THIRD EDITION

HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

SPONSORED BY THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION & THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

EDITED BY DIANE LAPP • DOUGLAS FISHER
The term “emic” is often used when describing qualitative research that focuses on the uniqueness of a culture or experience. Thomas Headland, noted linguistic, anthropologist, and student of Kenneth L. Pike, concluded that less than 30% of authors from 20 different research fields credited Pike in their discussions of emic and etic perspectives (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990). As can be expected, the terms “etic” and “emic” have been widely used and re-defined in the research literature from various disciplines. For this chapter, Pike’s original articulations of emic research are used as a means to re-capture the original intent of the term and to apply it to current research in the field that resonates with emic forms of scholarship.

The body of scholarship highlighted in the chapter comes from various methodologies, diverse sets of assumptions, and often does not adhere to a rigid set of “scientifically-based” research processes. The focus on emic research transcends the paradigms of post-positive, interpretive, and critical research (Willis, 2007) or external, internal, or interactional categories of research (Bredo, 2006). Instead, the chapter focuses on the common experiences, questions, and concerns researchers encounter when conducting intimate projects on learning spaces, families, and students involved in teaching and learning in English language arts (TLELA). Additionally, the nature of TLELA settings as connected to the discipline of English, as a complex set of relationships and group dynamics among teachers and students, and as tied to all aspects of language and culture, lends itself to a cultural linguistic analysis similar to the scholarship cultivated by Pike. In this chapter the nature and possibilities of research focused on emic perspectives of culture and behavior are discussed using recent studies in TLELA to highlight the value of emic perspectives, the tensions inherent in doing this work, and the new challenges and possibilities that emerge.

**Definition of Emic**

Pike, a researcher from the field of linguistics, constructed the terms “etic” and “emic” by removing the first half of the words “phonetic” and “phonemic” to describe the interplay between what the researcher sees as parts of language, verbal and nonverbal, and culture that are reflected in other cultures and languages specific to a certain group: “To put it another way, the etic is the level of universals, or the level of things which may be observed by an ‘objective’ observer. The emic is the level of meaningful contrasts within a particular language or culture” (Barnard, 2000, p. 114). Pike credits previous scholars and mentors for their descriptions of the dualist interplay between the general and the specific that is imbedded in linguistics and cross-cultural research. It was only when framing this interplay through a theory of tagmemes or tagmemic theory, that he felt the need to label the process of linguistic and cultural analysis in these distinctive ways. Pike states, “Culture and language learning form an essential inseparable dyad for understanding in cross-cultural contexts” (Pike & McKinney, 1996, p. 40). In truth, because Pike thought of language as both verbal utterances and nonverbal behavior that elicited response, he would rail at a distinction between language and culture as two separate entities when they are so indelibly tied to one another.

As with other dialectical systems, the components of emic cannot properly be defined and discussed without an understanding of components of etic. Pike describes the principal differences, which are referenced throughout this chapter, between them:

- Creation versus discovery of a system: The etic organization of a world-wide cross-cultural scheme may be created by the analyst. The emic structure of a particular system must be discovered.
In the beginning of the chapter, emic studies are not referred to as unique, but as intimate research. The distinction between unique and intimate is worth noting. The definition of unique is something that is like no other, whereas the definition of intimate is a relationship of closeness and proximity, physical and emotional. Studies that focus on emic constructs highlight those aspects specific to particular contexts, but also desire the reader to draw parallels between his/her own experiences and those of the participants. Stake (1978/2000) describes this phenomenon as naturalistic generalization. When explaining the relationship between the general and the particular, Stake states that “naturalistic generalization, arrived at by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural covariations of happenings” is “both intuitive and empirical” (2000, p. 22) and is often superior to other generalizations that can lead to over-simplifying events and people’s perspectives. Naturalistic generalization is neither prescriptive nor universal, but contextualized by the educator reading or hearing the scholarship.

Intimate research captures often unknown programs and examples of successful teacher practice and student learning. The context(s) of the events and participants’ experiences remain integral to the stories that the researcher relates to the public. Education researchers hope that documenting people’s lives in this manner will inspire other educators to replicate good practice, alter or eliminate less-successful elements of their approaches to education, and show more of the possibilities for teaching and learning. Lincoln and Guba (1979, 2000) offer that readers’ ability to make connections between themselves and the study, to transfer or translate the newly described situation to their own situations, is called “fittingness.” Fittingness is the ability of the reader, once that she has ample description and information about the contexts of the study, to then relate those contexts to her own, given that only she knows the details of that context. Only the reader, who knows both her context and the published study, can properly transfer the findings or suggestions to a new setting. It is incumbent upon the researcher to provide the necessary emic analysis to the reader so that she can properly make those transfers.

**Why TLELA Researchers Choose to Conduct Emic Studies**

The nature of teaching and learning in English language arts is both a personal and community endeavor. Through the many components of and interactions with language, English teachers regularly ask students to take various risks in their classrooms. These risks range from sharing an analysis of an academic text to disclosing personal experiences, thoughts, and beliefs. Teachers ask students to establish textual, personal, and social connections with and across canonical and contemporary readings as well as with popular cultural forms. Then, they require students...
to critically explain and explore their identities in writing and in speech. Students become emotionally vulnerable to peers and teachers when asked to submit their writing for critique or defend their position during a class discussion. Reader Response theory and critical theory, two commonly used frameworks for teaching literature, require the reader to personally engage with the text. When a teacher invites students on a journey through time and space, she seeks to engage students beyond the acquisition and enhancement of academic skills into a deeper understanding of social, emotional, and political issues that reflect who they are or wish to become in the future. Researchers attempt to mimic these same personal relationships and ask participants to risk vulnerability in emic research so that they may document the intimate nature of teaching and learning in English language arts.

**Nature of Methodologies that Highlight Emic Perspectives**

Given the emic nature of TLELA, research methodologies that support the philosophies of teachers of English seem to make a reasonable pairing. A meta-analysis conducted by Juzwik et al. (2006) showed that over 75% of the reported studies conducted between 1999 and 2004 on teaching and learning writing were done using interpretive methods. While that does not qualify the studies as emic, it does draw attention to the increasing ways researchers have gravitated towards methods that may provide emic data. We believe that most qualitative methodologies that lend themselves to research require an analysis of emic constructs. However, it is up to the researcher to shape her study in the direction of such an intimate research design.

A number of issues and criteria affect the decision to focus on emic constructs. Researchers who collect emic data on participants’ lives and perceptions appreciate the flexibility of the researcher as observer, participant, instructor, and learner: “Participants can be both subjective and objective, and observers [researchers] can be both subjective and objective” (Harris quoted in Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990, p. 50). In this vein, the researcher takes on different forms due to what is required by the contexts of the research, the way that the study evolves, and the research questions. In TLELA, these studies may have one or more of the following goals:

- Understand how teachers and students make connections between art and life
- Describe/explain students’ communities—small/large; close/distant; present/historical
- Describe/explain students’ literacy practices
- Explore student identity
- Document the teaching of ELA—how and why teachers of ELA do what they do
- Provide examples of good practice

The adaptability of the research process and these research goals reflect various methodologies that align with ethnography and case study research in TLELA.

**Ethnography**

Lillis (2008) justly contends that ethnographic methods and an ethnographic methodology are not synonymous terms. She advocates for more research on writing to employ a full ethnographic methodology to express an emic perspective of the TLELA. Lillis suggests that “a lengthy or sustained engagement in participants’ academic writing worlds, and the collection and analysis of a range of types of data in order to build holistic understandings” (p. 362) allow the researcher to create thick descriptions (see also Heath & Street, 2008) of participants, events, and contexts of these learning spaces. Her understanding of ethnography stems from Hammersley’s features of education ethnography:

- Ethnography is concerned with the collection and analysis of empirical data drawn from “real world” contexts rather than being produced under experimental conditions created by the researcher; The research involves sustained engagement in the field;
- A key aim is for the researcher to attempt to make sense of events from the perspectives of participants; Data are gathered from a range of sources, but observation and/or relatively informal conversations are often key tools;
- The focus is a single setting or group of relatively small scale or a small number of these. In life history research, the focus may even be a single individual;
- The analysis of the data involves interpretations of the meanings and functions of human actions…. (Lillis, 2008, p. 358)

In addition to these features, which parallel the components of emic research detailed earlier, Heath and Street (2008) argue for the subjective, interpretive, and partial nature of ethnographic research. They contend: “The emic or locally held perspective of an individual, group, or institution, such as a school, can bring into its knowledge system that which has been established from an etic or comparative analysis” (p. 44). Education ethnographers use emic perspectives from participants to highlight the emic constructs particular to groups or individuals in teaching and learning settings.

**Case Study**

Similarly, case study research in education is often used to document the emic perspectives of the participants and the emic constructs of a group while allowing the reader to create naturalistic generalizations or fittingness. When discussing the role of case study research Stake (1978/2000) gives his opinion:

Its [case study’s] best use appears to me to be adding to existing experiences and humanistic understanding. Its characteristics match the ‘readiness’ people have for added experience. As Von Wright and others stressed, intentional- ity and empathy are central to the comprehension of social problems, but so also is information that is holistic and episodic. The discourse of persons struggling to increase
their understanding of social matters features and solicits these qualities. And these qualities match nicely the characteristics of the case study. (2000, p. 24)

Undoubtedly, “cases are constructed, not found” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 2); they contribute to what we know about and learn from what Stake (2000) refers to as “existing experiences” and “social matters.” Case studies have holistic and episodic ventur es that correlate with emic and etic constructs of individual studies. The emic constructs are the bounded systems around the case—those criteria, contexts, and events that are specific to that study. The etic constructs are the grand hypothesis or broader issues being targeted in the study (Stake, 1978/2000).

**Role(s) of the Researcher** According to Pike’s tagmemic theory, etic and emic participant perspectives are two sides of the same coin that must be teased a part by the knowledgeable researcher. When the researcher analyzes etic data, those verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are clearly related to other groups or the greater society, she creates a type of cultural understanding across groups. When the researcher analyzes the data looking for independent emic data, she then creates a second type of understanding within the group. The third understanding results from removing the specific contexts surrounding the emic data and cross-referencing them with other non-specific emic data to confirm or disconfirm the possibilities for new etic data that can be generalized across groups. Thus, an emic data without its specific cultural context may also serve an etic analysis of the larger societal context (Pike, 1967).

The knowledgeable researcher, who understands the cultural contexts being observed and documented, is integral to the emic study. Pike and McKinney (1996) explain the dyad that is created by language and culture in contexts that are cross-cultural. To prevent misinterpretations and “cultural clash,” they insist that “the individual who seeks to work successfully in a second culture context needs to gain an emic view of that culture” (p. 40). The researcher’s ability to understand the insider perspective is only one aspect of conducting emic research. The researcher bridges academic explanations of behavior and perception to the documented events and lived experiences of the participants. Barnard (2000) asserts, “…they [the participants] might be unable to describe the emic system [constructs] which underlies their cultural understandings and practices. The discovery of that system is the task of the analyst, not the informant” (p.114). As highlighted in various educational studies, it is essential that researchers explain and translate the emic constructs of participants to other venues so that the lives of the participants may be better understood and acknowledged.

**Goals and Overview of Small Studies**

A wealth of scholarship in TLELA has embraced emic research. The shift from etic to emic research points to ongoing interest for researchers to ground ethnographies and symbolic and interpretive observational approaches in local events, practices, and ways of life. Such a perspective encompasses sophisticated analyses of life patterns, unique relations of spatial-temporal conditions, and events of/within specified groups (participants) and communities (contexts). Important in such studies are the ways researchers rely on emic perspectives to document what they observe and learn without the imposition of etic, outsider and predetermined, often fixed, analytic categories.

There are educational projects on students’ literacy practices (Mahiri, 1994; Dimitriadis, 2001), democratic engagements across contexts (Kinchin, 2009; Gustavson, 2008), school/non-school identities (Hill, 2009), and textual productions (Vasudevan, 2006). Additionally, a number of studies seek to understand how teachers and students make connections between art and life, describe students’ communities (e.g., small/large; distant/close; present/historical), and document TLELA to determine how/why teachers do what they do (Fecho, 2004; Yagelski, 2000). The importance of adopting an emic perspective impacts what researchers observe and how they conduct observations indicative of what participants demonstrate through their own actions and life experiences.

**Emic Perspectives and Literacy Research in Nonschool Contexts** This latter point—that emic data can reveal participants’ patterns of life and inform how researchers conduct observations—is reflected in representative literacy studies in nonschool contexts. Mahiri (1994), for example, describes the adaptive literacy practices of African American males participating in the Youth Basketball Association, in Chicago, Illinois. He observes how the youth engaged in a number of literacy activities: “close and extensive readings of certain texts—newspaper accounts of sports events, basketball card collections and associated guidebooks, and computer sport game screen texts and instruction books” (p. 143). In observing such practices, which he describes as “novel” and “alternative” reading rites because they often go unnoticed in schools, Mahiri recognizes relationships between participants and contexts. These behaviors and the contexts that make the reading both a viable literacy and an ignored competency may be classified as emic data specific to African American boys, but also an etic analysis concerning the nature of American boys’ reading interests.

The recognition of interconnections between people and places, or participants and their familial, social contexts, is a significant factor in research that utilizes an emic perspective. In addition to this early research on adaptive literacy, Mahiri (1991, 1994) has conducted extensive studies on the literacy practices of urban youth in a variety of contexts and forms: high school classrooms, community sites, digital environments, and African American youth culture. Close documentation of their actions and practices—whether during their involvement with sports or activities around writing—can reveal the complexities of youth literacy experiences as situated within local con-
texts and around local knowledge (Kinloch, 2010; Jocson, 2005; Dyson, 2005).

Undoubtedly, there are tensions inherent with conducting emic research. As the research study evolves, careful decisions have to be made about how to intimately document people's lives, engage in in-depth analyses of observations, and how to conceptualize personal and public (e.g., community/family and school/society) relations. These considerations parallel critical researchers' concerns about participant-researcher relationships and the dissemination of research findings (see Willis this volume).

To conduct "critical" research, Morrell (2008) acknowledges the sophisticated ability of people to engage in meaning-making processes that locate their lives and literacies within frameworks that reject deficit models (e.g., at risk, struggling readers/writers/thinkers). In this way, Morrell, much like Mahiri and other scholars (Bartlett, 2007; Lee, 2007; Lewis, Enciso, & Meje, 2002; Street, 1984) understand literacy as a social practice situated within contexts and by contextual factors that attend to dynamics of culture, power, privilege, and politics. These critical frames echo emic constructs and etic analyses in that the issues and frames of reference being documented are specific to particular racial, social, and gender groups, but their characteristics of oppression are very similar in ways that critical researchers may see as resonating with multiple groups.

Critical research further calls for researchers to work with participants to reveal emic data, culturally specific events, behaviors, and attitudes, which have been overlooked or under-valued in past research. Research that allows researchers to collaborate with and learn from local participants, such as Lunsford, Moglen, and Slevin's (1990) work prompts questions such as, "Are there literacies we do not see?" to re-evaluate TLELA classrooms from multiple emic perspective. Such is the case with current research concerned with the cultural practices of children, youth, and adults in and out-of-schools (Black, 2005; Hill & Vasudevan, 2008). By using an emic perspective in critical research, researchers can learn about the interactive patterns that affect participants' literacy practices, events, and learning processes as embedded in local time-space configurations. Such research moves beyond providing decontextualized superficial descriptions of participants and their environments. Critical and emic research both acknowledge and investigate the ways in which particular acts/events influence participants' engagement with others and local social institutions (e.g., schools, community centers, writing groups, etc).

Kinloch (2007, 2009, 2010) relies on theories of critical pedagogy and postmodern geography to observe cultural productions and community engagements of African American high school students in New York City's Harlem community. Concerned with gentrification in the area, participants utilize mapping, video interviews, and community surveys to: document art forms; question meanings of community; capture current and past spatial-temporal conditions; and examine the community as text to produce creative, personal written and oral narratives on their lived experiences and knowledge of historical trends. The students as researchers draw on their lives and the lives of local residents to document their emic perspectives of gentrification.

Important in the work of other literacy scholars are the critical stories that emerge from the experiences of participants and from the stories that are shared with readers (Kirkland, 2009; Lunsford, 2009; Fisher, Purcell, & May 2009; Chapman, 2005). As Vasudevan (2006) observes, it is important to engage in a redefinition of the meanings of teaching and learning in working with young people. This redefinition means that taking the stories of young people public in ways that honor students’ engagements with storytelling, multimodality, and spatiality, the researcher becomes the interpreter of the emic constructs in which students live. These interpretations contribute to how teachers can better understand and relate to students within and across contexts. These research examples, along with others (see Alvermann, 2002; Hull & Schultz, 2003; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002) offer an important rationale for using students’ emic perspectives and behaviors to support TLELA.

**Emic Perspectives and Literacy Research in School Contexts** Emic research on/with participants’ interactions within local settings impacts what researchers know about TLELA. As Lee (1995a, 1995b, 2007) explains, researchers and educators can benefit from employing multiple dimensions of learning, which stem from emic data of students’ lived experiences, to support educative collaborations between students and teachers. To demonstrate this point, Lee (2007) draws on student engagements with familiar repertoires involving African American language, hip-hop and popular culture, and students’ cultural knowledge from familial communities. Connected with her teaching and Cultural Modeling Project, these engagements support collaborations across dimensions of learning (i.e., social; emotional; cognitive). They reveal the effectiveness of *signifying* as a scaffold for the teaching and learning of skills in literary interpretation, which promotes students’ cultural knowledge and academic learning. Given the ongoing drive of policy makers to standardize student learning in public schools across the nation, Lee’s work is important because it reconfigures “the institutional contexts in which [students] practice their literacies” (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009, p. 331).

There are several other examples of transformative studies occurring within and across school space that are ethnographically based and that utilize emic constructs. Staples (2008) describes the negotiations with and around popular culture texts by African American youth in Youth Leadership (YL), an afterschool program at an urban high school. She engages in acts of teaching and learning as collaborative endeavors with youth. This approach allowed her to observe how they read critical media texts—film,
television, the Internet, print media—as they re-defined their identities from disengaged learners (institutional label) to cultural critics (Staples’ label). By encouraging participants to analyze media forms and media as texts, Staples sets the stage for additional work that, in her own words, “can show us the myriad possibilities for teaching and learning with adolescents who struggle with decoding skills, sociocultural understanding, and political resistance through inquiry and action” (p. 70).

Staples (2008) is not alone in her use of popular culture and media texts in a school setting as tools to motivate students to increase their critical capacities and re-define their identities. Hill (2009) turns his attention to “the ways that hip-hop-based education shapes and responds to students’ lived experiences with hip-hop culture” (p. 2). He views the classroom as a space in which teachers can use hip-hop culture, language, and techniques to educate students and honor their identities that are cultivated from emic and etic contexts.

Questions that Researchers Are Asking and Larger Implications

Researching the impacts of emic constructs of culture, race, and locale, to name a few, in TLELA leads researchers to a host of complex questions that can further guide English language arts research and teaching agendas: How do participants see themselves, their school and community contexts, and researchers? What stories do they tell, ignore, and resist? In what ways do they see themselves and those around them reading, writing, questioning, participating, and/or resisting involvement in learning spaces? How do researchers, and what is our responsibility to, represent their stories/lives to readers? These questions, not meant to be exhaustive, are grounded in emic research involving contexts and specificity that support researchers’ attempts to uncover etic analysis of common realities, conditions, and patterns as these things are connected to experiences in the world and to TLELA.

If researchers and educators of English language arts are to do this work, then Fecho’s (2004) advice is important. He insists “that we immerse ourselves in looking closely at the transactions we make across cultures” (p. 157) by engaging in reflexive inquiry on classroom practices and interactions we have with students in situations of learning and teaching. Fecho’s insistence is a crucial one to consider. Drawing on critical inquiry pedagogy, he examines ways for students to make their own meanings of texts and of the world while crossing cultural boundaries and using language to enhance critical literacy skills. Significant questions emerge from Fecho’s study: How can educators make space for and encourage students to draw on multiple voices and identities to construct texts that are thematically and linguistically complex? How do researchers acknowledge the possible tensions between students’ appropriation of mainstream discourse and their retention of familial discourses? How can an emic perspective reveal, “the tensions our pedagogy places on students” (p. 110; see also Yagelski, 2000)?

The emic studies of Fecho (2004), Staples (2008), Hill (2009), and other scholars (Chapman, 2007; Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997) point to Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999) call for a more critical “ethnographic research tradition and a multi-disciplinary understanding of language, literacy, and pedagogy” (p. 16). Undoubtedly, literacy researchers are working to meet this call in their investigations of issues that affect people’s learning processes. These studies include: the relevance of literacy and spoken word poetry in the lives of students of color (Fisher, 2007); the role of writing for students who craft, perform, and publish poetry (Jocson, 2008); and the value of stories of pain and progress etched onto human flesh (Kirkland, 2009). Such work points to expanded understandings of literacy and raises valuable questions: How do students conceptualize acts of literacy as they negotiate identities and participate in literacy activities? What can we learn from it?

As evidenced from the aforementioned review of literacy studies, educational projects that utilize an emic perspective can draw strength from Lee’s (1993, 1995a) cultural modeling framework. Her framework advocates for an instructional design “that makes explicit connections between students’ everyday knowledge and the demands of subject-matter learning” (Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003, p. 7). Utilization of this framework, for example, requires the researcher to focus on the common experiences, questions, and concerns she encounters when conducting intimate research in school and non-school learning spaces and with students in TLELA. Doing so highlights the value of emic perspectives and presents new challenges for doing this work.

References


