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Both Familiar and Unfamiliar: Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality in EFL Classroom Research

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Abstract

The article explores the complex nature of researcher positionality in an observational study centered on collaborative learning (CL) within an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The classroom was the main research setting but the article primarily emphasizes on the researcher's shifting positionality/roles between being an active-participant (a facilitator and advanced L2 learner) and a passive observer and the reflexive approach to positionality. The researcher gained access to the classroom through the institute at the administrative level and the English teacher who facilitated entry into the classroom and moderately influenced the expectations associated with the researcher's role. As a novice researcher, I experienced shifts in identity. My active participation in both virtual and physical classes influenced my positionality as an insider. Given my shared linguistic and learning background with the students, some perceived me as an insider, and semi-insider. However, at times, I felt like a complete outsider; my role as a passive observer and the resistance from some students positioned me as one. These changes in positionality influenced the nature of interactions and the research outcomes.

These shifts also highlight the fluid aspect of positionality. Drawing on Pechurina's (2014) insights from her ethnographic study of Russian migrants, this article illustrates that positionality is dynamic and constantly negotiated within different relationships. These experiences highlight the significance of reflexivity as both methodological and ethical practice, demonstrating how the researcher's identity shapes what is observed, interpreted, and presented in qualitative educational research.

Keywords: Reflexivity, Gatekeeping, Ethnographic-Research, Insider/Outsider, Collaborative Learning.

Introduction

The researcher cannot maintain a neutral stance in qualitative classroom-based research. Positionality, referring to the researcher's social and political location in relation to the research context, plays a crucial role in shaping access, observation, and interpretation (Holmes 2020). This article draws on my experience as a novice researcher conducting an ethnographic-inspired observational study of EFL students' interactions within collaborative-learning (CL) environments, where I occupied dual roles, a participant (an advanced L2 learner, providing help/feedback to students and a facilitator of CL interactions), and an observer of students' interactions during collaborative-activities.

Inspired by Pechurina's (2014) exploration of the insider/outsider dynamic in ethnographic home research, I reflect on how my own positionality influenced my perceptions, interactions, and the research findings. Rather than focusing on CL itself, this article highlights the sociological complexities of conducting research from a transitional space, where the distinctions/lines between participation and observation of the collaborative classroom activities, as well as insider and outsider, are continually changing. This article also argues that positionality in qualitative

classroom-based ethnographic-inspired research is fluid. It is constantly reshaped by the researcher's shifting roles. These complexities demand continuous reflexivity, which is essential in navigating ethical and methodological tensions of fieldwork.

Positionality and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research

Positionality is a key aspect of qualitative research. It encompasses the social and political identities of a researcher related to the research setting, participants, and the wider context (Holmes, 2020). It involves race, gender, class, language background, academic status and lived experiences (Milner, 2007). It refers to both an individual's worldview and the stance they take regarding a research task, along with its social and political context (Foote and Bartell, 2011; Rowe, 2014; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). It is fluid, negotiated and constantly shaped by evolving relationships with participants (England, 1994; Pechurina, 2014). In educational ethnography, the concept of positionality becomes complex when researchers are actively involved in the classroom and assume different roles. For example, a researcher who is a language learner, a former teacher, or shares the same cultural linguistic background as students may be perceived as both an insider and outsider (Merriam et al., 2001). In these situations, the researcher is not neutral as their access to certain insights can be affected by trust shared identity and institutional dynamics (Pechurina, 2014). Reflexivity, closely linked to positionality, examines how a researcher's presence affects participants behavior and how their cultural backgrounds influence their interpretations of the research context (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). It involves a continuous process of critical self-awareness about how a researcher influences every stage of their work from gaining access and collecting data to interpreting and presenting findings (Berger, 2015). It involves examining not just what one observes, but also questioning the reasons behind those observations and considering how one's position influences what is noticed and what may be overlooked. Rose (1997) noted that reflexivity serves as a means to contextualise knowledge recognizing that

all that understanding is inherently partial and shaped by individuals perceiving it. Students pursuing master's qualification in social-sciences are required to articulate their positionality in research (Holmes, 2020). Positionality is also frequently articulated formally in research papers, and doctoral-dissertations through 'positionality-statement', which explains how and what shapes their identity as researchers. A strong statement often entails an overview of researchers' perspectives (i.e. personal beliefs) and possible influences on their research, concerning aspects like age, prior career, and educational background, alongside researchers' selected position concerning participants (e.g. as an insider or outsider) in the project. It also addresses the research context, explaining how, where, and when these factors may have an influence on the research process (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). However, for novice-researchers, including details about their positionality and its impact on their research can often be challenging, as they may not have had to consider positionality in their former undergraduate studies. Thus, they frequently have difficulty understanding what positionality entails and articulate their own perspectives (Holmes, 2020). It is also typical for a novice-researcher to experience shifts in their positionality during extended research projects. Therefore, it is important to embrace a reflexive approach; recognizing the integration of reflexive accounts (personal insights) and acknowledging that educational research is inherently influenced by various factors should be integral to all forms of research (Greenbank, 2003) as it can clarify and provide context regarding researcher's stance on the research process, for themselves, participants, and the readers of the research.

Observer or Participant

As a novice researcher, identifying my positionality was challenging. It underwent multiple changes throughout the research process, beginning as an active participant-observer before entering the field. I then shifted to being a passive-observer, later reverting to being an active-participant, and ultimately returning to being an

observer. In the following sections, I will reflect on my positionality throughout the research process and its influence on the context. Specifically, I will discuss and reflect upon how I perceived my position as a participant or observer, and as an insider or outsider throughout this journey and how others (students) perceived it. In this paper, I used S1, S2, S3, S4, etc to refer to students' numbers and (1, 2, 3) to refer to group and pair numbers during observed activities to ensure anonymity, protecting students' identities.

Into the Field

Observer Role:

After entering the field and starting data-collection, I encountered a reality that turned out to be different from my expectations. I started adopting a different role, a non-participant-observer, during the first few classes due to several compelling reasons. First, after recognizing that my English proficiency-level was higher than that of the participants, who were at an A1 level, I took a step back and decided to observe rather than participate. This decision stemmed from my concern that my participation as an MA student-researcher would inadvertently overshadow students' learning experiences. Specifically, I worried that if I participated directly in their collaborative-activities, they might start relying on my input for correct answers, thereby hindering their language development. Additionally, it became clear that the students who actively engaged in pair-work were primarily working with established-peers, typically classmates they were close to. This complicated my attempts to join their collaborative-activities. This situation resonated with the observer's paradox concept as noted by Neuman (2003), where participants' awareness of being part of a research study and being observed can alter their behavior. They might act differently than they would in a natural, unobserved setting. Consequently, I chose to spend the initial classes observing students' interactions during pair-work without intervening.

Active-Participant Role:

After the initial collaborative-classes I observed, I decided to transition into an active-participant role (a facilitator and advanced L2 learner). My aim was to gain firsthand insight into students' experiences with CL, including its impact on their learning. I intended to engage gradually in peer-discussions. Given my advanced level, I aimed to participate as a facilitator, encouraging students to share ideas and work collaboratively without me dominating the discussion. Unfortunately, my facilitating approach did not unfold as intended. During one session which focused on verb agreement (there is/there are) grammar rules, I tried to facilitate collaboration by suggesting to S5, S6 next to me to cooperate after the teacher had instructed students to work in pairs. However, S5 informed me that her partner (S6) already switched to work with someone else, so I offered to pair-up with her, instead, leading me to taking on an active-participant role. We ended up working together throughout subsequent pair-work activities. She became aware of my identity and perceived me as an advanced L2 learner, someone exhibiting greater knowledge of English and providing guidance. Notably, she sought my assistance only when she came across difficult questions or was uncertain about her answers. She would ask me if her answers were correct or not. During pair-work, we would read questions together and then I would provide her with hints to guide her towards correct answers without dominating the interaction. I even expressed how tricky some questions were for me. My shared linguistic background with the student fostered an empathic bond enhancing our interactions quality, encouraging us to feel more at ease sharing our experiences, and relating to each other's challenges and successes in language-learning. Hence, this dynamic fostered an atmosphere of empathy and understanding making my partner feel comfortable interacting and seeking help from a more knowledgeable peer. I was happy with my first pair-work experience, despite being perceived as an advanced L2 learner. I was indeed an active-participant during my first encounter with pair-work as I contributed meaningfully to my partner's

learning-process through providing guidance, demonstrating my understanding of common struggles in language-learning and willingness to help students. This interaction reflected the idea of recognizing the 'humanness' embedded in our research (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023) and reflected emotional and relational aspects of humanness, emphasizing the significance of empathy, collaboration and mutual support.

Insider vs. Outsider Dynamics:

In qualitative research, the insider vs. outsider dynamic describes the researcher's relationship to study participants based on whether they are viewed as part of the group (insider) or separate from it (outsider). This relationship is influenced by identity markers like language, ethnicity, social background, and lived experiences, affecting the researcher's access, rapport, and the data collected (Merriam et al., 2001; Holmes, 2020). In my study of CL in the EFL classroom, I experienced the shifting dynamics of positionality. As an advanced L2 learner, I shared a linguistic and learning background with the students, which positioned me as an insider. For instance, students like S5 and S7 interacted with me in L1, Arabic, and sought my assistance during tasks, asking questions or requesting feedback on their answers. Furthermore, I assumed the role of a facilitator during online groupwork activities, which also positioned me as an insider. I facilitated the decision-making process for leader selection during the first group activity when I joined group 2, I clarified tasks for group members, like S3 who did not understand the task (writing an email to a friend about a job), and I offered suggestions. For instance, I suggested that someone could give an example of a potential job-title for the task to encourage collaboration. I also actively participated, sharing ideas and posing and answering questions embracing my insider role. For example, during another online class, after I joined group 2, I greeted the students to initiate interaction. S6 responded. Then, she shared her answers for the task (reading about three people applying for a nurse job at the

university). She evaluated the first person and justified her evaluation. I interacted with her, agreeing with her answer. Then I asked her to continue sharing her answers since I did not have the book that has the descriptions of the three characters. When she shared her second evaluation, I discussed it with her and asked how many languages the person spoke. She answered saying they only mentioned they did not speak French, clarifying that point for me. Her willingness to collaborate, assist and clarify emphasized the emotional and relational aspect of humanness. This fostered a supportive and collaborative learning environment. My interactions in both classes indicated that assuming the role of an insider was more pronounced in virtual group-activities than in physical ones. In virtual classes, I was able to engage more with students facilitating interaction and collaboration. Whereas in most of the physical classes, I adopted a more outsider role. For instance, I inquired S23 about the direction-description task, but she responded with a serious tone, which reminded me of S7 response in a different writing class (describing countries) when I asked if the task was individual or group-work; both students were not open to interacting with me, unlike how they interacted with their normal peers. My role as a researcher positioned me in a more observational stance. I was also aware that my advanced English proficiency-level and my participation as an MA student-researcher would inadvertently overshadow students' learning experiences, casting me as an insider observing students' interactions during CL rather than participating with them. This duality in identity blurred the lines between observation and participation, complicating relationships with participants. This resonates with Pechurina (2014) exploration of insider/outsider positionality in her study of Russian migrants' homes in the UK, despite sharing linguistic and cultural background ties with her participants, she described herself as both ''familiar and unfamiliar'', with her position depending on the setting, and the participants' expectations. Similarly, although I shared a linguistic background with the students and was familiar with the EFL classroom context, I frequently experienced a dilemma between participation

and observation. Like Pechurina, I found that my position shifted based on classroom dynamics and how others perceived me.

Reflection

Reflecting on my dual positionality has highlighted that, as Pechurina (2014) states, the researcher is not merely a passive observer recording events but an active participant whose presence and perspective can shape the research context and influence the interaction within it. Her insights have deepened my understanding of reflexivity, emphasizing that it involves not only recognizing influence but also being aware of the relational and ethical implications of being present in a research setting. This journey has led me to view positionality not as a challenge to be resolved but as a crucial framework to continually reassess my research experience. Pechurina insights also highlighted that positionality is a fluid and negotiated process, requiring reflecting on familiar or semi-familiar research environments. Ultimately, this perspective enhances my understanding of research dynamics, promoting an ongoing interaction between the researcher and the subject. This approach not only deepens my insights but also fosters a more mindful and reflective practice in my research. Moreover, reflecting on research process impact on the researcher and how positionality and experiences influenced research-outcomes is retrospective reflexivity (Attia and Edge, 2017). It illustrates the shared humanity of both researchers and participants, showcasing our strengths, imperfections, struggles, and achievements. Reflexivity should not be considered as a one-time occurrence, but a continuous process.

Context and Access: Gaining Entry to the Classroom

In qualitative research, access refers to the researcher's ability to enter a field site, engage with participants, and collect data. However, access is not merely about physically entering the field but shaped by various social dynamics (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Researchers depend on gatekeepers who are the individuals or

structures, such as institutional teachers or coordinators that control entry into the research environment (Crow et al., 2006). Gatekeepers play a crucial role in determining not only if access is grafted but also how the researcher role is presented, which participants they meet, and what aspects of the setting they are visible. Hence, gaining access is a complex and power-influenced process, not a neutral phase in research design (Clark, 2011). In my study, I obtained access to the research field through the institute and the English teacher who allowed me to conduct observations in her classroom. Before collecting data, I used word of mouth as a recruitment method to identify the potential candidate (teacher) who permits conducting classroom observations for my study. My selection of teachers was based on a set of criteria that considers the advocacy and the frequency of implementing CL. So, I reached out to a former classmate who previously observed an English teacher last year, asking whether the teacher employed CL in her classes or not. She confirmed that the teacher did. Following this, I arranged a meeting with the teacher on campus to assess her eligibility to participate in my study. During our meeting, I introduced myself and explained my research purpose and procedure. The teacher met the pre-established criteria as she confirmed her constant incorporation of CL in class. Initially, she introduced me to students as a researcher observing students' interactions during CL. She did not invite me to engage in group activities, then I began observing pairs/groups from a distance. However, I then shifted to participating with students during CL, as an advanced L2 learner in physical activities and a facilitator in online group tasks (insider), where I clarified tasks, made suggestions and interacted with group members asking and answering questions. Nonetheless, I eventually returned to the observer role in later classes. This shift provided me with better observational opportunities and not all students were open to collaborating with me. This experience highlights how students and the teacher perceived my positionality differently. While the teacher introduced me as a researcher, some students viewed me as an insider, and semi-insider (advanced L2

learner) due to our shared linguistic background and my English level, while others perceived me as an outsider and resisted interacting with me. These differences in perceptions were significant, influencing the nature of the interactions I observed.

Like Pechurina (2014), who navigated access to Russian migrants' homes, the dual identity influenced my positionality. While I shared a linguistic background with the students, I also occupied the formal role of a researcher. Pechurina captures this complexity by describing herself as ''both familiar and unfamiliar'', highlighting the nuances of conducting research in contexts where cultural connections exist alongside an outsider's viewpoint. In her ethnographic research, she illustrates how the concepts of positionality and access are not static but rather fluid and contextually defined. Despite her cultural and linguistic similarities with participants, this familiarity did not automatically foster rapport or simplify access. Her interactions within intimate domestic spaces required continuous renegotiation, changing expectations and unspoken duties that participants imposed on her. Her findings emphasize that a researcher's identity is never fully under their control, and such dynamics affect both the relationships forced in the field and the insights gained from them. Her experiences provide a critical lens for understanding the complexities involved in conducting research within familiar or socially intimate environments.

Conclusion

This article argues that positionality in qualitative classroom-based ethnographic-inspired research is a dynamic and relational process and constantly influenced by the researcher's shifting roles. My experiences shifting between being an active participant and a passive observer highlight that researcher identity is not neutral; it influences perceptions shaping what knowledge is produced. Similar to Pechurina's (2014) exploration of Russian migrants' homes, my study reveals that being perceived as ''both familiar and unfamiliar'', insider and outsider, is not a drawback but an essential part of ethnographic research which demands continuous reflexivity.

For novice researchers, these fluid roles emphasize the need to recognize the ethical and emotional responsibilities that come with accessing social and intimate environments. Positionality is not a single event, but rather an ongoing process of negotiation that requires the researcher to engage in ongoing self-reflection.

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