
Ethnography and Language Education

Ariana Mangual Figueroa

Abstract

This chapter traces historical and contemporary approaches to conducting ethnographic research on language education. Mangual Figueroa highlights key theoretical concepts and methodological approaches central to the field, focusing on the potential for ethnographic research to inform socially responsible and democratically minded practices in schools and communities. The chapter focuses largely on research conducted in North American contexts, paying close attention to the contributions of the Ethnography of Speaking approach and Linguistic Anthropology. It covers new terrain in global and multi-sited ethnographic work conducted in diasporic communities in the United States while also examining the complex methodological issues that can arise in the field. The chapter closes by discussing recent, ongoing ethnographic research concerned with tracking the influences of power on language and learning with the goal of advocating for racial and economic equality for all language learners.

Keywords

Ethnography • Methodology • Multi-sited • Ethics • Power

A. Mangual Figueroa (✉)

Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

e-mail: amf@gse.rutgers.edu

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Introduction

In the influential 1987 volume edited by George and Louise Spindler, educational anthropologist Harry F. Wolcott asserted that “the purpose of ethnographic research is to describe and interpret cultural behavior” (p. 43). Conducting ethnographic research involves integrating a rich theoretical understanding of culture with the systematic documentation and analysis of a set of social practices. More recently, Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street pointed out that the unique job of an ethnographer studying language and literacy is to sort “out as many connections of language and culture as possible across recurring and definable situations” (2008, p. 11). Ethnographers of language education seek to document patterns within everyday interactions in order to examine the organizing principles that guide teaching and learning across contexts. As we will see, ethnographers of language education share a commitment to studying language and social processes with the goal of making educational opportunities accessible and equitable for all.

Early Developments

Anthropological research conducted during the first half of the twentieth century laid the foundation for enduring perspectives on language and ethnography. A brief look at the work of Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Benjamin Whorf provides an orientation to key terms and techniques echoed in the following sections of this chapter. It is noteworthy that Boas was Sapir’s teacher and that he, in turn, trained Whorf in the field of anthropological linguistics; the processes of teaching and learning that we study as educational anthropologists of language are exemplified in the development of the field itself. While other ethnographers have made significant methodological contributions, I focus on the work of these three male ethnographers from Europe and the United States working with Native American communities in North America because of the foundational contributions they made to the study of language.

Responding to theories of cultural determinism prevalent at the time, Boas – founder of the first department of anthropology in North America – argued that

linguistic and cultural behavior is not determined by race. His *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, published in 1911, demonstrated that although the rules of language use are often tacit and unexplainable by its speakers, it does not follow that those rules and accompanying behavior are the result of a speaker's racial characteristics (attributes considered to be largely biological during Boas' time). After conducting a systematic review of cases of racial mixing and language shift around the world and throughout history, Boas concluded that "anatomical type, language, and culture have not necessarily the same fates" (p. 13). He argued that ethnographers should speak the languages of the groups that they research in order to move beyond the external analysis of linguistic structure toward the study of speakers' behavior and interaction within a social group.

Through his study of the Yana language and its speakers in California, Sapir worked to further define language and culture. In a series of essays, he argued that language served two main functions: first, a communicative function, inherent in its "formal completeness" which granted speakers the phonetic and referential material needed for expression (1968/1924, p. 153), and second, a socializing function, which led to "social solidarity" among speakers of a particular language (1968/1933, p. 15). Sapir found that the underlying rules that guided language use were highly patterned and, as Boas (1911) had asserted, often tacit to speakers of that language. As a result, he argued that the ethnographer could gain the most insight into language use and culture by observing breaks in these patterns. In order to observe these subtle events and ascertain their significance for members of a cultural group, the ethnographer needed to engage in close and sustained observation of social behavior.

Informed by Boas' position on determinism and Sapir's focus on the relationship between the individual speaker and social group, Whorf conducted a comparative study of the concepts of space and time in Hopi and Standard American English. He argued that the distinct grammatical systems reflected a different concept of temporality that in turn reified the speakers' definition of and relationship to time. Whorf extended Sapir's notion of language as an unconscious system, concluding that members of a speech community not only adhere to the tacit rules of their language but also adopt the worldview embedded within that language. He called this worldview a "fashion of speaking" – a way of perceiving the world that is informed by grammatical structures that shape the cultural frame of reference shared by speakers of a language (1995/1941, p. 83). Whorf advocated a comparative study of language that could bring into relief the differences between the ethnographer's and participants' language in order to identify those linguistic and cultural features that are unique or shared across cultures.

These works constitute important early developments in the ethnography of language education not because they are conclusive, but because they are indicative of the kinds of inquiry that continue to guide the field. In fact, much of the research covered in the next section of this review turned away from the more structural views of language elaborated by Boas, Sapir, and Whorf. The shift away from structuralism – the view that culture and ideology exists in language prior to social interaction – toward theories that situate language squarely in social context is all the more significant given the essential concepts and approaches that endured despite the

turn. Language education researchers continue to explore concerns taken up in this early period, including the role of language in society, the relationship between race and language, and the significance of language, learning, and socialization, among others. Moreover, methodological principles considered innovative during this early period are now taken for granted. For example, ethnographers of language document and analyze everyday routines, they often take a comparative approach to the study of language and its use, they seek patterns and anomalies in behavior, and they observe interaction and ask probing questions that elicit speakers' metalinguistic awareness.

Major Contributions

Ethnographers of language education have various research interests (evident in the diverse demographic groups and social experiences studied) and set forth a range of goals (from theory building to enacting social change). Kelleen Toohey's (2008) chapter on "Ethnography and Language Education" in the previous edition of this volume provides an in-depth review organized by central concerns in the field of language education – topics such as identity, home-school relationships, and cultural resources. Here I focus on two main approaches to ethnographic research employed in the field – first, the Ethnography of Speaking, and second, Linguistic Anthropology. Both of these exemplify the integration of theory and methodology outlined by early educational anthropologists and maintained by ethnographers today. I cite significant contributions from the field of Language Socialization, but I will not cover it as a separate approach since it will be reviewed in depth in Paul Garrett's contribution to this volume.

Ethnography of Speaking

In his 1964 essay, *Toward Ethnographies of Communication*, Dell Hymes quoted Sapir's call for linguists to "become increasingly aware of the significance of their subject in the general field of science" by conducting language research informed by and relevant to a broad set of social concerns (p. 1). Hymes was writing at a moment in which the field of linguistics was being developed according to prevalent Chomskyan approaches to descriptive grammatical study based upon idealized notions of the speaker/hearer. He was also writing in the wake of the "culture of poverty" concept, introduced in 1961 by anthropologist Oscar Lewis to explain his observations of life in a poor community in Mexico City. Against this backdrop, Hymes called upon language researchers to explore enduring questions regarding the role of language in society and the efficacy of deterministic theories of culture. These questions gained particular importance in the field of education because of the role schools play in the assessment and instruction of students in multilingual and multicultural settings shaped by integration and immigration (Gándara and Contreras 2010).

Dell Hymes and John Gumperz collaborated on many of the programmatic statements outlining this “speaker-oriented approach to conversation” (1964; Gumperz 1982, p. 35); these essays are themselves reviews of the emerging field of language education. In them, Hymes and Gumperz extended previous theories of language use and linguistic structure. They moved, for example, away from Sapir’s comparisons of bounded language systems that he assigned to speech communities presumed to be culturally homogeneous toward the concept of “verbal repertoires” that highlighted the dynamic and diverse communicative resources employed by interlocutors. They also shifted away from Whorf’s assertions that linguistic and ideological complexity was encoded in internal patterns within the linguistic system to the concept of “communicative events” that placed talk and social interaction at the center of research on language and culture. Along with other ethnographers working at the time, Hymes and Gumperz worked to capture the emergent quality of a rapidly changing social context that was empirically observable by tracking the “contextualization cues” employed by speakers in real-time interactions (Gumperz 1992, p. 232).

Two key methodological tenets for the ethnographic study of language were elaborated upon during this period (see Wortham 2003, for a related but different framing of these approaches). The first tenet was to seek local understandings of language in context. Hymes believed that our ethnographic imperative was to move from an “etic grid to discover an emic system” (1964, p. 24). From this perspective, ethnographers are thought to enter the field with beliefs about language and its speakers, and their work is to test those preconceptions or hypotheses against the everyday communicative practices of a community. According to Hymes, these practices are documented and analyzed by attending to the shifting and patterned roles that interlocutors take up in relation to one another and the multiple functions that language plays in the course of interaction. This is essential to understanding the ways in which communicative competence is defined, imparted, and demonstrated within a social setting. Ethnographers of language working across the globe have taken up the concept of communicative competence in order to examine their own methodological approaches to fieldwork as well as the cultural practices of the communities they study (see Ochs 1979; Moore 2009).

The second methodological principle was that interactions between diverse speakers in public institutions are points of contact that offer ethnographers unique opportunities to study the social significance of language use in a multicultural society. Displays and evaluations of communicative competence are never neutral – this is particularly true in the field of language education because school evaluations of speaker competence often have ideological and material consequences for those students and families being evaluated (García Sánchez 2014). As Hymes explained, researchers in language education are often “assuming from the outset a confrontation of different systems of competency within the school and community, and focusing on the way in which one affects or can be made to affect the other” (1972, p. 68). This is an enduring focus in the ethnography of language education as scholars have documented those tacit assumptions about language use and competency that guide interaction across settings, the continuities and disconnects that exist

across cultural frames of reference, and the impact of school-based assessments on the lived experiences of speakers and communities (see Erickson 1984; Baquedano-López et al. 2013 for critical reviews of this enduring concern). Hymes believed that raising these questions in schools and with practitioners was essential for addressing issues of equity and social justice that were fundamental if schools were to fulfill their democratic potential (see *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* special issue dedicated to Dell Hymes).

Linguistic Anthropology of Education

In a 2003 essay, Stanton Wortham established a bidirectional relationship between the ethnography of speaking outlined above and the linguistic anthropology of education. The common theoretical and methodological approaches used in these two fields have led to a contemporary focus on communicative competence, emic perspectives on language use, and macro-micro connections evident in interaction. Wortham argued that linguistic anthropologists today are largely concerned with four topics related to the social context of language use – indexicality, creativity, regimentation, and poetic structure – and that schools and educational settings are ideal places to engage in the study of these phenomena. As Betsy Rymes (2003) has noted, linguistic anthropology in education has extended our study of language to include a range of semiotic processes that are not limited – though often related – to speaking. Very often, she observed, the ethnographic study of semiotic processes has taken place in out-of-school educational settings, while studies of speaking have focused on teaching and learning activities conducted in schools and classrooms.

It is important to highlight two contributions made by linguistic anthropologists that have extended our theoretical understanding of and methodological approaches to the study of language education. The first is the focus on language as constitutive – not merely reflective – of social context; the second is the concept of a repertoire of semiotic resources that interlocutors employ during the course of an exchange. The related concepts of indexicality and creativity draw our attention to the agentic ways in which interlocutors use language to communicate desired meanings as well as the multiple ways in which these messages can be interpreted (Ochs 1996; Wortham 2003). These messages and their interpretations have social consequences that offer clues about the social context to interlocutors and ethnographers alike and that also help to produce the context in which subsequent interactions unfold. While context can be contingent and emergent, it is also bound by certain conventions such as language ideology and poetic structure (Wortham 2003). These theoretical principles, coupled with conversation analytic tools for analyzing language, mean that linguistic anthropologists continue to seek emic points of view by taking inductive approaches to data analysis and systematically analyzing “*patterns of semiotic cues* across particular segments of language use, instead of relying on isolated instances selected from the data” (Wortham 2001, emphasis in original, p. 257).

Focusing on creativity and communicative resources highlights the individual’s use of a range of semiotic material – refocusing our attention away from community-

level generalizations about language use and toward the particular insights that individual language use can give us into local social norms. Rymes' (2010) concept of the communicative repertoire builds on the verbal repertoire introduced by Gumperz in an attempt to reconcile the relationship between the individual and the community and the macro and the micro connection in language use. As in the ethnography of speaking tradition, one of the goals of the linguistic anthropology of education is to raise the metalinguistic awareness of educators and students, to enlist them in the research process, and to employ current technological tools to democratize the ethnographic approach (Rymes 2010). Ana Celia Zentella's (1997) book *Growing Up Bilingual* is an important example of democratizing research through, what she calls, an *anthropolitical* linguistic approach drawing from linguistic anthropological and sociolinguistic traditions. The goal of this approach is to simultaneously "understand and facilitate a stigmatized group's attempts to construct a positive self" in the context of macroeconomic and social systems that stigmatize groups of people and their language (Zentella 1997, p. 13; see also González 2006).

Works in Progress

Educational ethnographers who study language are taking up multi-sited and global ethnographic approaches as they work to amplify their methodology in keeping with rapidly changing social settings. In a recent essay, Voussoughi and Gutiérrez (2014) call for the development of a "multi-sited sensibility" that can contribute to our understanding of "learning as the organization of possible futures" (p. 609). They argue that scholars concerned with educational equity and ethnographic rigor can take up multi-sited approaches that capture the complexity of the everyday practices of communities living in contexts of migration. By studying the movement and enactment of culture and literacy across sites, we can work against the tendency to essentialize and homogenize nondominant communities and highlight the humanizing and democratizing potential of communities and our work within them (Voussoughi and Gutiérrez 2014). Multi-sited and global approaches are particularly well suited for ethnographers of language education because of the close attention to language and discourse suggested in the early statements delineating these methods.

In a description of multi-sited ethnographic research, Marcus (1995) explained that it "is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites" (p. 105). For Marcus, shifting from studying cultural practice in a single site toward studying people's everyday lives across multiple sites requires interdisciplinary study and a fundamental redefinition of ethnography. Marcus claimed that in order to track social and cultural phenomena across sites, the ethnographer must be able to understand discourse and "cultural idiom" as it travels, with the goal of making "connections through translations and tracings among distinctive discourses from site to site" (1995, pp. 100–101). This complements Buroway's (1991) call for ethnographers working in a global paradigm to engage in "dialogue" with

participants, acknowledging the role of power in shaping these interactions and using grounded theory approaches to reexamine and revise existing social theory. Both Marcus and Buroway have suggested that as ethnographers engage in participant observation, they may become activists as well – implicated in the everyday practices that they study and compelled to act in ways that establish ever deepening connecting with the communities they work alongside. Early methodological principles are echoed in these statements – dating back to Boasian claims that ethnographers should speak the languages (broadly defined in contemporary formulations) of the communities that they study and Whorfian calls for ethnographers to conduct comparative work across sites.

Several examples of multi-sited ethnographic research in the field of language and literacy exemplify the potential of the method for producing insights into routine interactions and for capturing emerging social practices. Lam's (2004) multi-sited study of interactions among members of a Chinese/English speaking peer group in face-to-face school interactions and virtual online forums demonstrated the ways in which language socialization is both informed by and also potentially subversive of state-defined national boundaries. The multiple sites for multilingual exchange suggest the possibility of the creation of new registers and codes that index emerging identities in a global context. Pahl's (2007) reflection on her 3-year multi-sited study of a family living in a Turkish Diaspora in London offered insight into the ways in which close attention to language use and literacy practices allowed her to see the various influences – intergenerational, international, and economic – on children's developing modes of communication and frames of reference. Emerging research from UC Berkeley's Laboratory for the Study of Interaction and Discourse in Educational Research (L-SIDER) led by Patricia Baquedano-López demonstrates the interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of multi-sited ethnographic work in the field of language socialization and education. This work includes research on Latina mothers advocating for their children's educational needs in community and institutional settings (Domínguez-Pareto 2014) and multi-sited ethnographic studies of the ways in which family members take up institutional discourses of educational reform within home settings (Hernandez 2013). Readers are also directed to two reviews of multi-sited ethnographic work in education that lay an important foundation for continued work in this area: Eisenhart's (2001) essay including a description of multi-sited approaches within educational ethnography and Hornberger's (2007) exploration of multi-sited studies specifically focused on transnationalism and language learning.

Problems and Difficulties

As ethnographers have worked to reconceptualize the boundaries of the traditional field site, they have also redefined the role of the ethnographer. Such shifts include a move away from the image of the neutral participant toward the belief that the ethnographer's presence inevitably changes those social processes that she observes

(Duranti 1997). Researchers have highlighted the emergent nature of qualitative research, suggesting that ethnographers need not only document dynamic social processes but also be prepared to adapt their methodological approaches based upon unanticipated conditions and experiences encountered in the field (Howe and Dougherty 1993). In this framework, a unique set of ethical challenges emerges; I briefly review three of them here: reciprocity and the writing process, language use, and entering/exiting the field.

Reciprocity has become a central ethical principle that guides ethnographers considering ways of equalizing the exchange between themselves and those who agree to participate in their studies. In volume six of the *Ethnographer's Toolkit* (1999), LeCompte, Schensul, Weeks, and Singer conceived of reciprocity as the act of “sharing ideas, resources, and responsibilities” (p. 65). Hernandez (2013) suggests that ethnographers should share not only social and material capital but also what she calls “the analytic gaze.” She argued that examining and publishing moments of researcher vulnerability would equalize the scrutiny placed on participants and ethnographers alike.

Ethnographers of language are particularly sensitive to their own language use and are reflective about the tools that they use to record participants' interactions. As mentioned briefly above, linguistic anthropologists and language socialization researchers have examined the ways in which their fluency in the language of the communities they study simultaneously shapes their ability to collect locally relevant data and interpret it with emic lenses (Moore 2009). In the field of language socialization, children are considered central social actors in any interaction and, as a result, unique modes of data collection and representation are needed to reflect the multiple communicative resources (not always verbal) that they employ in interaction (Ochs 1979). In addition, audio and visual tools for recording interaction may run the risk of reproducing participants' marginal identities or may be appropriated by participants to assert novel and agential forms of self within the study (Martinez 2016).

Ethnographers in the field of anthropology and education have raised a series of ethical concerns related to two aspects of the data collection process – obtaining informed consent at the outset of the study and concluding a study by exiting the field. By examining the institutional review board and informed consent process in which researchers apply for institutional approval of their study and then obtain participant agreement to participate, anthropologists have highlighted that these linguistic and legal processes shape our relationships to participants and can impact our roles throughout the study (Metro 2014). This initial stage of the research process tends to focus on protecting research institutions and the researcher from liability in the field, but it can also become an opportunity for us to consider how forms of reciprocity and responsibility might become integral to the research design and process (Mangual Figueroa 2016). In addition to focusing on ethical issues raised at the start of data collection, I have also argued that attending to the moment of exiting the field is an overlooked yet essential part of our work. As we attempt to conclude our research and exit the field, participants may ask us to reciprocate their

participation in our studies in ways that that we could not have anticipated before they had gotten to know us during the ethnographic process. The concept of a spatially and temporally delimited field that a researcher enters and exits might itself need to be reconceived in an era of globalization in which we are implicated in those economic, social, and political systems that shape our participants' lives directly or indirectly (Mangual Figueroa 2014).

Future Directions

Ethnographers of language education – including those that feature language itself as the central unit of analysis and those that center language learners as their focal participants – are concerned with the ways in which their research can make meaningful, positive change in the educational experiences of the communities and youth that they study. As federal regulations and funding sources continue to shape educational research by delineating what counts as valid research and what areas of study should be supported, educational researchers are calling for a definition of scholarly rigor that includes the criterion of “relevance” (Gutiérrez and Punuel 2014). In this formulation, rigor is not defined solely by criteria internal to the research design and analysis of data but also in relation to the study's import for the individuals and communities involved in the research process. I will briefly suggest two areas that ethnographers of language education may consider when making their research relevant to learners living in a diverse and dynamic society.

In a recent essay, Paris and Alim (2014) reviewed over five decades of educational research focused on honoring and preserving the linguistic and cultural heritages of communities of color in US schools. The goal of this review was to build upon previous educational research – much of it ethnographic – in order to elaborate a new paradigm for democratizing and humanizing future research. They asserted that in order to take on enduring challenges in our field – ones that arguably date back to some of the early anthropological work reviewed in this chapter – scholars must work against racial and linguistic deficit models, conceptualize equity not as cultural assimilation but instead as cultural sustainability, and resist oversimplistic views of racial identity that correspond to a stereotypic and static set of social practices. In order to work toward the “culturally sustaining pedagogy” that they call for, Paris and Alim ask that we consider research methodologies and educational practices that can support “the many practices and traditions of communities of color that forward equity” (p. 95). This includes not only foregrounding the positive and productive forms of cultural production that youth engage in but also critically examining the ways in which these practices may reproduce or create new injustices and marginalities. In this reflexive project, ethnographers of language education can work alongside communities of color to advocate social justice for all.

In 1972 anthropologist Laura Nader published an article entitled *Up the Anthropologist – Perspectives Gained from Studying Up*. She argued that “‘Studying up’ as

well as down would lead us to ask many ‘common sense’ questions in reverse. Instead of asking why some people are poor we would ask why other people are so affluent?” (p. 289). Nader literally turned the ethnographers’ work on its head – suggesting that in order to understand the way that power is produced, exerted, and preserved, we must study those individuals, communities, and institutions that wield it. Moreover she claimed that this kind of research can contribute to a better understanding of the everyday lives of those historically marginalized communities that anthropologists tend to study. More recently, Hamman (2003) applied the concept of studying up to educational anthropology, arguing that this approach can help to engage in a form of scientific research based upon the premise that educational research, policy, and practice is inherently political. This view, he argued, would allow us to challenge research findings that profess to be neutral and objective while also having disproportionate consequences for racialized and impoverished communities and their children. This ethnographic approach is exemplified in López’s (2012) longitudinal study of the ways in which the Texas state legislature developed the state’s testing and accountability regime, Wayne Yang’s (2010, published under the name Paperson) examination of the mechanisms used by school board officials in one California city to disenfranchise community members and close a neighborhood school, and Lipman’s (2011) study of the pervasive effects of neoliberal policies in the educational, economic, and civic lives of Chicago residents. These scholars redefine the role of the participant observer – they are educational advocates, school leaders, and scholar-activists as well as researchers, and they are unapologetic about conducting research that documents power and inequity while simultaneously demanding social justice. Moreover, they consider the multiple forms that scholarly research might take and the multiple audiences it might reach; by disseminating scholarly articles, public speeches, political pamphlets, and more, these researchers work to support communities working to meet the exigent educational needs that they face.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Critical Ethnography](#)
- ▶ [Linguistic Ethnography](#)
- ▶ [Microethnography in the Classroom](#)
- ▶ [Researching Language Socialization](#)
- ▶ [Researching the Language of Race and Racism in Education](#)
- ▶ [Researching Timescales in Language and Education](#)

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

[Encyclopedia of Language and Education, Language Socialization](#) (whole Vol. 8)

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