How to Undertake an Ethnographic Study: Via Looking at Adolescents’ Literacy Practices

Inran Choi
(Chonnam University)


With the aim of establishing a forum for discussion concerning the qualitative approach to language and language education, this paper explores various aspects of implementing an ethnographic approach to the study of language issues. An introduction to ethnography and its purposes is followed by a detailed description of other dimensions of this methodological approach. Methodological considerations are formed and shaped from research into the reading and writing engaged in by young people. The process of data collection and data analysis is examined and other dimensions such as reliability, validity and translation are discussed. This research study concludes that an implementation of the ethnographic mode requires an understanding of the qualitative approach to research, which is its theoretical underpinning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically there has been a heavy emphasis on quantification in science and there exists a widespread conviction that only quantitative data are ultimately either valid or valuable (Sechrest, 1992). In recent years, however, a strong counter-pressure against quantification has emerged. Guba and Lincoln (1998) point out certain limitations of the quantitative paradigm: context stripping; exclusion of meaning and purpose; disjunction of grand theories with local contexts; inapplicability of general data to individual cases; and exclusion of the discovery dimension in inquiry (1998, p. 198). Qualitative advocates in turn argue that qualitative data resolve the perceived shortcomings of quantitative approaches due to their intrinsic strength in areas such as context richness, delivery of an emic (insider) view of the studied individuals, groups, societies, or cultures, and their allowance of creative and divergent insight.
With reference to language education, Readence et al. (1998) point out that qualitative or interpretive studies presume that teaching is context-specific and complex and cannot be generalized across classrooms and schools. Although advocates of the qualitative perspective claim that qualitative methods and data explicitly enhance the generalizability and applicability of the findings, and are capable of producing profound insights into human behavior, perhaps the most significant benefit of the qualitative approach lies in its potential to present an in-depth account of a particular phenomenon which gives precedence to the researched subject's own voice. The fields of English language education and language studies also reflect such methodological trend. During the past five years, for example, one of the most respected academic journals, TESOL QUARTERLY, featured 18 research studies conducted within a qualitative framework, while containing 21 studies utilizing quantitative methods. From such statistics, it is apparent that the former has gained significance and recognition.

In my own area of literacy studies, the strengths of qualitative approaches can readily be observed in research studies which have adopted them. Moving from positivistic paradigm through critical theory to constructivism, scholars who favor qualitative methods are much concerned with the social, cultural and historical dimensions of their subject matter, namely the local context. They are intent on presenting the insider's perspective rather than concentrating on the verification of hypotheses. Bean (1998), for example, conducted ethnographic interviews with teachers to see how their personal pathways to literacy influenced their classroom instruction and learning. Some very strong links between teachers' literacy histories and their classroom practices were powerfully demonstrated through the actual voices of teachers and students, projected in excerpts from interview transcripts and realia such as autobiographical journals. The research illustrates how the use of young adult literature relevant to content-area instruction, as well as texts that resonate with the social and cultural lives of adolescents, can help students build positive attitudes towards reading and lead teachers to reconceptualize their understanding of reading in a wider social context.

Cohen et al. (1998) carried out action research to investigate the relationship between critical literacy and school reform. Adopting the theoretical perspective of critical literacy based on Freirean's educational model, they interviewed two groups of student cohorts and analyzed the interview transcripts using a qualitative approach. Focusing on the research participants' speech, the researchers describe in eloquent detail both the literacy and concomitant reform processes that occur in a school wherein parents, teachers, and administration set about taking seriously what students have to say about their school experiences. The resulting analysis of student voice explicitly exhibits the strength of the ethnographic mode of research.

Moore and Cunningham (1998) offer a descriptive and interpretative account of the ways in which students exert agency when they face choices, make decisions, and realize consequences.
From a stance of opposition to positivistic and structural attitudes towards literacy education, the two researchers used an ethnographic approach in their case study to investigate a high school literacy event, clearly demonstrating how agency is played out in specific actions and how these actions are interwoven with literacy. Their work offers suggestions to educators of ways to enable students to assert their human agency positively both within and outside the classroom context.

One of the most representative research studies in qualitative mode is that of Finders' (1997). Her year-long ethnographic study of middle school students' literacy practices demonstrates a need to re-examine accepted pedagogical practice and to take a fresh look at the role of written language. Using the ethnographic practices of participant observation, interview and collection of written artifacts, Finders takes here readers on a revealing guided tour which contrasts official classroom literacy activities with what she calls the 'literate underlife' of her six research subjects (op cit, p.24). Her work poignantly describes how the official classroom lives of her students are interwoven with an unofficial and unsanctioned other life and that student performance in the English language classroom is never free of sociopolitical entanglements.

In the field of CALL a body of research into the development of writing proficiency has also been implemented qualitatively. Warschauer (2000) uses qualitative methods in his examination of on-line learning in language classrooms, in which he attempts to understand how students and teachers themselves perceive classroom practices rather than trying to fit their behavior into pre-designed research categories. He found that, through their participation in electronic literacy, students in an on-line learning program, despite taking part in an English language-dominated on-line world, were at the same time able to shape on-line space for their own language and culture.

In this paper I intend to examine various issues related to qualitative methods, in particular ethnography. I present an in-depth examination as well as my own research experience of conducting an ethnography, with the aim of shedding light on what constitutes ethnography and how it may be implemented. My discussion begins by considering to what kinds of inquiry the ethnographic approach is appropriate. The ethnographic research I present in this paper was carried out during 2000 and 2001 with the purpose of identifying the roles played by, and the meanings inherent in, the written language of young people. For this research, eleven young people between the ages of 16 and 19 were selected and their literacy practices examined. An explanation of the rationale behind this approach is followed by a description of how data was collected and analyzed and then by a review of certain other methodological considerations. Through this detailed account of the entire process of implementing an ethnographic study, I hope to provide researchers and practitioners with some insights into its makeup and benefits.
II. RATIONALE FOR THE QUALITATIVE MODE

As the aim of my research was to explore the literacy practices of young people in a Korean context, I decided early on that the quantitative approach dominant in Korean inquiry into reading behavior (Um H.J., 1995; Kim S.A., 1997; Lee Y.S., 1998), would be inadequate for my purposes. I agree with Cresswell that a qualitative approach is called for when the nature of the research question is such that: i) a topic needs to be explored; ii) a detailed view of the topic is required in that the wide-angle lens or the distant panoramic shot will not suffice to present answers to the problem, or the close-up view does not exist; and iii) the research question involves studying individuals in their natural setting (1998, p. 17). My research question, ‘What does literacy mean to Korean teenagers?’, indeed presupposes an in-depth exploration of the literacy taking place in their lives. As far as I am aware, this line of inquiry has not been followed to any extent previously in a Korean context.

Having established a qualitative framework for my research inquiry, I drew extensively on the ethnographic mode among qualitative traditions, despite a lack of consensus on definition (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Having its origins in anthropology and in widespread use across various disciplines during the last two decades, ethnography exhibits the following characteristics: i) a strong emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them; ii) a tendency to work primarily with unstructured data; iii) an investigation of a small number of cases; and iv) an analysis of data that involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions (Atkinson & Hammersley, ibid, p. 248). In my own research, without attempting to test out any presupposition, I explored various dimensions of literacy as they are experienced by teenagers in their lives. The exploration relied primarily on data collected through unstructured interviewing, with the data then being analyzed to identify roles and meanings attached to or assigned to literacy practices. This kind of ethnographic study is characterized by Toren as “the comparative, descriptive analysis of the everyday, of what is taken for granted” (1996, p. 102).

Insofar as my ethnographic study examines a group’s “observable and learned patterns of behavior, customs and ways of life” as these are evidenced in its reading and writing (Harris, 1968 referred to by Creswell, op cit, p. 58), it can be thought of as a series of case studies. These case studies investigate the literacy-related interactions of a culture-specific group with the object of discerning pervasive patterns. Smith defines a case study as the investigation of a ‘bounded system’ or case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context (1978 quoted in Stake, 1994, p. 236). The ‘boundedness’ of my own research reflects the dimension of time (cumulatively four months) and that of number (eleven young people participated in my data collection).
III. DATA COLLECTION

During the two phases of my fieldwork I interviewed my informants and made observations on their reading and writing. For my selection, age, gender and socio-economic background were all important considerations. I aimed for a balanced gender mix as well as a representative selection from the social spectrum in terms of family income. In the event, I was forced to compromise on the latter criterion in view of my overarching need to gain unfettered access to a reasonable number of informants within the time frame at my disposal.

1. Ethnographic Interviews

As already indicated, the nature of my inquiry led to my choice of the interview as the main vehicle for collecting data. In order to create a relaxed and spontaneous atmosphere at interview I needed to consider the most effective means to build good relations with my informants. Indeed, Spradley’s comments on ethnographic interviews draw attention to the researcher’s need to maintain rapport with her informants:

It is best to think of ethnographic interviews as a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants. Exclusive use of these new ethnographic elements, or introducing them too quickly, will make interviews become like a formal interrogation. Rapport will evaporate, and informants may discontinue their cooperation. (1979 quoted in Flick, 1998, p. 93)

Given the nature of my research focus, I decided it would be most appropriate wherever possible to carry out interviews at my informants’ homes. I felt this would provide me with numerous opportunities to see at firsthand aspects of their literacy interests which would have been denied me in other settings. I was thus enabled to formulate questions about what my subjects read and wrote, at least in the preliminary stages, by reference to the literacy materials displayed in the interview spaces - sitting room and bedroom for the most part. Those particular spaces facilitated the interview process of questioning when, how, with whom and why the reading and writing activities of my informants took place. Moreover, both I and my informants could refer to relevant material as the need arose. Often this instant access enabled me to establish further lines of inquiry about something specific or to extend the discussion to other areas signaled by my informants as significant to their literacies. Inevitably, this kind of free-ranging spontaneity meant that my interviews ended up being very unstructured. In fact I had planned to use a list of themes from Barton and Hamilton (1998) to give structure to my
inquiry. I started off with some of these but quickly found that the interview flowed better if I allowed other topics of my informants' choosing to intrude and take the interview wherever they led. I referred to my original list between interviews, of course, comparing and contrasting the interview contents across all my informants and reinstating any significant omission at a subsequent session. This method had the effect of uncovering a vast range of unexpected data across an enormous variety of literacy domains.

2. Other Data Collection Methods

Wolcott (1994, p. 10) has identified three major channels through which qualitative researchers gather their data: participant observation (experiencing), interviewing (inquiring), and studying materials prepared by others (examining). As well as interviewing I also undertook observation. One view of participant observation holds that "because we cannot study the social world without being a part of it, all social research is a form of participant observation" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, quoted in Tedlock, 2000). I apply the term more narrowly. I see participant observation as one particular variant among various qualitative approaches. I need to stress that the range of observed events included literacy-related activities themselves as well as the products of literacy. Any individual elements derived from either of them, once observed, were further studied by means of subsequent interviewing. Thus participant observation, while a prototypical orientation for ethnographic studies (Wolcott, 2001), played a secondary role in the investigation of my own research topic.

I did, however, accompany two of my informants to a community and a university library respectively, places which were significant to the two young people in the provision of both reading materials and reading space. In such settings, observation initiated by the researcher's role as 'complete observer' (Gold, 1958 referred to by Angrosino & Perez, 2000, p. 677) extended to interviews at the location at which the respective literacy took place. As Lofland points out (1971 referred to by Fontana & Frey, 2000), in-depth interviewing and participant observation go hand in hand. My observation in this case provided first-hand experience about the kinds of literacy resources used by my informants and resulted in either a reinforcement or modification of my own cultural viewpoints.

In accordance with Wolcott's recommendations (2001), I collected various literacy materials from diverse archival sources. These included copies of magazines and comic books, samples of artifacts such as sticker photos, catalog letters and notes given to my informants by their friends a whole range of items which my young subjects were willing to let me have. For future reference and analysis I also photographed other materials, from entire publications to individual copies of specific artifacts such as diary entries and magazine and newspaper clippings. Analysis
of this initial data enabled me to form an overall picture of the literacy practices engaged in by my informants and to note issues deserving of further exploration and investigation.

In the process of analyzing the data from the first phase of my fieldwork I established several categories of inquiry around which I structured my interviews. That is not to say that my investigation was bounded by a fixed format. As the approach of my inquiry was to accommodate any and all components of literacy practices, I did not start with a predetermined list of questions. But by using my own short notes as a jumping-off point I initiated the interview and then let my informants come up with the issues they thought relevant. In this way it was possible for my interviews to explore both pre-determined and entirely fresh themes. Moreover, my plan to examine significant literacy activities in depth required me to carry out data analysis while the collection process was in full swing. Wiseman refers to these concomitant strands as the “constant interplay of data gathering and analysis ... at the heart of qualitative research” (1974 quoted in Bryman & Burgess, 1994, p. 217). New themes emerged from the process of data collection and subsequent analysis, making inevitable a further exploration of themes derived from prior data.

In order to do a preliminary analysis I transcribed the interviews as I went along, while planning to do a fuller analysis on completion of data collection. Typically I would spend up to three hours transcribing one hour of interview and then do a careful examination of the transcript for items requiring further investigation. From my examination it became clear that I needed to gather additional texts which were significant in my informants' literacy world. This involved a significant amount of textual analysis. Although I was then in a position to formulate issues for discussion, I still had to decide how to conduct my inquiry. For example, should I use leading questions or should I employ a more open approach, which demonstrated my familiarity with the content of the relevant texts but left the actual direction of the discussion to my informant? I tried throughout to maintain a healthy scepticism towards my data gathering in order not to end up with a body of work which supported a preconceived framework for the inquiry I was engaged in. Yet at times I have to admit that it required increasing concentration to keep uppermost in mind the question posed by Wolcott, “Am I attending as carefully to what is going on as I am attending to what I think is going on?” (1994: italics in original, p. 21).

3. Perceptions of the Researchers Role

I initially gained access to my informants by presenting myself as a researcher of young people’s reading and writing practices who was willing to offer English ‘lessons’ in return for their time and cooperation. Nevertheless, in the eyes of my informants I was someone of their parents’ generation and thus faced the challenge of establishing rapport with these young people.
and gaining their trust. Since our meetings had been arranged for the most part through their mothers, I could predict that I would have to go through some sort of assessment or weighting-up period before my informants would feel comfortable about letting me into their lives at all, let alone revealing to me things they would normally not even discuss or share with their parents. Indeed, during a discussion of student life in Britain, a theme with which I had some experience, one particular group of three male informants ‘tested’ my intentions by bringing up the subject of smoking, presumably to see how I would react to an issue which usually arouses strong feelings. I responded as objectively as I could, telling them as much as I knew about the prevalence of smoking among British young people and the prevailing social norms surrounding the practice. My account seemed to satisfy the boys that I did not embrace the authoritarian attitude in the matter that they had come to expect from their parents and school authorities. As a result I found them gradually more willing to open up to me about their literacy activities.

An exploration of sexual issues with my young female informants required a similarly sensitive approach since I was keen to avoid the risk of causing embarrassment on a subject which young females are unlikely to discuss outside their peer group. Knowing this, I expected my informants to be reluctant to express their views on sexual issues, for example the sexual activity depicted in romance comics and in fan fiction. I decided, therefore, to adopt an open and liberal stance in the hope that this would allay their anxiety that any ‘frank’ comments they made would reflect negatively on their own sexual image. In this I was guided by the philosophy of the so-called ‘reflexive approach’ to interviews (Dingwall, 1997 quoted in Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 664) which postulates that:

... if the interview is a social encounter, then, logically, it must be analyzed in the same way as any other social encounter. The products of an interview are the outcome of a socially situated activity where the responses are passed through the role-playing and impression management of both the interviewer and the respondent.

Indeed, my interviews proceeded along with my growing realization that interviewers are not the mythical, neutral tools envisioned by survey research, but rather increasingly active participants in interactions with respondents. These interviews, moreover, are the negotiated accomplishments of both interviewers and respondents, shaped by the contexts and situations in which they take place. As Schwandt (1997) notes, “it has become increasingly common in qualitative studies to view the interview as a form of discourse between two or more speakers or as a linguistic event in which the meanings of questions and responses are contextually grounded and jointly constructed by interviewer and respondent” (quoted in Fontana and Frey, op cit, p. 663). Assumptions and notions were attached to the interaction between myself and
my interviewees and these underwent a process of modification as we negotiated our identities.

IV. ANALYZING THE DATA

Before I explain how I analyzed my data, I will briefly describe the database I set up and the ways in which I handled it. As I have already mentioned, my primary data consisted of interview transcripts. I transcribed these tape-recorded interviews in longhand, as it would have taken me just as long to type the material as it took me to write everything out in longhand (My typing speed is not wonderful). There were forty-four interviews, each on average consisting of five thousand words. In addition to the interview transcripts, I kept a file of field notes containing observations, impressions and reactions which I wrote immediately following each interview, and during or after each observation when my memory was fresh. My research diary also forms part of my database. Here I kept notes of the discussion themes and questions I would use with my informants at each interview, as well as other details such as website addresses and examples of text messages given to me by my informants. As already mentioned, I also kept a collection of artifacts and documents relating to the content of interviews. Finally, there is a body of data of the type noted by Sanjek (1990), and described by Barton and Hamilton (op cit) as:

... headnotes - the memories and interpretations which remain in our [the researcher's] heads and which never reach the written form. (the latter: p. 68: italics inserted by me)

1. Analytical Methods

I had originally planned to use one of the qualitative analysis software packages such as Atlas-Ti to aid in the process of data analysis. Unfortunately at the time I was doing my analysis programs of this kind were not available in the Korean language. However, in order to explore the potential of this kind of software, I translated several of my interview transcripts from Korean into English on the computer. I quickly discovered that the translation itself involved a tremendous amount of interpretation and was enormously time-consuming. Apart from the painstaking process of identifying literacy related issues, making sense in English of the interviews themselves required a great deal of time and focused concentration. Even though I knew I would need to translate extracts from my data for the final writing product, until I produced that final account I wanted to keep everything in its original state. I realized that to translate the interview transcripts in their entirety was beyond a single researcher’s ability within
acceptable time limits. I therefore decided to give up the idea of facilitating my research process with a computer-assisted program and to stay in manual mode. As it happened, the translation experience was helpful in showing me how transferral across languages complicates the interpretation process.

As far as its approach to data analysis and collection is concerned, my research owes its elaboration to the grounded theory method. Although there are differences in the epistemological stance among proponents of this method, chiefly reflected in early positivism (represented by Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and constructivism (represented by Charmaz, 2000), it is generally agreed that “grounded theory methods consist of systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to build middle range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data” (Charmaz, op cit, p. 509). Specified as analytical strategies, not data collection methods, grounded theory methods include (a) a simultaneous collection and analysis of data; (b) a two-step data coding process; (c) comparative methods; (d) sampling to refine the researcher’s emerging theoretical ideas; and (e) integration of the theoretical framework (Charmaz, op cit, p. 511). I have mentioned that my data collection was based on a constant interplay between data analysis and collection: the criterion of constant comparison which is in accordance with grounded theory. My initial analysis was carried out following several practical strategies:

a) In the first stage I read and re-read the transcripts while making notes, an activity Barton and Hamilton (1998, p. 69) call ‘memoing’. As my research examines many of the same literacy themes across a broad range of literacy activities engaged in by my informants, I was able to identify themes I had already been aware of, as well as new ones which surfaced through my fieldwork.

b) In order to gain a better understanding of each individual’s literacy world, I then coded and re-coded my data. As Bryman and Burgess note, coding is considered “a key process since it serves to organize the copious notes, transcripts or documents that have been collected and also represents the first step in the conceptualization of the data” (1994, p. 218). Richards and Richards refer to two kinds of coding: “coding for retrieval of text segments and open coding for theory generation” (1994, p. 157). Using software support (NUDIST), these researchers further describe the former as indexing for retrieval purposes. Since my own analysis was manually generated, open coding was more relevant for my purposes. According to grounded theorists (Charmaz, 1988; Glaser, 1978), open coding represents the gradual building up of categories out of data, also characterized as “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61).

Through a process of synthesis between my preconceived notions of patterning and the
evidence presented by my data, I assigned each of the literacy aspects thus identified into one of four umbrella categories: gender, power relations, digital technologies, general patterns of literacy and other issues. These categories were further elaborated as required. Glasser and Strauss note the way in which data comparison leads to an emergent category which shortly starts to generate theoretical properties of the category (op cit). This is an interpretational process which is both the starting point and the culmination of qualitative inquiry (Wolcott, 1994) and involves constant travel between data and theory or speculation.

c) Selection is a crucial process along the way towards rendering the final account. In order to choose the most significant features of a literacy phenomenon, I repeatedly reviewed that phenomenon across the interview transcripts and other sourced data. At the same time I looked for artifacts or documents which afforded the greatest insight into the phenomenon, a process which Wolcott describes as follows:

The critical task in qualitative research is... to ‘can’ (i.e. get rid of) most of the data you accumulate. That requires constant winnowing, including decisions about data not worth entering in the first place, regardless of how easy that might be to do. The trick is to discover essences and then to reveal those essences with sufficient context, yet not become mired in trying to include everything that might possibly be described... (2001, p. 44)

There were in fact many such decisions of the kind that Wolcott refers to since I often had a range of exampleing data on the same phenomenon and making a choice among them was not always straightforward. I had continually to bear in mind Wolcott’s dictum concerning the impossibility of telling the whole story and the need for “creating a story-within-a-story in which the essence (but not the detail) of the whole is revealed or reflected in microcosm.” (1994, p. 19)

The fact that I was doing my analysis manually, and there was a limit to the amount of data processable in my head at any one time, meant that I could not afford to wait until the completion of my analysis before I began writing. Thus, once I had completed my preliminary categorization, I focused on a single category to work on in depth, constructing the subsequent detailed charts. Then I would write up the section on my findings in that category and the writing process continued the process of interpretation already begun. At times I had to attempt to conceptualize themes about which I had little theoretical knowledge. My exploration of gender and of digital technology, for example, demanded more background information than I possessed in order for me to interpret the data covering these themes in a satisfactory manner. In such cases, after doing my initial analysis, I familiarized myself with the relevant literature on
the subject before once again going back to my data.

My approach of moving to and fro between data and theory, which facilitated the structuring of my data and enabled me to expand on my themes, had the effect described by Bulmer (1979) in that:

... what appears to be the ‘discovery’ or ‘emergence’ of concepts and theory is in reality the result of a constant interplay between data and the researcher’s developing conceptualizations, a ‘flip-flop’ between ideas and the research experience. (referred to by Pigeon, 1996, p. 82)

The ideas in my case were developed by my increasing theoretical knowledge facilitating the interpretation of my research experience; theory provided the framework for analysis and interpretation by contextualizing the themes examined in my research and linking them up to broader issues. Thus, data analysis, writing and theory are not linear and discrete: analysis is entwined with writing and theory and results in further acts of interpretation.

2. Validity, Reliability, and Translation

There are multiple perspectives regarding the definition of verification in qualitative research. Researchers who oppose the continued use of positivist terms such as validity and reliability propose alternative terms. Lincoln and Guba (1985), for example, contend that ‘trustworthiness’ can be established by adhering more to naturalistic axioms and adopting terms such as ‘credibility’, ‘transferability’, ‘dependability’ and ‘confirmability’. Eisner (1991) also addresses the ‘credibility’ of qualitative research by constructing standards such as structural corroboration, consensual validation, and referential adequacy. Creswell argues that the term ‘verification’ is more adequate than ‘validity’ in that “verification underscores qualitative research as a distinct approach, a legitimate mode of inquiry in its own right.” (1998, p. 201). Other authors (Silverman, 2000; Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Wolcott, 1990) favor conventional terms. As my concern lies in establishing procedural thoroughness in my research rather than discussing concepts (although I am fully aware that the two are linked to philosophical stance), I will follow terminological convention by using ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’.

It has been argued that validity in a qualitative study is a function of the authenticity of the research findings:

Truth: interpreted as the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomenon to which it refers. (Hammersley, 1990 quoted by Silverman, 2000, p. 175).
Validity is clearly formulated in the following question: "Are these findings sufficiently authentic (isomorphic to some reality, trustworthy, related to the way others construct their social worlds) that I may trust myself in acting on their implications?" (Guba & Lincoln, 2000, p. 178). In order to advance a convincing claim that my findings were genuinely based on a critical investigation of all my data and not dependent on a few well-chosen examples, I subjected my research data to the process of triangulation described by Stake as follows:

Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation. But, acknowledging that no observation or interpretation are perfectly repeatable, triangulation serves also to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen. (2000, p. 444)

I felt I had satisfied the criterion in respect of collected data being from a variety of sources. Then, as already mentioned, my datasets derive from various procedures such as interviewing and observation and contain a range of different material including artifacts and documents in both print and electronic mode. Finally, I had made additional efforts to ensure validity by employing the constant comparative method in much the same way as grounded theorists do, namely by: i) comparing different people; ii) comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different points in time; iii) comparing incident with incident; and iv) comparing data with category (Charmaz, 1988, 2000; Glaser, 1978, 1992). For Silverman this method entails "moving from small to larger datasets" (2000, p. 179), the movement to and fro between different parts of my data, between data and categories and between data and sampling resulting in "comprehensive data treatment" (Silverman, op cit, p. 180).

Although respondent validation has been suggested as an important stage in confirming the validity of research findings, practical considerations made it impossible for me to go through this stage. Not only were my informants difficult of access in terms of their busy timetables but there was also the complicating factor that my findings are in English. Even if it were possible to make a Korean back-translation available to them (and it is debatable that such a rendering would be worth the effort), I would hesitate to intrude further on my informants' goodwill and time.

The issue of reliability in qualitative research is related to both the data collected and any succeeding interpretations placed on it by the researcher. These interpretations depend to a great degree on the accuracy with which the transcribing of the recording and the documenting of data were carried out in the first place. Concerning note-taking during observation, Kirk and Miller (1986) and Silverman (1993) have suggested the use of certain conventions, for which Flick
provides the rationale that:

... the genesis of the data needs to be explicated in a way that makes it possible to check what is a statement of the subject on the one hand and where the researcher's interpretation begins on the other... (1998, p. 224)

In my own observations I followed Silverman's precepts (op cit) to the extent of attempting to separate emic (my informants') utterances or concepts from etic (my own) in my fieldnotes. The fact that my recording equipment was sensitive and precise made me confident that my transcriptions were accurate. As might have been expected, of course, the presence of recording equipment caused my informants some initial nervousness but they seemed to get over this as our interviews progressed. Each time I tried to position the equipment as unobtrusively as possible; its small size and flexibility helped in this respect.

Hammersley provides some further criteria of reliability:

Reliability refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions. (Hammersley, 1992 quoted by Silverman, 2000, p. 175)

As a sole researcher I was unable to provide the conditions for fulfilling the first of these criteria but I attempted through repeated reviews of the data to satisfy the second.

Some critics (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988) suggest that rich, thick description allows the reader to make decisions regarding transferability. Detailed descriptions of participants and settings help the reader to determine whether the findings can be transferred to other settings and by so doing to ascertain the reliability of interpretation. In my case, I try to provide detailed descriptions of the phenomena under study, together with contextual information and extracts of my informants' accounts. Yet I cannot be fully confident in the matter of transferability for the very reason that I present my findings in a language other than that from which they derive.

As I have already indicated, and as is widely known, language-to-language transfer is fraught with difficulty. During the 'translation' process I was constantly faced with the question of how best to present excerpts, for example from my informants words or from documents provided by them, so that the effect achieved would be as faithful as possible to what was originally recorded. I came to the task with three appreciations based on prior experience: i) that a one-to-one correspondence between individual lexical items is rarely achievable; ii) that the meaning of a sentence or text is usually much more than the sum of the meanings of its constituent lexical
items; and iii) that the sentence structure of Korean is substantially different from that of English.

In discussing translation technique, Nida (1964) distinguishes between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence, viewing these as basic orientations rather than as a binary choice. An orientation towards the former focuses on the closest possible match of form and content between source text and target text by providing some degree of insight into the lexical, grammatical or structural form of a source text. An orientation towards the latter stresses the principle of equivalence of effect on the reader of the target text.

Newmark (1981) argues for semantic and communicative translation. Semantic translation, which “attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original” (ibid, p. 39), is perhaps less extreme than Nida’s formal equivalence.

However, the terms ‘equivalence’ and ‘communicative translation’ are judged inadequate by Hatim and Mason (1990) on the grounds that the actual effects on receivers of texts are difficult to gauge and that all translation, in a sense, is communicative. While accepting that translation might aim for an equivalence of intended effects, Hatim and Mason propose that the concept of ‘adequacy’ in translation is more useful than ‘equivalence’, since the latter carries the assumption that complete equivalence is an achievable goal, as if there is such a thing as a formally or dynamically equivalent target-language (TL) version of a source-language (SL) text.

With these considerations in mind I produced more than one version of many of the excerpts in my data, ranging from a ‘weak’ transfer (which involved a more or less direct translation from Korean to English with minimal consideration of the role of meaning) to a ‘strong’ transfer (in which a much greater effort was made to achieve semantic coherence). Subsequently, I gave my ‘translations’ to a native speaker of English who was not involved in my disciplinary interest but who was sufficiently familiar with academic discourse to provide reliable feedback. To my consternation, many parts of my first draft translation proved incomprehensible to this native speaker. That a version which ‘made sense’ could often only be arrived at through a lengthy negotiation of meaning between myself and native speaker made me fear for my goal of retaining the original in as pure a form as possible. Despite my fear, the process of reaching an acceptable translation product brought home to me the truth of Hatim and Mason’s assertion that translation is a communicative process which takes place within a social context (op cit).

This was certainly the case with my translation experience. Whereas I initiated the process via a text-centered translating approach, producing target-text with weak transfer, I and my native speaker informant subsequently agreed on the necessity of adopting a reader-centered translating approach, using strong transfer in order to convey the meaning of the source text. This process involved a twofold interpretation: my own interpretation of source text and my native
informant’s interpretation of my translation. As to the vexed question of rendering the “truth and tone” of youth discourse in translation, suffice it to say that both I and my informant have had broad exposure to youth culture: I as a teacher in the Korean context and my informant as a teacher in Canada, the UK and elsewhere. Despite our concern to project an equivalence of intended effect, however, we were both aware that some readers might respond critically to both the intended and, indeed, possible unintended effects of the rendering. The youthful idiom is both notoriously ephemeral and highly contextually determined. Nuance is extremely difficult to convey through the original printed word, let alone in translation. The following is one example of the product of translation/interpretation in order to illustrate the points I have been making above:

**Extract of Interview Transcript in Korean**

애란: 채팅하는 애들은 두 종류가 있어요, 공부도 잘하고 채팅도 건전하게 하는 애들과 다른 부류애들은요, 공부도 못하고 문제아들이죠.

연구자: 어떤 면에서 문제아들인가요?

애란: 이 애들은요, 아무렇게나 행동해요. 학교 공부도 소홀히 하고 술 마시려 다니고 술집같은 데서 일도 하구요. 채팅 좀 하다보면 이런 애들 금방 알아내요. 처음 얘기할때는 이런 애들인줄 몰라두요 시간이 좀 지나면 다 드러나네요. 아무리 안그런척 감추려 해도 다 드러나거든요. ‘내가 학교 명명이 쳐있을 때’ 이런 말을 하면 금방 ‘애는 문제아구나’ 하고 알수 있지요. 제가 애들 사절때 공부를 중요하게 바오. 아무리 채팅이라고 해도 저는 공부를 잘하는 애들이랑 하고 싶지 문제아랑 하고 싶진 않아요.

**English rendering**

Aeran: There are two kinds of chat room kid: those who come with good intentions and those who couldn’t care less. The first group work hard and do well academically. The second I would call troublemakers.

Researcher: Could you explain what you mean by troublemaker?

Aeran: Well, I mean kids who couldn’t care less about what people think of them. They don’t take their schoolwork seriously, they go out drinking at night, they work in bars, stuff like that. You get to sense who these bad ones are when you’ve been in chat rooms for a while. They might seem quite OK to begin with but somehow over time a person’s real personality comes out, no matter how hard they try to cover it up and have you believe they’re different. Sometimes it takes just one little comment to show up a baddy, maybe something like ‘when I was skiving off school the other day...’ Then I can tell that this person is not a good student. I have to admit that academic
performance affects my opinion of people. Even if it's only an online friendship I'd rather it was with someone who had the right attitude to school at least.

My concern that the process of interpretation and re-interpretation which translation entails would result in a rendering which would be in conflict with most considerations of reliability has resonance in House:

It seems to be unlikely that translation quality assessment can ever be completely objectified in the manner of the results of natural science subjects. (1976, referred to by Hatim & Mason, op cit. p. 5)

I could not help but conclude that the best way to resolve the issue of reliability in the matter of fieldwork done in one language and written up in another (but one that would for obvious reasons be difficult if not impossible to organize) would be for the researcher to review translations with someone who both shares her linguistic and cultural background and who is proficient in both languages. Although there is a need to elaborate a set of parameters which aim to promote consistency and precision in the discussion of translating and translations, the wider issue of conjugating the concept of reliability and that of translation deserves further study.

V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Having described the procedure of carrying out an ethnographic study and having discussed the key elements of my methodological approach, I now briefly present my research findings. I hope that these will help the reader to situate the issues discussed above in a broader context. Despite the fact that ethnographically oriented researchers are committed to conveying a sense of the whole, the actual research process is, as already noted, selective since prior experience, reading, theoretical assumptions and so on necessarily impinge on what the researcher deems noteworthy (Ramanathan, Davies & Schlepppegrell, 2001). Thus my research findings reflect the theory of literacy which served as the basis for the direction of my research from its inception and this fact makes it essential that any discussion of research results should refer to this theoretical concept of literacy.

The traditional model of literacy conceptualizes literacy as a set of decontextualized cognitive skills and competences, dislodged from their socio-cultural moorings in human relationships and communities of practice (Besnier, 1995). Street refers to this deterministic view of literacy as the 'autonomous model of literacy' (1984). This monolithic and static approach to reading and