ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY INTO
SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND INSTRUCTION

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IN THE PAST FEW YEARS, we in ESL have become increasingly aware of the important role culture and cultural differences play in communication, learning, and thinking. Yet research methods traditionally used in our field have been less than successful in clarifying this role, or in helping us to take account of it in teaching. Ethnography is potentially a very important tool for basic research because it gives us a way to focus on the intersection of language, social context, and society.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify what is involved in good ethnographic research both descriptively and analytically, and to illustrate the value of an ethnographic approach to research in ESL and second language acquisition. First, we will offer a basic definition of “ethnography.” Next, we will briefly describe key principles of ethnographic research (further discussed in Watson-Gegeo, 1988). Then we will illustrate our points through two examples of research in which we are individually involved.

Definition of ethnography

Originally developed in the discipline of anthropology to study what Shirley Heath has called people’s “ways of living” (1982), ethnography may be defined as the study of people’s behavior in real settings and situations, with a focus on cultural meaning (see also Firth, 1961, and Hymes, 1982). By “real settings and situations,” we mean those in which people actually live and work, in contrast to laboratory settings or testing situations set up by the researcher. The general goal of ethnography is to elucidate what people take to be shared—including culture, language, and rules of social behavior. In the study of second

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language acquisition, ethnography is directed towards examining basic questions of language socialization and teaching practices, including the circumstances in which children and adults learn second languages, the kinds of interaction that shape language learning and how they shape it, and moment-to-moment interaction in second language classrooms.

In tackling these issues, the ethnographer describes people's activities and naturally-occurring behavior in a given setting (such as a classroom or community), the social and cultural basis for these activities and behavior, and the way people themselves understand what they are doing (in other words, the meaning interactions and activities have for them). To do so, the ethnographer conducts systematic, intensive, detailed observations, and carries out in-depth interviews, especially with those who are observed. The analysis focuses on how behavior and interaction are organized in the setting, the social expectations and constraints affecting people's behavior, the cultural values underlying it, and the outcome of behavior and activities for participants.

Key principles of ethnographic research

Keeping in mind the definition of ethnography we've just offered, we want to emphasize the following key principles of ethnographic research.

1. First, ethnographic research involves both description and explanation of behavior, not just description (Pelto and Pelto, 1970; Diesing, 1971). Explanation takes the form of "grounded theory," that is, theory based in and derived from data, and arrived at through a systematic process of induction (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

2. Secondly, an adequate ethnographic analysis is holistic (Diesing 1971). Simply put, the analysis must account for both the behavior and the context in which the behavior occurred. By "context," however, we mean more than just the immediate circumstances in which an activity or interaction occurred. We use the metaphor of "horizontal" and "vertical" to distinguish among levels of context. Other analysts have referred to this distinction in terms of concentric spheres, or peeling off the layers of an onion (e.g., Spradley, 1979). By "horizontal," we mean behavior, interactions, and events as they unfold in
time, together with the immediate circumstances affecting them. The latter include where and when the interactions or events took place, who was involved, what the interactants were saying and doing, how the situation and behavior were defined by participants in it, and so on. Most research which claims to take context into account, or be what the psychologists call "ecologically valid," is referring to what we are calling "horizontal" context.

By "vertical" levels of context, we mean institutional constraints and influences from the larger culture and society that may appear to be outside the immediate context, but which can shape behavior in profound ways. For instance, what participants themselves bring to an interaction from their previous experiences and learning has been shaped by the society's socialization practices, whether at home, at school, or in the community. Similarly, teaching interactions in the classroom are strongly influenced by the characteristics of schools as social institutions, including societal expectations for what schools should accomplish, the hierarchical nature of authority and decision-making in schools, the reward structure for teachers, the need to prepare students to pass standardized tests, and so on (e.g., see McNeil, 1986). Therefore, despite the fact that vertical levels of context are not directly observable, and may be poorly understood or even unknown to interactants, they are very important for explaining behavior. (For an example of ethnographic work which includes both horizontal and vertical levels, see Ulichny and Watson-Gegeo, 1989.)

3. Third, and related to holism, an adequate ethnographic analysis involves "thick explanation." Our metaphor here draws on Clifford Geertz's (1973) distinction between thin and thick description. Geertz has emphasized the importance of going beyond behavioristic or "thin" description to include information on people's interpretations, their cultural understandings, and their processes of making sense of interactions and events—all of which require the researcher to write rich or "thick" descriptions.

We argue that one can have thick description, yet still have a thin explanation. Thick explanation means taking into account all relevant and theoretically salient contextual influences on the interaction, including those we are metaphorically calling "vertical."

What we have argued so far may seem abstract and difficult to visualize for a specific piece of research. We now will illustrate these points by giving
two examples of research projects which illustrate how an ethnographic approach examines language acquisition in context. Both projects involve the teaching of English as a second language to students who need to perform well in English for school and employment purposes, and therefore represent basic research towards understanding and improving teaching practices in second language classrooms.

The first example illustrates how a research project on discourse patterns in a second language classroom was set up to take into account a variety of levels of contextual information, allowing an integration of thick description into thick explanation. The second example illustrates the kind of explanatory narrative resulting from such an integration.

First example: A university-level ESL classroom in Boston

To illustrate ethnographic research which focuses on second language social interaction, our first example is Ulichny’s dissertation research in a college level ESL reading class. We describe this project from two perspectives. First, we discuss the way Ulichny structured the investigation in order to integrate multiple layers of context in an attempt to explain the complexity of an ESL teacher’s instructional practices. Second, we give examples of some themes emerging in the analysis and integration of the various layers. Rather than “second language acquisition” research, the project is more correctly labeled “second language interaction” research because Ulichny’s primary emphasis has been on constructing a holistic account of the processes that underlay interactions among students and teacher in the classroom. She has attended less to learning outcomes of a given instructional approach.

Stated briefly, Ulichny’s primary research questions were: What specifically constitutes an ESL teacher’s instructional methodology? How does the teacher make sense of interactions in her classroom? What is the relationship between her use of particular teaching practices and contextual influences? To address these questions, Ulichny found it useful to focus her investigation on what factors produce, constrain, shape and explain the discourse patterns that are observable in an ESL classroom.

To investigate these issues beyond the level of mere description—or coding—of what happens in a classroom, Ulichny collected three separate data sets: classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student interviews. Her
analysis involves examining each of the sets independently, then analyzing how these sets interrelate or mutually inform each other. Information from five levels of context (discussed below)—significant for explaining the content of the data sets—are being integrated to form a "thick explanation" of the interaction in the particular classroom she observed.

More specifically, in order to investigate what shapes classroom interaction, Ulichny observed and tape recorded 20 class sessions of a one semester, non-credit, ESL reading class. These observations and recordings constitute her first data set. She subsequently carried out a micro-analysis of segments of classroom interaction in these data, using techniques from discourse analysis and symbolic interactionism to build grounded theory.

Ulichny's second data set consists of 15 hours of interviews with the teacher of the class, whose real name is Wendy. These interviews were also carried out over the course of the semester, involved some stimulated recall activities (such as playing the classroom tapes and having Wendy comment on them), as well as more general sessions discussing Wendy's personal history, her philosophy of teaching and learning, and her dilemmas and desires regarding her role as an educator of non-native speakers of English. This data set has proved to be essential to a thick explanation. By taking the perspective of the teacher as a key to classroom interaction patterns, Ulichny is able to show how teacher options, dilemmas, constraints, and trade-offs affect classroom interaction as the teacher pursues her multiple goals for the class. Confining the analysis to classroom interaction without the benefit of the teacher's reflections and explanations would have constrained Ulichny's ability to explain the discourse patterns of the classroom. She would have been able to describe the types of patterns that recur in the classroom, as well as variations in the idealized types of interaction—what Fred Erickson has called "improvisation on a theme" (Erickson and Schulz, 1982, p. 5). But she would have had to surmise about other contexts—for example, that of individual students, the thoughts of the teacher, the role of the institution, etc.—in order to explain why patterns and their variations occur. The outcome would have been thick description, perhaps, but thin explanation.

Moreover, the enlistment of the teacher as a co-investigator of her own practice has had a number of unintended benefits in the research. First, the fact that Ulichny and the teacher met to discuss the class on a weekly basis meant
that their relationship went through a transformation from researcher and subject, to co-investigators of classroom meanings, to friends. Ulichny does not underestimate the personal dimension here, of course. But for the purposes of the research, the fact that she and Wendy deepened their understanding of each other as persons in terms of shared knowledge provided a very rich interpretive framework from which to view the classroom data. Secondly, their collaboration over time turned the invasiveness of the research method into an Action Research paradigm. By that we mean that through listening to the tapes, the teacher discovered aspects of class behavior of which she had been previously unaware. She then experimented with new strategies and procedures as a result of these discoveries, and she gained insight into and confirmation of her practice through intense dialogue with Ulichny. In other words, information flowed (and continues to flow) in both directions, from the teacher into Ulichny’s research questions and analysis, and from Ulichny and Wendy’s conversations into Wendy’s teaching practice.

Ulichny’s third data set consists of interviews with the students of the class. These were one-time interviews which Ulichny is content-analyzing to construct a description of the characteristics of the students, their expectations concerning the class and its aftermath, and what they found most helpful and most difficult about the lessons. Ulichny considers this to be her most superficial data set because it is not longitudinal. Nevertheless, the student interview data provide important points of comparison with the teacher’s perceptions of classroom dynamics and the researcher’s emergent perceptions through independent analysis. One of the key assumptions of an ethnographic project is that social or cultural meanings exist in the relationships among actors in their environments. Collecting data that articulate the actors’ perspectives is therefore an essential ingredient. While the researcher may wish to highlight some of the actors’ perceptions over others, in order to tell a particular story about the setting, multiple perspectives must be systematically pursued if the story is to count as thick explanation.

A thick explanation finds its storyline in the interconnection among patterns of interaction and levels of context. A holistic account of classroom processes requires an integration of various levels of context, each of which is necessary to explain individual classroom events. More specifically, Ulichny’s investigation is showing that interrelationships among five levels of context produces the predominant structures as well as the numerous variations of
interactional patterns in Wendy’s classroom.

The first level of context contributing to an explanation of classroom interaction patterns involves Wendy’s long-term goals for the class, her short range plans, and her on-line modifications in the plan based on her sensitivity to student needs and classroom dynamics. At this level we see a set of options she must choose from to best prepare ESL students for undergraduate academic work. Should she present her students with a simplified curriculum and ask them to perform as if it were a “real” (regular) college class? Or should she present them with more difficult, realistic material, and help them understand it by simplifying the comprehension tasks the students are required to do? Wendy mentally struggles with these trade-offs, but sees her main goal as helping students cope with authentic material. Her concern with this option, however, is that by schematically displaying the information and the kind of comprehension necessary for college coursework, she may be doing too much of their work for them and providing them with a nurturing academic environment they will not find in “real” university classes.

Related to the first level of context, but at a conceptually different level, is Wendy’s personality, her life history and her career history. As a result of her political beliefs, her philosophy of respecting differences and sharing authority in the knowledge exchange in the classroom, and self-defined high and low points in her 8-year teaching career, she interacts with students in a non-authoritarian mode. On one occasion, for example, when the students were unable to perform their group work because they had not done the assigned reading, it was Wendy who apologized for setting a task they were obviously incapable of completing. However, this example should not be taken as an indication that she relinquishes control of the curriculum or the performance of tasks to the students. Wendy carefully orchestrates the 50 minutes of class activity in a very supportive, “on-your-side” way.

Another layer of context important in shaping classroom interaction patterns involves the students themselves, especially the diversity of their backgrounds and experiences. The 18 students in the class come from 12 different countries. Their levels of schooling range from a completed Ph.D., or in the case of two others, several years of university in their native culture, to students from Cambodia and Vietnam who have completed American high school in a bilingual program, but who may have had as much as a 7-year interruption in schooling during their childhood. One would expect different
cultural patterns of schooling to play a role in this diverse classroom, but we can also see different levels of literacy preparation among them. The students vary widely in their experience with relating text information in interpretive frameworks which require selecting relevant details, synthesizing, organizing, and inferring information from text. Add to this a considerable range in English language abilities among the students, and we see a very disparate set of needs that Wendy must address to prepare these students for college-level work.

The next level of context recoverable from classroom patterns of discourse relates to variation in the task underway, in terms of both social dynamics and cognitive complexity. For example, patterns of allowable contributions from students and teacher differ depending on whether the task is organized for peer work or is a teacher-fronted activity. In addition, we find variation in allowable contributions depending on whether the topic of the talk requires an opinion or, conversely, text-related information which has to be extracted and reorganized into recognizable and culturally acceptable "literate" schema. By the latter is meant the kinds of schema activities outlined by Shirley Brice Heath (1985), including: requests for event accounts, queries about motives and causes, and event casts; requests for interpretation of figurative language; and inferential interpretation of literal language, such as in the case of satire.

At this level we again see a system of trade-offs operating. When the students exchange information from their own interpretive frameworks in opinion-based discussions, they participate richly in the discourse. They initiate topics, agree and disagree with each other and the teacher, negotiate meaning, and jointly construct contributions. However, when the students are asked to interpret the text to answer a question about plot, main points, or the construction of an author’s argument, they are unable to accomplish the task without the teacher’s scaffolding of it. The task must be broken down into smaller units by the teacher, who offers the students simple fill-in options through which they can construct the text-based or "literate" activities with her assistance. In addition, given the differences among students described above, it should be clear that students differ not only across task and social contexts but also among each other in their abilities to perform any of the tasks. Given that the class is a course in reading and not conversation (i.e., given the
teacher's goals), the teacher is faced with the problem of controlling the discourse to insure that appropriate content is modelled for the students. This concern runs against her other goals of encouraging variety and complexity of classroom oral interaction around the material, and distributing authority and voice in the classroom. The resulting classroom participation involves a constant flow from controlled discourse to more open participation, from presenting students with specific tasks to following their leads in the performance of class activities—in other words, a system of economies and trade-offs in discourse patterns.

The final analytic level to be integrated into the analysis is that of institutional constraints and pressures which reflect larger societal patterns and ideologies. At this level we can describe interpersonal relations and their effects on classroom discourse patterns as a product of the marginal status accorded both students and teacher in a non-credit, pre-college ESL course. Students and teacher of such a course tend to find themselves set off from the rest of the university, sustaining each other in a non-real-world environment of ESL preparatory courses. Under these circumstances, classroom discourse takes place in a nurturing, language socialization atmosphere similar to that of caretaker-child interactions in early childhood. The teacher models, scaffolds, fills out the basic interpretive framework for the students, and encourages them to participate at whatever skill level they can manage without sanctioning them for wrong answers or incomplete frameworks. She is on their side, which is outside the mainstream, and her personal advocacy and handholding is what will get them through this course and, perhaps, through others.

But will the "real" world of the larger university be as tolerant and nurturing as she is? Does the rest of the institution want to deal with this student population as it progresses towards academic competence? Or does the larger university instead reinforce the comfortable, out-of-the-way status accorded to ESL students? We can see an answer to this question in the professional status of ESL college instructors. They generally are expected to work harder (in terms of teaching hours and advising) and for less pay (as a result of non-real faculty status) than other faculty, as a reflection of how their work is less valued by the administration. The non-credit status of Wendy's course also reflects the value placed on the work of these ESL students and their teachers. Universities would rather not acknowledge their work fully,
would rather keep it on the margins, and encourage a self-sustaining support system until the ESL students can blend with and disappear into the mainstream.

From the foregoing brief description of the factors influencing a teacher's practice, it should be clear that an account of classroom interaction in terms of shaping and constraining factors is very complex, requiring the integration of several layers of context—from the more immediate (visible or audible) to the more general and abstract (invisible but deducible). We are not claiming that this is the only story these classroom data could be organized to tell. But we are claiming that our job as researchers is to give a thorough as well as a convincing explanatory account.

It should also be clear that ethnographic research of the type described here allows the researcher to go beyond description—beyond what the camera lens sees. We believe that looking at classroom interaction from a "thick" explanation perspective forces us beyond the question of which teacher moves correlate with or allow what kinds of student participation. "Thick" explanation provides a less tidy picture, one of interrelations rather than linear causality, a picture which shows the complexity of elements informing an ESL teacher's practice and making classroom interactions look the way they do.

We turn now to a discussion of Watson-Gegeo's research involving English-medium primary education in the Solomon Islands. Although the social context she investigates is radically different from the ESL classroom Ulichny has examined, we find the fundamental relationships among levels of context to be very similar.

Second example: Primary education in the Solomon Islands

As an anthropologist in ESL, Watson-Gegeo is particularly concerned with two issues: First, problems faced by children who attend schools where the medium of instruction is a language unfamiliar to them; and second, the need to develop culturally congruent education for minority and Third World children. These are important educational issues for language minorities in the United States. They are also important in developing countries such as the Solomon Islands, where over 80 languages are spoken, and the language of instruction in school is English.

A small, independent nation in the Southwest Pacific, the Solomon
Islands face many of the problems typical of Third World nations, including a high birth rate, rural and urban poverty, malnutrition, and low literacy rates. Watson-Gegeo has carried out her research together with her husband David Gegeo, who is a native speaker of Kwara'ae, the language with the largest number of speakers in the Solomons. They have been conducting educational research in the Solomons for several years, focussing on Kwara'ae district.

Rural Kwara'ae children have a very high failure and drop-out rate in primary school. Before starting school, they typically have little or no exposure to English, to Solomon Islands Pijin (an English-based pidgin/creole language), or to literacy materials, and their parents usually have had only two to three years of schooling, if any.

Many studies of minority or Third World children have suggested that prior to schooling, children like the rural Kwara'ae lack experience with so-called decontextualized language, together with metalinguistic skills necessary for acquiring literacy in school. Watson-Gegeo's primary research question, therefore, has been, What are the patterns of teaching and learning in the homes of Kwara'ae children during the important pre-school years? This includes examining how children acquire communicative competence in their first language; their language repertoire upon entry into school; the cognitive skills they have developed in their pre-school years, and the kinds of teaching/learning strategies with which they are familiar.

Other studies have argued for a cultural mismatch hypothesis for why minority and Third World children fail in schools whose classroom organization and teaching strategies differ in important ways from the children's home cultures. A second important research question for Watson-Gegeo has been: Can we develop culturally appropriate teaching strategies for S.I. classrooms that would serve as a bridge between home and school for these children, and which would make it possible to build on the knowledge and language skills they already have? The model behind this question is the talk-story reading lesson developed by the Kamehameha Schools in Hawai'i, from talk-story speech events in the Hawaiian community (see Boggs, 1985; also Watson, 1975, and Watson-Gegeo and Boggs, 1977).

Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo conducted a longitudinal study of 13 focal Kwara'ae children in 9 families, in a cross-age, semi-longitudinal study from birth to age 9 years. The study, which took place over four field periods (seven
months in 1981, and three months each in 1984 and 1987), focused on children's language learning and socialization in parent-child, sibling-sibling, and peer-peer interactions.

Contrary to her original expectations, Watson-Gegeo found that Kwara'ae language socialization practices emphasize direct, verbally-mediated teaching (that is, teaching through the medium of language) of many intellectual and cultural skills. In fact, Kwara'ae caregivers use strategies very similar to those that American white middle-class parents use, and which are thought to be important for developing metalinguistic awareness and other school-related skills (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, 1986a, 1986b).

From 6 months of age, young children are taught how to speak and behave through a set of routines which structure interaction, control the child's behavior, teach information and attitudes, and scaffold the child's developing linguistic skills. The over-all goal of these routines is to push the child to adult levels of competence and performance as quickly as possible. Early adult-like behavior is important in a society where children start productive work in the household and gardens by 3 years of age. It is at this age, for instance, that children are given their first sharpened bush knife. Three-year-olds are expert at cutting the grass, planting and harvesting vegetables, washing dishes, peeling potatoes, cooking, and tending babies. They are also skilled at using the vocabulary and discourse that go with these activities.

But there is also a special kind of teaching that begins when a child is as young as 18 months. This teaching is the traditional Kwara'ae equivalent of formal schooling, and is called fa'amanata'anga, which literally means "shaping the mind." Fa'amanata'anga is a general term for "teaching." In a narrower sense, however, it refers to a speech event marked by seriousness, in which teaching is undertaken in high rhetoric, the formal discourse register in Kwara'ae.

Fa'amanata'anga speech events involve abstract discussion, and the teaching of reasoning skills through question/answer pairs, rhetorical questions, tightly argued sequences of ideas and premises, comparison-contrast, and cause and effect. These sessions emphasize comprehension, inferencing, and creative uses of metaphor and examples to develop points and illustrate them (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, 1989).

Watson-Gegeo tape-recorded more than 25 such sessions between parents and children. These tapes show that children as young as 3 years can
follow and participate appropriately in the complex reasoning of these sessions (see Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, in preparation).

Fa’amanaata’anga is the “key event” Watson-Gegeo hoped to find, which might be adapted for use in school to make classroom lessons more culturally appropriate. And she plans to follow up on this idea. However, the more carefully she examined transcripts of fa’amanaata’anga and of Kwara’ae children’s interactions in other situations, the more she began to realize that the real puzzle was: Why aren’t these children doing superior work in the classroom? Why do they apparently seem unable to transfer the reasoning skills they learn at home to school-related activities, especially literacy?

To answer this question, she and Gegeo observed and tape-recorded first-grade reading in the local school, and interviewed a sample of parents, headmasters, teachers, and officials in the ministry of education. They found that in the typical reading lesson at first grade, the children are given isolated sentences that are decontextualized, that is, they are not used to communicate in the immediate situation, but to demonstrate abstract notions of grammar and vocabulary. One such lesson she and Gegeo recorded involved five sentences, three of which represent cultural scenarios unfamiliar to or problematic for the children:

Anna is making a cup of tea for her mother [as accompanied by a drawing of an English girl serving “high tea” to her mother, an unfamiliar cultural scenario to the children];

Ken is playing with ice cream [Ice cream is unfamiliar to most rural children, and even as native speakers of English, we find “playing with ice cream” a somewhat bizarre sentence.];

He’s only a little boy and he can’t help his father.

This last sentence is culturally incongruent: it stands in marked contrast to the local cultural emphasis on family interdependence and adult-like work behavior from age 3 years, as mentioned earlier.
The teacher’s pedagogical strategy in such lessons is of whole-group drill and practice with individual oral recitation—a strategy which does little to develop children’s cognitive and linguistic skills in English. Even the intonation contours the teachers use in group recitation are far from communicative in English (for further analysis of this example reading lesson is found in Watson-Gegeo 1988). Add to this that the children are being taught in a language they do not know, and we could make the case for the problem being simply one of poor teaching. But why is teaching in these schools so poor?

To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the less obvious relationships between these rural classrooms and larger institutional constraints—the vertical level of context.

Among the important factors affecting schooling at the institutional level are the following. First, the rapid expansion of primary education to meet development goals, and the replacement of expatriate teachers with local teachers, have both been significant in the decline of quality instruction in the Solomons since the late 1960s. As of 1987, school leavers with the equivalent of a 10th grade education were still being posted as teachers to rural primary schools without any teacher training. The school where Watson-Gegeo observed typifies many of the problems in rural schools: the province rotates teachers every year and sometimes mid-term; the teachers have less than secondary education themselves; there are few materials available at the school; and the outdated booklets used to teach reading are culturally biased in format and content.

Secondly, the theory of schooling held by educators in the Solomons reflects McNeil’s description of how Western-style schools “reward the splitting of the knowledge we have of our world from the official knowledge of schools” (1985, p. 15). That schooling involves “small bits of unrelated, sequenced information” is the model held by S.I. administrators and teachers, who are only repeating their own schooling experience in a system in which decontextualized, fragmented lessons are regarded as what school knowledge is about.
A third factor related to the second is the national examination system. Teachers' primary responsibility is that of preparing children to pass the exams which control entrance into secondary school. This increases the tendency to focus on small bits of information in formats similar to what will be expected on the exam.

Finally, an important factor in schooling—one which schools themselves have helped to create—is a growing class division among islanders, and a growing inequity between urban and rural areas. The poor quality of teaching and lack of resources in most rural schools guarantee that few children will pass the examinations for admission into secondary school. Children of the urban elites, however, have a much better chance to go to academic secondary schools, thereby guaranteeing that the elite group will perpetuate itself in the next generation. The plight of the rural schools, therefore, is not entirely accidental.

All of these factors add up to a situation in which rural Kwara'ae children as a group do not succeed in gaining mastery of English language and literacy skills. Their problem is not that they come to school lacking cognitive skills which would make it easy for them to learn literacy skills in English. The cognitive skills that they bring to school from their home experiences are universal reasoning skills. Rather, school lessons require less from the children cognitively than they already know how to do. To fully understand the complexity of why this is the case means examining all of the levels or dimensions of context that we have outlined in this brief presentation. And we would argue that intervention must also take all of these factors into account.

Summary

Whether because of the current paradigm for scientific research, or the process of schooling identified by McNeil, or the practice of literacy itself, as some commentators claim, a strong cultural theme in our society is that understanding comes through isolating and examining information in small bits. We do not discount the importance of this strategy, and our own forms of discourse analysis in fact require it.
It is also important, however, to look at wholes, and to examine them as systems and sub-systems interacting at many levels and in many ways. Researchers need to move beyond linear assumptions which can lead to simplistic notions of how second language teaching-learning interactions are shaped, and their outcomes. Quality ethnographic work can make an important contribution to understanding the complexity of factors affecting second language interaction.

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