

Opportunities and Constraints with Ethnography in Examining the Home Literacy Experiences of English Language Learners

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This paper is intended for researchers considering using ethnography as a methodology to investigate home literacy experiences of children learning English as a Second Language (ESL). After briefly setting ethnographic study in the context of English language learners' home literacy practices, I identify five opportunities and five potential constraints using examples from current literature in the research field. The five opportunities include (a) examination of a cultural group, (b) extensive time in the field, (c) multiple sources of data collection, (d) context or setting of the study, and (e) researcher reflexivity. The five constraints include (a) identification of a culture-sharing group, (b) extensive time in the field, (c) prior relationships with participants, (d) communication with immigrant families, and (e) translation issues. I present these so that researchers can understand more readily the opportunities and challenges they may face in exploring the home literacy experiences of immigrant children through ethnography.

Cet article vise les chercheurs qui considèrent employer une approche ethnographique pour étudier les expériences en littératie que vivent, chez eux, des enfants qui apprennent l'anglais comme langue seconde. Après avoir rapidement placé l'étude ethnographique dans le contexte des pratiques littéraires qu'emploient les apprenants d'anglais chez eux, j'identifie, par le biais d'exemples de la littérature actuelle du domaine de recherche, cinq possibilités et cinq contraintes potentielles. Les cinq possibilités sont les suivantes: (a) l'étude d'un groupe culturel, (b) la grande période de temps sur le terrain, (c) plusieurs sources de cueillette de données, (d) le contexte ou milieu de l'étude et (e) la réflexivité du chercheur. Les cinq contraintes sont les suivantes: (a) l'identification d'un groupe qui partage une culture, (b) les rapports préalables avec les participants, (d) la communication avec les familles immigrantes et (e) les enjeux liés à la traduction. Je présente ces dix éléments de sorte à ce que les chercheurs comprennent mieux les possibilités et les défis qui pourraient accompagner les études ethnographiques portant sur les expériences en littératie que vivent les enfants immigrants à la maison.

Methodologies employed in English language learner (ELL) home literacy research have ranged from large-scale, quantitative investigations with ELLs from multi-linguistic backgrounds to in-depth, qualitative studies with those having particular linguistic and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Spanish or Chinese; Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Li, 2007a, 2007b; Liu & Vadeboncoeur, 2010;

Raikes et al., 2006). The use of these many different methodologies is due to multiple factors in the home and community that are related to ELLs' literacy development. Although ethnography is one methodology that has been widely used in these studies, relatively little attention has been paid to its employment. Hence, it is important for researchers to have a better understanding of how ethnography is currently used in the field and of the potential opportunities and constraints that ethnography brings to the ELL home literacy practices field. Examination of examples found in current literature will assist the employment of ethnographic research and better prepare researchers with some insight into the opportunities and challenges that ethnography brings.

This review of ethnographic research will cover the following topics:

1. I will identify difficulties in research in the area of ELL home literacy practices; this depends firmly on the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of these learners.
2. I will briefly review relevant, current qualitative research to identify major research themes; and I will argue, subsequently, the suitability of ethnographic study in ELL home literacy research.
3. I will define ethnography and its different types, discussing different ethnographic research designs, the rationale for focusing on realistic ethnography and case study, and how ethnography benefits the study of ELL home literacy practices.
4. I will examine the five opportunities and five constraints that ethnography brings to this field of research.

The Challenge of Research with Immigrant English Language Learners

I begin with a discussion of how home literacy practices create challenges for the investigator. A little context will be appropriate. In this paper, I use the term ELL to refer to a learner who is learning English as a Second Language (ESL) in the K-12 school system where English is the official language. Although different terms appear in the literature to describe such learners, ELL is increasingly utilized because this term highlights the process of learning rather than a deficiency in non-native English-speaking students (Gere, 2008). These ELL student populations might be heterogeneous linguistically, culturally, and ethnically and may include children from Africa, Bangladesh, Latin America, China, Laos, and many others living in various English-speaking countries such as Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and Australia.

Without a doubt, this ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity includes many different home literacy practices that presumably influence English learning at school. To understand different aspects of how ELLs attain literacy, investigators have conducted research in both the classroom (Echevarria & Graves, 2007; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008) and in the home (Li, 2004; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006; Zhang, 2007) and have ferreted out a number of factors that influence English language acquisition. Each of these factors apparently interacts with English language learning. For example, the speaker's first language, his or her second language, or both, have some bearing on how English is learned. Some ELL home languages are similar to English, having similar phonetic connections between pronunciation and writing, while other ELL home languages depend on characters with no connection between sound and spelling. As well, people in the environment are important; for example, teachers, classmates, parents,

grandparents, siblings, or friends, in particular contexts (home, school, playground, or community) play different roles. For instance, teachers and parents may have different goals for literacy development and may find themselves in conflict or in accord with one another. Some parents will use a storybook as a series of vocabulary lessons for children to memorize, while teachers may pay more attention to the story itself. In addition, parents might have distinct understandings of literacy development, which might result in the discouragement of their children's reading or writing. The influences of home language, of possible discontinuities between home and school literacy, and immigrant family beliefs regarding literacy practices all reflect ELL ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, and which will inevitably influence the proficiency of ELLs' English acquisition.

Current Research with English Language Learners

To attain an in-depth understanding of the diversity of home literacy practices and how these practices influence ELL literacy development, current research has employed both quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research has focussed on the relationship between parental reading beliefs and home literacy activities, or on the relationship between parental literacy beliefs and children's school achievement (Arzubiaga, Rueda, & Monzo, 2002; Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002; Collins, 2010; Farver, Xu, Eppe, & Lonigan, 2006). Other quantitative research has examined the relationship between maternal booksharing styles and Latino children's language and literacy development and found that booksharing styles had differential predictive power over children's literacy development (Casper, 2009).

These different quantitative studies underscore the need for understanding the home literacy environment and children's literacy development. Yet, they do not provide an understanding of how home literacy beliefs and activities affect practices in an immigrant family home. In addition, some quantitative research presumes that individuals with a common ethnic identity experience the same difficulties or successes in bridging an identical school-home discontinuity (Casper, 2009).

Qualitative research can provide an in-depth understanding of what occurs at home and of how home literacy practices influence literacy development. Since qualitative inquiry occurs in a natural setting rather than in an experimental setting, a researcher may gain first-hand experience of a participant's daily life, where immigrant families display their home literacy environment. In qualitative research, researchers can immerse themselves in the setting and situation, which aids examination in detail of how immigrant parents provide literacy support to ELLs in the home setting. The inquirer can provide detailed descriptions of the home setting, of family members, of literacy events and activities, and narratives of immigrant family member descriptions of their ideas.

Given the heterogeneous and complex population of ELLs, investigators in the last decade have employed different qualitative approaches to study home literacy in immigrant populations. These approaches have used interviews, observation, focus groups, and documents, and have provided an opportunity to explore the support that ELLs receive in different homes and the influence of the home literacy environment on their English language acquisition. Addressing different ethnic backgrounds, such as: (a) Spanish (Garcia, 2008; Hammer, Nimmo, Cohen, Draheim, & Johnson, 2005; Menard-Warwick, 2007; Reese & Gallimore, 2000), (b) Chinese (Li, 2006a, 2006b; Zhang, 2007), (c) Sudanese (Li, 2010; Perry, 2010),

(d) Vietnamese (Li, 2010; Schulz, 2010), and (e) Arabic (Markose, 2007), these studies have collectively elicited a wide range of topics and phenomena associated with the home literacy practices of ELLs. These topics include (a) home-school literacy discontinuities with Chinese and Spanish communities (Li, 2004, 2007a, 2007b; Reese & Gallimore, 2000); (b) immigrant family home literacy practices (Markose, 2007); (c) immigrant parental beliefs regarding literacy (Garcia, 2008; Li, 2010); (d) bilingual practices (Kenner, Kress, Al-Khatib, Kam, & Tsai, 2004; Li, 2006a; Zhang, 2007); and (e) the influence of language learning on Chinese immigrant family human and social capital (Li, 2007a).

A major result of this research is that (a) certain literacy practices characterize specific groups of ELLs, and that (b) home and community language learning experiences shape the development of English language literacy. In regard to the former, for example, Li's (2004, 2007a, 2007b) examination of Chinese immigrant family literacy practices indicates a home-school literacy discontinuity within Chinese communities. Chinese families tend to emphasize memorization, spelling, and use of worksheets, but these practices do not positively influence Chinese ELL school achievement due to the differences between home and school practices. In regard to the latter, research has examined parental attitudes towards heritage language maintenance and concluded that home language maintenance has value in English acquisition, although not all parents value home language maintenance (Garcia, 2008; Kenner et al., 2004; Li, 2006a; Zhang, 2007).

Ethnographic Study and Home Literacy Research

The essential activity of ethnography is that researchers immerse themselves in the lives of participants, which involves “living, sometimes for long periods, in the environment—or ‘the field’” in which the researcher is interested (Frankham & MacRae, 2011, p.34). Ethnographic studies have different types of designs. Creswell (2008) identified three types of ethnographic designs: *realistic ethnography*, *case study*, and *critical ethnography*.

1. Realistic ethnography is an objective account of a situation through a third-person point of view about the information learned through the participants in the field.
2. A case study is an in-depth understanding of a case or issues around one or several cases.
3. Critical ethnography is an approach that supports the goal of the participants. Critical ethnography includes advocacy for the interests of marginalized groups.

Three different types of case studies indicate different focuses in case study designs.

1. An *intrinsic case study* focuses on the case itself (Stake, 1995), which can be a “single individual, several individuals separately or in a group, a program, events, or activities” (Creswell, 2008, p. 476).
2. An *instrumental case study* focuses on an issue that can be understood through a case (Stake, 1995).
3. A *collective case study* examines several cases that provide insight into an issue.

The primary designs used in ethnographic research in the field of ELL home literacy practices are realistic ethnography and the case study. For example, through collective case studies and realistic ethnographic studies with participants from Chinese immigrant families living in Canada, Li (2001, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2007a, 2007b) has raised a series of profound questions:

1. What are children's literacy activities at home?
2. What are parental perspectives on literacy?
3. What are parents' opinions about the possible reasons for a child's struggle to learn English?

In conclusion, ethnography is ideally suited to the study of ELL home learning environments as it may provide an understanding of the complex, interrelated factors acting in a home literacy environment, such as the learning context, family language use, cultural influences, and community practice. Through a detailed, day-to-day picture of how parents support children's literacy development in an immigrant family (e.g., Reese & Gallimore, 2000), researchers can capture parental behaviours and develop an in-depth understanding of how these activities are connected to beliefs, values, and goals.

Opportunities and Constraints

I propose that ethnographic study brings five opportunities and five constraints to the study of home literacy practices. It provides opportunities to examine a specific cultural group who have a shared pattern of thinking and behaviour through extensive time in the field with multiple data collection sources. In addition, ethnography provides a detailed description of the context or setting of the study. Finally, a researcher will have an opportunity to reflect throughout the study. However, it also provides constraints. It may be challenging to identify a culture-sharing group. Researchers will need extensive time in the field. In addition, prior relationships with participants may have implications. Finally, communication with immigrant families in a different language could be challenging and translation might need to be considered.

Opportunities

The opportunities an ethnographic study offers include (a) an examination of a specific cultural group, (b) extensive time in the field, (c) multiple data collection sources, (d) a detailed description of the context or setting of the study, and (e) documentation of the researcher's biases.

Examination of a cultural group. Researchers describe and interpret the shared patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs, and language of a certain culture-sharing group in an ethnographic study (Creswell, 2008). The group may be small or large, consisting of two or more individuals who have interacted on a regular basis for some time (Creswell, 2008). Usually, this group is representative of some larger group (Creswell, 2008).

Immigrant family groups are ideal cultural groups that can be observed through their behaviours, their language, and their thinking (Creswell, 2007). Through observation of and participation in the daily activities of a family group and ongoing interviews with participants, ethnographic research can elicit parental interpretations of why they choose certain literacy

activities, of how they view literacy development, and of how children are influenced. In addition, an ethnographer can examine whether these activities or patterns of behaviour are (a) *ideal* (what should occur), (b) *actual* (what did occur), or (c) *projective* (what might have occurred; Creswell, 2008).

Ethnographic researchers understand that their own way of being in the world is only one of many ways (Creswell, 2007). During a process of understanding the actions of culture-sharing groups, researchers need to examine how they see the world and withhold judgement (Agar, 1980). Therefore, ethnographic researchers bring a sincere interest in understanding the complexity of different ways of life and of the heterogeneity of cultural groups (Dantas & Manyak, 2010).

To examine a cultural group, researchers must understand the activities of the participants that are connected to participant beliefs, values, histories, and goals (Dantas & Manyak, 2010). This means that investigators need to recognize different human activities with the assumption that these activities make sense in the participants' cultural world. For example, in examining immigrant Latino cultural models of literacy development, Reese and Gallimore (2000) identified certain parental behaviours that might indicate parental discouragement of children's literacy development. An observation showed that Pedro, a child, noticing his parents write letters, grabbed a notebook and said that he wanted to write a letter too. His mother called out not to use her notebook while his father said the kid does not know how to write yet. Pedro then put the notebook down and did not pursue the task. Instead of simplifying this observation as parental "lack of interest in their children's learning" (p. 113), the researchers examined parental behaviour and language from the participant point of view. This observation revealed Latino parents' literacy beliefs that they do not "view these early experiments with text as precursors to 'real' reading" (p. 113). To come to this conclusion, researchers not only observed this group's daily behaviour and activities, but also learned how certain knowledge among this cultural group might guide their behaviour.

Extensive time in the field. A good ethnographic study can demand extensive time spent in the field. Chapelle and Duff (2003) advocated that researchers spend a considerable time at the site where participants live or play, interacting with participants, observing and recording their activities. Although no standard exists of how long an ethnographic researcher should stay in the field for observation, an understanding is that the patterns of the cultural group cannot be "easily discerned through questionnaires or brief encounters" (Creswell, 2008, p. 482).

Monzo (2010) exemplifies the time spent in a study in his two-year ethnographic stay with eight Latino families, emigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala. During his time in the field, Monzo (2010) used observation and interviews to gather data. The data included both (a) *emic* data, information supplied by the participants, and (b) *etic* data, information representing the researcher's interpretation of the participant perspectives (Creswell, 2008). Due to the great amount of time spent in family and classroom observation, Monzo (2010) was able to develop a close relationship with participants. He discovered that children became more confident as translators and decision makers in their home settings as their confidence increased in their academic life. It was only through extensive time in the field that the researcher was able to describe this group's core values and beliefs in detail.

Multiple sources of data collection. Drawing from Creswell's (2008) work that case study is identified as a type of ethnographic research, I have illustrated that one of the opportunities that case study brings is that data is usually drawn from multiple sources. Yin (2009) recommends six sources of information: documents, archival records, interviews, direct

observations, participant-observations, and physical artefacts. A variety of data sources allows researchers to interact with participants and to “touch things that otherwise [they] would never touch” (Patton, 2002, p. 47); in other words, it allows investigators to become close enough to people to capture what is happening at home with a child’s language learning experience.

Menard-Warwick’s (2007) study of two families from Nicaragua living in the same household provides an example of multiple sources of data. Menard-Warwick used (a) six open-ended interviews with participants at their home, (b) four audio-taped observations of the parents in an English as a Second Language classroom, (c) field notes in Spanish after a home visit, (d) work samples, (e) observations of the interaction between parents and children, and (f) one interview with a child. Through triangulation of data, this case study shows how two sisters-in-law drew on a variety of personal, family, and community resources to support their children’s academic success. The investigator developed the themes into overarching perspectives that differences exist in “the variability of educational backgrounds, literacy practices, and orientations toward schooling even within one household” (Menard-Warwick, 2007, p. 133). By comparing these two cases, the author argued that concrete support can take myriad forms, even within one extended-family household.

Context or setting of the study. Ethnography presents the themes and interpretations within a description of the context or setting of the culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2008). Context for ethnography refers to the setting, situation, or environment that surrounds the cultural group. It can be a physical location (such as a classroom) or a historical context (such as new immigrants; Creswell, 2008). In addition to the physical location and historical context, context can also refer to the social or economic condition of individuals (Creswell, 2008). Even within one ethnic group, “there are many different lived realities and literacy contexts that shape qualitatively different literacy experiences” (Li, 2001, p. 72).

An example of how the context may make a difference in our understanding of children’s literacy development occurs in Li’s (2007a) examination of the role that family capital plays in literacy development. Family capital includes (a) the *physical capital*, such as material resources and family income; (b) *human capital*, the educational level of parents; and (c) *social capital*, social resources in the family and community, such as the network of social relationships (Coleman, 1988; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). Li compared four Chinese families in a university town in Canada. Of these four families, two had high levels of education, but were financially underprivileged, while two with a poor educational background were financially in a better position. Although the higher educated families could not afford new English books for their children, they went to garage sales to buy second-hand English storybooks. The less well-educated families spent over \$10,000 CDN buying classics for their children, such as Aristotle, Plato, Shakespeare, and Einstein. Obviously, the latter family invested more money, but the books they purchased were useless in improving their children’s literacy. From the data, Li (2007a) concluded that family human capital can occupy a very important role in supporting children in attaining literacy. Clearly, one cannot understand the information on book purchasing without direct observation of the natural setting at the participants’ home.

Researcher reflexivity. An ethnographic researcher has an opportunity to openly discuss his or her role in the study, which honours and respects the participants (Creswell, 2008). In addition, it is important to understand that any particular investigator’s interpretation is only one of many possible interpretations; therefore, it is important for researchers to state their own positions in the ethnographic research so that readers will have an understanding of their standpoint or point of view (Denzin, 1997). For example, Li (2007b) identified her

understanding of literacy through the socio-constructivist perspective and described her understanding in the following way: “From a socioconstructivist perspective, I look at second language learning as a dynamic social process in which a learner is an active meaning maker” (p. 3).

However, she does not document her specific role in the study. She states:

I also conducted participant-observation of some of the classroom activities. During the school visits, I observed the focal children’s interactions with peers and teachers and took field notes of my observations in the school. I particularly paid attention to the literacy activities in which they participated, their language use and choices in different settings, their interactional patterns with teachers and peers, and the ways they used or talked about their home literacy experiences. (p. 6)

Through this description, we do not know specifically her biases or how she conducts this research reflexively. The report lacks any description of her background that would enable the reader to better understand her interpretation.

Constraints

Although ethnographic studies create many opportunities for an in-depth understanding of language learning experiences, challenges also arise in this type of study. Particular potential constraints in conducting research in this field include (a) identifying a culture-sharing group, (b) the necessity of spending extensive time in the field, (c) dilemmas in prior relationships with participants, (d) communication with immigrant families, and (e) translation issues.

Identification of a culture-sharing group. Ethnography is appropriate if one needs to describe how a cultural group works and to explore the beliefs, language, behaviours, and issues of its members. Conducting an ethnographic study means the researcher will need to identify a culture-sharing group and study this group by spending extensive time in observing and interviewing group members (Creswell, 2007). However, researchers might need to consider how they define culture and cultural group in their study. Any definition of culture must wrestle not only with the question of what culture is, but also with the question of what it is not. The concept of culture in the ELL home literacy practices field might be a broader concept than ethnic cultural backgrounds. Instead, it encompasses many different dimensions of social, economic and linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, it is important for researchers to identify the cultural group that they work with in the ethnographic study.

For instance, an example of a challenge in identifying a group occurs in Li’s (2007b) ethnographic study on second language and literacy learning in school and at home. In this report, the author makes no clear identification of the cultural group she studies. The three participants come from families sharing different social, economic and language backgrounds, which might not be considered as the same cultural group. Although the researcher intends to examine Chinese Canadian’s first grader literacy development and its relationship to the cultural values and beliefs held within participant social contexts (school and home), she failed to identify the cultural group that she intended to examine. The reader is uncertain whether the cultural group studied is the group of Chinese Canadian Grade one students or the students and their families and teachers. The researcher had difficulty either in identifying a culture-sharing group or in clearly communicating to the reader the cultural group examined. The difficulty could be due to the changing concept of culture (LeCompte, 2002). LeCompte (2002) argued

that "culture was once viewed as the product of human behaviors and beliefs worked out over a span of historical time to create a functional response to a specific physical environment" (p. 290). Therefore, the culture only changed between generations due to the stable environment in the past (LeCompte, 2002). However, with the rapid change of the environment now, LeCompte argued that it is important to view culture as dynamic sets of choices, which are "actively sought out by empowered individuals" (p. 291). Due to the changing concept of culture, readers would benefit from a better understanding of how ethnographic researchers define culture in their study.

Extensive time in the field. As previously mentioned, extensive time in the field is an opportunity that ethnographic study brings to the field of language learning. Equally, however, extensive time in the field can be a constraint. This constraint can have two aspects: (a) the time demands may prevent participants from participating, and (b) a researcher may require considerable resources. In the first instance, participants might hesitate to participate in a study due to extensive demands on their time. Inquirers might not be able to spend as much time as they want or need, due to the life schedule of immigrant families. As an example of the time demands, Reese and Gallimore (2000) conducted an ethnographic study through the stages of surveys, interviews, and ethnographic study with a group of Latino students. Approximately 220 hours in bi-weekly visits of observation were conducted with ten 5-year-old children's families. Each child received an average of 22 hours of observation for a whole year. Time spent on each child is quite limited.

As well, an ethnographic study may demand a large amount of resources. For example, it may take at least two days to write up the notes from a one-day field observation (Frankham & MacRae, 2011). In addition, investigators will need thinking and reading time to integrate what they have seen and heard. All these will demand that a researcher dedicate his or her time and finances to the study, which might constrain the possibility of conducting an ethnographic study.

Dilemmas in prior relationships with participants. Gaining access to data involves building a relationship with participants. Quite often, a relationship between investigators and participants develops because of the study, not prior to recruiting the participants (Garton & Copland, 2010). But the investigator and participants may have had prior relationships with one another. These might range from having no prior relationship, developing a relationship during fieldwork, having a prior professional relationship, or having a relationship with common friends or family (Mann, 2011).

Inevitably, different prior relationships will have different implications and consequences for a study. Sharing a relationship between researcher and participant before selecting participants in a case study would inevitably both enable and constrain the data collection. The advantage of having a prior relationship is that the inquirer might solicit information that would be inaccessible without it (Garton & Copland, 2010). When participants have an established connection with the researcher, they may be more willing to share information, especially when this information might require data collection in their home. The possible constraint due to a prior relationship in case study data collection is that, rather than a participant's describing his or her individual experiences, the interview process might become a shared construction of mutual knowledge (Garton & Copland, 2010). Yet, this might not be seen as a constraint; rather, it may be considered as a different situation that an investigator has to consider.

Prior relationships in recruiting participants are evident in many case studies that have examined home literacy activities. Clearly, it is essential that researchers in the field provide

explicit information about prior relationships, as did Brooker (2003), Menard-Warwick (2007), and Zhang (2007). For example, Zhang (2007) recruited participants in a weekend Chinese school where she was a teacher. Another example is Brooker (2003), who mentioned that rapport was established with the families half a year prior to the fieldwork. Furthermore, Menard-Warwick (2007) was quite honest in saying that she simply selected the cases based on the rapport she had developed with particular individuals, and to represent a demographic range of students where she was a volunteer in an English as a Second Language classroom. Menard-Warwick used her position as a former English as a Second Language teacher and a volunteer in the classroom to establish rapport with her participants before she invited them to participate.

Communication with immigrant families. Qualitative research requires that researchers communicate intensively with participants. Tsang (1998) argued, “communicating in the respondent’s language is of paramount importance,” as it will allow participants to “fully express themselves”; it is easier to build “good rapport” in the participant’s first language and doing so enables the interviewer to interpret the interviewee’s response with “cultural understanding” (p. 511). The qualitative research process, such as the selection of research phenomena, research questions, and access to potential interviewees is at least partly determined by the investigator’s language skills (Chapman, Gajewska-De Mattos, & Antoniou, 2004).

Communication with immigrant families who speak a different first language might be a concern if the inquirer does not speak this language (Shi, 2011). In working with these families, it is quite possible that the researcher does not share a linguistic or cultural background with the participants. If inquirers do not speak the participant’s language, they will have challenges if they intend to be a participant observer. In addition, a researcher will have to collect information in English (Li, 2010; Markose, 2007; Schulz, 2010), which might limit participant ability to communicate information. It may require that participants who cannot speak or write English be excluded from a study.

However, one solution is that the investigators might hire a research assistant as an interpreter (Reese & Gallimore, 2000), even if, as a consequence, the researcher might not recognize the nuances of events. Even through a highly skilled interpreter, a researcher might find it difficult to interpret certain gestures and cultural norms of the language. Some ethnographic studies demand field workers who speak the same language as the cultural group studied to enable data collection in the participants’ native language, for later translation by a bilingual research assistant.

Translation. In addition to communication with immigrant families, translation might be an additional constraint. Although there has been some recognition of “translation dilemmas” posed by qualitative research, it has not yet been “brought into mainstream social science research” (Temple & Young, 2004, p. 175). A translator in the interview process might “produce noise, artificiality and an absence of tempo” (Usunier, 1998, p. 92), thus damaging the natural rhythm of the interview. Qualitative studies in this field often do not clarify the translation issues. An example is Li’s (2004) ethnographic research with Chinese immigrant families. The reader receives no information about the language in which she collected the data. Similarly, Menard-Warwick (2007) mentioned that she translated the interview data from Spanish into English; however, she did not mention ensuring that the translation was accurate. Some techniques to verify the accuracy of a translation, such as “back translation,” are seldom mentioned in studies (Edwards, 1998). Back translation is a process in which the transcript is

first translated from, for example, Spanish to English; then, preferably using an independent translator, the English version is translated back to Spanish to ensure accuracy. A back translation will provide a possibility for checking the accuracy of translation.

Conclusion

Ethnographic research necessitates that a researcher enters the home of immigrant families and obtain firsthand information and insight into how immigrant parents support their children's attainment of literacy. Therefore, it is useful to reflect upon the opportunities and constraints that ethnography brings to ELL home literacy practices research. In summary, ethnography provides an opportunity to examine a cultural group through extensive time in the field via multiple data sources. In addition, a researcher can describe the context in detail to allow a reader a better understanding of the circumstances of the study. Through a statement of a researcher's background, the reader can better understand his or her interpretation. However, investigators will need to consider possible difficulties that may arise, such as (a) how to identify a culture-sharing group, (b) the resources needed for extensive time in the field, (c) dilemmas arising from prior relationships with participants, (d) how to communicate with participants if they speak a different language, and (e) translation issues. My goal in this article has been to sketch some of the opportunities and constraints that ethnography brings to research in the field of English language learner home literacy practices.

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