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0521559049 - *Voices from the Language Classroom: Qualitative Research in Second Language Education*

Edited by Kathleen M. Bailey and David Nunan

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The purpose of this introduction is to provide a context and rationale for the chapters in this volume. In what follows, we set out the terrain to be covered, and provide you, the reader, with a map to some of the substantive and methodological issues which you will encounter on your journey through the book.

*Voices From the Language Classroom* is written for teachers, teachers in preparation, teacher educators, and researchers involved in second or foreign language education. A number of studies will be of interest to second language acquisition researchers and students as well. We hope that the book is also useful for the nonlanguage specialist contemplating a career in second language education, since the volume elucidates several of the challenges confronting language educators around the world.

In addition to illuminating issues relating to the teaching and learning of languages, *Voices From the Language Classroom* can be used as an illustrative manual for those wishing to carry out interpretive research in their own teaching or learning situations. The studies reported here were conducted in the tradition of naturalistic inquiry (see Allwright and Bailey 1991: 41–42; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Although this tradition is just as important as experimental research in language education and applied linguistics, studies utilizing qualitative data gathered in naturally occurring settings have seldom been published as collections in our field. So along with presenting the findings of these studies, this book is intended to serve as a “sampler” for people interested in learning more about qualitative research in the naturalistic inquiry tradition. In hopes of furthering that learning process, we have included a set of “Questions and Tasks,” at the end of each major section of the book, which readers may address individually or in study groups.

Naturalistic inquiry is a research paradigm in which naturally occurring events are studied. Investigations are conducted without the control over variables or the intentional intervention (the “treatment”) found in laboratory experiments. In other words, the studies reported here are *empirical* but not *experimental* – and for this, we make no apologies. In a key text on naturalistic inquiry, Lincoln and Guba contrast this approach with the positivist (experimental) paradigm. Their five axioms of naturalistic inquiry are paraphrased as follows:

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1. Realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic.
2. The knower and the known are interactive and inseparable.
3. Only time-bound and context-bound hypotheses are possible (in contrast to the positivist desire for time-free and context-free generalizations).
4. It is impossible to distinguish causes from effects since “all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping.”
5. Inquiry is value-bound (in contrast to the experimentalist notion that legitimate inquiry must be value free, which is, in itself, a value statement).

(See Lincoln and Guba [1985: 36–38] in particular for an excellent summary of this juxtaposition. See also Allwright and Bailey [1991: 40–45] for a comparison of experimental research, naturalistic inquiry, and action research.)

As suggested by Lincoln and Guba’s third point, the studies in this book clearly indicate the importance of context in understanding behavior. The role of context finds expression in a key tenet of ethnographic research, that of the naturalistic-ecological hypothesis:

The naturalistic-ecological perspective has, as its central tenet, the belief that the context in which the behavior occurs has a significant influence on that behavior. . . . [I]f we want to find out about behavior, we need to investigate it in the natural contexts in which it occurs, rather than in the experimental laboratory. Arguments in favor of field research as opposed to laboratory research are supported by studies of particular phenomena which come up with different findings according to whether the research is conducted in a laboratory or in the field. (Nunan 1992: 53–54)

All these chapters illustrate the context-bound characteristic of naturalistic inquiry. That is, the data were collected in naturally occurring contexts, rather than in experimental classrooms that were artificially created to enhance the researchers’ control over variables.

Despite the differences of perspective, the chapters in this book share a number of other concerns. First, each is grounded in data, most of which are qualitative in nature. Qualitative data consist of records of phenomena which deal with the qualities or characteristics of those phenomena, rather than with measurements, frequencies, scores, or ratings. In recent years qualitative research methods have been adopted by education from anthropology and sociology, and several methodological texts have appeared (see, e.g., Marshall and Rossman 1989; and Van Maanen, Dabbs, and Faulkner 1982).

It is important to note that global references to “qualitative research” and “qualitative data” can be more productively examined if we separate concerns of *data collection* and *data analysis*. Allwright and Bailey

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have argued (1991: 65–68) that all four of the following combinations are possible:

1. Data collected quantitatively can be analyzed quantitatively (as is common in statistical studies).
2. Quantitatively collected data can be analyzed qualitatively.
3. Qualitatively collected data can be analyzed quantitatively.
4. Data can be qualitatively collected and qualitatively analyzed.

The contributors to this book utilize all four combinations, but it is the last which is most prevalent in these studies.

In addition, as far as possible, we requested that each chapter be based on multiple data sets, to permit data triangulation. *Triangulation*, a term borrowed from land surveying, refers to the idea that at least two perspectives are needed to obtain an accurate picture of any phenomenon (Denzin 1970: 472; van Lier 1988). Throughout these chapters, a rich array of data can be found, including lesson transcripts, observer's fieldnotes, research narratives, teachers' and learners' journals, stimulated recall protocols, interview data, and lesson plans.

Following Lincoln and Guba's point that "the knower and the known are interactive and inseparable" (1985: 37), we were careful to ensure that these studies developed the emic perspective (i.e., the viewpoints of the participants), as well as the researchers' etic perspective. As explained by Watson-Gegeo (1988: 579):

the emic or culturally specific framework used by the members of a society/culture for interpreting and assigning meaning to experiences differs in various ways from the researcher's ontological or interpretive framework (an etic framework).

Although there is certainly variation in the chapters as to the centrality of the participants' voices, the authors have consistently brought out students' and teachers' viewpoints – either as the phenomena under investigation, or as part of the analytic procedures, or both.

Finally, each chapter is an original paper which has not been previously published. Some are by scholars whose work is well known in language classroom research, while others are by scholars who are not yet widely published in this field. All these authors write candidly about the research process, including discussions of the research problems they faced.

As editors, we tried to ensure that each chapter would mesh with the others to provide a broad picture of language teaching and learning. Indeed, it became a challenge to subcategorize the chapters within the volume as a whole because the collection of papers were interrelated on many methodological and thematic levels. For this reason, the introduction to each section includes both substantive summaries and meth-

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odological commentary on the chapters it contains. In what follows here, we will, therefore, comment only briefly on each chapter in terms of its place within the volume's overall structure.

The five sections of the book are ordered in such a way that we work from the inside and move outward. That is, we start with studies that involve classroom teachers, their actions and ideas, as the central focus. We then branch outward a bit to consider classroom dynamics and the interaction among teachers and learners. The third section looks at the classroom and beyond, as the authors consider some of the noninstructional issues which influence students' learning. In the fourth section, which discusses curricular issues, the view is broadened even further to encompass programmatic concerns. In the fifth section, wide-scale sociopolitical issues influence the interpretation of the data.

Each chapter will be briefly capsulized below to give you a sense of both the structure and the content of the book. In the introductions to the five main sections, you will find more detailed comments about both the substantive findings and the methodological issues presented.

### **Teaching as doing, thinking, and interpreting**

The book opens with four chapters in the first section, which is entitled "Teaching as Doing, Thinking, and Interpreting." These chapters focus on the value-added nature of listening to teachers' voices in understanding language teaching and learning. The thematic focus on the teacher does not, of course, mean that the students' voices are ignored; the distinction between this section and the next is one of principal focus, not one of exclusivity of concern.

In the first chapter, Kathi Bailey explores etic and emic interpretations of teachers' on-line decision making. Bailey argues that while lesson planning is an important professional skill, language teachers must also know how and when to depart from the lesson plan, to make the best use of class time and to create learning opportunities.

In a companion piece to Bailey's, David Nunan uses several sources of data collected in Australia (lesson transcripts, observation notes, and stimulated recall statements) to provide insights into the dynamics of classroom interaction which would not necessarily have emerged if a single data source had been used. Nunan concludes in Chapter 2 that language classrooms represent cultures with their own norms of interaction, in which the notion of the "lesson" may not be salient to the participants on the inside of the action. His study reinforces Freeman's claim (this volume) that to tell the story one needs to know the story, and Katz's notion (this volume) of classrooms as socially constructed entities.

In Chapter 3, Anne Katz herself uses the notion of teaching "style"

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(in counterpoint to “methods”) as a way of understanding instruction. By presenting portraits of four different composition classrooms, Katz demonstrates how “knowledge is socially organized, formed, and shaped by the participants in the exchange and by the context in which the exchange takes place.” She builds a convincing case that it is teachers’ interpretation of their classroom roles that is significant, not some externally defined method. Katz employs the powerful literary device of the metaphor, which enables her to create unifying themes from disparate data. By utilizing metaphor as an “estrangement device,” Katz demonstrates that methodological labels (e.g., “process writing”) tell us little about what teachers and learners actually do to create a climate in which teaching and learning occur.

The last chapter in this section is entitled “Redefining the Relationship Between Research and What Teachers Know.” Donald Freeman identifies the gulf between practitioners and researchers and argues that it is crucial for two key questions – what teaching is and what people must know in order to teach – to be placed at the center of the second language classroom research agenda. In order to answer these questions, teachers’ voices must be heard, and to be able to hear their voices, the field will have to expand its concept of research and its norms for research reporting.

### **Classroom dynamics and interaction**

The chapters in the second section, entitled “Classroom Dynamics and Interaction,” highlight the different perceptions of students and teachers in the instructional process.

The contribution from Fauzia Shamim is valuable because it presents one of the “hard realities” of language classes in developing countries – class size. The study looks at some of the direct consequences of large classes for language learning, in this case, in Pakistan. Shamim found that where students are located in a classroom (toward the front or the back) has a major influence on the learners’ perceptions of themselves as learners, on the teachers’ perceptions of them, and on their chances of succeeding in class.

In Chapter 6 Amy Tsui addresses a serious concern in most foreign language classrooms, that of encouraging students to speak in the target language. In places such as Hong Kong, where this study took place, the problem has an intercultural as well as a pedagogical dimension: Student-student interaction is simply not typical of the culture of most classrooms. Tsui first identifies teachers’ perceptions of factors leading to student reticence (including low proficiency, fear of derision, teachers’ intolerance of silence, uneven allocation of turns, and incomprehensible input). She then relates her data to the issue of anxiety, before

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outlining some of the strategies which the teachers in her study utilized to encourage students to speak in class.

David Block's chapter considers instructional events from different viewpoints, examining the way teachers and learners interpret classroom action and interaction. Methodologically, this study, like others in the volume, utilizes a range of data collection techniques including teacher and learner oral diaries, classroom observation, and researcher notes. Of particular significance is Block's observation that while learners tended to agree on what constituted an activity and how many activities occurred during class time, there were differences, in some instances major ones, between the various informants' views on pedagogical objectives, content, and procedures.

### **The classroom and beyond**

In the third section of the book, we move beyond the classroom as we listen to learners' and teachers' voices. In each chapter, we see the importance of the learners' outside concerns (beyond those related solely to instruction) and their impact on language learning and use.

Cherry Campbell's chapter, "Socializing With the Teachers and Prior Language Learning Experience," contributes to an emerging tradition in language learning research, namely, diary studies. Campbell documents her learning of Spanish in Mexico, focusing on language acquired in interaction outside of the classroom. Data for the study came from journal entries and letters written during a two-month stay in Cuernavaca. The study reinforces the critical importance of social and affective factors in language acquisition, a point which has emerged in other diary studies. Another major theme, as the title indicates, is the perceived effect of Campbell's prior language learning experiences on her acquisition of Spanish. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of the study for language teachers.

Martha Clark Cummings presents a case study of twenty "repeater" students in a writing class in New York City. For many of these learners, Cummings' class is their last chance, as one more failure would require them to withdraw from school. Cummings' narration allows the students to tell their own stories and to articulate their own hopes and fears. The resulting chapter is a powerful illustration of Freeman's message (this volume) about teachers' knowledge. The difference is that it is largely the students' stories which are being told, with the teacher's reflections adding a sometimes poignant narrator's voice.

Anxiety, which emerges as a factor in several chapters, takes center stage in the study by Mick Hilleson. Working within the context of an English-medium school in Singapore, Hilleson encouraged a group of sixteen-year-old students to evaluate their own reactions to the learning

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situation. The data were collected through a range of methods including diaries, interviews, and observations. By linking the data from his own students with the relevant literature, Hilleson is able to illuminate important issues of anxiety which can affect the language learning and performance of non-native speakers.

Sabrina Peck also investigates learners' attitudes and emotions, as documented in their diaries, but in a very different context. She worked as the administrator in a Spanish as a second language program designed for social workers in the Hispanic community of Los Angeles. Some of the students were themselves Latino, though others were not. Through the social workers' journal entries, Peck documents their awareness of developing cultural sensitivity.

### **Curricular issues**

In Section IV we broaden the focus of the book to consider curricular concerns that influence language learning and teaching. What these chapters have in common is their diverse viewpoints on curriculum, materials, activities, registration, and assessment.

Ian Harrison's chapter investigates whether learners' classroom language behavior changed as a result of a large-scale curriculum renewal project in the Sultanate of Oman. The data for the study include lesson transcripts, inspectors' reports, interviews with inspectors, and reports from teachers' meetings. This chapter reinforces the view that in order to make sense of the complexities of the curriculum in action, one needs to triangulate data from a number of sources.

In Chapter 13 Ann Snow, John Hyland, Lia Kamhi-Stein, and Janet Harclerode Yu describe a project to improve teaching and learning in junior high school classrooms in the Mexican-American community of East Los Angeles. Through interviews conducted in English and Spanish, the study focuses on the students' reactions to the instructional processes in the curricular innovation. The researchers also elicited data on the strategies the learners themselves found to be successful in coping with the academic demands of school. Students expressed a significant preference for classes where more innovative procedures were used and for experiential learning activities, such as projects and experiments. Methodologically, the researchers found that the interview, as a research technique, enabled them to engage in an "instructional conversation" with the students in a way which revealed the learners' perceptions of effective teaching and learning.

The chapter by Peter Shaw examines the role of the ethnographer as a curriculum change agent. The data for this study came from an evaluation of the foreign language component in a professionally oriented graduate school. Research methods employed by Shaw included eth-

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nographic observation of selected classes, student and teacher diaries, debriefing interviews, and tapes and transcripts. A major procedural dilemma which Shaw examines is the fact that he was knowledgeable about the field under investigation (i.e., language curriculum and pedagogy) and that he was also a colleague of those implementing the innovation, and therefore, a stakeholder in the curriculum development enterprise.

Peter Sturman investigates an important topic which has not often been addressed: learners' initial impressions of a language program, based on their first contacts with the teachers and administrative staff in the registration and placement procedures. Sturman analyzes qualitative and quantitative data derived from questionnaires administered at two schools in Japan. The resulting statistical and interpretive account reveals the importance of learners' early contacts with a program.

### **Sociopolitical perspectives**

The last four chapters foray into political aspects of language education. The geographical contexts of these studies are tremendously varied: van Lier deals with the politics of being a "foreign expert" in a bilingual education project high in the Peruvian Andes, Adendorff explores the code-switching behavior of teachers in a KwaZulu boarding school in South Africa, Duff looks at dual-language school classrooms in Hungary, and Murray deals with multicultural classrooms in the United States.

In his report on a Spanish/Quechua bilingual education program in Peru, Leo van Lier documents the language use of children and teachers. In this eloquently argued piece, van Lier presents a vivid picture of an attempted educational innovation "in action." His chapter underscores the value of focused ethnographies. For most readers, the power of van Lier's account will underline the value of "portrayal" as a method and "understanding" as a goal of educational research.

In the next chapter, Ralph Adendorff explores the sociocultural context in which teachers switch between Zulu and English in their interactions with students. He uses data collected in various classrooms to explore the significance of switches between English and Zulu. The implications for language teacher education in South Africa are also discussed.

Patricia Duff conducts a vivid comparative analysis of two very different settings in Hungarian secondary schools: a traditional monolingual school, in which the dominant pedagogical strategy is that of recitation, and a dual language school, in which the instruction occurs mainly in English. The focus of Duff's study is the socialization of discourse competence in these two different instructional environments.



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The research evaluates the impact of the massive changes wrought within the educational system with the end of Soviet domination in Hungary. Duff uses her data to explain issues of educational and linguistic reform in a rapidly changing political environment.

The closing chapter comes from Denise Murray, who illustrates her theme of diversity by drawing on many different studies, which she weaves together using the metaphor of the tapestry. Her concern is to go beyond acknowledging ethnolinguistic diversity and to show that diversity is a valuable resource that can enrich the classroom. Murray is not myopic when it comes to the challenges posed by such diversity, and she readily admits that these challenges “threaten to unravel the whole cloth.” However, the chapter leaves the reader with a positive message, largely because Murray showcases the voices of the students themselves.

### **Conclusion**

As we said in the preface, in planning this volume, we invited a number of language educators and researchers to interpret the voices heard in classrooms throughout the world. Our intent was to produce a collection of articles written by authors schooled in the traditions of naturalistic inquiry. Our hope was to bring together a series of rich descriptive and interpretive accounts, documenting the concerns of teachers and students as they teach, learn, and use languages. As editors, we believe that the colleagues who accepted our invitation have met and even exceeded the challenge we set. Of course, it remains for you, the reader, to pass final judgment on the success of our efforts.

This book was born partly out of frustration as we sought in vain for appropriate qualitative studies as models for our own students, and partly out of respect for and fascination with teaching and learning. For our part, we believe that this international collection represents a unique contribution to the field. We hope you will agree.

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