

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROPOSAL: AN ALTERNATIVE FORMAT

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Introduction

Qualitative research is viewed as an inquiry process based on building holistic, complex understanding of a social problem. It is characterized by data collection in a natural setting where the researcher acts as a key instrument. The research contains a deep, rich description and is more concerned with process than specifying outcomes or products. Generally, the data are analyzed in an inductive process to provide meaning to the research consumer (Wainwright, 1997)

Before pinning down a format of a qualitative proposal for researches in language teaching, three important basic principles in qualitative practices—qualitative approaches, qualitative methods, and qualitative validity—should be clarified.

Qualitative Approaches

A qualitative "approach" is a general way of thinking about conducting qualitative research. It describes, either explicitly or implicitly, the purpose of the qualitative research, the role of the researcher(s), the stages of research, and the method of data analysis. here, three of the major qualitative approaches are introduced.

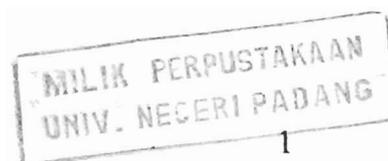
Ethnography

The ethnographic approach to qualitative research comes largely from the field of anthropology. The emphasis in ethnography is on studying an entire culture. Originally, the idea of a culture was tied to the notion of ethnicity and geographic location (e.g., the culture of the Trobriand Islands), but it has been broadened to include virtually any group or organization. That is, we can study the "culture" of a business or defined group (e.g., a Rotary club).

Ethnography is an extremely broad area with a great variety of practitioners and methods. However, the most common ethnographic approach is participant observation as a part of field research. The ethnographer becomes immersed in the culture as an active participant and records extensive field notes. As in grounded theory, there is no preset limiting of what will be observed and no real ending point in an ethnographic study.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is sometimes considered a philosophical perspective as well as an approach to qualitative methodology. It has a long history in several social research disciplines including psychology, sociology and social work. Phenomenology is a school of thought that emphasizes a focus on people's subjective experiences and interpretations of the world. That is, the phenomenologist wants to understand how the world appears to others.



Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a qualitative research approach that was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s. The self-defined purpose of grounded theory is to develop theory about phenomena of interest. But this is not just abstract theorizing they're talking about. Instead the *theory* needs to be *grounded* or rooted in observation -- hence the term.

Grounded theory is a complex *iterative* process. The research begins with the raising of *generative questions* which help to guide the research but are not intended to be either static or confining. As the researcher begins to gather data, *core theoretical concept(s)* are identified. Tentative *linkages* are developed between the theoretical core concepts and the data. This early phase of the research tends to be very open and can take months. Later on the researcher is more engaged in verification and summary. The effort tends to evolve toward one *core category* that is central.

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative data is extremely varied in nature. It includes virtually any information that can be captured that is not numerical in nature. Here are some of the major categories or types:

In-Depth Interviews

In-Depth Interviews include both individual interviews (e.g., one-on-one) as well as "group" interviews (including focus groups). The data can be recorded in a wide variety of ways including stenography, audio recording, video recording or written notes. In depth interviews differ from direct observation primarily in the nature of the interaction. In interviews it is assumed that there is a questioner and one or more interviewees. The purpose of the interview is to probe the ideas of the interviewees about the phenomenon of interest.

Participant Observation

One of the most common methods for qualitative data collection, participant observation is also one of the most demanding. It requires that the researcher become a participant in the culture or context being observed. The literature on participant observation discusses how to enter the context, the role of the researcher as a participant, the collection and storage of field notes, and the analysis of field data. Participant observation often requires months or years of intensive work because the researcher needs to become accepted as a natural part of the culture in order to assure that the observations are of the natural phenomenon.

Direct Observation

Direct observation is meant very broadly here. It differs from interviewing in that the observer does not actively query the respondent. It can include everything from field research where one lives in another context or culture for a period of time to photographs that illustrate some aspect of the phenomenon. The data can be recorded in many of the same ways as interviews (stenography, audio, video) and through pictures, photos or drawings (e.g., those courtroom drawings of witnesses are a form of direct observation).

Written Documents

Usually this refers to existing documents (as opposed transcripts of interviews conducted for the research). It can include newspapers, magazines, books, websites, memos, transcripts of conversations, annual reports, and so on. Usually written documents are analyzed with some form of content analysis.

Case Studies

A case study is an intensive study of a specific individual or specific context. For instance, Freud developed case studies of several individuals as the basis for the theory of psychoanalysis and Piaget did case studies of children to study developmental phases. There is no single way to conduct a case study, and a combination of methods (e.g., unstructured interviewing, direct observation) can be used.

Qualitative Validity

Depending on their philosophical perspectives, some qualitative researchers reject the framework of validity that is commonly accepted in more quantitative research in the social sciences. They reject the basic realist assumption that there is a reality external to our perception of it. Consequently, it doesn't make sense to be concerned with the "truth" or "falsity" of an observation with respect to an external reality (which is a primary concern of validity). These qualitative researchers argue for different standards for judging the quality of research.

For instance, Guba and Lincoln proposed four criteria for judging the soundness of qualitative research and explicitly offered these as an alternative to more traditional quantitatively-oriented criteria. They felt that their four criteria better reflected the underlying assumptions involved in much qualitative research. Their proposed criteria and the "analogous" quantitative criteria are listed in the table.

Traditional Criteria for Judging Quantitative Research	Alternative Criteria for Judging Qualitative Research
internal validity	credibility
external validity	transferability
reliability	dependability
objectivity	confirmability

Credibility

The credibility criteria involves establishing that the results of qualitative research are credible or believable from the perspective of the participant in the research. Since from this perspective, the purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participant's eyes, the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings. From a qualitative perspective transferability is primarily the responsibility of the one doing the generalizing. The qualitative researcher can enhance transferability by doing a thorough job of describing

the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research. The person who wishes to "transfer" the results to a different context is then responsible for making the judgment of how sensible the transfer is.

Dependability

The traditional quantitative view of reliability is based on the assumption of replicability or repeatability. Essentially it is concerned with whether we would obtain the same results if we could observe the same thing twice. But we can't actually measure the same thing twice -- by definition if we are measuring twice, we are measuring two different things. In order to estimate reliability, quantitative researchers construct various hypothetical notions (e.g., true score theory) to try to get around this fact.

The idea of dependability, on the other hand, emphasizes the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs. The researcher is responsible for describing the changes that occur in the setting and how these changes affected the way the research approached the study.

Confirmability

Qualitative research tends to assume that each researcher brings a unique perspective to the study. Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. There are a number of strategies for enhancing confirmability. The researcher can document the procedures for checking and rechecking the data throughout the study. Another researcher can take a "devil's advocate" role with respect to the results, and this process can be documented. The researcher can actively search for and describe and *negative instances* that contradict prior observations. And, after the study, one can conduct a *data audit* that examines the data collection and analysis procedures and makes judgements about the potential for bias or distortion.

Qualitative Paradigm in Language (Teaching) Research

Referring to the characteristics of qualitative research, not all areas of language studies can be put under the qualitative paradigm. Since qualitative research is viewed as an inquiry process based on building holistic, complex understanding of a social problem and usually contextual, studies in phonology, morphology, and syntax are assumed to belong to the descriptive paradigm.

Studies in semantics should be viewed from two different angles, logical and interpretive semantics. Studies in logical semantics are classified into descriptive paradigm, while interpretive semantics can be taken into the area of pragmatics. As far as studies in pragmatics mostly involves relationship of individuals in real contextual communication, it can be classified into qualitative paradigm. Within the area of language sciences, semantics belongs to either psycholinguistics or sociolinguistics. When it is viewed from psycholinguistic process, the study is not under the qualitative paradigm, but when it is viewed from the point of sociolinguistic studies, semantics cannot be separated from pragmatics, and hence belongs to qualitative paradigm.

Qualitative Research Proposal

Based on the descriptive factors involving in and supporting qualitative paradigm above, the format of a qualitative research proposal is better arranged in the following order with the checklist questions for some subtitles:

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Problem

1.2 Observation Focus

1.3 Research Questions

- Do they fit within the theoretical frame?
- Are these supported by the need for the study and rationale for the study?
- Do these guide the data collection strategies? evidence?

1.4 Purpose of the Study

- Does this make sense in light of the literature review?
- Does this make sense in light of the theoretical framework?
- Does this lead the reader to the research questions?
- Does this lead to the design of the study, e.g. ethnography, case study, life history?
→ if using the term ethnography, etc. - is it truly that?
Don't say ethnography unless it's truly an ethnography?

1.5 Significance of the Problem

1.6 Definitions of Key Terms

2. Theoretical Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.2 Theoretical Framework

- Does it make sense?
- Does it fit with the research question being raised?
- Does it carry through all data collection and analysis strategies?

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

- Are you selecting ethnography, case study, etc.?
- Does selection of design fit with the theoretical framework, purpose and research questions?

3.2 Selection of Site and Participants

How will you select your site and participants?

- How will the confidentiality of participants be protected?
Will participants be co-authors? If so, will real names be used in the text?
- Does selection fit with the theoretical framework?
- Does selection fit with the research questions?
- What criteria will be used for selection?
- What sampling techniques will you utilize (yes - this happens in qualitative research not just quantitative research)?

3.3 Description of Sites

- If information is available, how are the sites described?
- Does the description create a picture for the reader - making the unfamiliar familiar?

3.4 Description of Participants

- If information is available, how are the participants described?
- Does the description create a picture for the reader - making the unfamiliar familiar?

3.5 Researcher Role

- What role(s) will you take as a researcher, e.g. participant-observer, clinical interviewer, etc. ?
- Do these roles fit with the research questions and theoretical framework?
- What is your prior experience (research or otherwise) that affects this study (researcher bias)?

3.6 Gaining Access

- How will you gain access to the site you desire?
- If you have completed a pilot study at this site, how does this affect continued work at the site?
- ethical considerations?

3.7 Data Collection

- What data collection strategies will be utilized?
 - interviews (what types)?
 - field notes?
 - focus groups?
 - audio/video taping?
- Are collection strategies fully described with appropriate literature cited when necessary?
- Do the data collection techniques fit the theoretical frame?
- Do the data collection techniques fit the research questions?
- Do the data collection techniques fit the research design?
e.g., if you want case studies and want to do cross-case analysis, have you selected appropriate procedures so that cross-case analysis is valid?
- How are issues of validity, reliability, translatability, comparability, ethics addressed?
- How will data be managed?
- If using a computer program, how will it specifically be utilized?

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3.8 Data Analysis

- Is a particular technique being employed, i.e. constant comparison, analytic induction?
- Does the technique fit with the research questions and theoretical framework?
- What type of coding procedures do you plan to employ?
 - open coding?
 - axial coding?
 - selective coding?
 - conditional matrix?
 - unitizing?
 - theoretical sampling?
- Are adjunctive procedures to be utilized?
- memos and diagrams?
- Will narrative analysis be used?
- Will you verify your coding with your participants? why/why not?
- How will you develop your categories, properties, themes, assertions?
- If using a computer program, how will it specifically be utilized?

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