

4 Producing knowledge about plurilingualism with young students: a challenge for collaborative ethnography

Virginia Unamuno¹ and Adriana Patiño²

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1. Introduction

One of the core concerns of the research undertaken by GREIP has been to develop an interdisciplinary approach to plurilingualism that could be useful in education. This approach was established by taking into consideration, in a situated manner and based on the study of interactional data, the competences that make it possible to acquire the knowledge, orientations and practices that allow effective participation in a variety of everyday interactions in educational and social contexts (Codó, Nussbaum, & Unamuno, 2007; Nussbaum & Unamuno, 2006).

Giving an account of how plurilingualism and, more specifically, plurilingual competences should be managed in the classroom thus becomes a research subject strongly connected with the need to understand complex teaching-learning situations. On the one hand, different communicative repertoires are brought into play and, on the other, they involve people with different sets of knowledge, categorized unequally on an institution level. Describing this form of classroom management entails: studying plurilingual competences in a situated manner

1. CONICET-Centro de Estudios del Lenguaje en Sociedad (CELES)-UNSAM, Buenos Aires, Argentina; vunamuno@conicet.gov.ar

2. University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom; a.patino@soton.ac.uk

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so that tools can be provided for the different actors involved in the schooling process in order to promote socio-educational interventions according to a particular situation; putting forward inclusive schooling initiatives; preventing prejudice from forming and reproducing; and providing guidelines to prevent the social exclusion of minorities.

In the context of education in Catalonia, there is a long history of interest in research undertaken in pursuit of inclusive education. This can be linked partly to research carried out from the end of the Franco dictatorship to support the building of an educational system that would include different social sectors, characterized by being speakers of different languages. From our point of view, this foundational process of relating research and teaching had a profound effect on the way in which the GREIP group works insofar as it places importance on giving attention to school processes, but also to building a close relationship between universities and schools, thus creating a particular way of undertaking research.

Scientific interest in plurilingualism, the socially appropriate teaching of languages, and social inclusion are all present in the various projects of the GREIP group in relation to the study of teaching-language processes of first, second and foreign languages in contexts of linguistic diversity. Nevertheless, these interests kept shifting in response to social changes. Added to the initial complexity of the Catalan educational system, characterized by bilingual education models in which the language used at school and the one used at home were defined as resources available for schooling, new educational conditions came into play with the significant change in the student population of Catalonia that began at the start of the 21st century. We are referring here to students of immigrant origin entering the Catalan school system, something that marked a transformation in the composition of the school population and created a new teaching-learning context characterized by profound inequalities, mainly with regard to access to the languages used for teaching and to the curricular content. Within this context of transformations, the GREIP group was concerned not just with investigating what was happening in schools, but rather with supporting its agents in the search for methodological strategies and creating resources to face the new challenges that these changes presented.

The disquiet aroused by plurilingualism in Catalan classrooms led the GREIP group into an intensive debate with a variety of educational agents, and the need to investigate, amongst other things, the means and strategies to:

- improve the ways in which recently arrived and autochthonous participants communicate within the school environment;
- make visible the linguistic competences of all students, above and beyond those that educational institutions offer in their curriculum;
- reflect on the language model to use in teaching and the forms of communication and verbal actions categorized as ‘acceptable’.

Between 2003 and 2007 we worked with different primary schools (see [Nussbaum & Unamuno, 2006](#)). In these studies we were able to verify that throughout their schooling, immigrant children learnt Catalan as a vehicular language for teaching but only a few appropriated it as their language of communication. We also found that there was a specific concern in the schools due to the fact that, as students progressed through academic years, they stopped using Catalan in public.

To a certain extent, we were interested in continuing with this line of work. However, we did not feel we could limit ourselves only to what was happening in educational institutions. We needed to go further: to include linguistic practices in non-school environments and the views of the students themselves on their own and others’ language uses. We thought, therefore, that one way of doing this could be to design a project that included young people as researchers.

Thus, as with other GREIP group investigations, we resorted to a methodological design based on collaborative research. To do so, we proposed designing the project jointly with the teachers of two secondary schools. As [Nussbaum \(this volume\)](#) explains, this type of research is viewed as innovative and in methodological terms it goes one step beyond participative research as it facilitates teamwork with all the participants in the design and discussion of

methods and techniques, as well as the exchange of interests, objectives and benefits.

Taking into account these considerations, we put forward the project ‘Multilingual competences of secondary school students: continuities and discontinuities between educational and non-educational practices’ (DECOMASAI), which was carried out between 2007 and 2010 by various members of the GREIP³ group. Its objective was to study communicative practices in both school and non-school environments, viewing such practices as examples of language socialization. We started out from a collaborative methodological design with an ethnographic profile and an interactional focus, based on two case studies (the results can be found in [Codó & Patiño-Santos, 2014](#); [Corona, Nussbaum, & Unamuno, 2013](#)).

This chapter concentrates primarily on the methodological aspects of the project in question. Our goal is to explore the network of collaboration that was built up throughout the life of the project, mobilizing the various agents who took part in it. We believe that it is these relationships that allowed us to make progress in identifying and describing the ways that young people categorize school and non-school linguistic practices and give meaning to the sociolinguistic context that frames their language socialization.

2. The DECOMASAI project

The DECOMASAI project began at the start of the 2007/2008 academic year. We contacted and started to work together with teachers of Spanish and Catalan in two state secondary schools in the metropolitan area of Barcelona: *El Turó del Vent*^A (TV) situated in the Sagrera area in the north of Barcelona (district of Sant Andreu) and *Els Quatre Gats* (QG), in Badalona. The two schools provided

3. Virginia Unamuno (PI between 2007 and 2009) and Dolors Masats (PI from 2009 to 2010). Other members: Eva Codó, Víctor Corona, Luci Nussbaum, Amparo Tuson, Adriana Patiño, Cristina Escobar and Artur Noguero.

4. In accordance with the principles of ethnographic research, pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the sources and the places where the activity was carried out.

important contexts for studying the way in which the different plurilingual repertoires of the student body were managed.

The TV school, located in an industrial zone, did not have a high number of students of immigrant origin. During the 2006/07 academic year, of 485 students, 93 came from outside Spain. Perhaps this was the reason why, at the time of the investigation, cultural diversity did not play a major role in the curricular and extracurricular activities that formed part of the school's educational project. In spite of there only being a minor presence of recently arrived students, these were concentrated in what the teachers called 'adapted groups'. Specifically, it was students from two adapted groups of Compulsory Secondary Education (*Educación Secundaria Obligatoria*, ESO), 2nd grade A and 3rd grade A, who took part in the project.

Conversely, 90% of QG's students were mainly from Latin America. This school, being used to taking in recently arrived students, had introduced cultural diversity some years previously as one of the cross-cutting factors in its curricular content. Some of the teachers were already accustomed to organizing extracurricular activities to promote intercultural projects such as theatre, creative writing or storytelling in different languages. The group worked with was the 4th grade of ESO, given that most of the students had previous experience of using video in their extracurricular activities.

The proposal agreed with the two schools consisted of selecting curricular content from each cycle of the ESO course that was suitable for being approached in an innovative way. This would involve the students observing and noting down communicative practices in both school and non-school environments.

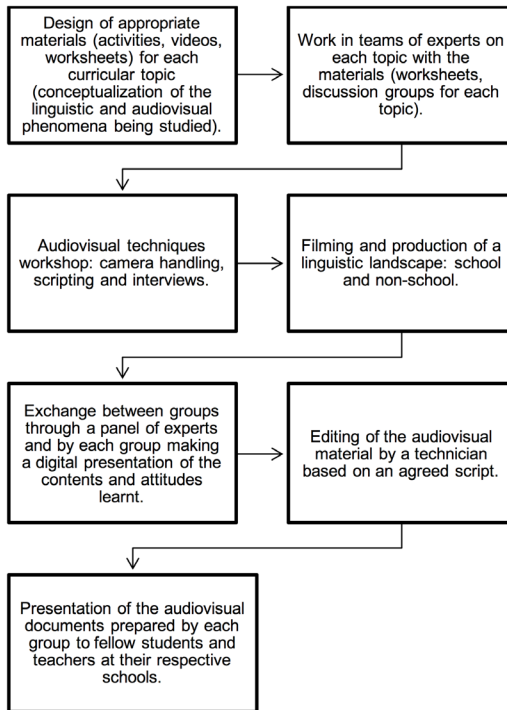
Each group (2nd and 3rd graders at TV and 4th graders at QG) was divided into four teams of experts in some of the topics included in the language subjects:

- multilingualism;
- linguistic varieties (of Catalan and Spanish);

- graphic communication;
- non-verbal communication.

In line with previous GREIP collaborative investigations, the proposed didactic intervention was based on project work (see [Nussbaum, this volume](#)). When linking this intervention with school tasks, an attempt was made to create situations that allowed participants to be observed behaving as they do in everyday life, so that students could be seen acting in spontaneous situations without the formal supervision of teachers, and in formal situations, presenting their work to the entire class. The following flowchart ([Figure 1](#)) shows the most important phases of the didactic intervention.

Figure 1. Summary of the didactic sequence



3. Students as researchers

As mentioned above, the design of the project was based on collaborative research involving different types of actors: university teacher-researchers, secondary school teachers, and students. While the secondary school teachers worked actively with the university team in the design of the teaching materials, the planning of the interventions and their execution, the students were responsible for the fieldwork. As the above flowchart shows, the youngsters had two stages of training.

First, within the framework of their curricular courses, they took part in workshops on topics that had been selected from the curriculum. The teaching proposition was to work in expert groups. Each group would be responsible for researching one of those topics, based on both theoretical material and empirical reflection.

Second, the students were trained in managing audiovisual techniques that allowed them to collect data and obtain material for making a brief documentary, the objective of which would be to explain to their other classmates the topic or phenomenon they investigated. This audiovisual document would also be useful as teaching material at other schools. As part of this workshop, the youngsters also took part in a session on audiovisual scripting and were trained to conduct interviews.

With these tools, researchers, teachers and students set out from the classroom to produce linguistic landscapes (see the following section), taking into account various verbal and non-verbal aspects present in both school and non-school environments.

4. Constructing the theoretical-methodological framework

One of complex questions for this project was finding a theoretical-methodological frame of reference within which to carry out the work

proposed. Some researchers had been trained in discourse analysis (see [Antoniadou & Dooly, this volume](#)), while others of us had a background in interactional sociolinguistics and conversation analysis (see [Masats, this volume](#); [Nussbaum, this volume](#)). Because of this, it became evident during the project that it was possible to explore different approaches to conceptualize the complexities and try to reconcile at least three aspects: what we wanted to look at (our goals or objectives); what emerged during the group work with teachers and students; and what we were finally able to take note of along the way.

Our progress was, therefore, one of revision and dialogue with a number of disciplines. Here we refer to two in particular: studies on language socialization ([Bayley & Schecter, 2003](#); [Baquedano-López & Kattan, 2008](#), [Duff, 2003](#); [Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986](#)) and studies on linguistic landscapes ([Shohamy, Ben-Rafael, & Barni, 2010](#)).

In the first case, language socialization studies proved to be particularly relevant to our objectives. This branch of linguistic anthropology is concerned with studying the processes by which “a child or other novice acquires the knowledge, orientations and practices that enable him or her to participate effectively and appropriately in the social life of a particular community” ([Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2002](#), p. 339). We believed that our goal of approaching the communicative practices of young people coming from other parts of the world within the framework of their schooling in Catalonia was directly associated with such an objective.

In addition, the framework of language socialization dovetails very well with the interactional studies undertaken by the GREIP group. Both approaches believe that the communicative patterns of a community are learnt through verbal interaction. In fact, it is accepted that, throughout our lives, we become socialized through language and it is through our use of language in the course of our everyday interactions and the different contexts we are engaged in that we learn not only to communicate verbally but also to express emotions (affection, joy, anger, agreement, disagreement, etc.).

Once it is established that learning (linguistic and cultural) is not a once-off event that takes place at school, but rather a continuous process lasting a lifetime that occurs through interaction with others, language socialization studies also provide an interesting framework for analyzing the relationships between the contexts and practices of language socialization both inside and outside educational institutions. Therefore, its methodological strategies appeared relevant to us in understanding the differences, similarities and ruptures between the different types of practices (school and non-school) involving the young people we were interacting with.

In the second case we were interested in studies on the linguistic landscape. These studies propose examining “the way linguistic signs mark the public space” (Shohamy et al., 2010, p. xiv). This implies ‘reading into’ public linguistic usage belonging to a particular moment and to a community, given the relationships between language ideologies, individual and collective identities, and social and political practices. Additionally, as this type of study is interested in using qualitative research techniques to produce a ‘snapshot’ of public linguistic repertoires, we believed its analytical strategies could be of use to us in explaining the linguistic uses that the students would collect in their audiovisual productions.

As several authors have indicated (e.g. Mondada, 2000; Scollon & Scollon, 2003), the concept of linguistic landscape is linked to the relationship between language, action and territory, and using it theoretically can be useful for understanding the way in which social actors appropriate or respond to such uses, interacting with them as ‘voices’ of collective identities present in the public space. In this respect we felt it interesting to observe not only which linguistic uses in public spaces the students chose to include or leave out, but also the ways in which they responded to these choices through their audiovisual narratives.

Ethnographically-based qualitative studies are characterized by constructing the conceptual framework necessary to account for what is being observed and analyzed throughout the course of the research. Part of the role of the results

from this type of study is to produce new conceptualizations. Unlike other types of study that seek to generalize results, studies based on case studies and ethnography aim to come up with conceptualizations that can be of use in new cases and contexts.

5. Results: what data are available?

One of the most important aspects of this project lies in its innovative design and collaborative nature, not only with teachers but also with students. It is, however, a complex, multi-layered project with a great deal of interplay of perspectives, many people observing and many being observed. In this respect, it is worth asking oneself what can be defined as data. What, out of everything that took place in the field, are the ‘data’ of the project? What were the circumstances that led these data to emerge in this way and in this format (discursive, audiovisual, etc.)?

Perhaps, in this case, it would be helpful to talk about the organization of the research team and its relationship with the type of data produced over the course of the study. It would also be worthwhile to distinguish between records and data in order to understand the analytical dynamics.

The team was organized around various research tasks: (1) ethnographical records in the form of fieldnotes from both school and non-school environments; (2) participant observation, recording and filming of teaching activities (classes and training workshops with the young researchers); and (3) participant observation and filming of the field trips undertaken by the youngsters and their teachers.

At the end of the project, the team had gathered the following records and materials (Table 1).

From the point of view of ethnographic research, there is a difference between records and other empirical material on the one hand, and data on the other. The former are considered to be linked to immediate empirical experience and

embedded in the interpretative process within which the production of data is framed. The data themselves are understood to be related to analytical processes.

Table 1. Summary of the data collected and the materials used

Records/Recordings	Class materials
a. Audio records taken by recorders managed by the students during group activities.	a. Material produced during group work sessions.
b. Audiovisual recordings filmed by researchers from our team during work sessions inside and outside the classroom.	b. Documentary and interview scripts prepared in order to produce audiovisual documentation.
c. Audiovisual recordings produced by students looking for images, moments and stories they wanted to include in their own audiovisual production.	c. Final digital presentations prepared by each work team, in which the students explain what each group has worked on (relative to different topics in the school curriculum) to their classmates.
d. Audiovisual recording of a Catalan teachers' staff meeting, during which the teacher taking part in the project made a presentation to her colleagues, explaining what had been done in each session, the results and her own assessment of the didactic proposal and collaborative research.	
e. Interview conducted by a member of the research team with two teachers from the TV school, in which they explained their views of the activities.	
f. Fieldnotes of the entire process.	

This is of prime importance to the project that we are presenting. The enormous quantity and variety of records made it impossible to carry out a systematic treatment or detailed analysis of all of them. Nevertheless, they remained available, as input that came up time and again during the interpretative process. This means that, in practice, not all of the audio or video recordings were transcribed: they remained available for researchers to return to them whenever research questions cropped up during or after the field experience.

An example may serve to clarify this point. While carrying out fieldwork we filmed, recorded, observed, etc. in many and varied situations. As mentioned,

the students took part in the research process by taking responsibility for certain tasks. Additionally, however, due to the fact that these tasks were aimed at producing audiovisual material to be shared, the students made decisions with regard to the material collected, keeping some of it and discarding others. It is from these decisions, contextualized by the whole ethnological process in which we were collectively participating, that data emerged that was worthy of consideration.

6. Reading clips, discarding material and making decisions: the hallmarks of the student's performance as researchers

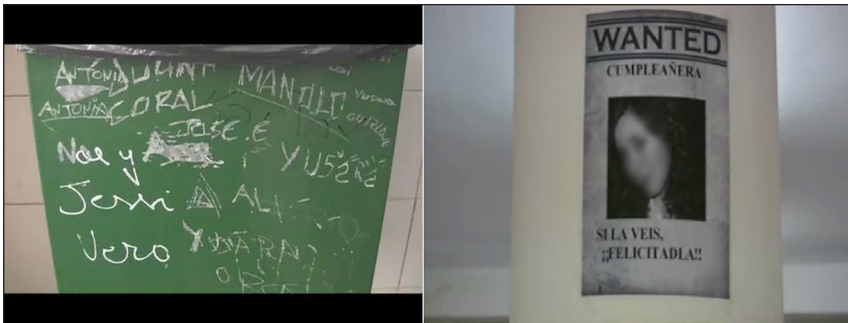
One of the data that seemed interesting to analyze concerned the way students made a connection between school learning, particularly with reference to language workshops, and their view of the world around them. As indicated, one of the groups addressed the subject of graphic communication. Their work generated a linguistic landscape that compared the relationship (and tension) between institutional and private communication. The booklet we were using in the workshops included some definitions of communication (taken from the textbook used by the teachers) to use as examples. In terms of the activities, students were invited, based on a guided proposal, to look for further examples on the internet. Once they had the concept of the subject clear and had been trained in how to use audiovisual tools, the students produced a script and went out to film both outside the classroom and outside the school altogether. The idea was to observe and compare communication practices, noting the differences in terms of mechanisms, types and languages present in the young people's habitual environment.

In the material finally selected for their documentary, the students clearly displayed a certain level of tension between one voice, the institutional one, which was normally Catalan, the official language of the school, and other voices that were selected from other languages and other discursive types. These voices were portrayed, for example, in the information posters for

parents and on the posters for the Parents' Association. Yet also the selections made by the students from all the material logged showed the way in which institutional discursive practices were confined to the school context, while the others, multilingual and rule-breaking in terms of the conventional written norm, broke through the symbolic walls separating the school from its setting. Records of short notes, minor annotations, comments in the margin, etc., came and went from the school to the surrounding area in a great many varied formats and languages.

The following photographs, for example, show some of the communications recorded by the students within the school setting: a poster in Spanish inviting classmates to congratulate a girl on her birthday (Figure 2, right) or graffiti on a lavatory door (Figure 2, left). The fact that practices were noted and selected which, from an adult and institutional perspective could be considered as marginal, shows that they were relevant from the standpoint of the young people.

Figure 2. Left: graffiti in the toilets; right: social announcements in the corridors



As explained earlier, another of the groups worked on non-verbal communication. The group workshop sessions, worksheets, websites visited and audiovisual material worked on in class focused on the importance of body language, facial expressions and interpersonal distance in the interpretation of verbal events.

Nevertheless, in one of the two schools, once the group responsible had been assigned the task of documenting non-verbal communication inside and outside the school, the students took an interesting decision that surprised the rest of the team. The students chose to record footwear in all of its forms, brands, colors and appearances (Figure 3). According to their records, shoes were a highly significant means of non-verbal communication in their community (the youth of Barcelona). This way of conceptualizing the subject of non-verbal communication by young people and their relationship with (or maybe distance from) class materials, demonstrates ways to appropriate school discourses and produce interesting data on the semiotic resources used by young people in their everyday lives related, as they explain, to the categorizations and collective identities of youth. In this case, the resulting linguistic landscape (in its broadest sense) reveals native classifications of the social world in which young people are involved that have a key meaning for the ways in which they socialize. These semiotic relationships are rarely considered in educational institutions.

Figure 3. Topics of interest for students



Another of the groups focused on researching linguistic diversity and plurilingualism. The challenge of having to document a phenomenon related to language (the subject of their language classes), and the fact of wanting this documentation to consider environments both inside and outside school, meant that the students had to view what surrounded them in a different way. They looked for information, images and statements that represented what they wanted to explain about linguistic diversity and plurilingualism, bringing into play a variety of viewpoints and strategies (Figure 4).

It was with these intentions that the students took to the streets, toured the neighborhood and spoke to acquaintances and relatives in milieus that normally have ‘nothing to do’ with what is taught at school. For example, one of their grandfathers was interviewed so that he could explain the sociolinguistic changes (amongst others) he had noted over the course of the last twenty years. Others interviewed shopkeepers from different neighborhood establishments to talk about the languages they and their customers use on a regular basis. But they also researched their own school and interviewed teachers who had come from different parts of Catalonia so they could comment on the dialectal differences present in the Catalan language throughout its regions and give examples of cases of speech discrimination.

The records of these statements were later processed in such a way that those pertaining to both school and non-school environments could be compared. We believe that this work on the records shows the students’ intention to demonstrate that linguistic diversity cannot be viewed only as a phenomenon relating to the neighborhood or immigration, but rather as something that cuts across groups and contexts located in their historical-social dimension. The linguistic landscape produced in this case places an emphasis on the different moments and stories of Catalonia, in which all of us are diverse. In a way, the students’ point of view as perceived in their approach to the subject of linguistic diversity and the way they produced their documentaries collectively minimized the distance between in-school and outside school environments that teachers and even researchers have been reinforcing in their teaching methods and everyday discourse. They also produced a linguistic landscape

that goes against the one promoted by the official discourses that classify between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the latter being diverse.

Figure 4. Plurilingualism in the street



7. Concluding words

The purpose of this chapter was to present an example of the way we do social science in GREIP. In particular, it discussed how research of a collaborative nature and within the framework of ethnography involves the complex task of observing, interpreting and collectively reflecting on how knowledge is yielded, and furthermore of exploring how this knowledge might be modified.

This task can be resolved in two ways: on the one hand, by proposing research together with other non-university actors in a symmetrical way, creating collaborative situations; and on the other, by suggesting research that is combined and sustained within an educational intervention, so that at the same time as observing phenomena related to the teaching and learning of languages, we construct different ways of teaching and learning along with students and teachers.

The way in which GREIP does and understands science also faces a second challenge of a methodological nature, which relates to the constant search for how to gather natural data without greatly altering the realities of the classrooms under study. We believe that the study of practices is what enables us to give an account of the ways in which social actors view their reality, closing in on the localized ways in which the participants describe and categorize plurilingualism.

The way we produce data that reveal the processes by which novices or new arrivals acquire linguistic and cultural knowledge, as well as their degree of participation in new contexts, is based on natural records that we collect together with others. This means that we take into account learning understood as instances of language socialization.

The importance of considering local forms of social classification and interpretation has been evident throughout this chapter. As we mentioned, the option offered by the DECOMASAI project to include young people as researchers allowed us to amass new knowledge about the linguistic and communicative diversity that characterizes our educational institutions. The production of this knowledge was made possible by taking into consideration, in dialogue with others, the perspective of young people on the social subjects we were researching.

Yet, at the same time, the project established itself as an interesting framework for trying out alternative teaching methods. As we have tried to demonstrate, placing linguistic and communicative diversity at the center of the curriculum and turning students into actors in its research proved to be a productive strategy with regard to new learning and new linguistic attitudes. The young people who took part in this project turned out to be more interested, attentive and understanding towards the diversity of languages, but also towards the different people and groups with which they interacted. Throughout the course of the project, both the students and the teachers we worked with became more aware of the internal and social function of the languages they were researching, and developed better skills with which to analyze them. With this, signs of their mutual processes of language socialization became evident. Newcomers are not the only ones who transform their linguistic aptitudes and ideologies; the native population also becomes aware of this new reality and learns to deal with it in a creative way.

Our data also show that young people were able to establish productive relationships between the theoretical content of the workshops and the situations observed inside and outside school, preparing scripts that accounted for specific

ways in which to describe these social situations. They were able to come up with unforeseen continuities between communicative and linguistic practices, as well as to focus on ruptures in the communicative practices observed within the different environments they explored in what was, for us, an original way. They were also able to categorize the linguistic knowledge of their peers and explain curricular content according to their own categories which, at times, were very distant from those used by the teachers and from the materials we had designed over the course of the teaching proposal.

With regard to the challenges, limitations and potential of collaborative research, the first thing to point out is that, unlike other research designs, attempting to carry out research that shares the role of researcher with other actors entails being willing to negotiate the research objectives with them (teachers and students in our case) as well as timings and conditions. This implies being willing to constantly redesign the instruments and the working plan developed according to the interests, timings and agenda of our fellow researchers, who are not immersed in university or academic rationales. Undertaking research alongside people from other fields also involves negotiating the focus of the objectives being investigated and the ways of going about it. But it also brings with it an understanding that the process of research itself is negotiable and open.

Secondly, ethnography involves having the time and inclination to spend long periods in the places being researched and with the people taking part. This type of research often involves being in a position to leave other things to one side, which is not always easy.

Thirdly, this type of research design implies not being very clear at the outset about what is being sought, but rather being open to what might be discovered (cf. inductive method, qualitative research; refer to the introduction by [Dooly & Moore, this volume](#)). This level of floating attention that ethnographic research work demands, at least initially, is challenging, and researchers usually find they are constantly asking themselves if what they are doing is research or wasting time. Nevertheless, if during this process researchers allow the everyday to wash over them, they can get to that point at which something that happens or

something they observe in the situation under study is sufficiently interesting, surprising or disturbing to be narrated: it is at this point that ethnographical work enters a different phase.

To conclude, perhaps it is worth mentioning that on many occasions, as a team, we asked ourselves if it would not have been easier, less expensive and more efficient to design and execute experimental research, use surveys, run tests, etc. But there is something marvelous about qualitative research, which is that moment when the everyday becomes extraordinary and that which does not surprise becomes an absolute rarity. It is the fact that the research transforms itself according to the viewpoint from which the researcher approaches and explores everyday realities. It is having achieved, or at least attempted, a dialogue between the view of the researcher about the situation being explored and the views of others about that same situation. What we are researching appears in this crossover of viewpoints, and this is what makes it so fascinating.

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Qualitative approaches to research on plurilingual education (English)
Enfocaments qualitativus per a la recerca en educació plurilingüe (Catalan)
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Edited by Emilee Moore and Melinda Dooly

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