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**Researching the language classroom through ethnographic diaries:  
principles, possibilities and practices**

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Introduction: contextualising the research

The classroom, notes Wright, 'is the true centre of educational experience ... it is here, through the teaching-and-learning process, that education 'happens' ' (2005: 1). And, although the work of an English language teacher comprises many elements and activities - for example, lesson preparation, training and CPD, setting and marking assessments, developing materials, and report writing - the classroom is, for most, 'the crucible' of our professional lives (Gaies, 1980).

This was certainly true for myself as I started out as an English language teacher in the early 1990s. Yet it was soon evident that the care with which I planned my lessons, carefully trying to anticipate potential pitfalls and problems in order that a session's aims and objectives could be achieved and language could be learned, did not relate in straightforward ways to what happened in the classroom. For example, teaching the same or similar material to two different classes would often lead to differences in the way the learners engaged with the lesson content and with each other in class, and in the language they seemed to remember and/or learn; some classes seemed to go well, some less so. And even after significant reflection, I often could not quite understand why this was.

Of course, every teacher encounters similar issues, of why some lessons 'work' but others do not; 'common sense' tells us that this is just part of the life of a teacher. However, it was whilst studying for an MA in ELT at Lancaster University a few years into my teaching career, that I first encountered ideas and conceptualizations of the language classroom that started to make sense of it all. Not only is the classroom a place (either physical or online) where 'typically, one teacher and a number of learners come together for a *pedagogical* purpose' (Allwright, 1992: 267; emphasis added), classrooms are also *social* environments (Tudor, 2001). From this perspective, classrooms have their own complex social cultures (Breen, 2001), which are shaped by, and shape, teachers and learners. A language class is thus...:

... an arena of subjective and intersubjective realities which are worked out, changed and maintained. *And these realities are not trivial background to the tasks of teaching and learning a language...*they continually specify and mould the activities of teaching and learning (ibid.: 128)

For example, teachers and learners come to class with particular ideas as to what is and is not a 'proper lesson'. These include views about classroom pedagogy, for instance, what constitutes a useful focus

for a lesson or what is an effective learning activity. But they also include perspectives about what are and are not appropriate ways for teachers and learners to behave and interact with each other in class (van Lier, 1988; Hall, 2017). Shaping the ways in which teachers and learners attribute reasons to other classroom participants' behaviour, and their own subsequent actions and reactions, such perspectives are also influenced by the expectations and demands of the school or institution the classroom is part of, and by society at large (van Lier, 1988). From this standpoint, therefore, classrooms and classroom events are socially constructed. And given the number of participants who in some way affect what happens in a class, every language classroom is both unique and complex (Tudor, 2001), consequently making classroom language teaching and learning 'messy' (Freeman, 1996: 103).

Yet whilst this way of thinking about classrooms starts to explain the complexities of classroom life in broad terms, if teachers and researchers are to understand the social processes which underpin and contribute to teaching and learning in more detail, we need to see how this 'messiness' plays out in practice, in particular language classrooms. This chapter, therefore, documents my own attempt to explore how a specific classroom was socially constructed. It focuses in particular on the principles underpinning and possibilities for my research methodology, and the subsequent decisions I made about the research design and its implementation. As with any research project, implementing the study effectively was not without its challenges.

#### Getting started: why ethnography?

As I read more about 'the social classroom' when planning my project, I was particularly drawn to the suggestion that learners' interpretations of what lessons 'are about' often differ from what a teacher intends, and that learners themselves often vary in their understandings of what happens in a lesson and in the language they notice and learn in a class (e.g., Allwright, 1984; Block, 1996; Tudor, 2001). Block (1996), for example, refers to a 'gap' between a teacher's and learners' perceptions of particular classroom events, with implications for the effectiveness or otherwise of lessons and for learning. Such a 'gap' seemed to offer a possible explanation for the types of questions I had about my own teaching (see Introduction).

Consequently, I narrowed the focus of my investigation from the very broad 'examining the social construction of a language classroom' to uncovering the ways in which a particular teacher and class of learners perceived and ascribed significance to what happened in their language classroom. As such, I hoped to develop a genuine understanding of how the classroom was socially constructed by establishing, comparing and contrasting the perspectives of the teacher and learners themselves. Such research would need to be contextual, unobtrusive, longitudinal, collaborative, interpretive and organic (Nunan, 1992), and I, as the researcher, would aim not to intervene in or control naturally

occurring events in the research setting. By trying to understand the classroom from the participants' own perspectives in this way, I would, in effect, be engaging in ethnography.

Popular across many social sciences (e.g., anthropology, sociology), ethnography is an interpretative approach to research which aims to 'provide a longitudinal (long-term), in-depth understanding of the beliefs and practices of a group of people' (Avineri, 2017: 123). It seeks to unpack and question what is familiar, making it 'strange', whilst at the same time understanding what initially seems strange, thereby making it 'familiar' (Kaplan-Weinger and Ullman, 2015). For example, in some language classrooms, learners are comfortable and even expect to work in pairs and small groups, but why is this - what beliefs and social and cultural norms inform this practice? Yet in other language classrooms, pair and group-work are difficult to establish, learners and teachers working and organising tasks and activities in alternative ways. Again, why is this? (In this example, differences between classes are not necessarily between those in very different cultural contexts around the world; even classes in the same institution can differ significantly). Ethnography thus seeks to 'enquire about the *hows* and *whys* behind the *whats* that we see in particular cultures, doing our best to remain as objective and curious as possible' (Avineri, 2017: 123-4; original emphasis). Consequently, the researcher aims to understand on its own terms the group being researched, which, in my study, was a specific class of learners and their teacher.

Thus, as Atkinson and Hammersely (1994: 248) note, in practice, ethnography emphasizes exploring social phenomena (e.g., a classroom) rather than setting out to test hypotheses. It tends to work with unstructured data, that is, data which is not assigned to a set of closed *a priori* categories when collected, instead allowing for key themes and topics to emerge from the data. Ethnography investigates a small number of cases, often just one, in detail. And it analyses human actions and activities through verbal and written descriptions and explanations, 'with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most' (ibid.: 248). Ethnography is thus an approach to research which was well-suited to my research goals of exploring a specific language classroom as a social environment, one in which participants behaved and interacted with each other, and understood classroom learning and teaching, in ways which made sense to them.

#### Developing the study: why ethnographic diaries?

Ethnographic research can draw upon a wide range of data collection tools, including observations and fieldnotes; questionnaires, interviews and focus groups; and participant self-report mechanisms such as diaries (Avineri, 2017). In my study, participants recorded their experiences and perceptions of a series of lessons in diaries, this approach being complemented by other data collection methods for subsequent triangulation - lessons were also observed and recorded, whilst the diary entries

provided the basis for follow-up interviews that further explored participants' reported experiences and insights, i.e., the 'diary-interview method' (Zimmerman and Weider, 1977).

I decided to make diaries, rather than the other data collection tools, the central element of the study (and, therefore, this chapter's discussion) as they offered participants the opportunity to provide 'a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries' which reported and reflected on those aspects which they themselves found significant (Bailey, 1990: 215). Giving more control to the research participants themselves than, for example, interviews, observations or questionnaires, diaries are 'self-report instruments used repeatedly to examine ongoing experiences' (Bolger et al, 2003: 580), which diarists keep as openly and honestly as possible (Bailey, 1983). Their key characteristics are thus: their *regularity* (regular timed and/or dated entries are made over a period of time); they are *personal*, kept by identifiable individuals, who also control access to the diary; entries are *contemporaneous*, made at or close to the time of experiences and events, rather than recalled and documented a significant time later; and they are *a record* of what the diarist considers relevant and important at that time, and might include activities, thoughts and feelings, interactions and so forth (Alaszewski, 2006), although participation in a diary-based research study might require diarists to focus on a particular aspect of their life or learning experience (ibid.).

Diaries therefore seemed well-suited to my ethnographic investigation of a particular language classroom. They offered participants the opportunity to record introspective reflections on their own experiences (Bailey, 1983), through which I could start to uncover the social and psychological processes operating within the classroom - a 'unique situated reality' embedded within layers of context (Blommaert and Jie, 2010: 17). I hoped that the diaries could capture the hard to reach thoughts and 'little experiences' of everyday life in the classroom that occupy much of teachers' and learners' conscious attention (Wheeler and Reis, 1991: 340, cited in Bolger et al., 2003), enabling me to discover and examine reported experiences in their natural and (almost) spontaneous context; by reducing the amount of time between an experience and the recording of that experience, using diaries was likely to significantly reduce the extent of recall error or bias compared to approaches such as interviews (Alaszewski, 2006; Bolger et al., 2003). And they could reveal the complexity of classroom life by prioritizing the participants' experiences and beliefs, drawing upon their 'emic' (Richards et al., 2012) perspectives on events and contexts (i.e., participants' own 'insider' understandings). Central to my use of diaries was the aim of providing participants with more 'voice' within the study, compared to other research tools and data sources, while I would move from a position of 'ignorance' at the start of a study to become a 'knower' through a process of diary data collection and analysis (Blommaert and Jie, 2010). The diary study was thus intended to provide me with a means of

unpacking what is often taken for granted in the classroom, those ‘common sense’ assumptions about teaching and learning that I wanted to move beyond (see Introduction).

However, beyond this broad understanding of how the use of ethnographic diaries would develop my understanding of the classroom, there remained a range of questions concerning the practicalities of diary design and implementation, whilst the subsequent analysis of data also raised a number of dilemmas; as Janssens et al. (2018:1) acknowledge, there is ‘no golden standard for the optimal design of a diary study’. Moreover, within applied linguistics research and, more specifically, within research into language teaching and learning, diaries are often undervalued or overlooked as a possible means of collecting data (Rose et al., 2020)<sup>1</sup>; there were thus few methodological models for me to follow within the research literature. Like all diary-oriented researchers, therefore, I faced a series of choices when designing my approach. Decisions would need to reflect both the aims of my project and also take into account any practical constraints on the research (e.g., the need to find both willing and appropriate (i.e., potentially informative) participants; maintaining their participation over the course of the study; acknowledging and accommodating any time constraints they may be under). However, my choices would also affect the quality, integrity and interpretability of the project’s data.

It is to the process of finding participants that the discussion now turns, subsequently moving on to examine the methodological choices underpinning the design of the diaries themselves, as these decisions were in part shaped by the participants’ perspectives and related practicalities.

#### Finding participants: access, ethics and consent

By drawing on participants’ own understandings and perspectives, ethnographic diaries are essentially an exploratory form of research (Bailey, 1991) which, as we have seen, aim to add depth, detail and realism to existing conceptualizations of language teaching, learning and classroom life. Additionally, through the researcher’s interpretation of the diary data, they can be used to generate new hypotheses (ibid.) or open up new lines of enquiry (Halbach, 2000). Thus, as Bailey (1991: 83) notes, ‘generalizability is neither the purpose nor the point of diary studies’. Rather, the objective is to understand phenomena - in the case of my own study, a particular language classroom - from the participants’ point of view, although any insights which emerge may, of course, have some relevance to, or prompt reflection about, other apparently similar contexts. Obviously, therefore, for a diary study to be successful, participants need to be comfortable with the aims and approach of the research, and given that they are being asked to reveal their thoughts and feelings, belief and trust in the researcher is a central concern.

Hence in my project, research design, finding a class who could and would participate in the research, and building trust between myself and these participants were simultaneous, overlapping

and ongoing processes rather than individual events. I negotiated 'site entry' (Erikson, 1986) with a proposed format in mind for both the diary and other elements of the broader ethnographic methodology (see above), but also hoped participants would actively help shape the research design, subsequently fine-tuning my approach in line with the circumstances (both physical and social) and recommendations of the teacher and learners (adjusting, for instance, the diary guidelines offered to participants (see below), the time demands placed on them, and so forth).

Ethical considerations were also, of course, central to these processes. Given the project's focus on 'the social classroom' and possible differences between participants' perspectives of classroom life and events, I had initially speculated that a class with social 'difficulties', where the smooth flow of classroom interaction might break down for whatever reason, might provide more 'interesting' data; the 'gap' noted in Block's (1996) diary study, for example, was between a teacher and a rather critical student, Block's data suggesting that (some) learners like to know the rationale for classroom activities in addition to how to complete them. And yet, to actively search for a class in which social difficulties were prevalent seemed problematic, and explicitly asking participants to focus on tensions and problems seemed to pose unacceptable social and psychological risks to them (see also, Erikson, 1986). I felt that verbalising, through a diary, previously unspoken thoughts may reify any negative attitudes the diarists might have, causing a degree of emotional harm, and potentially eroding further classroom relationships, with myself as researcher unable to intervene for reasons which included my lack of training in counselling, insufficient class knowledge, and the potential impact of any intervention on classroom life and the project's data in contravention of the project's ethnographic principles.

It therefore seemed important to work with a class whose members liked or interacted positively with each other. Clearly, however, these concepts are difficult to pin down precisely and play out in ways that are changeable and at times difficult to ascertain. Consequently, I relied on the professional expertise of a former colleague (and friend) who suggested that his class in a UK-based private language school might provide an appropriate focus for the research. Yet as the discussion above suggests, the benefits to participants of taking part in a research project are often not clear or straightforward, and participation may not even be in their best interests (Erikson, 1986), particularly, for example, in my diary study given its likely time demands and its possible inherent social and psychological risks. Thus, for both ethical and practical purposes, my research needed the participants' informed consent, not only that given at the outset of the project, but as an on-going process throughout the study built on trust and negotiation between myself as researcher and the teacher and learners.

In order to start the project on a sound ethical footing, therefore, once my own institution had assessed the project proposal and given its ethical approval for the study (reviewing an overview of its aims, methodology, consent processes and documentation, and provision for the safe storage and appropriate use of data), the language school principal, teacher and learners were approached through letters explaining the study's rationale and its voluntary nature. Drawing on the conception of the classroom as a social environment, for the learners, the project's goals were broadly summarised as 'how working with others affects the way you learn in class', whilst for the language school principal and teacher, this became the slightly more terminological 'investigation of the social constraints which exist on language learners in the language classroom'.

In the interests of both honesty and site entry, I highlighted to learners my friendship with their teacher, anticipating that if they liked him, this might assist in the practical development of the project. Yet it seems possible that the way in which I introduced the project to learners will have affected the data; ties between myself and the teacher *may* have hindered diarists' honesty and openness. Meanwhile, although emphasising that the project was voluntary, power imbalances between myself and the teacher on the one hand, and the learners on the other, meant that it was unlikely my request to participate in the diary study was unlikely to be rejected wholesale.

Consequently, the participants of the diary study were a British teacher and twelve upper-intermediate (CEFR B2 level) learners from a mainly German or Swiss-German L1 background. Most were female (the teacher was male) and aged between 20 and 30 years old, and data collection took place over a 4-week period. We shall return to participants, the differing ways in which individual diarists contributed to the study's overall body of data, and what this means for the subsequent analysis, later in the chapter.

#### Designing the diaries: questions and possibilities

We have already noted that there is no 'optimal' or fixed format for ethnographic diaries, and thus, as Blommaert and Jin (2010: 10) note, 'the process of gathering and moulding knowledge is part of that knowledge; knowledge construction *is* knowledge; the *process is the product*' (original emphasis). I was thus very aware that the way in which the diaries in my study were designed, as data collection tools, would affect the resultant data and subsequent analysis. Unlike personal diaries that many people keep in order to keep a 'life-record' of their experiences, thoughts and feelings, the diaries that my project's participants would keep were 'solicited', that is, they were kept at my request and in the knowledge that I would read and analyse what was recorded. At the outset, therefore, I needed to consider, for example, how the diarists would deal with moments of embarrassment and difficulty in their accounts, how would they be truly open and honest, and how would they avoid simply pleasing

the reader? Like most researchers engaged in diary studies, I needed to provide participants with guidelines in order to minimize the difficulties around these kinds of issues. Clearly, however, the provision of any guidelines, in addition to the diarists' own knowledge that their accounts would be read, meant that their diaries had to be regarded as co-constructions by the myself as the researcher and the participants as diarists (see also, Mackrill, 2008). A fundamental question when reflecting on the project, therefore, is 'how did *my* research design affect the data?' (Hall, 2008: 119), and it is to this that the chapter now turns.

### *Structured or unstructured diaries?*

A first key decision, therefore, was the extent to which the diaries should be structured or unstructured. Although ethnographic approaches aim to minimize the effects, disruptions and distortions of the research process on participants' experiences and understandings (Alaszewski, 2006: 78), the act of keeping a diary was, all the participants reported, a change in their behaviour; none otherwise maintained a daily journal or record. Hence, a central tension was how to give the diarists control over what they recorded whilst recognising my study's own focus and goals, in other words, how to attain 'relevant data without restricting [their] flow unnecessarily' (Mackrill, 2008: 8). Consequently, to what extent should diary entries be the participants' own 'free text' or be structured around a set of guidelines I might provide outlining what the diarists should record?

Thus, in an example of what Casanave (2017: 236) identifies as the 'struggles, twists and turns' inherent in almost all research projects (but which are often smoothed over or overlooked in final publications), the guidelines to diarists in my study progressed from the former to the latter approach, developing and becoming slightly more structured during the early stages of data collection. Initially asking participants simply to record 'anything you think was interesting', this guidance became more focused at the request of the participants themselves, many of whom had felt slightly lost in the array of possible topics they might document (an example of the diarists themselves shaping the research; see above, 'Finding participants'). Consequently, I asked the participants to record events that stood out most during lessons and why they remembered them, and to talk about what I, as a researcher-observer in the classroom, 'could not see, for example what really goes on in pairwork'. Although the diaries remained 'open in structure, and informal' (Alaszewski, 2006: 78), the data subsequently became more immediately relevant to my research aims and objectives. The diary guidelines can therefore be understood as being as rather similar to interview guides, potentially creating a 'dialogue' between the diarists and myself as the researcher (Mackrill, 2008), particularly as the diary entries formed the basis of the study's follow-up interviews (see 'Developing the study', above). However, as

noted at this start of this section, we should recognize that these guidelines inevitably affected, and are inseparable from, the collected data.

### *Recording the diary data*

The exact design and format of the diaries participants keep in any diary study depends on the project's goals, the kind of data subsequently required, and the expectations, abilities and needs of the diarists themselves; as we have seen, every study is unique (Alaszewski, 2006). In my study, therefore, the range of possible formats needed to be navigated carefully in order to balance the aims and goals of the research with the needs and priorities of the participants, whilst all the while attending to any further practical constraints on implementing the project.

In general, more structured approaches to the timing of participants' diary keeping require them to record their experiences at either 'interval-', 'signal-', or 'event-contingent' times: interval-contingent approaches require participants to update their diaries at regular, predetermined times throughout the study; signal-contingent designs contact diarists through a messaging service (e.g., a phonecall or SMS), to ask them to record their experiences at that particular time; and event-contingent studies ask participants to report each time a specific event occurs (Bolger et al., 2003). Clearly, however, many studies, including ethnographic projects, are organized in a less structured ways, encouraging diarists to record those experiences which they consider to be relevant, as and when they occur. Meanwhile, although paper-and-pen approaches remain the most familiar, and provide a format which matches the socially-constructed expectations of many research participants, new technologies, both offline (e.g., digital cameras and handheld audio- or video-recorders) and online (e.g., recording via SMS or online platforms) now offer a range of alternatives in project design. Such technologies may appeal to more digitally literate participants or those with limited literacy. López-Gopar's (2014) critical ethnography of the language classes of children from marginalized social groups in Mexico, for example, drew heavily on teacher-recorded photographs and video-clips to record the realities, as teachers saw them, of classroom life. Similarly, Block's (1996) use of audio-diaries, in which participants could choose the language they wished to record in (i.e., as multilingual language users, one of their own languages or English, which they were learning), allowed diarists more control of the research process in accordance with their own needs, preferences and strengths. The selection of audio-, video- and other non-traditional formats for diary recording is therefore much more than a simple adjustment to or the accommodation of participants' literacy constraints. Rather, they offer researchers and participants new ways of making sense of language teaching and learning.

My own study aligned with the paper-and-pen approaches that still predominate amongst the relatively limited number of diary-based research into language teaching and learning (e.g., Yi, 2008;

Gkonou, 2012; Huang, 2005). In my project, the teacher and learners were provided with notebooks in which to record their experiences and thoughts about their lessons each day, which I read and returned on a daily basis (the project was thus broadly event-contingent, although there was some flexibility within this approach, with diarists were free to record their experiences at any time following a class but prior to their next lesson). The intention was to develop amongst participants a sense of 'ownership' of the diaries, both as a process and as a product. More practically, collecting the diaries each day enabled the subsequent follow-up interviews to be more contemporaneous with the classroom events being discussed, whilst also, I intended, maintaining and enhancing diarist participation and involvement over the course of the project (for further discussion of maintaining diarists' participation, see below).

Paper and pen aligned with the expectations and abilities of these literate, upper-intermediate/CEFR B2 English learners and their teacher, and avoided the need for the further transcription needed with audio- or video-diaries; reporting took place in English for the practical reason that I could not myself translate the required languages, but with effects upon the data which are unclear. It may, of course, have limited the ability of some diarists to convey their experiences and perspectives as effectively as they would have liked (the project's regular follow-up interviews with the diarists went some way in addressing this concern); alternatively, however, communication in a second or foreign language might hinder obfuscation more than it hampers articulacy, to the benefit of my research (for further discussion of the data and issues surrounding data analysis, see below). Finally, and from a somewhat mundane perspective, yet one which is important in all research projects, paper and pen was also a format which was in keeping with the study's relatively limited budget. Undertaken before the now widespread use of smartphones, it was impossible to provide participants with the necessary number of individual audio- or video-recording devices during the research.

### *Maintaining participation*

As we have seen, keeping a diary in any form requires diarists to expend time and effort as, in order to obtain high quality and regular data, diary studies require a level of participant dedication 'rarely required in other types of research studies' (Bolger et al., 2003: 592-593). Thus, the overall duration of my project, and the detail required and regularity with which diary entries were to be made, had implications for the diarists' retention or drop-out from my study. The dilemma I faced in the design of the study, therefore, was that reducing the period over which participants would maintain their diaries and lessening the effort they required to keep them, thereby encouraging and maintaining

their contribution to the research, would most likely be at the expense of the quality and quantity of the data that was recorded.

As ever, the few published diary-based research into language teaching and learning addressed the issue in a variety of ways. Studies by Halbach (2000) and Huang (2005) into learners' strategies for learning, for example, were relatively long, lasting 'a term' and 18-weeks respectively. However, in both cases, the diaries were part of the learners' course requirements creating a context, perhaps, in which maintaining participation over such a lengthy period was possible. Such an option was not available in my own research. Meanwhile, Lopera Medina's (2013) investigation into the teaching of reading also lasted a term (120 hours of teaching), but only the teacher was required to complete a diary, presumably due to the significant time and effort this required, and the teacher's level of commitment - it is difficult to envisage a group of learners such as those in my research (or, indeed, any larger cohort of research participants) participating in a diary study consistently and in detail over such a timespan. Meanwhile, of the limited number of diary studies which have focused on groups of learners (rather than individual students) but have not embedded diary-keeping into the course requirements, Gnokou's (2012) investigation of learner anxiety required diarist participation for 8 weeks, with the researcher collecting and reading the diaries on a weekly basis.

Drawing both on these published insights and the practicalities underpinning my own project, therefore, data collection in my investigation consequently lasted for a period of 4 weeks, with participants completing their diaries on a daily basis after lessons (as previously noted). This timescale and level of detail attempted to balance the aims of my research with a realistic perspective of what participants could be asked to undertake. As we have already seen (see 'Finding Participants'), the project was voluntary and thus the diaries were an addition to the participants' already busy lives, both within the classroom and beyond.

Yet the risk remained that, although this approach appeared to be appropriate for the study, participants might still produce superficial or incomplete data, or drop out of the research entirely. Thus, it was important that my guidelines to the diarists were clear - that they knew what was required and what they were committing to (see earlier discussion for the complexities of balancing my project's aims and search for relevant data with the freedom needed for participants to express their own priorities and perspectives). Furthermore, I was present and available within the research setting (i.e., the school) as data collection started, enabling me to check my instructions with the participants on a face-to-face basis and answer the few queries that emerged (for example, refining my guidelines at the diarists' request; see 'Structured or unstructured diaries?', above). Additionally, I was able to check a sample diary entry for each diarist early in the study, reassuring them as to its value to the research (Hall, 2008; see also Alaszewski, 2006). Diarists are more likely to be confident from the

outset in what they are doing if they can see it the needs of the research. This confidence and clarity consequently supports and enhances their participation in a project, whilst confusion is clearly demotivating.

Moreover, pursuing a diary approach in conjunction with other methods of data collection also provided me with the opportunity to further develop the constructive researcher-participant relationships which were so central to maintaining the diarists' participation in the study. In the diary-interview method which I pursued, participant diaries were collected and read on a daily basis as the starting point for follow-up interviews. The interviews, also daily, further explored the diarists' reported experiences and perspectives on classroom life, participation in the interviews thereby reinforcing, for the diarists, the value of their perspectives for my own understanding of their classroom, and further highlighting, for them, the importance of their contribution to the project. In the interviews, the participants and I could also identify and iron-out any final methodological difficulties within the project (see also Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977), again helping to maintain their participation in the research.

Finally, I needed to consider whether the diarists should be paid or otherwise rewarded for their participation in my study. Small payments and rewards are often budgeted for and deployed as a practical means of recruiting and maintaining the participation of diarists (e.g., Kuntsche and Robert's (2009) work with young adults), yet some argue that such payments reinforce unequal power relationships (e.g., Ansell, 2001). Clearly, researcher beliefs and research context as well as resource availability will affect the way this issue is managed. Yet in keeping with the majority of published language teaching and learning studies, and taking account of the relatively 'resource-light' approach of my project, my diarists were not in fact rewarded for their participation. Given the steps I had taken to develop with the participants a clear understanding of the project and its requirements, and the positive relationships with the diarists that I worked to develop, I hoped that the act of keeping a diary and contributing to research would be rewarding enough in and of itself to encourage and maintain effective participation over time. Fortunately, these hopes were justified and all 13 participants continued to participate throughout the course of the research.

#### Interpreting the diary data: dilemmas and decisions

Like the vast majority of ethnographic diary studies, my research project generated a large amount of data, upon which I then had to attempt to impose some order so as to identify 'essential interpretations' of the classroom context and the participant experiences I was investigating (Clayton and Thorne, 2000: 156; also, Polit and Hungler, 1993). Yet, as Briggs (2020: 190) observes, dealing with qualitative data can be 'daunting', as understanding research participants' reported perceptions is

inherently difficult. Consequently, my data analysis needed to be systematic but also involve honest reflection about the ways in which I (as the researcher), the research methodology I designed and the analysis I pursued, and the diarists themselves might affect the data (see also Burnard, 1991; Richards, et al., 2012).

#### *Decisions about data analysis*

As the discussion throughout the chapter has shown, the ways in which I conceptualised the data collection process, my decisions underpinning diary design, and the ways in which I communicated with and related to the research participants shaped the resultant data; as Richards et al. (2012: 33) note about ethnographic research in general, I was 'the primary research instrument' in my project.

My analysis needed to make sense of participants' 'lifeworlds' in order to represent their subjective, insider representations of their classroom and in-class events (see also, Blommaert and Jin, 2012). Consequently, my analysis was necessarily interpretative, as I sought to both 'believe' and 'doubt' what the data was telling me (Bailey, 1991). This involved identifying the participants' 'truths' through themes and categorisations which emerged from the data itself, whilst at the same time acknowledging any difficulties around the diarists' recruitment and participation, and, consequently, the data they provided - for example, was the study subject to recruitment bias? Did the participants vary in their attitudes to self-disclosure, and did individual diarists' data differ in length and detail, giving some participants more 'voice' in the study than others; if so, how should this data be treated? (Bolger et al., 2003).

Consequently, my analysis needed go beyond the 'list-making' activity of solely categorising data to identify a conceptual framework which recurrent themes within the data would illuminate (Pavlenko, 2007). In the study, therefore, my framework for interpreting the data was my conceptualisation of the classroom as a socially-constructed environment (see Introduction). Subsequently, although there were a range of ways in which I could approach and analyse the data (ranging from, for example, content analysis to conversational or narrative analysis), I did not start the analysis with a series of pre-determined themes and categorizations in mind which I then attempted to identify. Rather, I pursued a data-led Grounded Theory approach in which patterns and categorizations within the data emerged during the analysis. Such emergent themes included, for example, learners' deliberate underperformance and the role of silence during class (i.e., some learners were reluctant to answer the teacher's questions during all-class plenary sessions even though they knew the answers, because, they were embarrassed at speaking in public or did not want to be labelled a 'know-it-all' by others); apparent inconsistencies in the teacher's treatment of some learners' enquiries (i.e., some learners' difficulties were dealt with in more detail and at much greater

length than others, dependent on, as the teacher saw it, the level of detail a particular learner required balanced against the needs, interest and in-class motivation/boredom of other students); and the ways in which potentially problematic 'moments' of interaction were smoothed over by all participants (i.e., all participants seemed to appreciate the need for a balance between developing their full understanding in a language classroom at moments of communicative difficulty and breakdown and the need for lessons to at some point 'move on', even when some had not fully grasped the language being presented, discussed, or practised). In each case, therefore, the data revealed regular patterns of behaviour in lessons that, whilst clearly affecting language learning opportunities, had its origins in the participants' understanding of the classroom as a social environment underpinned by shared social norms.

Throughout this processes of data interpretation and analysis, I was aware that my interpretation of the diary data might differ from that of another investigator or data analyst – as a researcher, I was inseparable from the findings which emerged. In order to lessen the risk of particularly partial or idiosyncratic interpretations, I therefore engaged in a process of 'respondent validation' (Richards et al., 2012) with the project's diarists, in which I shared and checked my interpretation of the data and, thus, the classroom, with them, and triangulated my understanding of themes within the diary data with those that emerged during my interviews with the participants.

#### *The diarists and the data*

As with any diary-based research, the participants in my study inevitably responded to the process of maintaining their diary in differing ways, with implications for the subsequent analysis of data. As noted in the previous section, I needed to be aware of recruitment bias during participant selection, taking account of, for example, the ways in which the diarists' age, gender, class and cultural background might affect their engagement with the research and with diary-writing. The cohort of learners were relatively homogeneous in terms of age and cultural background (see 'Finding Participants', above), and it seems reasonable to assume that, as they had all travelled to the UK to study in a private language school, there was perhaps a degree of similarity in their social or material resource backgrounds. However, over the course of the study, some variation emerged in their attitudes towards the self-narration and self-disclosure that ethnographic diaries require. Typical of similar studies, some were more comfortable with the idea and identity of 'being a writer' than others (Elliott, 1997), and thus the diarists differed in what they were willing and able to articulate, and how far they were prepared to do this in the diaries' written format (Hall, 2008). This had implications for the length and comprehensiveness of data that different diarists contributed to the research, and, consequently, for the extent to which any particular individual's 'voice' emerged during the analysis

of the diary data. This was not unexpected, however, and any unevenness in participant voice in the diaries was to a large extent ameliorated by the triangulation of different data sets (e.g., the project's interviews), these differing modes of expression enabling those reluctant to engage in writing, or who required further prompting in order to report their experience and perceptions, to do so more fully.

Meanwhile, some of the study's participants recorded their experiences and perspectives as soon as their lessons had finished, some noted them some time later on the same day, and some documented them the following day. Typical of many diary studies, this variation had potential implications for recall and participants' emotional engagement with what they discussed. Hall (*ibid.*), for example, outlines how, following a particularly negative diary entry, a participant clarified in a later commentary that they no longer felt that way about the event described. Although during data analysis, I needed to proceed on the basis that participants told the truth, or what they saw as the truth at the time of writing (Hall, *ibid.*), there was the possibility that the diarists might, whether deliberately or not, have misled, evaded, lied or 'put up fronts' (Fine, 1993: 271). Overall, therefore, my diary data needed to be treated with a degree of caution or even 'suspicion' (Fine, *ibid.*).

It also seemed possible that the actual act of reflecting on and recording experiences through a diary may have caused participant 'reactance' (Bolger et al., 2003), that is, changed their behaviour, experience, or ways of thinking. For Bolger et al. (*ibid.*), the overall impact of reactance on the validity of diary data is likely to be relatively limited as initial changes in behaviour fade over time, with diarists becoming increasingly used to their role as research participants through a process of 'habituation'. That said, many learners in my diary study experienced changes in the way they experienced and perceived group work, whilst, for some, the act of reflecting brought the unconscious into consciousness, and/or led to the development of more complex understandings of classroom life (see also, Hall, 2008: 116-117), echoing Elliott's (1997) report of participants' diary entries becoming more reflective over the course of her study.

Consequently, when analyzing the diary data, I had to some extent 'distrust' it. This involved the recognition that the data was partial; it was at times contradictory and recorded participants' many and multiple 'truths'; it included elements which were irrelevant to the study's aims; and some diarists' voices appeared within it more strongly than others'. Yet in the context of an ethnographic study, this variation within and between data was not a weakness—similar data does not necessarily equate to reliability when dealing with participants' insider understandings of their own experiences (see also Mackrill, 2008). All research, even that claiming to be 'scientific', is 'context bound and speak(s) to certain people, times and circumstances' (Plummer, 1983: 14).

Thus, what was important for my study, as with all projects, was that the processes of data analysis and interpretation were transparent, i.e., that I was clear about the reasons for the decisions I made

about data collection and analysis, and their implications (as outlined in this chapter). Furthermore, it was also important to make this explicit when the findings of the project were disseminated through presentation and publication. Indeed, the key paper resulting from this project, Hall (2008), focuses only on such methodological issues.

### Concluding comments

Language teaching and learning is such a broad field that the possibilities for research and researchers are seemingly endless, both in terms of what might be focused on (for example, from corrective feedback to learner identity, and from testing and assessment to teacher beliefs), and what research methodology might be adopted (for example, qualitative or quantitative, longitudinal or cross-sectional). Yet publications in our field typically (and quite reasonably) focus on the findings and (sometimes) implications of research to a far greater extent than they address the methodological processes and decisions researchers engage in. In many papers, while some reference is made to the limitations of a study, the detailed decisions and even compromises that researchers make in order to be able to proceed in as rigorous a way as possible are generally omitted (not least for reasons of word count in a journal article or book chapter!). This chapter therefore sets out to address this gap, documenting in detail the reasons why I set out to undertake a particular research investigation, the principles that underpinned my broad approach to the project, the subsequent methodological possibilities which presented themselves, and, consequently, the decisions taken to pursue the investigation in practice.

The initial impetus for the project emerged firstly from my own classroom experiences and the puzzles I was encountering when I reflected on the degree of unpredictability in my own classes. Reading relevant literature in the field provided a coherent conceptual framework for my questions, focusing my thinking on language classrooms as complex and at times, messy and confusing, social environments, each with their own social norms of behaviour and acceptable actions and reactions. From here, it was a short step to wishing to find out how this conception might play out in practice, by investigating how a particular classroom was 'socially constructed'.

The subsequent decision to pursue an ethnographic methodology thus derived from the goal of seeking to understand a classroom from the teacher and learners' own perspectives, and allowing that understanding to emerge from the context and the study's participants over time. In other words, the goals and related methodologies of ethnographic research were most in keeping with my conception of the socially constructed classroom, and with my aim to explore how the teacher and learners perceived and ascribed significance to particular events.

However, putting the principles of ethnography into practice was, and is, challenging. My decision to develop ethnographic diaries offered both methodological and theoretical flexibility – the diaries could be used alongside other research tools, such as interviews, to provide deeper understanding of the classroom through the systematic and transparent analysis and interpretation of the resultant data. Yet the decisions made when planning and implementing the ethnographic diary research carried significant implications for the data and, ultimately, the findings of the project. Even through at four weeks long, the project was not particularly long in terms of ethnographic approaches, it required significant participant commitment, and both the design of the project and the diaries and the way in which this was communicated and developed with participants was central to the resultant data, both in terms of its quantity and quality. Meanwhile, the participants contributed to the project with differing degrees of openness, reflectivity, and/or forgetfulness. Subsequent data analysis and interpretation thus needed to recognise the central role of myself as the researcher and the research methodology, making this transparent when disseminating the findings (Hall, 2008).

Despite these challenges, however, this ethnographic diary study offered a way of undertaking research which was truly participatory. It provided participants with a more evident sense of control within the research process, and was a ‘space’ for teachers and learners to reveal their own perspectives on their classroom. In spite of the demands on their time and energy, the participants potentially benefited from engaging in the study and reflecting upon their own actions and contexts, becoming, to some extent, co-researchers in the research project. Thus although the use of diaries in general, and ethnographic diaries in particular, is currently relatively rare within language teaching and learning research, more studies, particularly those which document transparently the ways in which the researcher ‘is the primary research instrument’, would be a valuable addition to our understanding of the complex and socially-constructed nature of language classrooms.

### Questions

- If you were to design ethnographic diaries in order to research a particular context and group of learners and/or teachers with which you are familiar, what would the key features of the diaries be, and why? For example, to what extent would the diary be structured or unstructured? How often would you ask participants to update their diary? Would the diary follow a ‘traditional’ paper and pen format or make use of new technologies?
- In what ways do you think your decisions and actions as a researcher might affect the data? How would you deal with these issues during the process of data analysis and interpretation?

### Suggested reading

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<sup>1</sup> Although diary-based research into language teaching and learning can be traced back to the early 1980s (e.g., Bailey's 1981 study of an individual's language learning experience, and her 1983 examination of competitiveness and anxiety amongst adult learners; Brown's 1985 exploration of the differences between adult and young learners), more recent diary studies remain relatively uncommon. Published studies include Yi's (2008) investigation into teachers' perceptions and use of rating schemes, Lopera Medina's (2013) study of the teaching of reading, and Farrell's (2013) account of teachers' own professional development through diary-writing. Meanwhile, learners' experiences and concerns have occasionally been uncovered through diary approaches, including fluctuations in the motivation of an individual learner (Casanave, 2012), the language anxiety experienced by students in a specific class (Gkonou, 2012), and more general difficulties and constraints on learning English experienced by students within an institution (Huang, 2005).