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Jo Mynard, Kanda University of International Studies,
Chiba, Japan

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Ethnographies of Self-Access Language Learning

Jo Mynard, Kanda University of International Studies

Abstract

In this short overview, I discuss how ethnographies could be considered an appropriate yet under-utilised research methodology for exploring the field of self-access learning. We could consider ethnographies of self-access spaces, autoethnographic accounts of language learning or professional development, and also collaborative and duoethnographies. An ethnographic approach will allow us to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of people in the field and a privileged insight into the learning process.

Keywords: ethnography, ethnographic research, self-access, autoethnography, duoethnography, collective autoethnography

In this short summary, I will give a brief account of the potential role that ethnographies might play in the future research agenda of the field of self-access. In line with what has become known as the “narrative turn” (Barkhuizen et al., p. 1), we have come to appreciate research methods that allow us to understand actual experiences of everyday engagement with self-access language learning. An ethnography is defined by Watson-Gegeo (1988) as “the study of people’s behaviour in naturally occurring, ongoing settings, with a focus on the cultural interpretation of behavior” (p. 576). The main goal of an ethnography is to gain access to “the cultural member’s own, or emic, perspective...in their daily lived experience” (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 576). Ethnographic work tends to be interpreted holistically. For example, in an ethnography related to language learning, we are not just interested in the methods someone chooses to learn a language, but the agentive, motivational, social and emotional factors associated with learning the language, the implications for learning the language, and so on. In her ethnography of storytelling within an Italian-American immigrant community of card players, De Fina (2013) studied not only the emergent narratives, but the purpose and function of particular narratives, and the social processes that they represented. Ethnographic research may have once been considered to be on the boundaries of research, but it is now considered to be a mainstream and legitimate approach to social science research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Holt, 2003). Barkhuizen

et al. (2014) consider stories that people tell as helpful for a “richer and more rounded understanding of language teaching and learning as lived experience” (p. 6).

It is important to note that there have been many excellent examples of ethnographies which have already been published in the field of self-access language learning. For example, Murray, Fujishima, Uzuka and colleagues published several books and papers based on ethnographic data from a five-year study of a self-access learning space in Okayama, Japan (Murray, 2018; Murray & Fujishima, 2013, 2016; Murray et al., 2014). Inspired by this work in particular, myself and a group of colleagues have recently completed an ethnography of a social learning space in our own context (Burke et al., 2018; Mynard et al., 2020). Taking an ethnographic approach allowed us to explore phenomena happening in a specific area of our SALC—the conversation lounge—in great depth with insights from learners’ voices, spanning four years or more.

In addition to ethnographic studies of learning spaces, taking an *autoethnographic* approach will provide the opportunities for individuals to explore their own self-access language learning or professional experiences (Anderson, 2006). Autoethnography, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000), is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). There are several well-known autoethnographies in applied linguistics, for example Simon-Maeda’s (2011) *Being and becoming a speaker of Japanese*, Schmidt and Frota’s (1986) classic study of Schmidt himself learning Portuguese in Brazil, Cummings’ (2003) first-person narrative study on the challenges of learning Japanese in Japan, and Osbourne’s (2013) autoethnography on the process of learning Italian using a mobile phone application. On the one hand, it is surprising that there have not been more of such accounts given how much we can learn about the language learning process through the reading of autoethnographies. On the other hand, data collection is lengthy and can take many years, researchers may feel uneasy about sharing such personal accounts, and many language learning projects cease altogether or include long spells of inactivity which may result in an incomplete project or an unwillingness on the part of the researcher to publish the account of an unfinished project. I would argue that incomplete accounts could add much to our understanding of the challenges of learning a language and the importance of concepts such as agency, motivation and perseverance in sustained self-access learning.

Many language learners, like Cummings (2003), keep a diary about their language learning experiences. Writing a diary with a purpose such as the intention of eventually using it as *data* for an autoethnography means that it is likely that the activity will be more regular and reflective. While engaging in the process of learning a language as part of an autoethnography, it is also important to remember the research role and the process of linking personal experiences to broader implications. Authors “take on the dual identities of academic and personal selves to tell autobiographical stories about some aspects of their experience in daily life” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). They use their own experiences in the culture to deeply consider themselves and other interactions around them reflexively (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

In addition to autoethnographies related to the language learning process, we could also benefit from encouraging autoethnographies related to professional development or professional identity. For example, Everhard (2018) documents a 20-year career in the field of self-access through the exploration of critical vignettes. In another example, Lammons writes about her journey in transitioning from being a language teacher to a learning advisor (Lammons, 2011, 2012a, 2012b). In a third example, Shibata (2012) takes an autoethnographic approach to look at her role as a learning advisor in a self-access centre. As both Everhard (2018) and Ellis (2004) note, the process of conducting autoethnographic research can be “revelatory and therapeutic” (Everhard, 2018, p. 266) for the author, but it can also be illuminative for the reader who may be considering their own professional or personal journey.

We could also consider *collaborative autoethnographies* (Chang et al., 2013) where authors/researchers collaborate on exploring a shared autoethnography, for example, a shared professional development experience. A good example of this in our field is provided by Şen et al. (2018) who discuss a shared experience of completing a professional language advising course and the implications this had for their professional identities and changing professional practices in their institution in Turkey. In the field of language teacher development in general, another example of collaborative autoethnography is provided by Yoshida and Verla Uchida (2020) who find parallels in their journeys into academic careers in Japan.

Another form of ethnography is *duoethnography*. A duo ethnography differs from a collaborative autoethnography in that different stories or experiences are compared through the process to engaging in dialogue with a co-participant. The concept was originally introduced to me by Daniel Hooper and Azusa Iijima through their fascinating duoethnography which

uncovered unexpected insights into native speakerism in Japan (Hooper & Iijima, 2019). In addition, I had the pleasure of attending a conference presentation last year by Peter Brereton (Brereton & Schaefer, 2019), who helpfully shared the practical aspects of the process and showed us a behind-the-scenes glimpse of a duoethnography on professional practice and teacher training (Schaefer & Brereton, 2020). In fact, a recent book is dedicated to duoethnography in the field of language learning (Lowe & Lawrence, 2020), indicating an increased interest in this kind of research in applied linguistics in general.

In this short paper, I hope I have succeeded in raising awareness of some existing studies and making a case for why we should encourage more ethnographic research in the field of self-access learning. In order to promote this narrative turn in self-access, *SiSAL Journal* is starting its own column dedicated to ethnography in self-access. Potential contributors to the column are likely to be advisors/teachers and/or language learners. The ethnographies might be published in one issue, but most likely they will be longer studies which can be serialised in several installments. The contributions could be traditional papers written in English; equally, they could be multilingual, multimodal, and/or multivoiced. Imagine how interesting it could be to actually understand the ongoing self-access journeys of individual learners and language professionals, to “hear” their voices and empathise with their experiences. I look forward to seeing where this initiative takes us.

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