Becoming an Ethnographer: A Personal Journey of an English Lecturer

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Abstract

Feeling dissatisfied with inefficient theoretical aspects of quality research and unsuccessful in implementing results from small scale researches, I (the first author) decided to pursue a Ph.D at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. Expecting to gain a more solid theoretical background of quality research, I chose to conduct an ethnographic study in Ban Khiriwong Community in southern Thailand. This paper, thus, describes my personal journey as an applied linguist from conducting small-scale studies to ethnography: how I grasped the concept of ethnography, how I conducted fieldwork and analyzed data, what how I discovered along the way of becoming an ethnographer, and how I came to realize the contributions of ethnography. My personal journey rewards me what I have expected to pursue and is useful for applied linguists to consider ethnography as another option in selecting a research paradigm.

Keywords: ethnographer, ethnographic study, Rajabhat University, professional development

Introduction

Thai public universities, based on the Office of Higher Education Commission in 2010, comprise of 78 universities; 14 government universities, 2 open universities, 13 autonomous universities (include King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi where I am doing a Ph.D.), 9 Rajamangala Universities of Technology and 40 Rajabhat Universities (include Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University, my workplace).

Rajabhat Universities were formerly Teacher Training Schools, first established in 1892. The schools were developed to 36 teacher colleges in 1969. Their chief mission was to produce teachers for schools in remote areas around the country. In 1995 all of the teacher colleges were upgraded into Rajabhat Institutes. Since 2004, all Rajabhat Institutes have upgraded into 40 universities located in all regions throughout Thailand. The philosophy of the 40 Rajabhat universities, according to the Rajabhat University Act 2004, has been stated that Rajabhat Universities are the Public Higher Education Institutions to aid local community development of all regions in Thailand (The Office of the Council of State of Thailand, 2004: 2). For the implementation of the philosophy, each Rajabhat University may stipulate its university mission statements slightly differently. At Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University, its mission statements require teachers to teach, to improve academic proficiency, to use advanced technology to enhance information retrieval and instruction, to conduct research for rural community development, to preserve and promote local and traditional arts and culture, and to provide academic services to rural communities (Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University, 2005).

To fulfil those mission statements, lecturers and staff have to be responsible for other projects for local community development besides teaching and improving academic efficiency in their career paths. According to Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University Year Book (2009), in the section on research, 69 research projects were published and 32 projects were in process. For academic services, 129 training courses were provided and 174 lecturers were invited to be guest speakers or visiting lecturers to conduct lectures for schools, colleges, community organizations, government and private sectors in the province of Nakhon Si Thammarat and nearby provinces.

I, the first author and English-language lecturer, had to follow the same rules to fulfil the university mission statement. My colleagues and I formed a team of 8 lecturers; 6 English

teachers (5 Thais and one American native speaker), one computer teacher and one performing art teacher to conduct research. Knowing that we were unskillful in doing research and the Rajabhat University Act would be promulgated in 2004, my team and I started applying for some funds to conduct community research studies and to run academic projects in 2002. We began attending some research trainings and outsourcing for community research mentors by cooperating with the Responsible Ecological Social Tour (REST; a semi-NGO), and Thailand Research Fund. In the past 6 years, we were granted some funding from various institutions such as our own Rajabhat University, the Office of Commission of Higher Education, Thailand Research Fund, the Office of National Research Council of Thailand and the European Union (under the name of Thai Coastal Habitats and Resources Management Project, CHARM Project).

We started from conducting small scale survey, action research to participatory action research mainly related to tourism in rural communities where our students were from and rural communities from the list of Nakhon Si Thammarat Provincial Tourism Master Plan 2001. We also provided some training courses of English for tourism and computer skills to local people at some of our research sites. We also helped local people to produce some community documents in English to serve their foreign visitors at the sites. Within six years, we had been conducting research in cooperation with local people in many villages of five districts in Nakhon Si Thammarat province and two nearby provinces. Some of our works are as the following:

1) Participatory action research studies (PAR) in developing Community Based Ecotourism management, organizing English and computer training courses, designing community websites, developing a Self-Monitoring and Evaluation System for the Savings and Loans Group, and making phrase books in English for Ban Khiriwong Community in Lansaka District, Nakhon Si Thammarat province (Thongsrikate, N. et al, 2002; Buddharat and Lejune, 2003; Thongsrikate, N. et al, 2005; Opasratanakorn et al, 2006 and Thongsrikate, N. et al, 2008).

2) PAR to help develop community-based tourism management in Ban Wanglung in Promkhiri District (Thongsrikate, S. et al, 2004) and in Ban Katun, Phipun District, Nakhon Si Thammarat province (Buddharat et al, 2004).

3) PAR to help develop Agro-tourism management in Ban Changklang, Changklang Sub-District, Nakhon Si Thammarat province (Patiyuth et al, 2004).

4) PAR to help develop Educational tourism management and to organize English training courses for members of National Artist's Puppet Museum, Muang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat province (Thongsrikate, N. and Buddharat, 2008).

5) Mixed-method research on Strategic Environmental Assessment for Community-Based Tourism under the Thai CHARM Project with REST, in the provinces of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phang-Nga and Surat Thani (Sewatarmara and Wellmanee, 2007).

However, six years of providing academic services and conducting research enforced and supervised by the university policy administrators as well as experts from fund granters and NGOs, we found that some of our work still could not be called quality research and sustainable development projects as we have expected. Moreover, some of our projects did not really contribute to the local people since the local residents could not continue implementing the results by their own after the research projects were finished. In contrast, the co-researchers from the communities still needed us as research consultants from time to time. Besides, some of our research methods such as the process of research question formulation and data analysis were sometimes questioned by some other researchers in national research conferences.

Feeling dissatisfied with my inefficient theoretical aspects of quality research and outputs from the projects my friends and I have done compared to our great effort, amount of

time, budget and human resources allocated to fulfil the university's philosophy, I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangkok and chose to conduct an ethnographic study. This paper, thus, describes my personal journey as an English lecturer from conducting small-scale research project to an ethnographic study for my Ph.D. dissertation entitle "An Ethnographic Study on the Role of English in Ban Khiriwong, Thailand".

Why did I choose to conduct ethnography?

I spent a year in 2008 to study paradigms in qualitative research and focused on ethnography. One of the particular reasons is that ethnography is one of the most in-depth longitudinal research paradigms in which a researcher should be at the site for a long time to see what is going on, to listen to what people actually say about what they are doing and why. As it is a longitudinal study, that means I can spend time studying theoretical aspects of research and improve my research skills beyond what I have gained from my previous experiences in conducting small-scale research.

Through my on-going literature review, I have learned that ethnography is defined as a field based research referring to both a method of research and a product of that research (Agar, (1980, 2008); Angrosino (2007); Creswell (2007); and Fetterman (1998, 2010). Fetterman (2010) explains that ethnography gives voice to people in their own local context, typically relying on verbatim quotations and a 'thick' description of events; a written record of cultural interpretation. The story then is told through the eyes of local people as they pursue their daily lives in their own communities (pages: 1, 125).

Ethnography, according to Atkinson and Hammersley (2007), refer to forms of social research with strong emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena, working primarily with unstructured data, investigating a small number of cases in detail and analyzing data that involve explicit interpretation of meanings and functions of human actions (page 248). Moreover, to some extent, there are some characteristics of ethnography that most of the professional ethnographers normally refer to, such as: 1) the researcher is the chief instrument; 2) it is field based, conducted in real settings with real people over long periods of time, and fieldwork is the vital part of the study; 3) emic (actor)'s perspectives: it gives voice to people in their own context; and 4) holistic: a portrait of human groups are formed by weaving various features together (Angrosino, 2007 and Denscombe, 2003).

As to why ethnography can be one of the research paradigms in Applied Linguistics, Blommaert and Jie (2010) have a clear argument that, while ethnography is perceived as description, it can as well be seen as a full intellectual program far richer than just a matter of description. To both of them, ethnography involves a perspective on language and communication, including ontology and an epistemology, both of which are of significance for the study of language in society, or better, of language as well as of society (page 5). They also explain the relationship between ethnography and the study of language that ethnography has its origin in anthropology, not in linguistics, nor in sociology or psychology. Central to any understanding of ethnography are its roots in anthropology. These anthropological roots provide a specific direction to ethnography in which it contains a perspective on language which differs from that of many other branches of the study of language (page 7). This argument made by Blommaert and Jie (2010) helps support my decision to choose ethnography to investigate community's perspectives towards the role of English as well as the communication patterns and language use in a rural community.

Why did I choose Ban Khiriwong as my research site?

Ban Khiriwong is a fruit farming community with 4 villages in Nakhon Si Thammarat province, South of Thailand. About 80 percent of about 2,500 local residents are fruit farmers who have been able to conserve their traditional unique ways of life and natural resources

management for more than 250 years. With the success of community development and natural resources management, the community was acknowledged by Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) as a prototype of eco-tourism management in 1998 (TAT, 1998: online) and by Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Tourism Working Group in 2006 (Heah, 2006: 102-108).

With the popularity of its name, the community has attracted development aid from many government organizations, non-government organizations, private sectors and educational institutions. However, not all of the projects were successful and sustainable. The community still need more help in conducting community research and English training courses. Therefore, this community was once again selected as research site for a longitudinal study.

How did I conduct fieldwork?

Fieldwork is the most characteristic element of any ethnographic research design. It usually means living with and living like those who are studied (Fetterman, 2010: 8). With concepts of ethnography, some characteristics necessary for a novice ethnographer and two broad research questions, I started conducting fieldwork in 2009 with ongoing self-preparation, getting access, selecting subjects, collecting and analyzing data.

- Self-Preparation

Before conducting ongoing fieldwork, I seriously undertook tentative literature review to learn more about the nature of ethnographic research. While conducting the fieldwork, I was also attending regular fortnightly supervisions, discussing new experiences and problems with Ph.D. friends and some researchers in the field of Applied Linguistics and other social sciences to constantly fine-tune research instruments, strategies and research skills.

- Access

I started fieldwork with two broad research questions; 1) What is the present situation in Ban Khiriwong? and 2) What does the community feel about role of English? I initiated access by asking for permission from Sub-District Headman to conduct research for a period of one year; about two to four days a week according to the context of the incidents collected. I explained the informed consent from King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi to the headman and other local residents in the four villages of the community. After 2 months, I made my first research question to be more specific by working through other three sub-questions to investigate the locals' routine and key events that impact and impose circumstances on their lives; a) What is going on in the community? b) Who is engaging in what kind of activities? With whom?, c) Why are the local residents doing what they are doing?

- Subject selection

Following ethnographic practice, a judgmental sampling strategy was used to select subjects from local and non-local residents. I considered local residents as the insiders and the non-local residents as the outsiders. To select insiders, three sampling techniques, reputational case, big-net approach, and snowball techniques (Fetterman, 1998: 32 and Creswell, 2007: 128), were used. To select outsiders, opportunistic sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2003: 143) was used. For convenient reason to contact both insiders and outsiders, I categorized them into two types of stakeholder; gatekeepers and informants, based on their roles and duties.

My 15 gatekeepers were local residents who were in positions to grant permission and negotiate my access to other informants, places and events in the site. They also helped contact and build trust between the residents and me. Some of my gatekeepers were Sub-district headman, Head of *Kamlone Tambon* Administration Organization, four village headmen, heads of community occupational groups and a local school director.

I had two types of informants, insiders and outsiders. The insiders were various groups of local residents with different careers and age groups, such as local fruit farmers, local guides, home stay hosts, resort owners, shopkeepers, tourism coordinators, motorcycle taxi drivers. The outsiders were both Thai and foreign visitors from various occupations such as fruit traders,

community contributors, academics, researchers, documentary producers, writers, day trippers, trekkers, sign language survey specialists, microbiologists.

- Data collection and Analysis

In my actual fieldwork, subject selection, data collection and data analysis were concurrently happening. I took a role as a human instrument mingling and mixing with local residents and their visitors using participant observations and interviews to gain information about physical characteristics of the community, geography, location, climate, economy, religious events, annual community activities, and tourism activities in the first two months. Then I spent another five months mixing with the locals' daily routine and key events that impact and impose circumstances on their lives, to understand their ways of thinking and patterns of their behaviors. After intensive participant observations and informal interviews, I discovered the reasons why the community was able to become a model community, how English was getting involved in the community routine, and why English language training courses did not work as well as my team in the university and I expected.

With the piles of data, I decided to spend another two months for data analysis to see which direction it would drive me to move further. Some of the data showed that there was a missing link between my first two research questions because the perspectives on the role of English seemed to be a small issue but the community seemed to have problems communicating with foreign visitors. Therefore, to further study, I needed to formulate another research question to study the patterns of communication and language use in the community. With this new research question, I spent another four months doing fieldwork.

During my data collection with the foreign visitors, I found out that participant observations were fine to collect data in almost all of the situations and types of visitors but not interviews. I found that the interviews, of all types, were pretty inconvenient for foreign visitors because they visited the community with their fixed purposes and schedule. After being unsuccessful in gaining the data with interview techniques, I tried open-ended questionnaires as another instrument to collect data. Even though I designed quite short, specific open-questions, such as occupation, purposes of visit, country they are from, and their first language and left some questions completely open for their opinions, some visitors still wrote that I should have made well prepared choices for them instead of open-questions. At this point, it suggested that conducting ethnographic research was not just new to me but also to some academic subjects

In addition to the mentioned methods, some technical tools such as stationery, notebooks, laptop computer, MP3 player and camera were also used for recording all data. Through these tools, the data yielded were field notes, audio files of informal interviews, photos and short notes of written documents from archives inside and outside community to compare and contrast with my empirical data from the field. The data yielded from my fieldnotes, interviews, questionnaires and archives were cross-validated to check validity, to add to some emerging descriptions or to combine some chunks of data with the themes analyzed using ongoing descriptive and theoretical analysis.

What have I learned through my personal journey?

- Things that surprised me

I had conducted many small scale research studies and English language training projects for this community since 2002 to 2007. To my pre-perception a local school director was the first one who asked for English language training for school children, then community headmen and tourism coordinators asked for other English training courses and computer courses for home stay hosts, tourism coordinators, local guides, and other interest groups. We agreed to provide all courses for them thinking that we also had some projects to fulfil our university's mission statement. That meant we could have outputs for annual professional promotion.

Then when I went back to the community in 2009 with a longitudinal study, I discovered why English learning was difficult for our local trainees. Directly listening to the silenced voices of the locals, they complained that the community headmen, especially tourism coordinators should be the ones who should learn English and should be responsible for facilitating tourism issues when dealing with foreign visitors, not them. While the community headmen and the coordinators' point of views, members tourism club should learn English to avoid misunderstanding with foreign visitors.

Furthermore, I understood why I felt disappointed with the slow and minimal improvement of the trainees who attended the courses. I discovered that the locals actually did not have time to revise and practice the lessons because they had to spend most of their time to earn their living. Tourism is just a supplementary income, not their main business. When documenting a group of locals with the results from the small scale survey conducted in 2006 on 'Needs of Khiriwong People to Study English for Tourism Business', in which the survey results showed that the local residents needed to learn all macro skills with various functions of English, one of the locals in our informal conversation interposed that "*Frankly speaking, I ticked all the questions I needed and expected to gain from the training because some questions look interesting and some really matched my needs. I think learning English might not be difficult and I hope the trainers will make it possible.*"

Another issue that I might have overlooked when conducting small scale research was that most of the community foreign visitors were non-English native speakers. For example, during my fieldwork, I collected data from about 90 trekkers from 28 countries; most of them were from Germany, France, Holland, Russia, Czech Republic. Through my participant observations, informal conversations, short interviews as well as being their mediators, and translators, I found that many of these visitors spoke different English with different accents, possessed different cultures (on bargaining, tipping, eating, shoe-wearing inside houses, etc) and also personalities (some of them were very understanding, kind, friendly, helpful, and loved and cared for nature while some were fussy, demanding, and took advantage whenever possible, etc). From days to months, I came to realize the locals' appreciation, expectation, misunderstanding, argument and the changing attitude to foreign visitors. I gradually understood why the tourism coordinators, local guides, local workers in occupational groups did not care as much about visitors (both Thai and foreign visitors) as they used to do and did not devote their time to adjust themselves to visitors or to improve their English.

- Adjustment of my personalities and working styles
Less dominant/ More modest
It is widely claimed by some foreigners that Thai teachers teaching in Thailand are dominant. Teaching methodology in all institutions at all levels in Thailand is still far too teacher-centred or teacher-dominated (Mountford, 1986: 4). Thai teachers of English are accustomed to conventional teacher-centred classrooms (Watson Todd, 2001); Hallinger and Kantamara (2001); and Foley (2005) similarly concludes that Thais place value on deference to people in positions of authority. Based on my background as a teacher for more than 25 years, I cannot be eliminated from this claim. After being familiar with the knowledge ordering and the extent of the top-down dynamic then turning to operate a bottom-up dynamic; listening to or obtaining as many grass-roots opinions as I can with less comment might sound an easy job but in fact it is a real tough task for me.

More open-minded/Talk less, listen more
As an ethnographer I have to adjust myself from a knowledge provider to a knowledge receiver. Realizing this factor, my supervisors (the second and third authors) started training me from the first year of my Ph.D supervision. Semester by semester, they gradually adjusted my behaviors by allowing me to initiate topics for discussion, express ideas, arguments, etc. Finally,

they concluded that it takes more than a year to adapt my personality from a situation manipulator to be an open-minded researcher. It may sound silly but it is a true story that I have just learned to listen more to my supervisors after I experienced from the field that if I keep talking, the villagers will stop telling their story.

However, through my labor intensive work in the field, I have learnt that having an open mind also required me to be a critical listener in order to control bias, preconceptions and existing relationships while working with local residents. As far as I am experienced, being sufficiently open-minded to gain all information is easily confused and contaminated by things or events that I have seen in the field or heard from various types of local subjects. Thus, being open-minded also required me to listen critically in order to check and select information because these characteristics helped me stay on guard and avoid contaminating and distorting my fieldwork.

Be a sensitive observant and an attentive listener

Realizing that an ethnographer is a main instrument to work and to develop research skills *in situ* and 'fine-tune' the self (Woods, 1996: 52) therefore I was there in the field expecting to collect data applying ethnographic concepts and research questions as guides to practice. However, after two months of mingling and mixing with local residents, it seemed to me that I could not see anything interesting; just local people were busy going out to work in the fruit orchards, participating in normal events such as community meetings, funerals, wedding parties, helping each other to earn their living, etc. Every day they went out from the houses, spent time in the orchards in the early morning and came back to the community in the late afternoon, left the community as a peaceful and quiet place for old people, young babies and disabled villagers. People whom I could meet during midday were some locals at the tourism center and at local career groups to work for their supplementary income mainly run by housewives, old people or local handicapped people. Only 3-4 of about 15 careers groups were run by men.

The community was always like this. What I had in mind was "*If conducting ethnography is to write about the routines of the group under study, this is the only thing I can write about. Why is it needed for a Ph.D study?*" I brought this feeling to my supervisions many times within my first two months until my supervisors told me to take a closer look at what the local were doing, how they were doing, then listen more intensively why they were doing what they were doing. With these questions, I had to spend another five months in the field mixing and participating in their daily routine again, to see how their routines and events were linked together to form the portrait of the community. Over another period of seven months of intensive data collection and analysis with new ways of observations, I talked less, listened more, became less hot-headed and more humble. I did this in order to observe carefully and link different issues from different sources together until I discovered the reasons why people here were able to become a model community for self-reliance and why foreigners have come to visit the community as well as why and how English was becoming involved in the community.

Dare to face new challenges/ Stick to paradigm and research questions

Bearing in mind that ethnography is data driven research and fieldwork is the most important element of the ethnography (Fetterman, 1998: 9), I, therefore, cannot complain when the data drives me to new challenges; the excitement of surprising issues, the feelings of frustration when expecting to work for one particular issue but the situations turn to something else. For example *'I made appointment to further interview one subject but on the date of the interview, he was shot dead. So instead of working for data, I had to participate in and share the community's and/or the family's sorrow with them for a week."*

Within one-year-fieldwork, I have experienced various feelings of excitement, frustration, boredom, exhaustion, isolation, being threatened and thick-skinned to deal with unexpected situations and confused feelings from time to time since the first day of accessing to the time of

leaving the field. I felt that I got lost from my research questions many times during my data collection and analysis process though I have tried to strictly take my research questions and my research paradigm as my navigators. Hence, along my journey, I almost always inspired myself with Goethe's couplets I have remembered: *"Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it."*

Walk & Work every day

Being diligent seems to be a common characteristic of any researcher, however learning to become an ethnographer, in my opinion, diligence at gut level is needed. As it is focusing on the actor's or *emic* perspective, I cannot set a clear goal and go for it as I teach students in my business classes. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I could not tell myself and other friends exactly what I was doing and where I was going (to me and some of my friends, this point sounded funny and stupid at the beginning). I had to go back and forth, search and research in the field to collect my data, wrote down as many information as I could from the field until I could find some emerged themes in my field notes or in my audio files. Then these themes would tell me which direction I should further pursue, otherwise I had to step back to re-search, re-collect and re-analyze data. The most frustrating time was during my data analysis since I did not know which parts of the information in my field notes or in my interview transcripts could be classified as 'themes'.

However, I have experienced later that learning to step back or to re-search is the rule of thumb in doing ethnography. I have found that, when I keep moving forward for progress, I sometimes overlook some salient points. Stepping backward helps me to recheck what I may forget or let it pass without paying attention to salient points on previous trips. Stepping back helps me see and hear things in broader and clearer views. Through this process, I have learnt that ethnography is nonlinear, dynamic, chaotic and complex (to novice ethnographer). One important saying that inspired me to cope with this hard work is my mother's saying: *"If you feel your journey is far away, why don't you walk every day. Don't run since you may die before you reach your final destination."*

- Contributions of Ethnography

Working intensively on ethnographic study rewarded me many invaluable practical research skills and experiences. In the past, for example, I preferred to conduct small-scale research because I could get it done quickly to serve the needs of the fund granters. However, after I spent more than two years for this longitudinal study, I have learnt that small-scale research is quite narrow, superficial, and top down in the process of gaining data from the subjects.

An ethnographic study also provides me clearer qualitative concepts. In the past, when I developed a proposal for funding, the granters usually asked for research questions, research process, and end products. Then with my ethnographic study, I have found that it can be possible to adjust research questions, add or delete them depending on the data obtained from the field and the research results depend on data discovered in the process.

Another contribution of ethnography goes directly to my personal development as a researcher. Prior to this study, I did not realize that I have been one of the pawns in a top-down educational system that seeks to force local people to learn English. Thinking only to fulfil the university mission statement and to gain key performance indicators (KPIs) for annual promotion, I forgot to listen and care for others' voices. I forgot to think that other people can think and choose to do things differently from me. Using authority and force is just the pedagogy of the oppressor, not that of an educator. Gradually, learned to listen more widely, deeply and intently to the many voices of the residents; from the top-ranking residents to grass-roots level, not only helped me to understand them but also understand myself.

Conclusion

As an English lecturer in a university whose philosophy is to be responsible for rural community development, but being assigned to conduct community research is a tough job. Feeling dissatisfied with inefficient theoretical aspects of quality research and how to implement research results, I chose to conduct an ethnographic study. Through my empirical study, I found out that ethnography is one of the most in-depth and intensive methods to help me gain more research skills and adjust myself to become a more qualified researcher. By investigating the local people's routines and perspectives through a longitudinal study, I have learned that there were various factors to consider in conducting research and providing English training programs to the public, particularly in rural areas?. Therefore, in my opinion, only small-scale (or even large-scale) surveys using interviews and questionnaires, comparing pre-test and post-test results of students' performance, or classroom action research, or participatory action research may not be sufficient to promote substantial professional development among university researchers who seek to work for community development or compete at national/international level in the field of research. Through my empirical study, I am confident that ethnography can be another research option to any intellectual fellow in the field of Applied Linguistics who needs to take a frame-breaking action.

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