

Republic of Iraq

Ministry of Higher Education

And Scientific Research

University of Tikrit

College of Education for Humanities

Department of English Language

Methodology / Ph.D. Program



## **Ethnography in Educational Linguistics**

## **The Handbook of Educational Linguistics**

**Prof. Dr. Nagham Q. Yahya (Ph.D.)**

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## **Introduction**

**Ethnography** is described as a “way of seeing” human behavior through a cultural lens, grounded in long-term and situated fieldwork. It also represents a “way of being,” reflecting a moral, human-centered stance that is democratizing and anti-hegemonic. It emphasizes three foundational views of ethnography:

- **A way of seeing** (conceptual lens),
- **A way of looking** (methods),
- **A way of being** (praxis and values).

## **Historical Perspectives**

Ethnography originates in anthropology and is shaped by its ontologies, methodologies, and epistemologies. Early anthropologists viewed culture as fixed, but Franz Boas introduced the idea of culture as learned and context-dependent, forming the basis for cultural relativism. Modern anthropology views culture as dynamic, linked to power, ideology, discourse, and practice. This shift also applies to language: language is inseparable from social life and must be studied contextually and longitudinally. The historical shift emphasizes the importance of the emic perspective understanding people’s own interpretations of communicative events as a core element of ethnographic research.

## **The Educational–Linguistic Anthropology Connection.**

Educational anthropology and linguistic anthropology converge to form educational linguistics, shaped by major social and political moments such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Ethnographers used cultural analysis and classroom observation to counter deficit perspectives of minoritized, bilingual, and Indigenous students.

The ethnography of communication highlighted culturally specific “ways of speaking,” showing how classroom norms often mismatch students’ home practices. Ethnographic classics demonstrated that students possess rich but often invisible cultural and linguistic

resources that schools may overlook. This connection shows how ethnography helps reveal the cultural organization of communication in classrooms and supports more equitable and responsive teaching practices.

### **Definition of Ethnography**

- **Ethnography** is a contextual, long-term qualitative method that seeks to understand how people construct meaning in everyday linguistic and social practices.
- **Ethnography** is a critical, culturally grounded inquiry examining language, culture, power, and inequality from participants' perspectives (McCarty)
- **Ethnography** as a way to reveal how language policies are created, negotiated, and lived in daily interaction (Bernard Spolsky).

Additional Integrated Insights include experiencing (participant observation), Enquiring (interviews), Examining (documents and artifacts), and Forming a comprehensive approach to understanding social and linguistic life.

### **Core Issues and Key Findings.**

Bernard Spolsky introduced educational linguistics in 1978; he cited the “language barrier” as a core issue for the emerging field. , Spolsky wrote that, “A major portion of any child’s education is concerned with modifying [his/her] language, enriching, adding, or suppressing a variety”. He viewed education as a process of modifying or suppressing a child's native speech to fit school standards.

We should distinguish between two ways of researching language in schools:

- **Micro-ethnography** looks at individual face-to-face interactions (teacher-student),
- **Macro-ethnography** looks at the bigger picture (institutions and policies).

### **Research Approaches:** A “Way of Looking”: Ethnographic Methods.

The English word ethnography derives from the Greek ethos (people) and grapho (to write). Ethnography is “writing about people. o write). Ethnography is “writing about people.” Ethnography is more than just describing behavior; it is a description grounded in specific

methodology and epistemology. Harry Wolcott describes this as a "way of looking," where the researcher serves as the primary instrument by being physically present for long periods to learn and interpret human activity.

### **Wolcott (2008) categorizes ethnographic methods into three main activities:**

- 1) **Experiencing** (Participant Observation): actively participating in daily activities while observing and recording them.
- 2) **Enquiring** (Interviewing): asking participants questions to understand their perspectives.
- 3) **Examining** (Documents and Artifacts); analyzing written records and materials.

Hymes (1974) proposed this **SPEAKING** mnemonic for recording observations of communicative interaction:

- **S (Setting/Scene):** The physical and psychological environment.
- **P (Participants):** The people involved.
- **E (Ends):** The goals or results of the act.
- **A (Act sequence):** The order of what is said or done.
- **K (Key):** The tone or manner (e.g., serious vs. joking).
- **I (Instrumentalities):** The forms and styles of speech.
- **N (Norms):** The rules governing the interaction.
- **G (Genre):** The category of communication (e.g., a lecture )

Ethnographers may have multiple roles that influence their research. Their perspectives change over time, and ethnographic accounts are partial. Data are collected through participant observation and interviews, which may be casual or structured.

### **New Debates**

- 1) **Intensified (Trans) migration and Super-Diversity:** The global movement of people, information, and technology has led to "super-diversity," characterized by urban neighborhoods and virtual spaces with diverse cultural, linguistic, and ethnic identities.

It has been resulting from massive global flows of people, information, capital, and technology.

- 2) **Language Endangerment:** Globalization increases diversity but also standardizes languages, threatening linguistic and cultural diversity, especially among Indigenous peoples. This requires rethinking culture and viewing language as mobile sociolinguistic resources.

**Furthermore, the interplay of super-diversity and language endangerment complicates:**

- Inherited notions of the unitary, fully fluent . . . native speaker as . . . the normal starting point for description and analysis.”
- The micro/macro analytical distinctions discussed in previous sections and related conceptions of the local and the global.

**- Other crucial aspects should be considered, including:**

- 1) **Reconceptualizing Culture and Language:** Culture is not fixed; multiple cultures can coexist. Language is better seen as flexible sociolinguistic resources rather than native-speaker fluency.
- 2) **Beyond Micro/Macro Distinction:** Local interactions and global structures are interconnected, creating complex multiscale realities.
- 3) **Youth and Translanguaging:** Youth actively shape language through translanguaging and multilingual practices, showing linguistic strengths rather than deficiencies.
- 4) **Schools and Language Revitalization:** Schools can support endangered languages through immersion and bilingual education, though families remain key for transmission.
- 5) **New Language Policy Studies:** Language policy is a dynamic process where educators actively interpret and implement policies in practice.

## **Implications for Education : A “Way of Being”: Ethnography as a Form of Praxis**

- **Ethnography as Praxis:** Ethnography is emphasized as a critical methodology that allows educators to see language and cultural practices as resources rather than deficits. It encourages looking at linguistic diversity from a holistic perspective, acknowledging the complexities of language use in various sociocultural contexts.
- **Transforming Educational Practices:** The document suggests that ethnographic research can lead to transformative educational practices. By engaging with the local community and understanding their linguistic environments, educators can develop culturally relevant pedagogies that validate students' home languages and experiences.
- **Bilingual and Multilingual Education:** Effective bilingual and multilingual education programs are showcased through various case studies.
- **Agency of Educators and Students:** The document discusses the role of educators not just as implementers of policy, but also as active agents in negotiating and interpreting language policies within their classrooms.
- **Challenging Dominant Language Ideologies:** Through ethnographic study, educators are better equipped to challenge dominant language ideologies that marginalize non-English languages.
- **Community Engagement:** Engaging with local communities through ethnographic studies strengthens the connection between schools and families. This partnership facilitates a deeper understanding of student backgrounds, which is essential for creating effective educational practices.
- ❖ **Language Policy and Planning (LPP):** the field that studies how language-related policies are formulated, how they are implemented in education and society, and how different languages are managed within a country or institutions. **LPP levels:**
  - 1) **Official policies** → national language laws and plans.
  - 2) **Everyday practices** → how people actually use language.
  - 3) **Teachers' role** → how educators interpret and apply policies.