Vol. 2, No. 1, July 2006, pp. 85-102

Reflecting Education
http://reflectingeducation.net

Mini-ethnography: a multi-method approach in an ESOL IT class

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the methodology employed for a mini-ethnographic review of a group of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students in a discrete Information Technology (IT) class. It may be of interest to practitioners working with ESOL students, or researchers wishing to pursue qualitative methodologies. The review concentrated on an eight week programme on the Internet. The research was undertaken as part of an MEd programme, and to pursue a personal interest in learning strategies. The research questions focussed on seeking evidence of common ESOL group-learning strategies; individual learning strategies; and the significance of English within IT classes. A multi-method research methodology was employed involving a pre-study questionnaire to gather base-line information; two focus group interviews at either end of the study period; and observation of the eight classes. Students were also asked to complete a computer diary on a voluntary basis, to explore the use made of computers outside of the class environment, and augment the data gathered through questionnaires, interviews and observation. The broad principles of content analysis were used on transcripts of the focus groups, field notes and diaries to identify themes emergent during the research period. This paper focuses on the methodology; however, data extracts and sample analyses are provided to exemplify the processes employed, and a summary of the data analysis is provided for context.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to explore meaning in terms of individual students. It reviewed individual perceptions; and looked for patterns, commonalities and differences.

This research focused on a group of adult ESOL students who were attending a series of discrete IT classes in a Scottish Further Education College. The students had been attending classes for at least six months. The purpose of the classes had been to introduce students to using a computer, and the focus to date had been on learning basic IT terminology; mastering the use of a mouse; and using the word processing package Microsoft Word™. Students' English levels ranged from Elementary to Upper-Intermediate. Students had undertaken two Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) qualifications:

i) Using Basic Computer Skills (Access 1) and
ii) Using a Keyboard (Access 3).

The students were about to embark on a series of classes designed to equip them with sufficient skills to attempt the SQA qualification Information Technology Access 3 (Core Skill).

The research focused on the student group as they worked through an eight week programme on using the Internet. The nature of this research was to review the process of the students' journeys; as well as the product, i.e. the use they made of the Internet by the

 ISSN 1746-9082

end of the course. It explored the complex nature of the context in which the group learned; and attempted to review both students' understanding (their knowledge and perceptions), and to discover what motivated them to learn new IT skills. It was exploratory and descriptive.

Through focussing on a specific student group, it was possible to achieve a rich description of the complex system in which they were situated. Processes and methods employed by the students, in undertaking coursework, were reviewed; as well as interaction between peers and between students and the teacher-researcher.

The nature of this research was context-specific and subjective. It was not therefore designed with a view to being replicable. It did however offer an in-depth description and analysis of a complex situation. This research was not geared to be generalisable, but did facilitate a deep understanding of the process of learning within a specific context, which might have been captured less easily in large-scale, objective studies.

My influence as teacher-researcher was acknowledged. I approached the study with some assumptions around the purpose of teaching Internet skills to the student group, namely facilitating access to material in the mother tongue, and concerns about students' ability to understand website content due to language level.

I chose to research this short programme on using the Internet for a number of reasons:

i) it sat within a manageable timeframe;
ii) many of the skills required had been taught previously and I would be able to see to what extent students were able to recognise these as common skills and apply them in novel situations;
iii) the nature of the coursework was student-centred and this would allow me to explore issues of importance to the students, i.e. the nature of information they chose to access.

ETHICS

Informed consent

In planning the research, considerable time was spent on drawing up suitable wording for an informed consent form. My main concern was to ensure that students would be aware both of what the purpose of my research was, and what it was *not*, i.e. participating in the research would have no influence on their immigration status (positive, or negative), and that the information from the research would not be passed to any outside organisation / body such as the Home Office. I was acutely aware of asylum seeker and refugee students being very wary of sharing personal information, and wanted to assure them that I would preserve anonymity and that I was interested only in information about their journey through the IT course. Of equal importance, I wanted students to understand that participation in the research was completely voluntary; they could opt to withdraw at any time, and that I would continue to teach them even if they decided not to participate.

A student-focussed form, based on an example from Marshall and Rossman (1999) was created (Figure 1), with my request for permission to include them in my study made explicit. Bullet points were used to provide a list of situations that the research might involve the students in, with minimal extraneous language.

Informed consent for dissertation research project participation: A mini-ethnographic review of ESOL IT classes.

Dear Student

I am interested in your experience of our classes. I am also a student – I am studying for a degree with the Department of Educational Studies at the University of Strathclyde. I would like to invite you to take part in a research project about Information Technology (computer) classes for ESOL students.

I would like your permission to include you in my research.

My study will involve:

- observing students;
- asking questions;
- small group interviews;
- questionnaires; and
- keeping a diary of computer use.

I may use a tape recorder sometimes when I am speaking with you.

I will not use your name, and I can give you a copy of anything you say that I use in my research. You have the right to withdraw from the project at any time.

The results of this project will be shared with my supervisor [redacted] and with [redacted] College. The project will be stored at the University of Strathclyde.

If you have any questions please ask me, or speak to [redacted]

Thank you

Jane Rand

Please sign below if you are happy to take part in this research project:

Signature: _____

Print name: _____

Date: _____

Figure 1: Informed Consent Form

To ensure sufficient time was devoted to student comprehension, I decided to issue the informed consent forms, and speak about my research with the group during the week before the research period began. Given my status as a novice ethnographer, I trialled some observation during this session, particularly in response to students completing the informed consent form and baseline questionnaire.

Pseudonyms

Pseudonyms are essential for permanent protection of participants' identities, and had particular importance for this student-group who was very cautious of revealing information in case it adversely affected their immigration application. Delamont (2002) provides an extensive discussion about choice of pseudonyms and identifies that letting people choose their own may not always be appropriate. Acknowledging that I had insufficient knowledge of cultural and religious issues relevant to each of the students involved I was anxious not to offend anyone by choosing inappropriate pseudonyms myself; I therefore invited the students to choose their own. I explained to the students that it was important that nobody could work out who they were from my report and encouraged them to choose a name that they would like – be it from their own culture, or a British name. Three chose British names (one influenced by her favourite English teacher); one chose a name that I felt was too similar to his own, and I suggested he should choose another. And so, Hammad, Fahiya, Fiona, Rance, Habiba, Mary, Anna, Hasib, Ali, Jeevilca, Regina, Mino and Lio started to participate in my research.

METHODOLOGY

This research was qualitative in nature, in the form of a mini-ethnographic study over eight three-hour classes.

Ethnography is flexible, and driven by the participants. It aims for insight into meanings and interpretations, which are generated through the social interaction being observed, and can change during the process (Burns, 2000; Simpson and Tuson, 2003). Its flexible nature allows for emergent understandings to be tested (Marshall & Rossman, 1999); and for both explicit connections, made by participants, and tacit understandings to be explored (Burns, 2000; Drever, 1995).

Ethnography involves observation of a particular social group, in context. It values views, perspectives and beliefs of informants and gives attention to their outlook and culture (Delamont, 2002). It is reflexive in nature, reviewing interactions and complexities. It is not homogenous (Burns, 2000). It can also incorporate questions and interviews, and review context-specific products. Successful ethnography identifies how all these elements are "mutually laminated" (Silverman, 2000, p. 143), providing a dynamic, cultural description.

The researcher *is* the research tool in qualitative methodologies, and the process is therefore susceptible to observer bias (Simpson and Tuson, 2003). The challenge to the ethnographer is to understand and identify the investigator effects (Delamont, 2002) and to examine her role and interactions/interrelations with respondents.

The difficulties associated with conflation of teaching and researching this student group were considered. It had not been possible, nor would it have been desirable on my part, for someone else to teach this group during the study period. I acknowledged the uniqueness of the situation – valuing the position of trust I had with the students, and recognising that this

had the potential to provide me with greater access to their thoughts, feelings and perceptions than might be afforded to an independent observer. The aim of this research was to provide a clear and detailed description. Both the characteristics of the group and the categories used in analysis would be made explicit, with the intention that the data became both comparable and translatable (Cohen et al., 2000), thereby maximising the research's external validity.

The student group chosen for this study represented, in number, approximately 20% of ESOL IT students in the College, but was an opportunity sample (Delamont, 2002). Most students in the group were studying English at Pre-Intermediate or Intermediate level, which enabled us to communicate well with each other. Students had been able to follow the majority of both verbal and written instructions in class, and were able to articulate their thoughts/questions to me with reasonable ease. The group had completed Units in basic IT and word processing and were studying towards an Access 3 IT qualification covering text processing, spreadsheet, and Internet.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire (Figure 2) was used to provide baseline information about the informants and, through open questions, encourage them to consider their current understanding of the Internet.

Acknowledging that questionnaires sit at the structured end of the verbal data dimension (Gillham, 2000[a]), the purpose for inclusion of such a method in this qualitative study was both to provide some baseline data, and to inform the construction of questions for use in semi-structured focus group interviews at the beginning and end of the research.

Name:			
1. What is your age?	18-24 ☐	25-34 ☐	35-44 ☐
	45-54 ☐	55-60 ☐	65+ ☐
2. What is your sex?	Male ☐		Female ☐
3. What is your first language?			
4. What level English are you studying?	Beginner ☐		Elementary ☐
	Pre-Intermediate ☐		Intermediate ☐
	Upper-Intermediate ☐		
5. What is your Immigration status?	Asylum-seeker ☐		Exceptional leave to remain ☐
	Indefinite leave to remain ☐		
6. What was your job before you came to the UK, for example: nurse/teacher?			

7. Do you have children in school?	Yes ☐		No ☐
8. Do you have a computer at home?	Yes ☐		No ☐
9. How often do you use your computer at home?	Every day ☐	2 or 3 times a week ☐	Once a week ☐
	Less than once a week ☐	Never ☐	
10. What do you use your computer for at home?			
11. How often do you use a computer at **College**?	Every day ☐	2 or 3 times a week ☐	Once a week ☐
12. What do you use a computer for in **College**?			
13. Do you use the Internet?	At home ☐	At College ☐	No ☐
14. What do you use the Internet for?			

Figure 2: Questionnaire

Age, sex, first language and current English level were included to demonstrate the range. Students were also asked to disclose their immigration status in order that similarities could be discussed [in the MEd dissertation] with earlier studies that link motivation to students seeking leave to remain (Roberts et al., 2004).

A question about employment status prior to coming to the UK was included to determine whether students had trained for a profession (and therefore received a formal education); and a question about having school-age children was included, again, to draw comparisons with earlier studies about motivation (DfEE, 2000; Owen et al., 2003; Robinson and Segrott, 2000).

Closed questions specifically about computers were included in the questionnaire to provide baseline information on how many students had, and used, a computer at home, and if students already used the Internet. Three open questions were included to provide students with the opportunity to explain what use they made of computers at home and in college, and (where applicable) their current Internet use. Open questions were chosen so that representative data could be gathered both about existing use of computers, and to help determine the level of pre-existing knowledge about the Internet.

The questionnaire was produced in two formats: paper and electronic, in the form of a Microsoft Word™ document. Students were given the choice of how they completed the questionnaire; with ten completing it electronically, and three by hand.

Students were asked to complete the questionnaires using their real names, for the purposes of baseline data collection. Thereafter, data was anonymised, through the use of pseudonyms. Data from the open questions was analysed for patterns, regularities and discrepant cases (Cohen et al., 2000) and validated both through further exploration with the respondents and between-method triangulation (Delamont, 2002).

Although there was an intention to pilot the questionnaire prior to use, due to a delay in the start of another group, this was not possible.

Six students reported using the Internet in college. Five did not specify what use they made of it, but Hammad revealed that he used it to access news, games and

> *reading some story about every Country on English language no my language because i Staudy English language course.*

Hammad is a prolific writer, and was the only respondent to qualify the use made of the Internet, in his questionnaire.

Only Mary reported using college computers in relation to her English classes, and only three students reported using computers (at home or in college) to help them learn English.

First Focus Groups

Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewees greater freedom to lead the content of the discussion (Gillham, 2000[b]). The purpose of the interviews was to further explore the students' existing computer use and their concept of the Internet.

Seven broad areas were identified for inclusion in the first discussions (Figure 3), informed by issues raised in earlier research on motivation (Charlaff et al., 2004; DfEE, 2000; DfES, 2001; Owen et al., 2003; Roberts et al., 2004; Robinson and Segrott, 2002; Vargas, 2002) and by the data generated in the open questions in the baseline questionnaire.

At the end of each discussion students were given the opportunity to ask me questions; and I provided a copy of the transcripts of the focus groups for students to review in class the following week.

Reason	Question
General/Motivation	*Why* do students come to computer classes?
Resultant from questionnaire data	Explore why some students don't use the computers they have at home
Resultant from questionnaire data	Explore why some students only use college computers in the IT class (not in the library, at break/lunch time etc)
General/Perception pre-course	What is the Internet?
General/Motivation	What do you want to learn about the Internet?
Resultant from	Why don't you use the Internet at home?

questionnaire data	
Research questions	Language used when accessing the Internet.
	Any questions for me?

Group 1 membership (9/2/05)	**Group 2 membership (9/2/05)**
Fahiya	Mino
Ali	Hasib
Habiba	Hammad
Rance	Mary
Anna	Fiona

Figure 3: First focus group: areas for discussion and group membership.

Ten students were present on the day the first focus groups were planned to be held. This fell naturally into two groups of five. I had thought about how I might configure the groups, and had considered the issue of female students feeling uneasy speaking in front of male students. However, I had become familiar with this group over a number of months and had not been aware of any gender issues within routine class exercises, which often included open discussions. The class was, therefore, simply divided into two groups of five.

The interview was transcribed and the data analysed. Using the broad principles of content analysis, substantive statements were identified and emerging categories noted. An unmarked transcript of the first focus group was reviewed by a colleague, for identification of substantive statements, in order that my own judgements could be reviewed. There was complete agreement in the identification of substantive statements by my colleague with my own coding; and minimal occurrences of statements highlighted by me that were not highlighted by my colleague. In reviewing the judgements I made, comparing my own initial analysis with the peer review, I was satisfied with the broad agreement. Most importantly, the peer review did not reveal any substantive statements that I had not recognised.

Motivation to attend the classes appeared primarily to be egoistic. Seven students spoke about the importance of them attending the classes, with most making reference to IT skills being required for work, and being key for the future:

> Hammad: … *I study more computer class and study now computers is good for job for me, and future…*
>
> Fiona: … *I want to get a job as a nurse, so I think … I have to do… use the computer.*
>
> Anna: … *I must learn about computers, I think it is very important.*
>
> Hasib: … *is important to have computer for job and for my future … I think it's important.*

> Ali: *I think computer is very important for myself. I want job but very important is computer, because all people need to use computer.*
>
> Mino: *I think the future… it is very important to know the computer… the basic skills… and to communicate.*

In terms of the students' pre-existing concept of the Internet, the most popular understanding centred around accessing **news**; identified by four students. Hammad, Fahiya, and Hasib referred to **words** and **English**; and both Fahiya and Hasib referred to **English grammar**. Three students understood the Internet to be about **communication**, and three drew links to **information**. In total, eight topics emerged from the first Focus Group data: **news, communication, information, everything, English, music, jobs and shopping**.

Hammad, Fahiya, Ali and Mino described the Internet in terms of three or more topics. Fiona, Mary, Anna and Hasib offered only one topic in their descriptions. Rance and Habiba, who had never used the Internet, offered no explanation. In common with the questionnaire responses, limited mention was made in the focus groups of specific websites; the BBC site was mentioned once.

Ali communicated the broadest perception of the Internet:

> *News, … e-mail, ….. to contact other people… to confirm everything … some people… some people think about what … er.. what is very important for life… and some people for friends. Everything.*

In pursuing students' use of computers at home, Hammad and Hasib both confirmed having computers at home but not using the Internet there. Hammad made a very interesting comment about the unsuitability of some Internet content for his younger siblings. He was the only student to raise any caution about using the Internet:

> *I have computer at home but I don't use because my small brothers use it. Because some programmes are not allowed for children. I use for Internet I go to library.*

The categories and emergent themes identified through the analysis provided direction for the ongoing research and between-method triangulation of evidence from responses to the baseline questionnaire and themes emergent from observation.

Class observation

Observation focussed on the processes students undertook whilst attending classes; it looked at the strategies they employed to achieve class objectives and considered outcomes from the students' perspectives.

Wolcott's strategy (as cited by Delamont, 2002, p. 133) provided a framework for observation:

1. observation by broad sweep;
2. observations of nothing in particular;

3. searching for paradoxes;
4. searching for the problem(s) facing the group.

In addition, Spradley's (1980) checklist for field note content provided points of reference in terms of space, participants, activities, objects, actions, events, time, goals and feelings (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 312).

The purpose of observation is to create a dynamic picture (Burns, 2000); to explain patterns, review complex and subtle interactions and seek relations (Burns, 2000; Robson, 2002; and Simpson and Tuson, 2003).

Field notes recorded during the observation sessions comprised short notes recorded at the time, and expanded notes written up shortly after each session. The unstructured data (Silverman, 2001) in the expanded notes was read and re-read to identify patterns and contrary instances (Delamont, 2002). Through this systematic approach, data-driven themes and categories were generated.

Manual coding of the expanded notes was undertaken, incorporating the emergent themes and categories. A colour-coding system was applied to each theme, and substantive elements in the notes were identified and colour-coded. In the first instance, an index of occurrences within each theme was kept, to identify predominant themes and demonstrate representativeness. To enhance reliability, categories were re-assigned to three unmarked expanded field notes; and any inconsistencies reviewed (Silverman, 2000).

Data was reviewed both in terms of the most common emerging themes, and those themes that were more narrowly represented. Comparison was made against my own expectations/assumptions, my research questions, and issues raised within the research. Associations between themes were sought, where suggested by the evidence; and to summarise key factors, concepts and areas for subsequent investigation (Cohen et al., 2000).

The aim of analysis is to a gain deeper general sense (Miles and Huberman, 1984) of the circumstances under observation and to provide a logical explanation of the same. Analysis was ongoing throughout the observation period.

Regularities, patterns and interrelations were sought from the data at the outset; the aim being a progressive focus. Contrasts and paradoxes within the data, from my own assumptions, and from the objectives identified by respondents were also sought, and their significance weighed (Cohen et al., 2000) to encourage a "… fresh look at social phenomena" (Delamont, 2002, p. 182). Analysis of data involves judgement of its potential meaning, and negative or discrepant cases were presented as *qualifying insight* (Gillham, 2000[b]).

Silverman (2000) discusses a number of techniques to enhance validity of qualitative research including respondent validation, constant comparison (between methods and between observations) and comprehensive data transcription. Where relevant, individual respondent validation was sought. This was also generally employed within the content of some classes in terms of summarising and confirming views expressed.

Data analysis was integrated. Between-method triangulation (Delamont, 2002) looked for evidence within other methods, for example diary entries or comments made in the focus group interviews. Within-method triangulation (Delamont, 2002) sought repeated evidence within the observation data. All data was transcribed and reviewed.

Second Focus Group

Four broad topics for inclusion in the second focus group were identified (Figure 4) following initial identification of themes emergent from the observation data.

Reason	**Question**
Tangible outcomes for students? Focussed on IT or English?	What have students learned about the Internet?
Research questions	How does using the Internet help individual students?
Themes emergent from classroom observation	What problems/difficulties have been encountered?
Themes emergent from classroom observation. Research questions.	Are students using Internet on their own now, where they weren't before? If so, where, what for, what language?

Group 1 membership 23/3/05	Group 2 membership 23/3/05	Individual interviews 23/3/05 & 30/3/05
Ali	Mino	Regina
Rance	Hasib	Habiba
Anna	Hammad	Fahiya
Jeevilca	Mary	
	Fiona	

Figure 4: Second focus group: areas for discussion and group membership.

It was possible to replicate the membership of one of the original groups interviewed. The second group comprised three of its original members plus Jeevilca, who had not participated in the original focus group due to absence. The two remaining original group members were absent on the day of the second focus group, but I was able to ask them the questions the following week, during the last class. Regina had not participated in the original focus group, due to absence, and was not present when the second interviews started. However, she arrived late for the class and was upset at missing the interview, so I agreed to interview her individually.

The second focus group interviews were fully transcribed and subjected to content analysis. Additionally the data was reviewed for any evidence of changes in student-reported use of computers independent of the class environment. Triangulation was sought through diary entries and discussions recorded during class observations.

DATA ANALYSIS SUMMARY

Whilst the focus of this paper is the methodology employed, this summary is provided as a snapshot of the data analysis and to show the shape of the eight weeks' research. It might be of particular interest to colleagues who seek an overview of the study.

Eight discrete themes were observed during the research (Figure 5). A minimum of five themes was observed in sessions three to eight. The lower numbers recorded in the first week are likely to be reflective of my own unfamiliarity with observation as a research technique.

Humour
Spontaneous verbal interaction
Focus on English
Peer interaction
Barriers
Reaction to failure
Novel application
Individual strategies for learning and development

Figure 5: Broad themes emergent during research

Student activity was most apparent across the themes in week four; a session incorporating a guided exercise on Tony Blair, and searching the Internet. The theme of *barriers* occurred most often in week five, with the skill acquisition associated with copying and pasting pictures and e-mail presenting most difficulties to the group.

Demonstration of *individual learning strategies* was most evident in week four, with a total of 27 substantive occurrences; the most prominent strategy being questioning focussed on IT skills. *Peer interaction* was evident across eight sessions and displayed by 12 individual students, reflecting the significant use ESOL students make of involving others to facilitate learning (Mellar et al., 2004; Roberts, 2004; Roberts et al., 2004).

The literature (DfEE, 2000; Roberts et al., 2004; Robinson and Segrott, 2004) suggests that ESOL students' prime motivator is to learn English. This was reflected in my research as a constant underlying trend, but as a discrete theme (*Focus on English*) it represented only 2% of all occurrences recorded. In the first focus group students seemed unaware that the Internet could help them learn English. Once introduced to the concept, students became aware of the ability to test their English through bespoke websites, and responded positively to this opportunity; reacting more strongly to failure to achieve English-orientated objectives than IT-orientated ones (*Reaction to failure*). The majority of peer interaction took place in English, and both vocalising text and verbalising understanding were prominent individual strategies for development. In the second focus group, six students associated learning English with the Internet.

Hasib: *It is I am for learning English, and writing,.. spelling… and er pronunciation*

Hammad: *Yes, first time important the language, English*

Mary: *Some websites for learning English.*

Regina: *Doing er games and typing, and learn, and grammar, and past simple I doing now… and email… and travel - train.*

This developed into how the Internet helped students individually:

Mino: *It is the… about the language you know.*

Hasib: *It is very important the internet, and so the er… English language, Yes. It is important to me.*

Fiona: *Looking for English language.*

Regina: *...I like more speaking, reading…...and more grammar…*

Hasib demonstrated the greatest focus on learning English. I asked him why it was so important to him, particularly his focus on grammar. He replied:

> *because correct talking for people…grammar is important for all language. English is hard language. There is lot of grammar…very important for local people, for ordinary people.*

Jeevilca represented a divergent case, often choosing to view Hindi religious sites; commenting in one class: *my computing every time my religion. Lot of. Lot of.* Jeevilca had never used the Internet before; I asked her if she liked the Internet and she confirmed this but said *not English, but for my religion.*

In general, Jeevilca preferred to find pictures or to return to sites we had previously visited rather than test, or develop, her English skills. Excerpts from her diary reflect this (Figure 6):

Wednesday 23 February	1	I went to microsoft word, ~~and~~ Internet, google, pop music, Hende Gods and kp Typing Tutor.	NO, I didn't have any problems.
Wednesday 2 March	1	I went to kp Typing Tutor, Microsoft word, Internet, google, Sydney operahouse, Prime Minister and Sir Robert walpole.	NO, I didn't have any problems.

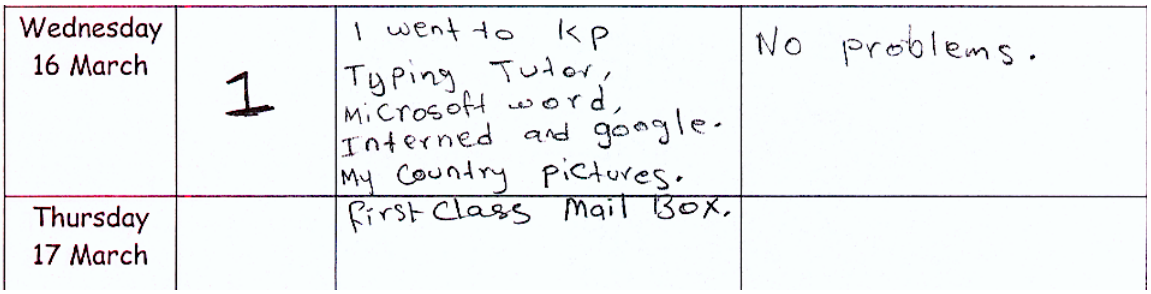

Figure 6: Excerpts from Jeevilca's diary

Most of the observed barriers encountered by students were related to English, and six students identified spelling as a problem in the second focus group.

> Mino: *Sometimes is the spelling, and the computer does not help [laughs] … it says the page it can't find.*
>
> Hasib: *Sometime I…. spelling is big problem.*
>
> Mary: *I think too sometimes spelling.*
>
> Ali: *Yes – for English – spelling mistake - very very difficult. Last week, I tried something my country… I have put something and something is missing – it is difficult because I don't know you check your spelling and you say to me check your spelling – again again.*
>
> Anna: *Yes I think spelling…*
>
> Regina: ... *spelling, that's wrong…*

One theme recorded during the observed sessions linked the three research questions addressed in this study. Spontaneous verbal interaction could be argued to be a development of the peer interaction strategy commonly used by ESOL students. However, such interactions observed in this study were unprompted, always in English and motivated by the desire to enhance both group and individual knowledge/understanding.

Reflecting other themes, this was evident in weeks four to seven, and most evident in week four. Examples include Fiona, in week five, volunteering *write hello* when I was explaining about the 'subject heading' in emails. Then, after I sent each student an email and advised them to look in their inbox Hasib said, *I think I receive this email, then click on reply*.

Additionally, there were examples of students spontaneously engaging me, usually to present information they had found on the Internet. Jeevilca, for example, found and printed a map of Sri Lanka; brought it to me and showed me where the December 2004 Tsunami struck.

The predominant strategy for learning and development demonstrated within the classes was questioning, representing 38% of observations. Half the questions focussed on IT skills, and a third explored English. Fiona (Intermediate level English) and Mary (Pre-Intermediate level English) asked most questions about IT.

Fiona's questions were usually clearly directed, for example, *where is copy, how I find….. words about Iran?* suggesting good concept understanding. Conversely, Mary's questions were usually more vague, *after select?, this?, what has happened?* This may reflect an advantage to Intermediate-level learners. Both Mary and Fiona have computers at home and reported in the initial questionnaire that they use them two or three times a week. Both students' diaries reflected regular computer use, but Fiona's demonstrated significant Internet practice and Mary's reported more practice in Microsoft Word™. Fiona also reported using the Internet more in the second focus group. Additionally, in the second focus group Mary identified problems she had encountered in using the Internet in procedural terms, e.g. spelling and needing to ask for help; where Fiona identified concepts she wished to explore, for example e-mail and English pronunciation sites.

Fiona and Hasib asked most questions about English, often seeking definitions of words they encountered on websites. Hasib often pursued his desire to master English grammar, for example reading out a sentence about Tony Blair being 'promoted', he asked, *is this adjective?*

Fiona, again, asked most task-related questions, on one occasion finding the words to the National Anthem and asking me how it is sung.

Evidence of application of skills in new situations occurred 11 times, over the last four sessions, and involved seven students. In week five Hammad extended a prescribed image search task by adding pictures of Afghanistan, a singer, Ahmad Khan (19th century Muslim statesman), himself, Peshawar (tourist region of Pakistan), Hamid Karzai (President) [spelt Karzar by Hammad] and some Afghanistan money.

More significant application, however, involved accessing new web-addresses and searching independently on the Internet. Ali, Fiona and Anna accessed sites in their first language, which were identified to them by family and friends. On reviewing her diary, I noticed that Fiona had also accessed a property developer website (Figure 7):

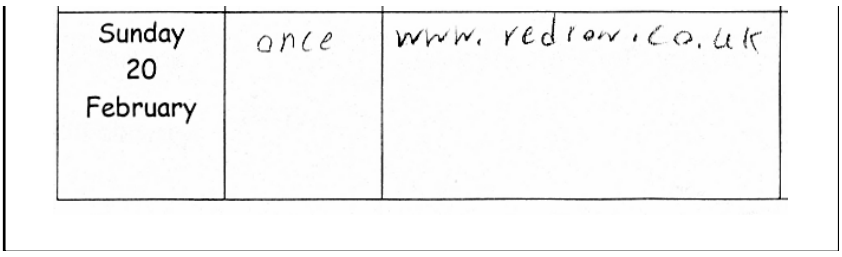

Figure 7: Excerpt from Fiona's diary.

She told me *I took this from the board … [advertising new houses] they are buying land to build houses. How I find the cost of these houses?* This was a unique example of a student noting a web address and looking it up at a later date.

At the start of the study, ten of the students reported having used the Internet before; Rance, Jeevilca and Habiba had not. In common with other research (Barclay et al. 2003; DfEE, 2000) Jeevilca and Rance reported, in the second focus group, that they continued to have insufficient time to access computers outwith the IT classes. However, Habiba reported in the second focus group (at the end of the study), that she was now accessing the Internet in college. Her diary had only one entry (Figure 8), but it did reflect Internet access and she had attached copies of the Arabic news pages she accessed.

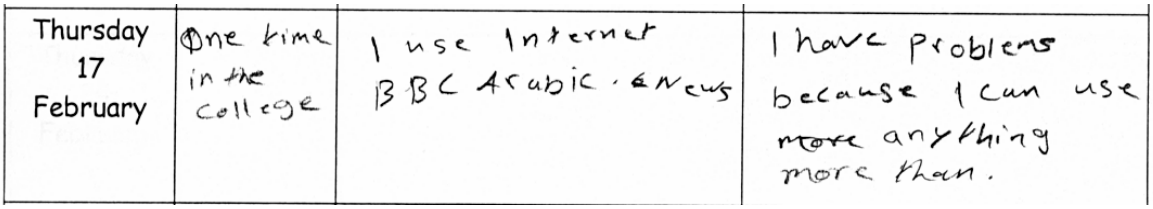

Figure 8: Excerpt from Habiba's diary.

CONCLUSION

This paper reviews the methodology employed whilst undertaking research for an MEd at Strathclyde University. It describes a multi-method mini-ethnographic study of a group of ESOL students learning how to use the Internet. As a novice researcher I approached this study with a desire to provide context to an issue ill-understood by many, and to develop professional understanding of ESOL students' motivators. The design, therefore, intended to provide both clear start and end points *and* an opportunity to review the distance travelled in some depth, but wholly from the students' perspective. As educators we make decisions on curriculum content; the purpose of this research was also, therefore, to review the students' perspective of the decisions we have taken on their behalf.

As a novice researcher, data analysis technique was based on research of appropriate literature, and expert guidance from my supervisor, who encouraged me to examine data from many angles. Undertaking this research has afforded me a unique insight into the learning strategies employed by ESOL students, and allowed me to witness a remarkable journey. It introduced me to qualitative research methods, and gave me an opportunity to develop my understanding of data collection methodology and ethnographic analysis. The focus of this research was the student voice. The multiple methodologies employed gave the respondents an opportunity to record their journey, and offer insight to practitioners and policy-makers alike. The full dissertation is held at Strathclyde University's Jordanhill Campus: Rand, J. (2005) *Adult refugee and asylum seekers learning information technology – a mini-ethnographic review*.

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