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ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES ON ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES RESEARCH

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Ethnographic research has its origins in anthropological studies of social groups within the natural settings in which they live and carry out their daily routines. Ethnographers seek to understand and describe these cultural practices through carrying out fieldwork and immersing themselves in these settings. Ethnographic approaches to investigating language learning and teaching have become more widely used in recent decades as researchers seek to better understand how learning is shaped by the social contexts in which it takes place.

There are a number of publications which discuss ethnography in applied linguistics research, demonstrating an increasing interest in ethnographic research in the field (see e.g. Dressen-Hammouda 2013; Duff 2016; Starfield 2015). There are, however, fewer accounts of ethnographic research that address the specific area of English for academic purposes (EAP). Indeed, most ethnographic research in this area could be described as ‘ethnographically-oriented’ (Hyland 2006; Ramanathan & Atkinson 1999) rather than examples of full-blown ethnographies. Ethnographically-oriented research, we argue, complements the body of textually-oriented research that has been carried out in the area of English for academic purposes in that it provides a contextual orientation to this research that moves beyond the text (Freedman 1999) in order to explore the socially situated nature of the use of language in academic settings and how we go about dealing with that language in our classrooms. Hyland (2006, p. 68), in his discussion of English for academic purposes, argues that ethnographically-oriented research:

lends itself well to education research, providing critical insights into educational processes and practices and ways of developing theories grounded in actual investigations to achieve deeper understandings of the social influences on language use in EAP settings.

Swales and Rogers (1995), similarly, argue that although there is value in textual studies and what they can reveal about specific purpose language use, more information than this is needed in order to understand the role of genres in social and institutional settings.
This chapter provides an overview of English for academic purposes research that has taken an ethnographic perspective. The chapter commences by outlining the basic characteristics of ethnographically-oriented research and research techniques that are typically drawn on in these kinds of studies. The chapter continues by reviewing examples of ethnographically-oriented research that has been conducted in the area of English for academic purposes. The particular foci will be in the areas of academic writing, speaking, reading and listening, and the teaching and learning of English for academic purposes. The chapter concludes by making suggestions for future ethnographically-oriented research in the area of English for academic purposes.

Characteristics of ethnographically-oriented research

A key feature of ethnographically-oriented research is that it studies people’s behaviour in everyday rather than experimental contexts and is interested in understanding their meaning-making practices. Typically, ethnographic research involves the researcher in prolonged engagement in the research site over time, though in research with an ethnographic orientation, the degree of researcher involvement may be less intense than this. Data is gathered from a range of sources, although chiefly by observation and/or relatively informal conversations. The data that are collected, further, are not based on pre-set categories or explicit hypotheses but arise out of a general interest in an issue or problem (Hammersley 1990). In addition to observations and conversations, ethnographically-oriented researchers might also make use of fieldnotes taken during the observations and collect documents relevant to the particular project. These multiple data sources help researchers provide the ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1975) that is essential to this kind of research and to enable triangulation of the data; that is, to provide multiple perspectives on what is being examined that will enable the researcher to gain a more complete understanding of the topic being investigated.

The use of ethnographic approaches has been encouraged by what has been called the social turn (Block 2003) in language studies which has led to the desire to develop in-depth understandings of language learning and teaching in the specific (and frequently unequal) social contexts within which they are taking place. While some researchers might assume that they already know what is important and what they want to find out, ethnographic research makes no such assumption. Researchers, rather, aim to immerse themselves in the everyday activities of the group of people whose meaning-making (also known as ‘emic’ or insider perspectives) practices they are attempting to understand. Rather than testing preformed ideas or theories (as in deductive research), ideas are developed inductively from the observations (Blommaert & Jie 2010). This is not to suggest that ethnography is atheoretical; rather it is seen as hypothesis generating, with theory being emergent (often referred to as grounded theory), leading to the development of theorization as the research progresses (Starfield 2015).

Writing in academic settings

Most ethnographically-oriented research to date in the area of English for academic purposes has focused on academic writing. Dressen-Hammouda (2013) provides an overview of ethnographically-oriented research in relation to English for specific purposes (ESP) more broadly while Paltridge, Starfield and Tardy (2016) discuss ethnographic research into academic writing specifically at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels as well as writing for scholarly publication. Studies tend to adopt a view of learning to write as learning to
participate in the literacy practices of the academy and examine the ways in which writing is shaped by the social contexts in which it takes place.

Leki (2007) examines the literacy experiences of four undergraduate students in a US university based on a five-year longitudinal study. She aims, in her study, to uncover how these students experience and respond to the literacy demands of their studies, how their English language and writing classes helped them meet the literacy demands of their disciplines and how they became initiated into the discourses of their disciplines. The data she drew on for her study were interviews and emails with the students, interviews with the students' instructors, documentation related to the students' course work (such as course syllabuses, class texts, writing assignments, drafts of papers and copies of exams), observations of classes, recordings of writing center sessions, and journals in which the students commented on the work they did during the semester and their responses to it. The main themes that emerged from her data were the academic, social and ideological issues that the students faced in relation to their writing experiences. Through her detailed discussion of each of her cases we see examples of the worlds these students live through and, importantly, how these students 'negotiate the complexities of the social, cultural, and academic and sociopolitical environments that surround them' (Leki 2007, p. 285).

Starfield's (2001, 2002, 2011, 2015) critical ethnographic research into undergraduate writing, in this case in a South African university, examined the experiences of black students in a former whites-only university. She collected her data over a year. Starfield attended classes, tutorial meetings, an academic support class, markers' meetings, tutor briefings, and took notes on conversations she had with students and their teachers. She formally interviewed students and their instructors as well as examined the students' written assignments. She also collected the course documentation that was given to students, the texts that they read as well as obtained information on the students' performance. She then connected her analysis of the students' disciplinary writing to what it meant, more broadly, for these students to become successful, the academic identities available to them, and their positioning in the unequal contexts of apartheid South Africa more generally.

Johns and Makalela (2011), also in South Africa, examined students' undergraduate writing needs from both 'client' (Makalela) and ‘consultant’ (Johns) perspectives. Their critically reflective study shows how difficult it is for an outside consultant to understand the context of an educational setting of which they are not part and issues that can arise because of this.

Prior (1995, 1998) provides examples of ethnographic research into graduate student writing and professors' responses to this writing. His research involved classroom observations, the collection of course syllabi and class handouts, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews with students and their professors, the collection of students' written texts with professors' comments and grades on them, and text-based interviews with the professors. Prior concludes from this study that writing in the academy is highly situated and that we cannot just teach generic academic writing tasks. We need, rather, to think about how we can facilitate students' development of the communicative flexibility they need to achieve academic communication in the situated and dynamic interactions in which they find themselves (Prior 1995). Casanave (2002) also examines the literacy experiences of graduate students from an ethnographic perspective, in this case in an MA TESOL/TFL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages/Teaching Foreign Language) program in the US. Her case study students were Japanese (3), American (2), and Armenian (1). What she found was that, regardless of the students' backgrounds, none of them was prepared for the kinds of writing they needed to do in the program. One spoke of her change in academic vision due to the different kinds of writing she was doing. Commenting on the diversity of
writing tasks the students needed to do and the issues they faced in doing this, Casanave points out that generalized approaches to teaching writing for students in these kinds of programs is highly problematic and is not able to take account of the many written genres and subgenres students need to have a command of.

At the doctoral level, Paltridge et al. (2012a, 2012b), Ravelli et al. (2013) and Starfield, Paltridge and Ravelli (2012, 2014) describe a study that examined dissertations that students in the visual and performing arts submit for examination at the conclusion of their studies. This new variant on the doctoral dissertation differs from many other areas of study in that students in these disciplines are typically required to create (or perform) a creative work as part of the examination process, as well as to submit a written dissertation. This study was prompted by advisor and student reports of difficulty experienced with the written component, and aimed to examine not just what these written texts typically looked like but also why there were written as they were. The methodology used for the study was a textography (Swales 1998a, 1998b), an approach to genre analysis which combines elements of text analysis with ethnographic techniques in order to examine what texts are like, and why. Data collected for the study included a nation-wide survey, 36 dissertations, 36 supervisor questionnaires, 15 student interviews, 15 supervisor interviews, university prospectuses, information given to students in relation to their candidature, published research on doctoral research and examination in these areas of study, in-house art school publications, discussion papers as well as attendance at roundtable discussions and exhibition openings. The study found that there was a range of ways in which students could write their texts as well as reasons for this range, some of which were institutional, and some of which were due to the influence of key figures in the field, rather than the particular disciplines. The textography, thus, provided insights into the production and meanings of the students’ texts that would not have been gained had the texts, alone, been examined.

Lillis and Curry (2010) and Li (2006a, 2006b, 2007) are examples of ethnographic studies which examine the experiences of multilingual scholars seeking to publish their work in English (see J. Flowerdew 2013 for an overview of research in this area). In their book Academic writing in a global context, Lillis and Curry (2010) employ text analysis, interviews, observations, document analysis, analysis of written correspondence, and reviewers’ and editors’ comments to examine these experiences. Their later (Curry & Lillis 2013) book draws on this research to propose strategies that multilingual writers can adopt to enhance their chances of getting published, as well as how other people can support these writers in this endeavor. Li (2006a) examines a computer science student’s research writing in Chinese and English while Li (2006b) examines issues faced by a physics student wanting to publish in English. In her (2007) paper, Li examined a chemistry student’s process logs, drafts of his writing, email exchanges she had with the student, and interview data to examine how he went about writing for publication and the engagement he had with others as he did this.

**Speaking in academic settings**

In her study of in-class presentations by undergraduate architecture students, Morton (2009) employs observations and semi-structured interviews with students and their instructor to understand what is important in these presentations. Morton concludes that it is not enough for students to explain their design to their audience and to walk their audience through their building or site. They also need to have something in their presentations, such as particular types of images and the use of a narrative style in the presentation, that creates rapport with
the audience and that will convey the richness and complexity of their design, as well as help the audience visualize the design. Her research shows the importance of investigating the nature of seemingly everyday genres such as academic presentations in the particular settings in which they occur to see what is valued in those settings, and what the features of effective presentations are from the perspective of different disciplines.

Participation in academic seminars is examined by Nakane (2007) at the undergraduate level and Lee (2009) at the postgraduate level. Nakane’s interest was in Japanese students’ silence in seminars in English-medium universities and what the reasons for this might be. She looked at the Japanese students’ spoken interactions in the classrooms, and also examined the other students’ and lecturers’ perceptions of the Japanese students’ interactions. She carried out a conversation analysis of the interactions and combined this with individual interviews, focus group discussions, and a questionnaire in order to obtain multiple perspectives on the issue she wanted to explore. Nakane found that the Japanese students’ silence was indeed a problem in the classrooms. She also found that gaps in assumptions about classroom communication between the Japanese students, fellow English-speaking students, and their lecturers contributed to the students’ silence. She found, further, that there was a conflict between the lecturers’ view of the Japanese students’ personalities (for example, as being shy) when this was not the case outside of the classroom. The students’ silence in class was interpreted, she found, as evidence of a negative attitude and lack of commitment to their studies where, in fact, for one of the students she examined, this was not at all the case (see Ellwood & Nakane 2009 for a study which compares Japanese students’ spoken participation in mainstream university and EAP classrooms).

Lee’s (2009) study of Korean students’ participation in masters and doctoral degree classes in the US employed classroom observations and formal and informal interview data. She found that the students’ proficiency in English, sociocultural and educational differences between Korea and the US, individual differences, and the classroom environment were all interconnected and both singly and together influenced the students’ participation in the classes. She found, further, that regardless of their length of stay in the US, all the students found it a challenge to take part in whole-of-class discussions. This differed, however, with small group discussions where the students’ participation varied greatly. The key observation she makes is that it is not just language proficiency (as is commonly believed) that is the main issue for English as a second language (ESL) students’ lack of participation in classroom discussions but other factors as well, all of which are interwoven with each other and that influence students’ participation.

Chang and Kanno (2010) carried out research into the value placed on linguistic proficiency (in particular, speaking) for doctoral students in different academic disciplines in the US. They carried out interviews, shadowing observations, collected information from departmental websites and student handbooks, and obtained samples of the students’ writing. Their conclusion was that the importance of language competence varies across disciplinary communities, community practices, and different community members. The students’ advisors, further, did not think that the students suffered major disadvantages due to their non-native speaker status and the students saw themselves as no less legitimate as beginning researchers than their native speaker peers.

Nakane, Lee, and Chang and Kanno’s studies, then, show the value of going beyond common assumptions about issues that face non-native speaker students in the academy and aiming for insiders’ perspectives on issues that relate to them in order to gain deeper understandings of these issues, as well as provide a firmer base for responding to them (see Feak 2013 for an overview of research into speaking in academic settings more broadly;
Morita 2002 for a study which looks at discourse socialization through oral academic presentations; Seloni 2012 for a study which examines academic literacy socialisation through spoken interactions, also in the US).

**Reading in academic settings**

Less ethnographically-oriented research has been carried out into reading in academic settings compared to speaking and, particularly, writing. Atai and Fatahi-Majd (2014), however, have taken an ethnographic perspective in their examination of teaching reading comprehension and teachers’ beliefs about this in Iranian classrooms. They observed three ELT teachers and three subject area teachers in a medical university for eight sessions using an observation checklist based on a framework proposed by Grabe and Stoller (2002). They also carried out interviews with both sets of teachers. There were considerable inconsistencies, they found, among the subject area teachers compared with the ELT teachers, as well as marked differences between the two groups in terms of what they did in their classrooms and the beliefs they held about this.

Medina (2010) and Pacheco (2010) have carried out ethnographic studies which focus on reading in elementary school classrooms. Medina took fieldnotes of students’ and teachers’ literacy activities over a period of a year to investigate Latino/a immigrant children’s engagement with bilingual literature in a classroom in the Midwestern United States. She took video and audio tapes of classroom discussions, wrote a reflective journal, collected writing samples, and conducted informal interviews with the students. Pacheco carried out participant observation, teacher and administrator interviews, made video recordings of reading lessons, and collected student work samples and school and district documents to examine reading activities in two Californian bilingual classrooms. What these studies show is the high value that can be obtained from this level of engagement in classrooms activities and what research of this kind can reveal about how learners (in this case bilingual children) engage in reading activities in their classrooms.

**Listening in academic settings**

Ethnographically-oriented research into academic listening includes the work of Benson (1989), Flowerdew and Miller (1995), Miller (2002a, 2002b, 2009), Mendelsohn (2002), and Northcott (2001). Benson (1989) followed a Saudi ESL student enrolled in a masters degree at a US university over an academic semester, focusing on his listening activities during academic lectures. The data included recordings of the lectures, the student’s notes and interviews with the student. Benson found that the activities the student engaged in during the lectures had very little resemblance to anything he had done in the intensive English program he had attended prior to starting on his masters degree. The student realised he needed to focus not just on new facts but also on the teacher’s attitudes, preferences, and opinions as these would have implications for how the teacher graded the student’s work. The student had to, he discovered, listen to learn rather than listen to comprehend as he had done in the intensive English course.

Flowerdew and Miller (1995) and Miller’s (2002a, 2002b, 2009) research was an ethnographic study of 17 engineering students’ listening to lectures at a university in Hong Kong over a period of three years. Data included student and lecturer journals, focus group discussions, questionnaires, student life histories, participant observations, participants’ verifications, and semi-structured interviews. Miller (2002a, 2002b) found problems arose
for students when lecturers did not use the standard local accent and pronunciation of English, when scientific text was delivered as spoken text, when lecturers deviated from the handouts they had given students such as when they made an aside, and when lecturers used visual material such as computer simulations to support their lectures. To help resolve these issues the students formed a very close community of learners but had little sense that they might, in the future, enter into the wider community of engineering practice.

Mendelsohn (2002) examined how 12 first-year ESL students coped with lectures over a period of two semesters in an economics program at a North American university. The students were paired with ‘lecture buddies’, native speaker students who were also studying economics at the university. Data included copies of lecture notes, lecture buddies’ journals and notes from the weekly meetings they held with the students, student interviews, and reports written by the buddies at the end of the project. While the data did not include observations (or recordings) of the lectures, the findings of the study have important implications for ESL students’ listening to academic lectures and their preparation in pre-university programs for this. Strategies that students used that were successful included reading the textbook before or after the lecture, asking the lecture buddy (or a native speaker student in the class) clarification questions on the lecture, attending an additional (or repeat) lecture if this was possible, and using note-taking strategies such as making a note in the margins on the handout of anything, or any word, that was not clear to ask someone about after the lecture. Similar to Miller’s (2002a, 2002b) study, students found it difficult when lecturers deviated from the set text. Students also found gaps in their vocabulary a major problem, suggesting that this is something content lecturers could spend more time on than they do. They also found the reading load for lectures heavy, suggesting this is also something lecturers could give attention to.

In an examination of the listening demands of MBA classrooms for ESL students in the UK, Northcott (2001) observed and transcribed a sample of lectures over two semesters, as well as took fieldnotes in order to identify particular characteristics of the lectures and issues these might present for ESP students. She also spoke to and sent questionnaires to students who had undertaken language classes in the university’s language center prior to commencing on the MBA to find out about the usefulness of these classes in preparing them for their studies. This was done in preparation for writing a new EAP course to be taught by the university’s language center that students would undertake prior to embarking on their MBA studies. Studies such as these show the value of carrying out needs analyses (Brown 2016; L. Flowerdew 2013) of this kind when preparing to write new EAP courses rather than assuming that ‘one size fits all’ in these kinds of programs.

Teaching and learning English for academic purposes

Research that has examined the teaching and learning of English for academic purposes from an ethnographic perspective includes Chun (2015), Giroir (2014), and Grey (2009) who have investigated EAP classrooms, and Cheng (2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2011a) and Tardy (2005, 2009) who have researched the teaching and learning of postgraduate writing.

Chun (2015) carried out a critical classroom ethnography of a pre-university EAP class in Canada. For his study, Chun observed the class over a period of nine months, as well as examined the textbook and other curriculum materials used by the teacher. He also took fieldnotes of his classroom observations and the meetings he had with the teacher, carried out semi-structured interviews with the teacher and her students, collected students’ written assignments and photos the students had taken of their literacy practices outside of
the classroom, as well as taking his own photos of the classroom interiors. Chun considers the findings of study in relation to theoretical discussions of critical literacy and how these are taken up in actual practice, including what counts as ‘critical’ (and ‘uncritical’) in EAP classrooms and why this matters. He then proposes what an alternative EAP curriculum might look like based on the findings of his study.

Giroir’s (2014) study of two Saudi students in an intensive English program in the US employs narrative enquiry (Barkhuizen 2015) as well as notes taken from classroom observations, individual interviews, and student-designed L2 photo narratives. Giroir discusses how the students participated in communities outside the classroom in the context of post-9/11 discourses that marginalize them in powerful ways. The study examines issues of identity and race, showing how discourses of exclusion impact on learners who identify as Muslim, especially in their broader participation in English-speaking societies. While the experiences of each student were not always the same, the study does point to ways in which othering of such students in terms such as race, relation, and ethnic identity can create obstacles for them which go well beyond language in their goal to participate more fully in society, beyond the walls of the classroom (see Barkhuizen 2015 for a review of this study).

Grey (2009) reports on a study she carried out with international students enrolled in a business degree who were carrying out a project which examined diversity in the university in which they were studying. The students were encouraged to become ‘nomadic ethnographers’ (p. 121) as they wandered around the campus using digital cameras, mobile phones, and pen and paper to make records of diversity they observed. They brought this material back to the classroom where Grey made videos of their interactions, as well examined journals the students had written, and visual images they had created such as drawings, photographs, and posters. Through the subversive use of visual images in their posters, she found, the students resisted more conventional forms of knowledge ‘in order to create hybrid forms of their own’ (p. 131). In doing this, they found alternative (and powerful) ways of describing themselves and others. Grey encourages EAP teachers to take the kind of risk she took with her students, arguing that the worst that can happen is that the students (and the teacher) ‘will encounter something unexpected and soar on a line of flight into something new, that is, difference’ (p. 131).

A common teaching strategy in genre-based writing teaching is what is termed ‘metacommunicating’ (Flowerdew 1993; Swales and Lindemann 2002); that is, the explicit analysis of examples of particular genres used in the classroom as a tool to heighten learners’ awareness of genre-specific language features, rhetorical organization, and communicative purposes (Cheng 2011b). Cheng’s (2006, 2007, 2008a 2008b, 2011a) ethnographic classroom-based research of postgraduate writing employed participant observation, as well as student–teacher conference transcripts and students’ written assignments to examine the use of genre as a way of teaching academic writing. Dressen-Hammouda’s (2008) eight-year study of a geology student’s writing experiences employed data such as literacy narratives, text-based interviews, conversations about disciplinary and writing practices, focus group discussions, as well as the analysis of artefacts such as fieldnotes, drawings, field reports, conference abstracts, research articles, dissertation chapters, and lecture notes. Dressen-Hammouda shows how the student benefited from a focus on genre, especially in relation to the acquisition of disciplinary identity. She argues that the teaching of written academic genres should include more than just linguistic and rhetorical features of genres. It should also focus on the disciplinary community’s ways of perceiving, interpreting, and behaving; that is, the ‘ways of being, seeing and acting’ (p. 238) that are particular to the student’s disciplinary community. Tardy (2009, p. 287), similarly, observes that ‘despite its problematic
normalizing effects … writing and writers are tied to genre, even as they purposefully break generic conventions’. As she concludes, the dynamic, contextual, and sociorhetorical nature of genres can make them difficult to address in ESP classrooms, yet at the same time, these are issues that need to be brought to learners’ attention. The use of ethnographically-oriented approaches to classroom research is one way in which we can see how these sorts of issues can be dealt with in the classroom.

Recommendations for practice and future research

What the studies we have outlined in this chapter reveal has implications for how we go about what we do in EAP classrooms. This research provides a way of unpacking the knowledge, skills, and ways of doing things that are necessary for students to become successful members of their academic communities (Johns 1997), as well as how we might focus on these issues in our classrooms. This kind of research, we believe, can provide a fuller and more explanatory perspective on what we do, and what we need to do, that might not otherwise be obtained.

In our book Ethnographic perspectives on academic writing (Paltridge, Starfield & Tardy 2016), we suggest areas of research that could be further explored that apply not just to academic writing but to English for academic purposes research more broadly. This includes the need for more EAP research in elementary schools (as in the work of Costley 2010; Kibler 2009), secondary schools (e.g. Cruickshank 2006; de Oliveira & Silva 2013), and transitions from secondary school to college and university (e.g. Harklau 2000, 2001; Roberge, Siegal & Harklau 2009). The ways in which people learn to become EAP teachers also needs further investigation (Belcher 2013), as do EAP teachers’ beliefs and cognitions (Borg 2003, 2006, 2015; Barnard & Burns 2012) about their teaching. The use of digital literacies (Hafner, Chik & Jones 2013) and multimodality (Lotherington & Jenson 2011; Prior 2013) in EAP classrooms also needs further ethnographic investigation.

Further reading

Duff (2016); Paltridge, Starfield & Tardy (2016); Starfield (2015)

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