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From theory to practice: A case study and ethnographic exploration of translanguaging strategies in second language academic writing

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of case study and ethnographic research methodologies within the field of Applied Linguistics, focusing specifically on the investigation of translanguaging practices in academic writing. The paper explores the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of these qualitative research methods, highlighting their key characteristics, benefits, and challenges. By reviewing exemplary studies, the paper aims to demonstrate the strengths and complexities of these methodologies in understanding the diverse language practices of multilingual learners in educational settings. It concludes by reflecting on the potential of these research approaches to inform the development of inclusive and effective teaching practices for diverse student populations in a globalized world.

Keywords: Theory; Practice; Case Study; Ethnographic Exploration; Translanguaging Strategies; Second Language; Academic Writing

1. Introduction

In a world characterized by increasing globalization and migration, classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, presenting unique challenges and opportunities for language education. The aim of qualitative research is to seek an in-depth understanding and knowledge of a social phenomenon within the native setting. Educators and researchers use qualitative methods to observe conditions or events that have an impact on people; for instance, feelings, beliefs, motivations, and values that trigger behaviors. Qualitative research provides objective data, which can be expressed effectively using numbers and statistics. There are five groups of qualitative research methods: case study, ethnographic, narrative, phenomenological, and grounded theory. It is recommended to have an overlap between the different types of qualitative research to serve your research in the best way. For instance, a researcher can combine case study with narrative when the researcher presents a participant's story.

In the field of Applied Linguistics, there are two types of qualitative research commonly used: Case Study research and Ethnography research. These two types of qualitative research share many facets in common; despite the similarity, it is often hard to distinguish between both methods. What are their similarities and differences? In this paper, their characteristics will be discussed in great detail. Exemplary research articles using these methods will also be reviewed and critiqued to provide a better understanding of these two commonly used methods in qualitative research, especially in the field of Applied Linguistics and Language Education.

2. Case Study and Ethnography

This paper will center Case Study and Ethnography in further details. The aspect that will be covered are the definitions, explore the major characteristics, and compared the benefits and advantages.

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2.1. Case Study

Case study is considered a quantitative research design and analysis. Gall et al. (2003) describes case study research as “the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon”. According to them, in the majority of education researchers, they tend to use the Case study approach as the most common approach of qualitative research. It is also referred to as a method, a “strategy.” (Punch, 1998; Yin, 2003) refer to this approach as a strategy, a method, and an outcome of research. The case study is a process started by determining the social issue that you want to investigate, having a literature review of previous studies, collecting data, analyzing the data, concluding your findings, and identifying the solution that would be the most appropriate for the research. Even though defining a case study approach might sound easy because it is about a single instance of some bound system, yet it is one of the most challenging methodologies to identify because its focus and study data might differ from an individual participant, group, or the entire community; in other words, the methods of collecting data (observation, different forms of interviews, taking field notes) and how to process and analyze this data (organize, coding, theming) cannot be done in a single way but takes many forms, and all are unique and carry the researcher's unique style. Case study can be categorized into three types: instrumental case study, intrinsic case study, and collective case study.

2.1.1. The Major Characteristics of Case Study

A good case study should include important and essential aspects to increase validity. For example, any case study must be meaningful and significant because it consumes lots of time and effort to produce solutions to your research; for the same reason, it is better to officially finish your study case. The case study must consider other opinions. The case study must have firm evidence; besides, it should be written in an interesting manner to get the attention of the reader. According to Merriam (2016), identifying the problem and curiosity drive compelling research.

Case study in the field of TESOL, the participant would be either a single case such as a learner or a teacher, or multiple cases such as in a group like the school or the university. This research method can take the form of a quantitative study or qualitative study to provide a solid image of the findings and enhance the understanding of the target phenomenon; moreover, it could be accomplished individually. Case study is different from ethnographic research because it does not require a focus on the cultural aspects of an individual or group. Case study is not objectivity, but subjectivity, which means the researcher, or the participant may have some impact on the result and the finding of the research.

There are many ways to collect data for case study, and one of them is context; this method provides enough information for the case that includes important social details and biographical information. Another method is sampling; using sampling for a participant or more can deeply affect the longitudinal nature of the case; the more samples collected, the more analysis and finding and time-consuming. Data can be processed differently by drawing multiple sources of data or from drawing one type of primary source like observation, interview, etc. It is important to keep a copy of all your data saved in case of any damage or loss of data.

In terms of data analysis, it would be better to start the analysis as soon as you start collecting the data. This will not only help you manage your time but also give you a hint on what to do next in case something needs to be edited or revised, for example, if you started to analyze the data from the first interview that can give you a clear idea of what is going to happen in the following interviews. Analyzing the data can involve any form, such as a spiraling, iterative, or cyclical process. Always have a pure copy of all the data; this would help you to have something to get back to it in case of any mistake happened, or something went wrong with the themes, patterns, and categories, which will become more evident later.

The interpretation is the step that the researcher makes sense of the research findings by linking them explicitly to larger theoretical and practical issues. Examples of ideological lenses are positivist, poststructuralist, feminist, or critical (Duff, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994). It is also possible to analyze the data and interpret through a variety of ideological lenses.

2.1.2. The Benefits of Case Study.

This type of quantitative research has a number of advantages; for instance, case studies provide thick description and triangulation, which according to Duff (2008), “case study may involve considerable primary data, such as interview transcripts, transcribed task-related or classroom/workplace discourse, writing samples, and participants’ and researchers’ journal notes”; the more data collected and shared in the study, the easier it is for the reader to follow and understand the research. A significant advantage of case studies is their ability to provide 'thick descriptions' of individual experiences and contexts, allowing researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the intricacies of

language use, including pragmatic competence. As Elemam (2018) illustrates in her study, understanding pragmatic competence, or the social rules of language use, is crucial for effective communication, particularly in intercultural settings.

Some of the most important characteristics of this method design are its exploratory and innovative potential, which means the study can be extended in the future to investigate either new or the same factors and their interactions, or to investigate the behavior of the participant. Case study can be considered as a potentially innovative, inductive approach, which allows the researcher to theoretically study unique cases, for example, individuals with atypical behavior or background. Case study is known as longitudinal research, which can be seen both as an advantage and a disadvantage at the same time. The advantage is when processing in-depth research on one or a few cases individually; it is more possible to observe the changes utilizing a longitudinal design. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that "researchers have used qualitative and quantitative components together to yield a richer understanding of the subject under study" using a mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative research would add more information and explanation to the case study and attain the in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

2.1.3. The Challenges of Case Study.

Conducting a case study has some advantages, on the other hand, it has some challenges as well. Some studies indicate that it is possible to have an influence on the collected data or results because the researcher is the one who decides what to collect, when it is enough data, and how to analyze and interpret the data. Furthermore, participants might potentially influence results by providing false or incomplete responses to questions. One challenge of case study research is the potential for researcher bias. Researchers must be vigilant in ensuring that their own perspectives do not unduly influence the findings. This is particularly important when studying language acquisition in specific contexts, such as religious schools, where cultural and linguistic backgrounds significantly impact learning. Elemam (2024) highlights the complexities of language acquisition in these environments, emphasizing the importance of understanding the specific needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

Other studies. The methods of data collecting, and analysis take a lot longer than other research methods. Another disadvantage is that it might be a time-consuming procedure; case study methodologies necessitate the engagement of the participant/participants, thus the collected data may be little due to having inactive, quiet, and/or shy participants, from the other hand, the data collected amount may be overwhelming due to a super active and/or chatter participant.

Case study requires a small group or a limited number of participants; otherwise, the findings and the result of the analyzed data can be very inefficient due to having different demographics affiliated or different needs to be addressed. Ethics can be a serious issue in a case study, for example, when the researcher fails to protect the privacy of the participant, health and safety, conflict of interest...etc. All the previously mentioned disadvantages have an impact on the result of case study research. To avoid any misleading or inaccurate result, having a distinctive design of qualitative research methods would be more beneficial.

2.2. Ethnography

Ethnography is a technique used by anthropologists, ethnographers, and other social scientists. Simply said, ethnography is the study of people in their own surroundings using techniques like participant observation and face-to-face interviewing. The most familiar type of qualitative research, ethnography is defined as "the study of people's behavior in naturally occurring, ongoing settings, with a focus on the cultural interpretation of behavior" (Watson-Gegeo 1988, p. 576). The goal of an ethnographer is to describe and to give an interpretative-explanatory account of people's behavior in a certain situation, for example, a classroom, neighborhood, or community; the results of their interactions, and how they understand what they are doing.

There are three key principles of ethnographic research according to Watson-Gegeo (1988). They are: 1) "focusing on people's behavior in groups and on cultural patterns in that behavior"; 2) "Holistic description of all aspects of culture or a behavior and explanation in relation to the whole system of which it is a part"; and 3) "Theory / Theoretical Frame guides the researcher's attention to certain aspects of situations and certain kinds of research questions" (p. 577-578). These principles imply the process and product of ethnographic research. The process involves in-depth studies of a particular cultural or social group system, by examining the group's observable and learned patterns of behavior, customs, and ways of life (Harris, 1968), cited in Creswell (1995, p. 68).

The definition implies the methodology of ethnographic research, such as observation, participant-observation, formal and informal interviews, audio or videotaping of interactions for detailed analysis, and collection of relevant and available documents from the settings. The product of ethnographic research is "a detailed description and analysis of

a social setting and the interaction that goes on within it, which has been inductively derived from systematic data collection and observation, i.e. grounded theory” (Watson-Gegeo 1988, p. 582 – 583).

2.2.1. *The Major Characteristics of Ethnography*

There are several major characteristics of ethnographic study. They are orientation, focus of research, research questions, data collection, purpose and product, immersion and engagement, viewpoints, logic of data analysis, general structure, and the validity and trustworthiness. They will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Ethnography was rooted in cultural anthropology and sociology, and the renowned 20th-century anthropologists were, among others, Boas, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Mead (Creswell, 1997, pp. 59-65). The theoretical orientations of ethnographic studies are structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, cultural & cognitive anthropology, feminism, Marxism, ethnomethodology, critical theory, cultural studies, and postmodernism (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994), and educational anthropology (Wolcott, 1994).

The focus of the research is on the study of people’s behavior in their naturally occurring, ongoing settings and the cultural interpretation of the behavior (Watson-Gegeo 1988, p. 576). The keywords in ethnography are settings, systems, people, and behaviors of a culture or an ethnic group or a cultural phenomenon.

Ethnographic research is particularly well-suited for investigating the complex relationship between language and identity. It can help researchers understand how individuals use language to express their cultural affiliations and to negotiate their identities in different contexts. Elemam (2019) examines this relationship in the context of Arabizi, a transliterated form of Arabic, highlighting how language can reflect both social and cultural factors and how it can be used to express both shared and individual identities.

While case study research asks questions of [What?], [How?] and [Why?], ethnographic research asks a question [What is going on?]. Normally, case study starts with a research question to guide the data collection. In ethnography, it is normal to have a less-defined question at the initial stage of the research (McKay, 2006, p. 74).

An ethnographer enters the setting by maintaining a naïve realism (Spradley 1980) or acting ignorant to elicit more information from the point of view of the informants. Rather, they have a conceptual framework to guide their methodology. The data collection is done through fieldwork, such as observations, interviews, field notes in natural settings; relevant documents; audio or video recordings of interaction, transcriptions of taped, open-ended interviews, and artifact analysis.

While the purpose of a case study is more outward-looking, ethnographic research is more inward-looking, as its purpose is to uncover the tacit knowledge of the culture participants. Thus, the product of the research is a holistic cultural portrait of what people do in terms of behaviors, language, and interactions, in a setting, the outcome of their interaction, and the way they understand what they are doing. To do this, ethnographers must immerse themselves in the culture, and prolonged engagement in the research setting is usually the norm (Starfield, 2015). For this reason, ethnographic study is “labor-intensive and requires time, energy, and resources” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006).

The viewpoints used in ethnographic study are the emic or insider’s perspective, which refers to the culturally specific framework used by the members of a society or culture to interpret and assign meaning to experiences, as opposed to etic or outsider’s perspective, which refers to the researcher’s ontological or interpretive framework. Agar (2006) argues that in ethnographic study, the initial view of a certain phenomenon from POV1 (Point of View 1 or etic) changes through the iterative and recursive application of abductive logic. Then, it changes to a different view of a particular phenomenon that considers contexts and meaning of POV2 (Point of View 2 or emic perspective).

The general structure of an ethnographic study (Creswell, 1997, p. 67) consists of:

- Introduction, where problems or questions are stated.
- research procedures, stating the ethnographic design, data collection, analysis, and outcomes.
- the description of culture.
- the analysis of cultural themes.
- the interpretation, lessons learned, and questions raised.

To ensure the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness, Maykut & Morehouse (1994) proposed the multiple methods of data collection. Watson-Gegeo (1988) suggests that triangulation or the collation of data from a range of sources or

through participant observation, informal and formal interviewing, and document collection strengthens the validity (or credibility) of the analyses and interpretations. Geertz (1975) proposes “thick description,” which refers to description and interpretation.

2.2.2. The Benefits of Ethnography

Ethnography is widely used because of the benefits the findings shed light on certain phenomena. Doing ethnography helps people know more about a certain culture, tradition, or norms. It can also help organizations or businesses to learn more about the target market or communities they serve. Ethnography helps scientists understand human behavior and actions. Due to its qualitative nature and its reliance on ethnographers' observations and interviews with the informants using open-ended questions, ethnography may reveal new discoveries and insights from the field. Ethnography is a type of research that intends to listen and understand the research subjects, providing a window to see the inside of a culture so that the outside world can see and understand why they behave in such a way.

2.2.3. The Challenges of Ethnography

There are challenges in conducting ethnography. Athanases & Heath (1995) list them as follows: selecting research sites, negotiating entry and building rapport, selecting informants, capturing teacher wisdom, accounting for the complexity of context, balancing tight order with the evolving nature of the research process, identifying what to analyze, determining how to report an ethnography, insuring credibility and rigor, and dealing with cost (pp. 269-283). Starfield, (2015; Talmy, 2015) argue that ethnographic study is challenging because it is labor-intensive; it requires patience; and the consent forms may pose problems, such as being coercive and incomprehensible due to lack of L2 proficiency and comprehension.

One challenge of ethnographic research is the need to account for the dynamic nature of language, which is constantly evolving in response to social, cultural, and technological factors. Elemam (2024), in her study of E-Arabic, illustrates how language can change over time, reflecting the influence of technology and globalization on communication practices.

Other challenges deal with trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative research. To increase credibility and internal validity, strategies can be done, namely 1) triangulation (Denzin, 1978) involving the use of multiple methods, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories to confirm emerging findings (Merriam 2009, p. 215); 2) member checking or respondent validation; 3) adequate engagement in data collection; 4) reflexivity or “the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the ‘human as instrument’” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183); and 5) peer examination or peer review.

There is also a problem of generalizability and transferability of the research. Lincoln & Guba (1985, p. 125) in Merriam (2009, p. 227) state that to ensure transferability, ethnographic research must use thick description, or an emic or insider's perspective in describing the setting, participants, findings, and evidence generated from the quotes from the participants during the interviews, fieldnotes, or documents. Ethnographic research requires extensive training in participant-observation, interviewing methods, data collection, data analysis, in addition to language and cultural training.

Lastly, the challenge is related to the ethical concerns. Patton (2002) cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 233) lists ten ethical issues checklist, namely explaining the purpose of the inquiry and methods to be used, promises and reciprocity, risk assessment, confidentiality, informed consent, data access and ownership, interviewer mental health, advice, data collection boundaries, and ethical versus legal conduct (pp. 408-409). These are the challenges that should be dealt with when conducting ethnographic research.

Concisely, ethnographic work is comprehensive. Ethnographers do not only observe people's behaviors in natural settings, but also to the micro and macro cultures. The key components of ethnographic research include a comparative frame, long term participation and observation, multiple methods, and the generation of theory. There are always obstacles and hurdles along the way in conducting ethnographic research. With sufficient training, adequate hands-on experiences in the field, and informed with the well-thought-of conceptual framework, ethnographers are well on their way to embark on ethnographic research journey.

3. Review and Critique of Exemplary Research

In the following subsections, review of exemplary research will be discussed, and the methodologies used in each research will be highlighted and critiqued.

3.1. Review of Literature

The case study exemplary research to be reviewed in this paper is written by Kaufhold (2018) who investigated the translanguaging space. The title is "Creating translanguaging space in students' academic writing practices," published by *Linguistics and Education*, 45, 1-9, cited 39 times in Google Scholars. The aim of this research is to investigate how students develop their academic writing across language codes and registers in the multilingual contexts of a Swedish university. This is a qualitative and longitudinal study describing data from the interviews with two students based on their written texts from their master's theses. It is an extended case study that followed two cases over time and the analysis began from a theoretical framework.

The data source was taken from the texts and the semi-structured interviews with two focal students. The texts included two reflections (150-word statement of purpose and self-evaluation on language ideologies), three text analyses (150-word selected sample theses and articles), and two versions of the assignment texts (2000-word proposal and an early thesis draft), as well as 60-70-page thesis written in Swedish with an English abstract. The semi-structured interviews that followed discussed the texts the students were engaged in. The first interview with each student lasted for 45-60 minutes aimed at eliciting students' reflections in their writing. The second interview aimed at understanding students' perspectives on the relation between writing in English and Swedish.

The interview transcripts were analyzed through two stages, namely content analysis, and narrative analysis. The content analysis involved a thematic coding using NVivo software to identify three emerging categories, namely linguistic repertoires, linguistic ideologies, and *Spracherleben* or affective response to academic reading and writing. Then a narrative analysis was drawn up from the themes to produce small narratives.

There are two ethnographic studies to be reviewed in this paper. The first ethnographic exemplary article is written by Canagarajah (2013) who investigated codemeshing in academic writing. The title is *Codemeshing in academic writing: Identifying teachable strategies of translanguaging*, published in *The Modern Language Journal*, 95(iii), 401-417. The article is cited 1,400 times in Google Scholars. This study aimed to learn from students' translanguaging practices and draw teachable pedagogical strategies from them. Using ethnography as a method, this article described a Saudi undergraduate student's translanguaging/translingual strategies in her Academic Writing essay. The article wrote about a selected case, Buthaniah's, from a larger study on literacy development. The data was collected from multiple sources, such as drafts of her essays, journals, class assignments, peer review, simulated recall, as well as member checking. In this research, the emic approach, and the thematic coding from the procedures in grounded theory were employed.

This article is one of the most cited among the scholars who studied translanguaging, especially from the postcolonial perspectives. It was one of few articles that sees learners from the asset-based perspectives by considering students' first languages as resources and funds of knowledge. This wonderful piece of work lays the foundation of translanguaging research, and it still has a tremendous impact on the later research.

The second exemplary ethnographic research article is written by Wang & Curdt-Christiansen (2019) who investigated translanguaging in the bilingual education program. The title of their article is *Translanguaging in a Chinese-English bilingual education programme: A university-classroom ethnography*, published by *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 22(3), 322-337, and cited forty-three times in Google Scholar. The purpose of their research was to answer three research questions, namely: 1) what types of translanguaging practices are found in the BE programme of the focal university? 2) What are the political contexts and pedagogical realities that gave rise to the translanguaging practice in the BE program?; and 3) How are students as individual agents engaged in the translanguaging practices?

The ethnographic research was conducted for two years being in the setting through three types of data collection methods, namely classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and the collection of documents. Researchers recorded fifty-six sessions, which lasted for 45 minutes each and conducted semi-structured interview with three managing directors of the program, four bilingual course teachers, and twenty-nine students. The documents that they collected included national or university policy documents, such as student-recruitment policies, program management records, web pages, online learning management system; and classroom data such as textbooks, student assignments, group projects, and lecture presentation slides.

The data analysis involved thick description of the ethnographic research through weaving together various types of data to create an interwoven and holistic understanding of the translanguaging practices of BE. They also adopted the resource map as a guiding framework to scrutinize the connection among the four dimensions of discourse around

translanguaging, namely bilingual label quest, simultaneous code-mixing, cross-language recapping, and dual-language substantiation. To answer the first research question, different types of translanguaging practices were identified in the BE programme. The connections were further explored within the broader national, institutional, and situational classroom contexts to answer the second research question. To answer the third research question, the major characteristics, and direct recipients of the program, i.e., students, were centered and they were examined as agents engaging in the translanguaging practices.

3.2. Critique of the Methodology

The goal of the method section, according to Matthews (2005), is “to provide readers with enough information to replicate the study” (p. 803). In the case study and ethnographic research articles, the researchers provided thick description of the settings, participants, data collection, and data analysis. It would be easy for future researcher to replicate or modify their research to suit to the contexts. The proof of the quality of analysis lies in the results of the research, which is presented comprehensively, in a thick description that was the signature of case study and ethnographic research.

4. Conclusion

In conducting qualitative research, the purpose and methodology are two important aspects to be carefully planned and organized. Ravitz and Riggan (2016) argue that research starts with a conceptual framework, or an argument of why the study matters and how the researchers will go about studying it (p. 3). The conceptual framework decides what to study and why it matters and determines the methods to study it rigorously and trustworthily in every step of the research procedures. Case study and ethnographic study are good examples of how this strong purpose and rigorousness are followed to produce a compelling and robust research.

Case study and ethnography study are similar in some points, one of them is that both utilize thick description. However, according to Casanave (2015), they are different in some respects such as, validity, ethics, and generalizability. For my future dissertation, I would like to employ one of these research methods or combine both into an ethnographic case study. My study will be inspired by the ethnographic perspectives, but the implementation is more bounded in a particular case. The case study and ethnographic research review and critique widens our perspectives in choosing the right methodology for our future research projects.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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