THE FORUM

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The Theory of Methodology in Qualitative Research

BONNY NORTON PEIRCE
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

> All methods are ways of asking questions that presume an underlying set of assumptions, a structure of relevance, and a form of rationality. (Simon & Dippo, 1986, p. 195)

■ At the 28th Annual TESOL Convention in Baltimore in 1994, I gave a presentation on my PhD research entitled *Language Learning, Social Identity, and Immigrant Women* (Peirce, 1993). During question time a member of the audience made the point that I had been an active participant in the study and had affected its outcomes. Her question was whether or not this situation posed a methodological problem for me. The short answer at the time was that different research questions call for different methodologies. Although there is a place for quantitative research in the field of language learning and teaching, the questions I was asking in my research did not lend themselves to statistical analysis. I indicated that the field needed to develop a more comprehensive theory of methodology. To some extent, this article is the long answer to the question posed in Baltimore.

In this article I examine the complex relationship between theory and methodology in qualitative research. I take the position that theory (implicitly or explicitly) informs the questions researchers ask; the assumptions we make; and the procedures, methods, and approaches we use to carry out research projects. In turn, the questions asked will inevitably influence what kind of data are collected, how they are collected, and what conclusions are drawn on the basis of data analyses. Specifically, I describe recent trends in educational research that I have found most helpful in my own research in language learning and teaching. Although the educational researchers who conduct this research do not always ask the same questions or share the same interests, their common assumptions about what I call *critical research* are compelling. I first describe six of these tenets and then indicate how they have influenced the framing, progress, and analysis of my

research on the language learning of immigrant women in Canada (Peirce, 1993, 1995).

SIX TENETS OF CRITICAL RESEARCH

The questions I ask in my research, the assumptions I make, the data I consider relevant, and the conclusions I draw are informed by the work of educational researchers in three related but as yet diffuse areas. The first group of educational researchers, some of whom are described by Weiler (1988) as primarily interested in "cultural production," include Bourdieu (1977), Connell, Ashendon, Kessler, and Dowsett (1982), Heller (1987, 1992), Simon (1992), Walsh (1987, 1989), and Willis (1977). The second group frames its educational work within a feminist project and includes Briskin and Coulter (1992), Luke and Gore (1992), Rockhill (1987), Schenke (1991), Smith (1987a, 1987b), and Weiler (1988, 1991). The third group locates its educational research within the emerging tradition of critical ethnography and includes Anderson (1989), Britzman (1990), Brodkey (1987), and Simon and Dippo (1986).

Having made distinctions among these three groups of researchers, I hasten to add that the overlapping interests within and among them are more significant than their differences. Indeed, Willis, for example, is referred to as a cultural production theorist by Weiler (1988) and a critical ethnographer by Anderson (1989); Weiler is described as a critical ethnographer by Anderson (1989) but defines herself primarily as a feminist researcher; Simon is considered a cultural production theorist by Weiler (1988) but defines his own work as critical ethnography (Simon & Dippo, 1986); Smith (1987b) collapses the boundaries by defining her work as a feminist approach to ethnography. The work of these educational theorists has a number of important tenets in common—tenets I draw on in my own research.

Tenet 1: Critical research rejects the view that any research can claim to be objective or unbiased. Weiler (1988) argues that feminist research begins with the assumption that the researcher plays a constitutive role in determining the progress of a research project. She contends that the researcher has to understand her own subjective experience and knowledge as well as that of the women she studies. Likewise, Simon and Dippo (1986) point out that the production of knowledge cannot be understood apart from the personal histories of the researchers and the larger institutional context in which researchers work. They suggest that critical ethnographic work should define data and analytic procedures in a way consistent with its pedagogical and political project.

Tenet 2: Critical researchers aim to investigate the complex relationship between social structure, on the one hand, and human agency, on

the other, without resorting to deterministic or reductionist analyses. Anderson (1989), for example, argues that critical ethnography has grown out of dissatisfaction with, on the one hand, "social accounts of 'structures' like class, patriarchy, and racism in which real human actors never appear" and "cultural accounts of human actors in which broad structural constraints like class, patriarchy and racism never appear" (p. 249). Likewise, although Connell et al. (1982) reject the "increasing dogmatism" (p. 29) of reproduction theory, they also reject "desiccated" (p. 24) research in which researchers seldom meet or speak to the people they are studying. According to Weiler (1988), the specific mandate of feminist scholarship is to investigate the relationship between the individual and the social:

> Thus focusing on the everyday world reveals the ways in which larger forces, both ideological and material, place limits and conditions on our actions. At the same time, making the everyday world of women the center of social research demonstrates that a concentration solely on the public arena is equally inadequate. Feminist scholarship, by revealing the everyday lives of women, opens up the other half of social reality which has been ignored in studies of public life. (p. 62)

Tenet 3: Critical research assumes that inequities of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation produce and are produced by unequal power relations in society. Drawing on the work of Gramsci, Simon and Dippo (1986) maintain that "power relations are those that structure how forms are produced and reproduced to limit and constrain, as well as contest and redefine what one is able to be" (p. 197). Similarly, Walsh (1989) argues, "In a world that is clearly unequal, participation and dialogue never just happen. Power relations are clearly at work, differentially positioning students in relation to one another, to the subject matter, and to the teacher" (p. 139). Weiler (1988) contends that, although women share a gendered history, women should not be treated as a single group with no differences: "Blindness to race and class leads to as much distortion of social reality as does blindness to the importance of gender" (p. 64).

Tenet 4: Critical researchers are interested in the way individuals make sense of their own experience. Connell et al. (1982) indicate that in their research they wanted to "get close to the situations people found themselves in, to talk to them at length about their experiences" (p. 29). Smith (1987b) argues that what she calls an *institutional ethnography* is a method of analysis that returns the researcher to "the actualities of what people do on a day-to-day basis under definite conditions and in definite situations"; it is a method that "fully recognizes individuals as competent practitioners of their everyday worlds" (p. 7). Similarly,

according to Weedon (1987), "Theory must be able to address women's experience by showing where it comes from and how it relates to material social practices and the power relations which structure them" (p. 8).

Tenet 5: Critical researchers are interested in locating their research within a historical context. As Simon and Dippo (1986) argue, "History is not to be relegated to the collection of 'background data,' but rather becomes an integral part of the explanation of the regularities explored in any specifics" (p. 198). Walsh (1989) holds that the purpose of her study on the struggles of Puerto Rican students in the U.S. was to highlight "how the past and present intersect in people's voices, infuse pedagogy, and sculpt the conditions and processes involved in coming to know" (p. 133). Luke and Gore (1992) argue that the identities that feminist academics have forged for themselves have been influenced by feminists "past and present," by the "voluminous feminist literature of the last two decades that has made the most powerful contribution to re-thinking the subject, to questioning theory in all disciplines, and to the debates on difference" (p. 4).

Tenet 6: Critical researchers believe that the goal of educational research is social and educational change. Brodkey (1987), for example, argues that "the goal of critical ethnography is always the same: to help create the possibility of transforming such institutions as schools" (p. 67). Briskin and Coulter (1992) maintain that "in its concern for social change and liberation, feminist pedagogy is situated firmly within the discourse on progressive education and critical pedagogy" (p. 251). Similarly, according to Willis (1977), "to refuse the challenge of the day-to-day—because of the retrospective dead hand of structural constraint—is to deny the continuance of life and society themselves" (p. 186). Simon's work, and that of his colleagues, is centrally concerned with what schools can do to address inequities in educational and social institutions (Simon, Dippo, & Schenke, 1991). All of these researchers agree that there are many possibilities for reducing inequities in society in general and education in particular.

CRITICAL RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY

In this section I argue that the six tenets of critical research outlined above can help to inform qualitative research in language learning and teaching. I illustrate my arguments with a brief analysis of a research project I have recently completed (Peirce, 1993) in which I conducted a longitudinal study of the natural language learning experiences of five immigrant women in Canada. The purpose of my research was to investigate under what conditions these language

learners spoke English and how such opportunities to speak were socially structured across time and space. The research was based on the premise that practice in the target language is a necessary condition of L2 learning (Spolsky, 1989).

In my research I was constantly aware that my own history and experience intersected in diverse and complex ways with the progress of the research (Tenet 1). As a graduate student in a progressive educational institution, I had access to a wide range of human and material resources that have influenced the way I approached data collection and data analysis. The supervision I received, the literature I was introduced to, the fellow students I consulted with, and the workshops I attended all informed my work. Before beginning graduate studies, I was not familiar, for example, with the work of Bourdieu (1977), Cummins (1986), Heller (1987), Kress (1985), Simon (1992), and Weedon (1987), all of which has had a significant influence not only on my PhD research but also on other research projects in which I have participated (e.g., Peirce, 1989; Peirce & Stein, 1995). At another time and place, my research would have been differently conceived and differently understood.

In addition, the fact that I am a white, middle-class anglophone may have made my study appear attractive to immigrants who struggled for access to the dominant group in Canadian society. I was not a neutral, objective researcher in the eyes of the participants. For some of them, I was identified as the only English-speaking friend they had; I wrote references for the participants; I helped them find jobs. I constantly juggled my diverse positions as friend, teacher, and researcher. Furthermore, my own position as a woman and a mother gave me some insight into the experiences of the women in my study. I could identify with the daily challenges of studying, mothering, working, and housekeeping under ubiquitous time constraints. Finally, my location as a teacher and researcher in the field of language education and my experiences of living in multilingual societies have constantly directed me to address the questions, "What would colleagues find interesting in my research? What kind of research would be interesting for my colleagues?"

In the research I was interested in the relationship between the individual language learners and the larger social structures that influenced their day-to-day lives and their opportunities to speak English (Tenet 2). I investigated why, for example, one participant who had spoken to her coworkers on a regular basis withdrew from social interaction after a series of layoffs in her factory. I questioned why one learner dropped out of a basic skills English class whereas another one, in the same class, remained until graduation. Such questions could not be addressed by observing the language learner in isolation from

society. I had to address them by drawing on the participants' own experiences as well as larger forces in Canadian society such as the economic recession and national language-training policies.

I investigated the extent to which the gendered identity of the women in my study as well as their position as immigrants in Canadian society served to constrain their opportunities to learn and practice English in the home and workplace. In other words, I addressed the extent to which inequitable relations of power based on gender, ethnicity, and class might affect language learning (Tenet 3). To what extent, for example, was one participant (a single woman) affected by her family's admonition that she cease her preoccupation with learning English and focus her energies on finding a "rich, young man"? How was one participant's language learning affected by the resentment expressed by her husband, whose progress had been slower than hers? How was another participant's social interaction affected by her perception than Canadians "look down [on] the immigrants"? Only by asking such questions was I able to focus on the similarities and differences among immigrant women learning English in Canada. The age of a woman, her ethnicity, her marital status, the presence of children, and her educational background all had an important influence on the extent to which she created, responded to, or resisted opportunities to practice English.

I wanted to understand how the participants made sense of their daily experiences with the English language. Why, for example, did one learner avoid talking to people she did not know whereas another telephoned strangers regularly to practice speaking? Why did one participant seldom speak to her customers in a fast food restaurant but was prepared to challenge a male customer who accused her of "putting on an accent" to get better tips? I found it significant that the mother who had come to Canada specifically for her children was concerned less about her own education than about opportunities for her children.

Like the critical researchers discussed above, I sought to uncover and create the "spaces and potentials" (Willis, 1977, p. 186) for change in the teaching of English to immigrant women in Canada. I noted carefully one participant's comment that she would rather take a computer course than a basic English skills course because she wanted the opportunity to "think." I took seriously one participant's comment that she never "learnt anything" when other students in her ESL class gave presentations about their home countries. I found it significant that a number of participants commented that what they had learnt about Canadian customs and values in their ESL class was not supported by their personal experiences outside the classroom.

In sum, the work of the critical researchers described above was

influential in my own research because it helped me to ask questions that I might otherwise not have posed in my research project. As a result, the participants had increased opportunities to share language learning experiences they might otherwise have dismissed as irrelevant. Together we confronted the complex relationship between the language learner and the social world. Over time I gained greater insight into the strengths and limitations of current second language acquisition theory and its practical classroom application. I learnt that the greatest challenge for educational researchers is not how to solve problems but how to frame questions.

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Teaching Issues

The *TESOL Quarterly* publishes brief commentaries on aspects of English language teaching. For this issue, we asked two teacher educators the following question: How has qualitative research informed your work in teacher education?

Edited by BONNY NORTON PEIRCE
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

Qualitative Research and Teacher Education

From the Ethnography of Communication to Critical Ethnography in ESL Teacher Education

KELLEEN TOOHEY
Simon Fraser University

■ I have chosen to interpret this question as an invitation to consider some of the ethnographic research I have brought to the attention of