

## Teachers as Ethnographers: Listening to Students' Voices for (Self) Development<sup>1</sup>

Oscar Narváez, Universidad Veracruzana  
onarvaez@uv.mx

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### Abstract

How can EFL teacher-researchers attain information about the lived experience of their students? Why is it important to 'listen' to what language learners have to say? How can we, as EFL teachers, use this information productively? Following the recent acceptance of and interest in the issue of 'voice' among qualitative researchers, in this paper I argue that 'voiced research' has the potential to provide access to a level of students' meaning seldom reached. The objective of this article is to set guidelines on how to approach research aimed at 'voicing' students insights on classroom practices. The implications of using such an approach to inform our teaching are outlined in this paper.

### Voice in qualitative research

Voice in qualitative studies frequently captures the lived experience of people that otherwise could not be achieved and communicated through conventional means of research (Shacklock & Smyth 1997). *Voice* is a term used increasingly in qualitative research and critical theorising as a way of reminding us that social research deals with the lives of actual people. In current research, voice has taken the form of oral (hi)stories, anecdotes, (auto)biography, narrative studies and the like. However, traditional research remains faulty in that researchers investigate what *they* are interested in and what usually makes it way into final reports is the voice of the researcher providing his or her interpretation of the issues. Voiced research aims at countering this limitation. Researchers working under this methodology usually pay close attention to the voice of the researchees to investigate what is relevant to them; and researchers portray the researchees' own voices as faithfully as possible.

Some authors have commented on the need to develop a different kind of research imagination in order to obtain more grounded results (Holliday 1996, 2002; Smyth and Hattam 2001, Hart 1998, Klaus 2001). Smyth and Hatam assert: "[A] 'sociological imagination' is required. This implies research to be *more attentive to the life worlds of young people ... [and to be] more flexible of its own agenda*" (2001:401; italics mine). In this regard, Kincheloe states:

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*Central to this kind of research is an appreciation and a utilization of the students' perceptions of schooling ... teachers must understand what is happening in the mind of their students....*

*Operating within this critical context, the teacher researcher studies students as if they were texts to be deciphered. The teacher researcher approaches them with an active imagination and a willingness to view students as socially constructed beings (2003: 136; citing Grady and Wells 1985; italics mine).*

Voiced research is a relatively new way of characterising the bringing to life of perspectives that would otherwise be excluded, muted, or silenced by dominant discourses. Numerous commentators have devoted time and effort to the discussion and dissemination of this particular approach to research (Stevenson and Ellsworth 1991; Herr and Anderson 1993, 1997; Lincoln 1995, Johnston and Nichols 1995, O'Loughlin 1995, Shacklock and Smyth 1997; Smyth 1998, 1999, 2000; Smyth and Hattam 2001; Hodgkinson and Bloomer 2001; Krishnan and Hwee 2002). Voiced research starts from the position that interesting things can be said by groups who may actually be situated at some distance from the centres of power. Shacklock and Smyth (1997: 4) claim that "in the telling of stories of life, previously unheard, or silenced, voices open up the possibility for new, even radically different narrations of life experience". In this category we can place students, who seldom have a voice in school-related matters.

Voiced research is consistent with principles of critical theory which discuss concepts of empowerment, transformation, and emancipation from dominant forces of oppression (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, Hopkins 2002). Voiced research, as a form of critical theory, is expected to 'reveal hidden realities, to initiate discussion' (Holliday 2002:122). If the epistemology of voiced research is followed, "then interesting things can be garnered from groups who do not usually occupy the high moral, theoretical or epistemological ground" (Smyth and Hattam 2001: 406). The concept of 'voiced research' has been characterized as epistemologically committed to a democratic research agenda and so needs to be constructed in such a way that a "genuine space within which people are able to reveal what is real for them" is created (ibid: 407).

What is decided to be important enough to research can only really come from the person being researched. Research questions can only emerge out of "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess, 1988) since trust and rapport between the researcher and the researchees must be established. Similarly, Kincheloe recognizes the need for a more democratic research agenda "where the experience of the marginalized is viewed as an important way of seeing the socio-educational whole ... [where] the voice of the subjugated [is used] to formulate a reconstruction of the dominant educational structure" (2003: 62). He also claims that

Our emancipation system of meaning will alert teachers to the need to cultivate and listen to the voices of students.... Teachers ... will find the need to incorporate a variety of qualitative research strategies into their teaching repertoire ... [so that they] can uncover those concealed social constructions that shape ... the consciousness of students, teachers, administrators, and community members" (ibid: 56; italics mine).

One of the aspirations of voiced research is to provide a platform on which dominant discourses might be unmasked and shown as representing management regimes while silencing the voices of the true educational actors. The methodological challenge of educational research is to bring these voices to a centrefold position in order "to find ways to allow the smaller voices ... to be heard" (Shacklock and Smyth 1997: 4). Voiced research is based on various assumptions:

1. Researchers must provide a genuine space within which researchees can *reveal what is real for them*.
2. Researchees may only 'open up' when a situation of mutual trust and rapport is established.
3. Research questions can only really emerge out of the informants' frame of reference, i.e. *what is worthwhile investigating resides within the research informant*.
4. Further research questions emerge out of the research encounter.
5. Findings are highly credible due to the time spent embedded in the lives, experiences and aspirations of those whose lives are portrayed.
6. Researchers and researchees' successive conversations result in *context-bound theorising*, which originates from a degree of sense making *in situ*.
7. The dialogic experience between researcher and researchees brings a certain degree of identity formation in both actors out of reach in current research.
8. Data is '*generated*' then and there on the spot, originated from the joint work of researcher and students through successive conversations (after Smyth 1998, 1999).

This type of research is meant to inform and to be useful to people who are able to identify with the images, issues, messages, and the language depicted in the form of verbatim quotations. This is why, perhaps, a growing interest in the lives of students and their personal narratives have made their own space in

research; the actual voices of those who have been previously represented have started to be heard.

### Underlying principles

In order for participants to be able to reveal what is real for them, an investigation should be constructed in such a way that it allows informants to express themselves; this "requires methods that allow the researcher to capture language and behaviour" (Maykut and Morehouse 1994: 46). Two of the most suitable ways of generating data for this kind of study are therefore conversations and involvement. The use of qualitative interviewing<sup>2</sup> -- in the form of purposeful conversations -- instead of a more structured form of interview is advisable because "it is important to build into the normal patterns of interaction within the [researched] group, and probably getting better evidence as a result" (Drever 2003:16). It is important to talk to informants in order to generate data because in our field of expertise this is very natural. The justification for using this method of data collection is expressed by Drever: "[I]n the teaching profession, when you want to get information, canvass opinion or exchange ideas, the natural thing to do is to talk to people" (ibid: 1). Furthermore, qualitative interviewing allows the researcher to capture the students' language and behaviour, a way of articulating their worlds.

This comes from an ontological position in which people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality that research questions are designed to explore. We should start from the assumption that students and ex-students have important stories to tell about their experiences at school, about the school itself, and about the structures that foster or restrain learning. In addition, it should be kept in mind that "natural language is studied ... often because it reveals something about the social situation in which talk takes place" (Brewer, 2000: 74). Such qualitative studies are described by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995: 12) as "approaches that enable the researchers to learn at first hand, about the social world they are investigating by means of *involvement and participation* in that world through a focus on what individuals actors *say and do*" (italics mine).

Accordingly, I believe that in order to improve the teaching of English as a Foreign Language in Mexico, we should pursue understanding from the learners' perspective, to make sense of what learning a foreign language *means* to them, *by capturing their voices*. Our role as teacher-researchers is primordial since "[the teacher] is the primary instrument of data collection and data analysis" (Merriam 2002: 5). Mason describes the qualitative researcher's role "as actively

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, I will use the term 'interview' in the sense of 'conversations with a purpose'.

constructing knowledge about that world according to certain principles and using certain methods derived from, or which express, their epistemological position" (2002: 52). Denzin and Lincoln (2003: 64) state: "If the [research] question concerns the nature of the phenomenon, then the answer is best obtained using ethnography." I am not suggesting that we should all carry out ethnographies but rather that we should use ethnographic methods of data collection to find out *emic* interpretations of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data generation for this type of study is usually multi-method in focus. This approach to qualitative research "reflects and attempts to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question" (Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 8). A researcher may obtain a rich, in-depth description of the phenomenon by using a "combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study" (ibid). As you may perceive, this is not a simple mission. However, there are some points in our favour, as I will now discuss.

EFL teacher-researcher: developing an 'ethnographic imagination.'

Verma and Mallick (1999:184) state that "anyone who has qualified as a teacher ... is perfectly capable of being a member of an action research team and making real contributions to the teaching-learning process." We are in a privileged situation to carry out research of the kind described here. While researchers have to spend a lot of time trying to get 'familiar' with the setting, we already spend most of our time within it. It has been recognised that teachers are in an excellent position to investigate what happens inside schools and that what a teacher does in her professional daily life is very similar to what a researcher aims to do (Nolla 1997, Woods 1998, Holliday 2002, Verma and Mallick 1999, Hopkins 2002). In particular, Nolla states:

In teaching practice, teachers are able to use ethnographic methods since they interact with their students and become outstanding observers and interviewers; their job allows them to be part of the group, yet they maintain their teacher's role; all that is needed is some time to reflect and analyze so that the experience becomes a fruitful ethnographic work (1997: 108; my translation).

So, what do we need in order to make this transition from teacher to teacher-researcher? Verma and Mallick explain why we should aim at researching our own educational environment:

The essentials of research are already in place [observation, application of questionnaires, interviews] and teachers are, in a general sense, already engaged in research. All that is required is a more rigorous approach to their existing activity and a system that

ensures the results of their work are published for the benefit of their colleagues nationally" (1999: 184).

Further, Holliday expands on the advantages of researching our workplace by explaining that "we do not have to adopt a different role ... [but] just ... a more rigorous approach to collecting data"; that "we are already part of the setting, which allows liberty of movement within"; and that "our tasks and responsibilities as researchers are simply an expansion of our roles as teachers" in that "we are expected to examine and assess our student's behaviour" (2002: 26). However, Holliday warns: "Here, though, over-indulgence can be a problem.'... To be able to examine the world of the participant the [researcher] must not take this world for granted, but must question his or her own assumptions and act like a stranger to the setting (ibid: 27).

Bassey highlights the advantages of being a 'reflective professional' over the 'expert professional': "[T]he *reflective professional* works with the client [students] in trying to make sense of the client's needs and shares knowledge as needed to try to *tackle the client's problems*. He or she has no need of a façade to express professionalism. It is obvious from the purposeful interaction with the client" (1992:1, italics added). As you can see, we teachers are in an advantageous position over academics since the information (knowledge) we generate is regarded as more meaningful and relevant to our teaching practice than that created by outsider researchers. In what follows, I will try to describe some guidelines for the generation of data.

### **Doing voiced research: some guidelines**

#### **Locating voices**

It will be our task to adopt (and adapt!) our existing role as EFL teachers in order to research a familiar setting, which is the place where we work; Brewer (2000: 61) has classified this as 'pure observant participation.' Observations should account for both formal and informal events within everyday school life. At the beginning, this exploration would be very broad and guided by general questions such as *How do students behave during their first days/weeks of class?* or *How do students react to our speaking in English?*

Initially, observation notes would be descriptive, focusing on what is on the surface and what is visible such as the classroom, seating arrangement, students, activities, events and noticeable feelings. These notes should be taken and kept in notebooks during the period of observation. It is advisable to immediately type and save them on computer files to facilitate storage and later retrieval.

We should find interesting voices by taking advantage of the so-called 'communicative activities.' These provide excellent space for interacting with

students and getting to know them. Find your informants, those students who seem to have something to say and always question, those who may be interesting cases.

### Contacting voices

Once initial observations have thrown some light onto topics emanating from students, it is time to contact the students who seem knowledgeable and articulate: your *research informants*. The main aim of this initial interaction is to build mutual respect. Denzin and Lincoln (2003: 39-40) state that the researcher "must establish trust, rapport, and authentic communication patterns with participants." This is crucial in order to "capture the nuance and meaning of each participant's life from the participant's point of view" (ibid: 40). It may be necessary not only to make evident your concern to improve the learning environment of your students but also to mention your interest in capturing their voices.

If you implement the right type of activities and show a genuine interest in your students' lives, they may soon perceive you as a reasonable, straightforward and caring teacher (which I am sure you are!). You have to be ready to open up to them if you expect them to do the same for you. Fear nothing; this is a win-win situation. As Lincoln says, "... listening to student voices can help us find our own" (1995: 88). In the same tenor, Kincheloe believes that "not only do we learn about the educational world surrounding us, but we gain new insights into the private world within us -- the world of our constructed consciousness" (2003: 54).

In order to establish 'authentic communication patterns' with informants, you may want to adopt a 'casual conversation' style in order to carry out 'purposeful conversations.' Most conversations ideally should take place in informal settings: corridors, school square, school cafeteria, nearby cafes, and so on. Provide a genuine space within which students can talk about their issues and concerns, their dreams, aspirations and struggles. In order to accomplish this, base your initial conversations with informants on 'orienting' questions (Smyth and Hattam 2001: 409), such as the following:

Ex-students: Tell me what was going on in your life when you decided to stop studying English.

Students: Tell me what it is like to be a learner of English.

As an illustration of the type of responses obtained in my study on 'dropping out,' I will provide some of the issues brought up by informants when answering 'orienting' questions:

D: In the teacher-student relationship there is a barrier, I believe that that barrier blocks [learning], it may be due to the number of students, the group, I don't know...

O: So you say there is a 'wall'....

D: Definitely, and this prevents learning to be complete, to be really good. (Dizzy; conversation)

One of the advantages of starting with 'orienting' questions is that you do not constrain your informants with pre-fabricated questions that may bias their answers. These questions also allow theorising *in situ* and the forming of 'grounded theory' (Strauss and Corbin 1998). By carefully listening to the informants' answers, you will discover the issues beginning to emerge. However, such a research interview strategy makes the task of categorizing data more demanding than with a detailed structure.

At this stage, your observation notes should come from more 'focused observation'; you should be able to disregard irrelevant things as observations gradually become more guided by the issues coming out of the conversations and/or the observations. Once you have identified these issues, you need to pursue them in following 'focused' conversations.

### Capturing voices

Although the conversations become more focused, it is vital to continue using informal conversations, in order to explore the problem in depth. It may be tempting (and perhaps easier) to invite informants to your office, but you should bear in mind that changing the setting may influence their behaviour. It would be wiser to follow the initial forms of interaction.

This is the stage of the study that should provide maximum interaction between you and the researchees. The number of interviews (and interviewees) will depend largely on how much data you obtain from each and/or how deep you want to go into the issues that they bring up. At this stage, you should be in a position to ask more specific questions based on the issues mentioned by the particular informants, but you should not impose your research agenda on them. You may want to practice 'selective observation,' concentrating on the qualities of the activities mentioned by your students. For example, a student may talk bitterly about the type of relationship with their teachers, as illustrated below.

I have had teachers who have this 'outside the classroom I don't give explanations, these are within lessons, outside, don't even speak to me' attitude. (Juana; conversation)

In this case, before you meet with the student again, you may want to observe classrooms with this sort of question in mind: *How are teacher-student relationships carried out in the classroom?*



### Clarifying Voices

This last phase of the research needs to be used to clarify doubts or sound out hunches that emerged during the previous phase(s). In order to tie loose ends, you will have to ask selected informants to have another chat. This time ask specific questions on the issues from the previous conversations that need clarification. You may need to repeat this last stage until you feel you have covered all the angles of the issue under study. For instance, you may say, *You mentioned that teachers set a barrier between them and you. Can you tell me about a specific time in which this happened?* You may receive a response something similar to that of Rubi in one of my investigations:

... and if you ask the first time and he makes faces at you, or explains unwillingly or mocks you, and he tells you 'What?! You don't know?!', then you don't trust him to ask again and then you say, 'You know what? I will never ask you again'. (Rubi; conversation)

What I have presented here is nothing but the ideas of an amateur researcher and should be taken as guidelines that you may find helpful in carrying out your own investigation. It is up to you to make the most out of them and use what you think would suit you best.

### Conclusion

I now will highlight the implications of approaching research from this perspective. First of all, I am appealing to the professionalism of those of my colleagues who are committed to finding ways to improve their practice. Who could be better informed about our teaching practice than our own students? Why not ask them, then? By giving ourselves the chance to hear our students' voices, we may be establishing the grounds that could help us refine the parameters of professional judgement.

This could be our initial reaction to the inappropriateness of traditional research that permeates our field and that usually presents alien interpretations of what actually happens within *our* classrooms. Adopting this type of research approach might allow teachers to identify the unsuitability of adopted foreign teaching methodologies, leading towards a *more context-bound teaching*. I am aware that, in order to achieve this, the institutions that host our intellectual efforts should be open to changes and devoted to excellence.

If we truly want to provide our students with the most appropriate learning experience the very first thing to do is to develop a more context-bound methodology of teaching (Bax 2003, Tudor 2003, Senior 2002). This comprises several points:

1. We need to know our students' needs and fears. This could help us in anticipating methodological problems.
2. We must know our students' expectations of a language class: What do they expect to gain from it? What do they expect their role to be? Our role? We seem to take this issue for granted as if everybody behaved and learnt in the same way.
3. We need to involve learners in decision-making about existing course materials and learning activities. What sort of material and activities do they prefer?
4. We ought to incorporate student-generated activities/materials. Students will express their likes and preferred topics if we give them a fair chance.

This paper has presented an approach in researching language learning/teaching, that of voiced research. Using this kind of approach can help in building a better understanding of learners' insights on language learning, informing both teaching practice and decision-making at an institutional level. Thus, if we spend time in listening to and voicing what students' want to express, we could be in a better position to improve the learning environment in which we work.

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