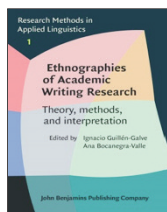# Book Reviews

Ethnographies of Academic Writing Research

Ignacio Guillén-Galve & Ana Bocanegra-Valle (Eds.).
Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2021, 162 pages. ISBN 9789027210067, 9789027210074 and 9789027258410.

In the complex knowledge societies of the 21st century, ethnography can make an essential contribution to research in academic writing. In particular, for the study of academic and professional literacies, ethnographic approaches offer huge potential to provide critical information about research contexts and practices. Within this framework, "Ethnographies of academic writing research", edited by Ignacio Guillén-Galve and Ana Bocanegra-Valle, fills a gap in the studies of written production in general and in research in academic writing in particular. Such studies incorporate ethnographic sensibilities (Lillis, 2021) in applied linguistics studies, and make visible dimensions of writing that are often invisible in academic contexts. Ethnographic approaches can help us to address our "textually-mediated social world" (Barton, 2001), and thus to avoid extreme textualist approaches that do not allow us to fully configure the socio-discursive and cultural dynamics that underlies writing practices. In this sense, it is essential to talk about literacy practices in relation to texts and contexts (everything in plural). Moreover, the ethnographic approach is also consistent with the dynamic concept of discipline, which has been characterized as involving a variety of people, practices and languages: "disciplines can be characterized by regularized practices, discourses, ways of thinking, procedures, emotional responses, motivations, and genres" (Tusting & Barton, 2016, p. 32). In other words, disciplines shape their own ways of doing and communicating in the academic space, and these ways can be accessed through ethnographies. Against this background, the present volume illustrates various ways in which ethnography, as a set of methodological approaches, affords insights into the worlds in which texts are written (including the virtual world) and literacy practices are deployed (Paltridge, Starfield & Tardy, 2016) enabling us

to see why they are written that way, what values underlie them (Swales & Luebs, 1995), and how they might be learned.

The subtitle of this work is "theory, methods and interpretation", and through the seven chapters we approach the ethnographic task in all the complexity that this implies. The first chapter, written by the editors themselves, presents the current state of ethnographic research applied to academic writing and presents key topics that characterize ethnographically oriented academic writing studies: thick description, deep theorizing, methodological alignment with ethnography, participatory and reflective research, reliability and ethics, among other relevant components.

Chapters 2 to 5 provide the theoretical foundations on how to develop ethnographically oriented research in relation to the main dimensions of academic writing using "deep theorising" (Lillis, 2008) and "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). After this, chapters 6 and 7 contain empirically guided reflections on the application of ethnographic methods in specific contexts. In this sense, a relevant contribution of this book is to introduce us to a diversity of methods, conceptual tools, heuristics and hermeneutical keys typical of ethnography.

The focus of chapter 2 by Christine Tardy focuses on the notion of "thick description" and its follow-up in 21 scientific articles that account for research in the field of writing. Special attention is paid to Geertz's original conceptualization of substantial and dense descriptions, and how these studies incorporate this notion, as well as to how participation can help us achieve substantial descriptions and understand our complex role as researchers in the area of academic writing. Following this, in chapter 3 Jennifer Sizer explains the methodological approach known as textography in the terms proposed by Swales (1998, 2018). On this basis, a variety of practices, contexts and texts are explored from the combination of textual analysis and ethnography, yielding "something more than a disembodied textual or discoursal analysis, but something less than a full ethnographic account" (Swales, 1998, p. 1). Ultimately, it is necessary to understand the writing practices in the disciplines and in higher education as practices inserted in specific contexts, with a strong experiential component, which acquire meaning through the interaction between subjectivities (Zavala, 2019). A relevant point of this chapter is also the treatment of ethical considerations when developing a textography.

Chapter 4 by Sofía Albero-Posac and María José Luzón focuses on digital

ethnography, an aspect of great relevance in the 21st century, since academic activity and communication are mediated by digital technologies. In this context, it is necessary to refine and adjust ethnographic tools such as observation and interviews to the new situations generated within digital communication, in order to analyse academic practices in online environments. We need to examine how the new online environments are defined and delimited, and what the limitations and possibilities of access to digital academic practices are. Rosa M. Manchón then presents a reflection regarding the contribution that ethnographically oriented studies make to researching writing processes in a second language (L2). The relevance of ethnographic approaches can be found in the sociocognitive and sociocultural orientations that seek to go beyond cognitive processes to understand the production of texts within diverse literacy practices that occur in real life. They also help reveal the hidden sequence of events, bringing out the dynamism of textual production in specific contexts. They shed light on writers and their writing situation (ethnography as a method), but also on the conceptualization or reconstruction of specific literacy events and their meanings.

Chapter 6 by Khuder and Petric is an empirical study with ethnographic data collection through a longitudinal multiple case study design that understands ethnography as deep theorising (Lillis, 2008). It focuses on the textual history and research trajectory of four Syrian refugee scholars as they attempt to re-establish their academic careers in a new context and publish in English. Based on over two years of follow-up, this research shows the importance of reflexivity and collaborative ethnography, and illustrates how qualitative data collected in different ways can be combined in ethnographically informed studies.

Finally, chapter 7 written by Natalia Ávila-Reyes presents an empirical study focused on student writing. Her chapter highlights the contribution that "emic" research methods and techniques make to the study of academic writing by students that traditionally are underrepresented in the Chilean and Latin American higher education subsystem. In this way, a critical view and an emic perspective (from the perspective of the participants in their legitimate peripheral role) allow us to counteract the models that approach student writing from a deficit-based understanding. Her work accounts for the explanatory power of two ethnographic tools: literacy stories and conversations around a text through the integration of two research projects that delve into student academic writing:

Ethnography of academic writing can enrich writing research by offering specific methodological devices for reaching context as a fundamental dimension of writing. When working with underrepresented students, it also has the potential for theorizing a frame of reference that is sensitive to diversity and problematize the structural nature of privileged academic practices (Ávila-Reyes, 2021, p. 10).

In this volume, theory, method and interpretation constitute a virtuous triad that allows us to investigate the interaction of multiple academic, scientific, and professional discursive communities and the intersection between the academy and the profession "from within". We thus enter the stories, the practices, and the trajectories from co-constructed pivots in a critical and collaborative way, and not from the traditional role of observer keeping a distance from the community. From another perspective, it would perhaps have been desirable for this work to incorporate a greater amount of empirically based research that would make it possible to configure a more complete map of the multiple potentials of ethnographic research. Nevertheless, this is a key resource book for researchers, teachers and students in the fields of applied linguistics, discourse genre studies and writing studies, among other disciplines.

In summary, the volume constitutes a clear, well-organized contribution that covers the most relevant dimensions of academic writing in today's world: online academic discourse, writing in second and third languages, student writing, refugees' writing, reflexivity, participation, textography, emic perspectives, rich, textured, dense identities and descriptions.

Reviewed by **Dr. Enrique Sologuren**
Universidad del Desarrollo (Chile)
e.sologuren@udd.cl

References

Ávila Reyes, N. (2021). Literacy histories and talk around texts: Emphasising the emic to explore student's perspectives on academic writing. In I. Guillén-Galve & A. Bocanegra-Valle (Eds.), *Ethnographies of academic writing research: Theory, methods, and interpretation* (pp. 125-144). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Barton, D. (2001). Directions for literacy research: Analysing language and social practices in a textually mediated world. *Language and*

Education, *15*(2-3), 92-104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500780108666803>

Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In C. Geertz (Ed.), *The interpretation of culture* (pp. 3-30). Basic Books.

Lillis, T. (2008). Ethnography as method, methodology, and "Deep Theorizing" closing the gap between text and context in academic writing research. *Written Communication*, *25*(3), 353-388. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088308319229>

Lillis, T. (2021). Foreword. In I. Guillén-Galve & A. Bocanegra-Valle (Eds.), *Ethnographies of academic writing research: Theory, methods, and interpretation* (pp. vii-xii). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Paltridge, B., Starfield, S., & Tardy, C. M. (2016).

Ethnographic perspectives on academic writing. Oxford University Press.

Swales, J. (1998). *Other floors, other voices: A textography of a small university building.* Lawrence Erlbaum.

Swales, J., & Luebs, M. (1995). Towards textography. In B. Gunnarson & I. Backlund (Eds.), *Writing in Academic Contexts* (pp. 12-29). FUMS.

Tusting, K., & Barton, D. (2016). Writing disciplines: producing disciplinary knowledge in the context of contemporary higher education. *Ibérica: Journal of the European Association of Languages for Specific Purposes*, *32*, 15-34.

Zavala, V. (2019). Justicia sociolingüística para los tiempos de hoy. *Íkala, revista de lenguaje y cultura*, *24*(2), 343-359.