

# International Fieldwork to the United States for Japanese Students: Its Theoretical Background and Implementation

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This paper explores international fieldwork that the author arranged and implemented in 2007 and 2008. He mentions that language learning and qualitative research methods such as participant observation and interviewing are combined in the international fieldwork, and the purpose of it is to understand multi-dimensional aspects of American education and business through experiential learning. Even though the students are not trained to be a qualitative researcher, they develop English language skills by participating in the international fieldwork.

## **Introduction**

This paper is based on international fieldwork to the United States that I organized and implemented in collaboration with Training System Institute (TSI) of Syracuse University in the State of New York in 2007 and 2008. This international fieldwork is a two-semester course where undergraduate students study American business practices and education by reading articles in English and watching documentaries and films, including an overseas field trip to New York City

and Syracuse for two weeks. In the first semester, the students read articles on American business and education as well as discuss documentaries and films that deal with these topics. Furthermore, they learn how to conduct an interview and how to take field notes in English. Then during spring break (in February and March), they visit New York City for three days and Syracuse for ten days. In New York City students do some sightseeing and get accustomed to hearing and speaking English. In Syracuse students observe some classes and interview American high school and college students, and also visit some companies and listen to managers talk about their business strategies. In the second semester, they complete writing their field notes and analyze them, and then write an eight-page paper on either American business practices or American education in English.

This paper explores the framework of the yearlong course in international fieldwork that I designed that includes a field trip to the United States. The international fieldwork provides students language-learning experience and the opportunity to use qualitative research methods. This paper investigates how to effectively organize international fieldwork that both offers students a meaningful learning experience and presents pedagogical implications. In addition, this paper discusses the difficulties I have encountered implementing the program.

## The Combination of Language Learning and Qualitative Research

Before I talk more about international fieldwork, I would like to mention how I came up with the course in it. When I was a graduate student at Syracuse University in New York State in the United States, I took a series of classes in qualitative research methods. In these classes, students were required to visit a site of their choosing where they observe what was going on or to interview persons at the site. Then they were asked to write field notes and to submit them to a professor. At that time I chose to visit a class of recently arrived immigrants studying English as a Second Language. I wrote a lot of field notes in English, which is not my native tongue. Reflecting back on my experience of writing field notes, I recognized two main benefits that I had learned from the experience.

First, observing a class of English as a second language and then trying to write down everything that was going on in the class was a very good exercise for improving my own English ability. The purpose of having students write field notes, as you easily imagine, was not to improve a student's English ability since almost all of the students in the research methods classes were American graduate students whose native language was, of course, English. I would say that being able to improve my writing skills was a by-product of the research classes, and yet this was an

important discovery for me.

Second, writing field notes gave me an opportunity to delve into the same culture that the immigrants wanted to absorb by learning English. I came to realize that the immigrants in the class, most of them were older and had difficulty learning the new language, were struggling with the new culture. Language and culture are inseparable, and my experience of writing field notes was good practice to understand another culture through language.

One weak point of English education in Japan is that students don't have a lot of chances to actually use English in a meaningful context. Even though native speakers of English usually teach conversation classes in college, students mostly practice English with other Japanese classmates in role-playing situations. I don't deny that such practice can be important in a classroom, but more authentic and meaningful situations where students are prompted to use English is needed, and international fieldwork provides students with such an opportunity.

## Theoretical Background of Combining Qualitative Research with Language Learning

I would like to explore language learning as ethnographer. One of the qualitative research methods is participant observation. A researcher observes phenomenon from his or her own point of view and tries to understand the meaning of it. An observer experiences what is going on in the field and reflects upon it by comparing the experience in the field with what he or she experienced in the past. As Barro, Jordan, Roberts (1998) put it, "the notion of the language learner as ethnographer aims to combine the experience of the ethnographer in the field and a set of conceptual frameworks for cultural analysis in the best practice from communicative and immersion language learning<sup>1)</sup>." Observation is the process of making meaning of cultural phenomenon where an observer witnesses.

I would like to illustrate how participant observation helped me realize complexity and difficulty of understanding culture by showing my example as a graduate student in Syracuse, New York. When I observed the class of English as a Second Language in Syracuse, I reconstructed what I observed in the class in writing field notes. This activity is based on information that I collected and on my experiences. Writing observations for qualitative research reminded me of

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1) Ana Barro, Shirley Jordan & Celia Roberts, "Cultural Practice in Everyday Life: the Language Learner as Ethnographer," in *Language Learning in Intercultural Perspective*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, p.80.

very significant elements in writing field notes.

First of all, I have to decide "who I am" while I am describing what was happening in the classroom. In my observations I kept a distance from other students there, and I objectified myself as an observer, in the same way that a novelist, except in writing an autobiography, takes a position as a third party. Even though I tried to recreate what I observed in the classroom as exactly as possible, what was happening was under the control of my authorship. It was an objectified self who reconstructed the world of the classroom, and I was very conscious of who I was in relation to others in the field (Angrosino, 2007).

Second, I have to decide where I should locate myself in the context of what I experienced. To put it another way, I have to take a risk to stand at a certain position, facing the phenomenon from a particular perspective. This decision is of great importance in writing field notes (Emerson, Fretz, Show, 1995). While observing the classroom activities, I unconsciously took a position of a former English teacher who had taught in Japan, constantly referring to my experience of how I organized classroom activities, no matter how hard I tried to be one of the students in the classroom. Since I had several kinds of filters that interpret a certain activity in a particular way in my mind, I could not, at first, recreate a multi-dimensional world, as if to shoot the classroom scene simultaneously captured by three cameras from different angles. It is an author's position to a great extent that decides how profound and complex the phenomenon is. I felt that I should have challenged my particular position so as to open other possible interpretations.

Third, details are very important in writing observations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). When I wrote a field note for the first time, I was not aware of the details that may be relevant to what I consider my main concerns. For example, I did not describe carefully what kinds of pictures and maps were hung on the wall of the classroom. I assumed that the pictures and maps had nothing to do with the teacher, so I did not particularly pay attention to these things at that time. However, when I reviewed my observations for coding, I noticed that the pictures and maps might have something to do with the teacher. I did not go in this direction at all, but if the teacher chose the pictures and maps, what they show would have some implications of her teaching style or even teaching philosophy. It was not until I reread my observations for coding that I realized that detailed descriptions of what I observed were crucial.

In this respect, it is very important for an ethnographer to describe the settings where main incidents take place at the beginning. The minute depiction of space and time gives readers concrete ideas of where they will go on an imaginative journey and makes it easier for them to transfer where and when they are now to the different world that an ethnographer conveys. It is vital to make careful observations both inside and outside the field. The careful description of the

field and its neighboring environment helps an ethnographer understand subtlety and complexity of culture in the field.

Fourth, writing observer's comments shows interpretations of participants' behavior and speech, or of events that occur in the field. It is sometimes hard to distinguish one's description of what was happening from his or her interpretation of it, but it is certain that an ethnographic observer constantly oscillates between description and interpretation and reflects on how to create thick layers of a narrative. The observer's comments are also insightful thoughts about the phenomenon. By adding the observer's comments, the observer may explore unpredictable aspects of the phenomenon, which may result in the discovery of something new.

Finally, an ethnographic observer has to live with ambiguity while finding new meanings of the reality with elaboration of language. There are a myriad of contradictions, absurdities, and irrationalities in the phenomena in which the human is involved, and it is a great pleasure for an ethnographic observer to probe into underlying or hidden intentions, logic, and fabrics by exploring different levels of the reality (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). But in order to attain insightful thoughts about the reality, the ethnographic observer has to endure ambiguity that makes him or her feel frustrated yet that leads him or her to penetrate new meanings of it. It is the long process in which no immediate exit is in sight. It is this deep darkness that inspires the yearning for a new light.

Curiously, by the end of my fifth observation, I sensed the darkness that comes from the process in which I endeavored to find new meanings of cultural phenomenon. Indeed, I would say that I needed to have the darkness in my mind to overcome my shallow understanding of what was happening in the field. By the darkness I mean that I was ready to enter a situation where I could not find easy solutions. There I did not take for granted what it means to be a teacher, to be a student, or to teach English. Everything had to be problematic so that I could get data that shed a light on other aspects of my initial research topic. It is the fruit of my efforts that I discovered the importance of penetrating contradictions in the process of writing field notes.

## Interviewing

Interviews are one way of collecting data, and this is not just to ask interviewees questions. Through the interviews, interviewees reflect upon their experiences and reconstruct the meaning of their experiences in many ways (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). When interviewees talk about their experiences, they consciously or unconsciously compare their experiences at present with the ones in the past. In this section, I would like to explore the ways in which an interviewer elicits rich data that lend itself to cultural understanding of experience.

As an ethnographer you have to find persons who are willing to talk about experiences. In the research I have done in the past I tried to find Americans who stayed in Japan because I wanted to interview persons who were currently experiencing many things in a foreign environment. It might be difficult to find interviewees in a foreign country. In the international fieldwork, my students interviewed American high school students and college students and the places where they conducted interviews are already arranged so that they did not have to worry about whom they should interview while staying in Syracuse.

To talk about experiences are reflective and retrospective, and yet when interviewees stay in a native country, their reflection and reconstruction of experiences are natural and unquestionable. When interviewers stay in a foreign country, which is temporarily the United States, they can ask fresh and interesting questions. In other words, they do not take for granted what the interviewees think natural. The interviewers who temporarily stay in a foreign country can take advantage of their environment that has many clues that reminds them of the unfamiliar. So interesting conversations may occur between the interviewers and interviewees.

Practically speaking, however, conversations cannot go on smoothly when an interviewer and an interviewee do not share some culturally common topics. This situation happened when Aichi University students visited North Cicero-Syracuse high school. Four American high school students and one Aichi University students formed a group and they talked about various topics. At first, they talked about school life and hobbies and interests. However, some groups became silent after ten minutes because they could not find common topics that they could talk about. If Aichi University students asked some thought-provoking or probing questions, American high school students could have elaborated on their experiences.

Understanding cross-cultural experience is multifarious. What happens when people are asked to reflect upon cross-cultural experience is that they compare what is taken for granted in their home environment with their unfamiliar experience. When some of them tend to be reflective on their experience, they try to make sense out of this experience. Cross-cultural experiences are not necessarily strange, and when people have a similar experience in an unfamiliar setting, they tend to think that the two experiences in different situations may have a similar aspect. In short, cross-cultural experiences have at least two layers of experience. One is experience that one has in his or her home environment. The other is experience that one has in a foreign environment. Cross-cultural experience generates meaning out of comparison between the two layers of experiences. Yet to avoid simplistic reduction of cross-cultural experience, just comparison of two similar experiences in a different setting are not enough and examination of multiple experiences on a similar topic is required (Fischer, 1986)

Interviews are a good way of encouraging interviewees to reflect upon their experiences. In a daily life people do not have enough time to contemplate the meaning of their experience. Interviewing offers interviewees time to stop doing things and to look back on their experiences. In addition, questions of an interviewer give interviewees a new insight into their experience. When a person is asked a question that one has never thought about, one tries to answer the question and to think deeply about its related issues. In short, questioning and answering are a reflection of one's experience and help interviewees understand meaning of their experience.

## Implementation of the International Fieldwork

International fieldwork is a highly demanding course for Japanese students at the university where I teach, with a process that interested students must go through. First, they have to take an American History class, which I teach in English prior to taking the international fieldwork course. I use an English textbook and students are required to read twelve pages every week. This is a lot of reading for them because when they studied English in high school they were used to reading maybe one or two pages of a textbook per class. I give them a midterm exam and a final exam and they have to review about fifty pages before each exam. If they get less than sixty points (from a possible 35 for the midterm, 45 for the final, and 20 for attendance), they fail the class and cannot take the international fieldwork course, even if they might have wanted to take it. This American History class, then, screens students to see if they are highly motivated to study English and American culture and if they have minimum English language skills in reading and listening to English.

Another prerequisite to taking the international fieldwork course is a course that introduces what international fieldwork is all about. The Faculty of International Communication at Aichi University also has three other international fieldwork trips (to South Korea, China, and Thailand). Students who want to participate in any of these or in the international fieldwork to the United States must take an Introduction to International Fieldwork class. This class is taught by four professors, including myself, who arranges international fieldwork, and one professor whose specialty is anthropology. Each week one of the professors talks about how to conduct fieldwork or gives an overview of a field trip to one of the designated countries. This class presents general information on what the international fieldwork is going to be like.

In 2006-2007 academic year eight students took the U.S. international fieldwork course, followed by seven students in 2007-2008. The main reason why so few students took the class was the roughly 4,500 USD (or about 2,700 GBP) each had to pay for the two-week field trip to the

United States. Even though Aichi University subsidized each student 400 USD (or about 240 GBP) and paid full expenses for my assistant and me during the field trip, this is a lot of money for Japanese college students, so money is a big issue. Another reason why so few students participated in the U.S. international fieldwork is that, as I mentioned earlier, students have to pass the American History class and this is not an easy class. Some students were not able to take the international fieldwork course because they failed the American History class. I think that these are the two main reasons the numbers of students were small.

In designing the syllabi for the two-semester-long international fieldwork course, it is highly significant to decide what students need to study before the field trip and what they need to do afterward. In the first semester, students study American media, business, and education, and some information about qualitative research methods. I used the documentary named *Control Room* (2004) to show how American broadcast intended to skew images from Iraq, thus helping justify the war there. Along with the documentary, students read an article about how advertisements target particular audiences and promote products that are sensitive to consumers' taste. I am not an expert in media studies, but when I was a graduate student I learned about cultural studies and the media. Since the students here visit a TV station and a newspaper company, it would be better if they could understand how the media create images to cleverly attract consumers or subtly deceive audiences, and how the images fit in the needs of special interest groups who want to control consumers or audiences.

In their second year students are generally undecided about their future career, but many graduates of Faculty of International Communication at Aichi University have found jobs in the service industry, so information about U.S. business culture is included in the course. I am also not an expert on business, so it can be difficult to choose reading assignments and films or documentaries. In 2007, I used a documentary called *The Corporation* (2003). This film deals with the rise of corporation as the dominant institution in the modern era and its effects on society. Milton Freedman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, and other noted economists talk about capitalism, brand images, and consumer culture. The documentary was very interesting for me, but it was difficult for my students to understand the content because they were not business major. So the following year I switched to another film, *Wall Street*. Even though this film came out in 1987, it still generally reflects the culture of Wall Street today. Moreover, this film is entertaining and understandable for a lay audience. My students also liked to watch this film.

Furthermore, I use *Super Size Me* (2004), a documentary about eating McDonald's fast food for one month to show a bit about food culture in the United States. The film's writer and director, Morgan Spurlock, keeps eating McDonald's food three times a day for one month and documents

how his health condition deteriorates over the period. This is a unique documentary that provides a look at the American diet and the social problem of obesity. One of the places that students visit in Syracuse is Wegmans, a privately owned regional supermarket chain, where students listen to a manager talk about how the food store educates customers to be more conscious of their health.

Some of the students who took the international fieldwork course are interested in American education, and I include some articles on education in my syllabi. One of my specialties is sociology of education, and it is relatively easy to select articles on American education. I used a couple of articles from *the Harvard Educational Review*. I also used a documentary, *High School II*, directed by Frederic Wiseman. This documentary depicts both classroom teaching and student counseling and assembly at Central Park East Secondary School in New York's Spanish Harlem, and shows how the school tries to create a positive learning environment for students. In my class I ask my students to compare this school with their own high school in Japan and to write a four-page paper on it.

As you see, it is very important to link what they study in the first semester and what they see and experience during the field trip to the United States. Before I arranged the first international fieldwork, I visited Syracuse University and discussed various ideas about how actual site visits would take place. I suggested that since my students were interested in either the service industry or education, it would be best if they could visit a hotel, a food store, and a travel agency, and also observe some classes at Syracuse University and high schools in the Syracuse area.

One of the difficulties that I faced in implementing the field trip was transportation. Public transportation is not well developed in Syracuse, and buses are the only means of public transportation. However, bus service is neither frequent nor convenient. In 2007, the hotel we stayed at in Syracuse provided a shuttle service to the sites we needed to visit, but in 2008 the hotel told me that it did not provide the same kind of shuttle service, so we decided to stay in a different hotel very close to the campus and rented cars. Two rental cars were needed to take all of our group members (seven students and one assistant) to the sites, so one graduate student from Syracuse University kindly drove one car and I the other. The rental cars worked well in 2008, but I am afraid of one thing if we do the same thing again. Even though Aichi University paid both rental fees for the cars and full insurance coverage, it might cause a liability problem if an accident should happen to either car. An accident would cause many problems for me as the supervisor of the international fieldwork.

Another difficulty I encountered during the field trip was that my students had trouble understanding what speakers at each site were talking about, mainly because of the speed at which he or she was talking. Students were not accustomed to hearing speech with a natural speed, and

they still had a limited understanding of some terminology in business and education fields. What I did to help them understand what they heard was, after returning to the hotel at the end of the day, summarize each talk and take questions from them in Japanese. It usually took about an hour to brief the students on what they had listened to. After my briefing in the hotel, students had dinner and then afterward wrote up field notes in English. In addition, I asked my assistant to videotape the talk at each site, and students watched the tapes after returning to Japan. I think that it's very important for students to finish writing field notes before the vivid memory of their site they visited fade out.

What worked well during the field trip to Syracuse was a business class that was specially organized for the students. The speaker was a doctoral student who had once stayed in Japan for a short time. In both 2007 and 2008 he conducted a 90-minute class in which he analyzed and compared Japanese advertisements for beer with American counterparts. He pointed out that Japanese people often drink beer with their meals while Americans tend to drink beer outside of meals, with the TV commercials reflecting the general drinking habit in each country. In other words, the Japanese commercials focused on the social aspects of drinking and eating with friends and colleagues, while the American commercials emphasized the brand of beer. The class showed a teaching style used at an American college, while covering a topic that was familiar and interesting for Japanese students, so they really enjoy participating in the class.

Another thing that students thought very interesting was a visit to a sorority house on campus. In the first semester, students watched the film *Legally Blond* (2001), in which the main character lives in a sorority house on a college campus in the United States. I used this film because I think it gives a good depiction of sorority life. When my students actually visited a sorority house and talked with some sorority members, they were intrigued by how sororities promote philanthropy. *Legally Blond* is a very popular film, so mentioning this film often prompts American students to talk about their lives compared to what's shown in *Legally Blond*.

After spending two weeks in the United States, students take another class in the second semester. In this class I teach how to analyze data in field notes and to find common themes emerging from the data. Students had already wrote field notes while staying in the U.S., but they sometimes miss some points, so they watched the videotapes again that my assistant took, and then added more information on the field notes or made sure that data in the field notes were accurate.

I also used brochures of the Wegmans, an article from a local newspaper called *the Post-Standard* and an article from the former Syracuse University newspaper called *Syracuse Record*. I tried to connect what students actually experienced overseas and what they learn in the second semester so that they can strongly feel that what they are studying is meaningful.

By the end of the second semester the students completed an eight-page paper on either American education or business practices, and then published a booklet of all their papers, field notes, itinerary, and syllabi. I corrected the students' papers, put all the documents together, and then edited everything in the booklet. It took a lot of energy and time to do all of these things, but it was well worth it.

All of the students who took the international fieldwork course said that the course was very demanding and tough, comparing with other classes in Aichi University. They also said that it was very rewarding and interesting to take the course, and that it was a life-changing experience to participate in the field trip to the United States. I would like very much to improve the international fieldwork course next time.

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