

Why Ethnography for Language Learners?

Introductory remarks and
guidance on use of materials

*(An Introduction to Ethnography
for Language Learners)*

This brief introduction aims to answer some of the questions staff and students often ask about doing ethnography for the period of residence abroad. We do not include here any extended discussion on the theoretical underpinnings of the ethnography programme or an overview of the actual practice of running such a programme. These are given in Roberts, C, Byram, M, Barro, A, Jordan, S and Street, B (2000) *Language Learners as Ethnographers*.

The idea of language learners as ethnographers originated with Michael Byram and Celia Roberts and their research project in the early 1990s.¹ The ethnography programme ran at Thames Valley University for seven years during which several different versions of the materials were tried out. It has also been piloted by the University of Southampton and by Oxford Brookes University, where a slightly different route has been taken. We hope that other Modern Language departments and staff will find ways of adapting our suggestions to meet their own particular needs and purposes. For example, in its second year of running, language staff at Southampton have added some of their own materials and modified the assessment patterns, whilst, at Oxford Brookes, the key elements of the ethnography course have been integrated with a broader French Cultural Studies unit for first-year students.

◆ **What is an ethnography programme and why is it worth introducing it into the curriculum?**

This ethnography programme is based on the idea that students will get the most out of their period of residence abroad if they take a leaf out of the anthropologists' book and undertake an ethnographic project. 'Ethnography' is the study of another group's way of life from their perspective. It is the fundamental method of anthropologists who seek to understand the cultural practices of others, whether that means going to a small atoll in the Pacific or studying how people re-design their kitchens on a London housing estate.

The rationale for developing language learners as ethnographers is to offer a systematic and rigorous approach to cultural and intercultural learning. Students learn new ways of looking at the ordinary and the everyday, drawing out patterns from careful and extended observation of a small group, e.g. students have studied dancers of the Sevillano dance in bars in southern Spain, blind students in Marburg University, Germany and the Carnivaliers in Nice. Spending time 'lurking and soaking' in a particular environment or with a group helps students develop an insider perspective on cultural processes and immerses them in the language of the group.

The ethnography programme consists of:

- ◆ A module in the semester before students go abroad: 'Introduction to Ethnography'. This consists of anthropological concepts and ethnographic method, culminating in a 'home ethnography' in which they try out the new approach in a familiar environment and focus on themselves as culturally constructed beings.
- ◆ An ethnographic study and field diary while abroad with support either through visits or at a distance from tutors.

- ◆ The writing up of the study on their return with tutorial support.
- ◆ The presentation of their studies as part of a final-year module on language development.
- ◆ A viva on the ethnographic study as part of the final degree award.

The programme is, therefore, well integrated into the whole degree course. By giving students a full module before they go abroad, they can relate the habits of observation, reflexivity, challenging of stereotypes and close analysis of data to other aspects of their course, and can prepare themselves intellectually for the experience abroad. Once there, they are strongly motivated to get out and find a group who can be their informants rather than waiting until near the end of their stay and relying largely on book-based learning. On their return, the process of writing up engages them in thinking about their own culturally-based judgements and in relating the cultural learning abroad to the re-integration into their home environment.

Writing an ethnographic project is the best way that we can think of for assessing the notoriously slippery area of cultural learning. The written project should provide evidence that the students have acquired cultural knowledge and can write about their own learning in an analytical way. The process of doing ethnography (even if it cannot all be displayed in the project itself) is equally important in giving the opportunity for a sustained and rigorous exercise in cultural learning.

Colleagues often comment that the idea of ethnography is a good one but it is difficult to offer a whole new unit or module in the curriculum and would a few workshops do? Our experience is that students need a considerable amount of time to learn new ways of looking at the everyday if they are to have the confidence to do an ethnographic study. Also, the whole programme is designed to integrate as fully as possible the learning while abroad with the curriculum both before and after the period of residence abroad. So, including the ethnography programme is an opportunity to add a significant new dimension to the curriculum and not just tinker with it.

◆ **How does ethnography contribute to students' cultural learning and intercultural competence?**

The problem with the notions of 'culture' and 'intercultural competence' is that they are difficult to tie down and mean so many things to different people. There has been a tendency in the field of foreign languages to think of 'culture' in a generalised way as if each nation had 'a culture' which was in some way essential and fixed. A nation's culture is, therefore, seen in terms of general behaviour or national stereotypes and personalities. An alternative view of 'culture' is a more cognitive one, usually related to literature or other forms of 'high culture'. As a consequence, cultural studies is often taught as a blend of literature and area studies or, in a rather ad hoc way, as part of functional language teaching.

Ethnographic approaches conceptualise 'culture' in different ways. It is not used to generalise about an entire national group. Instead it concentrates on the small, local and everyday. It does not see culture as a fixed set of beliefs and behaviour but as practices. Culture is not out there waiting to be discovered. Rather cultural practices,

for example, the way in which mothers-in-law are complimented in Las Palmas or young members relate to older members of the *pétanque* club in Aubervilliers, are dynamic, subtly changing or being transformed over time.

Cultural practices are not just ways of acting and being in the world, they also reflect and create more lasting patterns and structures. Ethnographic research, therefore, is the detailed investigation of the cultural and social patterns of interaction and the values, beliefs and assumptions that account for such interaction.

So, ethnographers participate in the lives of others and observe their interactions and gradually draw out the patterns and structures that give meaning to the fleeting and taken-for-granted encounters of everyday life. Embedded in these patterns and structures are the meanings, the symbolic significance, the beliefs and values that make sense of the everydayness of things.

Part of the process of learning about 'otherness' comes from comparing what you are learning as an ethnographer with knowledge and assumptions from your own socially and culturally constructed world. So, for example, to say that 'Young people respect old people more in France than in England' is no more than a generalisation. But the student who studied the *pétanque* club was able to observe the small, subtle ways in which this particular group of young people related to the older members. She was able, over time, to trace some patterns to these relationships and begin to work out the nuanced ways in which 'respect' was used and what it meant to this particular group.

Ethnography, therefore, is a method which links language and interaction to 'culture', as we have just described it, and provides strategies for cultural learning through ethnographic techniques of observation, conversations and analysis. It encourages a comparative approach so that students are always 'travelling' between their own cultural worlds and those of the group they are studying. So, an ethnographic approach to cultural and intercultural learning is both an intellectual, psychological and experiential endeavour.

Intercultural learning is often represented as a psychological process concerned with tolerance and understanding. While this is clearly one of the outcomes of intercultural learning, it is only part of the story. Both cultural studies people and indeed language teachers can dismiss intercultural learning as 'touchy feely stuff'. We maintain that an ethnographic approach to intercultural learning combines the experiential, the intellectual and the psychological:

Experiential: being part of another group's life. This means having a very specific role as an ethnographic researcher and not just a student who is spending some time abroad. Of course, teaching assistants and those on work-placements do have a clear role, and in these cases ethnography adds a dimension to their learning. For students attached to universities, ethnography may be the only means to establish a clear role for themselves and a reason for getting to know local people. In any case, ethnography motivates all students to go out and create learning opportunities for themselves:

I've been casting my net wide to get a feel for what I want to look at, which has made me do a lot more, talk a lot more and go to loads of places I would never have gone to before.

Intellectual: working out an interesting ethnographic question to pursue. This means engaging with the data, being systematic and imaginative in the analysis of it and bringing a comparative and reflexive element to the analytic process.

Well I think, you know, the conclusions that you come up with (in) ethnography, you can't just come up with them if you've just seen it once. So you know you need to be culturally aware, you have to spend a hell of a long time actually looking at it. And every time you look at a certain situation you observe different things and then they lead you on to other things.

In the intellectual endeavour, students are also drawn to see language and cultural learning as 'wired in together' (Agar 1994) rather than separate.

Psychological: developing an understanding of 'otherness'; managing risk and uncertainty in a study which is designed and carried out without the 'props' of books and available factual information. This means being reflexive and cautious in making judgements about others' beliefs and behaviour. And this personal development can have long lasting effects, as one student (now a college teacher of Spanish) described, eight years after completing the ethnography programme:

It had never occurred to me before the project to look at things from other people's point of view. That's one thing I overcame through this ethnography project, not to use your own vision, your own terms to describe things as a first resort. It was a huge step not only to see and speak to people but communicate with them in their own terms which was an excellent thing and one of the long lasting effects.

◆ **Does the students' language improve if they do ethnographic projects?**

It is very difficult to uncouple language learning from cultural learning or indeed to think of improvement in language as if language were an undifferentiated whole. It is probably fair to say that students' language-and-culture ability improves in those areas where they have had most experience and practice. This is, of course, a tautology. Students doing ethnographic projects tend to put themselves in situations where they do a great deal of listening, often from informants with a particular dialect or set of discourses that identify them as speakers:

The first thing is I think my language improved (indistinct) ... because it made me approach situations differently. It made me more bold where perhaps I wouldn't have been before. Regardless of my ability in the language I'd just, like, go for it, and so that helped ultimately.

So, doing ethnography gives students extended and often demanding listening comprehension. Some students tape and transcribe conversations they have with informants and the process of transcribing requires skills of comprehension that even the most advanced dictation exercise cannot emulate. Much of the data collection for an ethnographic study involves students in observation of practices, for example, how people use social space in a bar, the steps in the *sevillano* dance or the table-manners of a family. In this way, the language and interactions they observe (and may be part of) are always embedded in a context. The way people speak is wired in to the way they move, present themselves and use physical and social space. As students develop their communicative competence in relation to a particular group, so they learn not just ways of talking but also ways of being.

Informal evaluation of students' experience of doing ethnography as a way of cultural and linguistic learning has tended to show the following:

- ◆ some students feel their language has definitely improved because they have had to go out and meet informants and learn from them.
- ◆ some feel that they are more sensitive to the cultural associations of language.
- ◆ some feel that their language, conceived rather narrowly as the linguistic code, has not improved greatly, but they talk about being able to pass themselves off as Spanish or German, etc. which suggests that they have learnt how to *be* in the foreign language.

I've always held in the back of my mind what a marvellous thing to pass myself off as a speaker of another language. I suppose I must have learnt from the ethnography thing, as well, a more neutral way of being so that I can, to an extent, be taken for a Spanish person through things that I've absorbed – posture, body language. Heightened awareness from the ethnography would have contributed to that. (Ethnography) sparked off a huge curiosity – an interpenetrating of the culture and me – such that I behave feel and act to it like members of that group – like Spanish people but not fully.

On the whole, since they are not doing book-based studies and their ethnographic projects are written out of their own data and analysis, students' formal written language does not improve significantly (although it is a moot point how much the written language of students conducting non-ethnographic projects is improved as a consequence). However, as one student commented, the achievement of a seven-thousand-word project entirely written from their data (and in no way semi-plagiarised from relevant texts) is a great achievement in itself. Students gained a sense of ownership in their own projects and a resulting sense of intellectual independence:

At college you get loads of facts. Most of it isn't your own, but this is all your own. None of this is anyone else's.

Staff sometimes comment that improvement in oral/aural language, and in colloquial and dialect varieties in particular, is what one would expect from any student returning from their period abroad. Perhaps the difference with students who have done ethnography is that their learning has been more systematic and rigorous and surface competence is allied to deeper cultural understandings.

◆ **As a modern linguist, how can I teach ethnography and assess ethnographic projects?**

In an ideal world, lecturers embarking on the ethnography programme should try their hands at a small ethnography themselves. Two of the staff at Thames Valley University, Ana Barro and Shirley Jordan, did so and their ethnographic projects are used as examples in some of the units. They found undertaking such a project helped them to appreciate what the students had to learn and they were able to use their own experience as a resource in giving advice and support. However, as has been shown by staff at Southampton and Oxford Brookes, it is possible to teach and assess ethnography for language learners without doing your own project, provided that you have some background in cultural studies or sociolinguistics.

The Ethnography course provides adequate materials for both staff and students to familiarise themselves with both the concepts and methods for language learners to undertake an ethnographic project. Each unit has quite an extensive background section with references which is aimed at staff but may also be useful for students. Staff may also wish to add to these references with texts from the foreign language(s) they specialise in through their own contacts with anthropology and ethnology departments in the foreign country.

Criteria for assessment of ethnographic studies are given to students in Units 18 and 19 and are referred to throughout the course. Both in a number of the weekly tasks and in the 'home ethnography' (see below), an ethnographic way of writing is gradually built up, so that staff and students can become familiar with the kind of writing that makes a 'good' ethnographic project. Our experience is that students need a lot of support and encouragement throughout the whole process of selecting a topic, collecting data, analysing and writing up. For lecturers new to ethnography, this is probably the most difficult part of the programme. In many respects, staff are learning on the job during the first run of the ethnography programme but as their own experience builds up and there is a collection of student ethnographic projects for the new cohort to refer to, support and advice become easier to give.

The assessment of the ethnography course module is through a home ethnography and any other forms of assessment that the team feels are appropriate. One possibility is self-assessment which is described in Unit 19 (see below). Another possibility is a short essay on the concepts learnt on the course (this is being piloted at Southampton University). On-going assessment is through the weekly tasks and student contributions, without which the ethnography class cannot really function.

Projects/dissertations written during or as a result of the period abroad may be either in the foreign language or in English. At Thames Valley University, the requirement was that the students should write their project in the foreign language. Issues

arising from this requirement are discussed in Unit 18. Students are encouraged to seek help from a native speaker to check for linguistic accuracy and appropriate register. However, at least parts of the ethnographic project are likely to be written in a rather different style from the formal academic one (again, see Unit 18). If the project/dissertation is written in English, then students can draw on the many examples taken from ethnographic/ anthropological studies which are used on the course.

◆ **Should this be a core/compulsory course?**

This answer to this question may depend on university regulations. At Thames Valley University, the course and so the ethnographic project were optional. At Oxford Brookes, a modified version is part of the first-year core for all students. The approach suits some students more than others; the more rigid and authoritarian personalities can feel quite uncomfortable with it. On the other hand, it could be argued that all language students should be exposed to the risks and uncertainties of intercultural encounters as part of their degree and that the intellectual challenge of learning systematically from such encounters is necessary for everyone.

If the course is piloted with a small group of volunteers, they should not be expected to do it as an extra module in addition to the rest of their programme. The ethnography course is hard work and demands a lot in time and it is very unlikely that students will gain a great deal from it or be able to do a home ethnography if it is an additional burden in an already busy programme.

◆ **How should we organise the ethnography course?**

There are 19 units to the course. Eighteen of them are substantive units and the 19th is called The Butterfly Unit since elements of it may 'alight' on any of the units. Here is an overview of the units:

Overview of the Introduction to Ethnography course

The Units cover the following areas:

1. An Introduction to Ethnography for Language Learners

The period abroad is introduced as an opportunity to go out into the field, on the analogy of the anthropologist's fieldwork, and to study some aspect of a community in a systematic way.

2. What is an Ethnographic Approach?

Some of the fundamental principles of ethnography are introduced: ethnography as a holistic method, data as always interpreted in context, the notion of reflexivity.

3. Non-verbal Communication and Social Space

These concepts are used to introduce students to methods of observation. Goffman's work is introduced along with some of the anthropological studies of how people make meaning out of their use of space.

4. Shared Cultural Knowledge

The idea of ethnography as 'thick description' is introduced. The difference between description and interpretation is used to focus on the idea that we draw on our social and cultural knowledge in order to judge and label experiences.

5. Families and Households

The idea of the 'family' as a cultural construct is introduced and the role of cultural knowledge is illustrated by looking at kinship terms, and, more sociolinguistically, by the analysis of family conversations.

6. Gender Relations

The focus in this unit is on gender and language, both the discourses around gender and female and male interaction.

7. Education and Socialisation

The concept of education as a process of socialisation is introduced. Culturally organised patterns of classroom behaviour are related to wider issues of education as a means of social reproduction.

8. Participant Observation

This is the first session to focus on specific methods and it introduces the key method of participant observation. The tension between being a participant and being an observer is explored and practical help is given in how to locate informants and take field notes.

9. Ethnographic Conversations 1

Alternative methods to observation are discussed. Some techniques for informal ethnographic interviewing are tried out and problems raised and discussed.

10. Ethnographic Conversations 2

In addition to trying out some ethnographic conversations in a foreign language, more formal interview methods based on cognitive and linguistic anthropology are used to elicit key cultural words and their semantic associations.

11. Data Analysis 1

The relationship between data collection and data analysis is explored. Two ways of drawing out concepts from the data are introduced and students are reminded of the importance of reflexivity in data analysis.

12. Data Analysis 2

Further practice in interpretive data analysis is given. Ways of organising field notes and other data are introduced. The importance of writing a field diary is stressed.

13. National and Ethnic Identities and Local Boundaries

The period abroad is designed to immerse students in a different cultural experience and so questions of identity, of what it means to belong to a nation, are particularly salient. In this unit, the concept of boundary is used to explore ethnic and national groups.

14. Language and Social Identity

The relationship between language and social identity is introduced, drawing on sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication. The use of different varieties of language, styles of talking and code-switching illuminate the political economy of language.

15. Local Level Politics

The central role that small 'p' politics plays in the formation and maintenance of social relations is discussed. The notion of exchange is related both to students' own gift-giving habits and to wider social issues of honour and shame.

16. Belief and Action 1: Categorisation and Rituals

The distinction between the symbolic and functional is explored by looking at eating habits and the different ways in which what appears as 'natural' is classified symbolically.

17. Belief and Action 2: Discourse and Power

Aspects of the ethnography of communication, critical linguistics and the anthropological analysis of ritual language are combined to look at some aspects of institutional discourses.

18. Writing an Ethnographic Project

Recent work on writing ethnographic accounts is used to highlight the constructed nature of ethnographic texts, challenging positivistic assumptions of objectivity in writing. Students are also helped to think about some of the tensions they will have to manage in writing their ethnographic project in the foreign language but using many of the Anglo-American concepts of the ethnography course.

19. The Butterfly unit

This unit contains guidance on the home ethnography, the ethnographic project abroad and other suggestions for assessment. Like a butterfly, aspects of it can 'alight' on any other unit. Or they can be dealt with in a separate class.

Each of the 18 substantive units is designed to take about 2 - 3 hours, i.e. 35 - 55 hours. In addition, some time needs to be allowed for discussion of the home ethnography and selection of an ethnographic topic for the period abroad. If self-assessment is used, this also needs to be built in. The rationale for the sequence of units is as follows:

- ◆ Units 1-4 are laying down some fundamental principles of ethnography
- ◆ Units 5-7 introduce some useful anthropological/social concepts
- ◆ Units 8-12 provide basic tools for data-collection and analysis
- ◆ Units 13-17 introduce more demanding anthropological concepts
- ◆ Unit 18 gives guidance on writing an ethnographic project
- ◆ Unit 19 gives more general guidance on projects and assessment

In this way, students have a mix of concepts and methods which become increasingly demanding as the course progresses.

The course itself can be run over one or two terms or semesters but the most effective timing is the second semester (or final term) before the students go abroad. It is also more effective to run the course over a relatively long period (at least three months) rather than squeezing it into a few weeks. This is because it takes time for students to orientate to new ways of thinking and more than one task a week proves too time-consuming for them. If the course runs over one semester, there is frequently a break mid-semester (December or April) and this gives an excellent opportunity for students to collect data for their home ethnography.

The length and timing of the course will have to be adapted according to individual university regulations and cultures. It may not be possible to run all the units and units may have to be taught over two short class periods rather than, say, one 3-hour period. For example, at Southampton, not all the units can be taught in the time available and the sequence of units is somewhat different:

Example:

At Southampton, 14 of the 18 units are taught, in the following order:
2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 18, 13, 14, 12, 15, 16, 17.

◆ **What does each unit consist of?**

Apart from Unit 19, all units follow the same format:

- ◆ Introduction
- ◆ Links to other units
- ◆ Background notes
- ◆ Outline of a 'typical' session
- ◆ Description of a 'typical' session
- ◆ Advice and student comments
- ◆ Assignment
- ◆ Handouts
- ◆ Readings

The background notes give a brief overview of the topic and some of the key ideas and the theories that underpin them. They are written for staff new to this area of work but students may also find them useful. The description of a session summarises each item and suggests a sequence. Each class session includes feedback from the assignment, which is carried out before the class, and a discussion of the essential reading for the unit. There is usually a very brief lecture introducing or summarising new concepts/methods and, in the case of the methods units (Units 8 - 12), more practical tasks in class.

The Introduction to Ethnography video consists of off-air recordings and is used in the following units:

Unit 3 Non-verbal Communication and Social Space. An excerpt from a documentary on a comprehensive school, showing the use of non-verbal communication and social space in a staff meeting.

Unit 13 National and Ethnic Identities and Local Boundaries. One programme from the *Essential History of Europe* is used to discuss representations and images of England.

Unit 14 Language and Social Identity. An excerpt from one programme from *The Interview Game* is used to show culturally specific styles of communicating.

Unit 15 Local Level Politics. An excerpt from *Ongka's Big Moka*, set in Papua New Guinea, is used to show the social significance of 'exchange' in a traditional community.

Unit 17 Belief and Action 2: Discourse and Power. An excerpt from *Clap-trap* is used to show the rhetorical strategies used by politicians.

◆ **What can be left out of any unit if there is not time to do it all?**

The assignment feedback and discussion of the reading should always be included. Generally, students relate well to any practical task or activity and so it is worth including them. Apart from that, tutors will want to use their own judgement as to what their particular group of students will find most interesting and motivating. Particularly in the early stages, students find the content (and sometimes the method) of the sessions elusive and unsettling. They need quite a bit of reassurance that the lack of hard facts, set texts or right or wrong answers is part of the process of 'living the ethnographic life'. Some of the uncertainty and frustration that they may feel is a pre-cursor to the feelings they may have when they are abroad, starting out on their ethnographic project. So, it is worth spending a little time each week on reassurance and on relating what they have done in the session to actual or potential project work so that they can see clearly how the course is preparing them for their time abroad.

◆ **How is it possible to generalise from such specific, local and small-scale ethnographic studies?**

This question in turn raises lots more questions which anyone doing ethnography has to ask. Should we be trying to generalise at all? What is the value of generalisation? Can we generalise about some levels of understanding but not about others? As students go about collecting their data and starting to analyse it, these questions should be rumbling around in the back of their minds.

Generalising about a particular culture is, of course, the basis of stereotyping and often negative stereotyping. Helping students to think about the problems of generalising is a way of helping them to challenge their preconceptions and stereotypes. Most students feel that, if they cannot generalise, then what they have

learnt is merely local and fleeting. Ethnography aims to help them see significance in the local. Indeed, it may also encourage them to question the value of generalisations of people and their behaviour. We live our lives locally, not at the level of generality, and the reflexive, questioning orientation towards their informants and towards the writing process that students are developing should help them to question the generalisations that so easily come to mind.

This is not to argue that there should be no generalisation in their ethnographic projects. Cultural learning is about linking the local and immediate to the general principles and concepts that underlie social action. The task of the ethnographic writer is to ask how far any specific example of action or reflection links to these more general concepts. One way of doing that is to place the individual in his or her context as completely as possible, describing all the conditions under which, for example, they have taken a particular stance on a subject in order to understand where they are coming from. So, if the student looking at the *pétanque* club found that the young members let older members play before them, she would need to look at all the circumstances that surrounded that decision and relate the patterns of behaviour she found (however discrepant they turned out to be) to more general concepts such as 'respect', club rituals, notions of exchange and so on. The concepts are generalisable but the particular and local practices are not.

◆ **Why is the anthropological approach taken rather a traditional one?**

The ideas about culture presented to the students tend to be based on key writings of the 60s, 70s and early 80s. Some of the reading will look old – or even ancient – to students. There is hardly more than a nod in the direction of post-modernism and only in Units 17 and 18 is a more critical turn taken. This was a deliberate decision since the earlier writing is less demanding and students should be able to manage the weekly reading assignments which are mostly taken from this earlier period. It also seemed inappropriate to include a critique of traditional anthropology and ethnography when students were only just being introduced to these disciplines and methods for the first time.

Lecturers with a background in anthropology may feel that the course is rather traditional but the defence would be that we have pitched the ideas and reading at a level with which most language students seem to be comfortable.

◆ **What is the value of the home ethnography?**

There are three main reasons for the home ethnography:

1. It is a dress rehearsal for the extended project abroad. Students practise selecting a topic, collecting data, analysing and writing up.
2. Since it is a **home** ethnography, students have to study their own socially and culturally constructed worlds – to 'make strange' what is taken for granted and begin to understand that the cultural practices that seem so routine and natural to them are constructed. Part of the process of intercultural learning is to be aware of your own cultural practices.

3. It is the best way that we can think of to assess the module/unit on ethnography because it requires students to draw on both the conceptual and methodological elements of the course.

Students will need support in selecting an appropriate topic, encouragement to collect lots of data, specific help with analysis and with writing up. Small group sessions with two or more staff are ideal for this if staffing levels permit.

Often, students are working part-time or have a holiday job and these contexts can be used for their home ethnographies. For example, students have written about being despatch-riders, working in a fish-and-chip shop or at the airport.

- ◆ Why is the language of the ethnography course English?

Some tutors are concerned that a module/unit taught in English means time away from improving the foreign language. There are several reasons for using English as the medium and for most texts to be in English:

- ◆ the tradition of ethnography which is most suitable for language students stems from the Anglo-American tradition and so the texts and terminology are in English. It has been difficult to find texts in French, German, Spanish, etc. that are accessible and not too theoretical. However, if lecturers can find such texts, then they will undoubtedly enhance the course.
- ◆ the course usually draws students from a number of foreign language departments/sections (including overseas students with English as a foreign language) and English is the lingua franca for this group.
- ◆ although students are exposed to English rather than the foreign language on this module, this is counteracted by the benefits of ethnographic approaches abroad. Students tend to get stuck in early on and use the period abroad fully, developing skills in interviewing, writing field-notes, etc. in the foreign language. In addition, there are benefits to working in English. Firstly, new concepts can be more readily taken in and, secondly, students' own skills in English can be improved which is of use if they are to undertake interpreting or translating.
- ◆ **If students are spending a period of time in two countries, should they do an ethnographic study in each?**

Writing two ethnographic projects in nine months or so is very demanding. Where students are spending four or five months in each country, it is advisable that they undertake only one ethnographic project, particularly if one of their projects is a major and one a minor. The students from the ethnography course at Thames Valley University tended to write a more traditional book-based project for their second project. However many felt that they could not just leave ethnography behind and they used ethnographic insights and some of the anthropological background to enhance these minor projects.

- ◆ **How can we get students interested in ethnography when they have no idea what it is about?**

As the idea of ethnography is so new to nearly every student, it is necessary to market the programme. Some universities have a session when the options to students are explained to them. If such an opportunity is available, it is very worthwhile (once the course has already been run) to ask students from the previous cohort to talk about their experience of ethnography.

Any publicity literature or explanation of the programme should stress the following:

- ◆ it is a new and effective way of preparing for the period abroad;
- ◆ it is a new and effective way of preparing for the dissertation/project;
- ◆ both the content and methods will be rather different from other courses on offer;
- ◆ it provides a rigorous training in cultural learning.

References

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The materials were designed and written by: Ana Barro, Hanns Grimm, Shirley Jordan, Celia Roberts and Brian Street.

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