

## CRITICAL REVIEW OF ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

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### **Abstract**

*There are two basic characteristics of ethnography: (1) the observation takes place in natural setting, (2) researchers must understand how an event is perceived and interpreted by the people in a speech community. In other words, the researchers try to interpret the situation being observed from the perspective of the participants. Ethnography also relies on observations of interactions and interviews with participants in naturally occurring situation. The next characteristic of ethnography is the characteristic of "holistic" which means seeing the data as a whole in order to get a basis for explanation about the observable fact. Another characteristic is that ethnographic approach does not formulate the hypothesis prior to the research. The hypothesis will emerge as the data collection occurs.*

*Ethnographic research has one main drawback related to reliability. It is difficult to replicate ethnographic research because an event in natural setting cannot be reproduced. There is also one main problem dealing with validity. Unlike another research where the researcher can maximally control external variables, the ethnographic research does not have this facility because the research is carried out in natural setting and due to the long time period of observation.*

*Despite the limitations of the ethnographic approach, it has benefits for research in naturalistic setting such as class room research, language learning process in a particular speech community, and so forth because the finding is more real than a research that manipulates variables by using external experiments.*

**Key words:** ethnography, observation, natural setting

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Wiersma (1986) states that ethnography is concerned with what people are, how they and how they

interact; furthermore it tries to reveal what lies beneath. Recently, ethnography has also become of considerably interest to linguist who

sees the need to study human behavior in social context.

The primary objective of this review is to discuss the elements in ethnographic approach and critically review them. Firstly, this review will provide the discussion on the characteristics of ethnographic approach and the methodologies associated with this approach. Then, the aspect of reliability and validity in ethnographic research will be reviewed. After that, the types of research question will be discussed. Finally, this review will evaluate the advantages and limitations of this approach.

## **2. DISCUSSION**

### **2.1. CHARACTERISTICS OF ETHNO-GRAPHIC APPROACH**

According to Wilson (1977), there are two basic characteristics of ethnography: (1) the observation takes place in natural setting; (2) researchers must understand how an event is perceived and interpreted by the people in a speech community. Since the researcher try to interpret the situation being observed from the perspective of the participants, then, ethnographers is considered as “making the familiar strange” (Gall et al. 2005). This means that ethnographer examines cultural phenomena from the perspective of outsider (to whom it is strange) while trying to comprehend them from the perspective of an insider (to whom it is familiar).

Ethnography also relies on observations of interactions and interviews with participants in naturally occurring situation. Tuckman (1999) states that ethnography is a matter of observing and interviewing rather than manipulating variables by external instruments since what ethnographers observe is the behavior under study in the context in which it occurs through description rather than trying to abstract it from the use of test, survey, or questionnaire.

Observing the behavior in the context in which it occurs is a characteristic of ethnographic approach. It is called as the characteristic of contextualization (Wiersma, 1986). This characteristic requires the data to be interpreted in the context of the situation in which they are observed. The findings cannot be used to generalize the findings to other context. The findings must be considered in reference in their context.

The next characteristic of ethnography is the characteristic of “holistic” (Wiersma 1986 and Tuckman 1999). Holistic perspective views the data as a whole in order to get a basis for explanation about the observable fact.

Another characteristic is that ethnographic approach does not formulate the hypothesis prior to the research (Wiersma 1986, Gay and Airasian 1992, Tuckman 1999). The hypothesis will emerge as the data collection occurs. Since the main objective of the ethnographic approach is to provide a detailed description of the situation being observed and since this description becomes the basis of the

interpretation of the phenomena, the absence of the hypothesis at the initial stage of research help the researchers to avoid any ideas aroused from the hypothesis which will influence accuracy of the interpretation.

## **2.2. ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH METHODS**

The cycle in ethnographic research begins with the data collection. The next stage is analyzing the data. The data collection can be carried out through observation and interviewing. Other complementary methods of data collection are reviewing other sources.

Observation in ethnography is a comprehensive and ongoing process. Researchers have to record all relevant information all the time during the observation, for example: the study of classroom interaction requires the researcher to be at school every day for a particular period. The primary objective of the observation is to capture the perspective of the participants being observed.

There are two types of observation, namely participant observation and non-participant observation (Woods 1986 and Burns 1999). Participant observation requires the researcher to take part in the daily activities of the individual being observed. The field notes are taken on the spot or as soon as possible. The researcher may also use tape or video recorder as an additional instrument in observation. The central idea of participation is to enter the experiences of others within a group or

institution and to experience the thought process of the group (Woods 1986).

The attempt to be both member and researcher might lead the researchers to be subjective. To overcome this problem, Woods (1986) suggests the researchers to combine personal involvement and a measure of objectivity. Without the latter, the researcher will identify strongly with the members of the group and support their values instead of studying them. Another disadvantage is that it greatly demands energy and time of the observer. Researchers must meet the subject on a regular basis on the prescribed time and at a long period of time. Next, it is difficult not to have an effect on the situation under observation, for example when a teacher becomes observer, his/her colleague's perception of his/her role changes so do their behavior. Despite its drawbacks, there is one advantage of participant observation: the description will be accurate since it reports researchers' own experience and behavior.

Non-participant observation requires the researchers to watch and record the event on the spot. Furthermore, Burns (1999) states that non-participant observation exists when the interaction is viewed from cameras or recorders. The advantages of this type of observation are that it is less demanding than the participant observation. It does not ask a lot of energy and time of the observer. Secondly, it is not difficult for the observers to be objective because their interaction with the subjects is limited through the use of video or tape

recorder. The disadvantages of non-participant observation are that the researchers do not have satisfaction of contributing toward the function of the group and cannot penetrate to the heart of the group (Woods 1986). It is also difficult not to become involved somehow in the life of the group.

While the researchers observe the participants, at the same time they must record the information in field notes. According to Wiersma (1986) the content of field notes must identify the information of when, where, and under what condition the record is made. However, it may not be convenient to take notes openly because the participants will feel that they are being spied. Therefore, when the situation is not conducive for the researchers to take notes, they must rely on their memory.

Another data collection method is interviewing. According to Wiersma (1986), interviewing might be conducted casually or quite structured. Casual interviewing can be carried out when an event presents itself during observation. By interviewing the participants, the researchers try to find the clarification of what is happening. Formal interview may be conducted with predefined questions.

Reviewing other sources is considered as another way to collect the data. These other sources are usually records maintained by the organization in which the study is conducted, for example a study of language shift in Maltese immigrants may need record from immigration department to

discover the number of language that they speak.

The last phase in ethnographic research is the analysis. Researchers scan the data for categories of phenomena and for relationship among phenomena. After that, researcher must describe the data and interpret them. According to Burns (1999), to avoid bias of the interpretation, the researchers must provide detailed field notes which include reflection on their own subjectivity. It is important to guard against their own bias because the objective of ethnographic research is to give facts and information not to pass judgment on a setting.

### **2.3. RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH**

Reliability is concerned with the reproduction of procedures and findings. Burns (1994) indicates that reliability is based on two assumptions. The first is that the study can be repeated by using the same procedures of the original research. The second is that other researcher can have consistent interpretation by using the same procedures. The first assumption is called external reliability while the second is internal reliability.

The problem of ethnographic researcher with reliability is caused by the fact that ethnographic research occurs in natural setting and focuses on processes (Wiersma 1986 and Burns 1994). The accurate replication is very difficult to achieve because an event in

natural setting cannot be reproduced. However, this problem might be addressed by describing the methodology as comprehensive as possible so that the next researcher can reconstruct the original analysis strategies.

Another problem is that replication of the findings is based on researchers' agreement so that the findings can be replicated. Wiersma (1986) and Burns (1994) claim that it is difficult to replicate the findings because ethnographic research requires an accurate description of the phenomena under study. However, the flow of information to support the accurate description might vary. That is why one researcher will probably have thicker description than another researcher. This situation will lead to different interpretation. In dealing with this problem, the researchers must find the cause of disagreement from the description itself so that there is a chance to discuss and to resolve the disagreement.

When a conclusion of a study cannot be drawn in confidence, there is insufficiency in research procedure thus the study is lack of internal validity. When the result of the study is not applicable across group or do not generalize, then the study is lack of external validity. Unlike another research where the researcher can maximally control external variables, the ethnographic research does not have this facility because the research is carried out in natural setting (Wiersma 1986) and due to the long time period of observation. However, the longevity in the observation gives positive effects.

According to Burns (1994), it will allow researcher to analyze and compare the data continuously and to ensure the match between scientific categories and reality. Moreover, the research is conducted in natural setting so that it reflects more precisely the reality rather than the research in laboratory setting.

In addressing the limitation of internal validity, triangulation is used (Wiersma 1986 and Burns 1994). Triangulation involves the verification and validation of qualitative analysis. It assesses the sufficiency of the data. If the data is not consistent with the tentative hypothesis, they are insufficient. The triangulation is conducted by using different data sources or by using different data collection method, for example: in a research concerning language shift among Maltese immigrants in Australia, during the observation, the researcher proposes a tentative hypothesis that Maltese women tend to shift from Maltese language to English rather than the men. To check the consistency, besides observing the community the researcher interview female participants and reviews the record from the immigration department.

The external validity deals with the generalization. Since the result of the ethnographic research relies on the context, therefore, it is important to specify the conditions of setting so that the comparison (and generalization) can be made. To strengthen the external validity, "multi site studies" can be conducted (Wiersma 1986). If a phenomenon is likely to be consistent across a number of studies then the

“generalizability” is increased whereas if there is inconsistency in the phenomenon, thus there is limitation of the generalizations or special conditions of generalization. Furthermore, he suggests that the external validity can also be enhanced by including variations of the research context in the same study, for example if a language maintenance in the Maltese immigrant in Melbourne is being studied, including two or more states where the Maltese immigrants live will enhance the external validity.

## **2.4. RESEARCH QUESTION**

Unlike other research approaches that require researcher to specify the research question, ethnography calls for a general statement. Thus, the research question in ethnographic is lack of specificity. It does not contain a phrase which shows cause-effect relationship such as “*the effect of .....to.....*” but only a neutral statement such as “A study of language maintenance in third generation of Maltese immigrants in Australia.”

It can be seen that ethnographic research avoids a statement that will lead to a particular interpretation. According to Wiersma (1986), the absence of the specificity is resulted by the characteristic of ethnography which is a non-anticipated research. If researchers provide a specific research problem, their interpretation towards the observed phenomena is influenced by the specificity in the research question.

The research question in ethnographic research also implies that the research focuses on the process of behavior in a community and the interaction among members of the community. Therefore, classroom studies, which show process of interaction among members of the class, might get benefits from ethnographic research.

## **3. CONCLUSION**

There are limitations of ethnographic research that can be found. Participants during the observation might present an ideal behavior or tell the researcher what they think the researcher would like to hear. Although this limitation can affect the attempt to provide an accurate description, this limitation usually occurs at the initial stage of the research. Thus, Burns (1994) suggests the researchers not to accept too readily the validity of initial impression. Another way to avoid this problem is by treating the participants not as research subject. Researchers must interact with the participants in natural and non threatening manner.

Another limitation of ethnographic research is that it is usually a field study from a particular setting so that the result might only be applicable for that single setting. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize the findings of the ethnographic research. This limitation can be overcome by using procedure to enhancing the external validity such as multi site studies and variations of the research context as explained in sub section 2.3.

Despite the limitations of the ethnographic approach, it has benefits for research in naturalistic setting such as class room research, language learning process in a particular speech community, and so forth. The primary advantage of ethnography is its observational technique that allows researcher to record the behavior as it occurs. Furthermore, it will uncover and thoroughly describe the phenomena in a community. The last advantage of ethnography research is to understand the phenomenon under study from the perspective of those being studied. Therefore, the finding is more real than a research that manipulates variables by using external experiments.

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