This chapter provides a methodological discussion of how the research was conducted, and how the data were gathered. As the research reported in this book is broadly framed within an ethnographic approach, I firstly discuss some principles of linguistic ethnography which informed the research. I then outline the processes of ethnographic classroom observation, audio-recording, and interviewing participants used to obtain the data. I then introduce the particular methods of discourse analysis used throughout the rest of the book. I discuss how these approaches may be used in complementary ways as well as considering some of the epistemological tensions and contradictions between them, and how these may be addressed.

Linguistic ethnography

UK-based linguistic ethnography is largely influenced by work in linguistic anthropology (Erickson, 2004; Gumperz, 1982; Hymes, 1977; Silverstein, 2003) which advocates the study of language as a social phenomenon and the interlinking of language with its socio-cultural contexts of use. Tusting and Maybin (2007: 578) define linguistic ethnography as:

…a cluster of research which studies relationships between the micro-level of language practices and the broader context and social order, drawing on linguistics, social theory, and an ethnographic methodology which places the researcher at the heart of the research.

Thus, linguistic ethnography holds a view that ‘language and the social world are mutually shaping’ (Rampton et al., 2004: 2) and cannot be
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separated in the process of conducting and producing research. The main purpose of any ethnographic research is to seek to understand the meanings produced in any particular cultural settings. This can, and does, include classrooms. Ethnographic studies entail the researcher being directly involved in the action and context under study as an ‘insider’, in order that greater insights can be obtained than would otherwise be possible. In other words, the ethnographer observes and participates in the environments they study, and therefore participant-observation is used as a main method of data collection. This is precisely the approach I adopted in the research presented in this book. However, the involvement of the researcher alters the context so that ‘the researcher is inevitably part of, and shapes, the research that is being produced’ (Tusting and Maybin, 2007: 578). Therefore, the issue of researcher ‘reflexivity’ is a central concern in linguistic ethnography – the researcher is constantly required to be aware of the impact that their presence may be having upon the research context and the data being produced and analysed in that context. Indeed, there may be issues around the validity of any linguistic data obtained where the researcher is present. However, there are strategies which can be used to counter this potential problem. In my own research, I sometimes asked participants themselves to record their own interactions and removed myself from the room in which those interactions were taking place. This happened particularly when I wanted to collect data from a particular group of students, and my presence would have been more intrusive than at the times when I was sitting in with the whole class. Of course, an advantage of ethnographic research is that the researcher, over time, becomes familiar to the participants and they grow increasingly comfortable with the researcher being involved in the context being studied. I noticed this happening in my research. Any reticent or constrained behaviour noted at the beginning of the research soon disappeared as the participants became used to my presence. After the first few weeks, the participants appeared to be relaxed and seemed to have got used to the presence of myself and the recording equipment during their lessons.

Another tenet of linguistic ethnography is its concern with confronting any differences in interpretation between the analyst and participants of the social practices under scrutiny. Hammersley (2006) argues that the dynamic relationship between analysts’ and participants’ understandings is at the heart of ethnographic research. Tusting and Maybin (2007: 579–80) note that: this presents particular challenges for linguistic ethnography, arguing that: