Ethnography in ESP

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Abstract

Understanding contextualized language use, how it mediates and is mediated by social practice has long been a central endeavor in English for Specific Purposes, with the aim of supporting the development of more tailored language instruction. This chapter examines how ethnographic approaches have become instrumental in this endeavor. It describes how the convergence of key conceptual developments in language and academic writing research have driven interest in ethnography, resulting in a common frame of practice which draws on values and methods shared across the social sciences. This framework has emerged from rigorous assessment by language and writing specialists of how ethnography's theoretical underpinnings, core values, methods and ethical commitments can be adapted to meet the specific needs and concerns of language and academic writing research. After exploring the implications of this framework for ESP research, the chapter concludes with suggestions for areas of future ethnographic research in ESP.

Keywords: critical reflexivity; ESP and ethnography; ethnographic academic writing research; ethnographic approaches; ethnographic methods; ethnographically-oriented research; ethnography as method, methodology and deep-theorizing; language learning; thick description; trustworthiness

Introduction

In her reflection on directions for future ESP research in this volume's 2013 edition, Diane Belcher argued for the need to continue moving beyond a focus on written, spoken and digital text by carrying out more ethnographic work and 'situated naturalistic inquiry'. In her opinion, ESP's historic perspective on specialized language across a wide range of contexts – academic, scientific, technical, professional, public and private life – made it particularly well-equipped to contribute to a better understanding of key language learning processes, including language socialization, literacy development and joining communities of practice. Since then, extensive efforts to examine these processes have contributed to a growing framework which "integrate(s) understandings of context into ... accounts of human experience" (Paltridge et al. 2016, p. 29) and "gather(s) empirical insights into social practices that are normally 'hidden' from the public gaze" (Reeves et al. 2008, p. 514, cited in Guillén-Galve and Bocanegra-Valle 2021, p. 1).

As an approach originally developed in cultural anthropology with the goal of providing a rich explanation of cultural practices, ethnography has become widespread across the social sciences (see Green and Bloome 2004; Paltridge et al. 2016; Scott Jones 2010 for reviews). Over the years, ethnographic approaches have also become increasingly prevalent in ESP, EAP and academic and workplace literacies (Dahm et al. 2022; Fraiberg, 2018; Gardner and Martin-Jones 2012; Lillis and Curry 2018; Lu 2018; Salter-Dvorak 2019; Tuck 2018). More recently, ethnographically-oriented research on language and writing appears to be coalescing under the umbrella term 'ethnographic academic writing research' (Guillén-Galve and Bocanegra-Valle 2021; Paltridge et al. 2016), further highlighting how ethnographic approaches, grounded in sociocultural theory, can inform ESP research.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of these developments and discuss their consequences for ESP research. It will outline the underlying theories, methods, goals,

questions, practices, and knowledge currently considered important to carrying out ethnographic approaches in language and writing research. The chapter opens with a discussion of the reasons for the substantial interest in ethnographic approaches in language and academic writing research, and then goes on to discuss how ethnographers describe and frame their work, with considerations for integrating such approaches into ESP research. It discusses the emergence of a framework for ethnographic practices in language and academic writing research, and closes with some thoughts about areas for future research in ESP.

Why Ethnography?

To assess why ethnographic approaches have become increasingly popular, this section considers the convergence of some of the key conceptual developments in language and academic writing research. These developments represent 'methodological rich points', "those times when researchers learn that their assumptions about the way research works and the conceptual tools they have for doing research are inadequate to understand the worlds they are researching" (Hornberger 2006, p. 222). Hornberger's reflection encapsulates the observation that practices in language and academic writing research have shifted in response to new ways of thinking about language, writing and learning, requiring novel approaches not constrained by formalistic linguistics in order to better describe social phenomena.

The key starting point for these developments is the 'social turn' in writing research (Miller 1984) and applied linguistics (Martin 1985), which led language and academic writing researchers to adopt naturalistic inquiry and ethnographic approaches in an aim to better understand how language construction and use are contextually and socioculturally situated (Atkinson 1999; Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995; Myers 1990; Paltridge 1997; Swales 1998). Thus moving away from principally describing language patterns and variation, language and writing scholars became interested in investigating context as a way of providing an explanation for those patterns (Devitt 2004; Halliday 2009; Johns 1997; Paltridge 2017; Prior 2004). A subsequent methodological rich point is scholars' interest in contextual conditions for language socialization (Casanave 2002; Prior 1995), spurred by the recognition that people do not just learn to use language patterns, they learn to use them through social interaction in complex socio-cultural situations from which generic language patterns are indissociable (Lillis 2013). In this sense, language learners are only fully able to grasp and use textual meaning by embodying and dialogically recreating relevant social, historical, and ideological contexts (Paltridge 2017).

A closely-related methodological rich point is the focus on literacy development and the implications of individuals learning to negotiate socially-codified language resources in institutional settings. Drawing on the idea that 'literacies are social practice'(Street 1997), learners are seen to "deploy a repertoire of literacy practices appropriate to each setting, and ... handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes" (Lea and Street 2006, p. 368). Along similar lines, scholars in ESP have examined how individual writers construct their 'voice' using language-specific discoursal features (Matsuda and Tardy 2007), how voice shifts over time through contact with specialized communities (Dressen-Hammouda 2014), how students learn to negotiate genre conventions (Cheng 2007), and how their personal strategies can be harnessed to teach writing in the classroom (Canagarajah 2011). Others have examined how disciplinary enculturation allows individuals to demonstrate disciplinary

knowledge, genres and identities (Curry 2016; Dressen-Hammouda 2008; Johns 2014; Koutsantoni 2007) and explored how the societal constraints associated with educational and socioeconomic background impact the negotiation of identity through writing (Starfield 2004).

A corresponding rich point involves a growing concern for making visible those aspects of social practice which are mostly invisible or ineffable, that is, not easily described or accounted for. These are features which have until relatively recently been mostly dismissed as less significant for language learning. Such aspects include the ability to demonstrate tacitly-held assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge, to implicitly model relevant behavior, and to intuitively grasp information accessible only to those 'in-the-know'. It also includes invisibilization as a tool for control and gatekeeping (Lillis and Curry 2010). Not having access to these sorts of tacitly-shared abilities can put all language users at a disadvantage, whether first or second-language speakers, across both written (e.g., international publications, literacy tasks in higher education or in professional areas) and oral (e.g., interviews with potential employers, class/professional presentations) communication situations. To better account for such invisible processes, language and academic writing researchers have begun looking beyond the tangible frames of text-as-product toward research paradigms like ethnography to better investigate the tacitly understood processes, relations and communicative activities by which situated meaning-making unfolds in particular sociocultural environments. Responding to such issues requires 'deep-theorizing' and invoking frames like 'indexicality' and 'orientation': "indexicality—that is, the specific ways in which bits of language (speech, writing) index, or point to aspects of social context—and orientations—that is, how speakers/hearers orient to what is said and written" (Lillis 2008, p. 376).

To seek principled answers to these issues, researchers have expanded and refined well-established constructs, analytical lenses and research designs. The resulting 'ethnographic turn' (Paltridge et al. 2016, p. 38) in language and academic writing research has led to greater opportunities for empirical studies of the above-mentioned rich points. While embarking on ethnographic research is to locate oneself in a research tradition (Harklau 2005), many, if not most, ESP scholars have not received training as ethnographers, making it a matter of some significance to reflect collectively upon a workable framework of practice, so as not only to guide initial forays into ethnographically-oriented research but also to establish an actionable standard of practice to provide more legitimacy to research from a field traditionally driven by formalistic linguistic concerns and expectations.

What Is Ethnography?

Two key questions which might arise for ESP scholars looking to carry out ethnographic research is how to define ethnography and whether there is a clearly defined methodological approach relevant to their research needs. Answers to either one of these questions are not straightforward, however, a dilemma addressed by Atkinson (2021) in his reflections on ethnographies for academic writing research. After listing the wide array of topics covered in academic writing research, he notes that:

> It is commonly believed that research tools are deliberately designed to fit specific research objects ... But if a methodology called *ethnographic* really exists, and if it is designed to fit

> particular objects of study, how can it be used to study something as broad and diverse as academic writing ... we must ask how any single methodology can do so many things. (Atkinson 2021, p. 146)

Ethnographers themselves are famously equivocal about what ethnography is, and define it more clearly by what it is *not*:

> *Doing ethnography*... is not a matter of methods... From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques or received procedures that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in thick description (Geertz 1973, pp. 5-6, in Atkinson 2021, p. 147).

Such a position is widely held by ethnographers across the social sciences (Atkinson et al. 2008; Hammersley 2018; Heller 2012; Koro-Ljungberg and Greckhamer 2005; Scott Jones 2010) who take pains to reject methodological and definitional orthodoxy. In her chapter on ethnographic methods, for example, Heller (2012, p. 24) comments that she "cannot write a chapter about methods as though methods were technical skills. I see them as practices of enquiry, shaped by the questions we ask, and by what we experience." Likewise, Hammersley (2018) questions whether it is even possible to agree upon the meaning of ethnography, especially if the term is used to reference a whole methodological approach, while Koro-Ljungberg and Greckhamer (2005, p. 287) suggest that "the lack of a unified field of ethnography … [is] a strategic strength of the label ethnography." Scott Jones (2010, p. 6) similarly shies away from strong definitions in ethnography when she considers how debates about the definition of ethnography often amount to "nothing more than semantic diversions."

Another challenge ESP researchers might face when seeking clarification about how to define ethnography arises from shifts in ethnographers' approaches. For example, despite ethnography's postmodernist critical, reflexive turn (Van Maanen 2011), in-depth accounts of social, historical, narrative, and political conditions still largely rely on the same tool-kit ethnographers used before the postmodernist shift, something which no amount of 'meta-argument' or 'reflexive turn' can mask:

> ... any particular ethnography must still make its points by pretty much the same means that were available before these contingencies were recognized and absorbed – by putting forth evidence, providing interpretations (and defending them), inventing and elaborating analogies, invoking authorities, working through examples, marshalling one's tropes, and on (and on). While the nature of ethnographic evidence, interpretation, authority, and style may have changed – more modestly I think than radically – the appeal of any single work remains tied to the specific arguments made in a given text and referenced to particular, not general, substantive, methodological, and narrative matters. (Van Maanen 2011, p. 226)

Another challenge to ethnographic practices stems from the decline of what Hammersley (2011) describes as the 'academic inquiry model' and subsequent pressures placed on research institutions to comply with a competing 'investment model'. These pressures, he argues, are largely responsible for compelling academic social scientists to demonstrate how their methodologies align with those of the natural and hard sciences, where investment model practices have increasingly pushed scientists to solve problems 'beyond the science'. Such problems include the constant search for research funding and the management of large, often transdisciplinary research teams to mitigate the costs of equipment and expensive

missions. As a result, social science researchers have found themselves confronted with an accountability regime, internalized by research institutions and other funding bodies. While such bodies "purport to 'transparently' ... assess [the research project's] effectiveness and quality" (Hammersley 2011, p. 4), they tend instead to impose a form of strategic management of qualitative research outcomes, as reflected in expectations about methodological rigor and transparency. This trend runs contrary to ethnographic practices, which continue to be "open to a relatively artistic, improvised, situated, and pragmatic model of social research where the lasting tenets of research design, canned concepts, and technical writing have yet to leave their mark. [...] 'Whatever works' seems to be the animating spirit" (Van Maanen 2011, p. 256).

The implications of retaining 'old tools' to respond to epistemological shifts and new perspectives, and pressures to bow to demands for greater accountability and methodological transparency, are important to consider at a time when ESP-oriented language and academic writing researchers find themselves at a critical juncture, as evidenced by the growing interest in adapting ethnographic methods to answer fundamental questions about language. Such considerations hold particular relevance in light of the potential incompatibilities between ESP, a field in applied linguistics with clear methodological and epistemological boundaries bound by formalistic Saussurian practices, and ethnography, which intrinsically defies such labels. How such a gap might be bridged is suggested in Newmeyer's (1986) historical account of the politics of the field of linguistics. He describes the longstanding tensions at play between the tenants of an autonomous linguistics and their humanistic opponents who have, since at least the mid-twentieth century, pushed back against "the depersonalization of language implicit in the structuralists' inventories of grammatical elements" (Newmeyer 1986, pp. 102-103). Similar tensions exist in the ESP research literature, where detailed and rigorous studies employing micro-level analysis abound, including the analysis of evaluation, lexical bundles, cohesion, citation practices, rhetorical moves, metadiscourse, proximity, stance, engagement, voice and identity. Despite their significance in moving the field of ESP forward, such studies have often been removed from the larger discoursal context and questions about how the immaterial aspects of shared experience interact with and co-construct text, identity and social practice. By adopting qualitative and ethnographic approaches, a number of scholars have, since the social turn in language and writing research, pushed back against the idea that descriptions of context are conceptually limited to being next to and separate from text or as isolatable phenomena conveniently restricted to "talk around text" (Lillis 2008).

To be sure, tensions between 'autonomous' and 'humanistic' linguistics will likely persist as core elements of the field's epistemology, as will a corresponding push to orient ethnographically-inspired ESP research within traditional, formalistic frames of accountability and methodological transparency. Pressures to conform to this model, and their impact on gatekeeping in terms of publication and research funding, could yet hinder a fuller ethnographic turn in ESP research.

Describing an Ethnographer's 'Core Values'

As much as ethnographers remain resistant to definitional and methodological orthodoxy, a set of common practices or 'core values' has nonetheless emerged, as evidenced across

numerous accounts of ethnographic fieldwork. Mapping out these core values, Scott Jones (2010) argues that several commonalities across disciplines bind ethnographic practice:

> By identifying core values that all ethnographers hold, we can get away from definitions that are exclusive to only a handful of disciplines and instead acknowledge the diversity of approaches within the broad heading of 'ethnography'. It also allows us, as ethnographers and social scientists, to open up interdisciplinary dialogues that can further understanding of social worlds and actions." (Scott Jones 2010, p. 10)

She characterizes ethnography's core values as corresponding to a set of 'commitments': a commitment to carrying out participant observation, immersion, reflection, reflexivity, representation, thick description, participative ethics, empowerment and to promoting understanding.

While participant observation is typically considered the main method in ethnography, it is not the only one, nor is it always 'ethnographic': some ethnographic studies rely solely on focus groups and interviews since not all situations are conducive to participant observation (e.g., observing life inside prisons). Obtaining rich data through participant observation requires that the researcher commit – physically, socially, mentally and/or emotionally – to participating in their subjects' social worlds. A second core value, immersion in the social world being studied, is thus a closely-related commitment, and can be achieved through the researcher's social, emotional and mental involvement even when physical involvement is not an option. Scott Jones stresses that making a commitment to gaining the status of 'trusted outsider' is crucial.

A commitment to three other core values – reflection, reflexivity and representation – is also common across ethnographic practices. While the 'Three R's of ethnography' (Scott Jones 2010, p. 8) intend to avoid objectification, they also emphasize the understanding that carrying out ethnography cannot be socially or politically neutral. Reflection, for example, is a non-mechanical process that occurs throughout the research study life-cycle, implicating careful thought about how to carry out the work, how to write it up, and how to question one's motives in carrying out the research. Reflexivity, as a theoretical, ethical and political stance, is "more than just pondering how your participants might act differently towards you" (Scott Jones 2010, p. 8). It involves considering gender, race, sexuality and power, and making a commitment to be mindful of how such issues affect one's study participants. Reflection and reflexivity are accomplished through representation, by which the researcher commits not only to accurately describing the participants, but also to remaining aware of how that description is always tied to each party's relative status and power. It entails writing up the research account in such a way as to allow study participants to maintain their 'voice', all the while portraying them realistically, critically, and with empowerment.

Another core value identified is 'thick description', which involves characterizing the field setting, its artifacts and participants' actions "with as much detail and ... contextualization as possible" (Scott Jones 2010, p. 8). Ethnographers take on a corresponding commitment to continuously work within a frame of 'active, participative ethics'. In this frame, ethics is not limited to ensuring privacy obligations prior to carrying out the field study, but is intimately tied to the implications of fostering relationships during the research study, and to the researcher's sensitivity and careful treatment of their study participants' privacy including information disclosed within the intimacy of researcher-participant relationships. It also

includes how the researcher's representation of those intimate details can be empowering or disempowering to participants, and considers how to integrate consent and collaboration into the research process by allowing participants to view field notes or to respond to the written account. Relatedly, ethnographers commit, as much as they are able, to 'empowering' study participants, for example by allowing them to tell their stories or by working to influence change in wider social policies or legislation. As Scott Jones (2010, p. 9) observes, "Many ethnographers are very aware that they may be unable to empower their research participants, but at least they are committed to not disempowering them."

Finally, ethnographers commit to "creating interpretive bridges or frameworks for 'understanding'" (Scott Jones 2010, p. 9) by allowing phenomenological understanding to emerge from the field experience and participants' accounts of their lived experience. Such understanding cannot be achieved from objective, distanced theoretical frameworks using *a priori* notions of what is known in some contexts for some situations. Rather, invoking Geertz (1985, p. 135), Scott Jones describes interpretive understanding as

> more like 'grasping a proverb, catching an illusion … reading a poem'. Geertz's description of 'understanding' is valuable as it makes clear that ethnographers can never see the world as the 'natives' might, but at the same time insights, however fleeting, are possible and can be profound (Scott Jones 2010, p. 9).

To restate the issue in Geertz's words, understanding rests on unassumingly developing an 'experience-near' perspective:

> The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to (Geertz 1985, p. 125).

How language and academic writing researchers have endeavored to integrate these core values into a workable framework is the topic of the following section.

Toward a Common Frame of Practice for ESP Research

Over the past ten-to-fifteen years, a number of language and academic writing researchers have worked to consolidate thinking about the intricacies and dilemmas of ethnographically-oriented research. Their efforts have engaged with the core values and commitments of ethnography and draw on key concepts and approaches such as emic perspectives, thick description, thick participation, deep-theorizing, critical reflexivity, sustained engagement, long conversations, trustworthiness, data triangulation, member checks, text histories, textographies, re-interviews, stimulated recall interviews, personal literacy histories or talk-around-text. One of the consequences of this concerted effort has been the gradual emergence of a shared understanding of ethnographic practice in language and academic writing research. This understanding has emerged through discussions about what constitutes ethnographic research, who conducts it, the location and approach employed, the research topics pursued, and how the findings contribute to expanding the knowledge base in language and academic writing research (Guillén-Galve and Bocanegra-Valle 2021; Lillis 2008; Lillis and Curry 2010; Paltridge et al. 2016). Making ethnographic practices clearly identifiable is a crucial endeavor in ESP so as to support and lend credence to researchers' efforts and to create good research practices. As Paltridge et al. (2016, p. 15) remark, such work is

important because "Without an understanding of ethnography's epistemological claims – that is, the kinds of knowledge ethnographic research can provide – the claims we make for our research will not stand up to scrutiny."

In contribution to this research frame, Paltridge et al. (2016) situate the history and context for ethnographically-oriented studies in language and academic writing research and describe different degrees of methodological alignment to ethnography, moving from 'using ethnographic tools', to 'adopting ethnographic perspectives' to 'doing ethnography' (Green and Bloome 2004). They use this framework and that of Lillis (2008), described in detail below, as a lens to review a wide range of ethnographically-oriented academic writing studies which examine undergraduate and postgraduate writing, writing for publication, as well as teaching and learning academic writing. Their detailed review provides numerous examples of how academic writers and their writing have been studied using ethnographic approaches, and how such approaches complement text-based analyses. The studies have progressively led to strong engagement with a "new empiricism" (Guillén-Galve and Bocanegra-Valle 2021, p. 17) in ethnographic academic writing research which draws on several overlapping themes. These core themes, or "newer compass points" (Guillén-Galve and Bocanegra-Valle 2021, p. 16), revisit ethnography in ways most relevant to the specific needs and concerns of language and academic writing research. In the following discussion, I identify six compass points which have emerged to guide the uses of ethnography in language and academic writing research. The first three entail determining relevant ethnographic approaches, negotiating the degree of alignment to ethnography, and considering whether ethnography is a method or an ethic. Three additional compass points pertain to the role of critical reflexivity, the importance of trustworthiness, and the value of storytelling.

The first compass point stems from discussions about which ethnographic approaches may be relevant for language and academic writing research. One well-known approach was proposed by Lillis and Curry (2010) who, in a longitudinal study of scholars' research networks and access to English-language publishing possibilities, use 'literacy history interviews' to document how their participants' research manuscripts change as they cross boundaries in both local and international contexts over time. In particular, literacy history interviews can be used both to explore writers' evolving relationship with their discourses, writing practices and identity, and to gain access to relevant observations writers make about that process. Another prominent approach, Swales' (1998) 'textography', aims to describe the context for individuals' research writing and their interpretation of their texts using techniques like text-based interviews, place analysis and supporting artefacts. Adopting a slightly different angle, Starfield (2011) argues for critical ethnography as an approach relevant for addressing the unequal nature of writing contexts. Two recent publications illustrate this approach for language and academic writing research. Khuder and Petrić (2021), for example, describe their ethnographic work with a group of exiled Syrian scholars compelled to reconstruct their academic careers abroad and publish their research in English. They demonstrate how critical reflexivity informed their responses to various methodological challenges such as recruiting participants, conducting and analyzing interviews, constructing text histories, ensuring representation, and honoring an ethic of collaborative ethnography. Similarly, Ávila Reyes (2021) engages in researcher reflexivity using literacy histories, talk-around-text, triangulation and member checks to counteract institutional narratives of 'deficit', further revealing the multiple ways in which student writers negotiate their agency and identity.

A second compass point centers around how researchers might negotiate their degree of alignment to ethnographic approaches. Undeniably, Lillis' (2008) seminal paper on ethnography as method, methodology, or deep-theorizing has initiated a fundamental discussion in academic writing research about how and why to integrate ethnographic approaches. Regarding *ethnography as method*, Lillis observes that researchers may collect multiple data points using interviews, surveys, artefact collection, short-term immersion or participant observation. She describes such data as 'talk-around-text' because researchers tend to focus more on text than context, which they may treat as "a straightforwardly transparent, simple reflection of the writer's perspective" (2008, p. 361). Reframing Lillis' observations in terms of ethnography's core values (i.e., Scott Jones 2010), we can better appreciate that while practitioners of ethnography-as-method are interested in fuller understandings of text, they tend not to report on ethnographic commitments like reflection, reflexivity or representation, nor discuss what effects their physical, social, mental or emotional participation may have on their participants' social worlds. A second type of approach, *ethnography as methodology*, differs from the previous through its long-term site and actor engagement, drawing on the idea that long conversations are useful for gathering information. Practitioners of ethnography-as-methodology collect and analyze multiple data points to carry out thick description (Geertz 1973), "building up a detailed picture of places, people, and resources" (Lillis 2008, p. 368) using journals, field notes, or photos. They also work toward thick participation (Sarangi 2005, 2007), which involves "a form of [researcher] socialisation in order to achieve a threshold for interpretive understanding" (Lillis 2008, p. 367). Thick ethnographic practices "remind the researcher of the importance of staying located in writers' specific sociohistorical trajectories and to avoid reading the data (in this case, people's lives and perspectives) through any straightforward theoretical (etic) lens" (Lillis 2008, p. 372). Situating ethnography-as-methodology against the backdrop of the core values discussed previously, we can see that its practitioners more explicitly embrace a commitment to participant observation, thick description and immersion, and demonstrate a willingness to participate in their participants' social worlds, whether physically, socially, mentally and/or emotionally. Such commitments open the door to the practices of reflection, reflexivity and representation, and further pave the way for understanding to emerge. The third type of ethnography is what Lillis, following Blommaert (2007), calls *ethnography as deep theorizing*. Adopting this perspective aims to narrow the gap between text and context by using two context-sensitive categories borrowed from linguistic ethnography, *indexicality* and *orientation*: "the specific ways in which bits of language (speech, writing) index, or point to aspects of social context" and "how speakers/hearers orient to what is said and written" (Lillis 2008, p. 376). Using these theoretical frames makes it possible to explore the invisible aspects of language, such as the power dynamics and inequalities underlying social practices and situated language resources. Ethnography-as-deep-theorizing, which engages the researcher's commitment to building phenomenological understanding (Scott Jones 2010), draws on the entire spectrum of ethnography's core values and empowers, as much as one is able, the participants whose voices contribute to the research account.

The extent to which language and academic writing researchers should make explicit their degree of methodological alignment remains unsettled business, however. As Tardy (2021) observes, researchers tend, depending on their research orientation, institutional conditions, epistemological assumptions, publication venue, or study phase, to engage in varying degrees of ethnographic research, moving from the 'ethnographically-tinged' (Swales 2019) to

broader ethnographically-oriented or to full ethnographic research, but without necessarily making their alignment explicit. In her analysis of twenty-one research articles published between 1993 and 2019, she explores the uptake of thick description. While some of the authors surveyed used the term in accordance with Geertz' original conception, others employed it "to mean simply close detail or perhaps rich description" (Tardy 2021, p. 34). In her survey of five other core values – using multiple data sources, engaging with participants over time, considering emic perspectives, demonstrating researcher reflexivity, and making interpretations and potential theories explicit – Tardy observed that for a sizable proportion of authors, these values did not appear to be a prerequisite for characterizing their approach as ethnography. While allowing that space limitations in journal articles and disciplinary conventions on acceptable reporting styles can result in curtailing the sort of writing associated with thick description, Tardy's results suggest that many researchers pick and choose methods from across the methodological spectrum to respond first to their immediate research needs rather than adhere to any particular framework for carrying out ethnographic research.

A third compass point which may shift this practice over time concerns discussions about whether ethnography is an ethic or a method. This distinction underscores a growing understanding that adopting ethnographic approaches is not simply a question of choosing the 'right techniques' or 'best methods' but is fundamentally a question of shifting the researcher's perspective, including how to think about the people one is studying and how to best represent those considerations. A simple way of putting it might be how to "investigate the social world while treating people with respect" (Atkinson 2021, p. 149). Carried out through this lens, ethnography is not a set of methods but an ideal which embodies both commitments and core values (Scott Jones 2010). As an ethic, ethnography is a powerful intellectual endeavor that pushes researchers to constantly reflect upon and "question the value (or not) of the particular methodological and conceptual tools we are using" (Lillis 2021, p. ix). It must be repeatedly revisited and "worked at" (Lillis 2021, p. ix) and entails practicing a mindset learned over time as "sensibilities and practices conveyed in off moments and parenthetical conversations" (Atkinson 2021, p. 149). For Atkinson (2021, p. 150), "the ethic *is* the method".

One key aspect of ethnography's ethic is reflexivity, which "requires reflection on the relationship between the researcher and the researched, where both become partners in the research process and both critically reflect on their journey" (Khuder and Petrić 2021, p. 107). As a fourth compass point, reflexivity functions not as a single criterion but along a continuum, bringing researchers to reflect upon the implications of their initial idea, their research background, their field's underlying epistemological assumptions, the angle of study and methods chosen, the framing of their analysis and the ways in which they represent their research results through writing. This continuum suggests that "more than one level of reflexivity could be employed in a single research study" (Khuder and Petrić 2021, p. 106), for example framing a researcher's intellectual journey and acceptance that "direct answers to our questions [do] not necessarily lead to significant findings" (Ávila Reyes 2021, p. 140) while providing a blueprint for determining moment-to-moment research goals, resolving insider-outsider dichotomies and seeking 'in-betweener-ness' (Milligan 2014; in Khuder and Petrić 2021, p. 107). Ethnographic research that practices reflexivity provides strong counternarratives, for example of deficit models whereby powerbrokers such as teachers, learning institutions, journal editors or reviewers might be persuaded to relinquish long-held

beliefs that if the writing does not conform to norms and expectations, it is because writers suffer from a form of 'deficit'. Using ethnographic approaches, such writers are instead documented as coming from a place of diverging linguistic and sociocultural resources (Ávila Reyes 2021; Harwood et al. 2010; Starfield 2013).

A fifth compass point is the notion of 'trustworthiness', which speaks directly to the pressures of accountability and methodological transparency for publishing and funding purposes. For Atkinson (2021), the 'truthfulness' of ethnographic accounts is an ongoing concern for the field, a concern shared by Paltridge et al. (2016) who argue that ethnographically-oriented research needs to be able to withstand critical examination. To do so, Atkinson proposes Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concept of 'trustworthiness' and four constructivist criteria to address pressures to conform to standards of scientific validity: "Trustworthiness replaces the hallmarks of scientific method – truth value (internal validity), generalizability (external validity), replicability, and objectivity – with their constructivist analogues: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability" (Atkinson 2021, p. 148). To reinforce the acceptability of ethnographic study results, ESP researchers could thus aim to operationalize these four criteria, as demonstrated in Khuder and Petrić (2021).

A final compass point identified as central to an emerging framework of ethnographic approaches in language and academic writing research is the role played by narrative storytelling, or 'representation' (Scott Jones 2010), both as the form used to relate ethnographic research and as a way of ensuring greater commitment to an ethic of ethnography. For Atkinson (2021), doing ethnography is categorically about "stories all the way down." The way in which we tell those stories lies at the heart of efforts to consolidate the credibility of ethnographically-oriented research. Engaging with the genre conventions of ethnographic writing is central to this endeavor, and has long been emphasized by ethnographers who tend to be "as reflective about their writing as they are about their actual research and, for that reason, 'writing up' ethnographies is, perhaps, more time consuming and challenging than other forms of research writing" (Scott Jones 2010, p. 8). It requires careful attention and planning since ethnography is not considered 'ethnography' until it is written (Van Maanen 2011). Moreover, the ways in which ethnographies are written have shifted over time, a trend which is important to be mindful of when integrating ethnographic approaches into ESP research. Earlier ethnographic accounts strove to paint a vivid picture of reality using an impartial tone, with the author mostly absent from the narrative. In contrast, postmodern ethnographic writing more deliberately emphasizes the researcher's subjectivity and perspective, encouraging them to tell it in their own voice or in the voices of their participants (Scott Jones 2010). Today, ethnographic writing weaves together a careful balance between research findings and personal attributes: the researcher's reflections on identity or power structures, their own background and position in the research, how they gained entry to the site, how they built relationships with informants, etc. Such 'reflexive confessional tales' are now "routinely attached or blended to the ethnography itself rather than split apart and reduced to appendices, turgid and one-off method chapters, or separate, follow-up monographs" (Van Maanen 2011, p. 224). Although ethnographic writing may be rejected by researchers from more positivist research backgrounds as 'mere storytelling', it has been shown to strengthen research transparency, credibility, and ultimately trustworthiness. In their demonstration of researcher reflexivity, for example, Khuder and Petrić (2021) show how constructing a compelling research narrative while showcasing both ethnographic method and

ethic provides multiple opportunities for building trustworthiness. Explicitly recognizing ethnography as storytelling is especially important because doing ethnography essentially implies "getting to know people for research purposes" and "involves learning how to listen to their stories […]. Ethnographic research is part of an ancient human practice – storytelling – and will ultimately be judged and evaluated on its storytelling capacity" (Atkinson 2021, p. 150).

Conclusion and Areas for Further Research

This chapter has illustrated the vibrancy of ethnographic academic writing research, a field which over the last 15 years has accumulated a substantial body of theoretical and empirical studies to support the emergence of a shared framework of practice. A major development has been the emergence of a set of field-specific compass points, constructed around a straightforward and rigorous assessment of ethnography's core values, methods and ethical commitments, further adapted to the specific context of language and academic writing research. Much has been achieved in terms of making ethnographic practices more transparent and methodologically accessible, all the while clarifying and acknowledging the need for different degrees of methodological alignment and commitment to an ethic of practice.

Without a doubt, ethnographic research will continue to be an integral part of ESP in the future as there are undeniable benefits to be gained by drawing on rich descriptions of sociocultural context and behaviors thereby "demystifying prestigious forms of discourse, unlocking students' creative and expressive abilities, and facilitating their access to greater life chances" (Hyland 2013, p. 109). To be sure, ESP research has traditionally targeted English-language learners' and users' needs with the aim of describing how people make particular language choices in social contexts, subsequently enabling novice and less-experienced writers to participate more effectively in the academic and professional cultures they are seeking to join. The insights provided by ethnographic approaches into the contexts of culture and situation, their ability to reveal socially-situated cognition, behaviors, and power imbalances and their potential for improving our understanding of multimodal meaning-making processes all contribute to the longstanding ESP goal of providing more appropriate, tailor-made language instruction.

Even so, there remains considerable scope for future research on topics which have not yet benefitted from the same level of attention and research insight as writing. One suggestion would be to open the door to more ethnographic studies of spoken language. Since Louhiala-Salminen's (2002) 'day-in-the-life' observation study of a business manager's discourse activities and Gimenez' (2001) ethnographic observations of cross-cultural business negotiations, there have been relatively few ethnographically-oriented ESP studies on spoken language practices (see Brown and Lewis 2003; Chan 2019; Cheng and Mok 2008; Evans 2013; Handford and Matous 2011; Palmour 2023; Svennevig 2018; Woydack and Lockwood 2020). The need for such studies is particularly apparent in the era of digitalized workplace, industry and academic practices, which have given rise to new learner needs. In addition to traditional ESP spoken language tasks, such as running and participating in meetings, managing negotiations, giving oral presentations or socializing with colleagues, learners today are also required to manage and produce speech for video-based activities, including videoconferencing (e.g., scientific and professional presentations, meetings) and video-based

productions (e.g., explainer videos, instructional videos, video methods articles, video abstracts). Careful ethnographic studies of learners' target work and study contexts would enhance our ability to make explicit the rhetorical meanings associated with successful spoken language features for video-based activities, such as prosody, discourse markers and conversationality, as well as the consequences of failing to manage their interactions with other modes of meaning making (Dressen-Hammouda and Wigham 2022).

A second area in which we are likely to see new developments targets the invisible dimensions of language. Just as focus has shifted away from formalistic text-based investigations of writing toward the socially-situated and time-distributed nature of literacy practices, researchers have become increasingly interested in better understanding the hidden processes behind text production and reception, especially within the context of multilingual dynamics (Gardner and Martin-Jones 2012). It is in this capacity that we can best appreciate that ethnographic approaches are not 'mere storytelling', reframing information that could be analyzed using other methods in linguistics. Ethnographic approaches' fundamental strength lies in allowing researchers to gain unique insight into phenomena that cannot otherwise be described. For example, an important factor in language learning is the ability to interpret and use both linguistic and non-linguistic cues to understand the sociocultural contexts one is in or referring to. It is essential for both language learners and instructors to become better versed in recognizing and understanding how non-linguistic cues impact communication outcomes. A key theoretical concept from anthropology used to study this is indexicality, which captures the ways in which sociocultural knowledge and membership is constituted and communicated through semiotic signs (Dressen-Hammouda 2023). Further coupling ethnographic approaches with concepts like indexicality can offer ESP a "theorized order to a large number of what once appeared to be disparate phenomena, each existing in our field's empirical literature in frameworks with different terminologies, seemingly different claims" (Silverstein 2003, pp. 193-194). While Silverstein's observation about indexicality pertained to the field of anthropology, a multitude of phenomena similarly exist in ESP making the sociocultural theories and concepts underlying ethnographic approaches a new way to frame our understanding of these features of language.

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