

Collecting Field-Based Oral Language Data: Experiences and Reflections

Kamal Kumar Poudel

(Principal Author)

Reader (English Education)

Tribhuvan University,

Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development (CERID),

Balkhu, Kathmandu, Nepal

E-mail: kamalkumar.poudel@mrc.tu.edu.np

Kamal Raj Devkota

(Corresponding author)

Lecturer (English Education)

Tribhuvan University

Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development (CERID)

Balkhu, Kathmandu, Nepal

E-mail: kamal.devkota@cerid.tu.edu.np

Binod Luitel

Professor (English Education) and Chairperson

English and Other Foreign Languages Education Subject Committee

Faculty of Education, Tribhuvan University

Email: binodluitel71@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article unfolds our experiences and reflections of field-based oral corpus collection from the Nepali language in the business setting applying observation, audio-recording, interview and field notes as qualitative techniques. Understanding our own role as auto ethnographic researchers-as-authors, in this article, we draw a set of fieldwork traits: the simplicity of the fieldworker(s), context-dependence of appropriating research ethics, and understanding fieldwork as a spiral process. Based on our practical experiences, we recognize that the qualitative interview is an inefficacious technique for collecting functional linguistic data. Likewise, preserving the linguistic-cultural identity of the source language in terms of its forms, functions and sense while translating the corpus is challenging. We also recognize some fundamental traits to be followed by an oral corpus collector: relative simultaneity of data collection and

analysis, the researcher's autonomy in selecting the topic, the value of good planning in research, research as work and habits, and life and health as being more important than research. The insights derived herein are expected to be pivotal for the researchers working in a similar field.

Keywords: Reflection, oral business Nepali, corpus, post-data consent, linguistic culture

Introduction

This paper fundamentally stemmed from the principal author's (PA's) doctoral research which was guided by the third author. Likewise, in the field study part, the corresponding author contributed significantly as an informed-and-neutral-critical colleague (Griffiee, 2012). The research on which this paper largely builds was a linguistic study on oral business Nepali (OBN). The field was conceived as having 'sites' and 'hubs' situated in the business setting. In the research, the smaller centers of business within the sites were the hubs (Poudel, 2021). These sites and the hubs situated within the sites constituted the field of the study. The hubs, in specific, were the open market places, shopping centers, wholesalers' and retailers', hotels and lodges, bookshops and stationeries, ticket counters, garages, and tea-and-food/sweet stalls—located in each site. A typically common characteristic of the sites and hubs was OBN as the medium of business transactions. The total corpus collected over 13 months for the purpose of the PhD project comprised 24149 words, 800 being English borrowings and the rest of them Nepali.

Throughout our fieldwork we happened to encounter a set of field-based experiences and insights both recognized and unrecognized by the previous literature. We claim that such experiences will serve as a useful guide for the researchers working in the similar area, thus add to the existing knowledge in research methodology, more particularly language-specific fieldwork. In this article, we particularly concentrate on the fieldwork experiences of the research process aiming at appropriating data collection methods and techniques. Based on the researchers-as-authors' perspective, we unfold our hands-on practices and reflect ourselves on them.

Review of the Literature

Having swept through the relevant literature, one can come upon varying labels regarding fieldwork experiences for data collection. In this section, we connect our experiences with the most relevant literature in this field.

Fieldwork is often characterized as one of the exciting experiences in language research. Yet, in the context of the rural Himalayan hinterlands of Nepal it is characterized as being full of complexities, difficulties and challenges, attributable to such factors as the local administrative structures and practices, challenging geography, diverse cultures and limited communication resources - all coming as obstacles to the researchers (Rana et al., 2019). Similarly, as Schilling (2013) notes, fieldwork can be daunting as well as rewarding.

When it comes to the literature of linguistic fieldwork, the key notions *consultancy* and *training* are often emphasized (Chelliah, 2018). For Pole and Hillyard (2016), however, fieldwork is intellectually and technically challenging total experience. Similarly, Ocejo (2013) observes that establishing a common ground with people in the field is an important challenge for the fieldworker. He notes that, as a principle of participant observation, “being there, up close” or immersion in the daily life of the field site is paramount.

The primary principles of fieldwork ethics concern seeking assurance of causing no harm but granting some benefit to the community (Schilling, 2013) under study. Salkind (2018) more comprehensively advances seven basic principles of ethical research, namely, protection from harm, maintenance of privacy/anonymity, guarding against coercion, informed consent, confidentiality, debriefing, and sharing benefits.

Referring to the ‘writing habit’ Creswell and Creswell (2018) strongly suggest being regular/continual. Interestingly, they contrast between ‘weekend writers’ and regular writers. ‘Weekend writers’ just start-and-stop: they work on their research when all ‘important’ work of the week has been finished whereas regular/continual writers write something each day-at the best time for them. They suggest the researcher thus, “discipline yourself to write at this time each day” (p. 133) at a place free of distractions.

Under the interpretivist paradigm the researcher commonly applies such techniques as unstructured observation, case study, unstructured interview and participant observation. As an insider, he/she interacts with the participants; looks at people’s perceptions, feelings, ideas, thoughts, and actions which are heard or observed in the naturalistic situation; and analyzes emergent patterns in an attempt to recognize “multiple realities” (Thomas, 2013).

Methods

The research from which this article stems was guided by the qualitative approach. Specifically, it follows the qualitative methods of research, deeply inclined to the auto-ethnographic design in which, as in this article, the writing includes the author (and the author's perspectives) as an explicit presence in the fieldwork, and where the author is a character him/herself telling the story as a first person (Erickson, 2018).

Adult speakers of the Nepali language practically acting in the course of varieties of business transactions constituted the population for the primary data. Six urban centers within Nepal were selected as the sites, namely, Ilam Bazar (Ilam), Birtamod and Surunga (both from Jhapa), Dharan (Sunsari), Kathmandu Valley (Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur) and Pokhara (Kaski). These were the sites where Nepali was the sole medium of oral business transactions. Observation, audio-recording, interview, data elicitation, and field notes were applied as the major techniques to the collection of the field-based oral data. The OBN conversations and utterances collected from those sites constituted the data for the study.

In the research underpinning this article, a strict sample frame was neither appropriate nor relevant because the number of the informants was not exactly known. Therefore, the saturation of the data and the constant comparative method, which are the central principles of the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006), were followed as while collecting the data. Saturation was estimated partly on the researchers' subjectivity in line with the central essence of the grounded theory method and mainly in consultation with the supervisor as well as the "informed-neutral-and-critical colleagues" (Griffiee, 2012) who volunteered evaluating the data. A thematic-descriptive approach was adopted to the analysis and interpretation of the data.

In this article, we chiefly reflect on our hands-on experiences gained during the fieldwork, thereby toning them with the auto-ethnographic essence.

Results and Discussion

Considering the patterns of the fieldwork experiences and our reflections on them, the results have been organized and discussed under the thematic headings as presented below.

Being ‘Small’: Difficult but Desirable

A never-to-be forgotten lesson we learned from the field-study is that being great is easy but being ‘small’ is most difficult. Yet, it is an utterly desirable quality in the field-researcher. Being ‘small’ can be achieved by being simple. Being ‘small’ helped us being with the people in the field more easily. This strategy of establishing a common ground with the participants (Chelliah, 2018) enabled us to be received by the OBN speakers more closely, a concept Ocejó (2013) terms “being there up close”. We fortunately encountered no special challenges or complexities during our fieldwork other than an exception illustrated below (see Vignette 2), unlike Rana et al.’s (2019) experience in the Himalayan hinterlands. Indeed, the so-perceived ‘small’ traders acting practically in their business proved to be a rich source of knowledge for us.

Re-conceptualizing the Ethics of Research

Two of the well-established principles of research ethics are anonymity and confidentiality (Ocejó, 2013) suggesting in common that the participants should nowhere in the research or in its outcomes be exposed publicly. Notwithstanding this, we found these principles applicable only to a single event in the context in which we carried out this fieldwork (see Vignette 1).

Vignette 1

At a marketplace in Dharan, I (one of the researchers, the PA here) was attracted to a shop being haggled by a lady, bold and strong, accompanied by two little girls - seemingly her own daughters. I, meaning to be consented for recording the conversation, requested the lady and the shopkeeper. However, the lady rejected the request. The conversation went thus (translated from Nepali by the authors):

Researcher: Excuse me. I am researching into the spoken language in business. It seems your conversation would be useful for my research. Is it OK if I record your voice as you talk while selling and buying?

Lady: “Researching into spoken business language”? What research? Can research be into such talk?

I: It can be Sister, you know....

Lady: I would rather you not.

I: It’s OK then Sister!

She, along with the little girls, went away, and so did I but in another direction.

Later I happened to see a crowd at a grocery which, I thought, would give me some data to the least. I asked myself the ‘Glacer’s query’ “What’s happening here?” (Glacer, 1978, p. 25) and went towards the scene. As I approached the shop, I found that that very lady was asking the shopkeeper about some goods and for their prices. As one of the little girls (perhaps the lady’s daughter) signaled the lady about my arrival again, the lady stared at me. I said “Sorry Sister! I thought it was not you”. Then she set out saying “Huh, I might slap [you]”. The shopkeeper’s face was covered with a total confusion

However, in most of the cases in our fieldwork the participants expressed that they would not mind even if their names and the information were made public. In some instances, they even expected that their ‘idea’ (information) could be recognized or acknowledged by publishing it along with their respective names (see Vignette 2). That is to say, they regarded publicity as credit, rather than the other way.

The post-farewell query made by the business professional desiring for the publicity of their names and photos along with their contribution (see Vignette 2) came as a real dilemma to us (expressed as “Umm...”; see Vignette 2) because we knew that the desire was contradictory to the well-established principles of anonymity and confidentiality. Such cases push us to the claim that the given research ethics may not always and everywhere be true equally: they are context-dependent.

Another lesson we learned from this fieldwork is that reversing the order of taking informed consent will sometimes be necessary. Taking informed pre-consent might not always suit typical naturalistic settings such as the one we worked in because it formalizes the situation causing the Hawthorne’s effect on the participant(s), suggesting that informing the participants of the research likely arouses some different-from-the-usual behavior in the participants (Cohen et al., 2018) Therefore, we applied the post-data consent strategy, meaning that only later the sellers and buyers were informed that they had been recorded and only then “their written consent was obtained to use the recorded contents for the study purposes” (Poudel, 2021, p. 50).

Visiting the Field: A Cyclic Process

To us, fieldwork is not a linear process — it continues till data saturation (Charmaz, 2006). An example comes from our need for revisiting the field. Even after collecting the data through recording, field notes and interviews, we were only partially satisfied unless we obtained the data referring to the supernatural whose existence among the OBN speakers we were sure of. In consultation with the supervisor I, the PA, devised a ‘data elicitation frame’, and re-visited the field with it among a group of educated and informed knowledgeable business professionals. In fact, this technique proved to be a very effective complement overcoming the drawbacks inherent in the other

techniques, mainly the interview. It indicates that the field researcher may need to visit and revisit what he/she has done so far and what exists but has not been captured as the data yet, thus refining and modifying things all the time, a requirement that Charmaz (2006) also notes. Some other useful strategies for the researcher in this respect are receiving feedback from a community of colleagues, experts and written and electronic sources.

Low Efficacy of the Interview

In principle, the interview is also a highly articulated technique for collecting field-based data (e.g., Thomas, 2013). However, our experience says that it is not so effective when it comes to collecting functional data in linguistics. A central drawback of a formal interview we experienced in this study was that the interviewees (informants) were too inclined to telling their own stories. We realized that tracking the adult interviewees to concrete examples of functions would mean kidding them, so their zeal for participation dramatically decreased. This led us to making a new plan of elicitation (see the sub-section above).

Translation Matters

Language is a means of expressing overtly or covertly the worldview of the speakers. Every language has its own culture expressed not only in respect of the sense inherent (socially contracted) in the words employed by its speakers but also through the form or structure used as a unique tool. As a tendency, however, while translating data/text from one language to another, translators unduly focus on the form aspect. Notwithstanding this, our observation reveals that over-focusing on the sense aspect blurs the structural aspect of the language thereby distorting its linguistic-cultural identity as seen in Text 1 and Text 2.

Text 1

Specific context: B (buyer) is a permanent customer of an ‘electronics and electricals’ at Mahabauddha, Kathmandu. He turns up when S (seller) is fairly busy amid a crowd of buyers.

Translation 1

S: Namaste-namase! /ke tsʰʌ kʰʌbʌrkʰʌbʌr/ (What's the news?)(i)

B: *Is there a fan with us?* (ii)

Translation 2

S: *Namaste!! What's the news?*

B: *Is a fan available here?* (iii)

Source: Poudel (2021)

In this Text, Translation 1 represents the near-Nepali translation of the Nepali text into English and Translation 2 is the near-English version of the same. In the Nepali linguistic culture, speakers customarily ask about ‘the news’ (i) to express the phatic function, whereas in the similar context English speakers tend to ask about their health condition (“How are you?”). We can argue that in the perspective of the Nepali speakers one’s health condition is part of one’s ‘news’. Our assumption is that upon encountering such an expression, English speakers who are unfamiliar with the Nepali linguistic-culture can (need to?) contemplate this linguistic identity. In this situation, translating the Nepali expression ‘/ke ts^hΛ k^hΛbΛrk^habΛr/’ into “How are you?” would be unfair. Therefore, we maintained the same form in Translation 2, too. On the other hand, in the Nepali linguistic-culture, one of the strategies for being polite is to use the inclusive ‘we/us’ instead of ‘you’¹ as marked in the buyer’s (B’s) query (ii). For this reason, the query may be rather confusing to the English speakers, unfamiliar with the Nepali language. Therefore, we presented a near-English translation (iii), which is at least intelligible to the English speakers unfamiliar with the Nepali linguistic-culture². These differing pronominal usages also speak of the speakers’ worldview.

Text 2

Specific context: S asks if a little child accompanying his parents (B) likes a child's dress at a footpath stall in Pokhara

Translation 1

S: *La hai, la hai!* Let's see, let's see, OK.
Shall [we] see for the child? Shall [we] see in the cheap?

B: This became big, you see. (i)

S: /jΛsto mΛn pΛrts^hΛ nanu/ (*Do [you] like such [a dress], baby?*), OK. (iii)

B: Perhaps, [he] says [he] does not wear, or what?

Translation 2

S: Hello all, listen! Have a look at one for the child. Will you have a look at the cheaper item?

B: This is rather big, you see. (ii)

S: *Do you like such a dress, baby?* OK. (iv)

B: Perhaps, he says he won't wear this, huh?

Source: Poudel (2021)

Among others, two distinctions which Text 2 illustrates are the usage of the tense, and the pronominal ellipsis. As this text illustrates, even an event at hand is sometimes

¹ Usually, informal

² A form closer to English would be “Excuse me. Do you have a fan?”

viewed as the past by the speakers of Nepali (i) whereas it is viewed as the present by the speakers of English (ii). Similarly, words standing for different grammatical functions tend to be elided from the structure in Nepali (iii), a case not permitted in English (iv).

Then we took a position as the analysts that linguistic sense and forms are typical of the language under analysis. While translating, it would be unfair to make the source language (SL/ Nepali in this study) surrender to the target language (TL/English in this study). We, therefore, regarded as a guiding principle that the translated forms should be capable of maintaining their originality of structure, meaning and function (near-Nepali/Translation 1), while being tolerably intelligible (near-English/ Translation 2) to the speakers of the TL. Regarding this, we particularly followed this principle throughout the analysis of the data — “If the form is capable of being tolerably intelligible while maintaining the structure, meaning and function in both SL and TL, the same should be regarded as ‘Translation 1’ and ‘Translation 2’ in the Text section.” (Poudel, 2021). Data Collection and Analysis as Concurrent Processes.

The transition between data collection and concurrently managing them for analysis as per the spirit of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) also matters much. Complete accuracy in maintaining cultural meanings and managing sounds for original artistic effects while preserving the OBN structure was what we found almost impossible in some instances. As a strategy for overcoming this, we presented each text in two versions — near-Nepali and near-English (see Texts 1 and Text 2). Similarly, changing the recorded sounds into scripts was rather tedious, and changing the phonemic transcription of the Nepali sounds into English proved even more tedious and time consuming. These tasks not only took us nearly one year’s time but also caused a frozen shoulder compelling the PA to receive a physiotherapy for four months! Concerning the maintenance of trustworthiness of the data, we took two measures, namely, a close examination of the context(s) in which OBN was in action, and the inter-rating of the utterances by four informed-and-neutral-critical colleagues (Griffie, 2012) before finally enlisting the utterances as the *key individual exponents*. However, we left for future researchers the participant check/scrutiny which, we should admit, would have largely increased the trustworthiness of the results.

Topic Selection: Hunting the Issue of Researcher’s Own Interest

We suggest that the researcher him/herself should be the ultimate selector of the topic: at least we had our own favorite song – OBN. Fortunately, being the native

speakers of Nepali and educated in English as a foreign language, we needed neither any consultancy nor training (Chelliah, 2018) while working in the field. We can just imagine how challenging it would be for a researcher to go with a language he/she is unfamiliar with. Therefore, we suggest that the researcher should get freedom to hunt the research issue or topic guided by his/her own interest and motivation, rather than being imposed by others.

A Good Plan: A Half of the Whole

We are also convinced that a good plan equates a half of the whole work. The initially set ambitious plan for covering Nepali-English contrast, dialectal variations, pronunciation aspects, and a larger area—‘á double PhD!’—was what considerably delayed the completion of the entire project. Therefore, it is advisable that future researchers that before setting out for the actual study, future researchers should make a practicable plan in terms of the tasks and activities required to be accomplished throughout the research process.

Research as Both Work and a Habit

We further recognize research as both work and a habit. We propose that study should be part of a daily habit—not interrupted but continual. Linking fieldwork experience to Creswell and Creswell’s (2018) view of ‘weekend writers’ we suggest that field researchers should not ‘start-and-stop’ until the task is accomplished. Procrastination is often a self-deceit, if not an enemy. As a strategy, when tired with mental work we shifted to the manual/physical task.

Life and Health or Research?

Which is more important — life and health or research? Surely, the researcher also needs to take due care of his/her health. We continued morning walk and evening walk as usual. Often very brilliant ideas came to our minds while on a walk. Being with the colleague(s)—even while having tea and snacks—enabled us to talk about our field research. Our experience says: do during the sun!

Conclusion

In this research, most part of the fieldwork came to us as ‘rewarding’ rather than ‘daunting’ perhaps because we followed the rule of being ‘small’. We found that field ethics are context-specific, rather than universal and that ethics and research have some common trade-offs. We recognize fieldwork as a spiral, rather than linear process —

revisiting the field serves as a strategy for obtaining rich data. Similarly, the interview has low efficacy as a technique for collecting the field-based functional linguistic data because the participants are usually prone to narrating their personal stories. At the pre-analysis data management stage, the micro-level cross language distinctions are a real challenge as long as the analysis of linguistic corpus concerns; hence translation is a sensitive issue. Likewise, it would be better for the field researcher to collect data and analyze them without any delay — preferably prior to visiting the field for further data. As another reflection, we suggest that the researcher be autonomous in selecting the topic. Meantime, good planning is equally important for the successful accomplishment of the research project. Our experiences lead us to the conclusion that research, which is both work and a habit—part of everyday activity—should go along with life and health. 3

Finally, these hands-on experiences and reflections are expected to further contribute as a source of insights and practical knowledge for future researchers conducting similar fieldwork.

Acknowledgements

This article draws considerably on the PhD project accomplished by the principal author from the Faculty of Education, Tribhuvan University in 2021. We also owe much to the anonymous reviewers whose genuine feedback and suggestions have led to this form of the article.

References

- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage Publications.
- Chelliah, S. (2018). Fieldwork for language description. In R. J. Podesva & D. Sharma (Eds.), *Research methods in linguistics* (pp. 51-73). Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Erickson, F. (2018). A history of qualitative inquiry in social and educational research. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed., pp. 87-141). Sage Publications.

- Glacer, B. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methods of grounded theory*. Sociology Press.
- Griffee, D. T. (2012). *An introduction to second language research methods design and data*. California: TESL-Ej Publications. http://www.tesl-ej.org/pdf/ej60/sl_research_methods.pdf
- Ocejo, R. E. (2013). Introduction: Sociology's urban explorers. In R. E. Ocejo (Ed.), *Ethnography and the city: Readings on doing urban fieldwork* (pp. 1-14). Routledge.
- Pole, C., & Hillyard, S. (2016). *Doing fieldwork*. Sage Publications.
- Poudel, K. K. (2021). *Business-situated oral Nepali explored through English-based functional concepts: Implications for language teaching* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Tribhuvan University, Office of the Dean, Faculty of Education, Kathmandu.
- Rana, K., Greenwood, J., Fox-Turnbull, W., & Wise, S. (2019). Challenges in accessing fieldwork in the rural Himalays: An emerging researcher's experiences. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 24(1), 67-77. <https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v24i1.605>
- Salkind, N. J. (2018). *Exploring research* (9th ed.). Pearson.
- Schilling, N. (2013). *Sociolinguistic fieldwork*. Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, G. (2013). *How to do your research project: A guide for students in education and social sciences* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications