

Micro-Paper 36: *Participant Observation*

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Defining the Term

Participant observation (PO) is a key data collection technique in qualitative research, specifically on ethnographic and anthropology-based fieldwork. Since the purpose of PO is to have the closest observation to a phenomenon occurred on a certain setting or population, it has become one of the most used methods in ethnography as a way to collect data in the research field.

An important part in participant observation are field notes. Field notes become essential in order to have some record of what is happening during the observation. They are also important because one is not able to retain too much information and sufficient details of what one is studying and also because it helps improve one's involvement in the social phenomena at hand.

One of the determining factors for PO is making researchers belong to the field they are inquiring about, so this method can be adapted to anything done on a daily basis (shopping, listening to music, walking in the city, etc.). PO requires a very thorough observation that goes beyond basic interaction. It mixes observing, interviewing and –sometimes- doing, as a key to understand how the phenomenon and the culture itself works.

Connecting it to LSLP

As participant observation is one of the methods of choice in ethnographic research, it is directly connected to the nature and focus given to our project. At LSLP, some of our studies have implemented features from ethnography. We find PO to be more suitable for our studies because it does not have a fixed set of pre-established steps, thus making it easier to adapt to the researchers' profiles.

Participant observation fits our research because we have a certain involvement or expertise on the route we inquire about. When starting our projects, we first do an observation exercise to open our minds and eyes in order to see the world in an unconventional way. After that, we get involved in the field to be able to appreciate the phenomena in its own environment, using different methods to collect information during and after the process. As PO is not an external method, we make our own strengths play a significant part on the research.

Expanding Second Language Research

As language is a set of codes whose significance is given by society, PO can strengthen the second language research field by being an appropriate tool to analyze interaction – which build the different meanings language can have on a certain setting- and the tendencies of the particular society that uses it.

Participant observation has significant potential in second language research because is a tool that could be used to collect data directly in the field i.e. through taking part listening, seeing, and recording data of how people interact with different languages and use them to create new forms of communication..

References

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