3.1 Ethnographic case study

I have chosen ethnographic case study as my methodological approach for this study, as it possesses specific advantages in dealing with the intricacies of real-life contexts. It is thus a good fit for a study that views assessment through the lens of practice, and deals with change and innovation. Case study is a research approach that is largely associated with qualitative methods. However, it appears to resist consistent definition and description in the research methodology literature. In this section, I discuss the various perspectives of noted case researchers, with the aim of positioning my study within the ethnographic case study paradigm.

Case study is frequently utilised in applied linguistics research (see Duff, 2008). In the field of language assessment, several researchers (e.g. Swain, 1985; Wall, 2005) have used the case study approach, although not all have explicitly framed their research in these terms. In general, ethnographic case study is relatively uncommon in language assessment research. This is perhaps because such research has tended to focus on testing, particularly large scale testing such as IELTS or TOEFL. As mentioned earlier, McNamara (2001) has called for more research into classroom-based assessment practices, and studies by Rea-Dickins (2001) and Hill (2012) exemplify ethnographic research of this kind. In addition, Watanabe (2004) has reiterated Alderson and Wall's (1993) call for more ethnographic research in washback studies (e.g. Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996). A secondary aim of this study is therefore to contribute to language assessment research methodology.

The definition of a case study is fluid, with different researchers defining it in different ways. The variations result not so much from disagreement on the nature of case study, but more from disagreement on case study's defining feature(s). Most researchers appear to agree

that it entails the in-depth examination of complex real-world phenomena (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2014). Macdonald and Walker (1975) define it simply as ‘the examination of an instance in action’ (p. 2), while Stake sees case study as ‘the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances’ (p. xi). Yin proposes a more specific ‘twofold definition of case study’ that comprises of its scope and its features:

> A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident. (p. 16)
>
> A case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (p. 17)

VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007) highlight case study’s suitability regardless of research paradigm or discipline, defining it as ‘a transparadigmatic and transdisciplinary heuristic that involves the careful delineation of the phenomena for which evidence is being collected (event, concept, program, process, etc.)’ (p. 80). Researchers in education, in a similar vein, view it as an approach to research, or a ‘genre’ (Elliott & LukeŠ, 2008; Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013; Simons, 1996) ‘that aims to capture the complexity of relationships, beliefs and attitudes within a bounded unit, using different forms of data collection and [which] is likely to explore more than one perspective’ (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, p. 10). Simons (2009) emphasises the multiplicity of perspectives as well, defining the case study as ‘an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexities and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a “real life” context’ (p. 21).

There is also general consensus that case study involves the examination of bounded unit or units (Merriam, 2009; Smith, 1978; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Smith (1978) argues that the researcher, in designing case study research, should reflect on what the boundaries of their case are, and of what their case is an instance of. Gerring (2007) defines it more precisely as ‘a spatially delimited phenomenon (a unit) observed at a single point in time or over some

period of time' (p. 19). While the case was traditionally an individual person, it could as easily be a group or a community, depending on the researcher's initial research question(s) (Yin, 2014).

Case study possesses many other advantages for researchers. In writing about case studies, Stake (2005) argues that the qualitative researcher allows readers to arrive at their own interpretations and conclusions by providing sufficient descriptive detail. Stenhouse (1978, 1979, 1980), for instance, advocates the use of case study in researching education as it can capture complexities that positivist social science methods cannot. Simons (2009) points out its potential for 'exploring and understanding the process and dynamics of change' and its flexibility (p. 23). According to Merriam (2009), case study has the special features of being 'particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic' (p. 43). Gerring (2007) similarly highlights the usefulness of case study for generating hypotheses, its strong internal validity, the insight it offers into causal mechanisms, and its depth of analysis. Adelman, Jenkins and Kemmis, as cited in Bassey (Bassey, 1999, p. 23), summarises the advantages of case study as follows:

A. case study data is 'strong in reality' (though challenging to manage).
B. case studies permit 'generalisations' while still capturing the 'subtlety and complexity' of the case itself.
C. case studies acknowledge the complexity and 'embeddedness' of social reality.
D. case studies possess the richness of description that allows them to be used for future interpretations.
E. case studies are 'a step to action' in that findings can easily be put into practical use.
F. case studies are more accessible than other sorts of research reports.

Case study is often associated (and contrasted) with ethnography, with both research traditions emphasising the importance of Geertz's (1973) 'thick description' (Lincoln, 1990; Atkinson, 2001; Stake, 2005). In writing about case studies, Stake (2005) argues that the qualitative researcher allows readers to arrive at their own interpretations and conclusions by providing sufficient descriptive detail (the aforementioned 'thick description'). Stenhouse (as cited in Skilbeck, 1983), one of the earliest advocates of case study educational research, distinguishes clearly between the two, stating that while case study might draw on ethnographic techniques, it is primarily based on documents (such as those resulting from

interviews and observations) which benefit both researcher and participants. Other researchers, however, view them to be neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. Smith (1978) and Mitchell (1984) see ethnography as integral to case study, with Mitchell noting that case studies differ from general ethnography only in the 'detail and particularity of the account' (p. 237), while Yin (2014) concedes that ethnographic methods may be employed in case study. A useful compromise is presented by Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013), who, having defined case study as a genre of research, suggest that research methodology, such as ethnography, would be a separate consideration for the researcher. Simons (2009) defines ethnographic case study as a 'type of case study [that] uses qualitative methods, such as participant observation, to gain close-up descriptions of the context and is concerned to understand the case in relation to a theory or theories of culture' (p. 22). As I plan to use primarily ethnographic methods to examine two bounded units, namely two secondary English Language classes in Singapore over the course of a semester, my study would fit Simon's definition, especially as less time will be spent on site than is typical of 'full-blown ethnograph[ies]' (Wolcott, 2008, p. 178).

The choice of ethnographic methods was initially inspired by research in literacy studies (e.g., Heath, 2008). Tusting (2013) summarises notable work of this kind, including research on digital literacies. While my study does not investigate literacies and language use in this sense, it does, as already mentioned, also use the lens of practice. As Schatzki (2012) asserts, in researching practices, they must first be 'uncovered' with ethnography, because there is 'no alternative to hanging out with, joining in with, talking to and watching, and getting together the people concerned' (p. 25). Trowler (2014), in discussing practice-focused ethnographic research, argues that 'hybrid methods' (i.e., multiple data collection and analysis methods) enable the researcher to 'access the multiple dimensions of social practice: saying, doing, relating, feeling, valuing' (p. 10). In taking the ethnographic perspective in my case study, I am choosing to take an epistemological stance that is in my opinion more compatible with social practice theory and research.

While this study is a qualitative one, it is worth pointing out that case study can involve quantitative methods (Stenhouse, 1980; Yin, 2014), even though like ethnography it is often classed as a type of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). However, case researchers in general do not appear to subscribe to the qualitative-quantitative dichotomy, and this is

arguably one of case study's major strengths. Simons (2009) notes that not all case studies are purely qualitative (just as not all qualitative research is case study), a view shared by Yin. Stenhouse goes as far to argue that case study should include quantitative data. Similarly, Yin does not view case study as a form of purely qualitative research, as it can include both qualitative and quantitative data, or even solely quantitative data. In considering case study in assessment research, it is worth noting that while quantitative research dominates educational measurement, educational research benefits from a balance of both research paradigms; Cronbach (2000) rightly points out that 'description of [course] outcomes… should be made on the broadest possible scale, even at the sacrifice of superficial fairness and precision' (p. 247). Blommaert (2013) make a similar argument for how surveys and ethnographies can be complementary in an age of rapid social change.

Validity in the broadest sense is a concern with any research approach, though qualitative researchers such as Lincoln (2000) prefer to speak of credibility and transferability instead, since 'validity' can imply that there is a one 'objective' truth that can be arrived at. Yue (2010) accordingly chooses to define validity as 'the extent to which a concept is actually represented by the indicators of such concepts' (p. 959). He discusses several different kinds of validity and their application to case study research: face validity, ecological validity, predictive and concurrent validity, measurement or construct validity, internal validity (credibility), external validity (generalisability or transferability), and convergent and divergent validity. He notes that construct validity is partly concerned with reliability, and is not directly applicable to qualitative case studies, although Lincoln and Guba's dependability is an analogous concept. He points out that given the diversity of research methods in case study, it is impossible to accurately pin down how validity should be defined and assessed.

Stake (1995) cites Messick's influential concept of consequential validity, originating from the field of testing, as being an important one for case researchers. Messick (1989) considered consequential validity to be an important facet of validity that subsumes all other facets (construct validity, and relevance or utility). Consequential validity addresses the value implications of test interpretation and the social consequences of test use. In applying it to case research, Stake emphasises researchers' 'ethical obligations to minimize misrepresentation and misunderstanding' (p. 109). Working in the field of language assessment, Messick's consequential validity is especially relevant and significant to me.

McNamara (2006) has argued that while Messick's validity framework is the most comprehensive in the field yet, major developments since then have largely failed to move the operationalisation of consequential validation forward. In this study, I attend to consequential validity in two senses: the consequential validity of this study through the practice of reflexivity (as discussed throughout this thesis), and the consequential validity of the national examinations through the study of teacher resistance to its washback effects.

Despite occasional mentions of generalisability in case study literature, it is not in the strictest sense of the term a concern for case researchers. Obviously, case studies cannot claim generalisability by virtue of large sample sizes. Moriceau (2010) defines generalisability in case study as 'the ability of extending the validity of one's case study conclusions to other cases of the kind' (p. 419), and as such is similar to the concept of external validity. He argues that case researchers, in selecting alternative generalisation strategies, must align them with their ontological assumptions. However, he also casts doubt on whether case researchers should concern themselves with generalisability, when the trade-off is the richness of knowledge obtained. Stake (1995) maintains that case study is about 'particularization, not generalization' (p. 8). It works, he claims, to refine or modify generalisations by counter-example, such that research questions might be modified or even replaced mid-study. Cronbach (1975), despite working in measurement (which, as quantitative fields do, tends to value generalisations), argues against privileging generalisation in research:

> Instead making generalization the ruling consideration in our research, I suggest we reverse our priorities. An observer collecting data in one particular situation is in a position to appraise a practice or proposition in that setting, observing effects in context. [...] As he goes from situation to situation, his first task is to describe and interpret the effect anew in each locale, perhaps taking into account the effect anew in each locale, perhaps taking into account unique to that locale of series of events (cf. Geertz, 1973, chap. 1, on 'thick description'). As results accumulate, a person who seeks understanding will do his best to trace how the uncontrolled factors could have caused local departures from the modal effect. That is, *generalization comes late, and the exception is taken seriously as the rule*. (pp. 124–125, my italics)

As he also points out, ‘when we give proper weight to local conditions, any generalization is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion’ (p. 125).

In the face of such objections, Lincoln (2000) asserts that we should speak of transferability instead in qualitative research. Transferability depends on fittingness, which refers to the similarity between the two contexts. The thick description of case studies allows readers to decide on the degree of transferability. Stake (1982) argue for the similar concept of ‘naturalistic generalizations’, which are generated from vicarious and direct experiences. In their opinion, attempts to effect changes in schools fail because practice is primarily guided by naturalistic, and not formal, generalisations. Case studies therefore possess an advantage in providing vicarious experiences for natural generalisations. Simons (2009) also argues that case studies should exhibit transferability rather than generalisability. In listing six different forms of transferability, however, she keeps with the common terminology of generalisation. She includes in this list cross-case generalisation, naturalistic generalisation, concept generalisation, process generalisation, situated generalisation, and most importantly, in-depth particularisation. The last refers to the attempt to ‘capture the essence of the particular in a way that we all recognize’ (p. 167). Yin (2014), being more positivistically oriented, does not reject the importance of generalisability, suggesting that while quantitative studies allow for statistical generalisations, case studies offer analytic generalisations. He defines analytic generalisation as ‘the logic whereby case study findings can extend to situations outside of the original case study, based on the relevance of similar theoretical concepts or principles’ (p. 237), thus marking it as a kind of transferability as well. Having chosen case study as the approach for my research questions, I have inevitably privileged transferability over generalisability. I believe that in aiming for generalisability, I would risk losing sight of the social-situatedness of assessment practices, and thus the complexity of the case, resulting in an abstraction that is of limited practical application in the real world. I agree therefore that particularisation is a significant virtue of case study, and vital for understanding my research context … etc..

Given that generalisability is not particularly sought after by case researchers, it does not come as a surprise that neither is typicality. With regard to case selection, while researchers coming from a more positivist paradigm may prefer to choose the more ‘typical’ case, case researchers in general do not share this preference. Simons (2009) advises against looking

for the ‘typical’ case, pointing out that ‘each case is unique so no one is typical of another’ (p. 30). Stake (1995), too, argues that while a ‘typical’ case may work well, an unusual case can highlight matters we overlook in typical cases. He suggests that a case should maximise what we can learn. That is, we should choose a case that is accessible and well disposed towards our research activity. Mitchell (1984) emphasises the importance of selecting a ‘telling’ case that highlights ‘previously obscure theoretical relationships’ (p. 239). Abramson, as cited in Merriam (2009), agrees, arguing that atypical cases are worth studying because they ‘can help elucidate the upper and lower boundaries of experience’ (p. 46).

Both Stake (1995) and Simons (2009) highlight triangulation and member checking as two important validation processes. However, triangulation may be as problematic a term as ‘validity’ or ‘generalisability’ for some qualitative/ethnographic researchers, for reasons already discussed. Thus, Denzin (1989) prefers to view triangulation as a strategy for achieving a richer understanding of the issue concerned, rather than a means to validate (in the positivist sense) findings. Denzin's (1978) four types of triangulation are, as Flick (2004) suggests, useful in thinking about increasing understanding: data triangulation (data collected at different times or from different sources), investigator triangulation (different researchers independently collect data), methodological triangulation (multiple methods of data collection), and theory triangulation (different theories used to interpret the same data). Simons points out that triangulation in social research is also concerned with the consideration of multiple, socially constructed, perspectives. My case study employs multiple methods and multiple sources of data, to enable triangulation for deeper understanding.

Member checking is done by obtaining the confirmation of a study's accuracy, adequacy and fairness from participants and other stakeholders, and does not necessarily presuppose that there is one objective truth to be uncovered. As Stake (1995) notes, even though the researcher's interpretations of the data are by necessity privileged, they should try to ‘preserve the multiple realities’ (p. 12). To Simons (2009), member checking is particularly important in that it mitigates the power asymmetry between researcher and participants. Member checking, though potentially problematic ethically (as will be discussed later in section 3.3), is critical in democratising the research process and was conducted for this study [MORE DETAILS LATER]. I note Simons’s caveat that a more participatory model of

research is more time-consuming, but I believe that such a study would have more of an impact on the participants' practice, thereby fulfilling one of the aims of my study. This could have the added advantage of incentivising the school to permit access.

Reflexivity is also key to validity in case study. Begoray (2010) highlight the importance of reflexivity in ensuring the 'quality/validity/trustworthiness of findings, in ethics and in addressing power imbalances' (p. 789). According to Simons (2009), to be reflexive is to consider the ways in which your 'actions, values, beliefs, preferences and biases' (p. 91) impact your research process and findings. This is crucial, she argues, because the researcher is the primary research instrument in a case study. Researcher reflexivity should be articulated throughout the research process and in the research report, for the benefit of both researcher and readers. Mauthner and Doucet (2003) remind researchers that our research practices are shaped by our ontology and epistemology, and that in practising reflexivity, we should make such underpinnings explicit to ourselves and to readers. They rightly note that while the importance of reflexivity in the course of data collection all through to writing up is acknowledged, the actual processes (particularly in analysis and interpretation) are more rarely discussed. In this thesis, I attempt to describe these processes more explicitly.

3.2 Ethical issues

Ethics in qualitative research has several dimensions. Simons (2009) provides a thorough discussion of the ethics involved in conducting case study, emphasising the importance of establishing and maintaining trust with participants. She explains that she is guided by a set of democratic principles and procedures that 'accords equal treatment to individuals and ideas; establishes a flow of information that is independent of hierarchical or powerful interests; [and] maintains that no one has the right to exclude particular interests and values' (p. 102). She also discusses important ethical issues of informed consent, giving voice and participant control, and confidentiality and anonymisation (which she maintained should be treated separately). With regard to my study, I address participant privacy,

consent, data security and disclosure in this section. The related issue of reflexivity and researcher bias is discussed in section 3.4.

The ‘thick description’ of qualitative research, while ‘preserv[ing] the multiple realities’ of the case (Stake, 1995, p. 12), paradoxically also creates an ethical conundrum. How can we promise anonymity to participants and yet give a description so rich as to potentially make them identifiable? Davies (2008) points out that while the use of pseudonyms and other standard practices works to some extent, informants might still be identifiable from direct quotations, at least by those close to them. I can imagine this to be a challenge in my study, given the small local population and the centralised nature of the Singapore school system. There is an unspoken expectation that teachers as civil servants refrain from expressing any view that may be construed as being critical of the government and its policies. An even greater source of concern for me is keeping the views of pupils confidential, given that the power relationship between teacher and pupil is inherently unequal. At the stage of member checking (discussed below), for instance, a teacher who knows their class well may well be able to identify pupils from their quotations. Davies advocates that promises of confidentiality should be realistic and made cautiously, and I agree that this is the most ethical course of action, even though participants may as a result be more circumspect when speaking than we would wish. In my participant consent forms, I promise that their names and school will remain confidential, something which is within my power to do, unlike any promise that they would not be identifiable by other means.

According to O'Reilly (2012), full, informed and meaningful consent is sometimes not easy to obtain. Explaining one’s research fully might increase reactivity (i.e. the influence of the researcher on the researched), for instance. In my study, this was a concern when explaining it to the teachers involved, especially as one of them (Jen) was a trained researcher herself and familiar with the field. Being that my first conversations with her about my study were as a friend, it was never entirely possible to avoid reactivity. My strategy was therefore to try to minimise this by adopting an empathetic stance in my discussions with Jen (as well as other participants). I did this not only in self-interest (i.e. maximising the validity of my study by minimising reactivity), but also in keeping with the emic perspective in qualitative research. I kept initial thoughts about the data, such as those I would record in my fieldnotes

and memos, vague in our conversations (including our interviews), since they were impressionistic in any case.

Participants might also not fully understand what they are consenting to, or even feel that they are not in a position to refuse consent. In my study, this might have posed a particular problem for the pupils involved, especially as it concerned assessment, which is a particular source of pressure for pupils in a test-driven system. In obtaining consent from them, I stressed that the study would have no bearing on actual marks and grades. In the consent form, I stated that their 'participation (or refusal to participate) will have no influence on [their] studies or final grades' and this was emphasised when I briefed them face-to-face on the study.

Data security is more complex in the age of digital storage. Due to the nature of the study, as well as my personal approach to research (which takes advantage of the affordances of digital technologies wherever possible), practically all of the data were collected and then stored digitally. To guard against data loss, I not only backed the data up to local storage but also to the cloud. Cloud storage is reasonably reliable and also allows the researcher to access synced data from multiple devices and locations. It also carries security risks; for example hacks and vendor snooping. While there is no way to absolutely guarantee security however data are stored (in the cloud, on a local disk, or in a locked cupboard), I took whatever practical measures I could to ensure secure cloud storage. The bulk of my data (audio files and artefacts) are stored on the cloud service Tresorit (tresorit.com), which is one of the most secure available. Logging in to my account requires not only the password (which is a 12-character strong and unique password stored only on my similarly secured password manager app, LastPass (lastpass.com)) but also a Two Factor Authentication (2FA) code, a system similar to the one used in online banking. To access my password manager app and 2FA app, it is necessary to log into one of my digital devices, all of which are secured with a password or PIN. Accessing the apps requires logging in every time. Tresorit also has end-to-end, zero-knowledge encryption, meaning that even the vendor is unable to snoop on my data.

My fieldnotes, which avoid the use of full names, are saved on Microsoft OneDrive (onedrive.live.com). Services such as OneDrive, Google Drive and Dropbox do not have

end-to-end, zero-knowledge encryption, but the security of fieldnotes is arguably less critical. OneDrive is convenient as I use Microsoft OneNote (www.onenote.com), a notetaking app, on multiple devices to ink my jottings, type out my fieldnotes and conceptual memos, and record all other notes related to my study. Notebooks on this app are synced to OneDrive. My Microsoft account is 2FA secured. Artefacts on Google Drive (drive.google.com) were copied to my own 2FA secured Google account.

O'Reilly (2012) also highlights the problem of disclosure. While it is generally good practice to share transcripts and field notes with participants for the purpose of member checking, this should only be done if anonymity can be maintained. A more difficult dilemma is whether one should share findings with the participants if the participants are likely to object to them. O'Reilly concludes that research should be disclosed regardless, so as long as one avoids 'breaking confidences, risking anonymity or causing harm' (p. 67). While I believe that my research will be useful and empowering to my participants, I am wary of the teachers' reaction to the more critical aspects of my findings. Teaching is a stressful profession in Singapore, not least because of the recent increase in public scrutiny and criticism. The onus was on me, therefore, to establish a relationship based on trust and respect from the outset, and to make it clear that the study is intended to be mutually beneficial. ADD MORE HERE ON DISCLOSURE TOWARDS END OF WRITING

3.3 Data collection

As mentioned in section 3.1, there is no one method (or methodology) that characterises case study. While quantitative methods are sometimes used, methods associated with ethnography and other qualitative methodologies are more common. According to Mitchell (1984), case study allows for any method of data collection, in order to produce as complete a picture of the case as possible. Simons (2009), however, emphasises that methods should be chosen based on the research questions, with consideration also given to one's epistemological stance. Researchers recommend a variety of methods. Stake (1995) lists observation, interview and document review as data gathering methods. Hamilton (2013) suggests observation (including participant observation and more

structured observation), participatory visual data, field notes, journals, interviews, and questionnaires. Yin (2014) specifies six sources of case study evidence: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts.

In APA style, when you cite a source in your text, you should include the author's last name and the year of publication. For example, (Smith, 2020). If you are directly quoting or referring to specific parts of the text, you should also include the page number or the paragraph number for non-paginated material. For example, (Smith, 2020, p. 15) or (Smith, 2020, para. 4).

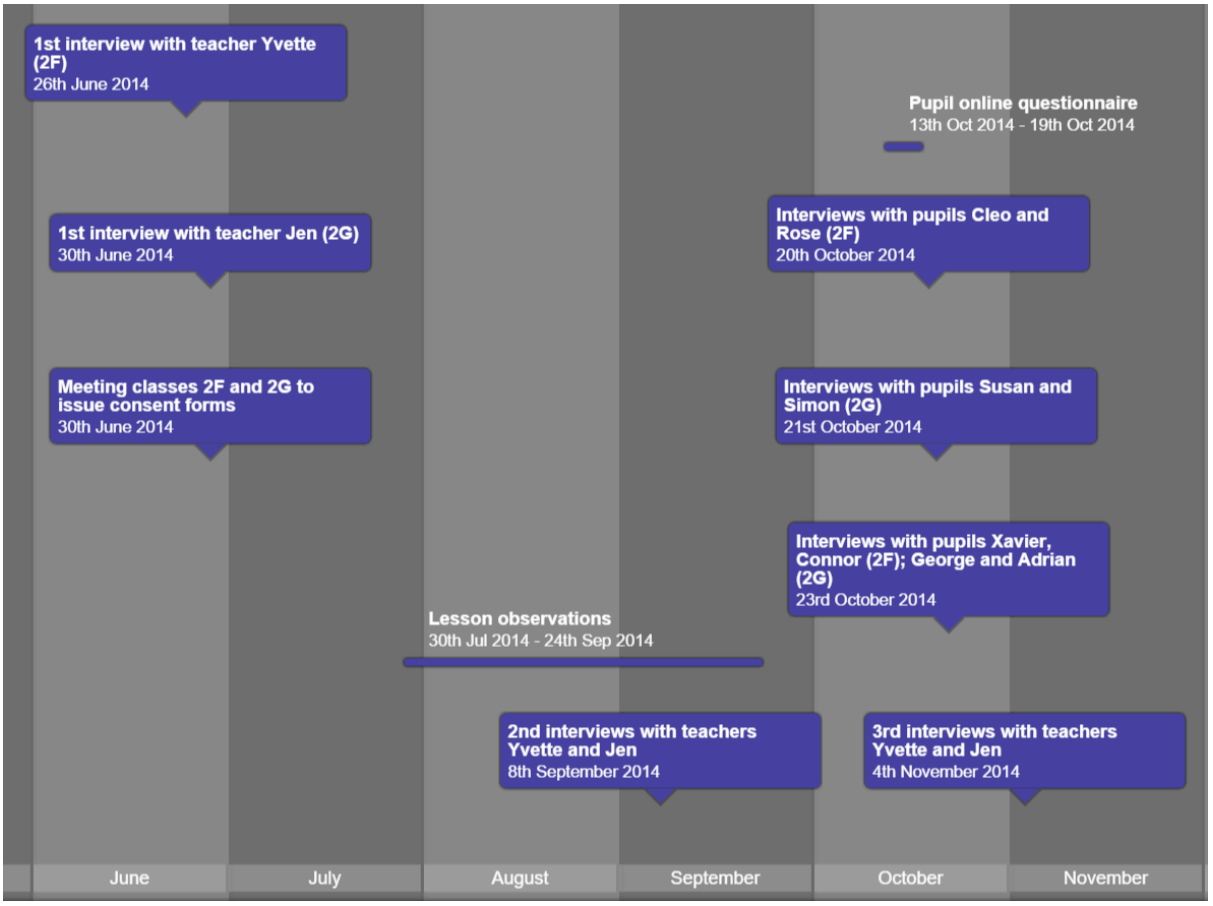

Figure 2. Data collection timeline (all names are pseudonyms)

In this study I have chosen to collect the following data, over a total period of about four months (Figure 2):

1. Participant-observation of lessons, with audio recordings of teachers and three groups of pupils per class: 21 (about evenly split between the two classes, over a period of roughly two months)
2. Pupil questionnaire: 1 (40 respondents, at the end of the data collection period)
3. Digital artefacts: Not yet tallied (collected throughout the data collection period)
4. Teacher interviews: 6 (three interviews per teacher, roughly at the beginning, middle and end of the data collection period)
5. Pupil interviews: 8 (four pupils per class, at the end of the data collection period)

I have chosen participant-observation as it is central to ethnography. Participant-observation may be defined as the 'process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting' (Schensul, 1999, p. 91). It allows the researcher to obtain access to the 'backstage life' of participants (de Munck, 1998, p. 41). DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) underscore the importance of participant-observation when they wrote that it forms the basis of other ethnographic methods such as interviewing. It contributes to the generation of new research questions, and improves the quality of the data obtained and the researcher's interpretation (p. 10). Unlike structured observation, which involves a preset observation scheme, the categories in (unstructured) participant-observation are generated from the data itself. The result is that unexpected observations are retained and contextual nuances can be included in the analysis, thus making it well-suited to the study of practices. Participant-observation normally entails, as in this study, transcribed recordings, extensive field notes, and subsequent analysis of both, all of which are very time consuming, so very large datasets are not possible.

The observer continuum ranges from non-participation to complete participation (Spradley, 1980). Ethnographers such as O'Reilly (2012) have argued, however, that completely non-participant observation is not actually possible, since we cannot be invisible observers (without provoking ethical questions, at least, as one might in undertaking covert research). Wolcott (2008) advises researchers to take the middle ground and participate actively only when it is necessary to obtain data. Even though researchers should aim to spend enough time with the observed for the latter to relax and let their guard down, he maintains that it is nevertheless undesirable, ethically speaking, for them to forget completely that they are

being observed. In this study, I have in fact found it impossible for the participants to forget my presence, particularly given the presence of audio recorders. Davies (2008) argues that the quality of participant observation (and ethnography) is not a matter of the degree of participation, but rather of the extent to which researchers reflect critically on their participation, its appropriateness to the research context, and the relationship between researcher and participants (p. 74). In her opinion, a high level of participation does not necessarily result in low reactivity (i.e. the influence of the researcher on the researched). Conversely, it is the quality of observation that affects the validity of the data. Accordingly, I viewed Hill's (2012) approach in her study of classroom-based language assessment to be unproblematic, and adopted a similar approach. She employed 'moderate participant observation' (p. 54) in order to minimise reactivity while still achieving an emic understanding of the classroom. When my participation was requested or expected, I acceded. At other times, I tried to keep my presence low-key; aside from wandering occasionally around the room to observe pupils working in their groups, I stayed in my seat to write my jottings for later translation into field notes.

While I had expected to collect many artefacts during the course of my study, the sheer amount that I had free access to took me by surprise. Jen shared planning documents, task sheets, etc. with the other two teachers and the Head of Department using Google Drive, so giving me access was a simple matter of adding my email address. Later, I was added as co-teacher to the class groups on Edmodo (www.edmodo.com), their social learning platform (operating similarly to a Virtual Learning Environment). This gave me access to some of the online interactions amongst teachers and pupils, all the work submitted digitally, and the online feedback from the teachers. The pupils used a selection of online platforms, with Google Drive being the most common. While the digital nature of the artefacts made access easy, the volume made organising them somewhat challenging.

In line with my ethnographic approach, I employed semi-structured 'ethnographic' interviews, which may be described as interviews in the tradition of ethnography. According to Brenner (2006), ethnographic interviewing aims to 'understand the shared experiences, practices, and beliefs that arise from shared cultural perspectives' (p. 358). The work of Spradley (1979), and Werner and Schoepfle (1987) promotes the use of the 'grand tour' question at the beginning of an interview, so-called because it aims to elicit a broad

description of the experience the interviewer wants to know about. This is the approach I have used in my interviews. In most cases, I have also followed Brenner's recommendation to use an interview guide that groups questions by topic. This allowed me to cover necessary ground and yet keep the interview conversational in tone.

An important defining feature of the ethnographic interview is its co-constructed nature. Heyl (2007) notes that ethnographic interviews are characterised by a high level of rapport between interviewers and interviewees, owing to their 'respectful, on-going relationships' (p. 369). She advocates that the ethnographic interviewer, regardless of their discipline,

- listen respectfully,
- be aware of their role in the co-construction of meaning,
- understand that the participants, the interview process and the project outcomes are all affected by the on-going relationship between interviewer and interviewee and the broader social context, and
- recognise that the interview can only ever uncover partial knowledge.

Similarly, O'Reilly (2012) characterises the ethnographic interview as 'collaborative rather than interrogative' (p. 118). While an interview guide may be used, there is no expectation that it has to be adhered to strictly. By allowing the interviewee to shape the conversation, a better picture of their point of view can be obtained. Accordingly, I used my guides very flexibly, and added, skipped or rephrased questions in response to what I heard.

I interviewed the teachers each three times (see Appendix 1 for the interview guides). The first interview asked more general questions about their past and present assessment practices, their views on digital literacies and assessment practices they had planned for that semester. The aim was to obtain an overview of their assessment practices, from their individual perspectives. The second and third interviews were in essence follow-ups, with the third interview focusing specifically on the last assessment project (online digital curation).

The pupil interviews were structured similarly and also focused on the last project (see Appendix 2), and attempted to elicit their views of the assessments. I chose to interview eight pupils; anymore would have generated too much data for me to handle, but I also feared that interviewing too few ran the risk of obtaining less useful responses, given that some pupils might struggle to express themselves. To help me choose the pupils, I administered a short and simple online questionnaire with mostly Likert items (using Typeform (www.typeform.com); see Appendix 3), but this proved to be more useful in eliciting more detailed responses during their interviews (if the pupil had responded). My selection of pupil interviewees was eventually based more on the teachers' opinions and recommendations. I aimed to interview a mix of pupils who felt positively and negatively about the project, as well as a mix of strong and weak pupils. The table that follows (Figure 3) gives an overview of the pupils interviewed, with profiles based on both my conversations with teachers and questionnaire responses (if available). While the balance is not perfect, it is fairly representative of the pupil participants in this study.

Class	**Pupil**	**Profile**
2F	Cleo	Has shown improvement. Very negative about the project.
	Rose	(Unplanned interviewee; accompanied her friend Cleo and replaced pupil who did not show up.)
	Xavier	Has shown improvement. Bright but tends to be uninterested or disruptive, though this project is an exception.
	Connor	Has shown improvement. Very negative about the project.
2G	Susan	Very weak in English Language. Neutral to negative about the project.
	Simon	Has improved a lot recently. Fairly positive about the project.
	George	Has presented outside of school, used to speaking. Quite positive about the project.
	Adrian	'Typical' N(A) pupil. Felt the project was tough because groupmates did not help.

Figure 3. Profiles of pupil interviewees, based on teachers' comments.

I kept in mind reflexivity as the key to minimising researcher bias. Scott Jones (2010) emphasises that 'ethnographers must think through their prejudices, biases and how their subjectivity affects their work at all stages, whether planning, in the field or "writing up"' (p. 24). While this appears to support ethnography's imperative to take the emic perspective,

particularly when the researcher is an 'outsider', I would argue that reflexivity is crucial whether the researcher is an insider or an outsider. The dangers of 'going native' and 'overrapport' are real (Hammersley, 2007, p. 87), particularly when we seek realistic but potentially unpalatable solutions to problems. Even assuming 'insider' advantage, the distinction between 'insider' and 'outsider' is not a straightforward one, as Hammersley and Atkinson point out; an insider researcher is an outsider in the community by virtue of her position as a researcher.

As I am not and have never been a school teacher, and do not work for MOE, my 'outsider' status seems clear. While this means I have to work harder at the emic perspective, there are research advantages to being able to ask lots of questions freely without feigning ignorance. Participants could not logically assume that I took the side of school management or the ministry, for instance, which I hope enabled them to answer less guardedly. Certainly for the pupil participants, I would always be an 'outsider', in the sense of not being a teen pupil. The danger here was of being viewed as another teacher with authority and power over them. I believe though that my lack of experience as a secondary school teacher helped me project a less teacherly image.

However, as a teacher-educator who was once a lecturer at NIE and still maintained links with them, I was a partial 'insider', in that I had (different) insights into the workings of the education system. In hindsight, it was an advantage to have left NIE before going into the field, as there is a tendency to think that NIE and MOE share identical agendas (even though the reality is far more complex). This status made my motives less suspect, while allowing me to establish myself as an expert who had something to offer the school in return. This something was a continuing professional development session requested by the school management, during which I confirmed that my teacher participants' perspective towards ICT and assessment was a minority one. Thus even though I was unable to recruit more teacher participants, I could obtain first-hand evidence of the resistance my teacher participants would refer regularly to. At the same time, I am acutely aware that my critical view of the education system tends to colour my perception of both teachers and pupils. In my interactions, I was always conscious of the possibility of being less than respectful and empathetic to both teachers and pupils.

I aim to maintain criticality while questioning my own assumptions and foregrounding the emic perspectives of the participants, in both data collection and analysis. This is notwithstanding that reflexivity should extend to the researcher's choice of and relationship with key informants (Davies, 2008), who are in this case Jen and Yvette. I recognise that it was precisely their own 'marginal' status (insiders as teachers but outsiders as non-conformist ones; in particular Jen who shares some of my background) that resulted in their participation in this study. While this made them ideal informants, it does mean that I have to be wary of mistaking over-identification with their perspectives for criticality. The management of my own marginality is thus as uncomfortable as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 89) claim, but, as they also argue, the discomfort is an assurance to the ethnographer that she has positioned herself in the right space.

3.4 Data analysis

TO REWRITE & EXPAND AFTER ANALYSIS

Following Hill (2012), I focus on data from participant-observation of lessons and interviews in my analysis, and draw on the rest for 'confirmatory and contextual information' (p. 57). The data collection period included two assessment projects, but as I was only able to start when the classes were already in the midst of the first assessment ('project work'), I will mainly focus on the second assessment ('online curation'), which I was able to observe from beginning to end.

UNIT OF ANALYSIS (assessment opportunity — how operationalised?)

To analyse the data, I use thematic analysis (TA), as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2013). They define it as 'a systematic approach for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns — themes — across a dataset… not tied to a particular theory' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 178). While other researchers (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest, 2012; Joffe, 2011) have outlined their own approaches to TA, I have chosen Braun and Clarke's as it is appreciably clear and systematic for a novice researcher like myself. The authors, too, recommend this method to inexperienced researchers. They also argue that their approach has 'theoretical

flexibility' and uses 'an organic coding process' that de-emphasises inter-coder reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 77). This makes it suited to the exploratory nature of this study.

There are six phases to Braun and Clarke's TA. They emphasise that this is a recursive, rather than a linear, process. I discuss here the phases as I have chosen to approach them in my study.

Phase 1: Familiarising Yourself With the Data

I transcribed audio data using orthographic transcription, with conventions adapted from Level 2 (Basic) of Du Bois's (2006) Transcription Delicacy Hierarchy (see Appendix 4). I chose to omit overlaps and simplify backchannelling in my transcription for the sake of clarity. I also chose to transcribe the data myself as this is a good way to familiarise myself with the data, as Braun (2006) point out. I read and reread the transcriptions for patterns, making notes as necessary.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Coding in TA can be 'data-driven' (inductive) or 'theory-driven' (deductive), or a combination of both. In an exploratory study such as this, I believe there is value in inductive coding. However, as I also have a theoretical framework based on practice theory, using a combination of inductive and deductive is ideal. Using MAXQDA, I started with a combination of these inductive coding methods in my first cycle (Saldaña, 2013):

- Descriptive (word/phrase, usually noun, summarising the topic)
- Emotion
- Values (values/attitudes/beliefs)

I did this twice to ensure that I had not overlooked anything potentially significant.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Braun (2006) emphasise that this is an active process, in that we 'generate or construct themes rather than [discover] them' (p. 63). I first performed a second cycle of coding, this time deductive, by categorising codes as one of the three elements: materials, competence or meaning, following Shove et al.'s ({Shove 2012 #204}) framework. While I started by

sticking closely to the original definitions of materials, competence and meaning, I soon found that I needed to reconsider what they meant in the context of this study. At this point, duplicate codes were also merged.

I then identified themes within each element. In NVivo, the elements and themes are both parent nodes, such that the node hierarchy is Element > Theme > Code. The element categories made it easier to work with the large number of codes, and also helped me to make sense of my findings in terms of my research questions. As I pulled codes into themes, I found that a few had been mis-categorised and re-categorised them. A thematic map is helpful in visualising how the themes are related to each other. Themes may also usefully be viewed as sub-elements.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

In this phase, I read through all the coded extracts for each theme to check for coherence. A few themes were renamed for clarity. I also checked the themes to ensure that they matched my overall understanding of the data so far.

Phases 5 & 6: Defining and Naming Themes, and Producing the Report

Braun (2006) explain these phases as telling the ‘story’ of each theme, and relating the themes to each other as well as to the overall ‘story’ of the data. The element categories came in useful here, as a way of organising the narrative. They emphasise that in telling the story of the data within and across themes, there must be sufficient evidence in the form of extracts, such that an argument can be made in answer to the research question. They warn against merely stringing together extracts without a strong analytic narrative. The focus on the ‘online curation’ story may help to produce a stronger narrative.

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