

# Using focused ethnography to understand brokering practices among international students

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## Abstract

The academic challenges of international students, particularly those with English as an additional language (EAL), have been mostly researched in the context of the formal curriculum (e.g. classroom communication styles, reading and writing skills). These challenges include inadequate English proficiency and differing educational expectations (Johnson 2008; Lee, Farruggia and Brown 2013), and being isolated from the host community (Sawir et al. 2008; Ward and Masgoret 2004). However, little is understood about students' informal academic learning outside the prescribed curriculum, in particular, their brokering practices. Brokering practices are help-seeking interactions that bridge gaps in the seekers' knowledge and understanding of new cultural practices thus enabling them to access resources they would find difficult to do so on their own. For EAL students, these help-seeking interactions may involve getting others to translate, interpret or explain particular aspects of the host academic environment. In this research, *focused ethnography* (Knoblauch 2005) is used to investigate the nature of brokering practices among ten international EAL tertiary students during their initial academic semester of fifteen weeks. Focused ethnography specifically addresses constraints in the research context (e.g. time and access to informants), as well as capitalizes on technological tools such as digital recording devices. In seeking to understand brokering interactions and relationships students have with their brokers, conventional ethnographic methods were adapted, for example, digital ethnographic methods (Pink et al. 2015) were used instead of participant observation. Digital ethnographic methods allows a large amount of data to be recorded and reviewed, a feature of focused ethnography

known as *data* intensity. While this form of intensity has been argued to compensate for a short period of research activity, this research suggests that another form of intensity – *relational* intensity – is just as important in addressing research constraints. Relational intensity refers to the researcher's ongoing responsiveness to the needs of research participants. The paper concludes that future focused ethnographic research should consider both data-related and relational forms of intensity in addressing research constraints.

### **Keywords**

academic learning, brokering, focused ethnography, informal learning, international students, methodology

### **References**

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