable research methodology, this paper describes its specific methods in order. A couple of studies on language learning conducted by using microethnographical methods are presented to show vivid examples of how those methods are used in actual research fields.

Key words: ethnography, microethnographical methods

1. Introduction

Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings by means of methods that capture ordinary activities and their social meanings. It involves the researcher participating directly in the setting in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally (Brewer, 2000). The objectives of ethnography are to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given setting. The ethnography assumes that knowledge is constructed by individuals in their living experiences, and so there can be many truths (Hall, 2002). Several methods of data collection tend to be used in ethnography, such as in-depth interviewing, participant observation, personal documents, and discourse analyses of natural

language use. Researchers observe people's behavior, work closely with them and perhaps participate with them in the field.

This method of research, usually used in anthropology and sociology, has been actively adopted in the education field. Educational ethnography has been used to describe educational settings and contexts, to generate theory, and to evaluate educational programs. It has provided rich, descriptive data about the contexts, activities, and beliefs of participants in educational settings (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). In an educational context, educational ethnography highlights common features of all teaching and learning situations such as construction of meanings and perspectives, adaptation to circumstances, management of interests in the ebb and flow of countless interactions containing many ambiguities and conflicts, strategies devised to promote those interests, and negotiation with others interests (Woods, 1996).

2. Microethnography

Many cases of ethnographical research in language education focus on activities in the classroom. Classroom ethnography refers to the application of ethnographic and sociolinguistic or discourse analytic research methods to the study of behavior, activities, interaction. It usually looks at discourse in formal and semi-formal educational settings such as school classrooms and adult education programs, emphasizing the sociocultural nature of teaching and learning processes, incorporating participants' perspectives on their behavior, and offering a holistic analysis sensitive to levels of context in which interactions and classrooms are situated (Watson-Gegeo, 1997). Classroom ethnography involves the intensive, detailed observation of a classroom over a certain period, recording a large sample of classroom activities on audio or videotape, and interviews with teachers and students as supplements. It includes a description of the classroom setting; a statement of the principles underlying classroom social organization; and an account of the social norms guiding participants behavior and shaping their interpretations of specific interactions (Erickson, 1985).

Many qualitative studies conducted in the language learning classroom these days tend to use microethnography which is concerned with the formal analysis of interactional events and with understanding how lessons, classroom organization, and school success or failure are jointly constructed by participants as interactional accomplishment (Watson-Gegeo, 1997). Microethnography, coined by Erickson, draws on perspectives and methods in ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and sociolinguistics. It is concerned with the local and situated ecology existing among participants in face-to-face interactional engagements and constituting societal and historical experiences. Microethnography aims at descriptions of how interaction is socially and culturally organized in particular situational settings (Garcez, 1997). Researchers of microethnography typically work with audiovisual machine recordings of naturally occurring social encounters to investigate in minute detail what interactants do in real time as they co-construct talk-in-interaction in everyday life. They also use the methodology for the investigation of face-to-face interaction and a particular point of view on language in use in complex modern societies (Erickson, 1992; McDermott et al., 1978).

Microethnography involves a narrow focus, offering a detailed analysis of only one type of event or even a single instance of an event, sometimes contrasted with a second type or instance found in another context (Shultz et al., 1982). Due to its narrow focus, common to the approaches used in ethnographical studies is a resolute attention to detail, and the use of quantitative as well as qualitative data (Gordon, et al., 2001). Considering its characteristics, the microethnographical approach can be termed as a form of educational ethnography frequently conducted in the settings of language learning

Even though the methods usually employed in microethnography do not seem to be much different from those in general ethnographical studies, they are used with some narrow and in-depth aspects: for example, focusing on the ability of students to recognize what teachers want, and teachers' reciprocal ability to recognize the competences that these students already have, on how the language is learned and used

in the classroom, and on how teachers maintain classroom order or how they define knowledge. Here are some representative methods and studies using them.

2.1. Observation

Most qualitative research in language education involves extended observation of some form. One important dimension along which observations vary is the role of the observer in the setting being observed (Slavin, 1992). In some studies, the observer is a full-fledged participant in the activity, and his or her role as observer may not even be known to the individuals in the setting. More commonly an observer is known to be an observer. Whenever the observer interacts with the people being observed, this is called participant observation. In contrast, in nonparticipant observation, the observer tries to interact as little as possible (Slavin, 1992).

The intent of participant observation is to generate data through watching and listening to what people naturally do and say, but also to add the dimension of personal experiencing by sharing the same everyday life as those under study. The researchers' own attitude changes, fears and anxieties, and social meanings when engaging with the people in the field form part of the data. Thus researchers who become participant observers have to develop certain personal qualities: the primary one is to maintain the balance between insider and outsider status; to identify with the people under study and get close to them, while maintaining a professional distance which permits adequate observation and data collection (Brewer, 2000). Participant-observer styles can be distinguished as active participant, privileged observer, and limited observer. As an active participant, the observer assumes the role of a participant. For most ethnographical research in schools, the observer becomes a privileged observer. That is, the observer does not assume the role of a participant but has access to the relevant activity for the study.

Slavin (1992) talked about one kind of nonparticipant observation

useful in many situations: naturalistic observation, in which the observer tries not to alter the situation being observed in any way but simply records whatever he or she sees. It emphasizes the outsider aspect of observer. He added that this type of observation is often used in studies of children's interactions and behaviors and is a primary tool used by psychologists. So, a proper balance in the participant observer's dual role as part insider and part outsider gives researchers the opportunity to be inside and outside the setting, to be simultaneously a member and non-member, and to participate while also reflecting critically on what is observed and gathered while doing so.

One more fact to be considered is that participant observation involves not only gaining access to and immersing oneself in new social worlds, but also producing written accounts and descriptions that bring versions of these worlds to others (Emerson et al., 2001). This is derived from Geertz's (1973) early insistence on the centrality of inscription in ethnography, calling attention to the fact that the ethnographer inscribes social discourse.

2.2. Field Notes

In most kinds of participant or nonparticipant observation studies (or ethnographies), field notes are the most important data that are collected. While actually observing a given setting, a researcher might take voluminous notes, if this is possible, but in some cases this is not possible. Either way, as soon as possible after the observation period, the researcher writes field notes to record what happened. Field notes usually contain descriptions of the key individuals being observed and of the physical setting and other contextual features (time of day, events preceding or following the observation period, and so on). Especially, for the research in the language classroom, writing field notes is very important since what the learners actually utter is one of the major focuses. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), field notes consist of relatively concrete descriptions of social processes and their contexts. The aim is to capture these in their integrity, noting their

various features and properties, though what is recorded will clearly depend on some general sense of what is relevant to the foreshadowed research problems.

Clifford (1990) describes three kinds of field notes. Inscription is the notation made in the midst of interaction and participation. These are quick jottings of key words and symbols or just a momentary self-prompt to remember something. The record resulting from inscription may be written fragments, the researcher's memory, or any other reminder of what occurred. The second kind of field note, transcription, is very different. Transcription is writing something down as it occurs, recording as much as possible as exactly as possible. To accomplish this, the researcher is fully observing and recording; participation is minimal, limited to occasional questions or nonverbal acknowledgements. Transcription is creating a text from what the observer is perceiving, from responses to questions, or from dictated narratives. Description, the third kind of field notes, occurs out of the flow of activity, sometimes even out of the field. Description is forming a comprehensible account of whatever has been observed. Descriptions are built on inscriptions and transcriptions, but all three constitute field notes. However, only the products of transcription and description have received much attention, probably because inscription has been considered too subjective for rigorous scientific discussion or presentation (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

According to Emerson et al. (2001), field notes have some particular characteristics. As representations, field note texts are inevitably selective. The researcher writes about certain things that seem significant, ignoring and hence leaving out other matters that do not seem significant. In this sense, field notes never provide a complete record (Atkinson, 1992). But field notes are also selective in what they do include, since they inevitably present or frame the events and objects written about in particular ways, hence missing other ways that events might have been presented or framed. Emerson et al. pointed out another characteristic: that field notes accumulate set-by-set over time into a larger corpus. That is, field notes are produced incrementally on

a day-by-day basis (or regular base), without any sustained logic or underlying principle and on the assumption that not every observation will ultimately be useful for a larger/finished project. As a result, a field note corpus need have little or no overall coherence or consistency; it typically contains bits and pieces of incidents, beginnings and ends of narratives, accounts of chance meetings and rare occurrences, and details of a wide range of unconnected matters (Emerson et al., 2001). As a last point, in recognizing the field as a construction, one can appreciate the ways in which the implicit assumptions and routine practices that produce it, in turn, shape and constrain the writing of field notes: unlike that of classic ethnographical approach that regards the field as a geographical place, the view of microethnographical approach assumed that the field lies wherever reality-constituting interaction takes place (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997).

Lately, in many research fields, not to mention of language education field, field notes have been getting more attention since it can be argued that writing field notes, rather than writing finished ethnographies, provides the primal, even foundational moments of ethnographical representation: for most ethnographical monographs rely upon, incorporate and may even be built from initial field notes (Emerson et al., 2001).

2.3. Audio/Videotaping

Ethnographers use a variety of mechanical devices to record data and preserve it intact (Erickson & Wilson, 1982; Jackson, 1987). They must decide what is going to be recorded and who is going to record it. Audio and video equipment indiscriminately record whatever is occurring within their purview. Transcription, coding, and analysis are imperative to render material usable. Using mechanical recorders increases analysis time because researchers may observe events while recording and then repeatedly reobserve them while processing, coding, and analyzing data later (Erickson, 1992).

Audio recording is so widely used among the general population that

obtrusiveness and reactivity are almost no longer the issues, and the cost, ease of transport and handling, and quality are no longer issues for most qualitative researchers, either (LeCompe & Preissle, 1993). The kind of equipment selected depends on the purpose of the recording, who is being recorded, and the circumstances under which the record is made: internal or external microphone, cassettes or microcassettes with different lengths and qualities. One thing researchers have to be careful about is that the dangers of misuse and overuse are greater than the possibility of under use. So, researchers have to use their discretion wisely in choosing what to record and not to.

Videotape recordings are extremely useful in microethnographical studies (Fetterman, 1998). Ethnographers usually have a fraction of a second to reflect on a person's gesture, posture, or gait. Videotape provides the observer with the ability to stop them. The ethnographer can tape a class and watch it over and over, each time finding new layers of meaning, nonverbal signals among participants. Over time, visual and verbal patterns of communication may become clear when seen repeatedly and in stop action. The tapes can help researchers make sense of what is happening in a specific place, such as a classroom. For example, using videotapes, the researchers are able to identify specific behaviors the teacher uses to solicit information or to silence students (Fetterman, 1998 p. 68).

Videotape equipment is essential to any microethnographical research. Since the tunnel vision of videotaping can be problematic, the researcher may need months to develop a reasonably clear conception of specific behaviors before deciding to focus on them for a time. The videotape can focus on a certain type of behavior to the exclusion of almost all else in the classroom. Videotape recording, although not yet as accessible as audio tape recording, and still obtrusive, has become a routine way of collecting data. It is now true that the equipment is common in schools and other institutions where it is used for instruction and evaluation.

Even though the use of videotape has limitations; like hiding the rough edges and sometimes concealing the reality which the actual

experience brings, it is used to analyze nonverbal interaction as well as to strengthen the participant-observation and other methods of triangulation (Robinson, 1994). Visual records are excellent in recording the complexity of human interactions and conveying its reality.

2.4. Interviews

Interviews depend on face-to-face questioning of participants and eliciting data from them (Siedman, 1991). Through elicitation and personal interaction, the investigator is better able to obtain data addressing the questions asked in the study. However, interviews can be more reactive or obtrusive, and respondents, deliberately or unconsciously, may supply false or misleading data. These distortions can be ameliorated by corroborating the information from other forms of data collection, including observations.

According to Fetterman (1998), general interview types includes formal, informal, and retrospective interviews. Each interviewing approach has a role to play in soliciting information. Formally structured interviews are verbal approximations of a questionnaire with explicit research goals. These interviews generally serve comparative and representative purposes comparing responses and putting them in the context of common group beliefs and themes. At the beginning stages of study, these formally-structured interviews tend to shape responses to conform to the researchers conception of how the world works. These interviews are therefore most useful at the middle and end stages of a study for the collection of data about a specific question or hypothesis.

Informal interviews are the most common in ethnographical work. They seem to be casual conversations, but whereas structured interviews have an explicit agenda, informal interviews have a specific but implicit research agenda. Informal interviews are useful throughout an ethnographical study in discovering what people think and how one person's perceptions compare with another's. Informal interviews seem to be the easiest to conduct. They do not involve any specific types or

order of questions, and they can progress much as a conversation does, following the turns of the participants' or the questioners' interests. These interviews, however, are probably the most difficult to conduct. Issues of ethics and control emerge from every informal interview. For the researchers, it is very important to offer the most natural situations to interviewees to make a comfortable atmosphere in eliciting the information they want.

Retrospective interviews can be formal or informal. The ethnographer uses retrospective interviews to reconstruct the past, asking informants to recall personal historical information. This type of interview does not elicit the most accurate data. People forget or filter past events. In some cases, retrospective interviews are the only way to gather information about the past. The manner in which individuals shape the past highlights their values and reveals the configuration of their worldviews.

The most important element of ethnographical interview is the relationship between the interviewer and interviewees since it affects how the research topics and questions are approached, negotiated, and responded to indeed, how the co-construction of meaning takes place (Heyl, 2001). This element must be also very important in microethnographical studies in the language classroom in that the researchers have to elicit the information they want and they think relevant to their research questions, even though its importance is not that significant as it is in full-fledged ethnographies.

2.5. Surveys and Documents (Artifacts)

Surveys, whether they use interviews or questionnaires, provide material for baseline, process, and values data. However, such information has limitations because self-reports of behavior elicited through a survey sometimes are inaccurate indicators of actual behavior. However, self-reports are useful for assessing how individuals make judgments about people and events, and they do register what people think they do or what they think is socially acceptable to do, especially when they are corroborated by observational data. Self-reports are

reliable and valid when interviewers and respondents share common or consistent assumptions about what protocols and instruments mean and how they are structured (Mehan, 1972).

According to LeCompte & Preissle (1993), surveys are categorized into three kinds. One category of data collection commonly used by ethnographers to facilitate backgrounding and development of common understandings between researcher and those being studied involves participant-construct survey. These are used to measure the strength of feeling people have about phenomena or to elicit the categories into which people classify items in their social and physical world. As a second one, structured interviews or questionnaires verifying the applicability of key informant and other data to the overall study group are confirmation surveys. Their purpose is to assess the extent to which participants hold similar beliefs, share specific constructs, or exhibit comparable behaviors. The third category, projective surveys, are used when it is impossible to have individuals react to the actual stimulus or context under study. For example, photographs, drawings, or games often can elicit peoples opinions or reactions or enable the researcher to determine patterns of social interaction unobservable in a natural setting.

In addition to what they say and how they behave, human beings make and use things. The artifacts constitute data indicating people's sensations, experiences, and knowledge and which connote opinions, values, and feelings. Artifacts provide evidence for the topics and questions ethnographers address because they are material manifestations of cultural beliefs and behaviors. Once accumulated, they provide resources for longitudinal comparisons; reexamining them long after they were collected sheds new lights on old observations and sometimes generates entirely new lines of inquiry (Spindler & Spindler, 1992). In educational research related to language learning in the classroom, the collection and analysis of textbooks, teacher-made games and teaching aides, curriculum guides, memos, enrollment records, minutes of meetings, student personnel records, student and teacher handbooks, student classroom products, lesson plans and other teacher

files, correspondence, and such researcher-stimulated materials as teacher diaries, logs, and recollections provide invaluable resources for baseline, process, and values data (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

2.6. Discourse Analysis

Many researchers have used generic processes and general analytic procedures (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) to construct an interpretive description of the processes and outcomes of what they observed. These processes and procedures involve scanning the data, creating categories, noting patterns, looking for counterevidence, and selecting important domains for further analysis. Lately, many microanalytical studies conducted in the classroom, especially language learning classrooms, employed discourse analysis methods.

Discourse analysis comes out of the qualitative paradigm but some people think that it has evolved into a discipline in its own right (Schiffrin, 1994). Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used. Discourse analysts study language in use: written texts of all kinds, and spoken data, from conversation to highly institutionalized forms of talk (McCarthy, 1991). Discourse analysis in microethnography emphasizes the research method of close observation of groups of people communicating in natural settings. It examines types of speech events such as storytelling, greeting rituals and verbal duels in different cultural and social settings (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972). Discourse analysis is the main analytic method in microethnographical studies.

In microethnographical studies of classroom interaction, discourse analysis can be conducted at macro and micro levels: the macro level looks at the big picture, exploring the social factors that influence the learning environment for learners, what types of student behavior a teacher appears to value, and the contextual or cultural gaps participants may have; the micro level looks at individual, identifiable constituents, such as intonations, particular grammatical structures, ways of talking, etc. (Riggenbach, 1999).

Overall, context is the most important term in discourse analysis. It refers to all the factors and elements that are nonlinguistic but which affect spoken or written communicative interaction. Context entails the situation within which the communicative interaction takes place. So, discourse may depend primarily on contextual features found in the immediate environment and be referred to as context-embedded, but sometimes it may be relatively independent of context and depend on the features of the linguistic code and the forms (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000).

3. Studies using Microethnographical Methods

Ohta's (2001) study is a representative study which used a video/audio recording method. In this study, which focuses on the interactions of students for investigating how recasts and private speech play roles in second language learning among learners of Japanese, the data were collected over an academic year, mainly by miking and audio recording the interactions of ten student volunteers as they participated in their language classes. Data were collected by video and audio taping the classes of these learners about three times each quarter with the consent from teachers. Ten individual learners wore clip-on microphones attached to individual tape recorders. They were advised to wear clothing with loose pockets that would accommodate the small recording units. A video camera monitored classroom activities on a grosser level, but was not connected to any of the individual students microphones. A research assistant took detailed field notes on what transpired in the classes, including writing down what appeared on the blackboard and overhead projector. Classroom materials used (handouts and copies of transparencies) were also collected from the teachers.

Large classes in small classrooms, and frequent reconfiguration of students for different activities made data collection a difficult task, resulting in occasional technical difficulties including disconnected microphones and recorder buttons being accidentally bumped, causing recorders to turn off during the class. Jamming of recorders into too

small pockets resulted in some technical problems, too. Even with these technical problems, this study was relatively successfully conducted with proper methods. All the data was transcribed and analyzed with the emphasis on turn-taking among interlocutors.

Hall's (1998) study mainly relied on audio-recordings and discourse analysis. She recorded a Spanish classroom for a semester. Supporting data included the field notes she kept during the observations of each of the class meetings and interviews with the students and teacher (two interviews with students as a group, and three interviews with the teacher). In addition, the students completed two questionnaires. This study revealed an explicit feature of typical exchange of turns between the students and the teacher, which is called IRF (Initiation > Response > Follow-up/Evaluation). Since this study is about the particular participation structure of the instructional practice, the individual student differences in terms of turn-taking within the practice, and consequences for learning, focusing on interactional turn-taking patterns among students and the teacher is essential in analyzing data.

Willet (1995) also used many microethnographical methods in doing her research focusing on language socialization of L2 learners in the classroom. She was a participant observer in the classroom as a teacher's aide for one year while taking field notes of events and critical incidents. Her notes concern the social and academic life of the classroom as a whole, as well as life in the school and community. She also collected artifacts from the classroom and had access to test results and other school records, and conducted extensive interviews with the teacher and parents. She audiotaped three girl subjects with microphone attached to them, but failed to audiotape any boys since boys considered microphone harness as girls' stuff (It was an unexpected obstacle). As a final method, she administered a sociometric test to corroborate her ethnographical analyses of the social structure in the class. As for analysis, she used generic theorizing processes and general analytic procedures, scanning the data, creating categories, noting patterns, looking for counterevidence, and selecting important domains for further analysis. She conducted micro analyses of selected

transcripts and of workbooks and other written texts using the theoretical insights and procedures of Bloome (1993), Erickson (1982), Gumperz (1982), and Hymes (1974). Transcripts were selected on the basis of their theoretical interest, as determined by the general analytic procedures described above.

4. Conclusion

Qualitative research methodology is pretty new to researchers in Korea where quantitative research one has taken the most dominant position. Most of all, microethnography derived from ethnography is the least known area. This paper was written to provide a brief introductory overview on microethnographical methods which are already popular in conducting research of language learning classrooms in other worlds. Because of contextual differences and insufficient understanding in Korea, it will take a significant amount of time to take this new methodology into effect. However, since language learning itself is not the process which can be measured as statistics; there are at least some limitations, qualitative research methodology including microethnography will take its firm ground in short time once accepted among researchers in Korea

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