Ethnographic chats: A best of both method for ethnography

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Abstract

Conventionally, ethnographic methods in sociolinguistics aim to discover how language works as "situated social practice and how it is tied to social organisation" (Heller 2011: 10). Within this, ethnography has viewed participant observation as central and essential. More recently ethnographers have moved to combine this with more structured, researcher-facilitated question-based tools such as ethnographic interviews (Sherman Heyl 2001) and focus groups (Suter 2000). This article reports on another creative method, aiming to bring together the strengths of both these approaches to access school-age young people's orientations to language education policies. There were three main motivations: firstly, to minimise the distracting influence of the researcher's presence, secondly, to aid in empowering participants, encouraging them into an active role in the research process and thirdly, to avoid favorability bias in participant responses. On the latter point, to truly value the voice of participants you have to find ways to move beyond the "right answer", which often requires pushing methodological boundaries. I developed a new protocol, ethnographic chats,[1] which I found offered the best of both from existing approaches: a compromise between the immersive depth of participant observation and the greater thematic precision of focus groups or ethnographic interviews. The method was characterised by specific procedural and interactional characteristics of frame and genre, which differentiate it in specific ways from ethnographic interview and focus group methods. Rich data emerged from this process, which would not otherwise have been available. I conclude by outlining the potential for ethnographic chats in other social and geographical contexts.

Keywords: ethnography, research methods, bilingual education, Wales

[1] Note that the term chat is not referring to online, but to face-to-face communication.

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1 Ethnography – the tradition

Hammersley (2006: 3) suggests that like many other methodological terms in the social sciences, ethnography does not form "part of a clear and systematic taxonomy". It is used in different ways and to describe various related approaches. Nevertheless, these different ethnographic approaches share many common features. Principally, ethnography refers to a form of social and educational research that is committed to "the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting" (Atkinson et al. 2007: 4). The nature of ethnographic research means that "no homogeneous units or specific characteristics of culture are defined a priori, but rather those groups and processes recognised by native participants are discovered and studied in their terms during the research" (Gregory 1983: 366). Malinowski (1922: 8–9) talks of "foreshadowed problems", rather than fixed research questions; and his anthropological linguistic research was foundational for ethnography.

Instead of going into the field with fixed ideas, ethnography is concerned with producing descriptions and explanations of particular phenomena, with the process and inquiry becoming progressively more focused. More than any other research method, ethnography requires the researcher to follow themes wherever they lead; it is a generative process,[2] requiring flexible adaptation.

The term ethnography refers primarily to a "particular method or set of methods" (Hammersley & Atkinson 1993: 1) characteristically involving the researcher participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives: watching what happens; listening to what is said; asking questions (through informal or formal interviews); and collecting whatever data is available to shed light on the focus of the research. In other words, ethnography, as a method of social research, seeks to capture and understand the meanings and dynamics in particular cultural settings using a range of systematic data-collection techniques.

2 Focused discussions

Whilst the mainstay of ethnography is participant observation (Hymes 1972), ethnographers often combine this with more structured question-

[2] One where new ideas and representations are constantly emerging and where existing understanding is continuously questioned and challenged.

based ethnographic methods, as well as audio recordings and visual materials, including photography, film and video. These more structured question-based methods can conventionally range from an opportunistic conversation, where questions arise on the spur of the moment and where accounts of these passing and fleeting conversations are captured in field notes (Roberts et al. 2001), to in-depth, one-to-one interviews (Sherman Heyl 2001) that are formally arranged, recorded and transcribed. O'Reilly (2012: 136–138) also talks of "group interviews" arguing that they are akin to focus groups in allowing for multiple views to be garnered. Suter (2000) advocated for the use of focus groups in an ethnographic approach where topics of inquiry do not provide ample opportunities for observation.

Focus groups share many common features with less structured interviews, but still revolve around a discussion being guided, monitored and recorded by a researcher. They also still sit some way apart from the more immersive experience of participant observation.[3] In my research, I sought to bring these two elements together. My research aimed to assess students' orientations to the consequences of language education policies. In this context, the traditional format of initiation/response sequences was felt to be inconsistent with the ethnographic priority that "no homogenous units or specific characteristics of culture are defined a priori" but rather "those groups and processes recognised by native participants are discovered and studied in their terms during the research" (Gregory 1983: 366).

Additionally, my aim was to empower research participants, to give them a voice and to allow them to become an active part of the research process. In order to fully realise this aim, researchers often need to work in new or creative ways in order to push methodological boundaries. In light of this, I built on existing methods to develop a refined ethnographic protocol.

3 The ethnographic chat

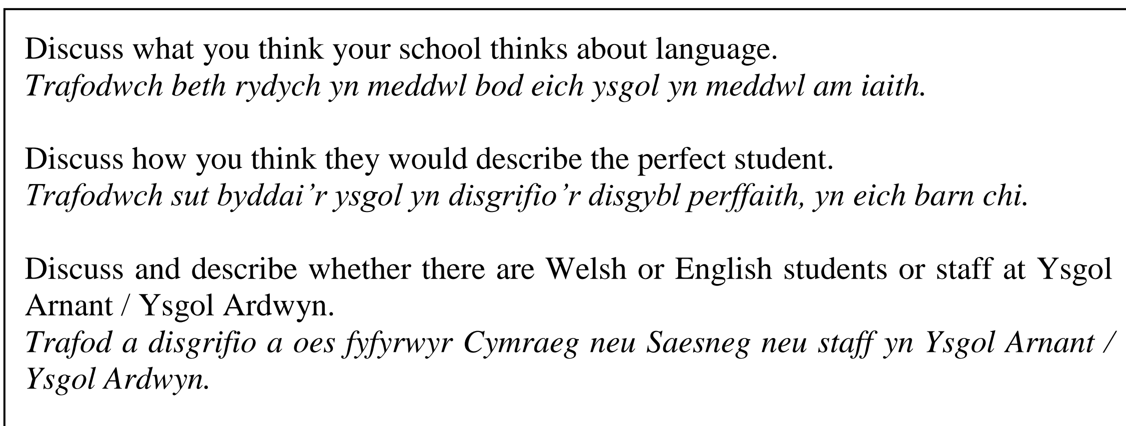
My research began as a conventional ethnography. My sites spanned two schools and one youth club. I observed activities both inside and outside the classroom. My observations were recorded in 27 sets of field notes

[3] Although note that Bloor et al. (2001: 5–6) argue that a focus group methods can, if managed appropriately, "yield up as much rich data […] as long periods of ethnographic fieldwork".

representing approximately 110 hours of fieldwork (in all three sites). An analysis of my initial field notes was undertaken in order to formulate research questions. Participant observation was working well, but when it came to complementing this with something more targeted, conventional researcher-facilitated tools like focus groups seemed ill-suited to capturing rich ethnographic insights. Furthermore, as noted above, I sought to empower my participants, to encourage active participation in the research. This similarly required some innovation.

Meanwhile, working as a non-Welsh speaking researcher in a bilingual (Welsh and English) community raised other practical concerns. I wanted to ensure that I was able to offer the participants a choice as to which language(s) to use during the research process but would have been unable to do this with a researcher-facilitated approach such as an interview or a focus group. The development of the ethnographic chat helped with this as well.[4]

Open-ended prompts were written to be used as the basis for the ethnographic chats, a sample of which is shown below, in Figure 1.



Discuss what you think your school thinks about language.
Trafodwch beth rydych yn meddwl bod eich ysgol yn meddwl am iaith.

Discuss how you think they would describe the perfect student.
Trafodwch sut byddai'r ysgol yn disgrifio'r disgybl perffaith, yn eich barn chi.

Discuss and describe whether there are Welsh or English students or staff at Ysgol Arnant / Ysgol Ardwyn.
Trafod a disgrifio a oes fyfyrwyr Cymraeg neu Saesneg neu staff yn Ysgol Arnant / Ysgol Ardwyn.

Figure 1. Sample of prompts

The prompts were written in both Welsh and English. Participants were given the choice as to which language(s) to use, and were explicitly told they could use both. Prompts were pragmatically realised as open-ended

[4] It is worth pointing out that my own position as a non-Welsh speaking researcher also had benefits in that participants felt the need to fully explain and justify their experiences, views, and ideologies (as opposed to implying and assuming knowledge on my part). Furthermore, my "outsider" status afforded me analytical distance on the research and emergent data. Winchatz (2006) also notes that the researchers own language skills (or lack of them) do function as fruitful ways to reach emic interpretations and are not always a hindrance.

"topics" rather than specific questions. This allowed and encouraged participants to have open and apparently frank conversations. Primarily the prompt-based chats were deployed to elicit evaluative discourse and key ideological stances as well as an analysis of reported language practice. That chat data was not therefore treated as a potential proxy for direct observation. Whilst the students generally proved to have a shared understanding of everyday experiences, some disagreement did emerge. A multiplicity of views was garnered but with consensual stances predominating. I had limited involvement in these chats, which proved crucial (discussed further below).

But these "chats" were not simply thrust at these young people out of nowhere. In the tradition of ethnography, I had previously spent several months living and working in the community, carrying out participant observations. Approximately forty visits of varying length were made to the community; and my time at the schools was spent observing classrooms, assemblies, break times, lunchtimes, school shows, sporting fixtures, and parents' evenings. I also observed and participated in community events such as local fêtes and cultural festivals.

On the basis of initial observations (as recorded in field notes), approximately twenty students were chosen as principal participants (key informants) in each school. Selecting key informants for ethnography should not be thought of as a sampling procedure based on empiricist principles of representativeness. That said, careful consideration was given to ensure, where practically possible, that a broad spectrum of experiences was reflected in the research, and in light of this a range of language abilities, language preferences, medium of instruction, ages, and genders were taken into consideration. Key informants were chosen on the basis of initial observations (see Selleck 2013: 55–60, for further details of participation selection). It was these key participants who went on to be involved in the ethnographic chats. I was well known to these students and had built good working relationships with them.

A group of 4–5 students (aged between 11 and 18), all key informants and part of an established friendship group,[5] were asked to take part in the ethnographic chats. The format of the sessions was consistent throughout. Participants scheduled the chats themselves, at a mutually convenient time

[5] Gamson (1992) in his "peer group conversations" minimized the researchers role and brought together groups of acquaintances. Likewise, Press & Cole (1999) in their "ethnographic focus groups" also gathered their insights from conversations with groups of friends who met in a home environment.

and location. This made for a relaxed, informal environment with students partaking in seemingly unrelated activities such as eating their lunch and listening to music. Allowing participants to do other things whilst discussing a series of prompts allowed for the kind of blending of approaches identified earlier, namely informal participation and more formal interviewing. These "other" activities often became relevant to the emerging data, for example they led me to previously unknown students, teachers, places, and activities; they allowed me to see the school context through the eyes of the students themselves.

Whilst the majority of the ethnographic chats were held during break and lunchtimes within the school day, some occurred after school at my third main research site, a local youth club. Other more ancillary sites included participants' homes, or other community spaces such as the local library. This flexibility was built into the research design not only to encourage a sense of ownership and control amongst my participants, but also to limit the impact of the research process on students' day-to-day lives.

Once the participants had agreed a time and location for the ethnographic chat, I would briefly meet them to give them the prompts. Students would be asked to elect a member of the group to lead the chat (by reading the prompts). Whilst students were encouraged to talk freely, the lead student was asked to occasionally bring the group back to the prompts. In practice, the discussion that led on from each prompt would at some point naturally wane and the lead participant would read the next prompt.

The chats were recorded using a voice recording app on a mobile phone, normally belonging to one of the participants, in order to minimise conspicuousness, and maximise flexibility in terms of location and timing. The recorded chat was then sent over to me and permanently deleted from the participant's phone. On reflection, using my own phone, or other recording device, may have given greater data security, and lessened the risk of accidental leaks contravening their consent.

As I have discussed, ethnography conventionally meshes observational data with more focussed, question-based methods. What then is distinctive about ethnographic chats? Ethnographic chats were developed by drawing on established methods such as the ethnographic interview (Spradley 1979), semi-structured interviews and focus groups, all of which are traditionally researcher-facilitated. The chats employed here were characterised by specific procedural and interactional characteristics of

frame and genre, which differentiated them from both the ethnographic interview and the focus group. I expand on these differences below.

4 Researcher involvement

In designing ethnographic chats, I sought to unite the best of informal participation and formal recordings. In other words, to blur the boundary between the two. The first point of departure from a more traditional researcher-facilitated approach was the level of involvement from the researcher. Once prompts had been given to the students, I had little or no involvement, choosing instead to leave the room/space.[6] Therefore, follow-up questions were initiated by the students themselves and in this sense the ethnographic chats resembled a conversation in that students were free to bring in new topics, and to signal a change of topic.[7] Extract 1 gives an indication of how this worked in practice.

(1) English-medium school, sixth-form (aged 16–18)[8]

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1   Will:      ok (.) so shall we talk about what we think our school
2              thinks about language?
3   David:     you can speak whatever you want
4   Will:      yeah
5   David:     sometimes you can speak to a teacher and you won't
6              understand (.)can say that I don't know what you mean(.)
7              but they won't
8   Will:      they won't tell you off
9   David:     won't tell you off or anything
10  Researcher: so I guess (.) would we say then that they (.) the
11             teachers are quite laid back (.) very laid back
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[6] In some of the more public spaces this was not always possible. In these cases I would move away from the discussion and engage in other activities (such as reading a book, listening to music or working on my computer). It is also worth noting that, given my long-term engagement with the community, on some occasions students sought me out to ask me a question and I would therefore, at times, become briefly involved in the chats.

[7] Sahlstein (2004) put forward the notion of a "couple interview" where two adults, in a relationship, came together to discuss a series of written prompts without the presence of the researcher. Crucially, participants were instructed to stick closely to the pre-written questions and were not given the freedom to introduce new topics. The ethnographic chats put forward in this text differ in that participants were allowed and encouraged to introduce new themes and topics for discussion.

[8] See Appendix A for transcription conventions.

12	David:	yeah (.)just because it's a bilingual school they have
13		to promote both languages
14	Alice:	yeah it's up to you (.) but I don't know how much they
15		actually want to promote Welsh or whether they have
16		to (.) I don't know whether there's some sort of
17		financial gain or something?
18	David:	what do you mean?
19	Alice:	well like (.) if they had a real choice would they just
20		do everything in English(.)which is obviously the most
21		important language in the world (.) it sometimes feels
22		that they are doing the whole Welsh thing to please
23		someone else
24	Will:	I'm not sure I agree
25	Chloe:	loads of the teachers here are first language Welsh
26		speakers so of course they feel it's important (.) some
27		of them are really passionate about the subject and the
28		language

So whilst I was able to maintain a focus consistent with my research themes through the use of prompts (lines 1–2 of the above extract), their loose structure (consistent with ethnographic principles) allowed discussions to flow and develop. Two follow-up questions were posed, one by Alice and one by David (lines 14–17 and line 18). Participants were free to explore the topic in whatever depth they chose, without checking or clarifying from me. Additionally, as seen in the above example, participants were able to build alignments and dissociations (e.g. line 24) with each other relative to the topic of the prompt. Overall, the chats resembled both the purposeful questions of ethnographic interviews and the emergent questions of a conversation. Meanwhile the greater distance between myself, as the researcher, and the participants gave them more autonomy and freedom to speak, and de-emphasised my role.

(2) Year 10 (aged 14 and 15), Welsh-medium School

1	Megan:	OK so let's talk about what our school thinks about
2		language (1.0) well Ysgol Arnant is a Welsh school and
3		if you speak English they'll (.)the teachers (.) be like
4		"speak Welsh" (.) "*siarad Cymreig*"[9]
5	Harri:	yeah we're not supposed to speak English at all (.) we
6		speak more Welsh than English
7	Ffion:	"speak Welsh"
8	Harri:	yeah but we can speak it outside of class (.) well I do

[9] Translates as 'speak Welsh'.

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9    Megan:   but why do you? (.) is it just to piss the teachers off?
10   Harri:   I guess (.) but like I'll do what I want in my own
11            time (.) none of their bloody business
12   Ffion:   but that's why you're always in trouble with the
13            gogs (.) (laughter)
14   Harri:   well the goggy teachers should just fuck off and
15            realise that there's more important things in life (.)
16            people in the world are starving and they're worrying
17            about a little old language
18   Megan:   bit harsh innit?
19   Harri:   yeah probably (.) I'm just a bit sensitive at the moment
20            because I feel like I'm always in trouble
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The above extract illustrates that the prompts allowed for an analysis of reported language practices and discursive understanding of these practices, while allowing for a degree of naturally occurring speech. This in turn enabled analysis of “ideologies in action” (Jaffe 1999), what young people actually do, conversationally, in ways that sometimes allow ideological values to leak through. In the above extract we see quite clearly that Megan, Harri and Ffion begin by articulating the more official school policy (that of separate bilingualism – see Selleck 2013) (lines 1–7). They identify that the school constructs and implements linguistic norms, understood as part of the school’s political and nationalist mission, embedded within a minority struggle for power. The group dynamics allowed for a snowballing effect, with one observation initiating a chain of additional comments. From line 8, the topic shifts slightly and we see discussion turn to why one student (Harri) fails to conform to the school’s expectations with regards to language use and language choice. Here we see the girls’ own ideological values coming to the fore. The ethnographic chats allowed young people to express themselves using their own informal shorthand and in-jokes, without concern for my comprehension.

Based on my earlier in-depth ethnographic observations, I felt assured these insights would not have arisen with more explicit involvement from me; but nor would I have gained these insights from entirely undirected observation alone. Ethnographic chats provided the best of both.

5 Conclusions

An ethnographic chat may be a different, and in some contexts, better way to combine participant observation with more structured recordings. They allow for an element of structure without compromising participants’

freedom to elaborate on topics of interest to them. I feel there is clear potential for the use of ethnographic chats in other contexts. O'Rouke's (2011: 332) research with Irish undergraduate students, for example, used focus groups in order to access "collective discourse practices with a high degree of spontaneity". Rich insights certainly emerge from this; however, the discussions were facilitated by an Irish language tutor from the University who had previously taught many of the participants. Did students feel they could talk openly, without judgment, given the presence of their tutor? Or was there an element of favourability bias? O'Rouke (2011: 333) also notes that these focus group discussions were conducted in Irish. Again, participants may have felt some constraint on their choice of language (or indeed the choice to code-switch) given the presence of their Irish language tutor. It is impossible to say; but that is precisely my point. Developing the ethnographic chat enabled me to find new spaces to experiment in, to allow new insights to arise; and I think the same approach could allow other researchers similar new perspectives.

To reprise my overarching theme, ethnographic chats offered me the best of both worlds, and I think they could do the same for others. They combine the strengths of other qualitative methods; the open and enquiring questions of an ethnographic interview, the overlapping contributions of a focus groups but crucially without the potentially diluting or distracting influence of the researcher. An added benefit is in enabling researchers without competency in the community language(s) to work alone without an interpreter, while offering genuine linguistic choice to research participants.

Last, but by no means least, ethnographic chats empowered my participants to decide where to take the research. They were able to introduce new topics, and through their discourse, also introduced me to new participants. I was ultimately able to hold on to the research aims and expectations through the use of prompts; but the participants had a form of ownership not otherwise available.

Let me close by re-emphasising the wider context of ethnographic chats. Ethnographic chat data enriched my understanding of key topics, but this was underpinned by a much longer and more traditional ethnographic process of participant observation and careful collation of field notes. Nevertheless, I do see potential for certain principles of ethnographic chats to be adapted in less immersive research contexts. For example, a focus group could begin by de-emphasising the role of the researcher, assigning one member as chair and giving prompts for key themes. This would

probably require at least some prior warming up of the participants, getting them used to the format; but it could be done, and may well provide more transparent insights than researcher-led focus groups. As I say, my own research insights relied equally on longer term observation, but I see scope for elements of ethnographic chats to be useful in other contexts.

Transcription key

Name:	the research participant's pseudonym name
(.)	an untimed, short pause
(3.0)	a timed pause, in seconds
Speech	transcribed speech
[text]	clarification
(*text*)	commentary
"speech"	voiced speech
Cymraeg	text in Welsh

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