

When is Ethnographic Research better in ELF

Geetha Durairajan

Thought Seed

Imagine that you have a range of food items at home (rice, dhal, vegetables, salt, oil etc). You would like to try making a new dish with what is available and impress those at home.

Your family however feels that you should not experiment and must stay with making what you always do. You however, want to prove to them that you can make something different and that you are more than capable. You therefore decide that you will make both dishes, and your family, as your 'tasters' can taste both and tell you which one is better and why. Someone older in the family, however, states that this is not fair, that you could easily spend more time and effort on the new dish you wish to make, probably take a lot more care and at the same time, not pay enough attention to what you usually do. This person tells you that this "I will make both dishes' is not on for it would lead to bias and therefore suggests that you give the recipe of what you usually make to someone else in the family, ask them to make it and that you make the 'new' dish. Would you agree with this suggestion and why? What do you think would happen if you yourself made both dishes, knowing you want the others to like the 'new' dish? How does bias work with you? Is bias different from prejudice? How are we affected by such prejudices or biases? What causes such biases, and how can we consciously avoid them? Would we like it if someone pointed them out to us?

As teachers who are interested in professional

development and growth, many of us would like to take up research projects, collect and analyze data, and write and publish it as a paper.

In earlier columns, I have written about how to decide on a research paper topic, how it is important to find something that you are interested in, and not settle for something that is either too small or attempt something too big; something neither very narrow in its focus nor too broad to be handled in just one research article. I also spoke about how it ought to be something that disturbs or bothers us the most. In another column I also wrote about the differences between theoretical and practical studies and how, if a practical study, which is what most of us are likely to stay with, these studies could be observational or interventionist in nature.

In this particular column, I am going to stay with interventionist research projects that can be taken up by any teacher/researcher. We will look at the different variables that can be worked with and try to understand which of them can be researched using an empirical approach, (with quantitative data analysis) and which ones need an ethnographic approach, (with qualitative data analysis). For purposes of this discussion, we will stay with the domain of language proficiency. Independent variables can be separated into those which can only be observed, and those where we can intervene and make a difference. Let us first take it for granted, for purposes of this discussion, that the dependent variable in all these cases is English language proficiency. The independent variable that can affect or influence

the dependent variable could range from background factors, like family background, age, or nature of schooling, or shift to cognitive factors like intelligence and aptitude. Affective factors like motivation, nature of the student, (introvert or extrovert), stress and anxiety are also a part of this listing. All the variables that have been listed above are observational variables, and therefore it is easy for us to put together a detailed questionnaire, collate and analyse the results and write up a research paper. But there are other independent variables, like new methods or materials used by the teacher in class which could be the focus of research. For example, it could be a method dealing with using the first language as an asset to either enable reading capability (Pathak, 2013) or to teach writing (Deepa and Srilatha, 2022). Alternatively it could be the kinds of materials used (using folk tales in a classroom instead of or as a supplementary to prescribed text books (Mahanand, 2010) that is the focus of a research study/paper. In each one of these research contexts, there are two kinds of investigations and analysis which are not usually possible.

First, it is not appropriate or ethical to carry out an experimental versus control group study, when the teacher is the only person either teaching both types of classes or trying out two different sets of materials. It may not be difficult to write out, as is done in many research methodology books, a null and a one tailed hypothesis for studies such as these, carry them out and prove, if the evidence is available, that one was better than the other. On paper, it is possible. But for research issues like these, this is not the best approach to take. The teachers/researchers themselves cannot teach in two different classes which are the experimental and the control group and state that they will document the differences. In our minds, we will

be biased towards what we wish to prove and that will affect our teaching. For such an experiment to happen, two different teachers need to teach using the two types of methods or materials. If, on the other hand, as a researcher, we wished to try out two different item types, in the form of tests, we could do that in the same class, because we are not teaching or intervening. We are only getting students to take two different tests, observing them and analysing the results. If we wish to intervene with new methods or materials, as the 'experimenter' we need to go into a school/college and teach one section using the method we wish to try out and ensure that the other teachers in that school/college are continuing to teach using the methods that they are following. As long we have checked and ensured that the 'experimental' method of intervention is not followed by the teacher in that school/college, such an intervention can be identified as a true control/experimental one.

Second, with such studies, where there is no experimental/control group and the teacher/researcher is the only one trying out the 'innovation' as it were, it is not possible to stay with quantification alone, and assertively claim and prove that based on a pre and a post test examination of marks there has been improvement and that the 'new method/materials' has been successful. We could use the pre and post test results to make an initial claim that our 'intervention' worked, but we would have to back it up with some qualitative analysis of student performance. This could be one or two of many kinds of data that we can collect, some as primary data and some for purposes of triangulation. For example, let us assume that we are working with the area of writing in English and using planning and preparation in the first language as the method of intervention and that over two months, two times a week, we got the students to sit in groups, discuss

and plan their essays using their more enabled/dominant language and write narrative/descriptive/argumentative/personal opinion based essays on a range of topics. The first and last essay written, using the first language as an asset, (Deepa and Durairajan, 2022) could be evaluated and the marks compared to check if there is any difference. We could also carry out a 't-test' of the two sets of marks and, if significant, prove that there has been some growth. But we will not be able to claim that only our intervention caused this difference. To make a strong case for this, we can attempt two different things. One, we could compare the paragraphing, the number and type of sentences used, the range of words in the essays, the kinds of connectors across all the writing samples, and if there are differences, state that more and better writing was possible because of the intervention. This is like capturing what can be termed as 'small gains' or tiny bits of growth in the student. Second, we could bring in a wee bit of triangulation and after the 2 months of teaching are over, have a whole class discussion on what the students felt about using their first/more enabled language in the classroom. For this, we could also ask them to write a reflective essay on the topic, and as long as the teacher/researcher can read and write their dominant/more enabled language, this essay could even be written in that language. We don't need to mark these essays but just read and take out snippets from them where the students have expressed their feelings on how they felt about this experiment. Even if the students write that they are not scared of writing in English any more, and have gained in confidence, that becomes good triangulatory evidence.

The other topics suggested above, and many others can all be worked on, in this manner. In each of these research studies, the teacher is

the researcher in the classroom. She 'intervenes' with a new method, or materials. But what is crucial is that it is not possible for the same teacher to teach two different sections, using two different methods, or different sets of materials and claim that one was better than the other. It is also not possible to carry out a pure empirical quantification based study in such a context. The study has to be ethnographic, where data will be analysed from a qualitative perspective. Soon, we will focus on how such data can be analysed, and presented, using data from published papers.

References

- Deepa, Shree. (2022). Academic Rape in Education Spaces - A Thought Seed Essay!. *Wisdom Speaks*. Vol.7: 82-89
- Deepa, Shree and Durairajan G. (2022). Warm welcome or cold shoulders: Demystifying (positively noxious) English in the multilingual classroom. *Critical issues in ELT*.
- Deepa, Shree and Srilatha. M (2022). Using multilinguality as an asset to learn writing. *Journal of English language teachers' interaction forum vol XIII.2:6-10*.
- Mahanand, A. (2010). Using indigenous oral narratives as scaffolding in L2 learning. *Languaging 2*, 142-158.
- Pathak, M. (2013). The Role of L1 in L2 Reading Comprehension: Evidence from a Study on Strategy Instruction. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Hyderabad: EFLU.

Prof Geetha Durairajan, Former Professor, Department of Materials Development and Evaluation, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.