Discovering the Host Culture Through The Ethno Project
by Patrick T. Randolph

In the summer of 2008, I read a comment on a student's course evaluation from a speaking-skills class that haunted me for years to come. "We spoke about many topics. I learned a lot. But, I will return to my country knowing nothing about this city or about the state."

Two years later, I noticed how many insightful cultural observations—both on and off campus—my students made in the first 2 weeks of the term; however, once homework, quizzes, and papers became a daily routine, their wonderful host culture observations subsided, their curiosity faded, and they no longer engaged in observing the immediate world around them. The academic life that was supposed to broaden their horizons suddenly confined them to a reality of time-consuming, dorm room–bound assignments. Would these students return to their homelands learning nothing about their immediate host culture as well? What could I do to keep their minds and eyes open to a rich and profound education beyond the classroom? And equally important, how could I keep their interest level engaged in speech topics that were relevant to their immediate lives?

The answer I came up with was something I'd studied years back in graduate school—ethnomethodology.

What Is Ethnomethodology?

Ethnomethodology can be best defined as a school of sociology that is based on pure observation and void of any theoretical underpinnings (Garfinkel, 1967). Ethnomethodology was developed by Harold Garfinkel, who was interested in making objective observations about everyday events and social interactions. The idea is to focus on asking "What is going on?" and "Why does this person or these people do what they do?" As an integral component of his method, Garfinkel emphasized the idea of asking the actual participants why they do what they do as opposed to seeking comments or opinions from "outsiders." Once this initial data is gathered, research into the topic can begin.

The Ethno Project

The idea behind the Ethno Project, then, is to get the students out into their local communities—either on or off campus—and make fresh, nontheory-based observations about their host culture and its citizens (McPherron & Randolph, 2013). Then, after the initial observation, they create a question about why the activity or event happened in the manner it did. Next, they construct a set of hypotheses that attempts to answer the original observation question. The students then come up with a set of interview questions that they ask the participants of the observed activity. The survey results will either confirm or deny their hypotheses. Finally, the students present the observation, hypotheses, and results to the class in the form of a 9–10-minute presentation. I would like to point out that although I have used this project in the United States, I believe that EFL instructors could easily use it abroad. I say this because ethnomethodology originated with Americans looking at American culture. So, I think the project could easily work in a myriad of

situations for English language learners observing their own culture (e.g., students from Spain making observations about Spanish culture and asking “Why do we do what we do?”).

Analyzing Stereotypes

To get my students to investigate their host cultures, I first have them discuss common stereotypes they have about Americans and American culture. This is done primarily so that they can learn to consciously differentiate between their preconceived ideas of their host culture and the pure, objective observations they are asked to make. I usually write all of their stereotypes on the board and then go over each one to confirm or deny its truth-value.

I have found that this stereotype analysis also helps the students to understand the potential dangers of making broad or sweeping generalizations by using determiners like “all” or adverbs such as “always” or “never” (e.g., All Americans love fast food; American men always hold the door for women.)

Ethno Introduction and Practice-Observations

After a brief explanation of ethnomethodology and a discussion of how it can help students foster a better understanding of their host culture, the project begins with sending the students onto campus to make observations. The students are asked to write these observations down and explain why they are of interest. Here is a sampling of student practice-observations:

- There are an equal number of recycling bins to trash cans in the halls of academic buildings.
- Elderly professors use the stairs versus taking the elevator.
- If eye-contact is made, students or teachers who pass each other in the hall greet each other.

Discussing the Practice-Observations

The following lesson focuses on the previous day’s observations. The observations are written on the board, and, as a class, hypotheses are created about the observations. For example, the elderly professors take the stairs versus the elevator because (1) they know that physical exercise is good for their brains, (2) it takes longer so that they can either mentally prepare for class or reflect on the class they taught, and (3) it makes them feel youthful again. The class examines the hypotheses to see if they would make good research topics and if they provide the possibility for further investigation (McPherron & Randolph, 2013).

The pivotal points of this class are to have the students reflect on (1) the pure nature of the observation, (2) why the observation is of interest (the “wow factor”), (3) if further research can be done about the topic, and (4) if they would be able to easily find participants who are doing the activity or at least have a relation to the observation. Once the practice-observations are completed, the hypotheses have been discussed, and the students have developed a better understanding of how the project works, I assign them to make observations over the weekend

about events, interactions, or places in the local community. I reiterate that the observation should have a "wow factor" that really makes them wonder "why do people do what they do?"

Checking the Observations and Conducting Interviews

As with the practice-observations, I like to go over the Ethno Project observations to make sure that they lend themselves to further research. For example, the observation, "All Americans walk on sidewalks" would not work, whereas "There appear to be many elderly greeters at Wal-Mart" would. Once I okay the observation, I ask the students to formulate a multipart hypothesis about the observation or a set of possible hypotheses. For instance, with respect to the elderly working at Wal-Mart, my student hypothesized that they do this to stay healthy through physical activity and they many need extra financial help (Randolph, 2012).

With the observation and hypothesis complete, the students then develop a list of demographic and observation-related questions to interview their respondents about their observations. These two categories of questions help the students learn more about their observation, and they help to either confirm or deny their hypotheses. It is important to stress that the students need to interview people who are participating in the observed activity and not "outsiders." That is, my student who observed the elderly working at Wal-Mart was not allowed to ask customers why they thought elderly were working there; he had to specifically interview the four elderly workers.

Analyzing the Survey Results

Once the interviews are finished, I devote a class period to helping the students analyze their results. Here, we look for any intriguing patterns that may exist in the demographic information and the observation-related questions. For instance, did respondents of a certain age answer one way while respondents of a different age bracket answer in another way? Did the female respondents answer differently than the male respondents? We also examine which questions were more helpful or elicited more information than others. And finally, we look at which hypotheses were confirmed and which ones were denied.

Discussion and Reflection

The final step before the students present their projects is to critically reflect on the project as a whole. This part is often the most fun for everyone, because the class can look back on how much they have learned as language learners, and also how much they have accomplished as researchers of their host culture.

The following is a list of questions we discuss and also use in the reflection section of the presentation.

1. What did you learn about your original observation, now that you received both confirmations and denials of your hypotheses?
2. How have the responses helped you learn more about your topic?
3. How does your observation compare or contrast to your home culture?

4. What aspect of your project was successful?
5. What aspect was not?
6. What would you do differently?
7. What was the most surprising aspect you learned during the Ethno Project?

The Presentations

With all the research and reflection completed, next, the students present their findings to the class. I usually allow 9–10 minutes for the presentations. Below is the guided outline I use. It is divided into four parts: the introduction, results analysis, reflection on the project, and the conclusion.

> *1. The Introduction: Background & Methodology (2 minutes)*
> Students present on the observation and why it was of interest, state their hypotheses, and share how they conducted their interviews (with whom they conducted them and where).
>
> *2. Results—Confirmation and Denial (2 minutes)*
> Here students summarize the results, highlighting the points of interest, and explain which ideas of their hypotheses were confirmed and which ones were denied.
>
> *3. Reflection on the Project (3 minutes)*
> Students select two to three points from the list of seven discussion points and present them to the class.
>
> *4. Conclusion (2 minutes)*
> Students reiterate their observation, hypotheses, confirmation and denial results, and one takeaway from the project.

Previous Topics From Student Ethno Projects

- Why do the elderly work at Wal-Mart?
- Why do students touch their chin with their hand when thinking?
- Is it common to say “Bless you” to someone you don’t know?
- Why are large pick-up trucks so commonly driven by young businessmen?
- Why do so few young women use the elevator in the dormitories?

Concluding Remarks

Since implementing the Ethno Project at various levels in my IEP and credit-bearing classes, I have finally been able to lay to rest the pesky ghost, the haunting echo of my student’s comment from years back. Now, I receive cheerful commentaries on student evaluations, or I listen to stories about how much students enjoy being researchers. But more important, I read or listen to how much they feel they have become a part of their new surroundings through keeping their eyes and minds open to the infinitely interesting classroom that they fondly call their host culture.

References

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Patrick T. Randolph currently teaches at the University of Nebraska where he specializes in vocabulary acquisition, creative and academic writing, speech, and debate.