

# Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics

## A Practical Introduction



Edited by  
Juanita Heigham  
Robert A. Croker



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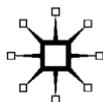
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# Preface

Research is a quest, an attempt to better understand the complex worlds we live in. It is an endeavor that can have the highest possible purpose – to help others. In applied linguistics, this means helping language learners, teachers, researchers, materials writers, and program administrators gain a deeper understanding of the multifarious worlds of learning and teaching languages.

Qualitative research has evolved over the past three decades into a broad body of knowledge. Within its domain is a wide range of approaches and methods that reflect not only the multiplicity of its root disciplines but also the diversity of contexts and purposes to which it is applied. You, like most people approaching qualitative research for the first time, may find this breadth overwhelming. We know this well because we have experienced it ourselves. As a result of that experience, we decided to create a practical book that might help reduce the anxiety novice researchers often feel as they begin their qualitative research journey.

Qualitative research is not just a body of knowledge, it is also a craft (Richards, 2003). It demands concentrated engagement with the participants in your study, and that engagement calls for an array of research skills. These skills are not necessarily difficult, but understanding, practice, reflection – and thoughtfulness – are required to develop them fully.

This book is designed to help you build your qualitative research knowledge and skills. Each main research approach and methods chapter opens with an illustrative example to give you a snapshot of its entire research cycle. That example is then woven throughout the chapter to show you how each element of the research process is realized in a qualitative research study in applied linguistics. Pre-reading and post-reading questions ensure that you have grasped the main concepts in each chapter, and tasks give you a chance to work with and reflect on your new knowledge. The chapters are written in a conversational tone to help you engage with the ideas offered within them, and accessible additional readings are suggested to encourage you to take your qualitative research journey further.

Doing qualitative research can be extremely fulfilling and has the capacity to transform not only your understanding of what you are studying but potentially, and more profoundly, of who you are in this world. So whether you are a graduate student being introduced to research approaches and methods in preparation for writing your

thesis, or a practicing teacher whose curiosity has been ignited and who has decided to find out what qualitative research is all about, this book is written for you. May it give you the confidence you need to begin your quest.

ROBERT A. CROKER  
JUANITA HEIGHAM

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**Part I**

**Overview**

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# 1

## An Introduction to Qualitative Research

*Robert A. Croker*

### Overview

#### Starting out in qualitative research

Qualitative research – when you first heard the term, your initial thought might have been, ‘What do qualitative researchers actually do?’ It may come as a surprise to you that you are already familiar with many of their activities, and you actually do them yourself – every day – as you watch and listen to what happens around you, and ask questions about what you have seen and heard.

For instance, think back to the first class you took as a university student. When you walked into the classroom that day, you probably checked out the room, noting the arrangement of desks and where people were sitting. You also watched the other students and the teacher to try and work out what sort of people they might be and what relationships might already exist between them. During the class, you listened to what the teacher and other students said; you probably talked to a few people in the class as well, asking them questions to help you understand the developing culture of the class. You might even have jotted down a few things about whom and what you had seen and heard. In this first class, then, you were doing something similar to collecting data, and practicing two of the basic skills of qualitative researchers – observing and interviewing.

And that is not all: as well as doing the things that qualitative researchers do, you probably also think in many of the same ways. For example, during your first semester at university, you might have begun to notice regularities of behavior: some students seemed to know each other already; students who did not know anybody tended to reach out to others who dressed and talked in a similar way; a few students did not seem interested in making friends yet and stuck to themselves. As you considered all of this, you were doing what all qualitative researchers do when they think about, or analyze and interpret, their data, which is to reflect on and explore what they know, search for patterns, and try to create a full and rich understanding of

the research context. Furthermore, when you described your new class to a friend, depicting your new classmates and capturing the sense of the class using carefully chosen, descriptive **vignettes**, you were doing in part what qualitative researchers do when they present their findings. So, although you may never have conducted a qualitative research project before, it is probably safe to say that the process of doing one will not be altogether new to you.

Of course, observation of everyday life is different to research. Research requires sound data collection skills and a methodological approach that provides a framework for the research process. It should be driven by some kind of theory, and have a clear research purpose. The goal of *Qualitative research in applied linguistics: A practical introduction* is to help you develop these data collection skills, and to understand the principal qualitative research approaches. More importantly, it will acquaint you with how qualitative researchers think about and see the world, and also the ways in which they address the common challenges they face. This is to prepare you to study language classrooms and other contexts in which language is used – not just as an everyday observer but as a trained researcher.

### **Qualitative research in applied linguistics**

**Applied linguistics** is a broad and exciting interdisciplinary field of study. It focuses on language in use, connecting our knowledge about languages with an understanding of how they are used in the real world. Applied linguists work in diverse research areas including second-language acquisition (SLA), teaching English as a second or other language (TESOL), workplace communication, language planning and policy, and language identity and gender – to name just a few. Many applied linguists also work in related fields such as education, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

One important area of applied linguistics research is *language analysis*. SLA researchers, for example, look at what language errors learners commonly make at different stages in their language development, or TESOL researchers consider how a writing textbook helps students develop their composition skills. A second important area in applied linguistics is investigating the *contexts and experiences of language use*. For instance, researchers specializing in workplace communication could examine how immigrant women with differing degrees of language proficiency use the target language to communicate with co-workers, or TESOL researchers might investigate how the classroom milieu affects students' attitudes toward language learning. Similarly, language identity researchers might consider how sexual minorities structure their identity through language.

How do researchers approach such issues? In essence, they have three choices: to use quantitative research, qualitative research, or to use both in what is termed mixed methods research. In very broad terms, **quantitative research** involves collecting primarily numerical data and analyzing it

using statistical methods, whereas **qualitative research** entails collecting primarily textual data and examining it using **interpretive analysis**. **Mixed methods research** employs both quantitative and qualitative research according to the aims and context of the individual project and the nature of the research questions.

In the following chapters, we mainly focus on qualitative research, first exploring what it is, then illustrating how it is used to investigate the manifold contexts and experiences of language in use; however, there is also a chapter that provides a thorough introduction to mixed methods research.

## What is qualitative research?

### An umbrella term

The term ‘qualitative research’ is an umbrella term used to refer to a complex and evolving **research methodology**. It has roots in a number of different disciplines, principally anthropology, sociology, and philosophy, and is now used in almost all fields of social science inquiry, including applied linguistics. A plethora of **research approaches** has been developed within qualitative research, including narrative inquiry, case study, ethnography, action research, phenomenology, and grounded theory. These approaches use a wide variety of **data collection methods**, such as observation, interviews, open-response questionnaire items, verbal reports, diaries, and discourse analysis; all of these approaches and methods will be discussed in this book. And within each of these research approaches and methods, a number of **research techniques** and strategies have been developed to help qualitative researchers do their day-to-day work – conceptualizing the research project, collecting and analyzing data, and writing up findings. The number of terms and concepts used to define these approaches and methods and their associated strategies and techniques has grown to the point where there is now even a *Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry* (Schwandt, 2007).

### Two important questions

Given that qualitative research is such a vast field, let us begin our exploration by considering two simple but fundamental questions that all researchers face, ‘What is reality?’ (see **ontology**) and ‘What is knowledge?’ (see **epistemology**). How researchers answer these questions is shaped by their view of the world, and also informed by how other academics conceptualize research. In the social sciences, a number of generally accepted models have been developed that articulate these conceptual frameworks, and they are called **paradigms**. Paradigms have profoundly affected the development of research in general and qualitative research in particular. This can be illustrated by comparing two that are often given as examples of opposite perspectives – positivism and constructivism.

**Positivists** believe that there is only one, fixed, agreed-upon reality, so research must strive to find a singular, universal 'truth'. They see the world as real, as something that exists independently of themselves. They believe that this reality can be quantified, and that the purpose of research is to measure it as precisely as possible. Since positivists believe that there is one universal reality, they also presume that any truths they discover about that reality are equally applicable to other groups or situations, regardless of the context. For researchers who take a positivist approach, one of the primary aims of investigation is therefore to formulate hypotheses that will allow them to make predictions about what will happen in the future, or inferences about other contexts. According to the positivist school of thought, the role of the researcher is to be detached and 'objective' both in the gathering of data and the interpretation of the findings.

Some readers may recollect having been taught many of these points in high school science classes. Indeed, positivism has its roots in the nature of inquiry that was developed for the physical sciences, where 'truths', 'laws', and 'axioms' wait to be discovered. During the early stages of the development of research in the social sciences, this dogma was generally accepted without question because of its historical respectability. However, as the nature of research in the social sciences became more multifaceted, and the complexity of the questions it sought to answer increased, the shortcomings of the positivist approach became more and more apparent. Now, not many researchers subscribe to a strict notion of positivism, but it provides a useful contrast to another important perspective that developed in the social sciences, constructivism, which profoundly influenced the development of qualitative research.

In contrast to positivists, **constructivists** believe that there is no universally agreed upon reality or universal 'truth'. Rather, 'meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world' (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). That is, each individual creates his or her own unique understandings of the world, so there are multiple constructions and multiple interpretations of reality. And these constructions and interpretations change, depending upon time and circumstances, so reality is not universal but person-, context-, and time-bound.

To illustrate constructivist ideas, let us think about the people who were sitting in that classroom when you walked in on your first day. Partway through that first class, if you had asked each of them the simple question, 'What is happening now?' it is likely that you would have gotten a range of quite different answers. You would probably have found that each person was attending to different aspects of the lesson, and interpreting what was going on in terms of their own expectations and learning experiences. The classroom context would also have been influencing each person differently, as their experience of the class would have differed depending on

where they were sitting and with whom they were interacting. If you were to have repeated this process at the end of class by asking your classmates, 'What happened in our class today?', you would most likely have gotten a completely new set of responses that may not have borne much resemblance to the earlier ones. You would have found that each student had constructed her own understanding of the lesson, and was in fact (re)constructing it for herself as she talked about it with you. This is the key point of constructivism: that the reality of this class for the students present would certainly not have been a one-size-fits-all assessment but rather a person-, context-, and time-bound experience. The task of a constructivist researcher, then, is to understand these multiple ways of looking at the world – a fascinating, and intriguing, challenge.

As constructivist ideas became more popular in the social sciences in the latter half of the twentieth century, researchers sought better ways to understand these person-, context-, and time-bound experiences. Although many researchers continued to use quantitative research, qualitative research based upon a constructivist view of the world began to emerge as a rigorous and systematic methodology to help researchers explore people's worlds. Now, most – but not all – researchers who use qualitative research approaches and methods would state that their views of the world are closer to the constructivist one than the positivist. Ultimately, its tenets came to underpin much qualitative research.

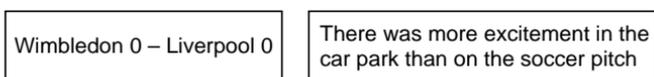
But what exactly does 'understanding multiple ways of looking at the world' mean, and how do constructivist qualitative researchers achieve this? In the next few pages, I am going to give you a whirlwind overview of the essential characteristics of the constructivist account of qualitative research, then review three other perspectives that have spurred further development in qualitative research methodology – critical theory, postmodernism, and pragmatism.

### **A focus on the social world**

As qualitative researchers believe that meaning is socially constructed, their research focus is on the **participants** – how participants experience and interact with a **phenomenon** at a given point in time and in a particular context, and the multiple meanings it has for them. They are interested in the ordinary, everyday worlds of their participants – where they live, work, and study. These **natural settings** include such places as homes and workplaces, staffrooms, classrooms and self-access centers, and online chat rooms. 'Qualitative researchers go to the people; they do not extricate people from their everyday worlds' (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 9). They recognize that these settings are complex, dynamic, and multifaceted.

Unlike quantitative researchers, who emphasize the importance of measuring outcomes, qualitative researchers focus on understanding the process

of what's going on in a setting. Here is a simple illustration:



Source: Dey (1993, p. 9).

The left box succinctly summarizes the outcome of the soccer game, but does not provide a sense of what actually happened there that day; the right box captures this much better. To give another example, this time from applied linguistics, quantitative researchers often measure gains in proficiency over a period of time – the outcomes of learning. However, qualitative researchers focus on the process, by trying to understand how those gains were made, what the participants thought about improving their proficiency, and how the setting – and the other people there – influenced them. This kind of research is often longitudinal, and a lot of qualitative inquiry requires researchers to spend a relatively prolonged period of time in the research setting to develop deep and comprehensive understandings of what goes on there. With a more detailed and intensive focus on each participant, working even in one setting is very time and labor intensive so the number of participants is usually small and they are carefully chosen.

Qualitative researchers ask particular types of questions about a setting (Patton, 2002), such as: What's going on here? What does the world look like for participants? What meanings do they make here? How does this setting influence participants' perceptions and behavior? Researchers ask these sorts of questions because they want to comprehend the subjective meanings and understandings that participants create about their own social and personal worlds. To do so, researchers 'position' themselves closely to the participants, to endeavor to see the world as their participants do – from the participants' angle. This participant or 'insider' point of view is termed the **emic** perspective; the researcher or 'outsider' point of view is termed the **etic** perspective. Developing an emic perspective usually means directly interacting with the research participants in the research context, 'in the field, face to face with real people' (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 9). It also means using the participants' own terms and concepts to describe their worlds when analyzing data and presenting findings.

### The research process

In a qualitative study, researchers often use multiple data collection methods, including observations, interviews, open-response questionnaires, and diaries. Each of these 'makes the world visible in a different way' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4), so a fuller, richer picture of the participants' perspective can be explored and represented. All of these data collection methods create

data that is primarily textual not numerical: researchers doing observations create written notes, called field notes; researchers using interviews generate written transcripts or summaries; and the other data collection methods such as questionnaires and diaries use text that the participants themselves have written. That is not to say that numerical data is not used, but that its purpose is supplementary not central. A vast amount of textual data is created in a qualitative research study, and managing it is often challenging.

The textual data that researchers create in their field notes and interview summaries should be richly detailed and descriptive of the participants and the research setting – capturing what researchers have seen, heard, smelled, and touched. As they create this data, and later as they think about them, researchers add their own thoughts and reflections. Taken together, this creates a **thick description** of the participants and setting. Qualitative researchers then use interpretive analysis to sift through their data and group similar ideas together, to discover patterns of behavior and thinking.

The data that researchers collect permits them to paint a richly descriptive picture of their participants' worlds – the participants themselves, the setting, and the major and minor events that happen there. A well-written qualitative research study will carefully use the participants' own words to augment the researcher's vivid description and clear interpretation. It should give readers a sense of entering the participants' worlds and sharing the experience of being there with them. The process is, in a sense, like filmmaking – the researcher assembles data into montages by blending images, sounds, and understandings together to create a compelling composite creation (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, for a fuller explanation).

### The nature of qualitative research

When little is known about a phenomenon or existing research is limited, qualitative research is a very useful research methodology because it is *exploratory* – its purpose is to discover new ideas and insights, or even generate new theories. This research is not necessarily done to predict what may happen in the future or in another setting – what is learned about the phenomenon, participants, or events in the setting can be an end in itself. That is, qualitative research mostly focuses on understanding the particular and the distinctive, and does not necessarily seek or claim to generalize findings to other contexts. Some qualitative researchers do consider the extent to which their findings may be generalizable, but many leave it up to the readers to decide to what degree the features of the research setting are relevant to their own context. The richer the description the researcher provides in the study's report, the easier it is for readers to envisage the research setting and thus make a judgment about the relevance of the research for them.

As qualitative research is often exploratory, most researchers do not define specific research questions at the outset of the study, as doing so would likely impose their own framework on the research context. Rather, they usually

begin the study with only a research purpose and conceptual framework, and a sense of the initial focus of interest. They then prefer to enter the research setting and become familiar with the context and the participants, and ascertain what participants think the main issues and problems are, before determining their specific research questions. These questions are modified and refined, and the research design developed, as their understandings of the research setting, participants, and research focus mature. This reflects what is called the emergent nature of the qualitative research process – understanding emerges as the research proceeds. Donald Freeman explores this in Chapter 2.

The quantitative research cycle is usually characterized as being linear, each stage being carried out one after the other: research questions are formulated, data is collected then statistically analyzed, and findings written up. By contrast, qualitative research is more simultaneous, nonlinear, and iterative. That is, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data are done largely at the same time, with researchers constantly moving back and forth between all three until new information does not add to their understanding of a topic, a point called **data saturation**. In fact, **data analysis** will often steer data collection, as ongoing analysis indicates what avenues of research to pursue – who to observe or interview next, what questions to ask, and what documents to request – so the emergent nature of qualitative research is also evident throughout the research cycle.

Although emergent, qualitative research is systematic and rigorous. As Gretchen Rossman and Sharon Rallis illustrate in Chapter 13, for readers and other researchers to trust your research, there must be a strong conceptual framework to guide your study, and congruence between the research approach that structures your study and the data collection methods that you employ. Moreover, you need to demonstrate that your research practices are sound and that you have used clear logic, provide strong evidence to substantiate the claims that you make, and diligently document the process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting your data.

While qualitative research is systematic, it is not formulaic, so there is no requirement that researchers follow a set of prescribed research steps. This point is stressed by Rallis and Rossman (2003):

...inquiry proceeds through a complex, nonlinear process of induction, deduction, reflection, inspiration, and just plain old hard thinking. This can be characterized as *researcher praxis* (Jones, 2002), that is, an iteration between theoretical ideas, data, and the researcher's reflection on both. A... feature of qualitative research... is a reliance on sophisticated reasoning that is multifaceted and iterative, moving back and forth between the parts and the whole. (p. 11).

Qualitative research also requires you to be intuitive, to see links and patterns in the data, and to build these into themes that simultaneously fulfill

your research purposes and also express both the particular and the essential nature of the setting and its participants. Qualitative research is a discipline that calls for a balance between order and insight.

### **The subjectivity of the researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary research instrument. This has two aspects. First, researchers themselves collect the data, by directly observing or interviewing the participants, for example. The advantage of researchers doing this is that they can be responsive and adaptive to the participants and research setting and can quickly begin to explore unanticipated avenues of research. They can also collect a wide range of data and begin to think about it immediately, allowing them to clarify ideas promptly for accuracy of interpretation (Merriam, 2002). The second dimension is that observation field notes and interview snippets do not speak for themselves (Rossman & Rallis, 2003); nor do questionnaire answers and diary entries magically indicate to the researcher underlying patterns of reality. Rather, the researcher has to interpret them, so analysis in qualitative research is often called interpretive analysis.

But when researchers go into research settings, they also take their own intellectual baggage and life experiences with them. Inevitably, their gender, age, ethnicity, cultural background, sexual orientation, politics, religious beliefs, and life experiences – their worldview – are the lens through which they see their research. This may color their perceptions of the research setting and also the constructions of reality that they develop with the participants. This is a major concern in qualitative research, so it is important for researchers to be constantly aware and systematically reflect on their own personal identity and impact on the participants and research setting, and state that they have done so in the study's final report. Qualitative researchers can also handle this through a process called **triangulation** – obtaining different perspectives on a phenomenon by gathering data from different participants, and using a variety of data collection methods like observations, interviews, and questionnaires. On the other hand, some qualitative researchers see subjectivity as a virtue, the 'basis of researchers making a distinct contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected' (Peshkin, 1988, p. 18, cited in Merriam, 2002, p. 5). Each researcher's perception, 'like light hitting a crystal, reflects a different perspective' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 6, from Richardson, 2000).

### **Different ways of looking at the world**

This diversity in qualitative research illustrates an important point – that the constructivist approach to qualitative research is now by no means universally accepted. It has been criticized for assuming that the interpretive reconstruction of reality is essentially 'unproblematic'; that is, that researchers can

preserve a completely impartial and unbiased perspective, and that qualitative research itself is politically and socially a neutral activity.

Many qualitative researchers strongly agree with this critique – they argue that truth is never value-free. Rather, they assert that all research is necessarily political and so fundamentally value-laden, involving issues of power in society. They also believe that social science research, including constructivist qualitative research, has often contributed to the silencing of marginalized and oppressed groups in society, by making them simply passive objects of inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

From these concerns developed **critical theory**, which views society as fundamentally conflictual and oppressive. Critical theory seeks ‘not merely understanding but change’ (Richards, 2003, p. 40); it is openly ideological, emancipatory, and transformative. Because critical theorists are interested in the power asymmetries that underlie society, they explicitly want to empower marginalized groups, often by doing research together with members of these groups. Critical theory has made major contributions to qualitative research, as it has forced researchers to question the meanings of concepts that they had taken for granted, and also examine the assumptions underlying their work. Critical theory encompasses an array of theories and perspectives, such as critical race theory and **feminist theory**. In qualitative research, a critical lens can be applied to a number of research approaches (explained below) to create critical discourse analysis, **critical ethnography**, or critical action research.

Although Lazaraton (2003) notes that qualitative research in applied linguistics does not yet have a ‘clear sociopolitical agenda’ (p. 3), marginalized groups that could be researched by critical applied linguists include new immigrants from non-English speaking countries, hearing-challenged students, or language teachers who teach a language other than their mother tongue. In fact, within applied linguistics as well as in the broader social sciences, critical approaches are becoming more common. ‘We want a social science that is committed up front to issues of social justice, equity, nonviolence, peace, and universal human rights. We do not want a social science that says it can address these issues if it wants to. For us, that is no longer an option’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 13).

**Postmodernism** is another perspective whose ideas are included under the umbrella of qualitative research, yet its basic assumptions are significantly different from the constructivist paradigm. It is an ideological perspective that questions the early twentieth-century emphasis on science and technology, rationality, reason, and positivism. This perspective is challenging constructivist-interpretive qualitative research, so it is important that researchers also understand some of its basic notions. Merriam and Associates (2002) provide a useful summary:

A postmodern world is one where the rationality, scientific method, and certainties of the modern world no longer hold...In the postmodern

world, everything is 'contested.' What has been considered true, real, or right can be questioned; and there are multiple interpretations of the same phenomenon depending on where one is standing. There are no absolutes, no single theoretical framework for examining social and political issues. ...

Postmodernists celebrate diversity among people, ideas, and institutions. By accepting the diversity and plurality of the world, no one element is privileged or more powerful than another. ...

'Most postmodernists do not talk about methodology' (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 184), and the 'literature provides only the vaguest indication of what ideals of multiple voices mean concretely in empirical studies' (p. 185). Indeed, it would be congruent with this worldview to *not* come up with a singular approach to doing research. Instead, postmodern research is highly experimental, playful, creative, and no two postmodern studies look alike. (p. 375)

Richards (2003) notes that the broad topic of the hegemony of English as a world language provides a rich environment for postmodern researchers in applied linguistics.

Another perspective in social research, one that encompasses both qualitative and quantitative research, is called **pragmatism**. As outlined by Creswell (2009), pragmatism is not based on a particular ontological or epistemological stance; there is no predetermined view of what reality or knowledge is. Pragmatic researchers may start collecting and analyzing data without necessarily giving any thought to philosophical issues such as the nature of truth and reality. Instead, they focus on the impact or consequences of their research, choosing the qualitative and quantitative research approaches, methods, and techniques that best meet their research purposes. '[P]ragmatism opens the door to multiple methods, different worldviews, and different assumptions, as well as different forms of data collection and analysis' (p. 11). It represents the philosophical underpinnings of mixed methods research.

The constructivist paradigm, and critical theory, postmodernism, and pragmatism, are the maps that illustrate the terrain of the broad and increasingly disparate field of qualitative research. Understanding them will help you assess the relevance and importance of published research that you will read in the course of your studies. Also, understanding your own view of the world will help you to 'position' your research appropriately within or across paradigms and to create a more coherent research design. For a somewhat dense but thorough introduction to different paradigms in qualitative research in the social sciences, see Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Merriam and Associates (2002). In our book, most authors have positioned their chapters within the constructivist paradigm but make reference to the other three perspectives.

## Qualitative research approaches and methods

Now that you have a general understanding of the essential features of qualitative research, let us take a closer look at what this book offers you. To complete Part I, Donald Freeman explores the nature of the qualitative research cycle, to help you understand what distinguishes it as 'qualitative'. Part II introduces five qualitative research approaches commonly used in applied linguistics – narrative inquiry, case study, ethnography, action research, and mixed methods – and Part III presents several of the most commonly used qualitative data collection methods – observation, interviews, questionnaires, verbal reports and diary studies, and discourse analysis. Finally, ethics and trustworthiness, and writing up your research report are considered in Part IV. The book concludes with a glossary of key terms used in qualitative research, and a subject index.

### Qualitative research approaches

To provide a snapshot of the five qualitative research approaches presented in Part II of the book, here is a brief description of each of them:

- **Narrative inquiry** (Chapter 3) provides a storied analysis of a person's life. It assumes that people use narrative to make sense of who they are and how their lives change (Bruner, 1990). As Garold Murray notes in his chapter, it takes the perspective of the participant(s) and uses first-person accounts of life experiences as data, mostly gathered through interviews.
- **Case study** (Chapter 4) creates an in-depth description and analysis of a 'bounded system' – one individual, institution, or educational context. By concentrating on a single (or few) case(s), this approach can describe a particular learning or teaching process or research setting in great detail. Case study uses multiple sources of data and data collection methods, and it is often combined with other qualitative and quantitative research approaches, as Michael Hood explains in his chapter.
- **Ethnography** (Chapter 5) refers to both a research process and also the product of that research. It describes and interprets the common patterns of a culture-sharing group through prolonged observation. Juanita Heigham and Keiko Sakui in their chapter observe that ethnography is not defined by how data is collected, but rather by the lens through which data is interpreted; the goal is to recreate for the reader the shared beliefs, practices, artifacts, knowledge, and behaviors of a group of people (Merriam, 2002). Whereas narrative inquiry and case study often look at the individual, ethnography, with its focus on culture, looks at groups.
- **Action research** (Chapter 6) is a systematic and self-reflective approach to collecting and analyzing information to help teachers explore issues that they face in their classroom teaching in order to change or improve their current practice. In her chapter, Anne Burns notes that action research

employs a range of data collection methods that are flexible and open-ended. The outcome of action research is more often a change in understanding and behavior than some form of a published report, partly because this is often its principal purpose.

- **Mixed methods** (Chapter 7) combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods in a single study. For example, language proficiency test scores are used along with student interviews to create a more multidimensional view of a language learning process, or a teacher questionnaire is combined with classroom observations and teacher diaries to generate a fuller understanding of one aspect of language teaching. In their chapter, Nataliya Ivankova and John Creswell illustrate the procedures for collecting, analyzing, and mixing qualitative and quantitative data at different stages in the research process. A mixed methods study could emphasize qualitative and quantitative data equally, or give one type greater emphasis. It is an emerging field of study and is becoming more commonly used in research in applied linguistics.

To help you get a better understanding of these approaches, their main characteristics are summarized in Table 1.1, and, of course, they are further elaborated in the text.

Beyond the scope of this introductory text are a number of other qualitative research approaches that do have application in the field of applied linguistics, but are less commonly used by novice researchers. Phenomenology and grounded theory are the two most significant, and as you will come across these terms in the literature, they are introduced here:

- **Phenomenology:** Whereas a narrative inquiry explores the life of a single individual, a phenomenological study describes the meanings that several individuals make from experiencing a single phenomenon. In our field, that could include understanding the experience of adult learners trying to create and negotiate meaning in a new foreign language, or the experience of long-term immigrants who are beginning to learn the language of their adopted home. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to reduce individual experiences of such phenomenon to a description of the basic ‘essence’ of that experience, by creating a composite description of that experience for all of the participants. Having a deep understanding of such a phenomenon can help teachers be more aware of their students’ language learning experiences, or help language program administrators more sensitively structure courses. In a broader sense, phenomenology as a school of philosophical thought underpins all qualitative research, because of its interest in understanding and representing the subjective experience of participants.
- **Grounded theory:** While phenomenology describes the meaning of an experience, a grounded theory study goes beyond description to generate

*Table 1.1* The main characteristics of five qualitative research approaches

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Narrative Inquiry</i>	<i>Case study</i>	<i>Ethnography</i>	<i>Action research</i>	<i>Mixed Methods</i>
<b>Focus</b>	To explore the life of one or more individuals, using in-depth interviews	To provide an in-depth description and analysis of a case (or cases), using multiple data sources	To describe and interpret the common patterns of a culture-sharing group through prolonged participant observation	To explore problems or questions in your teaching or learning context by systematic data creation and analysis	Combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods in a single study, to provide a fuller understanding of the research focus
<b>Foundation disciplines</b>	Anthropology, literature, history, psychology, and sociology	Psychology, law, political science, medicine, and education	Anthropology and sociology	Management studies, organization development, education, and health	Social sciences, especially education
<b>Unit(s) of analysis</b>	One or more individuals	An individual learner or teacher, a class, school, education area, or country; a class activity or language program	A group that share the same culture – a group of learners with the same first language, a class or year of students, the students or teachers of one department or school	An individual or group of learners or teachers, one group or class of students, the teachers in a department or language program	An individual or group of learners, teachers or language users
<b>Data collection methods: main forms</b>	One main source: interviews	Multiple sources: interviews observations diaries and verbal reports discourse analysis documents and records	Two main sources: interviews observations	Multiple sources: interviews observations recordings of classrooms or natural settings questionnaires diaries and verbal reports documents, such as textbooks and class materials, or examples of learners' writing	Multiple sources: interviews observations questionnaires diaries and verbal reports
<b>Data collection methods: other forms</b>	Documents and records	Questionnaires	Documents and archival records	Recordings of learner and teacher discourse for analysis	Quantitative data, including: proficiency and achievement tests

or discover a theory. This theory is 'grounded' in data that has been systematically collected from participants who have experienced the process being studied, and then methodically analyzed by the researcher. This theory is usually 'substantive' (a relatively narrow, limited theory about just one facet of learning or teaching) but can be 'formal' (a more extensive theory that combines a number of substantive theories together to make a broader theory). Like the other qualitative research approaches outlined above, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, and qualitative data collection techniques such as interviews and observation are used. Grounded theory was first outlined by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967 in their ground-breaking book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, which was in fact crucial in the broader development of qualitative research methodology. Glaser and Strauss did not offer a prescribed set of research procedures in their original work, but these have gradually been developed over time, principally by Strauss and his new co-author, Juliet Corbin (1990, 2008). Glaser has criticized Strauss and Corbin's approach to grounded theory as being too prescribed and structured (Glaser, 1992), but their approach has come to be commonly used in the social sciences and health. In applied linguistics, grounded theory is rarely used by novice researchers due to its complexity, but research procedures like **theoretical sampling** and the **constant comparative method** of data analysis are often used by qualitative researchers employing approaches other than grounded theory.

For a more substantial introduction to phenomenology and grounded theory in the social sciences, particularly in comparison with ethnography, see Creswell (2007) and Richards and Morse (2007).

### Qualitative data collection methods

In most qualitative studies, researchers use a variety of **research methods** to collect data, in order to obtain as many perspectives as possible on the phenomenon being researched. In this book, six data collection methods most commonly used in qualitative research in applied linguistics are addressed in Part III:

- **Observation** (Chapter 8) occurs when researchers carefully watch participants in the research setting with the aim of understanding their experience of being there, as Neil Cowie explains in his chapter. It is used to collect information about participants' external behavior, which can be further explored casually in conversation or more formally in interviews, with questions about participants' inner ideas, beliefs, and values. Researchers can choose to be 'complete observers' and not take part in the learning or teaching phenomenon being studied, or they can choose to take part as 'participant observers'. Data is created in the form of field

notes, which include explanations of what researchers observed as well as their reflections.

- **Interviews** (Chapter 9) offer a way to explore people's experiences and worldviews and the meanings they bring to them, as Keith Richards illustrates in his chapter. Interviews can be carefully structured by pre-determined questions to elicit specific information, or be more open to allow for generating richer insights. The greatest challenge in interviewing is getting the interaction with the participant right, by recognizing that interviews are jointly constructed encounters.
- **Open-response items on questionnaires** (Chapter 10) are questions on a survey that do not require respondents to select their answers from a limited list or selection; rather, participants answer in their own words. They are commonly used when researchers would like to quickly and efficiently collect textual data from a relatively large number of participants. James Dean Brown in his chapter provides guidelines for writing good questions, and for how to administer and analyze data.
- **Verbal reports** (Chapter 11) are oral records of a participant's thought processes, provided by individuals when they are thinking aloud either during or immediately after completing a language learning or teaching task. **Diaries** (Chapter 11) are another way of accessing participants' inner worlds; they are an account of a language experience as recorded in a first-person journal. These accounts may be analyzed and published by the diarists themselves or by an independent researcher. Both verbal reports and diaries are particularly important in applied linguistics, and their use is discussed by Sandra Lee McKay in her chapter.
- **Discourse analysis** (Chapter 12) looks at how language is used in spoken and written communication. It uses authentic language that has been produced spontaneously in naturally occurring events, that were not elicited experimentally specifically for the sake of research. The researcher should analyze this data with few or no preconceived notions, but allow the patterns of language use to emerge. Anne Lazaraton explains how to collect and analyze such spoken data in her chapter.

These six data collection methods can be conceptualized by placing them along two intersecting continuums. The first of these continuums expresses the amount of control researchers have over the research setting as they collect their data. In most qualitative research, researchers do not control the research setting at all, as they are interested in authentic behavior in natural settings. However, researchers using verbal reports do control what participants do during the research process, as you will learn when you read Chapter 11. By comparison, with research done outside qualitative research, most language analysis also involves researchers carefully controlling the research environment: researchers try to control the language that participants use when they complete a language task, and they also collect

data in settings specified for the purposes of collecting data, like a researcher's office or a language laboratory, rather than in natural settings.

The second continuum indicates the degree to which the researcher structures the actual collection of data. Some qualitative data collection methods allow the researcher to structure data collection carefully, like structured interviews, or observations using observation checklists. Many qualitative data collection methods, however, are less structured, permitting researchers to be more adaptive and responsive to the research setting. In fact, most methods can be both. For example, with the collection of diary data, researchers may ask participants to respond in their diaries only about a specific topic, or they may ask respondents to write on any topic with no set format. The advantage of more structured data collection is that information from different participants or in different periods of time can be compared; the disadvantage is that fertile insights that the participants might have otherwise offered could be lost. These two continuums are represented in Figure 1.1.

Probably your first questions after you have established your area of research interest are which approach and methods you should use in your study. The answers are straightforward: the ones that best suit your research

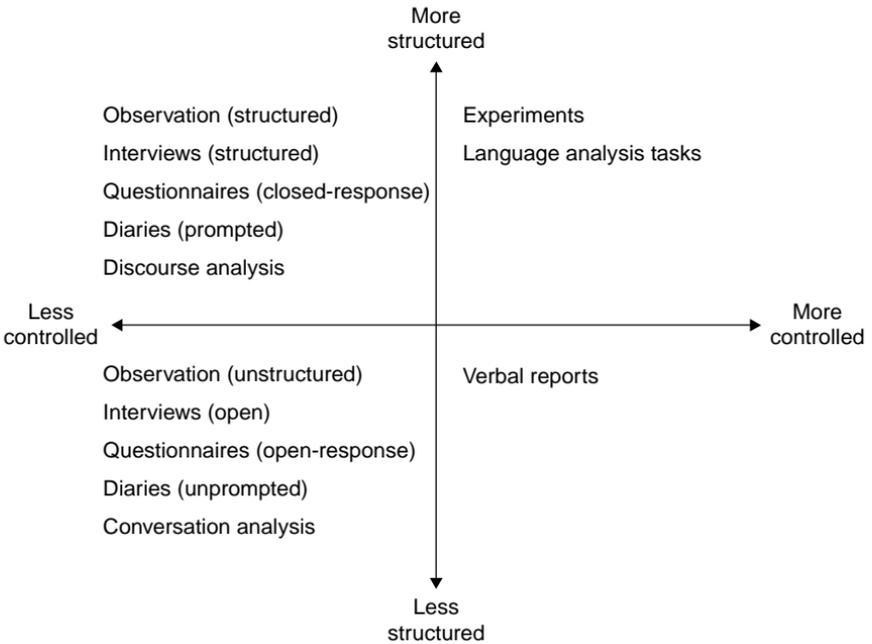


Figure 1.1 Qualitative data collection methods

Source: Adapted from van Lier (1988, p. 57).

purpose and research questions. That is, there must be congruence between your research purpose and research questions on the one hand, and the research approach and data collection method that you use on the other. This important issue is explored further in each chapter.

### **Practical issues**

Qualitative researchers often work closely with participants for extended periods of time, and in trying to understand their participants' worlds they inevitably become part of them. In entering the worlds of others, researchers must recognize the significant ethical responsibilities that they have to the people there – to honor them as individuals, respect their decisions to participate (or not) in a study, and also protect them from any damage or harm that may stem from their participation. In their chapter on ethics and trustworthiness (Chapter 13), Sharon Rallis and Gretchen Rossman emphasize that being an ethical researcher demands vigilance and thoughtfulness throughout the entire research cycle. Researchers make many decisions, both when planning their research and also on the spot, which affect the participants and other people in the research setting. These decisions must be thought through ethically, based upon codes of ethics and also moral principles. Rallis and Rossman's chapter will help you reason through these choices, so that when you leave the research setting, you will not have harmed the worlds that you have tried to understand.

Another practical – and challenging – aspect of qualitative research is the process of recording and writing up your study. Much of the data that qualitative researchers create is textual – written field notes and interview summaries, and transcripts of interviews. In addition, the qualitative research report itself should bring the realities of the participants' worlds to the printed page. Clearly, working well with text is an important skill for qualitative researchers to develop. Christine Pearson Casanave (Chapter 14) explores how to do this, encouraging researchers to write early, revise regularly, and get frequent feedback. She also suggests that novice researchers read widely and find 'textual mentors' – writing that they would like to emulate in their own. In her chapter, Casanave gives six tips to help novice researchers – and writers – create text that is engaging and accessible, and stresses that writing eloquently and creatively can be a compelling and rewarding process.

## **A guide to this book**

### **Chapter organization**

This book is designed to be a classroom text for qualitative research in applied linguistics and TESOL courses, as well as a user-friendly reference or

self-study book for those already practicing in the field. All of the chapters include the following sections:

- *Pre-reading questions*, to start you thinking about the chapter's topic
- A *chapter summary* that concisely reviews key information from that chapter
- *Post-reading comprehension and discussion questions*, to help you go over and explore the chapter's main points
- *Tasks* that give you hands-on practice working with each chapter's topic
- A list of accessible *further readings*, to help you independently explore the aspects of qualitative research that interest you most.

As the chapters in Part I (Overview) and Part IV (Practical Issues) explore very different facets of qualitative research, each has a unique chapter format. However, the ten central chapters of the book in Part II (research approaches) and Part III (data collection methods), follow the same basic format:

- An *illustrative example* begins each chapter and is then woven throughout it, to help you visualize how the approach or method is used 'in action' in applied linguistics research
- An *overview* provides an outline of each approach or method and the research contexts in which it is commonly used
- The section *What is...?* provides a succinct explanation of each approach or method
- The section *Why use...?* explains the advantages of using the approach or method in applied linguistics
- *Collecting your data* illustrates how to collect data, guiding you through the process
- *Organizing and interpreting your data* provides matter-of-fact explanations on how to manage data, and analyze and interpret what you have collected
- *Presenting your findings* summarizes how to effectively present your research study
- *Improving the quality of...* provides a succinct outline of how you can avoid common mistakes and how to improve the quality of your research.

As there are many terms that may be unfamiliar to you, those that are important in qualitative research are bolded throughout the book, listed at the end of each chapter and defined in clear and straightforward English in the *glossary* at the back of the book.

### **Ways to use this book**

If you are an independent reader, you could think of this book as a reference text, dipping into the chapters that are most relevant for your immediate research interests or needs and checking unfamiliar words in the glossary.

If you are a teacher using this book in your research methods class, you could go through the book sequentially, exploring what qualitative research is then moving through research approaches in Part II to research methods in Part III. Alternatively, you may find that your students need to get started on their research projects quickly, in which case you could start with the research methods first, referring individual students to the research approaches that most suit their research purpose. Whatever way you wish to approach it, we urge you to work through the chapters in Part I and Part IV near the beginning of your course because they provide important perspectives on the qualitative research process that students will need to learn early on. The glossary is also an excellent resource and should help readers develop a firm understanding of terms commonly used in qualitative research.

Finally, we hope that you find this book informative and easy to use, and that when you have finished reading it, you will have the knowledge and skill to study language classrooms and other contexts within the field of applied linguistics with confidence.

### **Key words**

constant comparative method  
constructivism  
critical ethnography  
critical theory  
data collection methods  
data saturation  
emic  
etic  
epistemology  
interpretive analysis  
mixed methods research  
natural settings  
ontology  
paradigm  
phenomenon  
positivism  
postmodernism  
pragmatism  
qualitative research  
quantitative research  
research approaches  
research methodology  
research techniques

theoretical sampling  
 thick description  
 triangulation  
 vignettes

## Further Reading

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

A key text on qualitative research, it introduces narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study in a very thorough manner.

Lazaraton, A. (1995). Qualitative research in applied linguistics: A progress report. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(3), 455–472.

Lazaraton, A. (2003). Evaluative criteria for qualitative research in applied linguistics: Whose criteria and whose research? *The Modern Language Journal*, 87(i), 1–12.

Two articles by a leading researcher in the field, providing an overview of qualitative research in applied linguistics.

Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

A golden oldie, providing a thorough introduction to both qualitative research and a number of qualitative research approaches and data collection methods used in applied linguistics.

Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative inquiry in TESOL*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

An engaging exploration of qualitative research in the teaching of English as a second language field.

Richards, L., & Morse, J. M. (2007). *Readme first for a user's guide to qualitative methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

A very readable, practical, must-have guide to qualitative research.

Rossmann, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

A clear explanation of the qualitative research process, with a particular emphasis on ethical issues.

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# 2

## What Makes Research ‘Qualitative’?

*Donald Freeman*

### Pre-reading questions

1. When we say a piece of research is ‘qualitative’ (as opposed to some other kind of research), what is being described about it? What makes it ‘qualitative’?
2. Think about an instance when someone makes a claim about something, for example, that Arabic is a difficult language to learn. What is that claim based on? On what basis would you agree or disagree with the claim?
3. One key thing that distinguishes a research study from opinion or conjecture is that the study makes clear its limitations. In other words, good research responds to the question, ‘How could this be wrong?’ Thinking specifically about a newspaper account, what are some ways that these accounts might be wrong? What could be some limitations?

### A short scenario: It isn’t just about the questions

Let’s say that you were at a party a few days ago and now you run into a friend who was not there. The friend asks you, ‘How was the party?’ You say something general about who was there, about what you did or talked about, about the food. ‘Was there any dancing?’ your friend asks. ‘No’, you reply. ‘Was it crowded?’ ‘How many people were there?’ your friend continues. ‘It turned out to be small. I think there were about 20 people,’ you answer. ‘Actually, there must have been 25 people, because we used the whole package of paper plates.’

Thinking about this exchange, what kinds of things do the questions ask? How do they differ from one another? Can you make any distinctions among the various questions? Which questions seem to ask about what happened? Which ones ask about other aspects of the situation?

This scenario focuses you on asking questions about a situation (in this case a party). I start this discussion of qualitative research here because

many people argue that the distinction between ‘qualitative’ and other forms of research stems from the questions asked in each type of study. But actually the distinction is more complex than that; it isn’t just about the questions. The conventional assumption is that research is ‘qualitative’ if it has to do with meanings, with how people who participate in an event or setting think about, describe, and understand what they know, think, and/or are doing. The problem is that this view breaks down fairly quickly, as you can see in the short scenario. From one perspective, all the questions in the scenario are about meaning; they are about determining an interpretation of the party – yours as someone who was there, versus your friend’s as someone who wasn’t. But this view disguises the fact that the questions do differ in important ways. Some, like ‘How was the party?’ ask for an opinion; if you ask the same question to several people, you are likely to get several different answers. Others, like ‘How many people were there?’, are questions that should have relatively consistent answers. And others, like ‘Was there any dancing?’, lie somewhere in between, depending on how you define dancing. So we can make useful distinctions about both in the ways in which information about the party is gathered, through these various questions that are asked, and what the questioner understands about the party as a result.

This chapter is about what makes research ‘qualitative’ and why it may be useful to you as someone learning about the research process to understand some of the features that characterize research done in this way. In this chapter, I will use four key ideas to outline research generally and to distinguish what characterizes some research as ‘qualitative’. These ideas are:

1. What is a **research question**? Qualitative research asks many types of questions, but it asks them in particular ways.
2. What is a **setting** in which a research question is studied and how it is studied? Researchers that are doing ‘qualitative’ studies work in and with settings in particular ways.
3. What are **claims**, or findings, that researchers make in responding to the questions about these settings? ‘Qualitative’ research differs from other forms of research primarily in the kinds of claims the studies make.
4. And what are **warrants**, or bases, on which the claims are, or should be, judged? Like claims, the warrants are the foundation of what makes some research studies ‘qualitative’.

These are the four main features in my discussion; to elaborate them, I will sketch out the general research cycle and the moves that distinguish ‘qualitative’ work in it. By the end of the chapter, you should have a sense of both this general cycle, and how the actual process plays out to characterize particular studies as ‘qualitative’.

Let me start with a word of caution, however. There is a basic cycle that is common to all forms of research and is generally shared across them. So the types of **data** you collect and the methods you use to collect or analyze these data will not *per se* define your research as being 'qualitative'. Although some people may refer to a piece of research as 'qualitative' because of the methods used or the type of data collected, these arguments tend to simplify a much more complex and nuanced set of distinctions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). People who depend on these features to define research as 'qualitative' are using a shorthand way of referring to it. Were it that simple, the distinction would be a lot less powerful and ultimately be less useful to you.

## The research cycle and research process

There is a common misperception that carrying out any research study has to begin with a question; while the work may start there, it doesn't necessarily have to. I think the confusion arises from two sources. First, we tend to confuse what is intriguing and interesting in a particular area, phenomenon, or problem – what I would call the '**inquiry**' – with the question(s) that we use to articulate that area (Lampert, 2003). The role of the research question(s) is to put into words the area of inquiry so that it can be studied, which is why developing the question is seen as the crucial, and often the first, move in the research cycle. Second, there is a tendency to confuse the research process, what you actually do in carrying out a research project, with the research cycle, which is a formalized description of that process. I will come back to this point but first I want to examine the interrelation between inquiry and questions since it is central to getting started as a researcher.

One way to think about this interrelation is to draw a parallel to how language works. When people communicate with each other, they generate what linguist Noam Chomsky (1957) called 'surface structures'. These are the forms of the language: verbal utterances we can say or hear, or sentences we can write or read. Because they carry the endless variety in what people say or write, 'surface structures' themselves would be random unless we have a way of recognizing or understanding the common patterns or meanings they express. Chomsky referred to what he called 'deep structures', the kernel forms or nuclei in the language that anchor these surface structures. So here is the irony and the connection to inquiry and research questions. As language users, because the surface version can always vary, we do not have direct access to the deep structures themselves. We cannot say what a deep structure is; we can only make use of it. The surface structures are examples of the deep structure, but we can only know the deep structure through these surface examples.

I introduce Chomsky's distinction for a couple of reasons. For one, the interrelation between an area of inquiry and its research question(s) is

similar to the deep-surface structure distinction that Chomsky proposed. Just like the deep structure, the area of inquiry is not directly knowable itself; it is articulated through the questions it generates, like the surface utterances. These questions reveal a point of view on the area of inquiry. Putting this in the context of a research study, let us say the inquiry has to do with the relationship between which languages and how much of them students use when working in groups. So consider two possible research questions that are linked to this inquiry:

- Why do some students speak in the target language more often in groupwork than others?
- What happens to students' target language use when they work in groups?

Both questions are about the area of inquiry – language use and groupwork – but the difference in perspective between them is interesting. The first question embeds a potential reason by assuming that it may be because the students are in groups that they speak more. The second question simply asks whether there could be a connection between groupwork and students' language use. So the first question is based on a hypothesis, that some students may speak more often *because* they are doing groupwork (as opposed to just being more talkative all around). The second question is open-ended, holding out that there might – or might not – be some link between the way social participation is organized in groupwork and the amount and kind of language students use.

I do not want to create a misunderstanding here. A research question is never an entirely neutral articulation of an inquiry any more than a surface structure utterance is the only version of its deep structure. In either case, the 'deep structure' (inquiry) serves as the thing, like the root of a tree or the keel of a boat, that steadies and guides the momentum and variety of the 'surface activity' (the research questions). This dynamic interrelationship between the research question(s) and the inquiry – between the surface and the deep structures – goes to the heart of a key characteristic of qualitative research. The (re)formulation of research questions is proactive, ongoing, and iterative (Maxwell, 2005), and it is central to both the processes of designing and implementing a qualitative research study.

This continual movement is not random; it has to be managed in a disciplined and methodical way. As a researcher, you will develop a research plan that is based on the initial version(s) of your research question(s). However, like an architect, you are likely to 'go back to the drawing board' many times as you get into your study. You will think about your research question(s) in terms of the inquiry, and the research design (what the data is and the methods of gathering and analyzing it) in terms of those questions. Just like the architect, who explores and reconfirms the plans with the clients and then

reexamines the construction documents in terms of plans, you will find the research process involves a lot of back-and-forth. In both architectural and research design, the movement is not a linear one from question to design to implementation. Qualitative research has a back-and-forth momentum all its own in which you are constantly clarifying your intentions, what you want to do, as you implement your study.

This brings us to the second reason that research is often seen as starting with questions. The **research process** and the **research cycle** are often treated as synonyms, although they are not, any more than building the house is the same as designing it. The research cycle is seen as neat and linear, the ideal way in which things should work. The research process is its really messy counterpart, the way things actually happen. The research cycle is generally mapped as beginning with a research question, and then moving to a research design in which the types of data needed are defined and the means for collecting and analyzing them are laid out. In this general scheme, the cycle has four distinct stages, and these are usually portrayed in a sequence (see Figure 2.1).

The first stage starts with formulating a question (or set of questions) that you want to study. In the second stage, you think about, or 'design', a way to study that question. This design involves figuring out the various kinds of information that you want to draw on as data, as well as how you plan to gather the information, and how you will take it apart or analyze it looking for patterns or themes. The third stage involves doing the work of gathering data, and in the fourth stage you analyze what you have gathered. It is referred to as cyclical rather than linear because the data analysis, and more particularly the findings or claims that arise from it, can often lead to more questions. In this way, the cycle can start again, like the same melody played another time, but in a different key.

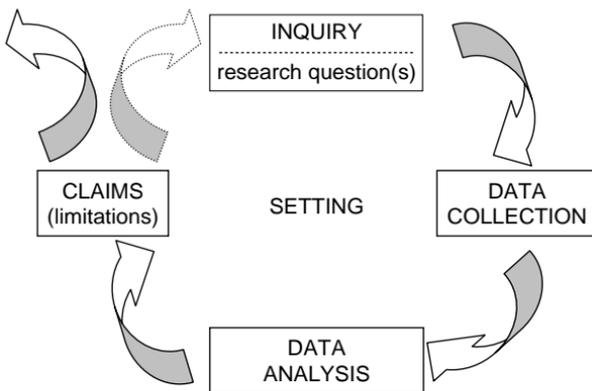


Figure 2.1 The research cycle

The problem is that this view of research as a cycle can suggest that the actual process is neater, more orderly, and sequential than it is. In reality, the process always happens in a particular place and time; it can be messy and it is always very human. Some things will go wrong; others will go right. Some aspects of data collection work out as planned, even as others do not. For instance, you plan to interview five students, whom you have preselected in your design, but one is sick and another does not want to talk with you. That day you end up with three interviews at a point in your study when your design has specified five. And so it goes. While there is always a certain amount of improvisation in the actual research process, it is a balancing act. Too much spontaneity risks the methodical discipline that makes research what it is.

The research cycle is essentially an idealized version of the research process. While the cycle follows sequentially ordered stages, the process works iteratively, which is why it is helpful to think of those 'stages' as phases in an overall movement from having an inquiry expressed in questions to making claims and developing understandings. The notion of stages in the research cycle gives you a sense of order and direction, like the plot of a novel. When you think of these stages as phases, you are identifying the main or primary concern in that part of the research process. In the data collection *phase*, you will be mainly concerned with gathering the information you decided in your design will respond to your question(s), but you will also be anticipating how you will take apart and analyze what you are collecting, and you may even be thinking ahead to the claims you will make. The specific phase of the research process defines the particular concern of the work at hand, while allowing for other activities to percolate around the edges.

Questions, however, are the center of gravity in the entire research process, which is why they are so important. These questions arise out of an area of interest, something that is intriguing or interesting or troubling you (Duckworth, 1996). Whether you start your project with a clearly articulated question or just a hunch that you express as 'What happens when...?', this area of interest and your feelings about it combine into an inquiry, and it is the inquiry that actually drives the research process. As I have said, while the questions may shift, the inquiry generally stays firm. In our earlier example, the deep-seated interest in how student groupings seem to influence their language use can be expressed in various surface questions, such as, 'Why do some students speak in the target language more often in groupwork than others?' or 'What happens to students' target language use when they work in groups?' Nonetheless, it continues to be the same inquiry. This dynamic is important because as you formulate the questions that flow from the area of inquiry, you are doing a number of important things. You are embedding certain assumptions, which you cannot avoid doing, and thus you are taking a position about what you think may matter

in the process. You are also anticipating decisions about your research design, about what information will become data, and how you will collect it, which leads to the design.

### **Design and method: Why and how do settings matter?**

As I explained in the preceding section, designing a research project starts with making some tentative suppositions about an area of inquiry, which are expressed in your research question(s). Like any assumption or hypothesis, these are bound to be partly right and partly wrong. Being methodical in both designing the research project and in carrying it out will allow you to sort out the correct from the incorrect among your suppositions. The aim is not to avoid all suppositions, which is impossible in any case, but rather to recognize these ideas you bring and to make use of them in the process of carrying out the research. Although the term has other meanings as well, I call this commitment to recognizing and using of your preconceptions *discipline*.

So what is this *discipline*? How exactly does it happen? It comes into the research process in two basic ways: the first has to do with the process and the second with the product(s) of that process (see Shulman, 1981). The process-meaning of discipline captures the methodicalness of doing good research. It is anchored in the research methods you choose for your study and how you carry them out. As I have said previously, by making certain to examine your research question(s) as you work, you will be creating the space to reconsider the suppositions that are embedded in them. These reconsiderations, which should be active, ongoing, and iterative, are motivated by the key question, 'How could I be mistaken in what I am thinking?' On one level, this commitment is about reflective self-examination; on another, however, it is driven by the setting – the people with which and the physical site in which you are doing the research.

How can the research setting shape your work as a researcher? It probably seems like you're in the driver's seat, you choose the setting for the study, so how can the setting talk back? It happens through the information in the setting, because the setting is essentially made up of bits of information. The research question organizes some of the information into data. It provides a lens through which you see particular information in the setting as 'data'. As a researcher, you come to the setting interested in certain features that are potentially helpful in answering your questions, and you attend more explicitly to these features than to others. But the setting is not passive; it is not simply the background for the study. As I have said, it carries lots of information and meaning independent of the research question(s) you are asking in and of it. The setting can reveal information that can recast your research question(s) and/or design, or even open up a whole new inquiry over time.

Let me draw an analogy. If you go to a museum to look at the paintings of one artist, you are pursuing an inquiry, to find the paintings of the artist,

Table 2.1 Choosing between data collection methods: A small example

<i>Research question</i>	<i>Information</i>	<i>Data</i>	<i>Research method</i>	<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>
<i>What happens when the new curriculum is implemented?</i>	What people think is happening	Students' and teachers' opinions	<i>survey</i>	Generates comparable information from a number of responses	Less opportunity to probe answers and follow-up
			<i>interviews</i>	Interactive and responsive to what people say	Time consuming to do and to transcribe

in a setting, the museum. You may even have a specific question about the artist's work that you want to satisfy, or you may be more of a 'What happens when I look at this artist's work?' frame of mind. As you walk through the museum's galleries, your attention may also be drawn to another artist's work or to a sculpture done by the artist whose paintings you were looking at. Letting the setting offer new or unconsidered information, while not losing track of your questions or sight of your inquiry, is the pleasure and the dance of good research. Because of this central role of setting, I refer to this process as 'being methodical about place'.

To continue this metaphor, research methods are the steps of that dance. Methods are ways of collecting information in and from a particular setting. Calling them 'ways' of collecting information is important for two reasons. First, it makes a distinction between the means and the purpose; second, the distinction can create space for you to think more flexibly about which ways, or means, you choose to accomplish your purposes. Consider collecting information about what people think about a new curriculum, for example. You could do so with interviews or with a survey. The purpose, as expressed in the research question, is constant, but the means vary as Table 2.1 illustrates.

Making the determination to use one method instead of another involves thinking through your research question(s) in relation to the setting; this entails care and discipline. You want to make the choice based on what you are trying to learn and the amount and kinds of information that will help you, which brings us to carrying out the study.

### **Collecting your data: When is information 'data'?**

When you carry out a study, as I have said, you need to be methodical about the place; this involves first and foremost being responsive to the setting in which the research is happening. The place, or site, itself, with its

possibilities and challenges of what can and cannot happen, the people and their personalities, will all come into play as you work in the setting. This setting houses many sources of information; it is this information that will help you to respond to or answer a particular research question.

Let us think through a simple example. If I want to know the gender breakdown in a class, a very straightforward question might be, 'How many boys and girls are there in this class?' The class is thus the setting, and the information lies in counting up the boys and girls that are in it. Such a study does not examine a complex research question. However, if the question becomes, 'How many students in this class are fluent readers?', nothing changes *per se*, but the setting becomes more complicated. The information is no longer simply the number of students in the classroom, but it now becomes that number of students as it is refracted through the lens and definition of 'fluent' reading. Now if the setting is a second-grade classroom, 'fluency' will mean one thing; if it is an adult education classroom, it will mean another. And then if the home language or mother tongue of some of the second-graders or the adults in the class is, say, Spanish, and we are measuring their reading fluency in English only, the setting becomes even more complicated. While a setting and the information available in it are stable, that information becomes relevant in a particular study only if and when it is examined in particular ways that are shaped by that study.

You might say that physically the setting does not change: in this example, it is always the same classroom. The difference is the classroom attributes, and in particular the attributes that are connected to the research process as data. This connection is triggered, of course, by the questions you are asking. In this way, research questions focus attention on particular aspects of a setting; they include certain features, while overlooking or excluding others. In the question how many boys and girls are in the class, students' gender is salient, while their height or ethnicities are not. The challenge as a researcher, then, is to always be (re)checking these connections, of determining what matters to the research question. Because it is impossible to know 'up front' every aspect of the research setting that might be salient to your question, you must always be a bit off-balance, looking for what could matter even as you proceed on the basis of what you think does matter to your question and project.

The ways in which you collect data structures your work in this process (Patton, 1990). There is much discussion among researchers about hierarchy in the means of collecting data, or what constitute research 'methods' versus 'techniques'. In essence, most of what you will use as research techniques are simply ordinary ways of acting. When, for example, does talking to someone become 'interviewing', when does watching something become 'observing', when (and how long) does spending time in a place become 'doing ethnography', and so on. However when you combine these ordinary forms within a purposeful structure to respond to questions, they become

research techniques with a method. In general, we could say that a research method carries in it a set of commonly applied techniques; thus a single technique can show up, differently, in various research methods.

Let's take asking questions as an example. If your questions are all open-ended, guided by what the other person says or does not say, you may be following a method of 'open' interviewing in which you allow the person speaking to take the lead. If, by contrast, you have a set of questions that you have decided in advance, that you follow as a script to gather comparable information among the people you are talking to, your method is quite structured. So in the context of our example of reading fluency, you could ask about students' home languages in a number of ways. You might ask which language(s) the student uses at home, which would be a fairly structured approach, or you could ask the student to talk about what happens at home when the family members and caregivers are there in the morning or evening; this would be a more open-ended approach. The same technique – asking questions – will elicit information as data, but these data will be shaped by how the questions are organized (see Mishler, 1996). This organization formalizes assumptions in a method, in this case interviewing.

Part of the formalization process involves the researcher making a commitment to commonly shared procedures. Without these public procedures, the work can all be serendipitous – being in the right place, asking the right questions, and seeing the right things at the right times. You can share the questions you asked (your interview guides) or you can make public the notes you took as you observed (your field notes) and so on. The methodicalness of data collection and analysis encapsulates the potential for publicness in the research process; this is because the conclusions of research studies are challenged on two bases. One is the means the researcher has used to arrive at those conclusions, which includes what the data were, how they were gathered, and how they were analyzed. These challenges come under the general heading of concerns about the validity of the research. The other challenge can lie in the comparability and relevance of those conclusions to other settings, what are sometimes called the 'so what' or 'now what' questions, which are generally referred to under the heading of concerns about the replicability or generalizability of the research. Both kinds of challenges are connected to the claims you make in your research and the warrants you use, implicitly or explicitly, to support those claims, points that we come to in later sections of this chapter.

I have been using the terms 'discipline' and 'methodicalness' in several senses. Figure 2.2 summarizes these various meanings and their interrelationships.

The research cycle is characterized by two meanings of discipline. The cycle is 'disciplined' in a process sense because it follows a planned order that is driven by the question(s) that you are exploring in a methodical way. The word 'methodical' here is applied to how you organize your work in the

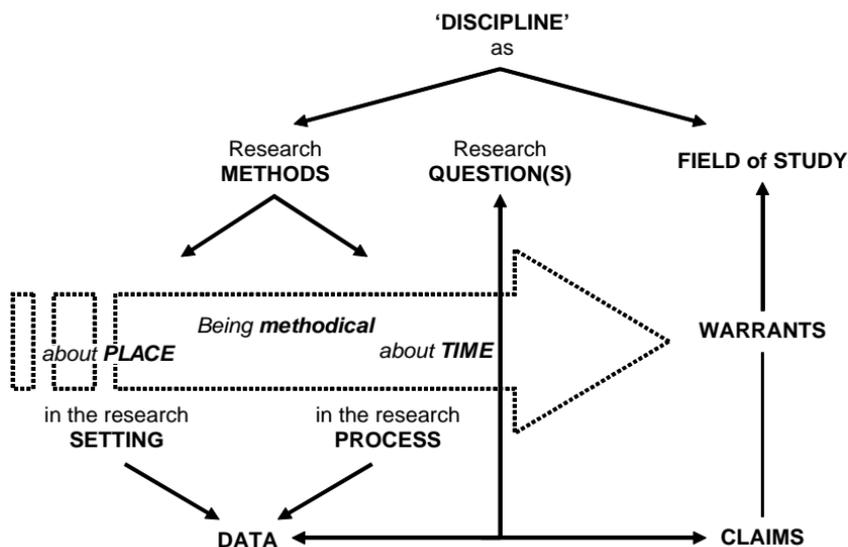


Figure 2.2 Disciplines of the research process

setting – being methodical in the place – and how you work to organize and sequence your work – being methodical in time. The second meaning of 'discipline' addresses the products that are generated by your research and how these products are viewed by the wider public or community within which you intend for your research findings to be understood, debated and valued. So, for example, you probably want the research you do to matter, or to be recognized, by those within the community of applied linguistics, whereas researchers studying biology would want their work to matter within the community of biologists. This product-meaning of discipline is where the idea of claims and warrants enter in. Here discipline, in the sense of a field of study, places findings as products of research in that field. The types of claims that locate findings in a field are based on the warrants of that field, so applied linguists determine what makes research in their field just as chemists determine what makes it in theirs, and each group does so based on the warrants of their respective field and discipline.

### Findings: Making claims in your study

As I have said, the research cycle is a map, and the research process follows that map through the territory of the research setting you are studying, guided by the questions and suppositions you have about it. I have talked about ways in which the setting can (re)shape your work and how you need to be methodical in terms of the place and the people in it. As your study

unfolds in the setting, and as information in the setting becomes data, a picture will start to emerge. This picture, which is likely to be fuzzy and incomplete at first, is a response to your research question(s). It may confirm what you thought at the outset of the process and/or it may introduce new ways of seeing things. The picture comes into focus through a process of collecting data and analyzing it. You tentatively figure out what you think is going on and you check it against the data you have as well as the gaps, what you do not have. During this process, because it unfolds throughout the course of your research study, you need to be methodical in how you use time. As time passes in your study, gaps in your thinking will emerge; these gaps, which are conventionally referred to as the 'limitations' of the study, are as important as the data you collect and the analyses you make. If you are methodical about them, your study will include both the statements about what you are finding out and discussions of those gaps or limitations.

This emerging picture of findings and limitations together is what I am calling your *claims*. It is interesting that in writing about the research process, claims are generally called 'findings', which suggests both the momentum of searching for something and ultimately finding it. In other work (Freeman, 1998), I have referred to 'understandings', meaning that they are the product of a question pursued and understood in a particular way within a particular setting. In the term 'understanding', I meant to emphasize the changeable nature of what you find out in the research process: that understandings can be (and are) replaced by new understandings through life and experience. But most importantly, both the words 'findings' and 'understandings' are participles – they end in *-ing* – meaning that they represent processes that capture (in grammatical terms) the open-ended and ongoing nature of the research process.

In doing a research study, there can be a lot of pressure to reach conclusions and to feel that you are getting somewhere with answering your research question. But research questions are rarely, if ever, answered; they may be satisfied for the time-being, and the challenge and skill is not to be seduced by either the finiteness of conclusive findings on the one hand or the constant open-endedness that you could do more on the other. So when you are methodical about time you try to come to closure on your study, while remaining open to alternative explanations of the data and extensions of the inquiry through new and related research questions. This is why research conclusions are called 'claims'. The term captures both the balance and the interaction between being definite about what you find and being open-ended about what you can still speculate on.

Most research studies, large or small, produce claims; generally these come about when the researcher decides that the study is over. In part the decision comes when the research plan has run its course, and the methodicalness of data collecting and analysis have been completed according to the plan. At that point, you make claims about your data in terms of your

research questions. The claims you make are thus anchored in the way you have carried out your work; the information you have determined to be data, the ways in which you have collected and analyzed that data, and the argument you have fashioned out of these analyses. As I said in a previous section, you can be challenged on any of these steps. If you are, you will have the discipline of your methods to turn to in two senses. You will have worked in and with the setting in a disciplined way, which I have called being *methodical about the place*, and you will have managed the research process also in a disciplined way, which I called being *methodical about time*.

### **Warrants: Why should you be believed?**

So you can be challenged on how you carried out your research work, and you can be challenged in your study according to whether your claims make sense to the broader community or public. It may seem strange to think about an abstraction like a piece of research as 'belonging' to a particular community or group, but as actual or virtual groups of people, communities do give value to work by recognizing and accepting research as worthwhile. That recognition sits on a continuum (see Lincoln & Guba, 2007). At one extreme, as a researcher you can certainly decide that your work will stand independently; you can make it what you want. These choices will have an impact, however. The more idiosyncratic the work is, the less open to scrutiny of method, the less likely it will be considered to be research by broader groups. At the other end, you can choose to position your work through the research questions you ask, the methods you use to collect and analyze data, and the claims you make. Together, these choices can make public both the discipline of the research process, and they can reinforce the choices made by the particular research community that accepts that work as valid and useful. 'Warrant' is the term used as shorthand for these community-reinforcing choices.

A warrant is a standard that creates a justifiable reason for acting; these actions can be internal, like thinking or believing something, or external, like doing something (Maxwell, 2002). In the context of research, the justification hinges on agreement by a particular research community. It is a sort of *quid pro quo* in which this group of like-minded individuals agrees to accept the claims so long as the claims meet the standard the community warrants. This acceptance is based on the internal action of accepting the claims, so that the community agrees to believe those claims are valid (see Moss, Girard, & Haniford, 2006). It is a sort of circular logic, the inverse of Groucho Marx's aphorism about not wanting to belong to any club that would have him as a member. By being a member of a research community – arriving at claims through the disciplined process of using a particular research method or methods – you follow its warrants; thus you belong to that club.

These warrants characterize a piece of research as ‘qualitative’ or ‘quantitative’ in very broad terms. In research that is called ‘qualitative’, the warrants tend to refer to meaning and sense making; they respond to the general question, ‘Do these claims seem to fairly capture the ways in which participants think about and make sense of the phenomenon or situation?’ In other words, do the claims make sense to the insiders in the community? Going back to the opening scenario, in response to the question, ‘Was there dancing?’, how would the people at the party have answered? In ‘quantitative’ research, the warrants are more often numerically based; they use standards drawn from statistics, like frequency and probability, to establish the validity of claims. In either instance, though, these warrants accomplish the same basic purpose: they answer the question, ‘Why should I accept or believe in these claims?’ and ‘On what basis should I accept them as true?’

In this way, warrants are the foundation of the research enterprise. Warrants distinguish research studies from conjecture or opinion because they make explicit the basis of belief for the claim. In this way, warrants provide a way for a research claim to be wrong or potentially falsifiable over time through further research. If the claim can be shown to be poorly prepared (data badly selected or analyzed) or incomplete, this is done on the basis of the warrant. Just as legal cases are tried, and proved or disproved based on evidence interpreted according to a specific law or laws, in a similar way research studies are valued as complete, useful, and ultimately true, based on data in response to research questions that are interpreted according to the warrants of that research community.

### **Final thoughts: How could you be wrong?**

In this chapter, I have outlined the general research cycle in terms of the interrelated notions of research questions, settings, claims, and warrants. These four elements are, in a sense, the building blocks of any research study. What makes a study ‘qualitative’ then, is not the use of a particular research method, or even posing particular types of research questions. Rather, it is the relationships among these key elements, namely:

- That your research questions will be (re)shaped by the setting in which you study them;
- That information surfaces as data in an iterative fashion in this setting in relation to the research questions you are asking;
- That your analyses will likely be more cyclical than linear – often raising more questions than they answer;
- That your claims, or findings, will be anchored in warrants of the meaningfulness of your findings to those in the setting, usually over those of numerical characteristics.

But these are very general characteristics. As you get into doing any research project, qualitative or otherwise, you will find that the work is more about the orientation you take toward what fascinates you than it is about the specific methods you use to study and investigate that fascination. One of the most succinct expressions of this comes in the writing of psychologist Eleanor Duckworth. At the end of her essay titled, *On the virtues of not knowing*, she sets up a figure-ground interrelation between what we know and what we do not yet know, saying that the ultimate strength of knowing something lies in recognizing the boundaries of that knowledge. She concludes with the statement, 'What you do about what you don't know is, in the final analysis, what determines what you will ultimately know' (Duckworth, 1996, p. 68).

This interconnection between known and unknown, like the relationship of ying and yang or the way the positive and negative images of the geese simultaneously define each other in the etchings of artist M. K. Escher, is the foundation of any good research. Understanding what you do not yet know, and how it grows out of what you have found out, is what propels inquiry and indeed the whole research process itself.

## Summary

- Designing a research project starts with making some assumptions and tentative suppositions about an area of inquiry; these are expressed in your research question(s).
- The research cycle, which is essentially an idealized version of the research process, moves from articulating a question, to identifying data that respond to the question, to collecting and analyzing that data, to making claims based on the analyses.
- The research setting is not just the site of the study in a passive sense; it can be highly influential in shaping the research process.
- A research method generally includes a set of commonly applied techniques; thus a single technique can be used differently in various research methods.
- Research claims combine findings and limitations; claims depend on warrants.
- A warrant is a community-reinforcing choice that creates a justifiable reason for acting, whether internally (like thinking or believing something) or externally (like doing something).
- Warrants are fundamental to the research enterprise because they distinguish its claims from conjecture or opinion.
- 'Qualitative' research is not defined by a particular set of research methods or techniques. It focuses on questions that examine the relationships between information about people's actions and phenomena, and the settings in which they do these things.

## Key words

claim  
data  
inquiry  
quantitative research methods  
research cycle  
research process  
research question  
setting  
warrant

## Post-reading questions

1. What makes a research study 'qualitative'? What would you say are the essential features?
2. Given that you will bring your own preconceptions to any research study you do, where are these suppositions likely to show up in the research process? Is the fact that they will be part of the process good or bad? What can you do about them?
3. Describe the different ways in which any research is disciplined and must be methodical.
4. How would you explain the relationship between a claim and a warrant?
5. What, for you, is the most important idea you find in this chapter? Why? How might it help shape what you would do as a new researcher?

## Tasks

1. Choose a setting, perhaps a place that you spend a lot of time and/or an activity that you do regularly, and make a list of three to five things that you wonder about in that setting. These things can be concrete or open-ended, but they should not be things that you believe you know the answer to.
2. For each statement, make a list of the kinds of information that might provide insight and satisfy what you wonder about.
3. Choose one of the types of information from your list and think about how you might gather that information in the setting. Create your own version of the chart in Table 2.1.

## Further reading

Freeman, D. (1998). *Doing teacher-research: From inquiry to understanding*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

An entrée into how teachers can undertake research in their own classrooms, while working within the disciplines of inquiry and the demands of classroom teaching.

Huberman, A. M., & Miles, M. B. (Eds.). (2002). *The qualitative researcher's companion: Classic and contemporary readings*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

An excellent collection of useful papers on a variety of topics selected and introduced by two senior researchers whose work has shaped the field of qualitative research methods; excellent to have all these sources accessible and in one place.

Lampert, M. (2003). *Teaching problems and the problems of teaching*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lampert addresses teaching as the management of complex problems of practice, which serve as the source of many inquiries in the classroom. Although the examples are framed around elementary mathematics teaching, this is a very useful and thoughtful book.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

One of the classic texts on qualitative research as 'grounded' inquiry.

Maxwell, J. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

A very readable introduction to qualitative research methods and design; good general text to start with. It balances Lincoln and Guba just above, which is denser.

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## **Part II**

# **Qualitative Research Approaches**

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# 3

## Narrative Inquiry

Garold Murray

### Pre-reading questions

1. Have you heard any good stories lately? What is it about stories that we find so appealing?
2. How pervasive is our use of stories or narratives? Brainstorm – with a partner or on your own – examples of narratives or stories in our daily lives (for example, news stories). What useful purposes do they serve in our daily lives?
3. How can the retelling of an event from someone's life experience provide us with insight into the world in which we or they live?
4. What role do stories play in our understanding of who we are? In other words, how do stories help us establish our identities?

### Illustrative example

*A commonly held belief is that in order to become proficient in a language, learners need to live in a target language community, and thereby immerse themselves in that language and culture. However, I began to question this notion when I was doing my dissertation research in Canada in the mid-1990s (Murray, 1998). As I interacted with my fellow graduate students, a number of whom were from China and Japan, it became clear to me that many people learn to communicate in English without leaving their home country. I wanted to conduct a study that explored the learning experiences of people like these. How do learners develop the proficiency necessary to communicate in a foreign language while living in their first language community? Several years later when I relocated to Japan, I had the opportunity to carry out this project. I decided I would ask people to tell me the story of how they learned English. This decision led me into the area of narrative inquiry.*

*I began to collect the language learning stories of Japanese who had acquired intermediate to advanced levels of English language proficiency without having studied or lived outside of Japan. To document their stories, I interviewed them*

*and configured stories from the interview transcripts. I then sent the stories to the learners for their input. As I analyzed the stories, I often contacted the learners by e-mail or telephone in order to clarify points, ask additional questions and share my interpretations. Through these stories I have been able to explore the role of learner autonomy, pop culture, communities of practice, and identity in language learning. In addition to this, insights I have gained into the learners' use of learning strategies have been helpful in my work to develop self-access language learning programs.*

## Overview

Everybody loves a good story. From bedtime stories to malicious gossip, stories are a pervasive aspect of our daily lives. We use stories to entertain, to inform, and to instruct. In fact, much of our cultural heritage is transmitted to us through some genre of narrative – fairy tales, fables, parables, and novels, to name a few. Not only do stories play an important role in our lives but some scholars would argue that our lives are stories – stories about ourselves that we tell ourselves and other people. In the last century, social scientists working in a number of disciplines decided that one way to understand human experience would be to document these stories and study them. As a result, **narrative inquiry** has emerged as a form of research. In this chapter, I briefly explain what narrative inquiry is, outline how I go about doing it, and discuss some of the issues surrounding this form of inquiry.

## What is narrative inquiry?

At the heart of narrative inquiry is a story or a collection of stories. Doing narrative inquiry involves eliciting and documenting these narratives. Unfortunately, researchers often do not move beyond telling a story (Josselson & Lieblich, 1999), which has led critics to ask, 'How can a story be research?' A story can be research when it is interpreted in view of the literature of a field, and this process yields implications for practice, future research or theory building.

Narrative inquiry is based on the premise that we understand or make sense of our lives through narrative (Bruner, 1990). Increasingly, psychologists and theorists are taking the view that not only do we 'make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story' but that 'we achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of narrative configuration' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 150). Bruner (1990) argues that it is through telling ourselves stories about ourselves and others that we come to understand who we are, who they are and what the relationship is between us. Our life story is constantly changing as new events unfold. Our sense of self is, therefore, ever-changing,

reliant upon our 'configuring of personal events into a historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 150). Narrative inquiry is conducive to documenting the changing conditions of lives and the impact these new conditions can have over time on all aspects of an individual's life, including language learning.

Narrative inquiry brings together a multitude of genres (see Cole & Knowles, 2001, for an annotated list). In the field of applied linguistics, researchers have made use of a variety of genres, including case studies, life histories, learner autobiographies, diary studies, biographies, and memoirs. Within this range of methodological possibilities, I position myself as a life history researcher. While the distinction between narrative and life history research is not always obvious, Cole and Knowles (2001, p. 20) see '**life history research** as taking narrative one step further; that is, life history research goes beyond the individual or the personal and places narrative accounts and interpretations within a broader context'. They go on to note that among others these contexts include 'cultural, political, familial, educational, and religious spheres'. I have been collecting the language learning stories of Japanese in order to understand how they can become proficient in English while living in their first language environment. While life history research often focuses on one aspect of a person's life, a language learning story is not easily separated from the individual's life story and its sociocultural contexts. In order to make sense of the stories I collect, I need to have knowledge of the social, cultural, and even historical contexts in which they are situated. For these reasons, I have come to see myself as a life history researcher.

### **Why use narrative inquiry in applied linguistics research?**

There are many benefits to this type of research. Perhaps the most important is the variety of insights narrative and more specifically life history research can provide educators. Among other topics, narrative inquiry has been used in the field of applied linguistics to explore motivation (Norton Pierce, 1995; Schumann, 1997; Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2004); identity (Benson, Chik, & Lam, 2003; Kanno, 2003; Murphey, Jin, & Li-Chi, 2004; Norton, 2000); multilingualism (Block, 2006; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004); learning strategies (Oxford & Green, 1996); language loss (Kouritzin, 1999), communities of practice (Murray, 2008); and autonomy and self-directed learning (Murray, 2003; Murray & Kojima, 2007; see Benson, 2004, for a review of the literature on narrative inquiry in language learning). In addition to information which can inform theory building and policy-making, narrative inquiry can yield practical pedagogical information.

Life history research can also help us to understand learners' beliefs and assumptions about learning. As language educators working with learners from other cultures, we all know how important it is to be aware of cultural

differences and their expression in the learning environment. One way of gaining a better understanding of learners from other cultures is to explore their stories for underlying assumptions (Bell, 2002). According to Bell, this makes narrative research, and more specifically life history research, a valuable approach for language educators.

In addition to providing insight into learners' assumptions and beliefs about how they learn, life history research also enables researchers to access the identity of the participants (Clandinin & Huber, 2002; Kouritzin, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Pavlenko, 2002). Insights into learners' identities can be instrumental in understanding a number of language learning issues, including motivation, affect, learning styles, and choice of learning strategies. In a classroom setting, language learning histories can provide valuable information about who the learners are and how they learn. Whether in the classroom or the larger community one of the benefits of life history research is that it allows individual voices to be heard (Benson, 2004), especially those of the disenfranchised – people who have historically been marginalized in the research process, such as disabled people, gays and lesbians, and racial and ethnic minorities. These voices from the margins have the potential to change theory by prompting us to take a critical look at the existing canon or standard (Kouritzin, 2000).

*Narrative inquiry or in my case life history research lends itself to documenting process and changes that occur over time. Therefore, it seemed to be an appropriate approach for investigating how Japanese learners go about learning a language in their own country – a process that involves incremental changes over a period of time. In my study of Japanese learners, the use of narrative inquiry has provided me with insights that I have been able to apply in my work with other learners. For example, what I learned about their use of pop culture materials has been helpful in my work developing self-access centers and programs.*

## **Collecting your data**

Just as there are many approaches to narrative inquiry, there are many ways to do life history research (Cole & Knowles, 2001). So much of what we do as narrative researchers is determined by the context of the research situation. In this chapter, I will tell you how I have been collecting the language learning stories of Japanese who have learned to speak English while living in Japan. My intention is not to provide a prescriptive how-to formula for doing life history research, but rather to explain the steps I have followed in carrying out one particular study.

### **Step 1: Develop your research design**

There are three steps to this: determining the research question (what I will study), developing a rationale (why I will study it), and selecting an

appropriate approach (how I will study it). Written accounts of research projects, like most stories, never begin at the beginning. A research project has its birth months or even years before in the mind of the researcher. It starts with an intuition, a curious thought, or possibly a critical look at an assumption. As I mentioned earlier, the research project I refer to in this chapter began to be formulated years before while I was a student studying with foreign students who had learned to speak English in their home countries. The research question which formed in my mind was ‘How do people learn to speak English in their own country without having lived or studied abroad?’ My rationale for the project was to explore the commonly held belief that the best way to learn a foreign language is to immerse yourself in the target language and culture. It seemed to me the best way to go about investigating this question was to ask people who had never lived or studied outside of their own linguistic and cultural milieu how they had learned to speak English. In other words, I would ask them to tell me their language learning story.

### **Step 2: Prepare interview questions**

Once I had settled on a research approach, my next step was to prepare a list of interview questions, or an interview guide (see Chapter 9, Interviews). While ideally I wanted to sit down and say, ‘Please tell me how you learned English’, experience has taught me that people often need questions to prime and prompt them. Also, a list of questions is helpful because participants are uncertain about what information they should include. A review of the literature on motivation, learning strategies, and learner autonomy yielded a list of questions divided into the categories of personal background, motivation/goals, language level, strategies, and resources. These questions pertained to why it was important for the learners to learn the language, how they went about it, what resources they used, and how successful they were in achieving their goal.

### **Step 3: Conduct a pilot study**

A **pilot study** provides an opportunity for researchers to test and refine their methods and procedures for data collection and analysis. My pilot study consisted of two language learning stories that I collected, one from a friend and the other from a student. The pilot study enabled me to revise my interview questions and alerted me to a problem with my interviewing technique – I had a tendency to talk too much. While the best interviews are often a conversation, it is truly an art to know when to speak and when not to speak. One life history researcher advises, ‘The life history researcher must remember to follow rather than lead, to listen rather than query, to hold back rather than probe’ (Kouritzin, 2000, p. 29). While a pilot study cannot provide us with all the experience we need to be expert researchers, it can save a lot of time and energy

by alerting us to potential problems that can be worked out before we begin the actual study.

#### **Step 4: Select the participants**

While the literature on qualitative research refers to 'selecting the participants', in my case it is more apt to say that I 'found' people willing to participate in the study. The main criteria for 'the selection of participants' was that they had to have learned to speak English in Japan, and none could have lived or studied in an English-speaking country. At first I asked people I knew, mostly from the university milieu, but once I started the study I found participants by word of mouth. Later, in order to have as much diversity of experience as possible, I tried to have participants of different sexes, ages, and occupations. While life history researchers are not looking to generalize their findings, diversity of experience is important because it increases the range of input the researcher can draw on in order to make conclusions or derive insights (for discussion of diversity, see Benson, 2004).

#### **Step 5: Establish a rapport with the participant**

When I found a potential participant, the first step was to become acquainted with this person. Life history researchers stress the importance of the researcher and the researched establishing a relationship based on mutual respect and trust (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Coles & Knowles, 2001; Kouritzin, 2000; Measor & Sikes, 1992). Establishing a comfortable rapport with participants is crucial if we expect them to talk about their lives. Therefore, I arranged a first meeting in a safe, neutral space that was conducive to conversation, like a coffee shop. During this conversation I explained the purpose of the study, the role of the participant, how much time would be required, what I would do to protect the participant's privacy, and what I intended to do with the results of the study. A discussion of the participant's role in the interpretation process was usually left for a later conversation. At the end of this conversation, I asked participants if they were interested in taking part in the study, and we made arrangements for the next meeting, which could possibly include the first recorded interview.

#### **Step 6: Conduct and transcribe the interviews**

After we had the first interview, I transcribed it. In this chapter, for the purpose of clarity, I have tried to separate the data collection and analysis procedures, yet in reality they overlap. The analysis process actually starts with the transcription of the first interview (Riessman, 2008). Hearing the participant's words over and over again as I wrote them verbatim gave me the opportunity to understand what was being said and to reflect on it. While transcription was a time-consuming, tedious task, it had the advantage of immersing me in the participant's words. At the end of the process,

I felt I knew what the participant had said, which statements I should have probed more in the interview but did not, and which areas I needed to explore in the second interview. Once the transcription was complete, I checked it against the recording and read it several times in order to generate questions for a second interview. I then met the participant for the second interview, which I subsequently transcribed.

*Unlike many studies where there is a clearly delineated data collection period, I have been collecting learners' stories over the past six years. Actually, the data collection process is ongoing – only yesterday I met two women with advanced levels of proficiency whose stories I would like to document. In life history research, collecting these stories means getting to know the participants and staying in touch with them over a period of several months or even years. While I only have two formal interviews with the participants, there are also informal interviews or 'conversations' which provide data for the study. For example, the conversations I have with the participants before the first formal interview are written up as **field notes**, notes commenting on the context of the meeting as well as what was said. After the two tape-recorded interviews have been completed, I continue to contact the participants by telephone or e-mail throughout the lengthy transcription and data analysis period in order to clarify information or to ask additional questions.*

## Organizing and interpreting your data

While there are books that explore the subject of narrative analysis (for example, Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 1993, 2008), generally the literature does not provide much detail on how to perform this task. One reason for this is that space limitations in professional journals only permit a brief summary of analysis procedures. Because it is a creative endeavor which tends to be circular rather than linear, 'It is also the hardest process to describe: the standard technique is to read and make notes, leave and ponder, reread without the notes, make new notes, match notes up, ponder, reread, and so on' (Plummer, 1983, as cited in Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 99). While Plummer's description may resonate with experienced narrative researchers, those new to this approach could benefit from a more detailed account. Therefore, in what follows I outline my data analysis procedures, which draw on **categorical content analysis** (Lieblich et al., 1998) and the **constant comparative method** (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Both of these methods of analysis involve comparing, contrasting, and classifying the data.

### Step 1: Code the interview transcripts

In order to compare, contrast, and classify the data, it first has to be coded. **Coding** means to label or give names to passages within the text which express a particular idea or refer to an event. Coding breaks the data up

into manageable pieces and gives these pieces names, or tags, which enables the researcher to manipulate them; for example, to group them together, regroup them, and classify them. When I coded the interviews, I read through the transcripts isolating individual utterances or segments of responses that contained a unit of meaning. I attached a code word to these units of text. Initially, the code words came from the literature. For example, when I coded an interview for the first time, if a segment suggested the learner's motivation, I would attach the code word 'motivation' to the text. Sometimes the code word I chose corresponded to an aspect of the participant's experience. A number of the participants in my study were members of the English-Speaking Society – or English club – in their high school or university. Segments of text in which they referred to this experience I would code as 'ESS'. I made a list of the codes for quick reference. One advantage of having a code list was that it helped avoid having different codes for the same phenomenon.

As a starting point for the coding process, I found it helpful to have some sort of epistemological framework or list of guiding concepts. However, there is a danger in adhering rigidly to a framework: it can cause a researcher to overlook segments of text that do not fit the schemata. It is important to pay attention to these pieces of data because they often point to insights somewhere down the road. When I came across a segment of data which contained an idea or event that did not correspond to my framework, I coded it with a word that summarized or captured the essence of the segment, and then I copied and pasted the segment into a special file. As I encountered other pieces that did not fit, I compared them to the previous misfits in order to see if there was a connection and possible pattern forming. If I decided that a segment of text referred to the same phenomenon, I gave it the same code and grouped it with other segments with the same code by copying and pasting it into the appropriate file. This process of comparing pieces of data in the search for relationships and patterns is the basis of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the categorical content analysis approach (Lieblich et al., 1998).

### **Step 2: Look for connections between codes and start to group codes into categories**

As the study progressed and I had interviews from more than one participant, I added any new codes from these interviews to the original list. Here too I continued to compare and contrast pieces of data. In other words, I compared new units of text to those that were already coded to see if the same code might apply. I started writing comments and ideas about the already coded segments, as well. As a part of this process, new codes emerged, and existing codes merged to eventually become categories. A **category** results from related codes – along with the segments of data they represent – being grouped together. Whenever I assigned a new code or a new

category emerged, I had to go back and check all the interviews comparing the coded data to the new code or category in order to look for additional instances of the concept or phenomenon.

### **Step 3: Configure the participant's story from the interview data**

After the second interview had been coded, I configured the participant's story from the interview data. The interviews usually had a loose narrative structure with a chronological order. Following this pattern, I could piece the stories together using the narrator's original words. However, starts-and-stops, back channeling (saying 'okay', or repeating back what the participant says), and repetition had to be eliminated. I had to add 'bits' for the sake of cohesion. For example, at times the narrator was responding to a question; therefore, for the response to make sense in story-form I had to integrate the idea from the question into the text. Also, the narrator may have talked about an event more than once during the course of an interview. When that happened, I thought it best to incorporate all the related information into one episode. In addition to this, I found that when the participants read their stories and detected mistakes of grammar or syntax in the written text, they were not happy about 'going public' with them, so I started to routinely correct grammar and other errors. Once the story was constructed, I revised it. During the revision process, I concentrated on the story itself, its structure and meaning. If something was not clear, or if something did not seem to be quite right, I went back to the interview transcripts, and when necessary contacted the participant.

### **Step 4: Send the story to the participants for their comments**

After I revised the story, I sent it to the participants along with an explanation of what I had done. Reminding the participants that the stories were theirs, I asked them to make any changes they thought necessary. Because this process could easily have resulted in a misrepresentation of the participant's situation, member checks were very important. Moreover, for this same reason, consultation with the participants continued into the analysis phase, when I would share my interpretations with them and ask for their feedback. At times it was possible to initiate a dialogue enabling the participants to play a key role in the interpretation process.

### **Step 5: Carry out a 'cross-story' analysis**

When I had more than one story, I began a 'cross-story' analysis. I did this by first coding the stories using the categories as code words. I isolated segments of text that corresponded to the newly formed categories and labeled them accordingly. For example, if in the interviews a participant had been talking about using repetition and memorization, these segments of text would have been coded with the words 'repetition' and 'memorization'. These two codes referred to strategies the learners used and eventually were

grouped with others to form the category of 'learning strategies', so I took the story and coded the segments in which the participant spoke of 'repetition' and 'memorization' as belonging to the category 'learning strategies'. Using a word processing program, I then grouped segments of text from different stories into the appropriate category. To do this, I listed the categories in a file, copied the segments of text from the different stories, and pasted them under the appropriate category. Sometimes the segments fit under more than one category. Seeing how one segment of text could be placed under more than one category drew attention to the possible links between the various categories. Even at this point nothing was fixed, the codes and categories were fluid. It was this fluidity which traced the connections, outlined the patterns, and drew my awareness to eventual themes. When I noticed possible relationships, I made notes. As I wrote, ideas came to mind which I was careful to attach as annotations to the segments. During this phase I often turned again to the literature in the hope of finding information that would help me clarify my thinking and better understand what I was seeing in the data. It was through this analytical process that themes were developed.

#### **Step 6: Note themes as they emerge from the stories**

In many ways the emergence of themes is a highly creative process, making it difficult to explain in concrete terms. However, I hope the example provided in Table 3.1 will provide greater clarity. In the first column of the table, there are three examples of isolated segments of text from three learners' stories, Hiro, Taka, and Masumi. In the second column, entitled 'Codes', I have written the words that I used to code these segments when they were in the interviews. In the first segment, Hiro was talking about his experiences in junior high school, so I could easily have used the code 'junior high experiences'. The point I am making here is that codes are arbitrarily assigned; therefore, the researcher must be closely guided by the research question. Since my question focused on 'how' with less emphasis on 'when', my codes reflect this, and these segments are labeled according to actual learning activities. When two segments shared a similar code word, I compared them to see what relationship might exist between them. What was the relationship between recitation, memorization, and translation? For these learners, they were learning strategies. Therefore, learning strategies became a category under which I could group these segments of text.

Much later, after I had collected Masumi's story, I could compare and contrast her experience with that of Hiro and Taka. This meant that I could re-examine the first two segments of text in light of the third. In Masumi's anecdote, there was the suggestion of memorization, just as there was of repetition in Hiro's anecdote. However, in Masumi's anecdote she talked about an additional element, the ability to spontaneously use the elements of language she had learned. Going back to the literature I found the term

Table 3.1 From text to themes

<i>Isolated segments of text</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Emerging category</i>	<i>Theme</i>
Also, for every class we were supposed to remember the text which we had covered in the previous class. On the way back home or on my way to school, I had to remember and try to recite those sentences. I think this was very important because it helped me to understand the basic or key sentences. I think memorizing not just conversational phrases but the whole text is a must for junior high students trying to learn a foreign or second language. (Hiro)	Recitation Memorization	Learning Strategies	Pre-communicative Activities	The role of pre-communicative activities in the language learning experiences of people studying the target language in their first language environment.
I started a correspondence course. I just forced myself to translate every single sentence, using just grammar books and a dictionary. To translate things is not about memorization though. You don't memorize the translation. You look words up in the dictionary. You could learn the actual meaning. (Taka)	Translation Memorization			[Through a review of the literature and writing, this theme evolved into...]
I made some cassette tapes with dialogues...I listened to them and shadowed them in my mind while doing other things at home. Such repetition was very effective. I felt like I was absorbing those dialogues in my mind fully. I often used the expressions which I learned in this way almost spontaneously when they were needed. That made me even surprised sometimes. (Masumi)	Shadowing Repetition Memorization Automization			The role of pre-communicative activities in developing automaticity.

'automatization', acquiring the ability to produce the language automatically (for a discussion of automatization, see DeKeyser, 2001), and subsequently added this term as a code. As I compared the three segments and made notes, I began to see a common denominator. There was the suggestion that the participants were using these strategies to develop automaticity in the target language. I then discussed my interpretation with Masumi who referred me to something she had read about 'pre-communicative activities' (Littlewood, 1981). It then became clear to me that the activities or strategies referred to in these three segments were in reality pre-communicative activities, and so the new category emerged, 'pre-communicative activities'. This led me to consider the role of pre-communicative activities in the language learning experiences of these learners. This consideration became a theme (see Table 3.1). The next step was to write about this theme (Murray & Kojima, 2007). Through writing and reflection on the literature, this theme evolved into 'the role of pre-communicative activities in developing automaticity'.

*In my life history project, writing has played a key role in the analysis process. However, in most journal articles there is no space for even a condensed version of the learners' stories. Usually I can only cite quotations from the stories and sometimes they are taken directly from the interviews. So why, I ask, do I bother to configure stories from the learner's words? One reason is because it is in the writing that the analysis happens (Ouellette, 2003; Richardson, 1994; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). In order to configure stories from the interviews, I have to put myself in the interviewee's place and try to understand what it is they actually want to say. Writing the stories enables me to immerse myself in the participant's experience (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Later, when I prepare to report on my study at a conference or in a journal article, I usually ask a question of the data which becomes the theme of the paper. For example, for one presentation (Murray, 2005), I asked the question, 'What is the role of pop culture in the learning experiences of these learners and how might this inform pedagogical practice?' As I think about questions like this and put my thoughts on paper to read, re-consider, and re-write, the writing works as an analysis tool.*

## **Presenting your findings**

In my view, a serious difficulty in reporting on narrative inquiry involves the mode of presentation. In my study, I prepared stories based on the interviews, but how do I present these to the public? Ironically, because narrative inquiry goes beyond 'simply telling stories to an analytical examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates... narrative inquiry is therefore rarely found in the form of a narrative' (Bell, 2002, p. 208). Conference venues and journal articles do not permit telling these stories in their entirety with their richness of detail and experience.

Therefore, how do researchers do justice to the storied lives of the participants in their studies? In addition to the human interest, there is an important research issue at stake here. If the stories are told with sufficient fullness, or what Geertz (1973) has described as ‘thick description’, they can be analyzed by other researchers from different theoretical perspectives. Having researchers with different theoretical backgrounds analyze the same stories increases the potential for insights into the learners’ experiences. This is clearly an important benefit of narrative inquiry.

Unfortunately, in my work I have not been able to find a totally satisfactory solution to this dilemma. When I prepare a conference presentation or a journal article, I follow a fairly standard format for reporting on qualitative research. I begin with a brief introduction in which I attempt to attract readers’ attention. This leads to a statement of the research question or the theme of my paper, followed by an outline of the points I will be addressing. I then provide a rationale for addressing this topic; in other words, I explain why I am interested in this topic and why I think others should be. I relate this explanation to the research literature in my field of study, which leads to a discussion of the prior research and theoretical concepts that inform the current project. I am also careful to provide definitions for the terms and concepts that I will be using. This is followed by a very brief description of the study, the data collection procedures, and analysis process. After I have provided the background information, I introduce the participants. If I am referring to several stories in my report, I often present information on the participants in table form – name (pseudonym), age, occupation, level of language proficiency, and one piece of information germane to the study (for example, their reason for learning English). Wherever possible, it is good to incorporate tables or diagrams – visual aids to help readers or listeners clearly see and understand the information and ideas you are presenting. Sometimes in a paper I am only examining one to three stories; in this case I usually include greatly abridged versions of the participants’ stories. (For a conference presentation, these can be provided on a handout.) I then address the theme of my talk or paper, illustrating the points I want to make with quotations or anecdotes from the participants’ stories. I have learned with experience that one quotation which aptly supports my point is often-times better than three – in other words, it is best not to get carried away by providing too many examples. After I have discussed the theme of the paper in terms of the participants’ experiences, I consider the implications for other learners and teachers. I also make suggestions for future research and conclude with a statement of what I would like the readers or audience to remember from my paper or presentation.

To see some published narrative studies you could look at Murray & Kojima (2007), which provides an example of the reporting format in which an abridged version of the participant’s story is included. A second publication (Murray, 2008), investigating the learners’ participation in communities of

practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) – small social groups within their community that the learners joined in order to improve their English proficiency – exemplifies the format in which three abridged stories are presented.

*I have had proposals for papers reporting on this research project accepted at international conferences in five different countries. At one conference presentation I was accompanied by one of the participants, Masumi, who told her own story. In a variation on my data collection methods, Masumi wrote her own story and, through a prolonged dialogue via e-mail, played a key role in the interpretation process. As we corresponded, her role transformed from participant to co-researcher and co-author. The resulting paper (Murray & Kojima, 2007) is mentioned above.*

### **Improving the quality of narrative inquiry**

While there are many benefits to narrative inquiry, it also has its limitations. Narrative inquiry in all its various forms is very time consuming and labor intensive. For these reasons, it is difficult to have a large number of participants. If researchers are looking for results which can be generalized, this is not the form of research they should be pursuing. While narrative researchers do not engage in the quest for universals, the research does reveal commonalities of experience which can be shared with learners in other contexts. Writing from the perspective of life history research, Doyle (1997) argues that we need to use the results to provide provisional models rather than direct prescriptions. Clearly, the more stories we have to compare, the broader our understanding will be of how individuals learn languages and the better our capacity will be to apply this understanding in developing provisional models. However, we must be mindful that narrative researchers are seeking 'knowledge which empowers rather than making possible prediction and control' (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997).

Another limitation, according to critics, is the trustworthiness of the information the participants provide (for a discussion, see Doyle, 1997; Kouritzin, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Life history researchers readily admit that the truth the participants tell can be different from the historical truth (Measor & Sikes, 1992). Life stories change over time (Bruner, 1996; Linde, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988). The passing of time coupled with additional life experiences – for example, becoming a parent, being promoted to a position of responsibility at work, having a foreign exchange student stay in our home – can change people's perspective on past events. In addition to this, our multiple identities (a woman can be a mother, wife, daughter, teacher, learner, and so on) can provide us with varying perspectives and even conflicting narratives (Raggatt, 2006). Furthermore, because of any number of social constraints, participants may not feel free to tell the whole

truth. Considering this issue, Lieblich et al. (1998, p. 8) say, 'We do not take narratives at face value, as complete and accurate representations of reality. We believe that stories are usually constructed around a core of facts or life events, yet allow a wide periphery for the freedom of individuality and creativity in selection, addition to, emphasis on, and interpretation of these "remembered facts."' As Kouritzin (2000) points out, more important than the events themselves are the participants' understandings of these events and the impact these events have on their lives. Moreover, because of the kinds of questions educational research explores and the fact that participants volunteer, Kouritzin believes there is little reason for participants to misrepresent their situation.

Another caveat is the role the researcher plays in the construction of the story. From the outset, 'as researchers we are participants in creation of the data' (Tierney, 2000, p. 543). It is the researcher who creates the context for the story telling by deciding what will be investigated, formulating a research question, and selecting the participants thereby establishing whose story will be told. Furthermore, in any interview situation the questions asked determine the information elicited. When the researcher is leading the interview by asking the questions, there is the danger that the interview will center on what the researcher feels is important rather than on what has been important in the participant's life. Later, when writing the story, the researcher can highlight aspects of the participant's experience, diminish others, or choose not to include certain details or vignettes. Researchers must be sensitive to the co-constructed nature of these stories if they are to avoid misrepresenting the participants' experiences. Some of the potential for misrepresentation can be eliminated by the researcher developing a close rapport with the participants and employing member checking. By doing so, 'the researcher is better able to capture the nuances and meanings of each participant's life from the participant's point of view' (Janesick, 2000, p. 384). The researcher, however, must bear in mind the ethical issues at play here. Not only must life history researchers gain the participant's trust but they must show themselves worthy of this trust, especially in the reporting phase.

*Developing a close rapport with the participants does not necessarily mean working in close physical proximity. When I was working with Masumi to elicit and analyze her story we never met once, but instead corresponded by e-mail. At one point I invited her to co-author a paper with me. At the time, I did not know that my suggestion would help forge a bond of trust that determined the nature and quality of the story Masumi was prepared to tell. In her research journal, Masumi, who had taught herself English and German and was starting to learn Portuguese, wrote that she hoped to someday write a book about her language learning experiences and was not sure to what extent she should reveal her experiences to me so I could report on them in my research. She went on to*

*say that my offer to co-author a paper was a turning point in our relationship. We were no longer the researcher and the researched but co-researchers. As a result, she felt she could trust me and no longer hesitated to tell me her story. Had we not been able to establish this level of trust, the quality, depth, and wholeness of the story Masumi provided could have been adversely affected.*

## **Final thoughts**

Just as languages are learned and not taught, so the art of doing narrative inquiry is learned. There are many things to know about narrative inquiry and the specific genre you choose. While I have discussed a number of them here, many of these things you will have to learn by doing. However, before you begin, I would like to emphasize three things. First of all, narrative inquiry is about letting the participant's voice be heard. Therefore, you will need to listen intently. This applies to the interpretation phase of your study as much as it does to the data collection stage. Second, never lose sight of whose story is being told (Pavlenko, 2002). Third, when you ask someone to tell you their story, you are asking them to open up their personal lives to a stranger and to scrutiny. In order to get the whole story you have to gain this person's trust. Honoring that trust places a heavy responsibility on the shoulders of the researcher at all phases of the research process. Nonetheless, documenting the story of a life lived can be a highly rewarding personal experience which has the potential to provide valuable insights into your area of inquiry.

## **Summary**

- Narrative inquiry involves eliciting and documenting stories of individuals' life experiences.
- These stories are then interpreted in terms of the literature of a field – a process which yields implications for practice, future research, or theory building.
- Narrative inquiry is based on the premise that we understand or make sense of our lives through narrative.
- Narrative inquiry is a generative term which encompasses a number of genres including case studies, diary studies, life histories, autobiographies, memoirs, and so on.
- Narrative inquiry has been used in the field of language education to investigate motivation, identity, multilingualism, learning strategies, language loss, learner autonomy, and a variety of other topics.
- Interviews are the principal method of data collection; however, participants can write their own stories. Sometimes researchers analyze previously published autobiographies, memoirs, and other genres.
- The stories are often analyzed using thematic analysis procedures such as categorical content analysis, common in qualitative research.

- Narrative inquiry is rarely reported in narrative form; rather, in journal articles and conference presentations, researchers discuss the themes emerging from the stories and support their comments by quoting the participants.

## **Key words**

categorical content analysis  
category  
coding  
constant comparison method  
field notes  
life history research  
narrative inquiry  
pilot study

## **Post-Reading Questions**

1. What are some advantages of doing a narrative inquiry?
2. What is the difference between narrative inquiry and life history research?
3. What are some of the problems or issues a novice researcher should be aware of before undertaking a life history research project?
4. How important is it to carry out a pilot study? Why is this so?
5. What are two principal methods of eliciting stories (collecting data)?
6. What is the advantage of transcribing the interviews yourself?

## **Tasks**

1. Write the story of your experience learning a second or foreign language. Perhaps you could begin your story by telling your readers about the first time you were aware of hearing the language. Then you might continue by exploring the following questions that are relevant to your experience:  
What were your first impressions of the language? What were your classes like in junior high school and high school? Did you like the language then? Why or why not? Do you have any interesting or funny stories to tell that relate to your language learning? What things have you done to learn the language outside of the classroom? How motivated have you been to learn the language? How successful have you been? At this point in your language learning which skills do you need to improve the most? What do you need to do to improve these skills? How do you know? What plans do you have to continue learning the language?

- Exchange your story with a classmate. In what ways are your stories similar or different? What themes can you identify in each other's story?
2. Find a journal article that reports on a narrative inquiry project. Answer these questions: What is the research question? What is the context? Who are the participants? What data collection methods and procedures are used? What does the researcher say about how the data was analyzed? What format was used to present the findings (were there actual narratives or were there quotations in the participants' own words)? What conclusions did the researcher draw? What is your opinion of the presentation format (Did you want more information? Did you want it to be more like a story?)? Discuss your article with a classmate. Working as a pair, compare and contrast the data collection and analysis methods and the style of presentation of your articles. What conclusions can you draw?
  3. Develop a proposal for a life history research project. Address the following questions: What will you study (research question)? Why is this an important question or issue (rationale)? Who will the participants be and why have you identified these people? What procedures will you follow to elicit and document their stories? How will you analyze the stories? What will you do with the findings – how will you report on your project?

## Further reading

Benson, P., & Nunan, D. (Eds.). (2004). *Learners' stories: Difference and diversity in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

A collection of articles based on learners' stories that explore a range of issues in language education such as motivation, age, culture, and identity.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

The authors trace some of the historical influences that have shaped narrative inquiry and provide specific methodological suggestions for conducting narrative research.

Cole, A. L., & Knowles, J. G. (2001). *Lives in context: The art of life history research*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.

The authors explain what life history research is in comparison to other narrative inquiry genres, illustrate how they go about carrying out life history research, and discuss relevant epistemological issues.

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

In addition to providing guidance for interviewing and transcription, this book discusses in detail thematic, structural, dialogic/performance, and visual narrative analysis methods.

Webster, L., & Mertova, P. (2007). *Using narrative inquiry as a research method: An introduction to using critical event narrative analysis in research on learning and teaching*. London: Routledge.

This introduction to narrative inquiry describes its development as a research approach, demonstrates its value as a research tool, and outlines an approach to data analysis.

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# 4

## Case Study

Michael Hood

### Pre-reading questions

1. How would you define a 'case study'?
2. Why do you think that case studies are so widely used in education?
3. What kinds of issues in applied linguistics might be explored using case studies?
4. What data collection methods do you think a qualitative case study researcher might use?
5. What can we learn from studying individual cases? From comparing cases?

### Illustrative example

*Terry is an instructor in an Intensive English Program (IEP) attached to a North American university. One goal of the IEP is to help international students improve their English proficiency – first to meet university entrance requirements, and then to go on and complete their degrees. Although Terry has helped many students enter the university, he is dismayed that some of them subsequently fail to graduate, and eventually withdraw. To understand the difficulties faced by his students once they leave the IEP and to see if there is any way IEP teachers could better prepare them for their university studies, Terry decides to conduct longitudinal case studies of two of his IEP students (one graduate and one undergraduate) currently working toward their degrees at the university. Over the next two years, through interviews with participants and their professors, observation of their university classes, analysis of participants' learning diaries, and examination of course materials and university policies, Terry attempts to pinpoint the specific difficulties and their sources and understand how his participants cope (or fail to cope) with problems. Gradually, themes begin to emerge from the data. First, Terry finds that institutional support for L2 students (students from non-English speaking countries) varies greatly from the undergraduate to the graduate level and*

*from department to department. Furthermore, sensitivity to L2 students' needs differ significantly from instructor to instructor. Second, Terry discovers that social networks may be key sources of support and encouragement for L2 students. Terry uses these results in two ways. First, he reports his findings to university administrators along with specific suggestions for improving support for L2 students at all levels of the university. Second, he designs a new course for the IEP to teach coping strategies to students who will go on to pursue degrees at the university. He writes up his results and submits an article to a professional journal.*

## Overview

A quick look at the tables of contents of the leading journals in the fields of linguistics and language teaching (like *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Learning*, *Applied Linguistics*) reveals a steady trend in recent years toward the use of case study in applied linguistics and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) research. This trend is a response to the recognition that the questions researchers seek to answer are complex, and that traditional quantitative methods are not always up to the task. This trend also reflects the emergence of a new kind of researcher – one who seeks to understand the world not only in terms of the generalities produced by quantitative methods, but also through close and extended analysis of the particular. The qualitative researcher is interested in rich, real, and uniquely human material. Case study is popular with qualitative researchers precisely because it provides a framework for analysis of such material.

Prior to the 1960s, quantitative designs dominated educational research. Large surveys were the tool of choice, and experiments were considered the most rigorously 'scientific' and thus the most reliable method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). However, case studies had been appearing in other disciplines for decades. Anthropologists devised case studies to look at society and culture at the beginning of the twentieth century (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), relying on data from interviews, observations, and public and private documents as they turned their attention toward particular instances of action in everyday life. Historical case studies looked at institutions, programs, and practices as they evolved over time, drawing upon primary sources such as documents, records, and firsthand accounts (Merriam, 1988). Psychological case studies focused on the individual to understand human behavior, while sociological case studies focused on demographics, social relations, and the roles played by individuals in society. In the 1960s, educational researchers began drawing upon techniques developed in these fields and applying them to educational issues (Merriam, 1988). As a result, even today case studies in education are marked by an application of methods originating in other disciplines to the concerns of educational researchers.

In SLA, early exemplars of case study include Schumann's (1978) study of Alberto, a Puerto Rican man learning English as a second language in the US, Schmidt's (1983) study of Wes, a Japanese man learning English in Hawaii, and Schmidt and Frota's (1986) first-person diary study of Schmidt himself as a learner of Portuguese. These early case studies not only shaped the investigators' theoretical orientations but also 'helped shape the entire field in quite substantial ways' (van Lier, 2005, p. 198). Other case studies that illustrate case study methodology in SLA include Hakuta's (1976) study of a Japanese child learning English as a second language and Norton's (2000) study of identity and language learning among immigrant women in Canada.

This chapter will focus on qualitative case studies, although case studies can also be quantitative or draw upon both qualitative and quantitative approaches in a mixed methods study. Qualitative case studies are preferred by researchers who believe that 'reality' is multiple, contradictory, and changing, and that the researcher inevitably becomes part of the study. They are also better suited for exploring issues rich in context (for example, socialization of L2 students into a discourse community or the role of identity in language learning). In the field of applied linguistics, Duff (2008) notes that case studies 'are now usually associated with interpretive qualitative research' (p. 35).

### What is a case (study)?

A simple definition of **case study** is elusive. Perhaps the main reason for this is that case study is often looked at as a research *method*, rather than a research *focus*. However, as Stake (1995) notes, 'Case study is not a methodological choice, but an object to be studied' (p. 14), and the case study researcher can draw upon a variety of research tools to study that object. What, then, is a 'case'? For the leading case study theorists, the principle of **boundedness** is central. Merriam (1988) suggests that a case is a 'bounded system' (p. 9), or a defined individual or entity (like a student, program, school, institution) that the researcher wishes to explore. However, Stake (1995) points out that what forms the boundaries and contexts is not immediately apparent. Yin (2003) agrees, defining a case study as 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, *especially* when the boundaries and contexts are not clearly evident' [emphasis mine] (p. 13). So, if a case is a bounded system, and if the boundaries of that system are unclear, it is the researcher's task to identify and explore those boundaries. But how is a researcher to determine these boundaries? To answer this question, let's first look at what comprises a bounded system.

A bounded system is composed of an individual (or institution) and a site, including the contextual features that inform the relationship between the

two. Using the illustrative example as a model, Terry is interested in the cases of two L2 students; they are the individuals in his case studies. The scope of the site depends upon Terry's interest in these individuals. If his interest is limited to classroom interaction, the site will be the classroom and all of the contextual features (like professors, classmates, course content, and assignments) that intersect with those individuals. If Terry is interested in support for L2 students at the university level, he will expand the site to include the campus as a whole, where he will consider the role of tutoring, advising, counseling, and institutional policies in relation to the individuals. If Terry suspects that social networks play a significant role in L2 students' success, he will expand the boundaries even further, to include off campus activities, living arrangements, and free-time pursuits. As you can see, ultimately the boundaries of the case are firmly linked to the researcher's interests.

Once the boundaries have been determined (and it is important to note that boundaries may move as the study proceeds, as researchers' awareness of the individual and the context deepens or his interest changes), it is time to decide which tools to draw upon to examine the social phenomena of interest within those boundaries. The highly individualized and contextualized nature of the problems tackled by qualitative case study researchers makes it impossible to be prescriptive, but this is not necessarily a drawback. Quantitative researchers tend to apply prescribed methods and tools to a research question, believing that such standardization guarantees the validity of their results. The qualitative researcher, however, looks first to the object of study and determines which methods and types of data are most likely to shed light upon it. Therefore, the qualitative case study researcher carries a rather large and diverse toolbox.

To sum up, for a qualitative researcher a 'case' can be seen as a bounded system comprised of an individual, institution, or entity and the site and context in which social action takes place, the boundaries of which may not be clear and are determined by the scope of the researcher's interests. The 'study' of a case requires the researcher to select methods and tools appropriate to the case. Some researchers, such as Merriam (1988), also include the 'end product' (p. 34) of the process of analyzing the case (that is, the written report of the analysis and the findings) in her definition of 'study'. This is because the actual writing up of the case study report can be considered part of the analytical process – the researcher makes sense of the case herself while simultaneously making sense of it for the audience.

With this understanding of case study, we can proceed to a discussion of specific types of qualitative case study. The boundaries between types of case studies are not sharp, and a case study may fit under more than one type. Stake (1995), one of the leading case study researchers, defines three broad types of case study. First, he describes the **intrinsic case study**, in which interest lies purely in one particular case itself. There is no attempt at all to generalize from the case being studied, compare it to other cases,

or claim that it illustrates a problem common to other, similar cases. The emphasis is on gaining a deep understanding of the case itself. For example, if Terry were not interested in improving support and instruction for his L2 students but rather simply wished to understand the lived experience of his two participants, he would be conducting an intrinsic case study.

The second type defined by Stake is the **instrumental case study**, in which a case is studied with the goal of illuminating a particular issue, problem, or theory. This is closer to the type Terry is planning to conduct, as he wants to understand why some students succeed while others fail, with the aim of improving support and instruction. The intrinsic case study requires a primarily descriptive approach, with an eye toward the particularity of the case at hand; the instrumental case study is more likely to require interpretation and evaluation, in addition to description. Instrumental case studies may be used to develop conceptual categories or illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions (Merriam, 1988). In other words, case studies – both intrinsic and instrumental – may lay the groundwork for future studies by providing basic information about the realms in which little research has been conducted.

The third type of case study identified by Stake is the **collective** or **multiple case study**. Again, one issue, problem, or theory is focused upon, but the researcher chooses to study more than one case to shed light on a particular issue if doing so ‘will lead to a better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases’ (Stake, 2005, p. 446). Terry’s study is a multiple case study, as he studies one issue and compares different students (i.e., undergraduate and graduate) to see how their experiences are similar or different, for the benefit of a broader group of cases – future undergraduate and graduate students in the IEP. Terry could also have compared students going into different departments or faculties, or students who come from different language backgrounds. Stake cites Jonathan Kozol’s (1991) *Savage Inequalities* as an example of a collective case study. Kozol investigated the experiences of students in different school systems to gain a better understanding of the role of disparate school funding on the quality of education. Norton (2000) looked at the experiences of several immigrant women in Canada to understand the role of identity in language acquisition. Both Kozol and Norton look at multiple cases as a means of theorizing about a broader category of cases.

Another leading case study researcher, Yin (2003), offers a different categorization of case studies, by describing them according to purpose: exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory. An **exploratory case study** is used when little is known about the case being examined, as in Terry’s case. It is often used to lay the groundwork for subsequent, possibly more quantitative studies by defining questions and hypotheses. For example, based upon his findings, Terry could later write and then administer a questionnaire to a larger sample of L2 students. A **descriptive case study** aims only

to present a detailed, contextualized picture of a particular phenomenon. This is similar to Stake's definition of an intrinsic case study, where the emphasis is simply on gaining a deep understanding of the case itself. Finally, the purpose of an **explanatory case study** is to explain cause-effect relationships related to a phenomenon (Duff, 2008). An explanatory case study is frequently a long-term, or **longitudinal case study**, and may draw upon quantitative research approaches as well.

Regardless of the type of case study one chooses to conduct, cases are selected because they possess certain characteristics – psychological, linguistic, institutional, sociocultural, or biological – that the researcher wishes to explore (Duff, 2008). Terry has chosen two cases for their linguistic (second language), institutional (university), and sociocultural (members of the academic community) characteristics.

There is often confusion between what a case study is and what an ethnography is. Duff (2008) notes that whereas case study 'focuses on the behaviors or attributes of individual learners or other individuals/entities, [ethnography] aims to understand and interpret the behaviors, values, and structures of collectivities or social groups with particular reference to the *cultural* basis for these behaviors or values' (p. 34). It is this broader cultural orientation of ethnography that distinguishes it from the narrower concerns of case study.

Chapelle and Duff (2003) define the case study specifically for language teacher-researchers in the following terms, 'In TESOL, a case typically refers to a person, either a learner or a teacher, or an entity, such as a school, a university, or a classroom... In language policy research, the case may be a country' (p. 164). Furthermore, they stress an important feature of qualitative case study that makes it a good choice for language teacher-researchers, 'Acknowledging multiple realities in qualitative case studies, as is now commonly done, involves discerning the various perspectives of the researcher, the case/participant, and others, which may or may not converge' (Chapelle & Duff, 2003, p. 164, citing Yin, 2003). Qualitative research is built upon the understanding that there is no absolute 'truth' and that two observers looking at the same thing may interpret it very differently (Phillips, 1990). In all qualitative research (and in educational case studies in particular, where the researcher may be a teacher who plays an active on-site role), the researcher is not a disinterested, objective observer. Rather, the researcher is enmeshed in the study, meeting and talking with the person or people who comprise the case. In the instance of a teacher studying his own students, the interaction is profound, and the teacher is an integral part of the study. The researcher is an intervening factor, but not one to be controlled for, as in quantitative studies. Rather, his role must be made transparent, his biases confronted, his agenda and beliefs explicitly stated, and the precise nature of his interaction with the study's participants meticulously described. To attempt to control for the teacher-researcher's influence would be to decontextualize the case,

and this is against the very nature of qualitative case study as defined above. Thus qualitative case study is well suited to research in education in general and applied linguistics in particular.

### **Why use (qualitative) case study in applied linguistics?**

The researcher does not so much *choose* to conduct a case study; rather, the decision to conduct a qualitative case study is suggested by a careful consideration of the object of the study, what the researcher wishes to learn about it, and what he hopes to do with the findings. We will look at these questions in turn.

- *What is the object of study?* As defined above, the object of study is a bounded system, comprised of an individual or entity and the context in which social action occurs. A case may be narrowly or broadly bounded, depending upon the scope of the researcher's interests. Still, it is obvious that some objects of study of interest to educational researchers are not bounded systems. To use Stake's (2005) example, 'A doctor may be a case. But *his or her doctoring* probably lacks the specificity, the boundedness, to be called a case... [T]he prime referent in case study is the case, not the methods by which the case operates' (p. 444). And certain questions, though interesting, might fall outside of the scope of the case. The correlation between TOEFL scores and graduation rates, for example, is an issue best studied by surveying a large sample and conducting statistical analysis. At the same time, every bounded system does not necessarily make for a good case study. It depends on how you answer the next question.
- *What does the researcher wish to learn about the case?* Certain questions or interests will require the kind of in-depth, long-term study that qualitative case study affords. Other questions will not. For example, let's say you have a bounded system – a school district comprised of 1,000 students in an urban, professional, multicultural, and multilingual area. If you are interested in the efficacy of a particular language teaching technique, you might conduct a quantitative case study, complete with experimental and control groups, treatments, and statistical analysis of the results as measured by test scores. However, if you wanted to understand how the language is used at home and in public spaces in this community and how this affects L1 and L2 language use in the classroom, you will likely have to go into homes and schools and spend an extended period of time there. Home life is not the sort of reality easily or accurately measured by a questionnaire using a five-point scale; the actual and precise effects of home language use on classroom language use is not going to be revealed simply by test scores. For this question, you need to go into the community and the

classroom, observe, talk to people, get a sense of the lived experience of these students, and deepen your understanding of that experience through extended contact.

- *What does the researcher hope to achieve with the findings?* The results of qualitative case studies do not ‘prove’ anything in the positivist sense. They do not establish laws that will be confirmed or discarded through further study (though further study may deepen or change our understanding of a particular case). Rather, the results of case study are typically used in one of two ways. First, they may be used to improve conditions or practice for that particular case. For example, the lessons drawn from language use in homes and in classrooms in the school district described above may suggest ways of improving the learning experiences of students throughout that particular school district. Second, the results may be extended to other cases where the particulars are similar (that is, other urban school districts in professional, multicultural, and multilingual neighborhoods). This is the same sense in which lawyers and judges discuss case law – the applicability of a past court decision to a case under consideration is determined by the factual and legal similarities between the two. There is a third possibility, when an intrinsic case study is conducted, that the researcher has no aim other than to understand a particular case very deeply. In any particular case, the qualitative case study researcher will have limited goals for the use of his findings, compared to the quantitative researcher who aims for generalizability and theory testing.

Implicit in all of these questions is the researchers’ belief system. The ontological and epistemological stances that inform qualitative research paradigms are discussed in the first chapter. Here it is important to note that the researcher may choose to conduct a case study if he believes there is value in the particular, and that objectivity, neutrality, and control of intervening factors is not always possible and not always desired.

*Terry has decided to conduct qualitative case studies for several reasons. First, he has determined that the students he wishes to study and the contexts in which they act comprise a bounded system. Second, the rich data, deep analysis, and long-term contact with the cases afforded by case study is better suited to his research interests (the experiences of L2 students in the university community and the possible role of social networks in their success) than quantitative methods. Third, his aim is not to generalize or test a hypothesis, but rather to improve support and training for other L2 students on the same campus. Recognizing the multi-perspectival nature of case studies and his own **positionality** within this case, he sets out to recruit two participants – one graduate and one undergraduate – whom he will observe closely and interview repeatedly over the next two years.*

## Collecting your data

As discussed earlier, it is difficult to be prescriptive when discussing case studies. And as Yin (2003) notes, there is no ‘comprehensive catalog’ (p. 19) of case study designs. When it comes to data collection, you will have to decide the types of data that are most relevant for your research and then choose appropriate methods for collecting them. Terry has already taken two preliminary steps that might apply to all case study projects: he has identified a problem and framed it in terms of a very general research question, and he has selected two cases to study to shed light on the problem.

Research questions for intrinsic, exploratory, and descriptive case studies are usually broadly stated; however, instrumental case study research questions, which might challenge a hypothesis by examining a disconfirming case, are often more narrowly defined. Though research questions may be more specific than ‘What’s going on here?’, they are typically built upon ‘how’ and ‘why’ type questions. Terry frames his research questions as:

- Why do some former IEP students struggle to earn their degrees?
- How are these students coping with difficulty?
- How does the university help or hinder international students’ progress?
- How do social networks help or hinder their progress?

Unlike quantitative designs, research questions in qualitative designs in general, and case studies in particular, are likely to evolve over the course of the study, as the researcher gains a deeper intimacy with the participants and the context. Case study research questions should be reexamined and revised throughout the study. For example, Terry’s question, ‘How does the university help or hinder international students’ progress?’, might be revised, as he becomes more aware of the problems faced by his participants, to something like, ‘How do particular professors view and fulfill their role as educators of international students, and how do the participants respond to their professors?’

In a purely intrinsic case study, a case may be selected before research questions are formulated – questions might grow out of the researcher’s initial encounter with a case. Whether you select a case before or after formulating research questions, defining your case is not as simple as it may at first seem. Remember that the boundaries of a case and its context may not be fully understood at the outset. In fact, a major goal of case studies is to define those very boundaries. Identifying the case to be studied, in response to your initial exposure and curiosity, is relatively easy. But you will spend a lot of time and energy defining both case and context, and the interplay between the two, throughout your study. An effective way to start, once you have identified the case you wish to study, is to brainstorm all you know,

suspect, and hope to discover about the case and the context. The picture that emerges will appear, initially, to be painted with broad strokes. As your project proceeds, take careful notes as your understanding changes; continually add definition and detail to that picture.

Terry knows that reading and writing academic texts is particularly difficult for his participants. He knows that some former IEP students do indeed overcome this difficulty. He suspects that some professors are more nurturing and patient than others; he suspects that some participants may be reluctant (due to culture or personality) to ask for help. He also suspects that some participants form social support networks that may affect their academic success. What is the nature of these networks? Are they comprised primarily of other international students from their home country? Are they a mix of native and nonnative speakers of English? How do these networks function to facilitate (or hinder) academic success for particular students? Terry only vaguely apprehends these issues and questions at the outset. As he proceeds in his research, some may become clearer; others may prove to be irrelevant. His interactions with his participants, observations, and ongoing review of previously published literature related to his interests may continually refine his focus. He must keep an open mind and be willing to change focus as his understanding evolves.

Qualitative case studies are often longitudinal, which means that researchers typically collect a large amount of data over a long period of time. The length of time required will depend on the research interest. Terry has noticed that most of his L2 students who fail to earn their degrees give up within the first two years of entering their degree fields. Therefore, he plans to gather data throughout this crucial period. He may extend the study depending on how things progress.

Once you have selected a case and have defined general research questions, begin gathering data related to those questions. Terry has begun brainstorming a list of the types of data he believes will help him answer those questions:

- *Interviews with participants:* These could be conducted regularly, perhaps once a month, in Terry's office or via email. Early in the study, the interviews might be more open-ended, giving his participants an opportunity to raise the issues that they feel are most relevant. Later, they may become more structured as Terry identifies specific issues that he wishes to understand more deeply.
- *Interviews with participants' professors:* They may be able to shed light on issues that the participants themselves do not understand while adding an additional perspective on their experiences. Participants' permission is vital.
- *Classroom observation:* Terry would like to sit in on some of his participants' classes to better understand how they interact with professors

and classmates during class. Participants' and professors' permission is essential.

- *Participant learning diaries*: Terry arranges for each participant to regularly write a learning diary, so he can keep track of and understand in their own words each participant's perspective on significant learning experiences and events.
- *Copies of participants' course syllabi, reading lists, assignment sheets, and policy statements*: These documents may help Terry better understand the demands being placed on his participants and help him frame questions about how they cope with particular demands.
- *Rules, policies, and resources for international students at the departmental and university level*: Such data will shed light on how his participants are viewed and supported at the institutional level. He may at some point seek to interview policy makers to better understand the rationale behind particular policies.

This is a preliminary list, to be altered as the study proceeds. Nevertheless, it provides Terry with a starting point for data collection.

The skilled investigator draws upon a variety of sources of data. In fact, the case study researcher should not feel that any form or source of data, even statistical, is off limits if it contributes to his understanding of the case. As one anonymous scholar put it, 'everything is data'. Moreover, it is desirable to have several sources of and types of data from which to draw inferences at the data analysis stage as a means of triangulating the findings (Merriam, 1997). Box 4.1 provides a brief overview of the most common data sources for case studies; other chapters in this book elaborate on how to use them.

As should be clear by now, you are likely to amass a huge amount of data and spend vast amounts of time accumulating it. Ensuring that the data is of high quality and easily accessed requires certain skills. Yin (2003) identifies certain characteristics of the effective case investigator (see Box 4.2).

Two ideas in this list stand out. First, the case study researcher must be a careful observer, with ears, eyes, and mind open. Second, Yin refers twice to the problem of preconceptions, highlighting the deep concern that all case study investigators should have about themselves as data elicitation instruments. As the investigator, you are the filter, deciding what data is meaningful in relation to the focus of your study and what is not. You always run the risk of tainting the data with your own preconceived notions. At the data collection stage, your own biases might determine which questions you choose to ask – and which questions you choose not to ask. It is impossible to be completely free of bias, but you must try to be honest about it, explain it, consider how it might affect your work, and account for it throughout the study. Some researchers start by writing **memos** at the design stage in which they explore sources of bias, their own attitudes, and possible blind spots in

#### Box 4.1 Sources of data

*Interviews:* Perhaps the most commonly used method of data elicitation in qualitative educational research, interviews may yield a wealth of valuable data. Interviews may be structured, semi-structured, or open, depending on the scope of inquiry and the role of individual interviewees. The interviewer can record the interview or take notes.

*Direct observation:* The investigator plays the role of observer, watching participants as they act in certain settings. Though positionality is still an issue, the investigator is not an active participant in the setting. He sits quietly on the fringe, taking notes. For many case study researchers, direct observation is a key source of data; countless hours may be spent at the research site, documenting in minute detail his or her observations.

*Participant observation:* Unlike direct observation, **participant observation** means that the investigator himself plays a key role in the setting. For example, a researcher conducting a case study of an academic conference may attend sessions to gather data. He plays two roles – that of a researcher observing and that of a participant attending a session. Participant observation is, in a way, more difficult than direct observation because attention may be divided as the researcher-participant tries to balance two roles.

*Diaries:* Participants' records of their own experiences, and their interpretations of those experiences, are particularly relevant to the case study researcher. They have the advantage of being recorded in proximity to the events themselves and may suggest follow up questions for interviews.

*Documents:* Wherever phenomena occur in the post-literate world, there is usually a paper trail. What can be gleaned from this record? Documents include letters, pamphlets, agendas, minutes, reports, other studies, and newspaper articles.

*Archival records:* Organizations keep records, and these records may shed light on various aspects of the case in question. These records may include client records, organizational charts, budgets, maps, census data, and even personal notes. All of these records may help you understand a case at a particular point in time.

*Artifacts:* Physical artifacts such as pictures, artwork, tools, or even technology may reveal much about the places where they were seen as necessary or desirable.

(adapted from Yin, 2003, p. 86)

their own perceptions. These memos in turn may be referred to throughout the study – when framing preliminary research questions, deciding what kinds of data to collect, collecting data, and analyzing it. Keeping a research diary may help the researcher maintain a critical perspective on the data (Richards, 2003). Reviewing that data with participants is also a popular guard against bias.

*Terry collects a diverse set of data. Interviews with participants and, with their permission, their instructors are a primary source. Direct observation is conducted in the classroom and at other sites on campus, such as the writing*

**Box 4.2 Skills required of case study researchers**

A case study researcher...

1. should be able to *ask good questions* – and interpret the answers.
2. should *be a good 'listener'* and not be trapped by his or her own ideologies or preconceptions.
3. should *be adaptive and flexible*, so that newly encountered situations can be seen as opportunities, not threats.
4. must *have a firm grasp of the issues being studied*, whether this is a theoretical or policy orientation, even if in an exploratory mode. Such a grasp reduces the relevant events and information to be sought to manageable proportions.
5. should *be unbiased by preconceived notions*, including those derived from theory. Thus, a person should be sensitive and responsive to contradictory evidence.

(Yin, 2003, p. 59)

*center and the international student affairs office. Terry also asks participants to maintain a diary in which they document their experiences and feelings. In addition, he collects the preliminary and final drafts of written assignments, course syllabi and policy statements, and reading lists. To understand institutional policy, he collects documentation of the university's stated policies toward L2 students.*

## Organizing and interpreting your data

In qualitative studies, data collection and analysis occur simultaneously and continuously, so it is somewhat misleading to mark them off as separate steps. At the outset, when data collection begins, case study designs can be quite tentative. With analysis from the very first interview, diary entry, or observation, research questions begin to take more solid form, the scope and direction of the inquiry emerges, and the boundaries of the case become clearer. It is also a cumulative process, whereby continual and recursive analysis of data adds shape and texture to the project and suggests direction for its own continuation. As you collect and analyze data, your task is to identify categories, themes, and patterns that help explain the phenomena under consideration and the contexts in which they occur. Terry begins immediately after his first interview by transcribing the data, **coding** them, and looking for patterns or recurring themes that might be significant.

There is also a very practical reason for conducting data analysis from the outset. In any longitudinal study, a mountain of data will accumulate. It would be easy to lose track of it, forgetting what each piece of data means and how it fits in the overall project. 'Coding' is key to keeping track of the data you have collected. Coding is the simple but vital process of developing

a textual or alphanumeric reference system and assigning a unique marker to each piece of data as it is collected.

Coding functions on both the macro and micro level to help keep track of information. On the macro level, all field notes, summaries, interviews, documents, and so on must be coded, dated, and stored so that you can quickly access them later. On the micro level, coding serves an analytical function. Throughout the data collection process, categories, themes, and patterns that explain the phenomena under consideration begin to take shape. These will form the basis of the inferences you draw throughout the study and support the claims you make at the conclusion. You will justify those inferences by explaining in your report exactly how those patterns emerged. In other words, you must present to your reader the evidence that supports your inferences. How will you find it in that mountain of data? If you have coded all instances that illustrate particular themes as your study has proceeded, you need only extract those particular instances, pull them together, and explain their meaning when you write your report.

Let's look at Terry's coding challenge in more detail. He has two participants, and he must keep data relating to each one separate and easy to access. He might start by using the pseudonyms he has chosen for the participants as the broadest code level: Nicole and Dexter. Imagine Terry has two large boxes, one labeled 'Nicole' and one labeled 'Dexter'. Within each box, there are a number of coded compartments, each containing even smaller compartments. After Terry completes his first round of interviews, he transcribes the two interviews and labels them 'NII' (for 'Nicole Interview 1') and 'DII' (for 'Dexter Interview 1'). He can then place the transcripts in the appropriate compartment within the appropriate box (or computer file). Next, perhaps Terry conducts a classroom observation with each of his participants. He labels his notes: 'NCO1', 'DCO1', with 'CO1' representing the first classroom observation. Create your own coding system, keeping it as simple as possible yet thorough enough to account for all of your data.

The keys to keeping data organized and readily accessible are logic and consistency. Code everything, maintain a legend of the codes you have assigned, and store data in an organized manner. Now that Terry has started collecting data and coding them for storage and retrieval, he can work on the micro level, reviewing the data and coding it for the patterns that he sees emerging. For example, in his review of transcript NII, he notices that his participant refers to specific action that a classmate took to help Nicole overcome a problem. Terry might code this piece of data CM+ to indicate an instance of a classmate taking positive action in support of the participant. Similarly, if the participant refers to a specific action taken by a classmate that made him feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in the class, Terry might code this instance CM-. Some researchers choose to begin with a starting list of codes, anticipating or looking for particular themes; others prefer to allow the codes to emerge from the data as the analysis proceeds.

Regardless of the approach you select, it is vitally important to be consistent and meticulous as you code the data. For more information on the different types of codes and coding processes, see Miles and Huberman (1994).

This brings us to data analysis. As Richards (2003) puts it, ‘analysis is neither a distinct stage nor a discrete process; it is something that is happening, in one form or another, throughout the whole research process. The relationship between data and analysis is therefore an intimate one...’ (p. 268). Analysis occurs throughout the data collection and coding process. As you collect, code, and review your data, certain patterns, themes, and issues begin to emerge. These emerging ideas may refocus your study, or it may send you in a new direction. It is impossible to be prescriptive, to offer a step-by-step data analysis procedure, because of the particularistic nature of case study – the case and the investigator’s questions about it will determine both the data to be collected and the means of analyzing it. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) state that ‘analysis is not about adhering to any one correct approach or set of right techniques; it is imaginative, artful, flexible, and reflexive. It should also be methodical, scholarly, and intellectually rigorous’ (p. 10). Though these adjectives are likely to appeal to the qualitative researcher, they do not show us how to conduct data analysis in any practical way. Richards (2003), while resisting the temptation to be prescriptive, lists some general procedures – what he calls ‘aspects’ (p. 272) – performed by the investigator (see Box 4.3).

These aspects cannot be called ‘steps’ because they are not done successively but rather continuously, recursively, even simultaneously. The investigator shifts among them as needed, exercising critical judgment and imagination to decide how best to proceed at any particular point of the case study. Through an artful process of iteration, an understanding of the case in its particularity and complexity takes shape.

Research findings take shape throughout this iterative process. Not only does the researcher shift among the steps listed above, he may also shift

*Box 4.3* Aspects of case study data analysis

1. *Collect* data.
2. *Think* about the data in relation to the research project.
3. *Categorize* (code) the data.
4. *Reflect* on the data (write notes, memos, comments, etc.).
5. *Organize* the data in different ways to find previously unseen patterns and connections.
6. *Connect* the emerging issues and themes to concepts and theories that may help explain them.
7. *Collect* more data, based on the directions suggested by previous analysis.

(adapted from Richards, 2003, p. 272)

among various sources of data relating to a single issue in an analytical process known as **triangulation**. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) define triangulation as ‘the comparison of data relating to the same phenomenon but deriving from different phases of the fieldwork, different points in the temporal cycles occurring in the setting, or...the accounts of different participants...differentially located in the setting’ (p. 230). This general definition is helpful, but different researchers may view its application and purposes differently. In a quantitative study, triangulation increases internal validity – interpretations are reinforced by accretion of confirming instances from a variety of data sources. Think of a photo-finish horserace. There will be more than one stopwatch and perhaps several cameras trained on the finish line from different angles. The data from all of these instruments will be gathered and compared in order to ensure that the correct horse is declared the winner. Thus no single data source carries the burden of accounting for the correctness of the interpretation; rather, the mutual confirmation of an interpretation from several sources strengthens the reliability of the claims.

Qualitative researchers conceive of triangulation somewhat differently. Remember that qualitative researchers do not generally seek objective, unitary, or verifiable *truths*. Rather, they focus on the *meanings* people attach to experience and the realities they construct to make sense of the world. Triangulation proceeding from this assumption is not confirmative; rather it is used to gain the broadest and deepest possible view of the issue from different perspectives. Different people will experience the same event differently, constructing different explanations, drawing different conclusions, learning different lessons and, importantly, telling different stories about it. Triangulation of data in this sense, rather than confirming particular interpretations, may reveal both the complexity of the issue and apparently contradictory ways of viewing it. For example, perhaps as Terry is pouring over his interview transcripts, he notices that both of his participants complain that they feel their professors ignore them in their classes. He turns to his notes from classroom observations and finds that, indeed, it seems instructors are calling on L1 students more frequently than the participants, even though they are raising their hands at about the same frequency. Terry may turn to class policy statements to see if there are specific guidelines for class participation. He interviews professors to get their perspective on the issue. In a qualitative study, the researcher’s own perspective may also be taken into account (Duff, 2008). Drawing on details from these data sources, Terry finds that the issue is more complex than he had imagined. He may find that his participants view the matter quite differently – perhaps one views it as a snub, while the other sees it as a lack of assertiveness on his own part. Perhaps one professor believes that his L2 students do not really want to speak up in class and are only raising their hands in an attempt to meet participation requirements; perhaps another professor fears being unable to

understand her L2 students' questions and intends to answer them outside of the classroom. In this case, multiple sources of data do not pinpoint a singular, easily agreed-upon explanation of the issue. Instead, the meanings attached to the issue of talking in class – inconsistent as they may be – are laid bare, revealing a complex reality that resists simplification.

Duff (2008) notes that 'methods themselves' (p. 143) can be triangulated (that is, by mixing qualitative and quantitative designs) to render a multifaceted understanding of the case – see Chapter 7, Mixed Methods. Regardless of how it is to be used, triangulation is considered at the outset of the study. Qualitative case study researchers first consider the issues (not necessarily research questions) that they wish to examine, then decide which sources of data are most likely to shed light upon them. Having a variety of sources for each major issue will ensure coverage that is both broad and deep.

*Having decided to collect data from a range of sources, Terry has set up the study so that his findings will likely be strengthened through triangulation. He begins his analysis immediately after the first round of interviews with his participants. Certain themes emerge from those interviews, so he codes them and keeps his eyes open for more data on the same themes. As the study progresses, he accumulates a well-organized, easily accessible mountain of data. The accumulating data continually reaffirm the inferences he begins to draw – first tentatively, then with more confidence with each confirmation.*

## Presenting your findings

While quantitative study reports are relatively brief and straightforward documents, conforming to well-defined patterns of organization (introduction, background, method, results, discussion, and conclusion), qualitative study reports are typically longer and less uniform. Case study designs are so diverse that it is difficult to be prescriptive when discussing form. Instead, content tends to dictate form. Nevertheless, some features seem to be common to most case study reports; they tend to assume a narrative style. A qualitative case study can be looked at as a good story, with characters (the participants), events, conflicts, resolutions, and conclusions. Furthermore, the narrative form allows the investigator to describe in fine detail the contexts in which the participants act, thus helping the reader of the report understand how the conclusions were drawn, adding to their **trustworthiness**. Narrative also allows for a more personal tone. This is important for two reasons. First, the researcher is part of the story, interacting with the participants and being present in the research settings in a way that makes his story inseparable from the case. First-person *I* is entirely appropriate. Second, participants in qualitative case studies are real people, not mere statistical abstractions. The researcher seeks to understand them in terms of their own human complexity and particularity – he wishes to depict them

as real people, deserving the reader's empathy. Nothing could be more personal than that.

Another reason why qualitative case study reports tend to be relatively long is that case study investigators must present the data in a way that allows the reader to see the inner workings of the phenomena under consideration. This is often accomplished by means of '**thick description**'. The term was coined by Ryle (1971) and expanded upon by Geertz (1973) as a way to describe the ethnographer's task of describing the 'web of significance' (Geertz, 1973, p. 5) that forms culture and the individual's relation to it. In short, to understand how and why the participants act and react in particular ways, the investigator must describe the context and the participants in minute detail. For example, what if one of Terry's participants is particularly silent and apparently detached from classroom activities? What is the significance of this silence? Is he indeed detached or alienated from the group, or is his silence a reflection of cultural differences or personality traits? If he is detached, is it because of a conflict with the professor or a classmate? Is it the result of dissatisfaction or frustration with the course? Whatever inference Terry draws, his audience will be skeptical. The only way to convince a reader of the validity of the inference is to make the web of significance explicit. Terry does this by describing the context as thoroughly as possible, putting the reader into that classroom with the participant, with the same understanding of the intervening factors that Terry has gleaned from a variety of sources. Using thick description, the researcher paints a picture for the readers, renders visible the previously unseen forces that animate and motivate phenomena, and gains the readers' assent to the conclusions.

Beyond these general features of case study reports, there is great variation in how they are organized and developed. Novice researchers are encouraged to turn to exemplars in the field to see how more experienced researchers have approached the task. Spack's (1997) study of a Japanese student struggling to succeed in an American university is one such exemplar, and particularly relevant to Terry's study. Morita's (2004) study of how nonnative English speaking students negotiated membership in academic communities at a Canadian university is another example. You will undoubtedly come across more examples in the course of a review of published literature. Novice researchers should read these with a keen eye as to how they are organized and developed.

With my running caveat that it is hard to be prescriptive, Stake's (1995, p. 123) outline of a case study report may provide a helpful model for you (see Box 4.4); reading a range of published case studies would also be instructive.

*Terry starts his report with vignettes to describe his two participants in detail, including their academic and cultural backgrounds, goals, and experiences up to the point at which the study begins. He also describes the IEP and the university.*

**Box 4.4** Case study presentation of findings – example outline

1. *Entry vignette*: to help the reader get a feel for the place and time of the case.
2. *Issue identification*: to introduce the researcher, how the case came to be an object of study and what he hopes to learn.
3. *Extensive narrative*: to present the most significant data to describe the case and its context as clearly as possible.
4. *Issue development*: not to generalize beyond the present case but to try to understand its complexity. Here understanding of other cases and other research may be drawn upon.
5. *Descriptive detail and triangulation*: to elaborate on and confirm the most relevant issues that have been raised in the report so far.
6. *Assertions*: to summarize what the researcher has come to understand about the case.
7. *Closing vignette*: to remind the reader that the report is the researcher's encounter with the case.

(adapted from Stake, 1995, p. 123)

*Next, he introduces himself, describes his role in the lives of his participants, why he has chosen to conduct this study, and what he hopes to achieve. The narrative proceeds with a detailed account of the participants' experiences in the university and their thoughts about those experiences. Terry focuses on a few of the most important issues that have taken shape during the study and provides support for them from a variety of sources. He summarizes his key findings and outlines their implications for changes in the curriculum at the IEP and improved support at the university. Finally, he leaves us with an update on his participants' progress.*

## Improving the quality of case study

The best thing an inexperienced researcher can do to ensure that his first adventure in case studies yields high-quality results is to read exemplars in the field. Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* (1983) is a must-read for anyone interested in both ethnography and case study. TESOL publishes an entire series of volumes of case studies on various subjects (such as academic writing programs and action research) that illustrate the current standards of reporting favored in the TESOL community. Every major journal that publishes case studies usually establishes specific guidelines for reporting case study findings; these should be followed meticulously. Also, TESOL has published case study guidelines on its website.

In my own experience reading case study reports, I have found the following to be the most common and troublesome shortcomings:

- *Insufficient self-reflexivity*: The case study investigator is deeply involved in the research, interacting with participants and the setting in ways that

are anathema to the quantitative investigator. In qualitative research, this adds depth to the study. It is only a problem if the researcher fails to account for the ways in which his presence and personal predispositions might affect the project. Self-reflection should start early. As the investigator begins to design the study, he should sit down and write a memo, stating as explicitly as possible his relation to the case and his feeling about that relationship. This memo should be revisited, revised, and expanded throughout the study in light of emerging issues and interpretations.

- *Insufficient methodological reflexivity*: Because of the uniqueness of each case study project, investigators must make choices about how to proceed – what methods to employ, what strategies to follow, what data to collect. These choices need to be justified. For example, if asking participants to maintain a diary of their experiences, the investigator must consider how he will analyze them and to what ends, and explain why diaries are an appropriate data source for those ends. What other data sources might supplement the diaries? How big a burden will maintaining a diary be for the busy participants? All of these questions need to be asked *before* deciding to use diaries as a source of data. Though all of this reasoning will not likely appear in the case report, the investigator should write a memo about the decision at the design stage. The reasonableness and appropriateness of any methodological decision must not be taken for granted.
- *Insufficient triangulation*: Though it is possible that a singular inference may be so simple and obvious that a single data source can support it adequately, most inferences are more tenuous than that. When an investigator fails to draw on various sources of support, the inference may fall flat, and the reader of the report left intrigued but unconvinced. The number of data sources required for triangulation is relative to the complexity of the inference. Generally, the more of a ‘stretch’ the inference appears to be, the more it needs to be backed up by multiple sources of data.
- *Insufficient description*: Remember that the investigator’s main task in writing up the report is to reveal to the reader the web of signification in which the phenomenon plays out. Too often, out of space or time considerations, descriptions are underdeveloped, and the reader does not have a sufficiently clear view of the case. Here is where the case study investigator practices his art – reproducing for the reader in minute detail the reality of the phenomenon under investigation. It requires good storytelling and an economical use of words. Awareness of audience and purpose are key to ensure that you provide just the right amount of detail to make your claims trustworthy.

*Terry guards against these common shortcomings by doing extensive memoing at all stages of the study and returning to them throughout the study. Furthermore, he subjects his report to strict scrutiny, first by having participants read it to see if there are gaps in the report and if his inferences conform*

*to their own experiences, then by having colleagues read a draft of the report to help identify shortcomings.*

## **Final thoughts**

In this brief chapter I have attempted to highlight the key features of case study research. Typically longitudinal and marked by thick description, the qualitative case study demands much of its practitioner – in terms of time, patience, flexibility, and introspection. But I believe the results, fundamentally different from those found in quantitative studies, are well worth the labor. Qualitative case studies can map previously unexplored territory, bring into focus previously unseen or misunderstood phenomena, and begin to answer *how* and *why* questions that quantitative studies cannot. For the dedicated researcher with an eye for the questions best suited to case study methodology, a challenging and satisfying journey awaits.

*Terry's report is well received. University administrators adopt some of his suggestions to improve support for L2 students once they leave the IEP and enter the university. With his ideas firmly grounded in his research, Terry is able to revise the IEP curriculum with confidence that his revisions will address real needs. Finally, Terry's report is accepted for publication in an international journal. The journal's editors accepted the report because it summarized a well-planned and executed study, was well-written, and because IEP instructors around the world are dealing with many of the same issues Terry addressed – his findings may help many others.*

## **Summary**

- Case studies are empirical investigations of contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts. They comprise a bounded system, including an individual or entity and the settings in which they act.
- Case studies may be characterized as intrinsic, instrumental, or multiple (Stake, 1995). Alternatively, they could be characterized as exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory (Yin, 2003).
- The decision to conduct a case study depends on the object to be studied, what the researcher wishes to learn about it, and what he hopes to do with the findings.
- There is no catalog of case study designs. The researcher must decide what types of data are most likely to shed light on the particular case and issues he wishes to investigate.
- Qualitative case studies are typically longitudinal, which means that the researcher will collect large amounts of data over a long period of time.

- Qualitative case study investigators should draw upon a range of data sources and triangulate the findings. Case study investigators are themselves data elicitation instruments; they must carefully consider their own biases and blind spots.
- Data collection and analysis are done simultaneously and recursively.
- The keys to keeping data organized and readily accessible are logic and consistency. Develop your own system; keep it simple yet thorough.
- Triangulation, the analysis of data from a variety of sources, may confirm inferences or render a multifaceted view of an issue.
- A case study report often takes a narrative form and personal tone as the investigator attempts to tell the stories of the participants and portray them as real people.
- The quality of case studies can be improved through extensive memoing at the design stage regarding positionality and methodological choices. Participants may be asked to confirm inferences, and colleagues may be asked to read drafts of the report to identify shortcomings.

## Key words

boundedness

case study

coding

collective case study

descriptive case study

explanatory case study

exploratory case study

instrumental case study

intrinsic case study

longitudinal case study

memoing

participant observation

positionality

thick description

triangulation

trustworthiness

vignette

## Post-reading questions

1. How does the researcher determine the boundaries of a case? Try to think of a couple of examples of 'bounded systems' and explain what makes them so.
2. Case studies are often categorized as intrinsic or instrumental (Stake, 1995), or exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory (Yin, 2003). What are

the relative merits of each type? In what circumstances might you choose to conduct each?

3. What challenges does the longitudinal nature of qualitative case study pose for the researcher? How can he cope with those challenges?
4. How does triangulation support or confirm a researcher's inferences?
5. How does thick description improve the trustworthiness of the findings?
6. Can generalizations be drawn from the results of qualitative case studies?

## Tasks

1. Find a published qualitative case study related to your own research interests. Summarize it, then discuss its strengths and weaknesses. If possible, identify an exemplar for the same research topic.
2. Outline a potential case study. Identify the case and what you might learn by studying it, describe your own positionality in relation to it, and list and defend your choice of data sources that you would draw upon. Finally, try to anticipate obstacles to conducting such a study.

## Further reading

Duff, P. (2008). *Case study research in applied linguistics*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

This is the most up-to-date and comprehensive text focusing on case study in applied linguistics – a must read.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

These two texts provide a general overview of case study methodology in the social sciences. Stake also has articles in the 2nd and 3rd editions of the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, which are concise summaries of his evolving ideas.

Merriam, S. B. (1997). *Qualitative research and case study application in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This is a revision of Merriam's 1988 text; it is somewhat broader than Duff's focus on applied linguistics.

Chapelle, C., & Duff, P. (2003). Some guidelines for conducting quantitative and qualitative research in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(1), 163–168.

Edge, J. (Ed.). *Case studies in TESOL practice series*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL Publications.

Chapelle and Duff's guidelines are an excellent, brief summary – a must read for anyone planning a case study involving language learners. The volumes edited by Edge may serve as models.

Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

This is the exemplar for both ethnography and case study. While quite long, it illustrates in detail the principles outlined in this chapter.

Spack, R. (1997). The acquisition of academic literacy in a second language: A longitudinal case study. *Written Communication, 14*(1), 3–62.

Much shorter than Heath, Spack provides an exemplar of a journal article-type case study report.

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# 5

## Ethnography

*Juanita Heigham and Keiko Sakui*

### Pre-reading questions

1. When you hear the word ethnography, what comes to mind?
2. Have you read an ethnography (or seen any ethnographic documentaries or performances)? If so, what were the contexts of these studies?
3. What types of topics or issues do you think could be explored through ethnographic research? What topics could not be? Explain.
4. Based on what you might already know about ethnography, list some advantages and disadvantages for using it as a research approach in applied linguistics.

### Illustrative example

*Elizabeth teaches English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at a medium-sized Japanese women's university that has a self-access center (SAC) for students. The SAC is designed to promote independent learning, and it aims to facilitate the development of communicative competence through learner-learner peer interaction and the development of learning communities. Uniquely, it is staffed entirely by third- and fourth-year students who act as peer advisors (PAs), and there is a strict 'English only' policy. Although Elizabeth is not the SAC coordinator, she is very interested in the center and spends quite a lot of time there. She has noticed that in some years a strong supportive community of learners develops, but in other years it does not. She wonders why this is so, given that the freshman student orientation about the SAC is standardized. She has done research projects in the past, and decides that she would like to explore this situation by doing an ethnographic study of this small SAC culture. She talks about this with the SAC coordinator and the department chair, and they support her idea. Elizabeth then gets permission from her university's ethics board to begin a two-year research project, and the department chair, who feels the success of the SAC is important for the department and understands the time commitment that ethnography requires, arranges for her to teach one less class during the project period.*

*From the start of the next academic year, Elizabeth begins to spend about ten hours a week in the center. She often sits in the back of the room but sometimes wanders around mingling with students, and she makes extensive field notes of what she sees and hears. To find out how students view and use the SAC, with their permission, she also interviews the SAC coordinator, the PAs, some of the current students, and some of the alumni. She collects all of the posters and learning materials the PAs create. In addition, she reviews students' Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) scores. Throughout the two years, Elizabeth continuously analyzes and interprets the data she collects, and this continues after she finishes her data collection. Over time Elizabeth is able to compile a 'cultural portrait' of the SAC that reveals how the culture develops and changes and decides to present her findings to the department. She then begins to write up a report about the research that she hopes to have published.*

## Overview

Although **ethnography** is not the most commonly used qualitative research approach in applied linguistics, it is an approach that has some unique offerings for the field. 'Ethnographic approaches are particularly valuable when not enough is known about a context or situation' (Mackay & Gass, 2005, p. 169), so for Elizabeth it is a good choice because she is interested in investigating something which is largely unknown – how culture is created in a university SAC. Ethnographers' main purpose is to learn enough about a group to create a cultural portrait of how the people belonging to that culture live, work, and/or play together. They do this through fieldwork – extended observation of and engagement with participants. Fieldwork, which has also been referred to as 'deep hanging out', typically uses participant observation, interviews, and artifact analysis, all of which we will discuss in this chapter.

The term 'ethnography' refers to both the product – the presentation of the final analysis and interpretation of the completed study – and also the research process itself. It finds its roots in anthropological work conducted in the early half of the twentieth century by researchers such as Bronisław Malinowski, Margaret Mead, and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, but although ethnography was begun by anthropologists, it did not take long for the use of the approach to be adopted by researchers in many other disciplines such as sociology, health, business, and education. Over time, the 'classical' form of ethnography has metamorphosed, and today there are a wide variety of ethnographic forms, including critical ethnography, feminist ethnography, focused ethnography, confessional ethnography, autoethnography, and in the internet age, virtual ethnography. Since this is an introductory chapter to a multifaceted and complex topic, we will focus on the basic constructs found in many forms of ethnography and issues related to them. We hope the chapter provides you with the tools to read and understand

ethnographies in applied linguistics and guides you in undertaking your own ethnographic research.

## What is ethnography?

Considering the number of different forms that ethnography can take, pinning down a precise definition for the term is not an easy task. However, a commonly cited definition in the field of applied linguistics is ‘the study of people’s behavior in naturally occurring, ongoing settings, with a focus on the cultural interpretation of behavior’ (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). Through ethnographic studies, researchers look at cultures for ‘what people do (**behaviors**), what they say (language), the potential tension between what they do and ought to do, and what they make and use, such as **artifacts**’ (Spradley, 1980, as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 71), which include standardized test scores, photos, handouts, and surveys. In order to fully understand ethnography, we need to take a closer look at a key term – **culture** – an understanding of which is crucial to appreciate this rich research tradition.

Culture is an abstract concept used to account for the beliefs, values, and behaviors of cohesive groups of people. It is a narrower term than race (which accounts for biological variation); a racial group may contain many different cultures, and a cultural group may contain members of different races. Although cultural group may refer to a particular nationality, cultures may cross political boundaries and a nation may contain many cultural groups... Within a cultural group, behaviors are patterned and values and meanings are shared. (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 53)

Ethnographic research allows researchers to explore how people create, sustain, change, and pass on their shared values, beliefs, and behavior – in essence, their culture. It draws on an interpretive approach where ‘the researcher’s intent... is to make sense (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 21), meanings usually unexamined by these people themselves. Research topics are necessarily fairly broad because researchers usually choose ethnographic approaches when ‘the social issue or behaviors are not yet clearly understood’ (Angrosino, 2007, p. 26), and they are looking for focus. The aim of ethnographers is to painstakingly develop an understanding of the particular cultural worlds which people build and live in and explain them to people outside those worlds.

Since ethnography has a strong focus on culture, and culture only exists in groups, it is groups rather than single individuals that are studied in ethnography. However, the conception of ‘group’ has evolved in recent years. When this research tradition began, ethnographers typically went into

'exotic' or 'uncivilized' cultures where the groups were considered 'others'; the others typically spoke the same language as each other or lived in the same region, usually distantly located and little known by the researchers' culture. Today, although some ethnographers continue to study such unknown cultures, more and more they are like Elizabeth, staying home and studying cultures closer to their own. In addition, it is now recognized that culture exists even in much smaller groups, such as organizations, industries, gangs, and schools – all of which are contexts ethnographers could investigate (see Holliday, 1999, for a discussion on small cultures). In this shift from the unknown to the known, ethnography lost its defining feature as the study of 'others', or at least others who differed dramatically from the ethnographer (Wolcott, 2008, p. 22).

Traditional ethnography typically focuses on location, not issues. Ethnographers choose to explore a group living in a particular *place*, with the aim of building a **cultural portrait** of the group found there. Such studies are exemplified by researchers entering the field with no preconceived focus and staying there for an extended period of time, allowing a comprehensive description of the culture to be developed (Richards & Morse, 2007).

Other ethnographic forms are quite different from traditional ethnographies. For example, in focused ethnography the focal point of the research is typically on an *issue* about which researchers may mold a guiding question before the study begins (Richards & Morse, 2007). With critical ethnography, researchers aim to go beyond rich cultural description to promoting change (Madison, 2005; Sleeter, 1992). Such nontraditional studies are often conducted in small cultures such as organizations or institutions. The group studied may be a sample of participants who share a particular *feature*, but not necessarily the same *location*, such as a group brought together in an online chat room (Angrosino, 2007). In such a situation, the researcher focuses on the common behaviors, experiences, or identities shared by the group in order to reveal the culture the people share.

Focusing for a moment on the field of applied linguistics, let's consider the type of topics or issues ethnographers might investigate. Ethnographers might choose to study something like Elizabeth did, 'development of learning communities in a SAC', or, for example, 'relationships between native-English-speaking teachers and nonnative-English-speaking teachers in Russian high schools'. Notice that these topics are not well-defined research questions. Rather they are topics that a researcher cannot clearly understand and hopes to gain clarity of through research. The research in the latter case would likely take place in a narrowly defined site in Russia, and the participants would include native and nonnative-English-speaking teachers. The researchers might be interested in investigating the impact of administrative decisions on teachers' practices in the classroom, so the administrative staff might also become research participants.

## Why use ethnography in applied linguistics?

Perhaps the greatest advantage of ethnographic research, and what sets it apart from other research methods, is the detailed and profound understanding of a given culture it can provide. Other research methods rarely allow researchers to understand a culture in such depth. One reason that this can be achieved is that ethnographic studies are fluid and flexible; 'the research question employed in these studies can be dynamic, subject to constant revision, and refined as the research continues to uncover new knowledge' (Mackay & Gass, 2005, p. 169). Also, since ethnographic research is generally conducted from within a target community, it allows for the recording of behavior as it occurs instead of depending on people's reports of their past or expected behavior. Thus the behaviors researchers observe in the field should not be significantly different from the behaviors that occur in their absence (Burns, 2000), and this authenticity can help provide an accurate depiction of a given situation or culture. An excellent example of deep cultural insight gained through ethnographic research is that of Heath (1983). Over a ten-year period, she examined two cultural communities in the southeast of the United States, a black working class community and a white working class community. By studying how the children learned to socialize through the use of language, she revealed how black children's verbal socialization significantly disadvantaged them when they entered school, as school norms were based on white culture. To achieve the depth of cultural illumination she gained, she had to devote an extensive amount of time to study these people's practices: she observed them in daily life, listened to their stories, participated in their cultural practices, and studied their related artifacts in detail. From a wide perspective that included socio-cultural and political considerations, she continued to analyze her data throughout the course of her study and allowed her discoveries to direct, and redirect, her research. By doing this, she made important contributions well beyond her field.

Within the field of applied linguistics, many ethnographic works have shed light on the diversity of various cultures in our profession. For example, in Japanese secondary schools, where young teachers from English-speaking countries such as the US, UK, and Australia are invited to work as assistant teachers (McConnell, 2000); in a Sri Lankan university, where a Sri Lankan teacher from a middle-class background meets with resistance to the Western textbooks she uses (Cangarajah, 1993); and the controversial roles that English plays in the post-colonial era in Mexico are explored (Clemente & Higgins, 2008).

Another reason to consider using ethnography is that the final reports have the possibility of reaching a wide audience. Other types of research are often presented in a conventional written format, but ethnographies are presented in many different ways, including narratives, novels, dramas, and

documentaries, as well as traditional research articles. Since there are far more practitioners than scholars or researchers within our field, the abstract nature of more quantitative research reports can deter some readers. In addition, since teachers frequently find the 'stories' reported in ethnographic studies accessible, those reports may be read and understood by more people. Thus, ethnography has the possibility of having greater practical influence on what teachers are doing in their classrooms.

*Elizabeth considers different types of research approaches before deciding to use ethnography. She knows that ethnographic methods are particularly useful to investigate situations that are not clearly understood, like the one in the SAC. She also knows that she needs to 'see' what happens in the center as well as 'hear' the opinions and views of those who work in and use it in order to gain an understanding of the culture of the SAC. Thus, ethnography seems like the best choice.*

## Collecting your data

Ethnographers must develop a deep understanding of the culture they study. Conventionally, this requires doing extended **fieldwork** within the culture, and with an open mind observing firsthand what happens there. To uncover hidden meanings of behavior, observation is usually supplemented with interviews to learn what those in the group make of their experiences. Related artifacts are also investigated. Rich, deep description is the hallmark of ethnography, and to build it, researchers make detailed **field notes**, creating meticulous descriptions of the context, participants, and events they witness. They also create maps of relationships between participants and chronologies of significant events. As a process, ethnography is 'an emergent construction' (Fitzgerald, 1997, p. 53). That is, it is expected to change and evolve throughout the research process – it does not progress in a linear fashion. But this flexibility does not indicate a lack of rigor; ethnographers enter the field with an open mind, not an empty head (Fetterman, 1998)!

Quantitative research usually has a clear order which unfolds step by step; by contrast, ethnographic research is quite fluid. In fact, analysis begins as the first general research interests are formulated and clarified, long before any data is actually collected. Thus, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and writing up are not exclusive processes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983), but overlap and happen simultaneously. There are no prescriptive chronological 'steps' that ethnographers follow; however, the flow of typical ethnographic studies is somewhat predictable. It moves something like this: after you have determined that ethnography fits the research question or issue you would like to investigate, decide what type of data you want to collect (keeping in mind this will evolve throughout your study) and where you can collect it. Once you have decided these, you select your research site(s) and arrange entry. Gaining entry usually involves working

with a **gatekeeper**, someone like a school principal who has the power to let you in – or keep you out of – a certain location. The next step is to begin the actual data collection. You analyze your data on an ongoing basis, and finally, you complete your analysis and interpretation, and write up a report or present your findings in some other manner. Although we do not discuss them here, throughout your research you should be sure to follow ethical practices. For a clear overview of these, see Chapter 13.

Ethnographic studies are well known for the amount of data that they generate, and ethnographers often use a variety of methods to collect them. Below, we look at some of these methods.

## Methods of data collection

### *Participant observation*

The most commonly used methods of collecting data in ethnographic studies are **participant observation** (recorded in field notes), interviews (often transcribed and summarized), and artifact analysis. Of these methods, participant observation is perhaps of greatest importance because it is crucial to develop an understanding of the culture. Richards (2003) lists four main components that observers should make a conscious effort to note: setting (space and objects), systems (procedures), people, and behavior. At first, it will probably be difficult to know what to focus on in your observation. Fetterman (1998, p. 32) comments that most people begin with a ‘big net approach’ – trying to focus on as many systems, people, and behaviors as possible in their observations until their focus naturally narrows to more specific issues or questions.

While observing, researchers may participate to a varying degree with the target culture. In traditional ethnography, researchers come from ‘outside’, moving into a community and living there for an extended period of time (see Heath, 1983; Peshkin, 1986); in contrast, in focused ethnographies they may continue to live at home but shadow the people in the study for a specific period of time (Wolcott, 1994), or temporarily become a member of a given group by, for example, acting as a substitute or visiting teacher in a school (Winograd, 2005). Whatever the extent of your participation in a study, you must maintain a balance between your roles as an insider and an outsider and be conscious of your own part in your research. A clear understanding of your participation and influence throughout your study is crucial in analyzing and interpreting your study, and later in the chapter, we will discuss this further.

Although the degree of immersion in the target culture might differ from study to study, an important criterion is that a researcher maintains an **emic** (insider or participant perspective) and **etic** (outsider or researchers’ perspective) position simultaneously. By slowly adopting an emic position, over time you learn to understand certain cultural practices and routines, participate in them, and learn some of the jargon (and in some cases, the

language) of the target culture. This allows you to develop knowledge about the culture from the inside.

Even as you increasingly gain access to the 'inner' circles of a group and develop a better understanding of the people you are studying, you must also maintain an objective distance, an etic position, as a researcher. This is so you can both understand what you see from an insider's perspective yet are also able to clearly explain what you see to others unfamiliar with your research context when you write up your findings. One of the authors of this chapter, Keiko Sakui, balanced an emic and etic existence as she conducted an ethnographic study of Japanese teachers of English at Japanese secondary schools (Sakui, 2004). Keiko is Japanese and herself an English teacher in Japan, so she held an emic perspective since she speaks the same language and shares some cultural understandings with the Japanese teachers being studied. At the same time, however, she was aware that she held an etic position, and in many ways what she experienced was very 'foreign' because she was an outsider. There were several reasons for this. First, she did not have any secondary school teaching experience, so she was not familiar with the rituals and routines that were taken for granted by the participants. Second, she and the participants of her study were not at the site for the same reason. Keiko was there to collect data for her Ph.D. thesis, whereas the participants were there to teach English to secondary school students. Tedlock (2000) describes this as 'outsiders wearing insiders' clothes' (p. 455). For Keiko, and all ethnographers, 'methodologically, the challenge is to do justice to both perspectives during and after fieldwork and to be clear with one's self and one's audience how this tension is managed' (Patton, 2002, p. 268).

While researchers are observing, they write field notes. These notes should be detailed and provide rich contextual information derived from the setting itself rather than from preconceived ideas of the researchers (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Careful attention to field notes prevents researchers from forming over-generalized impressions and interpretations, and allows them to describe the phenomenon or event observed more precisely. For example, a field note taken while observing a language class, which states, 'a student is sleeping and seems unmotivated', is inadequate or thin. It does not describe the event and setting in detail, and it includes the researcher's subjective view as it describes the student as being 'unmotivated'. A better description would be as follows:

A boy sitting in the second row from the back by the window has had his face down on the desk since the class began. It is the second period after lunch. Other students seem to be on task, but he has not participated in any learning activities for 20 minutes. He has not opened his textbook or notebook. They are covered by his head and arms. He has not moved much either. Cannot tell whether he is really sleeping or this is the way that he is resisting participation.

This description, a close emic look at a sleeping student, might be followed by a simple drawing of the classroom. Researchers might also add parenthetical remarks about what they are thinking about what they are observing (Donan, 1997). In this example, comments like these might be added: 'Maybe he gets sleepy after lunch but is active in other classes.' 'I wonder why the teacher doesn't wake him up'.

The above sketch is an example of **thick description** (Geertz, 1973). When given this information, a reader can visualize the context and the boy's behavior. By using thick description, you can record the totality of what you observe so that your notes can help you remember both the events and their contexts when you return to analyze them later. Also, when thick description is put in a research report or article, it allows readers to picture the scene clearly, and since ethnography assumes an active role for its readers, this is essential. Furthermore, when recording what participants or informants say, try to capture not only the words but also the context in which they spoke as richly as possible, and later, share that richness with the reader.

It is important to note here that using meticulous description in your ethnographic report is key since these reports are not presented as definitive fact but as an informed interpretation, and readers are expected to read them and construct *their own* interpretations of them. The readers may then agree or disagree with what you argue. Thus, from the beginning of a study to the end, the role of maintaining thick description in field notes – descriptions that allow you to present clear pictures of what you experienced in the field – cannot be overemphasized.

### *Interviewing and artifacts*

Interviews and artifacts are other fundamental parts of ethnographic research that we will only briefly mention. Conducting good interviews is a skill that needs careful development, and, as we will only make a few comments here about them, please see Chapter 9 for a full discussion.

Each researcher formulates interview questions based on his or her own unique etic position. If another researcher went into the same field and were to interview the same people, the interview questions he or she chose to use would probably be different. Similarly, if the same interview questions were used by different researchers, interviewees would likely respond to the questions differently for reasons such as differences in age, gender, ethnicity, or class between themselves and the interviewers. As for who to interview, ethnographers have to find **informants** from within the target community to interview. Finding good informants, people who are articulate and gifted at description, is essential because the information researchers get from their informants can provide some of the mainstays of the research data. Using the big net approach mentioned above when entering a site can often help you discover good informants.

The artifacts ethnographers use in their research can take a variety of forms. They can be pre-existing documents such as past English grades, standardized test scores, handouts from lessons, end of term tests, or pre-existing video footage or photos. As you are examining these, it is important to remain as skeptical of anything you read as you are of anything you hear or see (Wolcott, 2005, pp. 111–114). Every aspect of your research must be approached with the same questioning attitude.

### **Additional considerations**

The gathering and later comparison of different data sources by using a combination of methods is called ‘triangulation’ and it is used ‘to test the quality of information ... and ultimately to put the whole situation into perspective’ (Fetterman, 1998, p. 9). ‘Good ethnography is usually the result of triangulation’ (Angrosino, 2007, p. 35), so doing it is crucial; it enables you to validate claims and discover inconsistencies that require additional investigation. For example, in interviews teachers might emphasize the importance of teaching English communicatively, and field notes from classroom observations may also show the regular use of communicative activities, so a researcher might conclude that teaching students to communicate in English is the teachers’ primary goal. However, when the artifact of the final test is examined, the researcher discovers that it focuses on students’ grammatical knowledge rather than on their communicative skills. This kind of discrepancy revealed through triangulation could guide the researcher to examine why there is a difference between what teachers teach and what they test, and thus lead the researcher to important new discoveries.

Finally, researchers should be especially alert throughout the research process to remaining nonjudgmental and not imposing their own cultural norms on the people being studied (Fetterman, 1998). To use Keiko’s example again, her participants had not attended graduate school yet she had, and she also had had greater access to ‘up-to-date’ teaching methods and methodologies. This ‘imbalance’ between researcher and participants is not uncommon. Nonetheless, researchers should never consider the participants’ behaviors or verbal reports as less valuable or informed. When you enter a new culture as a researcher it is difficult not to quickly make value judgments, but you need to resist that temptation. For example, an ethnographer might enter a language classroom and find an English teacher requiring students to copy pages from an English textbook into their notebook. One interpretation might be that this practice is outdated at best, and a waste of time at worst, and that the teacher is not teaching effectively. However, it might be the case that the teacher believes that the repetitive aspects of the writing activity, especially the kinesthetic aspect of hand–eye coordination that copying engenders, promotes learning. Whatever the deeper meanings in any context are, as an ethnographer you must take the time to find them out and avoid making quick, subjective judgments.

Making hasty judgments can be dangerous because they can easily lead you to erroneous interpretations.

*During her study, Elizabeth uses many different data collection methods. She conducts about 400 hours of observation in the center. She takes detailed field notes that include what she sees and hears, as well as her own reflections on these observations, which she records while consciously trying to keep an open mind. She interviews all of the PAs who work in the center, 16 students who use the center (four from each year), and six alumni. In addition, she reviews artifacts such as test scores, and flyers and posters made for the center by the PAs. The variety of data that she collects allows her to conduct thorough triangulation which helps guide her ongoing research, analysis, and interpretation.*

## Organizing and interpreting your data

Due to the length of many ethnographic studies (remember Heath's lasted ten years), researchers often end up collecting an enormous amount of diverse data, so they need to be sure they have solid organization skills; otherwise, they might quickly find themselves in over their head. It is good practice, and we would argue essential, to keep your collected data well organized from the beginning of the research process. Since each ethnographic study has a unique mixture of data, collected in an order designed by the individual researcher, there is no prescriptive 'how to' guide for organizing it. Nevertheless, it is important for you to create your own system that suits your working style. Some basic starting points include:

- Keep your notes in well-defined groups or categories (for example, separate observations of classes from observations of faculty meetings)
- Always write the date, time, and place where the data were collected
- File data in chronological order
- Make and maintain a 'contents' list for each notebook or computer folder
- When using a computer, label files and folders with unambiguous titles (if there is a need for confidentiality, develop a logical code system)
- If you use a code system, do not make it so complicated that you cannot understand it later
- As your data expand, devise cross-referencing systems.

Regularly paying attention to organization will pay dividends every time you sit down to analyze your data.

Analysis and interpretation in ethnographic studies are inductive processes of methodically searching for patterns and meaning in your data. When looking at the data, you can think of them as pieces of a puzzle. 'The object is to put these pieces together to create a puzzle picture (analysis) and then to tell the reader what you see (interpretation)' (Hesse-Biber & Leavy,

2006, p. 263). Although different ethnographers adopt different analytical approaches, there are three basic steps or stages that many researchers employ (Emerson et al., 1995). Due to the fluidity of ethnographic studies, these stages are usually repeated in a cyclical, or iterative, manner throughout the research process, not in a sequential order.

In the first stage of analysis, read your various kinds of data carefully and repeatedly. While collecting data, you are immersed in the culture being studied, so it is difficult to completely separate yourself from it, but it is good to often step back and view it as objectively as possible. Successfully doing this allows you to gain a deeper understanding of what goes on at the research site. While you are going through this reading process, you might write **analytic memos**, memos that record your ideas and impressions as you are thinking them through (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). These memos can help you organize and focus your emerging interpretation.

At the next stage, you can read these texts line-by-line and code them. **Coding** means that you give a label or categorization for a fairly small chunk of data, such as a line for an interview excerpt or a paragraph of field notes. The process of coding is extremely time-consuming and some people do not do it, but it can enable researchers to *discover* themes or theories, rather than *impose* pre-existing ideas or categories on the data. 'Coding data can be helpful, but it can also keep the work at a very superficial level; it can block the analyst from proceeding to "thick description"' (Fitzgerald, 1997, p. 55). If you do code, you can then use those codes to look for relationships among the categories. If you do not code, continue looking over the data, and group and regroup your ideas as you gradually work toward building assumptions and identifiable themes which are the basis for your final interpretation.

Lastly, as we discuss interpretation, it is important to carefully consider the role of researchers in the research process. Ethnographers immerse themselves in a research site, and this typically means that they develop relationships with the participants as they join them, to some degree, in rituals, work, casual chatting, meals, and so forth. They also interact with the setting as they experience the sights, sounds, and smells there. The research becomes a whole body experience for them. Thus, in ethnographic studies, it is recognized that the analysis of this global research experience reflects the researchers' *subjective* cultural interpretation. The subjectivity is in many ways unavoidable because the researchers define the issue to investigate, what culture to study, and what questions to explore. The researchers decide who to interview and how to present interview questions. The researchers determine how to collect the data and how to connect all the threads of that data throughout the research process. And finally, the researchers decide how to make sense of what they have experienced in the field. Thus, the researchers' subjectivity is assumed, accepted, and valued in ethnography; however, it is also understood that

ethnographers will do all they can to maintain an open mind and avoid making value judgments.

*Elizabeth knows that one of the keys to a successful ethnography is keeping her data well organized. At the end of each data collection session – no matter what type of data she collects – she always allows a few minutes to highlight points or make organizational memos. At the end of each week, she reviews all of her new data and inputs them into her computer into well-organized files. Sometimes she scans information, other times she types it in. This process not only keeps her organized but also acts as part of her ongoing analysis and interpretation since she has the opportunity to see the data again while they are still fresh and can add analytic memos. After her data collection is complete, she repeatedly reads over her data and makes additional notes. She is pleased with her progress, so she decides not to code her data. Over time, as she is working and reworking the data, she begins to see patterns of behaviors and values that she realizes are central to the SAC culture, and from there she is able to identify a number of central themes.*

## Presenting your findings

'It is often assumed that the only logical way to represent ethnographic data...is in the form of a traditional work of scholarly writing...' (Angrosino, 2007, p. 77), but in fact this is no longer true. There are a wide variety of options from which ethnographers can choose to present their findings; however, the written form is still the most common, and even when presenting your findings in other forms, writing about your research discoveries is usually a part of the preparation process, so in this section we will focus on the written report.

As mentioned before, ethnographic research tends to be iterative, and thus not unexpectedly, the analytic process continues while researchers write their reports. Ethnographies do not typically follow a traditional social science form, so they are not likely to include sections such as methodology, results, or discussion, and they are often quite long. While articles based on ethnographic research are published, it is more common to see book-length works devoted to them.

Whatever their length, ethnographies are often organized around key topics that are presented in a way that progressively lead the reader through the researchers' interpretations or arguments (Fitzgerald, 1997). A final ethnographic report is often a cultural portrait of the group, incorporating the researchers' and the participants' viewpoints and terms of reference (Creswell, 2007, p. 72), and it is often presented as a narrative. Chambers (2000, p. 856) states, 'Much of the value of ethnography lies in its narrative – in the telling of a story.' Thus, ethnographers' ultimate goal is to tell a 'good story' about the experience of their research to an audience who may be unfamiliar with the culture. The tricky part of this is combining field notes, interview transcripts, and artifacts (from which you must maintain objective distance)

together with subjective memos, which include your personal interpretations, reflections, and opinions to create a rich, thick description and compelling portrait that 'rings true' for the reader. Here again, you must reflect on your emic and etic positions as you examine your data recorded from a *they* and *I* perspective and weave these different types of data into a consistent narrative form that fairly portrays the group you have studied.

Another consideration about reporting is the importance of *setting the stage* for the reader. A detailed description of the context as a whole, including the degree of your participation and positioning in the target group, is crucial for the reader to fully comprehend the study. Part of your job is 'convincing the reader [or viewer] through drawing him or her into the world of the participants and sensing the believability of that world' (Goldbart & Hustler, 2005, p. 17). As discussed earlier, readers of ethnography are expected to make their own interpretation of the study because ethnographic studies assume and accept multiple interpretations and are not considered stories with a single 'truth' valid to all participants and readers. In fact, the ability to highlight particulars rather than generalities is one of the strengths of ethnography, so attention to detail, which should be presented clearly and concisely, is vital to an ethnographic report.

To see different ways that ethnographic work can be written up, see Van Maanen's clever book *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography* (1988). He presents three narrative conventions associated with writing about culture: a straightforward realistic report of classical ethnography, a confessional tale, and a dramatic vignette. He also discusses the pros and cons of these presentation styles. For three ethnographic works on different topics in applied linguistics presented in journal articles, see the *TESOL Quarterly* special topic issue, 'Qualitative Research in ESOL' (1995, volume 29, number 3).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that we have described a more or less traditional approach to writing an ethnography. Since today ethnographic studies take many forms, the communicating of their findings also takes many forms. Ethnographic products are presented in a multitude of ways including taxonomies, novels, novellas, short stories, poems, plays, dance performances, web-based texts and images, and films – all with varying proportions of description and interpretation (Angrosino, 2007; Crang & Cook, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Madison, 2005; Richards & Morse, 2007; Tedlock, 2000).

*The cultural portraits that Elizabeth constructs during her research reveal a variety of interesting issues that impact students, such as how the influence of periodic TV game-shows that use English, or Japanese actors appearing in popular English-language films, serve as transitory inspiration for interest in English and learning community building. In addition, as the research progresses, Elizabeth finds that the coordinator of the SAC seems to favor one type of student over another, based on her personal and cultural beliefs of how students*

*should behave in autonomous ways. When students' behavior matches the coordinator's beliefs, she is encouraging and supportive. When they do not match, she is sometimes dismissive. Elizabeth feels this is a very critical point in her findings but at the same time does not know whether she can honestly report it because she and the coordinator have developed a positive rapport and Elizabeth fears that if she shares her interpretations, the coordinator might feel betrayed. This causes her some anxiety. In time, she finds that she is able to share her findings honestly with the coordinator, and their discussions together lead her to more discoveries. Later, Elizabeth gives a presentation on her discoveries to her department, and the faculty begins working on an action plan to improve the SAC orientation and PA support structure. To share her findings outside the department, she begins writing up a lengthy narrative about her research, which she hopes to have published. As she writes, she is careful to support her interpretations of the SAC culture by detailed description and expressive quotes from participants.*

## **Improving the quality of ethnography**

While the labor-intensive nature of ethnography makes rich, detailed accounts of culture possible, it may also be its biggest disadvantage – ethnography requires an extremely long commitment of time and a vast amount of energy. Since long-term observation is often vital, it can be difficult for researchers to conduct their research and maintain other social responsibilities – like holding down a job (Richards, 2003). It is probably realistic to assume that ethnography is best employed for Master's or Ph.D. studies, or by researchers on sabbatical. In addition, because of the commitment required for completing an ethnography, before you embark on such a study you need to be sure you have the determination to stick with the project to the end. If you are not confident of your own interest in and dedication to the project before you begin, then it's not likely that you will be successful in completing it. So, before you choose ethnography as the approach for your research project, make sure that you have the skills and drive necessary to finish it.

Another issue of importance in ethnography is the representativeness (or otherwise) of the research participants. Ethnographers rely on informants for data; they may observe or interview these people extensively and review artifacts linked to them. Thus researchers need to keep in mind that their informants might not be typical members of a given culture. When you are choosing informants, it is important to consider this and recognize the degree of their 'typicality' in your report. In addition, you can triangulate data collected from your key informants by checking with other informants, reviewing artifacts, and so on.

Something else ethnographers need to consider is that there is a possibility that a researcher might 'go native' (Tedlock, 2000), abandoning their

researcher position and deciding to completely join together with the target group. An example of this would be a doctoral student studying an ESL program at a secondary school who takes up a position at the school, giving up his research and researcher position. While this is not a common problem for most language teacher-researchers, it does again emphasize the need to carefully maintain the etic/emic balance throughout a research project. One practical way to do this is to regularly check your ideas and understandings with your research supervisor or a fellow student or colleague, and ask that person to monitor your 'research identity'.

Researchers also need to recognize that their presence in the field is an inevitable influence on the research process. You need to consider how your power as a researcher versus that of the participants influences the research process. You should represent the voices of your participants without filtering them too strongly through your own cultural perspective (Goldbart & Hustler, 2005, p. 17), and simultaneously present your own analyses and interpretations. Regularly checking your understandings with participants, called 'member checking', is one way to address both of these issues. Another way is for you to develop an awareness of the way your own cultural values, beliefs, and biases influence your relationship with participants, and what data is collected and how it is analyzed and interpreted. Reflecting about these and keeping a record of them, for example in a research diary, is an effective way to remain aware of your impact as an 'instrument' of research. Giving careful attention to this will have a profound impact on the way you move through the process of making sense of your data (Richards & Morse, 2007).

Finally, ethnography assumes that one of the researchers' responsibilities is to make sense of what they observe, hear, and experience, and as a result, what an ethnographer finally claims is 'meaning construction', not 'truth'. Ethnography is inevitably partial because it is incomplete – it is usually limited to one person's view, at one point in time, based upon one set of experiences, enhanced by a certain selected set of experiences chosen by often a relatively small number of informants (Wolcott, 2008, p. 80). Thus, it is all to some degree subjective. But there is no clean escape from subjectivity in any type of research, and as Hegelund (2005) remarks, 'It is exactly the particular, individual point of view, with all of its subjective biases, idiosyncrasies, and distortions, that gives the ethnography its edge, its enlightening effect, its power' (p. 660).

*Elizabeth is vigilant in making meticulous field notes during her observations and reviewing them frequently. During her interviews she is careful to write thorough descriptions of how she believes her informants fit within their culture, and she frequently refers to these notes as she does her analysis. Throughout the research process, she takes her developing interpretations and conducts member checks with participants. In addition, to further strengthen her interpretations,*

*she triangulates her different data. By doing these things, she feels that the results of her research will 'ring true' with readers; moreover, through applying what she has learned, both she and the faculty believe the learning communities within the SAC can be improved. In her report, Elizabeth tries to clearly communicate to her readers in rich detail not only the cultural portrait of the SAC that she has developed, but also how she built her understanding of it.*

## Final thoughts

We believe ethnography is an excellent way to explore the unique mysteries any culture contains; however, it is a challenging approach that takes skill and a lot of perseverance. When the aim of your research is to create a rich and detailed portrait of a given culture, ethnography is one of the best options there is. If you want to describe how a cultural group – be it a school system, a bilingual community, an ESL classroom, or a group of English teachers – works, and to explore the beliefs, values, and behavior of the people in that group, ethnography could be the right choice for you. But when you set out to choose a research approach, you should carefully consider its advantages and disadvantages, and decide if it's right for your research topic and for your qualitative research skills. Since Elizabeth had some experience doing research and wanted to investigate the beliefs and values of the students in the SAC, ethnography was an excellent choice for her.

If you decide that ethnography is the most appropriate research approach for your research purpose and questions, we hope that the information in this chapter is a useful stepping-stone for you as you begin your research. If you decide on another approach, you might nevertheless still find it useful to train yourself to have an ethnographer's eyes, ears, and mindset so that as you conduct your research, you can see, hear, and question with patience and without judgment. No matter what research approach you finally adopt, having the open-minded attitude of an ethnographer will help you carry out well-balanced and revealing research.

## Summary

- Ethnography is a research approach that focuses on 'people's behavior in natural occurring, ongoing settings, with a focus on the cultural interpretation of behavior' (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 576).
- It draws on an interpretive approach and allows researchers to explore how people create, sustain, change, and pass on their culture.
- Groups rather than individuals are studied in ethnography. These groups can be large or small because culture is not limited to big groups.
- Topics studied in ethnographies are typically broad; they investigate little understood issues, behaviors, or situations.

- Ethnographies can provide profoundly detailed understanding of a culture; moreover, because they are often presented in narrative form they may be very accessible to practicing teachers.
- Ethnographers collect a large quantity of varied data that includes detailed field notes from observation, interviews, and artifact analysis.
- Keeping data well organized is essential, and each researcher should design a system of organization that suits him or her.
- Analysis and interpretation are inductive processes of methodically searching for patterns and meanings in the data.
- The research process is fluid and iterative, and data collection, analysis, and interpretation overlap.
- Balancing an etic/emic position during an ethnographic study is essential.
- Triangulation is important to validate claims and to discover inconsistencies throughout the research process.
- Subjectivity in ethnography is assumed; ethnographers should recognize that their presence in the field influences the research process and that what they finally claim at the end of their project is 'meaning construction' not 'truth'.
- However, ethnographers are expected to maintain an open mind throughout their research, and should avoid making quick value judgments.
- Ethnographic reports do not usually follow a traditional form. They are often presented as narratives, are quite long, combine objective and subjective views, and include very detailed description.
- Ethnographies can also be presented as novels, short stories, dance performances, films, and so on.
- Ethnographies require long time commitments, so researchers should be sure they are prepared to make that commitment before they begin.

### **Key words**

analytic memos

artifacts

behavior

coding

culture

cultural portrait

emic

etic

field notes

fieldwork

gatekeeper

informant

participant observation

thick description

## Post-reading questions

1. Why is culture so integral to ethnography?
2. Based on the information in the chapter and your own ideas, what are some ways to help keep collected data organized?
3. How could making swift value judgments damage the quality of ethnographic research?
4. Explain the importance of thick description in ethnographic researching and reporting.
5. Why is it necessary for ethnographers to maintain an emic/etic balance throughout their research projects?

## Tasks

1. Choose one of the ethnographic journal articles mentioned in this chapter or one of your own liking. While you are reading, try to pay attention to how the researcher describes the setting, systems, people, and behavior (Richards, 2003), as well as how he or she allows the voices of the participants to be heard. Then answer the following questions about the article:
  - (a) What was the topic or issue investigated in the study?
  - (b) What cultural group was studied?
  - (c) How were the participants chosen, and who were they?
  - (d) What types of data were collected?
  - (e) How were they analyzed?
  - (f) What was the role of the ethnographer in the study?
  - (g) What claims were made? Do they 'ring true' for you? Why or why not?
  - (h) Consider the form in which the article was written. Does it work for you? What other ways might the report have been presented?
 Prepare to discuss your article and the answers to these questions with a group.
2. Think of a topic or issue you would like to investigate using an ethnographic approach. What site could provide you with useful data? How might you gain entry to the site? What types of data might be useful to collect for this study? How could you go about collecting them? Can you anticipate any problems you might have collecting your data? How might you overcome those problems? Write your answers or discuss them in groups.

## Further reading

Angrosino, M. (2007). *Doing ethnographic and observational research*. London: Sage Publications.

A 'short and sweet' guide to doing ethnography presented in an easy-to-follow format.

Cangarajah, A. S. (1993). Critical ethnography of a Sri Lankan classroom: Ambiguities in student opposition to reproduction through ESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27(4), 601–626.

This article describes the complexities of language learning in Sri Lanka. In order to get a ‘feel’ for a good ethnographic work, such as the author’s voice, the richness of descriptions, and the political aspects of language teaching, this is highly recommended reading.

Fetterman, D. (1998). *Ethnography: Step by step* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Although this book was published over a decade ago, it provides an excellent general introduction to ethnography. It is written in a conversational tone and filled with short examples that help clarify issues.

Watson-Gegeo, K. A. (1988). Ethnography in ESL: Defining the essentials. *TESOL Quarterly*, 22(4), 575–592.

This article gives a good basic introduction to ethnography in our field.

Wolcott, H. F. (2005). *The art of fieldwork* (2nd ed.). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

This book introduces you to the main conceptual and practical aspects of fieldwork, and is written in an accessible manner.

Wolcott, H. F. (2008). *Ethnography: A way of seeing* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

A very readable text that provides a practical introduction and overview of ethnography.

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# 6

## Action Research

Anne Burns

### Pre-reading questions

1. What does the term *action research* mean to you?
2. List some features of action research that you might have heard about.
3. What topics would you (and your colleagues or classmates) be interested in exploring in your teaching location? Think about changes, improvements, puzzles, or dilemmas related to your teaching.
4. What advantages might there be for teachers in doing action research?
5. What challenges would teachers investigating their classrooms face?

### Illustrative example

*Hartini is involved in a collaborative action research group of ten Indonesian high school teachers, facilitated by a teacher educator at a local university. She presently teaches at a top ranking high school in Indonesia. Her eighth grade students are highly motivated and several receive private English tuition outside school. Hartini considers their work sophisticated for their age. She finds the class exciting and challenging to teach – ‘my problem is not to be left behind by my students!’ However, the time allocated for her speaking class is insufficient for all her students to practice. She decides to investigate by experimenting with different teaching strategies and recording her observations in a journal. When she organizes group work, neighboring teachers complain about the noise. She decides to continue with group work but to relocate to the school hall. She discusses this idea with the principal and gains his approval. Following pre-speaking activities in class, Hartini allocates students into five groups, and they practice using the language functions in conversations. Although the students are enthusiastic, she notes that two of the five groups are quiet and inactive.*

*She decides to rearrange all of the groups by mixing active and less active students. However, her students react negatively; after discussion, they agree to maintain the three active groups and rearrange the others. As the students work she makes notes on their interactions. Later she records in her journal that the*

*rearranged groups still did not participate well and ended up merging into one big group. She realizes after re-reading her journal and analyzing class observations that after groups are formed, often group members do not want to be separated because they prefer working with their friends. She decides to let the students choose their groupings next time and to interview some of them about her teaching approach. She notes that participation increases dramatically even for previously quiet students, the groups are more dynamic and enthusiastic, and the energy level is high. The students she interviews indicate that holding lessons in the hall and choosing groups gives them the freedom and confidence to practice and they believe their skills are improving. Hartini analyzes her journal entries, class observations and students' comments, and discusses her reflections with her class. She presents her research to colleagues at a staff meeting and in a poster session at a teacher workshop.*

## Overview

As you read this example (based on Rochsantiningasih, 2005), you probably noticed particular features of Hartini's research. First, she identified something that she was concerned about in her own classroom. Even though she worked in a situation where she did not encounter the challenges of discipline, motivation, or student achievement commonly experienced by many high school teachers, she was a very reflective teacher interested in transforming her teaching practices to achieve the best results for her students. Second, she decided to record information about the changes she made systematically, by keeping a journal, making notes on her classroom observations, and interviewing her students. This meant that her plans for change at each stage were not based on her intuitions or assumptions, but on data and evidence collected deliberately and self-reflexively by watching and questioning what was happening. The third feature was that Hartini did not immediately reach an outcome that satisfied her. Over several lessons, she went through different phases of experimentation with a variety of approaches, each time basing her new teaching strategy on what she had learned from documenting her previous attempts. As a result, her research was cyclical, or *iterative*, going through several spirals of action and reflection that each built on the previous data she had collected. She continued by using a systematic approach that involved asking more questions, collecting new information, (re)analyzing her data, drawing out insights and conclusions, and interpreting her findings. Another feature was that she was intimately involved in the research both as a participant and a researcher in the social context and interaction of the classroom as it unfolded day to day. Her role in the research was therefore 'subjective', but at the same time involving 'objective' evidence collected through observation and reflection. Finally, through this overall research process, Hartini made broader

connections beyond this particular student group to her personal teaching philosophies and beliefs. As she noted:

...providing a supportive environment promote[s] learning...The happy atmosphere in my speaking class was inspiring. I would like to apply the technique of teaching speaking in my other class in the next school term with some adjustment and improvement.

As this example suggests, action research is productive for classroom practitioners as it focuses on issues and questions related to immediate practice and application. It involves exploring and discovering more about a specific issue which has significance for a teacher in relation to his or her own classroom and students. Because it is a flexible and open-ended approach to inquiry, the teacher researcher can select the methods used as needed and change them as new insights emerge and different techniques are required. Action researchers are interested in understanding what their explorations reveal, so developing personal practitioner knowledge and 'practical theories' is a central focus of this type of research. Action research uses mainly qualitative research data-collection methods, but particularly observation, interviews, questionnaires, and diary studies, and may also use discourse analysis.

## What is action research?

As the term suggests, **action research** is an approach that involves both action and research. However, the term can also be puzzling as it contains two ideas that do not seem to sit comfortably together – *action* and *research*. Let's take each word and consider its implications in an action research approach.

The *action* is usually associated with identifying and exploring an issue, question, dilemma, gap, or puzzle in your own context of work – the classroom, the school, or the institution at large – although I should mention here that action research is not used only in educational contexts (see Burns, 2007). The action, as we have seen in the example of Hartini's classroom, usually involves putting deliberate practical changes or 'interventions' in place to improve, modify, or develop the situation. There is a whole range of areas you may wish to investigate, but four broad areas of interest commonly provide a focus (Fischer, 2001). These are:

- your teaching and making changes in teaching practice (for example, 'How do my learners respond to my teaching of pronunciation?')
- your learners and how they learn ('What kinds of activities motivate my learners most effectively in writing class?')
- your interaction with the current curriculum and with curriculum innovation ('What can I do to make the school's mandated curriculum more appealing to my learners?')

- your teaching beliefs and philosophies and their connections with daily practice ('I am interested in the concept of teacher expertise. What should be the balance between learner-centeredness and teacher-centeredness in my classroom?').

The *research* in action research involves a systematic approach to collecting information, or data, usually using methods commonly associated with qualitative research. In this way, action research differs from the passing reflections or intuitive thoughts that most teachers have about their work. As the actions you have planned are tried out in the classroom, you record the information systematically, **reflecting** on it and analyzing what it is revealing, so that any further actions you plan are based on current evidence.

When you undertake action research, it may involve working on a specific issue in your own classroom, or it could involve collaboration with others in the same social and educational context – administrators, other teachers, students, or even students' family members. Action research can aim to influence what is done in individual classrooms or can have wider social and political effects and influence the way things are changed across a whole institution or system. So to summarize, the main point of action research is to find out more about what is going on in your own local context in order to change or improve current practice in that situation. Thus, action research can be contrasted with other types of research which may aim to hypothesize, describe, analyze, explain, interpret, theorize, and generalize – but not to make immediate changes in specific teaching practices within the research context.

There are numerous models and definitions of action research, but one that is widely known is from Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 162):

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out.

In addition to the reflective and practical aspects, Carr and Kemmis's definition incorporates sociocultural, political, and critical dimensions that are prominent in some versions of action research (see Burns, 2005, for discussion of different 'generations' of action research). Kemmis and McTaggart (1986, pp. 11–14) describe the essential stages as a self-reflective **action research cycle** of **planning, action, observation, and reflection**, where you:

- Identify a focus area of your practice that presents a 'puzzle', problem, or question and plan strategies to change or improve the situation.
- Collect information systematically about this focus area.
- Analyze and reflect on what the data you have collected are telling you about the situation.
- Act as necessary again to change or improve the situation.

*Hartini's teaching situation is a very positive one on the whole. However, because she is a reflective teacher, she wants to problematize her own ability to teach a high-achieving class and to delve more deeply into her personal theories of how to teach particular skills. She also wants to optimize learning opportunities for her students in order to improve their speaking abilities while systematically investigating the effectiveness of the new strategies she tries out. Her deeper understanding of the social and psychological aspects underpinning the learning in her class, as well as strategies for developing speaking skills, emerge gradually over several research cycles.*

## **Why use action research in applied linguistics research?**

Action research often appeals to teachers as it is one of a group of activities associated with reflective teaching. Educators who advocate reflective teaching argue that teachers' voices have been absent too long from the research literature. They propose that teachers should be recognized as thinking professionals who can 'both pose and solve problems related to their educational practice' (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 4).

For a number of reasons, many teachers find action research an engaging way to refresh their teaching and extend themselves professionally. It is highly contextualized within the personal daily workplace and provides a way to open up, question, and investigate the realities of the teaching situation. It can take your thinking in new directions and can be modified flexibly as you progress, as there are no fixed 'rules' about how the research process should proceed or what the outcomes should be. The methods used for collecting data can be 'doubled up' with information often readily available to a classroom teacher, thus allowing you access to new ways of thinking about classroom issues that are a natural part of your work. Issues that may have been challenging, even frustrating, you for some time can be resolved in a satisfying way through the research process. Also, action research actively encourages dialogue with colleagues who may be facing the same teaching dilemmas and wanting to share their thoughts and ideas with others. Working collaboratively in a research partnership or groups offers you forms of professional development that draw on your own practical theories, and professional and personal resources (see Burns, 1999; Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001; Richards & Farrell, 2005). For many teachers, action research offers professional insights that are more immediately applicable and relevant to their classrooms than externally structured workshops or courses that deliver research findings or advocate particular teaching approaches in a top-down way. Action research empowers teachers by enabling them to be 'agents' rather than 'recipients' of knowledge.

Teachers often report a great deal of personal satisfaction from investigating their classrooms more deeply, improving their working relationships with their students and other colleagues, (re)affirming their approaches

to and theories about teaching, challenging themselves to go beyond the routine of daily teaching practice by acquiring research skills, and learning how to present and share their research with others. Potentially, action research by language teachers also contributes to the body of practice and theory that the field requires for deeper knowledge about effective English language teaching (see, for example, Freeman & Johnson, 1998).

*Hartini's previous experiences of research involved outside researchers coming in and observing her class – 'but actually we were the object of the study, to do this and do that and we were evaluated by the researchers'. But because she is interested in her own development as a teacher, she has volunteered to be part of the collaborative teacher action research group. Although she is new to action research, she understands that it is an approach that focuses on teachers' practical classroom issues. She also hopes it will help her find out more about doing research, as well as give her a chance to discuss practical ideas with other teachers working in a high school situation. Most of all, she wants to achieve some of the teaching and learning outcomes she is looking for with her students.*

## Collecting your data

Essentially, there are two different **data collection** methods common in qualitative and action research – seeing and asking – in other words, **observational methods** and **nonobservational methods**. These approaches assist researchers to gain knowledge from an insider (or emic) perspective. They come from forms of research classically associated with sociology and ethnography. Table 6.1 summarizes the kinds of data-collection tools that teachers I have worked with have used:

Table 6.1 Observational and nonobservational methods for action research

<i>Observational</i>	<i>Nonobservational</i>
Examples:	Examples:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• brief notes or recorded comments made by the teacher while the class is in progress</li> <li>• audio- or video-recordings of classroom interaction</li> <li>• observation by self or a colleague on particular aspects of classroom action</li> <li>• transcripts of classroom interactions between teacher and students or students and students</li> <li>• maps, layouts, or sociograms of the classroom that trace the interactions between students and teacher</li> <li>• photographs of the physical context</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• questionnaires and surveys</li> <li>• interviews</li> <li>• class discussions/focus groups</li> <li>• diaries, journals, and logs kept by teacher or learners</li> <li>• classroom documents, such as materials used, samples of student writing or tests</li> </ul>

Source: Burns, 2007.

The methods highlighted here do not imply that action researchers avoid quantifying their data. Depending on the data sources and how the data-collection instruments are prepared, presenting numbers (percentages, ratings, rankings, and so on) may be part of data analysis (see the next section). However, using statistical calculations typically associated with quantitative approaches is uncommon.

It is important to remember that selecting a method for collecting your data is not random, but must be directly related to the kinds of questions or issues you want to know more about. If, for example, you want to find out what participants think about a particular issue, observing them as they do a learning activity will not provide the information you need. The three methods Hartini employed are frequently incorporated into action research, so let's consider in more detail how you could use them.

### **Data-collection method 1: Journals**

Journals, or diaries, are a common and popular learning activity in language classrooms, and they provide an ideal opportunity to serve also as a data-collection tool. Asking your students to write a journal could provide insights into their perceptions about the issues you are investigating. You can use a journal yourself to explore your observations, reflections, decisions, and insights. Table 6.2 provides examples of different ways in which a journal can be used, the aims, the timing, and the questions addressed.

Journals can be kept using whatever materials and techniques fit best with your personal circumstances and preferences – electronically through a word processor, electronic mail, a web-page, or a voice recorder; or in handwritten form using a notebook, loose-leaf file, or formatted diary. Apart from formal written entries, journals can include short post-it note memos or reminders, or visuals such as photographs, drawings, sketches, diagrams, maps, or illustrative samples of students' work. They can be used individually for your own reflection and analysis, or collaboratively for responses from other teachers, cowriters, 'critical friends', mentors, or supervisors. In short, a journal is a versatile data collection tool that can be tailored to your research needs (see Bailey, 1990; Burton & Carroll, 2001; Richards & Farrell (2005), and Chapter 11 of this book, *Introspective Techniques*).

### **Data-collection method 2: Observation**

Observation, as the term suggests, involves watching events and people in such a way that self-consciously heightens your senses (hearing, seeing, and monitoring) of what is happening. Observation in action research differs from the routine watching and listening inevitable in a classroom situation. In action research, it involves paying particular attention to things you are interested in investigating, and screening out for the time-being other events that are less relevant. Richards (2003) suggests four main focus areas: (a) the setting (for example, context, spaces, locations); (b) the systems (typical

Table 6.2 Using journals for action research

<i>Type of journal</i>	<i>Aim</i>	<i>Timing of entry</i>	<i>Question(s) addressed</i>
Factual journal	To record observations, incidents, or events in a factual way	Immediately after the lesson/event	What is happening here?
Descriptive journal (sometimes 'double-entry' – factual events on one side of page, and reactions on other)	To note factual events and personal reactions to them	As soon as possible after the lesson/event	What is happening here and what are my perceptions/ attitudes about the happenings?
Reflective journal	To capture 'stream-of-consciousness' ideas, thoughts, reflections, insights, feelings, reactions to lesson/events	Quite soon after the lesson/events, following thinking about and processing what occurred	What are my responses to/ interpretations of what has happened and what meanings can I make about these happenings?
Daily/weekly log	To construct an accumulative record of daily or weekly events	At the end of the period of time when the events took place	What happened in sequence throughout my teaching day/week?
Memoir journal ('stepping stones' (Progoff, 1975) or 'significant moments')	To develop an account of your development as a teacher and theories about your teaching.	At a time in the research process when you want to articulate your values and theories as a teacher	What and who influenced my development as a teacher and my teaching philosophies?

routines and procedures); (c) the people (roles, relationships, responses); (d) the behaviors (timing, activities, events).

The mode of observation can take place in different forms too, for example:

- Other-observation: observations by you of others in the classroom setting (learners, team-teachers, pre-service practicum teachers, classroom aides, bilingual assistants, parents)
- Self-observation: observation of your own behaviors, thoughts, actions, communication as the teacher
- Peer observation: observation of other teachers by you, or of you by other teachers (acting as mentors, influencers, critical friends, supervisors).

Observation is often accompanied by note-taking or audio- or video-recording. As the teacher is at the same time being the action researcher

and one of the key players in the research context, collecting data while teaching is difficult. This is where using recording devices is useful as they allow you to revisit the lesson and to review in detail the interactions that occurred. Audio-visual recording has the advantage of revealing nonverbal behavior, but is more intrusive than audio recording. If you use an audio-visual or audio-recorder, you should give the participants time to get used to it, so that it does not divert them from their typical behavior. Obviously, making notes can be difficult during class time (Samway, 1994), which is where a peer observer who records events on your behalf can be a useful collaborator. Giving them an outline or checklist of the areas you want them to focus on beforehand is more likely to provide the information and feedback you need than an open-ended request to 'just observe' the classroom. If a peer observer is not available, you will need to decide on other ways to record observations. Apart from the use of journals described above, teachers I have worked with have used: handheld recorders for quick spoken comments; post-it notes for rapid insights or reminders; 'jottings' about activities on lesson-plans or class-handouts; copies of board writing from electronic whiteboards; focused observations noted by students who take turns as core-searchers; photographs taken by teachers or students; maps and diagrams; mindmaps linking key observations and insights; logs or summaries made immediately when the lesson ends; and spoken and/or written debriefings with peer-observers immediately after the lesson. Again, the point is that observations can be recorded in ways that are flexible, convenient, and fit in with your own preferences.

### **Data-collection method 3: Interviews**

Interviews are widely used in qualitative research as a way of getting access to participants' backgrounds, self-reported actions, opinions, thoughts, beliefs, or interpretations. In action research, they can double as a classroom task if they are set up to focus on the issue under investigation. In Hartini's case, she wanted to get feedback about the impact of the changes she was making and decided to select a few of her students rather than the whole class. Choices about the number of interviews to conduct will depend on the time available – they can be more time-consuming than observations or surveys, for example – and whether the interview is your main data collection technique or an additional tool. Alternatively, to include the whole class, Hartini could have used the interview questions for a discussion activity or a small group task.

A problem that inevitably arises with teacher-student interviews is the power-relationship. Students may say what they believe they want their teachers to hear! McKay (2006, p. 55) suggests that teachers minimize this bias by: (a) explaining the purpose of the interview, what will be done with the information, and the benefits to participants; (b) being sensitive to students' responses and any awkwardness or nervousness that might arise;

(c) providing feedback and reinforcement to responses throughout the interview, using thanks, praise, and support. The interviewer also needs to consider how to record the responses; usually a recorder or notes are the main ways. Audio- or audio-visual recording captures the actual words but can seem intimidating and make the interviewee more nervous. Note-taking is less intrusive but means that word-for-word recording is not possible and diverts the researcher's attention away from the interviewee.

There are three types of interviews that are typically used in action research:

- Open-ended interview: conversational-type, unstructured, and individualized, with the purpose of bringing out issues related to the research.
- Semi-structured interviews: organized and supported, with a general set of questions covered according to how the interviewee responds.
- Structured interviews: directed and ordered, with each interview being asked questions in an identical sequence.

Not all interviews are conducted with individuals and you may prefer to set up focus group interviews which typically involve using any one of the above types with groups of six to eight participants (see Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Of course, before you begin collecting data, you need to make sure you have considered the ethics of action research (see Chapter 13). Not only are these linked with the quality of action research, but they are also related to doing research in a morally and professionally responsible way. It is important to ask permission of all those concerned and explain how you will involve them, outline your overall aims, and indicate how you will collect data and what you will do with them. Finally, you must ensure the anonymity of those involved when writing up and reporting the research.

*Hartini explains her research intentions to the principal of her school. He promises his support, so Hartini adds this to the note she sends home to parents. Not only does she get informed consent but the students and parents give her their enthusiastic support. Some of the students say they feel special to have been 'chosen'. As the research proceeds, she makes decisions about different methods needed for her investigations – journal writing, observations, note-taking, and student interviews. In her journal, she mainly records subjective personal and reflective comments about her students, her teaching strategies, and the insights and challenges she is experiencing in her research. Her observations focus on watching her students carefully as they undertake the new activities she organizes and recording the events objectively through brief notes that she makes during lessons; for example, 'Students are absorbed and keep taking turns in the conversation.' To supplement her notes, she audio-records a different group each time to analyze how their speaking skills are developing. She writes in*

*her journal that she finds note-taking a challenge as she is also busy teaching her class and monitoring students' speaking performance. However, the guided interviews she conducts with some of the students give her useful feedback on how they perceive the changes. 'You know, miss, when I told my friends in other classes about this, they were jealous and wished to have their speaking activities in the hall, too.' She audio-records the interviews so that she can analyze the students' exact words and use them when she reports her research.*

## **Organizing and interpreting your data**

It can be challenging, not to mention daunting, to be faced with a large amount of data that you are not sure what to do with. Depending on which methods you have used to collect data, this part of your research can seem overwhelming. As Patton (1990, pp. 371–372) notes, the challenge is to 'make sense' of the data, 'reduce the volume' and 'construct a framework' to show what is revealed. However, because of the cyclical nature of action research, you will probably find yourself reflecting from an early stage on what your data are telling you. As the research proceeds, it is important not to be swayed by your initial interpretations but to keep an open mind and to see how further data collection provides new information and interpretations. Let us look briefly at some of the main strategies to analyze action research data.

### **Data analysis strategy 1: Identifying themes and patterns**

One way of organizing and analyzing open-ended written data that comes from methods such as journal writing is to look for emerging themes or patterns. Are certain ideas or words frequently repeated? Do particular students or activities come to the fore? Does your attention seem to focus on particular issues, events, locations, classroom setups, or behaviors?

Hartini's journal, her first method, gave her time to stand back from events in her classroom and to think more deeply about key themes and ideas. Like other action researchers, she found that writing brings into play deeper feelings, ideas, and explanations that may not be obvious at first. One of Hartini's early journal themes was that, despite the protestations of other teachers, she made a clear distinction between the healthy noise of her students' speaking practice and the negative noise her colleagues thought was occurring. Rather than eliminating noise, this led her to think about innovative ways to relocate her class. Relocating the class brought out the theme of 'freedom to speak' which she realized was a strong belief about the way she approached teaching speaking. Associated with this was the theme of 'students working in groups' so that the class could move from being teaching-centered to learning-centered. She also wanted to ensure balanced opportunities for her students to speak and looked for new solutions about grouping when she observed that this balance did not occur. Identifying the

major themes and patterns across a body of data helps to make your data more manageable and reduce them in such a way that these themes can be presented in your findings.

### **Data analysis strategy 2: Coding verbal data**

Data collected from recorded interviews can be transcribed and then coded for the key topics that emerge. Transcription is very time-consuming, and after listening to your recordings, you will need to decide how much to transcribe and which parts of the data to focus on. Typically, coding involves reading over or listening to the data several times, aiming to arrive at the key categories. The main categories may be further coded into subcategories, but they should always emerge from the data and be supported by quotes that demonstrate the concepts. In Hartini's research, a major category that emerged from the interviews was 'student satisfaction' which she was able to code into two further subcategories: satisfaction with time for speaking (for example, 'I am happy and satisfied to have plenty of time to develop the topic of the discussion'); and satisfaction with the location for speaking ('When I told my friends about this, they were jealous and wished to have their speaking class in the hall, too').

### **Data analysis strategy 3: Narrating your observations**

One way you can analyze and reduce observations and observational note-taking data is by telling the research story. There are four ways that you can present your notes or recordings:

- Chronological – reducing them into a form that recounts the main events (the story of the process over time).
- Selective – picking out unusual, special, or critical events that show how/why the direction of the research changed (the story of key incidents).
- Particular – focusing on particular students, activities, classroom materials and their uses, or locations and describing their roles in the research (the story of a specific case).
- Conceptual – focusing on issues or decisions that arose as you observed and took notes on your practice (the story of your developing understandings and teaching theories).

### **Data analysis strategy 4: Quantifying the data**

I mentioned earlier that quantification is not excluded from action research and there are several different ways to quantify your data. One obvious way is to count the number of times particular incidents, behaviors, or utterances occur. For example, some action researchers have used classroom transcripts to note the number of times a particular student makes a contribution. Hartini could have decided to observe her speaking groups to identify how many turns each student contributed to the discussions and which students

contributed most. She could also have quantified the types of contributions they made (asking/responding to questions, providing descriptions, giving explanations, offering feedback, and so on) (see Burns, 1999, pp. 177–178 for an example).

Another common means of quantification is through using closed-response items in questionnaires, where participants are asked to provide answers to closed (yes/no/maybe), rank-ordered (list in order of preference, 1, 2, 3, and so on), or interval (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) scales. You can then present your data as tables, pie-charts, or bar-charts that show numbers and percentages.

Reducing and presenting the data are the first steps in moving toward conclusions and findings. To go beyond straightforward description of your research, data presentation, description, and commentary needs to be followed by interpreting the *essence* or meaning of your research, which could involve developing personal theories about its meaning in your classroom or for your teaching, and how it might have resonance for teachers elsewhere. It is at this point that action research invokes deeper questioning and critical understanding. This is also the point where action researchers may decide to contribute to the professional field by publicizing their research more widely, and it is to ways of presenting your research that we now turn.

*Hartini reports her observations qualitatively in ways that are chronological and particular, while moving also toward conceptual observations. Because she has collected several different types of data she can triangulate (or make comparisons among) the different sources. Her analyses are all qualitative. She reduces the data by identifying patterns in students' behavior, types of speaking skills used during different activities, and key words/themes arising from her reflective journal and student interviews. An important part of her self-reflexive process is verbalizing what she is learning from her analyses to her colleagues in the research group to clarify the meaning of her research experiences. Also, the action research approach means that she cannot wait until the end of the research to begin describing and interpreting her data. From the very first cycle, she realizes that action and analytical reflection go together – evidence from the data suggests what and how she needs to keep exploring and changing, and in turn, the changes lead to further questions and the need to collect and analyze other kinds of evidence.*

## **Presenting your findings**

Unfortunately, presenting your findings is the part that often gets left out in action research – it has always puzzled me, for instance, why this aspect is not specifically included in models such as those of Kemmis and McTaggart (1986). There could be several reasons: unlike academic

researchers, teachers are not employed and rewarded to publish research; or teachers may want to keep their research quiet in case they are regarded with suspicion, or even criticized, by their peers. Although classroom teaching means that teachers stand in front of an audience daily, many teachers are not confident, or trained, to give formal presentations; research conferences, or even teacher workshops, where your work is up for critical scrutiny can be intimidating; if you decide to write up your research, there are still relatively few journals that focus specifically on teacher action research and welcome such submissions; the formats and genres for writing up teacher research are not as well established as those for other forms of research. In short, practitioner researchers are often not confident about presenting, writing about, or publicizing their research, but in my view teachers' voices should be encouraged. Fortunately, more published accounts of teacher action research are becoming available. The TESOL series, edited by Farrell and listed in the Further Reading section at the end of this chapter, provides a wealth of interesting examples from many different locations, such as Bailey, Ray, and Rosado (2007) in Colombia, Roach (2008) in New Zealand, and Troudi (2007) in the United Arab Emirates.

If you are interested in doing action research, I would strongly urge you to consider ways to share your findings with others. Overwhelmingly, teacher audiences welcome hearing how their peers have investigated and dealt with issues common in classrooms worldwide, and they may be inspired to reflect on their own teaching or conduct action research themselves. When they have opportunities to attend presentations, bureaucrats, district officers, administrators, curriculum developers, school principals, and educational researchers also say they gain unexpected insights by hearing teacher researchers explain their classroom issues and describe the practical ways they have changed and improved them (Burns, 2000). To illustrate, Rochsantiningasih (2005) describes the positive reactions of the representatives from district high schools, the committee members of the regional teacher education authority, and officials from the Ministry of Education who attended the poster presentations and seminars of teachers she worked with.

Table 6.3 briefly suggests ways that you might consider presenting your research.

As you can see from Table 6.3, there are numerous ways you can disseminate your research to others – really, the possibilities are only limited by your imagination and also by the circumstances under which you present your research. If you are studying for a formal course, you will most likely need to submit a paper written in a conventional academic style, following the requirements of your institution. If you are writing a more general report for other teachers, you can probably be more creative in how you present your account.

Table 6.3 Presenting your action research

<i>Spoken presentations</i>	<i>Written presentations</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brief informal descriptions to other teachers at staff meetings or teacher workshops</li> <li>• Reports at project meetings to colleagues, research collaborators, mentors, 'critical friends'</li> <li>• Project summaries to fellow students, colleagues, or peers</li> <li>• Formal presentations to audiences at conferences or seminars focusing on teacher research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Web-postings on your own, your peer-group, or general teacher research sites</li> <li>• Poster presentations at workshops, seminars, conferences (often accompanied by informal discussion with a passing audience)</li> <li>• Contributions to newsletters (local, regional, national, international)</li> <li>• Submissions to a published collection of teacher action research (often following guidelines or a template)</li> <li>• Submissions to an action research-focused journal (following the guidelines and submission procedures)</li> </ul>

Written reports tend to follow a narrative style where you 'tell the story' of the research. If you do not feel very confident about writing up your research, the outline in Appendix 6.1, which I developed with Australian teachers, may provide a helpful guide (see also McKay, 2006, chapter 4, for an excellent discussion of writing research reports). Apart from the ideas presented in the table – and especially if you have a more visual bent – you may want to offer photographic or video displays, drawings, or paintings that symbolize the most striking features of your research and the part you and your students played in it, maps or diagrams showing the journey you took during the research, or even performances with colleagues showing the main events and discoveries you made (see Burns, 1999, chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion).

*Hartini is part of a collaborative action research group which is not required to submit a formal report. However, Hartini and her colleagues do write up accounts of their research, with support and feedback from their facilitator and from each other. They see these experiences as an apprenticeship in learning how to write for a wider research audience. As Hartini notes in her journal, 'I am not familiar with expressing my ideas in written form. I find it very difficult to develop an entry into a richer description. And time is also a constraint.'*

*They also develop posters based on the information in their accounts and present their posters and papers at a seminar for teachers, principals, administrators, and ministry officials. Hartini, like her colleagues, feels anxious before the seminar, but they receive positive feedback from the audience. This experience confirms their feelings of responsibility to share their research with others, so that concrete changes in the language classroom based on a systematic process of research can be illustrated to a wider audience.*

## Improving the quality of action research

One question that novice action researchers sometimes ask is, 'What's the point of this research, when it is just something I have done subjectively in my classroom?' In other words, they worry about the quality and validity of action research. One point to remember is that action research does not set out to answer questions that can be generalized to other classrooms. Nor does it aim for the kind of objectivity required in experimental quantitative research. Validity relates to the 'trustworthiness' of action research – are the findings presented supported by the data? How accurate are the claims being made?

One way to strengthen trustworthiness in action research is through **triangulation**, an approach commonly used in qualitative research and repeatedly discussed in this book. By using several data-collection techniques and comparing what they tell you, you can determine whether your analysis and findings are well supported across different sources of information. Another way is to undertake member checks, that is, taking the data back to the participants and asking whether your interpretations fit with what they intended to say or do. Other ways of increasing action research quality are: to follow LeCompte and Goetz's (1984) advice that 'the design of the study should fit lines of inquiry' (p. 245); to consider the changing dimensions and stages of the study; to describe the context in sufficient detail for the specific circumstances to be well understood; and to be as objective and unbiased as possible by drawing on the data rather than your assumptions. Schwalbach (2003) recommends that action research is reported using thick, rich description, also common in qualitative work. 'In that way, other teachers who read the findings will be able to ascertain whether or not the project is applicable to them or their students' (p. 9).

Action research is still a relatively new approach to investigation and therefore it is open to criticisms about its underlying philosophies and approaches, the tentativeness of the processes and procedures for carrying it out, the rigor of data analysis, its lack of replicability, and the limited generalizability of the findings (see Burns, 2005, 2007). As Somekh (1993, p. 29) notes, action research is 'chameleon-like'. It is difficult to make firm plans in advance about the underlying questions or steps in the approach, because the process must vary according to how the research resonates with changes and improvements in practice. Typically, too, it takes place in localized contexts so that, by the standards of experimental research, it is impossible to show that the findings can apply elsewhere. Because of the specific nature of classroom dynamics and practices, it is not possible to reproduce the exact conditions of the research to provide further evidence.

Action research draws frequently on qualitative research approaches, which typically rely on the ability of the researcher to interpret the meanings of the data. This inevitably leads to questions about the status and reliability of the

knowledge that is generated and the way in which it is reported. However, advocates of action research argue that these criticisms misinterpret the aims and goals of action research and come from the perspectives of the experimental research tradition. In reporting or publishing action research, it is important to 'tell the story of the research' as completely as possible, so that consumers of the research are able to clearly detect the steps in the design, the extent to which findings have been checked against those of other participants and tested through practical action, and how compatible the insights gained by the researcher are with the overall educational aims and demands of the teaching situation (see Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993, pp. 74–81; Burns, 1999, pp. 163–166). In other words, the researcher needs to show that the steps in the research are reasonable and logical and the conclusions presented are well supported by the available evidence.

*Hartini strengthens the findings of her research by triangulating her data sources. This allows her to make comparisons to see that the themes emerging from one source, for example her own observations, correspond with what she is finding in another, such as the responses of her students. Nevertheless, at the end of her action research, she feels she is only just beginning to find out how to do research, 'I am not always sure that the procedures of my research are correct.' In particular, she still finds it hard to analyze the data to identify themes and categories. She also feels that she has not evaluated the students' responses thoroughly enough to find out what specific speaking skills they thought they had developed. Next time, she will ask her students to fill in an evaluation form at the end of each activity, with both closed responses she can categories quantitatively and open responses where they can express their ideas more freely.*

## **Final thoughts**

Action research is still a relatively new development in the English language teaching field. Although it shares many of the features of other forms of qualitative research described in this book, it differs in being an approach that integrates theory generation with more immediate local and practical application. It also opens research to classroom practitioners in a way not usually envisaged in other approaches and thus takes research beyond just the control of traditional academic researchers. It deals with research in and on real workplace situations, looking at dilemmas and challenges in classrooms where the teacher cannot fully predict how daily activities will unfold and where constant change is inherent to the processes of the research and its findings. It is therefore extremely well suited to investigating what goes on in classrooms at a time of innovation or the implementation of educational reforms. Consequently, because of these differences and the strong focus in action research on process rather than product, there are still many unanswered questions, such as how rigorously it should follow qualitative

data-collection methods and analyses; what kind of research training teachers should have in order to conduct it; and what kind of research genres should be used to report it. Nevertheless, many teachers who undertake action research say that it offers them considerable professional satisfaction. It holds promise, too, as a way for teachers to make valuable contributions to the body of research knowledge about language classroom processes and practices. My hope is that having read this chapter you will be inspired, as Hartini was, to try action research yourself.

## Summary

- Action research is a form of self-reflective inquiry conducted by participants in a social situation, such as an educational context, with a view to changing and improving that situation.
- It can be used to investigate issues or dilemmas in your teaching situation in a systematic way.
- It involves a process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, as well as sharing the outcomes with others.
- Information, insights, and changes identified through one cycle of research can lead to further action research cycles.
- Data collection involves selecting from a range of observational (for example, classroom observation) and nonobservational (interviews and journals) methods according to what you are trying to change.
- Various analytical techniques are used to analyze the data. These could include quantitative analysis using descriptive statistics, as well as qualitative approaches that identify key categories, themes, and concepts.
- Triangulating the sources of data helps to ensure greater trustworthiness and credibility. It is important for action researchers to draw conclusions from the data and not from their own personal assumptions or biases about their teaching contexts.
- Reporting action research essentially involves ‘telling the story of the research’ in the voices of the people who participated in it.
- The biggest action research challenges for the teacher are time, knowledge about conducting research, the tensions between being a teacher and researcher at the same time, and experience in presenting the research.
- However, action research is generally seen as a form of research that appeals to teachers, as it is directly related to issues and challenges in their own teaching practices and contexts.

## Key words

acting

action research

action research cycle

data collection  
ethics in action research  
nonobservational methods  
observational methods  
observing  
planning  
reflecting  
triangulation

### **Post-reading questions**

1. Does the idea of doing action research attract you? If so, what skills would you need to develop to do it well? If it does not attract you, why not?
2. Have you ever tried to do action research yourself? What was the topic? What did the process involve? What were the outcomes?
3. Action research involves self-reflection. If you have not tried action research, have you used any formal techniques for monitoring your own practices, such as a diary or observations of your classroom? How useful was this experience?
4. What are some reasons why it is important to share your action research findings with others?

### **Tasks**

1. Find an article in a professional journal or book aimed at a teacher readership. Share the article with other colleagues and brainstorm ideas from it for action research topics. Think about questions such as the following: What issues puzzled you? What intrigued you? What inspired you? What reminded you of questions or dilemmas in your own classroom?
2. Brainstorm a list of areas that you and your colleagues could investigate in your classrooms. Use statements or questions like: 'I would like to help my students do...better. How can I do that?' or 'What would happen if I changed...?' Share your ideas with colleagues, and discuss what data you could collect and how you could analyze it. What problems do you anticipate you may have?
3. a) Select an issue you would like to investigate in your classroom. Develop some plans for changes you could make to your teaching over the next week. Try out these plans in the classroom to see what happens.  
b) Review what happened when you made the changes in your classroom. How did you and your students respond to them? Decide how you could develop your investigations further. Select one or more of the data-collection procedures described in this chapter and collect data over a specific period of time (for example, a week or month).

- c) At the end of your data-collection period, reflect on what the practical outcomes of your actions and your data are telling you. What changes/improvements/further questions can you identify? If possible share your ideas with colleagues.
- d) Decide how you could develop the cycle of planning, action, data-collection, and reflection to take the next steps in your investigation of your classroom.

## Appendix 6.1

### Writing up your action research project

Here are some suggestions for writing up your project. Depending on what you did in your research and how you did it, you might not need to use all of them.

1. *Title*
  - Use an engaging title that will attract your readers
2. *Background*
  - Say why you are interested in this topic
  - Say why you chose to be involved in this research  
(In this section you might want to refer to published material/research.)
3. *How you went about the research*
  - Give a description of your students (language level, language background, etc.)
  - Give a description of how you went about your research  
(This section might include a description of an approach/sequence of teaching activities.)
4. *Your observations*
  - Say how your teaching approaches/sequences affected student performance  
(It is very important here to give examples and evidence to support your comments.)
5. *Conclusion*
  - Give a general statement about the effectiveness of what you did
  - Show the ways in which your research will (or does already) inform your teaching practice
  - Provide any recommendations or suggestions for other teachers
6. *References*
  - Include the full reference of any publication that you have cited in your paper  
(Provide author, date, title, place of publication, publisher, page numbers.)

## Further reading

Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This is a detailed account of how to conduct action research that emphasizes the advantages and benefits of a collaborative model. The illustrative examples used are based on extensive experiences of collaborative action research in the Australian Adult Migrant English Program.

Burns, A. (2005). Action research: An evolving paradigm? *Language Teaching*, 38, 57–74.

This state-of-the-art article discusses the history, definitions, processes, and purposes of action research in education generally and more specifically in English language teaching. It also considers how action research relates to the more established paradigms of basic and applied research. In regard to the field of English language teaching, it outlines the scope and nature of recent action research studies and considers some of the challenges that face action research as a research approach.

Burns, A., Hood, S., & de Silva Joyce, H. (1995–2005). *Teachers' voices, series 1–8*. Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research.

Each volume in this series focuses on a specific research project conducted in the Australian Adult Migrant English Program. Introductory chapters are followed by reports from teachers involved in the project. Volume 8 contains a DVD showing the teacher-authors in their classrooms.

Edge, J. (Ed.). (2001). *Action research. Case studies in TESOL practice series*. (Series Editor: J. Burton). Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

Following an interesting and useful introductory chapter by the volume editor, examples of action research conducted by teachers from around the world are presented.

Farrell, T. S. C. (Series Editor). *Language teacher research series*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

The volumes in this series present collections of research conducted by teachers in different regions of the world. They provide accessible examples that illustrate how teachers can go about conducting and reporting research in their own teaching contexts. Other volumes in the series are:

Borg, S. (Ed.). (2006). *Language teacher research in Europe*.

Burns, A., & Burton, J. (Eds.). (2008). *Language teacher research in Australia and New Zealand*.

Coombe, C., & Barlow, L. (Eds.). (2007). *Language teacher research in the Middle East*.

Farrell, T. S. C. (Ed.). (2006). *Language teacher research in Asia*.

Makalela, L. (Ed.). (2009). *Language teacher research in Africa*.

McGarrell, H. (Eds.). (2007). *Language teacher research in the Americas*.

These volumes are excellent sources of examples of action research (and other types of research) conducted by classroom practitioners at all levels of education and teaching experience in different regions of the world. They provide a very wide range of ideas about topics, research approaches, and methods that can be used to investigate teachers' own educational contexts.

Wallace, M. (1998). *Action research for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This volume provides a readable and hands-on introduction to action research, illustrated by short extracts from teacher research conducted as part of a teacher training program.

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# 7

## Mixed Methods

*Nataliya V. Ivankova and John W. Creswell*

### Pre-reading questions

1. What are the main characteristics of quantitative research? Of qualitative research? In what ways do they differ from each other?
2. What do you know about mixed methods research? What are its main characteristics?
3. In what research situations do you think it is appropriate to use mixed methods research?
4. From your prior readings of research studies, can you identify any specific ways for combining quantitative and qualitative data within one study?
5. What are the main steps in designing and conducting a research study? Do you think these steps will be very different for designing and conducting a mixed methods study?

### Illustrative example

*Li Jie and Qin Xiaoqing are foreign language education researchers in China. They are intrigued by a growing tendency in recent literature on ESL/EFL classroom research to relate student learning style and learning strategy to English language learning success. They decide to examine this relationship through research on university students in China. After careful consideration, they decide to use a mixed methods approach because they believe it will allow for a more complete understanding of the research problem. They choose to investigate three research questions: What are students' learning styles? How do their learning styles affect their use of learning strategies? How do high and low achievers with the same learning styles use learning strategies differently? Jie and Xiaoqing first collect quantitative data from a sample of 187 second-year non-English major undergraduate students from two universities in China. There were three sources for this data: a standardized personality test to measure students' learning styles; a self-developed questionnaire on the use of learning*

strategies; and end-of-term English tests to indicate students' language learning outcomes. After analyzing this data, they find that learning styles have a significant influence on learners' learning strategy choices. To probe their major findings from the quantitative data in more depth and to understand how high and low achievers with the same learning styles use learning strategies differently, Jie and Xiaoqing then select a small group of three high and three low achiever students (based on the end-of-term English test) from their sample, and interview them to obtain qualitative data. Qualitative analysis reveals that high achievers are more capable of employing learning strategies typically associated with their nonpreferred styles.

Using both quantitative and qualitative data gives the researchers an opportunity to obtain an overall picture of the learning style distributions of the students and the relationship between learning styles and learning strategies. It also provides greater insights into the differences of learning strategy deployment between high and low achievers of the same learning style. Based on the study results the authors conclude that learning styles may influence learners' language learning outcomes through their relationship with learning strategies. They make the following recommendations: (a) teachers should help students become self-aware learners; (b) teachers should encourage students to experiment with extending their preferred styles; and (c) teachers should incorporate learning styles into learning strategy training. (Based on Jie & Xiaoqing, 2006)

## Overview

The complexity of the modern world demands more sophisticated approaches to understand it. To best research an issue, we need to be flexible, and finding 'what works' often calls for combining complementary **research methods** within a single study. **Mixed methods research**, with its focus on the meaningful integration of both quantitative and qualitative data, can provide a depth and breadth that a single approach may lack by itself. However, because of this integration, mixed methods research can often prove challenging for novice researchers.

Over the last two decades, the practice of collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data within one study has become relatively popular in the social sciences (Creswell, 2003). In applied linguistics, this 'mixed methods approach' is still a relatively new phenomenon, but will be used more often in the future as it becomes clear that combining quantitative and qualitative data provides a more multidimensional and accurate view of the process of second language acquisition (Rocco, Bliss, Gallagher, Perez-Prado, Alacaci, Dwyer et al., 2003). Mixed methods can be used in case study and action research, and can use observation, interviews, open-response questionnaire items, verbal reports, and diaries to collect data. This chapter is designed to introduce you to the mixed methods approach

to research and the use of this approach in applied linguistics research. We describe four basic mixed methods designs – Explanatory, Exploratory, Triangulation, and Embedded – and then offer an eight-step process for designing and conducting a mixed methods study.

## What is mixed methods research?

There are three broad research traditions in the social sciences: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Both the quantitative and qualitative traditions are well established. In **quantitative research**, researchers gather numeric data, for example, proficiency test scores or multiple choice question (or ‘closed-response item’) responses on questionnaires; they then try to objectively analyze this data using a variety of statistical techniques, and let the numeric results prove or disprove a hypothesis so that those results can be generalized from a sample to a larger population.

On the other hand, in **qualitative research** researchers try to understand participants’ experiences with the central phenomenon (the focus of the study) in a natural setting, using research approaches such as ethnography or case study. Instead of numbers, researchers collect words (text, such as interviews or observation notes), and images (pictures or audio-visual footage) about the phenomenon of the study. Without preconceived hypotheses or ideas they analyze the data for common patterns (themes) in order to allow multiple interpretations of participants’ individual experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In this type of research, the goal is not to try to prove or disprove something; rather, the aim is to explore and then describe in rich detail the phenomenon that is being investigated.

As compared with quantitative and qualitative research, mixed methods research is an emerging field of study and may be less recognized than more conventional research traditions. It is defined as a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and **mixing** quantitative and qualitative data at some stage of the research process within a single study in order to understand a research problem more completely (Creswell, 2008). In mixed methods research, a researcher collects both numeric information (for example, through closed-response items on questionnaires) and text (from face-to-face interviews, picture descriptions, and so on) to better answer a study’s research questions. The term ‘mixing’ implies that the data or the findings are integrated and/or connected at one or several points within the study. Although many models and designs have been discussed in the mixed methods literature (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Morgan, 1998; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998), the four mixed methods designs most frequently used are Explanatory Design, Exploratory Design, Triangulation Design, and Embedded Design. Following is a description of the general characteristics these designs share and then a brief discussion of each one.

## Characteristics of mixed methods research

Mixed methods research has defined procedures for collecting, analyzing, and mixing quantitative and qualitative data in a study, based upon three main characteristics: (a) **timing**, or the sequence or order of collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data in a study; (b) **weighting**, or the priority given to one type of data in the study; and (c) **mixing**, or the way quantitative and qualitative data and results are integrated during the research process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

These characteristics will be introduced here and then elaborated on in the description of mixed methods designs which follows, using Creswell's (2003) widely used notation (based upon Morse, 1991, and Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998): large and small letters in the labels (QUAL/quan or qual/QUAN) indicate weight of the quantitative and/or qualitative approaches, and the symbols → and + indicate timing in the data collection and analysis.

There are three main characteristics of mixed methods research:

- *Timing*: Timing refers to the sequence or order of the implementation of the quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis procedures in the study when one phase builds on another. The two possible timing options include: (1) sequentially – collecting and analyzing the data one after the other (quantitative → qualitative, or qualitative → quantitative); or (2) concurrently – collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data at the same time (quantitative + qualitative) (Morse, 1991).
- *Weighting*: Weighting refers to the relative importance or priority given to each type of data. The two possible weighting options include giving equal weight to the quantitative (QUAN) and qualitative (QUAL) data, or giving one type greater emphasis – to quantitative data (QUAN vs. qual) or qualitative data (QUAL vs. quan). When making the weighting decision, there are a number of things to consider: What is more strongly emphasized in the purpose statement, exploration (qualitative) or prediction (quantitative)? Which data collection process, quantitative or qualitative, is most central to the study? Which data analysis procedures, quantitative or qualitative, are more sophisticated, complex, and discussed more extensively when the study is presented?
- *Mixing*: Mixing refers to how the two methods, quantitative or qualitative, are integrated within the study. It is an essential component of mixed methods research (Greene et al., 1989; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Mixing quantitative and qualitative data can occur at different stages in the study: during the data collection, the data analysis, or the interpretation of results. Deciding on how to mix depends on the purpose of the study, its design, and the strategies used for data collection and analysis.

If the purpose of the study is to *explain* quantitative results that were obtained first, qualitative data can be collected after quantitative data by interviewing (or administering an open-response questionnaire) to a small number of participants, based on these quantitative results (see *Explanatory Design* below). Mixing here occurs at two points: when selecting participants for interview and creating interview questions grounded in the statistical results (connecting the quantitative and qualitative phases), and at the interpretation stage of the study, when discussing the results from the two phases. If the purpose of the study is to *develop a closed-response questionnaire or survey* grounded in the views of the participants, first qualitative data is collected through interviews and then the questionnaire is developed; then quantitative data is collected using this questionnaire. Mixing here occurs while analyzing the qualitative data for codes and themes and transforming them into questionnaire items and scales (see *Exploratory Design* below). If the purpose of the study is to *compare* the quantitative and qualitative results, both quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed separately. Mixing here occurs at the data interpretation stage, when the results from two data sets are compared (see *Triangulation Design* and *Embedded Design* below).

## Principal mixed methods designs

Four mixed methods designs that are most frequently used by researchers are the Explanatory Design, the Exploratory Design, the Triangulation Design, and the Embedded Design. In the following sections we will describe and illustrate each design using the notation system discussed above.

### Design 1: Explanatory Design

The **Explanatory Design** is the most straightforward mixed methods design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003), and it is used extensively in applied linguistics research. The word *explanatory* in the design name suggests explanation: qualitative findings are used to help explain, refine, clarify, or extend quantitative results. Quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed in sequence: first quantitative data is collected and analyzed, and then qualitative data. A typical example would include conducting follow-up qualitative interviews of representative or extreme cases to more deeply explore quantitative results. An example of this is Saito and Ebsworth's (2004) exploration of Japanese ESL students' perceptions of the classroom activities and classroom-related behaviors of their English teachers in the United States and in Japan. They first surveyed a large sample of Japanese ESL learners in both countries using a 49-item questionnaire, and then they conducted follow-up interviews with three students to help interpret and elaborate the results obtained from the survey. Figure 7.1 presents the visual diagram of the Explanatory Design procedures in this study.

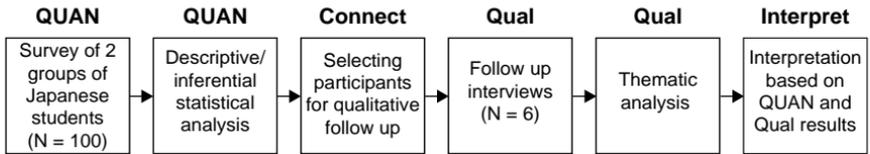


Figure 7.1 Explanatory Design procedures in Saito and Ebsworth's (2004) study

The weight in this design is typically placed on quantitative data because the quantitative data collection represents the major aspect of this mixed methods data collection process; it also comes first in the sequence. The mixing of the two methods occurs at two stages in the research process: first, while developing the qualitative interview protocol and choosing the participants for in-depth exploration of the quantitative results; and second, while integrating the results from both quantitative and qualitative phases at the interpretation and discussion stage of the study.

The data analysis typically involves several options. A researcher might choose to follow up on extreme or representative cases from the quantitative analysis, or seek to explain the quantitative results in more depth. The structure of an Explanatory Design report typically follows the sequential character of the design: the quantitative data collection and analysis is described first, followed by the description of the qualitative data collection and analysis. A separate section in the report might discuss how the two phases were connected in the research process. During the discussion of the study results, a researcher explains how the qualitative findings helped elaborate or extend the quantitative results.

An advantage of the Explanatory Design is that its two separate phases make it straightforward and reasonably easy to implement for novice researchers. This sequential nature also makes it simple to describe and report on. However, compared to a straightforward quantitative study, an Explanatory Design study may take longer to complete.

## Design 2: Exploratory Design

The **Exploratory Design** is used when a researcher needs first to explore a topic using qualitative data before measuring or testing it quantitatively. This design is particularly appropriate when studying a topic which has been little explored, so there is little information about the relevant constructs (ways of conceptualizing the topic) and how to measure important variables. In this design, the qualitative data is collected and analyzed first, followed by the collection and analysis of the quantitative data.

As the name suggests, this design allows a researcher first *to explore* a topic by collecting qualitative data to help identify principal themes and possibly generate a theory. Then, the researcher collects quantitative data to examine the initial qualitative results, such as to test a theory or to develop

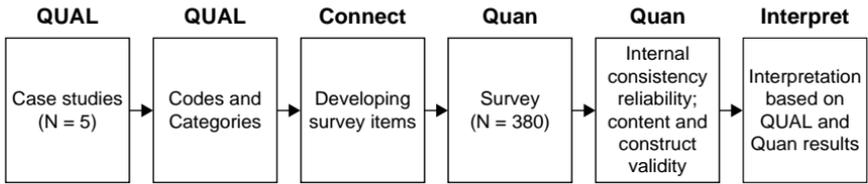


Figure 7.2 Exploratory Design procedures in Daud's (1995) study

a measurement instrument such as a questionnaire or survey (Morgan, 1998). For example, Daud (1995) applied the Exploratory Design to investigate teachers' attitudes toward computer-assisted language learning (CALL). In the first phase, five case studies were conducted in four schools and a university to explore teachers' attitudes toward CALL. Next the qualitative findings from these studies were used to develop a 56-item questionnaire to measure those attitudes, which was then tested for reliability and validity with a larger sample of school and university teachers. Figure 7.2 presents the visual diagram of the Exploratory Design procedures in this study.

The weight in the Exploratory Design is typically given to the qualitative data, because it provides the foundation for the quantitative exploration of the topic. The mixing of the two methods occurs while developing the quantitative survey items based on the qualitative data analysis and also while comparing the quantitative results with initial qualitative findings. The most popular approach for data analysis is to use the qualitative themes and categories to develop the quantitative measurement instrument (Creswell, 2008). In writing up the research, a researcher first reports the qualitative data collection and analysis and then explains the development of the instrument. Next, the quantitative data collection and analysis are discussed, and finally the overall results of the study are presented.

Like the Explanatory Design, the two-phase nature of the Exploratory Design makes it straightforward for a researcher to design, implement, and report on. However, like in the Explanatory Design, implementing the two separate phases of the study can be time consuming. In addition, developing a measurement instrument is not easy. A researcher must use careful procedures to ensure that it is grounded in the qualitative results – that it is not constructed from common sense or theory, but based upon the qualitative data collected – and that it is tested for reliability and validity.

### Design 3: Triangulation Design

The **Triangulation Design** is the most common mixed methods design, and also the most complex. The name *triangulation* comes from the same term used in surveying and in ship navigation in which multiple measurements are used to provide the best estimate of the location at a specific point, like the point at the top of a triangle (Jick, 1979). The Explanatory

and the Exploratory Designs are straightforward to implement because of the sequential order of each data collection and analysis phase; however in the Triangulation Design, quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously. For instance, both a questionnaire and focus group interviews are conducted at the same time with the same participants, and then a researcher compares the quantitative and qualitative results. Often quantitative and qualitative data are collected using a questionnaire that contains closed-ended (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) response items. Triangulation design is best suited when a researcher wants to collect both types of data at the same time about a single phenomenon, in order to compare and contrast the different findings to produce well-validated conclusions (Creswell et al., 2003). For example, Lopez and Tashakkori (2006) applied the Triangulation Design to investigate the effects of two types of bilingual programs (two-way and transitional) on the academic performance and attitudes of fifth grade students who entered kindergarten or first grade with different levels of English proficiency. They collected both quantitative data, such as students' academic achievement scores, Spanish reading skills, and attitudes toward bilingualism, and qualitative data, including interviews with the randomly selected subsample of 32 students. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected, analyzed, and reported separately. Quantitative data analysis revealed no significant differences in standardized measures of English achievement between the two programs, although significant differences were found among students in oral language acquisition in English, Spanish-reading ability, their attitudes, and perceived levels of proficiency in English and Spanish. Qualitative data indicated that students in the two-way bilingual education program had more positive attitudes toward bilingualism. Based on the quantitative and qualitative results of the study Lopez and Tashakkori concluded that despite some similarities in the outcomes, each bilingual education program also has its unique effects. Figure 7.3 presents the visual diagram of the Triangulation Design procedures in this study.

The weight in this design can be given to either quantitative or qualitative data, or equally to both. The mixing of the two methods occurs either at the data analysis stage or during the interpretation of the results from the two components of the study. As for data analysis, there are a lot of options. The most popular approach is to compare the quantitative results and qualitative findings to confirm or cross-validate the findings from the entire study. Another commonly used strategy is to transform qualitative data into quantitative data by counting codes, categories, and themes (called **quantifying**), or quantitative data into qualitative data through cluster or factor analysis (called **qualifying**) in order to compare it directly with another data set or include it in the overall analysis. The reporting structure of the Triangulation Design differs from the sequential Explanatory and

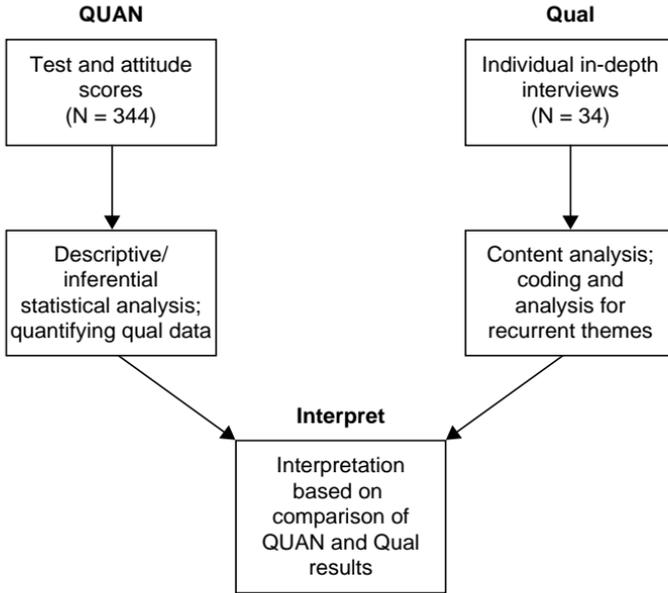


Figure 7.3 Triangulation Design procedures in Lopez and Tashakkori's (2006) study

Exploratory designs. A researcher presents the quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis in separate sections, but combines the interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative findings into the same section, to discuss whether the results from both study components converge or show divergence.

An advantage of the Triangulation Design is that it typically takes less time to complete than the sequential Explanatory and Exploratory designs. It can also result in well-validated and substantiated findings because it offsets the weaknesses of one method with the strengths of another method (Creswell et al., 2003). There are, however, two significant challenges: first, it requires a lot of effort, as well as expertise, to collect and analyze two separate sets of data simultaneously; and second, it is sometimes technically difficult to compare different quantitative and qualitative data sets, especially if the two sets of results do not converge.

#### Design 4: Embedded Design

The **Embedded Design** is used when a researcher needs to answer a secondary research question that requires the use of different types of data within a traditional quantitative or qualitative design. To accomplish this, one type of data collection and analysis is embedded or nested within the design associated with another type of data. For example, a researcher may need

to embed qualitative data within a quantitative experimental design and will conduct qualitative interviews during the research study to understand the reasons for certain participants' behaviors. Less frequently, a researcher may embed quantitative survey data within a traditionally qualitative case study to help describe the broader context in which a case is situated. Unlike the Triangulation Design, the Embedded Design has a predominant method (quantitative or qualitative) that guides the research study (Creswell et al., 2003). For example, Andrews (2006) used the Embedded Design to study the development of teachers' second language awareness with specific reference to cognitive processes of teaching English and particularly grammar. The study was primarily qualitative by nature, as the data was collected in the form of interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and teacher narratives. The quantitative data, in the form of test scores, was used to answer one study research question, 'What is the present level (as measured by a test) of each teacher's subject-matter knowledge as it relates to grammar?' (p. 4), and inform the discussion of the teachers' past and present subject-matter knowledge. The analysis of the test scores over time indicated that teachers' language awareness and grammar-related cognition had changed very little, while the overall study described teachers' underlying beliefs about grammar pedagogy and the role of explicit grammar teaching. Figure 7.4 presents the visual diagram of the Embedded Design procedures in this study.

The weight in this design is given to the predominant method, quantitative or qualitative, that guides the project (Creswell et al., 2003) and within which another method is embedded. The mixing of the quantitative and qualitative data occurs either at the data analysis stage if the data is collected concurrently (like in the Triangulation Design), or at the interpretation stage if the two types of data are collected sequentially (like in the Explanatory and the Exploratory Designs). The quantitative and qualitative data analysis in this design is conducted separately because they seek to answer different research questions. Depending on the timing of the data collection, the structure of the report could follow either a sequential or concurrent design model.

The main advantage of the Embedded Design is that a researcher builds the study on a design that is well known (for example, a case study). Another advantage is that a researcher can collect the two types of data at the same

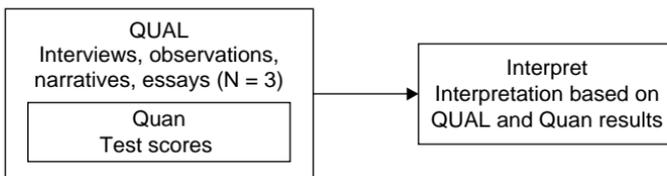


Figure 7.4 Embedded Design procedures in Andrews's (2006) study

time. However, it might sometimes be challenging to integrate the quantitative and qualitative results because the two methods are used to answer different research questions. Nevertheless, due to the nature of the questions, researchers can present the two sets of results separately.

### **Why use mixed methods in applied linguistics research?**

Compared to quantitative and qualitative research approaches, mixed methods research is still relatively new. However, its perceived legitimacy is growing and this new approach is increasingly being used in many social science fields, including applied linguistics. In fact, Patton (2002) argues that studies that use only one method are more vulnerable to errors linked to that particular method compared with studies that use multiple methods, in which different types of data can help validate each other. Mixed methods research is also an intuitive way of conducting inquiry: many individuals look to both numbers and stories to make sense of everyday events. In addition, mixed methods research is flexible and allows a researcher to choose the best strategies, quantitative and qualitative, to address the study research questions and place more emphasis on finding answers to these questions rather than the methods used. Thus, it can provide answers to both 'what' and 'why' questions and this way gain a more complete understanding of the research problem than if qualitative or quantitative methods were used alone.

A mixed methods approach can have a number of benefits. It can be helpful in gaining in-depth understanding of trends and patterns; generating and testing theories; developing new measurement instruments; studying diverse perspectives; or understanding the relationship between variables. In any of these situations, collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data within one study will produce a more comprehensive understanding of the research situation than collecting only one type of data or the other (Greene et al., 1989; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Creswell et al. (2003) identified four main reasons for combining quantitative and qualitative methods within one study. Each of these objectives is addressed by a specific mixed methods design that we discussed above: (a) explain or elaborate on quantitative results with subsequent qualitative data (the Explanatory Design); (b) use qualitative data to develop a new measurement instrument or theory that is subsequently tested (the Exploratory Design); (c) compare quantitative and qualitative data sets to produce well-validated conclusions (the Triangulation Design); and (d) enhance a study with a supplemental data set, either quantitative or qualitative (the Embedded Design).

*In the illustrative example, Jie and Xiaoqing used a mixed methods approach to study the relationship between Chinese students' learning styles and learning strategies to English language learning success. Collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data gave them an opportunity to gain in-depth*

*understanding of the trends and patterns in such relationships. They pursued the first objective outlined by Creswell et al. (2003) – to explain or elaborate on the initial quantitative results with subsequent qualitative data. Specifically, they collected quantitative data to get an overall picture of the students' learning style distributions and the relationship of learning styles to learning strategies, while the qualitative interview data helped them explore the significant quantitative results to gain greater insights into the differences of using learning strategies by high and low achievers.*

## **Designing and conducting a mixed methods study**

While designing and conducting a mixed methods study it is useful, especially for novice researchers, to follow a set of logical steps. Here we present eight basic research steps, steps that can also be used to evaluate mixed methods studies conducted by other researchers. Their order does not necessarily follow the logic of typical approaches to designing a study, but, in the end, the major aspects of design will be addressed. In our approach, the selection of a research design is completed early in the process, and this selection, in turn, informs many other aspects needed to design the study. We will describe these steps and illustrate them with Jie and Xiaoqing's mixed methods study. The eight steps include:

- Step 1: Determine if mixed methods research is the best approach to address the research problem that you want to study.
- Step 2: Select a specific mixed methods design (Explanatory, Exploratory, Triangulation, Embedded).
- Step 3: Write a detailed mixed methods purpose statement for your study.
- Step 4: Write specific research questions to address the quantitative and qualitative aspects of your study.
- Step 5: Choose the quantitative and qualitative data to collect.
- Step 6: Draw a visual diagram of the procedures in your study.
- Step 7: Collect and analyze the quantitative and qualitative data for your study – this is the major part of the study.
- Step 8: Write the final report reflecting the mixed methods design you used in the study.

### **Step 1: Determine if mixed methods is the best approach**

You need to decide if a mixed methods approach is the best choice for your study. Here are some questions to guide your decision: Would quantitative or qualitative data alone provide too limited an understanding of the research problem? Would the use of both quantitative and qualitative data enhance understanding? Are there advantages in having both a large sample representative of the population (quantitative data) and the views or experiences

of selected individuals (qualitative data)? On the practical side, do you have the knowledge and skills necessary to conduct both quantitative and qualitative research? Is there enough time for collecting both types of data?

If you can answer ‘yes’ to all of these questions, then a mixed methods approach would be better for your study than using a single method. From here, you need to clarify your rationale for choosing this approach. What is the specific purpose for using mixed methods research? Will it help you gain in-depth understanding of trends and patterns, develop a new measurement instrument, or produce well-validated conclusions?

*In the illustrative example, Jie and Xiaoqing expected that the quantitative data would help them get an overall picture of the learning style distributions of the participants and the relation of learning styles to learning strategies. Then, significant quantitative results could be explored through qualitative interviews to gain greater insights into the differences of learning strategy use between high and low achievers. Thus, the rationale for using mixed methods was that the qualitative findings were anticipated to help explain the results of the quantitative investigation.*

### **Step 2: Select a specific mixed methods design**

Once you have decided that mixed methods is the right approach, you must next determine which mixed methods design is the most appropriate for your study – Explanatory, Exploratory, Triangulation, or Embedded. Think again about the purpose of the study and the rationale for using a mixed methods approach. Also, consider the timing of the quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, the weight given to quantitative and qualitative data sets in the study, and the stage in the research process where mixing or integration of the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study would occur.

*Jie and Xiaoqing used the Explanatory Design because the purpose of their study was to obtain a general picture of the relationship between learning styles and language strategies of foreign language learners, and then use the qualitative findings to obtain a more in-depth understanding. The quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed in two sequential stages, in which the qualitative phase was built on the quantitative through purposeful sampling. The weight was given to the quantitative data, and the two methods were connected after the quantitative data analysis was completed and the participants for the follow up qualitative interviews were selected.*

### **Step 3: Write a detailed mixed methods purpose statement**

Getting focused is an important part of the process of research in general. A mixed methods purpose statement can help you do that. It typically consists of three sentences and includes the overall purpose of the study and

the purpose of each quantitative and qualitative component. It should also indicate the site and sample for each phase. We recommend using the following sample script to assist in writing a purpose statement – fill in the information that applies to the study in the space between the parentheses (Ivankova, Creswell, & Plano Clark, 2007):

The purpose of this (Explanatory/Exploratory/Triangulation/Embedded) mixed methods study is to (state the overall intent and the reason for collecting both types of data for this study). The goal of the quantitative phase of the study is to (state the purpose of the quantitative aspect of the study; indicate independent and dependent variables, instruments, participants, and site). The goal of the qualitative phase of the study is to (state the purpose of the qualitative aspect of the study; indicate the central phenomenon, type of data, participants, and site).

*Since Jie and Xiaoqing did not provide a mixed methods purpose statement in their published study, we developed one following the suggested script:*

*The purpose of this Explanatory mixed methods study is to examine the relationship between learning styles and learning strategies of foreign language learners in China. The goal of the quantitative phase of the study is to obtain an overall picture of the learning style distributions of 187 Chinese tertiary-level English learners and the relationship of learning styles to learning strategies. The goal of the qualitative phase of the study is to more deeply explore the differences of learning strategy use between high and low achievers of the same learning style through individual interviews with six purposefully selected participants.*

#### **Step 4: Write specific research questions**

Next you need to write up the specific questions that you are going to investigate. Specific research questions should be developed for both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study. When writing the quantitative research questions or hypotheses it is necessary to specify independent and dependent variables and focus on their relationship. When writing the qualitative research questions it is necessary to indicate the central phenomenon that is to be explored. We recommend also developing a mixed methods research question that spans both quantitative and qualitative data collection and that reflects the rationale for choosing a specific mixed methods design.

*In the illustrative study, Jie and Xiaoqing did not specify the research questions for the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study; instead they listed three research questions which follow the quantitative-qualitative pattern of the Explanatory Design:*

- a) *What are the learning style distributions of the Chinese tertiary-level English learners? (quantitative)*

b) *How do learning styles affect the use of learning strategies of tertiary-level English learners in China? (quantitative)*

c) *What differences relating to learning strategy deployment exist between high and low achievers of the same learning styles? (qualitative)*

*These three questions are clear and focused, but we would suggest adding an overall mixed methods research question, such as:*

d) *'How do the qualitative findings explain the statistical results obtained in the quantitative phase about the relationship between learning styles and language strategies of foreign language learners?'*

*This would emphasize the Explanatory Design of the study.*

### **Step 5: Choose the quantitative and qualitative data to collect**

Your research questions should guide the decision about the types of quantitative and qualitative data to collect in the study; it is important to choose the types of data that will best answer the study research questions *and* that are not too difficult to collect. Quantitative data that researchers can consider collecting include closed-response questionnaire items, test scores, checklists, and records. Typical qualitative data collection methods include open-response questionnaires, individual and focus group interviews, observations, and artifact analysis (documents and objects).

At this stage in the process, it is important to decide on the weight that the quantitative and qualitative data sets will have in the overall study design. Where will your emphasis be? Additional things to think about are the type and size of sample needed for each phase of the study. Quantitative research often requires a large random sampling to allow for the generalization of the study results to a wider population. Alternatively, qualitative research generally uses a small purposeful sampling to promote an in-depth understanding of the explored phenomenon. In a mixed methods study, it is typical to select both quantitative and qualitative samples from the same population. For example, all students in a class may be surveyed, and then a few of those students interviewed to investigate typical or extreme cases revealed in the survey findings.

*Jie and Xiaoqing's quantitative research questions, 'What are the learning style distributions of the Chinese tertiary-level English learners?' and 'How do learning styles affect the use of learning strategies of tertiary-level English learners in China?', led them to ask their 187 second-year undergraduate participants to complete the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Measure of Learning Styles, and a self-developed questionnaire on the use of learning strategies. In addition, they used the scores on the final English tests as indicators of students' language learning outcomes. To answer the qualitative research question, 'What differences relating to learning strategy deployment exist between high and low achievers of the same learning styles?' and to gain the students' perspectives, they interviewed six of the 187 participants,*

*selecting three students from the top group and three others from the bottom group.*

### **Step 6: Draw a visual diagram**

Since mixed methods studies are often complicated with multiple stages of data collection and analysis, it can be useful to create a **visual diagram** of all the procedures in your study. A visual diagram helps you envisage the big picture, so you can see the flow and timing of the quantitative and qualitative data collection, the weight given to the quantitative and qualitative data and where the mixing of the two methods will occur within a study. Including the visual diagram in a research report also helps the readers understand the study (see Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick (2006) for specific rules for drawing mixed methods visual models).

*Jie and Xiaoqing did not provide a visual diagram for their study, so we developed a visual model of the Explanatory Design used in their study based on their report (see Figure 7.5).*

### **Step 7: Collect and analyze the quantitative and qualitative data**

After the data is collected, you need to organize it into files to prepare for analysis. You should follow the basic procedures specified for each type of data, quantitative and qualitative. The choice of strategies for the quantitative and qualitative data analysis depends on the research questions and the type of the mixed methods design used in the study. Quantitative data can be analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. Explaining these analytical procedures goes beyond the scope of this chapter; however, for a basic introduction to statistical analysis, see Creswell (2008) and Gravetter and Wallnau (2007). Alternatively, qualitative data can be coded for descriptions and themes using, for example, the 'constant comparative method' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Please also see the 'Organizing and Interpreting Your Data' section in other chapters of this book. In both quantitative and qualitative analysis we recommend using software programs such as SPSS for quantitative analysis and MAXqda, Atlas.ti, or NVivo8 for qualitative analysis to help organize and process the data. However, both quantitative and qualitative programs operate on different principles and require time to learn. Of note is that the qualitative programs only help researchers organize and manage the data during the analysis process that the researcher conducts himself/herself.

Depending on the type of the mixed methods design, consider choosing one or more of the data analysis strategies discussed earlier within each design:

- **Explanatory Design:** explain or expand the quantitative results, or further investigate the typical or extreme cases revealed in the quantitative results. The choice of the cases for qualitative follow-up depends on the purpose of the study and the results of the quantitative data analysis. For example,

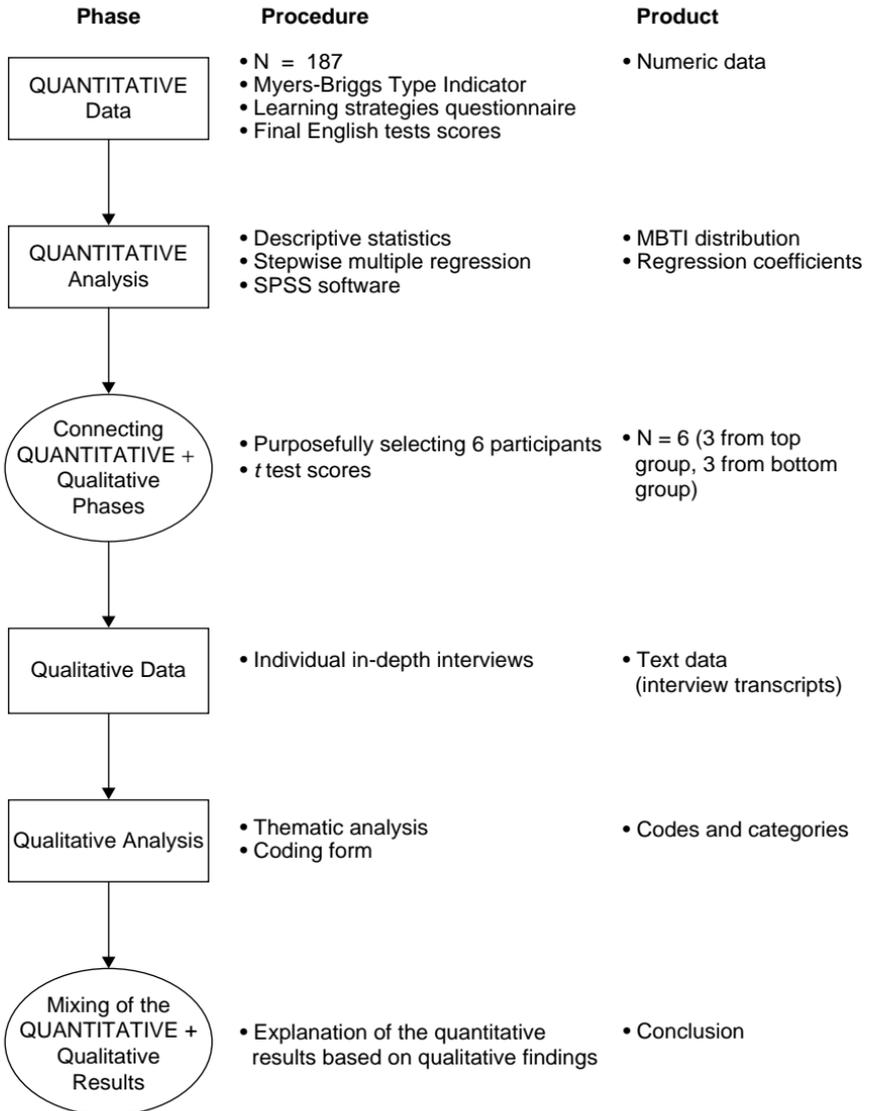


Figure 7.5 Visual diagram of Explanatory Design procedures in Jie and Xiaoqing's (2006) study

if the purpose of the study is to identify significant predictors, it might be useful to further qualitatively explore selected typical cases; if the purpose is to reveal trends in the data, it might be reasonable to follow up with outlier or extreme cases.

- **Exploratory Design:** develop an instrument or identify new variables. The qualitative data collected via interviews or focus groups is analyzed for codes and themes. If the purpose of the study is to design a survey instrument, qualitative codes, themes and quotes are used as a basis for developing items and scales of the survey; if the purpose is to form new variables to further test them quantitatively, qualitative themes are used to help inform the quantitative phase of the study.
- **Triangulation Design:** transform data (quantifying qualitative data or qualifying quantitative data) or compare the results. Depending on which data set, quantitative or qualitative, carries more weight in the study, qualitative codes and themes may be counted for frequencies of occurrences (quantifying), or quantitative data is statistically transformed into themes using cluster or factor analysis (qualifying). Then transformed data is compared with the other data set or both are used in further analysis. When the purpose of the study is to draw well-validated conclusions about the explored phenomenon, quantitative and qualitative results are compared to see whether they support each other or diverge (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).
- **Embedded Design:** use regular strategies for quantitative and qualitative data analysis, and depending on the study purpose, follow the procedures described for other mixed methods designs.

*In the illustrative study, the quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics for the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator distributions of the participants and the stepwise multiple regression analysis for the examination of the relationship between learning styles and learning strategies. The stepwise regression analysis was aimed at revealing whether a learning style can be a significant predictor of the learning strategy choice. The qualitative data from individual interviews was analyzed using a specific coding form. Then the results of learning styles and learning strategies obtained from the qualitative data were compared against the participants' quantitative results for consistency.*

### **Step 8: Write the final report**

The last step in any research study is writing up the report. The structure of your report should follow the type of the mixed methods design used. You should be careful to make clear distinctions between the quantitative and qualitative phases of your study, and indicate their weighting. Depending on the sequential or concurrent timing of the data collection and analysis in the study, the procedures and the results should be reported differently. For example, in the Explanatory, Exploratory, and sometimes Embedded Designs, where the quantitative and qualitative data sets are collected and analyzed one following another, the procedures should be reported in different sections to emphasize the sequential order and the connections between the phases. In the Triangulation, and sometimes the Embedded Designs, the procedures

should be reported jointly to show the convergence of the two methods. The findings from the quantitative and qualitative components of the study should also be compared and interpreted in the Discussion section of the report.

More specifically, the structure of an Explanatory or Exploratory Design report typically follows the sequential character of the design: the initial data (quantitative or qualitative) collection and analysis is described first, followed by the description of the further qualitative or the quantitative data collection and analysis. A separate section in the report discusses how the two phases were connected in the research process – for example, selecting follow-up cases in the Explanatory Design or developing a survey instrument in the Exploratory Design. During the discussion of the study results, a researcher explains how the qualitative findings helped elaborate or extend the quantitative results in the Explanatory Design, or how the qualitative findings lead to the quantitative results in the Exploratory Design. When reporting a Triangulation Design study quantitative and qualitative data collection, analysis, and results are presented in separate sections. During the discussion of the overall study results, a researcher combines the interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative findings to see whether they support each other or diverge. The structure of an Embedded Design study report could follow either a sequential (the Explanatory Design) or concurrent (the Triangulation Design) design model depending on the timing of the data collection.

Examples of published research for each design are listed in the second part of the Further Reading section below. Reading these will show you how other researchers have written up their mixed methods research.

*The reporting structure in Jie and Xiaoqing's study is consistent with the sequential nature of the Explanatory Design. First the quantitative procedures, including the description of the sample, data collection, and analysis, are presented; they are followed by a similar description of the qualitative procedures. The results are also presented in a sequential manner: first the results from the statistical tests are reported and then the findings from the individual interviews are provided. In the conclusion, the major findings from both phases of the study are discussed and integrated.*

## Improving the quality of mixed methods research

Like with any research, it is important that the results of a mixed methods study are reliable and valid. To ensure the quality of results generated from the quantitative and qualitative data sets in the study, it is recommended to carefully address each component separately and to apply procedures specific to each research tradition. These procedures are well described in quantitative and qualitative research literature and are recommended by mixed methods authors as initial steps in establishing the quality of a mixed methods study. For example, the reliability and validity of the quantitative

data can be assessed using different reliability measures and different types of validity (Thorndike, 2005), while the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative data can be established through the use of various verification procedures (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In addition, since mixed methods research produces knowledge generated from the integration of the quantitative and qualitative data, it is also necessary to ensure that such knowledge is correct and legitimized (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). This is not an easy task because due to the different nature of quantitative and qualitative research approaches, different quality standards are applied. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) identified establishing validity of mixed methods results as one of the six major issues in mixed methods research.

In the mixed methods literature, validity is defined as the ability of the researcher to draw meaningful and accurate conclusions from all the data in the study, quantitative and qualitative (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). It is recommended to address validity from the standpoint of the mixed methods design chosen for the study and consider potential threats to validity that might arise during the data collection and analysis at each study stage; for example, problems associated with different sampling strategies used in quantitative and qualitative research, or choosing weak quantitative results for qualitative follow-up, or using inadequate procedures for data transformation. To avoid or minimize these threats and achieve accurate and meaningful results from the integration of the two data sets in a mixed methods study, a researcher needs to design and conduct the study carefully (following the suggested eight steps), systematically apply the appropriate procedures in the quantitative and qualitative components of the study, and integrate the two methods as the mixed methods design dictates.

*In the illustrative study, to ensure the quality of the quantitative results, Jie and Xiaoqing used two validated questionnaires: the Myers Briggs Type Indicator and Measure of Learning Styles. For a self-developed questionnaire on the use of learning strategies they reported reliability for both pilot testing of the instrument and its use in the study. On both occasions reliability was high (.85 and .88), which indicated the obtained numeric scores were reliable. However, the authors did not report whether they assessed the credibility of the qualitative findings. Some useful procedures that they could have used include member checking (letting participants verify the accuracy of the interview transcripts) and inter-coder agreement (both researchers independently coding the data and then establishing themes based on the reached consensus). The authors did not discuss the validity of the integrated mixed methods results either or problems associated with the use of two different data sets; however, they addressed the limitations of the study, such as drawing conclusions based on a limited and nonrepresentative sample of the introductory level second-year students.*

## Final thoughts

The world today is more complex than ever before and gaining knowledge about it often requires researchers to study it from a number of different perspectives. The mixed methods approach, which combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis within one study, offers such an opportunity. Drawing on the strengths of both methods and integrating them in the ways discussed in this chapter, researchers can gain a richer and more complete understanding of the research problem they study. The steps for designing and conducting a mixed methods study outlined in this chapter should help researchers in accomplishing this task as well as provide them with the tools to be critical consumers of mixed methods research. In addition, the feasibility of the project, access to both types of data, and expertise in both quantitative and qualitative research design and analysis are important factors for novice researchers to consider before launching a mixed methods research project in applied linguistics.

This discussion, using examples from applied linguistics research, extends the application of the mixed methods approach to the area of language education. In time, designs specific to applied linguistics will develop and perhaps the four mixed methods designs advanced in this chapter will need to be modified. Also, it will be useful to track the present and future studies of mixed methods to determine if the core definition advanced in this chapter needs to be adjusted or expanded to better fit the area of applied linguistics. At the same time, as mixed methods research continues to emerge in applied linguistics, it is hoped that this discussion will prompt more investigators to explore the feasibility of this research approach and to apply the steps in designing a mixed methods study as they examine language learning and classroom practices, the specifics of language acquisition, and language program evaluation.

*In the illustrative example, Jie and Xiaoqing used a mixed methods approach to study the relationship between Chinese students' learning style and learning strategies to English language learning success. Collecting, analyzing, and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data gave them an opportunity not only to obtain an overall picture of the students' learning style distributions and the relation of learning styles to learning strategies, but also allowed them to gain greater insights into the differences of using learning strategies by high and low achievers. The next step for these researchers might be to investigate whether different aspects of learning style interact with other cognitive, affective, and personality factors to predict foreign language learning success. They might again apply mixed methods research approach to get a more complete understanding of this research problem – an understanding that only mixed methods approach can provide.*

## Summary

- Mixed methods research is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and ‘mixing’ quantitative and qualitative data at some stage of the research process within a single study in order to understand a research problem more completely.
- Mixed methods research has defined procedures for collecting, analyzing, and mixing quantitative and qualitative data in a study, based upon three main characteristics: (a) *timing*, or the sequence or order of collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data in a study when one phase builds on another; (b) *weighting*, or the priority given to one type of data in the study; and (c) *mixing*, or the way quantitative and qualitative data and results are integrated during the research process.
- The four most frequent mixed methods designs are Explanatory Design, Exploratory Design, Triangulation Design, and Embedded Design.
- Mixed methods research has four main objectives, each addressed by one specific mixed methods design: (a) explaining or elaborating on quantitative results with subsequent qualitative data (the Explanatory Design); (b) using qualitative data to develop a new measurement instrument or theory that is subsequently tested (the Exploratory Design); (c) comparing quantitative and qualitative data sets to produce well-validated conclusions (the Triangulation Design); and (d) enhancing a study with a supplemental data set, either quantitative or qualitative (the Embedded Design).
- In the Explanatory Design, quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed in a sequence; first quantitative data is collected and analyzed, and then qualitative data. The weight is typically placed on the quantitative data because it comes first in the sequence and represents the major aspect of this mixed methods data collection process. The mixing of the two methods occurs at two stages in the research process: first, while developing the qualitative interview protocol and choosing the participants for in-depth exploration of the quantitative results; and second, while integrating the results from both quantitative and qualitative phases at the interpretation and discussion stage of the study.
- In the Exploratory Design, the qualitative data is collected and analyzed first, followed by the collection and analysis of the quantitative data. The weight is typically given to the qualitative data, because it provides the foundation for the quantitative exploration of the topic. The mixing of the two methods occurs while developing the quantitative survey items based on the qualitative data analysis and also while comparing the quantitative results with initial qualitative findings.
- In the Triangulation Design, quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously. The weight can be given to either quantitative or qualitative data, or both. The mixing of the two methods occurs either at

the data analysis stage by quantifying qualitative data or qualifying quantitative data, or during the interpretation of the results from the two components of the study by comparing quantitative and qualitative results.

- In the Embedded Design, one type of data collection and analysis (quantitative or qualitative) is embedded or nested within a predominant quantitative or qualitative design to answer a secondary research question. Depending on the study purpose the data can be collected and analyzed sequentially or concurrently. The weight is given to the predominant method that guides the project and within which another method is embedded. The mixing of the quantitative and qualitative data occurs either at the data analysis stage if the data is collected concurrently or at the interpretation stage if the two types of data are collected sequentially.
- To design and conduct a mixed methods study, it is suggested to follow eight steps: (a) determine if the topic is best approached using mixed methods research; (b) select a specific mixed methods design (Explanatory, Exploratory, Triangulation, Embedded); (c) write a detailed mixed methods purpose statement; (d) write specific research questions to address the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study; (e) choose the quantitative and qualitative data to collect; (f) draw a visual diagram of the procedures in the study; (g) collect and analyze the quantitative and qualitative data; (h) write the final report.

### Post-reading questions

1. What is mixed methods research? Give a definition using your own words. Explain how it is different from quantitative and qualitative research approaches.
2. Why do researchers choose to use mixed methods research approach? What advantages does it offer?
3. What are four major mixed methods research designs? Explain each using your own words.
4. How do researchers decide which of the four designs to use? What characteristics should they consider?
5. What steps should researchers follow to design and conduct a mixed methods study?
6. What should researchers consider to improve the quality of their mixed methods study?

### Key words

Embedded Design  
 Explanatory Design  
 Exploratory Design  
 mixed methods research

mixing  
qualifying data  
qualitative research  
quantitative research  
quantifying data  
research methods  
timing  
Triangulation Design  
visual diagram  
weighting

## Tasks

1. Choose a mixed methods research study in foreign language education from the Further Readings list. Read the article, paying specific attention to how the authors implemented each of the eight steps for designing and conducting a mixed methods study discussed in this chapter.
2. Consider a topic of interest to you. Using the eight steps for designing and conducting a mixed methods study discussed in this chapter write a short outline explaining each step that you will take in designing and conducting your study; draw a visual diagram of the mixed methods procedures of that study.

## Further reading

### Overviews of mixed methods research

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

The most recent textbook in mixed methods research that addresses both methodological issues and application of mixed methods designs.

Ivankova, N. V., Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2007). Foundations and approaches to mixed methods research. In K. Maree (Ed.), *First steps in research*. Pretoria, South Africa: Van Schaik Publishers.

This chapter provides a basic overview of mixed methods research, its historical and philosophical foundations, characteristics, and basic designs.

Plano Clark, V. L., & Creswell, J. W. (2008). *The mixed methods reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

The book offers a rich balance of foundational mixed methods works and exemplary studies across a range of disciplines.

Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (1998). *Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Applied social research methods series, 46. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

The book introduces the reader to mixed methods research. It discusses its history, philosophical foundations, and major characteristics, and provides a typology of mixed methods designs and models.

Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (Eds.). (2003). *Handbook on mixed methods in the behavioral and social sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

The handbook provides a comprehensive overview of the use of mixed methods research in different disciplines. It also addresses its methodological and procedural issues.

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## **Part III**

# **Qualitative Data Collection Methods**

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# 8

## Observation

Neil Cowie

### Pre-reading questions

1. Have you ever formally observed someone teaching, for example, a colleague or student teacher? What did you do during the observation? What was the experience like?
2. While observing someone, what does the observer typically do? What might he or she do after the observation?
3. What kind of information do you think you can learn through observation? What can you not learn through observation?
4. What do you think are some of problems you might encounter when collecting research data through observation?

### Illustrative example

*Aya is a new teacher who recently started to teach English to 35 freshman fashion design majors at a women's junior college in Japan. The English class is a compulsory one for the first-year students, who have twice-a-week 90-minute classes for two semesters of 15 weeks. The classroom is a spacious, well-lit room with moveable desks, comfortable chairs, and a good view of the city outside. The students and teacher can mingle easily if asked to take part in group activities.*

*Aya soon notices that her students are a little different from what she had imagined. The students are not particularly well behaved, they do not seem very interested in learning and seem to have much more interest in fashion and their appearance. She wonders if this behavior is typical and decides that one way to find out would be to observe students in other lessons. Aya asks to observe a colleague's class and he consents. He seems fairly comfortable with her observing, so she asks to do it on a more regular basis. Although at first a little skeptical and nervous about this, he agrees, and Aya begins observing one of his classes each week.*

*While she observes his class, Aya jots down many notes as she sits quietly at the back of the classroom, occasionally talking to the students and helping*

*them with their work but mainly staying in the background. Her notes first focus on the classroom space; the layout, where the students sit, how the teacher positions himself. As she becomes more familiar with individual students, she notes what they are wearing, how they behave toward each other, and she transcribes small snatches of their conversations. After every lesson she writes up her notes, synthesizing them into a slowly evolving theory of this classroom 'culture'. Aya also interviews some of the students and talks as often as she can with her colleague. This data Aya also feeds back into her cycle of observation and writing. Gradually, she feels that she is coming to better understand the educational background and motivation of the students and that helps her relate to her own students so that they can better learn from her. Finally, after a semester of classroom observation, Aya writes up a final report which she presents at a teacher development workshop. (Based on Sakui & Cowie, 2008)*

## Overview

Observation is a familiar word for most language teachers. We have all 'observed' teachers as students in school or university, and every person makes an individual assessment of his or her teacher based on these observations. Many student teachers also have to observe others, and in turn be observed as they go through the often tortuous process of qualifying to become a teacher. Observation, then, may be strongly associated with evaluation of teachers and may be seen as something that anybody can do relatively easily. However, undertaking observation can be challenging and difficult, requiring stamina, dedication, and a great deal of thought. This chapter will treat observation as a data collection method for developing an understanding of behavior rather than making judgments about teachers and students.

Observation is closely associated with ethnography, but is also common in action research, case study, and mixed methods as part of a bank of data collection methods to gather data on problems or issues or to answer a study's research questions. It is probably rare to see observation used exclusively on its own as it often goes hand in hand with interviews or questionnaires, providing important preliminary information about participants' external behavior which can then be followed up with questions about their inner values or beliefs.

## What is observation?

**Observation** is the conscious noticing and detailed examination of participants' behavior in a naturalistic setting. In applied linguistics, this can include a classroom or teachers' room, or any environment where language use is being studied, such as a bilingual family home or a work environment that is bilingual or has nonnative speakers. The role of observers varies widely

along a continuum according to how involved they are in the research context. At one end of the scale, researchers can be full participants in the setting, such as a teacher investigating his or her own class, and at the other end they can be passive and uninvolved, as when, for example, viewing a video recording of another teacher's class. Gold (1958) classifies observers into four roles corresponding to this continuum: complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant, and complete observer (**non-participant observation**). Where observers place themselves depends on the setting and the purposes of their research, and their placement may change as a study develops. This chapter will focus mainly on participants as observers as it is the most nuanced and complex role to play; it will be used to illustrate the issues that researchers doing all forms of observation face.

**Participant observation** is the key data collection method used in ethnography, which itself has a long history in anthropology and sociology – the former abounds with reports of researchers living a life of total immersion with a 'native' culture, often for several years at a time. However, sociologists tend to live lives of *partial* immersion; that is, they can usually go home at night. As the two words 'participant' and 'observation' suggest, this technique involves both participating in and observing a particular context at the same time. Participation does not have to mean taking a full part in whatever activity is going on. Rather, it means interacting with people while they are carrying out their normal tasks such as teaching or studying. While experiencing what is going on in a research site, researchers need to observe this and make detailed notes, called **field notes**, about the place, the people, and the interactions that occur. This note-taking is a difficult skill to learn to do well, especially when teacher-researchers are observing in educational settings where so much that is observed can be taken for granted. I will return to this idea below in the section on 'making the familiar strange'.

This chapter should be seen as complementary to the chapters on ethnography, case studies, and action research. Ethnography and case study research tend to be carried out by outside researchers who have gained access through a **gatekeeper** to the research site, such as a university dean or school principal; action research more often involves the observation of a colleague or peer, with a view to improving or developing practice. This chapter focuses on observing other language teachers and students in a school setting, particularly on relatively long-term observation rather than everyday one-off classroom observations that many teachers have taken part in. These kinds of observations are very common for evaluation purposes but not for more in-depth academic research or sustained teacher development. For an excellent overview of the issues involved in observation for evaluation, see Patton (2002).

*Aya is a new teacher and feels that formally observing her own class would be very difficult. Instead she decides to observe a colleague's class, believing that*

*she will get insights into the behavior of the students in their interactions with her colleague. She starts with a broad research focus – she wonders why the students in her own class seem to be more focused on fashion and appearance than on learning. Nevertheless, she begins her observations with an open mind hoping to uncover what is really happening in the classroom beneath the surface of this apparent resistance to learning.*

## **Why use observation in applied linguistics research?**

There is one overriding reason why observation is a useful tool: there is no substitute for firsthand experience of a research setting. The sights and sounds, the smells, even the temperature of a place will leave a visceral impression on the researcher long after she leaves. For this reason alone it is worthwhile doing observation. Beyond this, there are three other main reasons why you might choose to use observation in applied linguistics research.

First, teachers and students follow familiar routines and activities in schools and often have quite fixed values, beliefs, and assumptions about what does or should go on there. Observation can help uncover these familiar and fixed aspects of education and ‘help demystify what is actually going on as opposed to what one might hope or assume is happening’ (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994, p. 129). Patton (2002) further explains that observation is a method to describe the behavior of participants in a study from an open, inductive, and holistic perspective – such a perspective is vital in that it allows us to see behavior in a new light and to discover new aspects to a context that has not been described before. Observation, then, can help researchers literally look at what is going on around them and give them important insights into the external aspects of language learning.

Second, observation is often used in tandem with other methods of data collection to triangulate or provide additional evidence for a research study. Observation is particularly useful in action research where teachers frequently work collaboratively to better understand their teaching situations. Reciprocal observation of each other’s classes is commonly used by action researchers to find alternative perspectives and to allow the sharing of insights.

Third, the practice of language teaching and that of research have much in common – both try to make sense of complex situations, and in both, teachers and researchers are continually observing their environment (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). In some ways, as language teachers teach they participate in observation, especially participant observation, all the time, so it is a particularly appropriate method for research in or about the classroom.

## **Collecting your data**

Various kinds of data can be collected during observation: field notes made by the researcher, quantitative checklists of different behaviors, video, and

audio recordings and artifacts like maps, photographs, and organizational charts. This section will focus on field notes – thorough notes taken by the observer either at the time of observation or not long afterwards – and also on the writing up of those notes, as these are the basis of rich, in-depth observation data. Other forms of data can be invaluable as additional information but will not be examined in detail here (see Burns, 1999, for an exploration of their use).

This section is divided into three parts: preparing for observation; understanding important concepts underlying observation such as thick description and ‘making the familiar strange’; and the art of making effective field notes.

### Step 1: Preparing for observation

In many respects, each example of observational research will be unique, and researchers must decide which way to approach a particular context. However, there are two overlapping issues common to all research: **entering the field** and **foreshadowing problems**, which include concerns such as the selection of participants, and research contexts and time in the field.

*Entering the field* means gaining access to a research site. This is obviously not difficult for teachers observing their own classes. However, it can be complicated to enter another teacher’s world as it involves potentially awkward steps such as initiating contact and gaining consent, as well as deciding how to best represent the observer’s research and role (Richards, 2003, pp. 107–109). As Holliday (2007) points out, all qualitative research is concerned with relations between people, and for a researcher, creating a positive relationship with the observed is crucial. Being observed can stir up visceral responses in many teachers, especially observation by a colleague, who may be seen as having a hidden agenda. Even writing notes in front of a person can sometimes be seen as threatening and an invasion of privacy (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). An alternative to observing a colleague is to find a different context where a third person can act as a gatekeeper in allowing researchers to observe someone the researchers do not know. When getting help from gatekeepers, you have to be careful to understand what the gatekeeper’s role is in that school and how their position might influence the observed. If, for example, the gatekeeper has some authority over the teacher being observed, this might make the teacher perceive the observation as a threat rather than as an academic activity, and this may make them behave very differently than they otherwise would.

A second aspect of planning is to examine *foreshadowed problems* (Delamont, 2004), or to put it another way, to plan what general problems or features to look for when carrying out observation. This needs to be done while having as few pre-conceived ideas as possible so that what you observe is seen with fresh eyes, so new aspects of the familiar can be noticed. Bound up with the purposes of the observation is the amount of time available.

Traditional participant observation can last for at least six months and even mean years in the field in order to unravel the complexities of a culture (Patton, 2002). On the other hand, observation for a master's thesis will be considerably shorter. What is important is to match your purpose with the time available.

If teacher-researchers are observing their own classrooms, then it is very likely that they are doing so in response to a particular problem or interest, and have foreshadowed questions such as: 'How and why do students resist learning?' and 'What do I do to engage, or push away, students?' Obviously these kinds of questions will encourage teachers to be on the lookout for certain behaviors and events, and they are typically the kinds of issues that prompt action research. In these circumstances, even very brief visits to the classroom can yield useful insights into the original research question. However, when possible, prolonged observation is more likely to lead to a deeper, richer, and more grounded understanding of what is happening in a classroom. Whether observing your own class or some other context, it is important to remember that focusing too early on one particular problem or feature can obscure all kinds of other valuable information that might be much more interesting or useful in the long run. It is important not to jump to conclusions but to let your hunches and theories emerge from extended observation.

*Aya decides that she will observe her colleague once a week for a 15-week semester and gradually build up a thorough picture of the classroom life. She reassures her colleague that she is not interested in evaluating him. He appreciates her quiet seriousness in the classroom, and her insights into the students that she periodically shares with him.*

## **Step 2: Observing**

Before we move on to observation data, I would like to make a brief comment about the 'skill' of observation. It seems to be a skill that we all have naturally, but some people are more observant than others – and there are activities that you can do to improve your observation technique. A key feature of a good observer is awareness. You can become more aware through observation practice almost anywhere. For example, you can sit quietly in a park, look around at the space you are in and mentally note what is in the park, how it feels to sit in the sun (or rain), what kinds of trees there are, what smells you can detect. Once the setting has been observed and you have made mental notes of it, move on to the people and describe to yourself what they are wearing, what they are doing, and what they are saying if you are near enough to hear them. Spend as long as you can in the setting to get as familiar as possible with it, but avoid judging what is going on – just see and describe in detail to yourself. People vary as to how long they can do this, but 30 minutes will probably exhaust most people. If you

do this kind of activity regularly, you will train yourself to be more aware of your surroundings and gradually develop your observation skills. There is more advice about building observation skills in the tasks at the end of this chapter.

For research data collected through observation, field notes are key. I will describe some possible procedures and ways in which notes might be taken after I briefly cover two important considerations that underpin note-taking and writing up in general: thick description and ‘making the familiar strange’.

One fundamental aspect of participant observation is that a researcher should engage in **thick description** (Geertz, 1973). This means that the writing about a research setting should be as detailed and rich as possible so that readers can imagine that they are there because such descriptions encourage a strong element of verisimilitude or truthfulness in research reports. Readers need to be able to connect a researcher’s version of reality with their own, and the best way to foster this is to write in as much detail as possible at all stages of the research process.

A second important notion in observation is that the researcher needs to avoid having a taken-for-granted attitude and instead ‘take on the discipline of *making the familiar strange*’ (Holliday, 2007, p. 13; author’s italics). As Schutz (1964) notes, we always need to try to act as a stranger in a new situation would – questioning what is going on in a context and trying to explain the unquestioned. When we go somewhere for the first time, things that we experience will likely appear fresh and new, and it is easy to ask questions about all that we see around us. However, in our own classrooms or even in another school setting, it is very difficult to do that – schools the world over have similar schema, rituals, and routines that make it difficult to see them anew. So this ability to see afresh is a skill or a frame of mind that an observer must try to attain and retain.

*In her notes, Aya systematically describes the classroom in as much detail as possible. She tries to see this world afresh, as a new place with unknown rituals and activities. To help her do this Aya writes many questions in her notebook such as, ‘Why are the students putting on make-up? Why don’t they open the textbook?’ Aya takes nothing for granted and poses many possible answers to these questions to go beyond the obvious.*

### Step 3: Making field notes

This section will address two practical issues about making field notes: how to take notes, and what to take note of. Taking notes is a very personal task and different researchers will approach it in different ways. One suggestion for the beginner is to divide the pages in a notebook into three columns. The left-hand column is for details about time and place, the middle column is for the field notes themselves, and the third column is for analytical memos and comments about the field notes which are usually made after

Table 8.1 Key dimensions of observation

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Space	The physical place or places
Actors	The people involved
Activities	A set of related acts people do
Objects	The physical things that are present
Acts	Single actions that people do
Events	A set of related activities that people carry out
Time	The sequencing that takes place over time
Goals	The things that people are trying to accomplish
Feelings	The emotions felt and expressed

*Source:* adapted from Spradley (1980, p. 78).

the observation is over. It is wise to make field notes in such a way that the person you are observing cannot see what you are writing, perhaps using your own symbols and abbreviations. However, you should be prepared to show and explain your notes to the observed person if he or she asks to see them. Some researchers also keep a separate log of their research with reflections on the research process. This can be an invaluable aid to improving the quality of the research process and provide a so-called 'audit trail' of what happened, when, and why. Other ways to make notes include using post-it notes, memos on student files, or speaking your thoughts into a voice recorder to be typed up later (Burns, 1999). These ways are particularly useful when doing action research on your own class.

Moving away from note-taking, a second very practical issue is what to take notes of. There are many 'how-to checklists' of general observation procedures, and one of the most well known is that of Spradley (1980), who identifies nine key dimensions that an observer might wish to focus on. These are summarized in Table 8.1.

You could choose to write all nine categories down at the edge of your notebook to make a grid with the three-column system described above, or you could simplify the nine into a shorter list to reflect your own priorities. Not all of these dimensions will be relevant in a single observation, but they can be an extremely useful way to systematize observations. In this way researchers can avoid centering on particular events or incidents, remain detached, and make the familiar strange.

These kinds of checklists are a practical way to initially frame the gathering of data, especially if you have done little formal recording of observation data before. However, some researchers argue against being too prescriptive:

...if the teaching and learning situation is viewed more in terms of relationships and interpersonal communication...then rigid pre-coded

observation schedules are at the very best going to miss out on capturing the true nature of the interactions, or at worst they will simply distort them (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 238).

Whichever strategy you use, your notes of initial observations should try to represent the 'big picture' of what is going on in a setting. As researchers spend more time in a setting and think and write about what they see, or as they notice particular paradoxes or contradictions that emerge, it is likely that they will focus in on particular issues that seem to have more salience (Wolcott, 1994). Noting analytical comments in the third column of the field notebook will help you find what to focus on in the next set of observations since initial data analysis will often guide subsequent data collection.

*At first, Aya uses Spradley's model to organize her initial note-taking. She has done little observation before and finds its structure helpful. However, after a while she realizes that she wants to focus on how student behavior varies according to task type. She writes down as many of the actions that students make and as much of their talk as possible. After the class finishes, the students and teacher usually leave quickly so she is alone and can immediately polish her notes while still in the research context.*

## Organizing and interpreting your data

I mentioned above that the most important data source will be the notes that the observer makes during the observation. These notes might be very brief for a small-scale 'quick and dirty' project where the main purpose is to quickly find out information about an issue or situation. This section, though, will be more concerned with longer-term observations where there will be a lot more data generated.

In many senses, each piece of observational research is unique and the methods that researchers choose to organize and interpret their data are unique too, as they adapt to the exigencies of their particular research purpose and context. However, there are a number of general comments that are relevant to any research project. First, organizing and interpreting observational data is very tiring work; it includes recording detailed notes in the field and then transferring key memos and analytical notes to a log book or a journal, and all this becomes a long process of summarizing, reflecting, and theorizing. As the research proceeds, the observer's descriptions, ideas, and hunches gradually develop and are fed into an ongoing **interpretation** as to what is happening in the research setting. Such a process can get very messy, and you need to be rigorous in recording and writing. There is computer software that can help you organize your data (such as NVivo), but if you are not careful, these too can be very unwieldy. I prefer to begin with a combination of note-books and hand-written cards for the original

observation notes, and then type up my analytical notes and memos on my computer as I move on to interpretation.

Looking more closely at the interpretive process, it takes place in different stages. Holliday (2007) categorizes these into three, beginning with 'description', then an initial 'making sense' of the observations, and then moving toward an 'argument' in which the whole experience is clarified in the final report for the reader. Here researchers must clearly lay out their commentary and demonstrate connections between the ideas that they are proposing. Through this often very complex story will emerge a synthesis of evidence, argument, and emerging theory. This kind of 'story telling' is a difficult but rewarding creative process. Where it differs from actual story telling or journalism is that observation must be bound up with **emerging theories** and analytical frameworks. Although you might begin observation with some kind of guiding theory, typically this will change over the course of the observation as 'one discovers what the research is really about' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 175).

*Aya uses note-books to make field notes – she uses a three-column system in the classroom and then transfers her main ideas and commentary to NVivo. She is competent with computers and finds the software an intuitively easy way to organize her data into different categories, topics, and themes. Aya uses the software to make illustrative tree diagrams of the key relationships in her research. Her original focus was on student 'resistant' behavior, but gradually she realizes that the most important issue is that of student confidence in carrying out learning tasks successfully. Aya increasingly begins to see that her observations of student behavior are linked with psychological theories of self-esteem. The way in which different students react to different tasks seems to be reflective of their prior experience of failure and success and their self-confidence. Aya is excited because she feels that her observations are helping her really understand why these students behave as they do.*

## Presenting your findings

There is a lot of overlap between interpreting data and presenting findings in observation studies, because, like all qualitative research, the process of writing up helps you explore and understand your data. However, the way you present findings will vary enormously according to different purposes. A long-term detailed participant observation study will likely result in the writing of an ethnography or a theorized account of a context (Delamont, 2004). An ethnography is primarily descriptive and based strongly in the specific data that the researcher collects, whereas a theoretical account, such as a grounded theory study, is more hypothetical. It creates a more generic, even artificial account that captures core aspects of the participants' identities and their experiences. This is often done to protect the identity of

participants. On the other hand, a short-term action-research project may simply involve writing a report for a supervisor or organizing a presentation for a school or group of teachers to consider. A case study may result in a journal article or a number of presentations for professional peers. Each approach will vary in its literary devices and framework, but I would like to focus on **research narrative** as a particularly useful way to present your findings.

As stated above, organizing and interpreting observational data can be akin to creating a story, and not surprisingly ethnographies, where observation is so integral, are often narrative in shape. An interesting example of this is Van Maanen's *Tales from the Field* (1988), which is a classic account of three different ways to write ethnography: a realist tale with an objective and scientific tone; a confessional tale, with a more subjective and personal stance; and an impressionistic tale, which is a combination of the two. Narrative accounts are found in education in general (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000) and more recently in EFL/ESL (Kalaja, Menezes, & Barcelos, 2008). Research narratives are typically story-like, with a plot, participants, and a chronology. They also have key incidents and events that turn the path of the research and are an appropriate way to describe the complexity of classroom settings. When presenting research in the narrative style, you should carefully weave your theoretical insights and interpretations into the writing.

Within the research narrative, you need to refer to the various stages in the research process and make them explicit. You work toward doing this by asking yourself a number of rhetorical questions such as, 'Why did I choose the setting?' 'How did I get access to the site?' 'What foreshadowed problems did I see?' 'How did I make the familiar strange?' All these questions can be answered by a thorough description of your research journey, including your reflections on the process and how you tried to make the quality of research as high as possible. When presenting observation data, there are two practical steps that you can take. First, make sure to separate your *description* of the research process and the *interpretation* of that process. Second, try to choose a number of vivid or poignant moments that emerge from the observation and explain them in detail, if possible including appropriate quotations from the participants to illustrate your claims.

Two examples of articles reporting on research that included observation in EFL are those by Duff and Uchida (1997) and Sakui (2007). Duff and Uchida's account is an intriguing look at the identities and practices of four EFL teachers in a language school in Japan, and the effects that the observation experience had on the researchers themselves. Sakui observed Japanese English high school teachers and interviewed them about the dilemmas of trying to teach communicatively in a grammar-oriented curriculum. An interesting aspect of the study was how one teacher asked Sakui to stop

observing because the teacher gradually started having trouble managing her class.

*Aya presents her findings at a teachers' meeting at her school. She uses Van Maanan's more objective and scientific tone, as she is not sure how her colleagues would respond to a more reflexive and personal account. Her main focus is the link that she sees between the previous educational experiences of some of the students and their apparent resistance to learning English. She recommends that the students need to be given very clear and attainable goals which, when achieved, will give them a sense of success – a feeling that they seem not to have experienced much in their prior language learning.*

### **Improving the quality of observation**

There are a number of basic ways that observation skills can be improved, such as practicing observing as much as possible or observing with another person and comparing notes. These are important, but it is probably more essential to be continuously reflexive about the research process itself. I would like to look at two aspects of the observation process: the ethical relationship between the researcher and the observed, and triangulation.

The ethical aspect of research is an important issue, and the relationship between the researcher and the observed is paramount. You need to be very sensitive to the people that you observe and always be aware that your presence may lead to unpredictable ethical issues and sometimes negative outcomes. I will illustrate this with a simple example – explaining the research purpose to participants.

Holliday (2007) makes the very interesting point that no matter how well-meaning, in 'coming clean' (p. 155) about the purpose of your research you may actually alienate some teachers who might feel intimidated by the discourse that you use. This can happen when you use terms that the participants are unfamiliar with, such as field notes or foreshadowed problems. Also there is always the question of 'what's in it for them?' Many researchers, including myself, think earnestly about collaborating with and giving 'voice' (Hargreaves, 1996) to the teachers that they research, but in reality, the participants often do not really participate or have any actual voice in the research process. They continue teaching or studying, but the observer leaves with data to use for a master's thesis or a publication. You should always try to ensure that participants benefit from your involvement; for example, by sharing your findings with them and answering any questions they may have. Finally, it is also important that participants are assured of confidentiality and that their identities are kept anonymous, if that was the agreement you made. In addition, you should always be prepared to show participants what you write up about the research, and if they object, you should be willing to change your

report before publication. (For a more complete discussion on ethics, see Chapter 13).

A related point about coming clean about your research is the effect that this may have upon the teacher or students being observed. The **observer's paradox** assumes that the act of observation will change the observed person's behavior. This may also be the case if the researcher's purposes are made too explicit to the teacher under observation. For example, if a teacher is told that they are being observed in order to learn more about error correction, then he or she might end up focusing on errors in an unnatural way. It is sometimes wise to be as open as you can but, without being duplicitous, avoid giving away all the reasons that you have for doing the observation.

Another way to improve the quality of research data collected through observation is to ensure that your findings are triangulated; that is, that your conclusions are backed up by other evidence. Ways to do this include collecting documents such as class tests or students' work, having other researchers observe the same people in the research context and compare notes together, or, after completing your analysis, sharing it with those who were observed for 'member checking' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Silverman (2001) recommends that you compare the observations that you have made or the theories that you have developed with similar studies conducted in other settings or with other groups, to improve the rigor of an observational study.

*Aya is very careful to reassure her colleague that her observations are focused on the students and not him, and she regularly shares her ideas, as well as early drafts of her final research report, with him. She also tries hard to benefit the students: directly by being more supportive of less-confident students in her own classes; and indirectly, by showing greater understanding of their language learning history and motivation.*

## Final thoughts

Observing others in the classroom and being observed are experiences language teachers have had, so it can be a relatively small step for teacher-researchers to use observation as a research tool in applied linguistics. However, because of its very familiarity, observation is difficult to do well. It takes a lot of practice, stamina, and attention to detail to carry it out successfully. It is a basic tool for use with other qualitative data collection methods like interviews, and is often used in qualitative research approaches like ethnography and case study research. It is also common in action research, particularly where teachers wish to observe their own and their students' behavior in order to improve their practice.

I hope that this brief guide has given you enough information to begin (or revisit) this challenging but very satisfying method of data collection.

Although some of the aspects presented may appear somewhat formulaic or prescriptive, in reality, every time you start observing a teaching or learning context it is an opportunity to shape a unique view on a world and bring that to the attention of other educators. For that reason alone, observation is a stimulating and worthwhile data collection method to try.

*Aya is surprised and excited to tie her observations of the students with psychological factors such as self-esteem. She feels that she understands more as to why her students appear resistant and less than motivated to study. She changes her teaching approach to help students succeed, and she changes her mind-set to be more sensitive to students from different backgrounds to her own.*

## Summary

- Observation is the conscious noticing and detailed recording of participants' behavior in a naturalistic setting.
- Observation is commonly used in ethnography, case study, and action research, and is often complemented by the use of interviews and surveys.
- Observation is a difficult skill to do well and needs practice and rigor.
- Before carrying out observation you need to arrange access to the research setting and plan your research there carefully.
- Whilst observing you need to write rich field notes of the setting and of participants' actions and try to see both of these afresh, taking nothing for granted.
- By adding memos and analytical notes to field notes you can gradually build up your own insights and hunches.
- Writing up observation is an interpretive process that can often take the form of a narrative.
- The final presentation of findings should include links with theory, either your own or other's, in order to take reporting beyond story telling.
- It is important to think carefully about your ethical responsibilities to participants.

## Key words

emerging theories  
 entering the field  
 field notes  
 foreshadowed problems  
 gatekeeper  
 interpretation  
 making the familiar strange  
 nonparticipant observation  
 observation

observer's paradox  
 participant observation  
 reflexive  
 research narrative  
 thick description

### Post-reading questions

1. What are some reasons you might choose to include observation as part of your research project?
2. What are some things you should do to prepare for observation?
3. How can you make note-taking as effective as possible?
4. How can you improve your observation skills?
5. What are some concerns people might have about being observed that you should be aware of?

### Tasks

1. Practicing observation and note-taking: Choose a public place in which you can spend at least 30 minutes, such as a waiting room or cafe. Sit where you feel comfortable and can take notes. Try to focus on the setting, objects in it, and the people. Note down everything that you can, but be careful to balance actual observing with note-taking. After 30 minutes leave the setting and, as soon as you can, add any further notes so that you have as rich a description as possible. If possible, add any analytical notes, insights, or hunches about what you saw. Write up the experience into a short narrative and add any reflections about your 'performance' as an observer. Give this to a classmate or friend and ask them for feedback on it.
2. Finding a focus: At some point in observation research you will probably need to find a specific focus. To practice this, arrange to observe a language class. Take notes about the classroom setting, the teacher, and the students. About half way through the lesson, try to focus on just one aspect, for example, the actions of one student. Choose your focus and write about it in as much detail as possible. Try to include quotations of what the participant(s) say. As before, write up further notes and memos as soon as possible and then transform them into a narrative report complete with your own reflections on the process. If you can, show this to the participant(s) for their feedback.

### Further reading

Evans, G. (2007). *Educational failure and working class white children in Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

This is a truly marvelous book written by an anthropologist which uncovers the complicated links between class and education in the UK.

Holliday, A. (2007). *Doing and writing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications.

Holliday's book includes an excellent commentary on the ethical relationship between the researcher and the researched, and on the writer's voice in research.

Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative inquiry in TESOL*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Richards weaves into his text many examples of his own extensive observation in a language school, mixing theory with practice in a witty and original manner.

Winograd, K. (2005). *Good day, bad day: Teaching as a high-wire act*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Education.

Winograd describes his sabbatical year in elementary school after a long period of time as a professor of education. It is a very moving account of how emotionally difficult teaching can be.

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# 9

## Interviews

*Keith Richards*

### Pre-reading questions

1. Think of an interview you have heard recently on the TV or radio. What sorts of questions were asked? How would you describe the way the interviewer and interviewee interacted with each other? In what respects do you think a research interview might be different from this?
2. What data can you collect with interviews that you cannot collect with other qualitative data techniques like questionnaires or observation?
3. For what research questions and in what research situations would you choose to use interviews rather than questionnaires or observation?
4. Can you think of different types of research interviews? In what respects do these differ in terms of data collection method?
5. What do you think are the biggest challenges facing the interviewer doing research interviews, and how might you prepare for these?

### Illustrative example

*Ben works in Brimful School, a large government high school in the UK, teaching ESL to students who are new to the school. He has been doing this for a few years now, and he has noticed that many of them find the process of adjusting to their new school very demanding; in fact, it seems to interfere with their academic development. He has discussed this with colleagues and even raised it at a staff meeting, but everyone puts it down to 'problems with the schools they come from', without identifying what the problems are. He decides that if he is to understand the problems students face, both in English and more generally, the best way of doing this is to begin by interviewing them in their first semester in order to explore their experiences and feelings. He thinks carefully about his aims and creates an interview guide designed to provide him with a deeper understanding of key incidents and their impact on the students. He first clears the project with the necessary authorities and obtains permission from the students and their parents by explaining his project to them, giving them a*

*brief description of it and asking them to sign a consent form. Then he pilots his interviews with some students currently in their first year. This helps him to improve the guide and allows him to practice and refine aspects of his interview technique. When new students arrive, he chooses ten participants covering a range of backgrounds and levels and interviews each twice, once at the beginning of the semester and once toward the end. Most interviews last between about 30 and 45 minutes, but some go on longer. Then he spends a few months working on his analysis and is able to identify three specific issues that can easily be addressed. He presents his findings to a staff meeting and together they prepare an action plan to help students settle into their new school.*

## Overview

You probably noticed as you read Ben's story how his research did not emerge from a bright idea or from a desire to 'do research'; it was prompted by something in his own professional context that he felt he needed to understand better, and instead of leaping straight into research he first sought advice from his colleagues. Eventually, though, he realized that the understanding he sought could be achieved only through a properly structured investigation. You probably noticed, too, that he was seeking understanding, not looking for straightforward answers.

Ben's choice of the interview as a data collection method is a good one because it will allow him to probe beneath the surface of things and try to see things from the students' perspective. This is why the interview is often seen as a core method in qualitative research, where the focus is on the nature of experience. It is often used in narrative inquiry, case study, ethnography, action research, and mixed methods research. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) capture the nature of qualitative research very effectively in their observation that 'qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (p. 2). This is something that's worth bearing in mind when approaching interviewing.

## What are interviews?

The typical qualitative research interview has been described as a 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984, p. 102) or 'professional conversation' (Kvale, 1996, p. 5), and has been described as 'the gold standard of qualitative research' (Silverman, 2000, p. 51). As we shall see, it is not simply a matter of using questions and answers to elicit information that we then go on to analyze, but a data collection method that offers different ways of exploring people's experience and views.

It is interesting to note that interviews can contribute to other research methods. They are often used, for example, as part of the preparation

for designing a questionnaire, and observations in the field may include encounters with participants that are to all intents and purposes brief and informal interviews. We are also very familiar with them from their use in the media, but the relationship there between the interviewer and respondent is often very different from that in research interviews. Media interviews can be very interrogatory, even aggressive, and there may be a sense of competition for control of the relevant agenda; in research interviews, however, the relationship is essentially collaborative and exploratory.

One way of finding out more about how interviews are used in research is to read papers which are based on this form of data collection, and if you have a clear project in mind, you will need to search the research literature to find out what has already been done in your chosen area. As well as providing you with valuable insights into how to approach your project, this will enable you to develop a picture of the current state of knowledge. Undertaking a full literature review represents a considerable challenge, though fortunately Hart (1998) provides an excellent introduction. A more basic search can be made using Google Scholar, which usually yields excellent results. You will need to practice a little to refine your search terms and get used to using the relevant links, but it does not take too long to turn up useful publications, many available online.

There are essentially three types of interview: the structured interview, the open interview, and the semi-structured interview. Let's look at each one in turn.

### **Type 1: Structured interview**

The **structured interview** represents data collection in its most controlled form. In this type of interview, the interviewer is seeking very specific information and trying to collect it in a way that will allow as little variation as possible, so the questions are precisely formulated and designed to elicit responses that can be recorded exactly (often using a coding scheme). This usually means a long list of exact questions, called an interview schedule, which the interviewer asks with scrupulous attention to precise form and order, and it yields answers that can be compared across respondents. Since the researcher will know what sort of information they are seeking and the results can be analyzed quantitatively, this type is ideal for surveys; in fact, the term 'survey interview' is sometimes used.

This sort of interview is a kind of a spoken questionnaire, and, as with questionnaires, the advantages of precision and comparability have to be set against the disadvantages of lack of depth and richness. In practice, this sort of interview tends to be used where it is impractical to use questionnaires or where the return rate of questionnaires would be likely to be very low. It is worth noting, though, that there is evidence that the interactional nature of interviews means that standardization in this type 'is not guaranteed by its rules and procedures' (Maynard & Schaeffer, 2006, p. 27).

## Type 2: Open interview

At the opposite end of the scale is the **open interview**, where questions are not pre-determined. This form is also known as 'in-depth' and 'unstructured', although the latter implies a lack of shape which is not always a fair reflection of reality. It would be a mistake for the interviewer to assume that it is a good idea to approach this interview encounter without making clear to the respondent what the purpose of the interview is because '[i]f the respondents have no clear idea of what the researchers' interests and intentions are, they are less likely to feel unconstrained than constrained by the need to put energy into guessing what these are' (Jones, 1985, p. 48). In fact, the relationship between the interviewer and respondent lies at the heart of this sort of interview and trust must be established from the outset. The aim of the interview is to explore in as much depth as possible the respondent's experiences, views, or feelings, and although the interviewer will have topics in mind, the direction of the interview is largely determined by the speaker. The interviewer will encourage, probe, and sometimes even nudge the interviewer in a particular direction, but not at the expense of the respondent's contribution.

Unsurprisingly, the advantages of this sort of interview, deriving from the richness of insight it can generate, and its disadvantages, which make comparison across respondents very difficult, are almost a mirror image of those applying to structured interviews. The nature of the open interview makes it not only difficult but dangerous to pursue particular issues in the interview for the purposes of comparison because this can interfere with the natural development of the interview and lead to analytical distortion. As Richards notes (2003), such interviews involve construction, not excavation; that is to say, meaning is jointly constructed through the process of interaction, so analysis is not a matter of digging for data but exploring the respondent's understanding through a careful and sensitive reading of the interaction. There is a rapidly growing body of research, for example, that explores the ways in which identity is constructed through, and represented in, these exchanges, with important implications for the interpretive stance of the researcher (see Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006). These interviews can yield rich data, but their apparent simplicity is misleading: in terms of both approach and analysis, they in fact demand considerable sophistication.

## Type 3: Semi-structured interview

Although the **semi-structured interview** is the most commonly used type, I think Dörnyei (2007, p. 136) is right to describe it as a 'compromise' because it does draw to some extent on both of the other types. The researcher, for example, knows what topics need to be covered and to a large extent what questions need to be asked (though this does vary), so a degree of comparison is possible. However, at the same time, the interviewer needs to allow

sufficient flexibility to probe some aspects in depth and, where necessary, to let the respondent lead in much the same way as in an open interview. For this reason, the interview should be based on an **interview guide** that identifies key topics that need to be covered. The term 'interview schedule' is sometimes used for this, but I think this term is probably best reserved for structured interviews where it captures the focus on following the order of questions precisely.

Although to some extent the semi-structured interview has the best of both worlds in terms of what it offers, this does not mean that it is simply a mixture of the two other interview types. For example, it may seem logical to begin with structured questions then move to open questions, but this is unlikely to work well: the respondent will get used to providing short, precise answers and as a result may find it difficult to adjust to a new mode of interaction that involves 'opening up' to the interviewer through extended turns. In fact, since the interviewer–respondent relationship that is established at the outset is likely to determine the nature of the exchanges that follow, it is a good idea to begin with a fairly open question.

A semi-structured interview, then, is one where the interviewer has a clear picture of the topics that need to be covered (and perhaps even a preferred order for these) but is prepared to allow the interview to develop in unexpected directions where these open up important new areas. At the end of a really successful interview the interviewer will at least have covered all the intended topics and the respondent will feel that they have participated in a 'conversation with a purpose'. Part of the skill in using this form of interview, therefore, lies in allowing the interview to develop naturally so that the respondent does not feel that they are simply replying to questions.

Interviewing is a craft and the relevant techniques can be honed only through practice, which will develop key skills and experiential knowledge. This is why it is a good idea to become familiar with all three types of interviewing, not least so that you can adopt the type that is most suitable for your needs or indeed use all three types if your project calls for this.

*Ben wants to develop a general picture of what happens when the students encounter their new environment, so he knows he will need to identify key areas and compare the students' experiences of these. An element of structure is therefore important. On the other hand, a general picture is unlikely to reveal the undercurrents of feelings, expectations, opinions, and so on that will help him understand the reasons for what he sees happening. For this he will need more open questions to allow students the freedom to bring to the surface aspects of their experience that would otherwise remain hidden. For these reasons he opts for semi-structured interviews.*

## Why use interviews in applied linguistics research?

Interviews are valuable to teachers because, properly conducted, they can provide insights into people's experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and motivations at a depth that is not possible with questionnaires. They do not yield the breadth of information that questionnaires answered by numerous respondents can offer, or reveal intricacies of behavior that are exposed by observation or video recordings, but they do hold out the possibility of *understanding* the lived world from the perspective of the participants involved. Questionnaires might tell us that students hate drills, that they find them 'boring' or 'pointless', and their (recorded) behavior in class might confirm this, but only interviews can probe the beliefs and experiences that might explain their responses. In a profession like teaching, such understanding can be invaluable.

*Ben has chosen interviews because he thinks that they will be more effective than questionnaires or observations. He knows that responses in questionnaires are not likely to capture the complex nature of the students' experience, and he believes that interviews will give him the time and freedom to probe key incidents, beliefs, and underlying feelings. Ben decides that observations would not be appropriate, since he is more interested in understanding students' thinking than their behaviour. Moreover, he can arrange interviews with enough students to gather useful data within the timescale that he has in mind.*

## Collecting your data

Although there is no fixed process of collecting data through interviews, there is a series of basic steps that most researchers follow: preparing for an interview, setting it up, getting the interaction right during the interview itself, and the final organization of your data after the interview is finished.

### Step 1: Preparing for an interview

It is natural to think that the best way of preparing for an interview is by drawing up a list of questions, but this can turn an open-ended interview into a spoken questionnaire. To avoid this, you first need to decide on your overall aim in the interview and think about the topics you will need to cover in order to achieve this. You do not have to do this alone: talk to colleagues, to students, read, probe, explore. Things are rarely as simple as they first appear and some preliminary investigation can pay dividends later.

During the course of your investigation, some questions may have suggested themselves, so you can begin with these. Try to think about how the questions can be grouped under relevant topics and how these topics can be organized to produce a naturally developing line of exploration. Once

you have this general picture, you can begin to think about how you might structure your questions. This might involve moving from more general questions to more specific aspects or exploring lines of development within a particular subtopic.

It is worth thinking a little about the sorts of questions you ask. I think a useful distinction can be made between ‘event’ questions designed to elicit chronologies, relationships, reactions, and so on, and ‘perspective’ questions, which invite explanation and interpretation. Patton (2002, pp. 348–351) also suggests a useful set of question types: experience and behavior, opinion and values, feeling, knowledge, sensory, background, and demographic. Eventually, you should have a clear idea of the order and shape of the topics and the questions associated with them. You will also have firmed up the key questions in your interview; these can be written up as an interview guide for yourself. Finally, you need to decide on a warm-up question that will give your respondent the chance to talk at length. I often find that something along the lines of ‘Could you just talk me through...’ works well.

Having done this, you will need to trial the interview with some willing colleagues or friends, or respondents similar to the ones you will interview in the main study; in fact, some researchers do two or three trial interviews as part of their pilot testing. Try to establish an effective line of development, test different questions and approaches to questioning, and do not be afraid of jettisoning any that do not work. You can also work on refining some aspects of your technique so that you will be able to approach your first research interview with confidence.

Before you begin your first interview, however, you must make sure that you have addressed all the relevant ethical issues. Ensure that issues such as confidentiality and anonymity have been addressed and that you have obtained all the relevant permissions (for further guidance on ethical issues, see Chapter 13).

*Ben has his set of signed consent forms (including permission to record the interview) filed away and has developed an interview guide (refined after initial piloting) that includes topics such as ‘initial impressions’, ‘teachers’, and ‘teaching methods’. Most of his questions fall into Patton’s first three categories, and he plans to begin with descriptive questions, moving on to more sensitive issues later in the interview. He has also decided to take into the interview some photographs that he hopes will stimulate responses in areas that interest him. Here’s an extract from his guide (with just one example from each category):*

*(Topic) Teaching methods in the new school*

*→ (Subtopic) Adapting to new approaches*

*→ (Question) Can you think of an example where you did not understand what the teacher wanted you to do or where you felt confused by what was happening in the classroom?*

## Step 2: Setting up the interview

In preparing a schedule of interviews, you should make sure that you have allowed enough time for each interview and enough time between interviews to allow you to reflect, recover, and plan. You will also need to address the following questions:

- *Who?* Who will you interview, why, and in what order?
- *When?* Do you need to relate interviews to particular events (for example, when a recent lesson is still fresh in the memory) or avoid specific times (the end of a hard week)?
- *Where?* Privacy is important, but some places are likely to influence the sort of responses you will get. A student in the principal's office or your classroom may be less than forthcoming.
- *How long?* Some researchers advise half an hour as a maximum, others are happy with a couple of hours. In my experience, an hour seems a reasonable maximum to aim for.
- *Under what conditions?* Some researchers record the interview, others make notes, but making notes is unnecessary and distracting if the interview is recorded. Always allow plenty of time after the interview to note down any relevant impressions though.

Once these decisions have been made and the first interview has been scheduled, you should make sure that you arrive at the venue in good time in order to prepare the ground: check the arrangement of the furniture, make sure your recorder is working, that water is available, and so forth. Then when the respondent arrives, confirm that they understand what's involved and reassure them about things like confidentiality and anonymity. Take some time to establish rapport with them and try to get an idea of their interactional style. Richards (2003, p. 68) contains a checklist of points for setting up an interview.

## Step 3: Getting the interaction right

The greatest challenge in interviewing is getting the interaction right: you need to maintain control while allowing the interview to develop as naturally as possible. So you need to be sufficiently familiar with your topics and lines of questioning to be flexible when it comes to the order of their development, picking up on the respondent's points and working them naturally into your own plans.

The key to successful interviewing, though, is the art of listening. If you want the respondent to reply to your questions fully and enthusiastically, show genuine interest in what they have to say and do not be distracted by things like your interview plan, your notes, or the recorder. You should also treat each interview as an opportunity to develop your technique as an interviewer, never allowing your approach to become merely routine. In

this respect, the research interview is like a journey within a journey: your approach in the interview must be as exploratory as the interview itself.

In the rest of this section, I shall offer an overview of **moves** that you might make in an interview, but it is vital to understand that interviews are not created out of neatly structured steps but are *jointly constructed encounters*. I have suggested elsewhere (Richards, 2003, p. 58) that it can help to think in terms of structural questions, which are designed to structure the elicitation of information, and interactional questions, which help maintain the flow of talk; but even distinctions as broad as this should be regarded as ways of understanding your approach rather than hard and fast distinctions. It is a commonplace, for example, that researchers should not ask leading questions, but Rapley (2006), drawing on the work of Gubrium and Holstein (2002, p. 15), gets this into its proper interactional perspective: 'interviewers do not need to worry excessively about whether their questions and gestures are 'too leading' or 'not empathetic'; *they should just get on with interacting with that specific person*' (Rapley, 2006, p. 18, emphasis in original).

There are no hard and fast rules about how to approach questioning, but it helps to be aware of the types of questions you might ask and the control options available to you. Questioning involves three different aspects: opening the interview (discussed above), exploring topics, and moving from one topic to another. As I suggested earlier, it may be possible to move from one topic to another by exploiting opportunities in the respondent's replies, but if necessary, you should be prepared to introduce a shift in topic with 'Can we move on to...' or some similar formulation.

Once a new topic has been established, the interviewer needs to explore this as fully as possible. There are various ways of achieving this but the questions involved are likely to fall into three categories:

- **Checking/Reflecting:** Never be afraid to check your understanding or seek clarification of something that is not completely clear. The easiest way of doing this is simply to reflect speakers' own statements back to them, which they can then confirm. 'So you're saying that...' or 'So you mean...' are two common ways of checking. In fact, speakers may take this opportunity to expand on their original statements in order to clarify them further.
- **Following-up:** Speakers often give subtle indications in their talk that there's more to be said about a particular issue, and interviewers must be particularly sensitive to signals of this sort. Sometimes a simple, 'Could you say a little more about...' will prompt the necessary development.
- **Probing:** This is the most delicate aspect of questioning because it can easily become interrogatory. Nevertheless, good interviewing depends on it because it is what helps the researcher get beneath the surface. Wh-questions are fine, but bear in mind that too many of them can be counterproductive. Try to think of probing in terms of exploring experiences

or beliefs in detail, inviting the speaker to paint a more detailed picture. If the topic is a sensitive one, you may need to use **indirect probes** to take the pressure off the speaker. For example, hypothetical formulations such as 'If you were principal, what would you do if ...' reduce the element of personal challenge. It may actually be more useful, whatever the situation, to think outside questioning. It can be valuable, for example, to invite a story from the respondent, or to prompt a response by offering a metaphor or quoting an opinion. In a very brief paper on 'object and walking probes', De Leon and Cohen (2005) describe interesting alternatives that involve the use of objects that evoke memories (like photos) or taking the informant to a key site and walking around it with them. The relevance of the latter may be limited in an educational context, but the former is at least worth considering.

#### **Step 4: After the interview**

As soon as possible after you finish the interview, complete an interview cover sheet. On this, record the practical details of the interview (when, where, who, topics discussed, and so on), and summarize the main points covered and further questions to be followed up in the next interview(s). This can even occur before transcribing the interview. This initial organization and data analysis will help guide further data collection.

*Now that he has completed his data collection, Ben is surprised at the extent to which he has developed as an interviewer. He seems to find it easier to allow the interviews to follow a natural course while still covering all the relevant topics, and he has become much better at reading subtle clues from the students. The photographs work particularly well, especially those prompted by a new idea that occurred to him when he saw the new students lined up on their first day, keen as mustard in their brand new uniform. He decides to begin the end-of-semester interview by showing them a photograph taken of them (with permission) in the week of their arrival, accompanied by the prompt, 'How much do you identify with this person now? How much has he or she changed?' Ben is confident that he has a good data set; now in his data analysis he has to do justice to its richness.*

#### **Analyzing and interpreting your data**

It is a mistake to think of qualitative data analysis as subjective, except in so far as all data analysis involves choice and interpretation. In fact, if anything, rigor is more important here than in other forms of analysis because of the need to let the data 'speak'. There are computer programs available (for example, NVivo) and some useful books dedicated to the subject of analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), but all successful analysis depends in the end on the way in which codes and themes are identified and developed. In this section I shall

highlight some practical and theoretical issues that are particularly relevant to analyzing interview data.

**Transcribing** interviews is by common consent the least enjoyable aspect of this form of data collection, but it can be made less onerous by breaking it down into small chunks, making use of transcription software, and adopting a convenient format. I use 'Soundsciber' because it is freely downloadable, and it allows me to set a standard return time (I find 2–3 seconds about right) following the use of the pause button. It also sits neatly at the top of my screen, and I can set the page on which I am transcribing below this. When transcribing interviews, I capture only essential aspects of delivery such as overlap, emphasis, sound-stretching, cut-off words, and pauses (for details, see Richards 2003, p. 297), and I use a template that has at least two columns, one with numbers and a blank one with tabs set to allow the insertion of a name then continuous typing without having to use the return key at the end of each line. These are small adjustments, but they save a great deal of time.

The most difficult step in the process of analysis is probably the first: coming to the data 'fresh' and allowing categories to emerge naturally. In order to do this, I recommend beginning with a transcript and reading it as quickly as possible (in fact, almost skimming it) while scribbling down in the margin the topics covered in the interview. At this stage it does not matter how many or how specific these are – the aim is just to get down as much as possible. For example, in a response from a student about starting a new class you might have a collection like this: *excitement, fear, hard to understand, other students, confused, new book*. At first sight, this seems less useful than something more organized (for example, emotions – fear, excitement; dis-orientation – confusion, lack of understanding; newness – students, book), but it is important at this stage just to scribble things down without thinking because if you spend time working out categories these will determine how you 'see' what follows. Once you have a long list of scribbled words, you can turn to the more careful and analytical process of coding.

In the case of interviews, however, there is an additional layer of analysis that must be addressed. As I noted in the last section, interviews are essentially interactional encounters, and this has profound implications for the process of analysis. To some extent this process begins in the interview itself, as the interviewer analyzes and responds to the ongoing talk, but when the interview is over the analyst must revisit this to see how the talk has been constructed by both participants. As Baker has pointed out (1997, 2002), we need to treat interviews as **accounts** rather than **reports**; they are not simply reflections of a set of interior beliefs or knowledge, but constructions that depend on category identifications and accounting processes. In other words, if a respondent is speaking on the topic of self-discipline as a student to me as a teacher, they will develop their account in a way that reflects their membership of the category 'student' and in terms of the

relationship between student and teacher. However, if we are talking as fellow leisure cricketers, pianists, or painters, the account will develop in a very different way (for a more detailed account of these interactional processes, see Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006). In addition, the analyst will need to see how the interviewer's talk is designed and what impact this might have on the nature of the respondent's replies. Rapley (2006) provides an excellent and very accessible illustration of how such analysis might be conducted.

*Ben has spent a long time working on his analysis and now has a rich collection of quotes and illustrations to represent his categories. His close analysis of the talk revealed a very interesting shift in the way his respondents constructed their identity as students: in the first interview they oriented to explicit school rules and customs, presenting themselves as Brimful School students, but by the second interview they sought to establish a distance between themselves and the school and its rules. He has identified some key themes, including uncertainty, confusion, and conflict; now he has to work out the best way of presenting them.*

## Presenting your findings

The key here is to let the voices of the participants emerge clearly, remembering that in qualitative research it is usually the particular that has the greatest impact. Resist the temptation to say too much about the processes of data collection and analysis (though you should obviously mention these), and concentrate on your key themes. Show these diagrammatically if you can, using for example a flow chart or mind map, and help your audience to understand how they relate to one another and to the aim of the research. Then illustrate them with quotations from the interviews and illustrative vignettes.

You can do this by presenting quotations that capture subtly different aspects of the same topic or which amount to a list of key claims or evidential statements. Sometimes a single word followed by a list of adjectives can be very powerful ('classrooms were described as...'), while a single narrative can bring a situation to life ('There was one lesson when two students actually forgot it was a role-play. We were...'). While sometimes you will want to use a selection of quotes, occasionally one can stand for all, especially if it is particularly moving or evocative.

If you allow the respondents' voices to emerge in this way, you will probably be surprised at how in the questions/discussion afterwards these will stimulate responses from the audience. Letting others speak through you can be a humbling experience, especially when these are voices that are not usually heard. This is something that makes qualitative research, and interviews in particular, very powerful.

If you want to see examples of the different ways in which data can be represented, compare papers by Cheung (2005), Hayes (2005), and Simon-Maeda (2004). They are all concerned with the experiences of teachers, albeit from different perspectives, and they were all published within about six months of one another, but they adopt different approaches to the presentation of data and to the balance between this and methodological and theoretical aspects. Finally, if you would like a critical perspective on the place of narrative in applied linguistics, you might find it helpful to read Pavlenko (2007).

*Ben successfully presents his findings at a staff meeting, where he identifies some key problems faced by new students and suggests possible responses to these. For example, students are overwhelmed by the information they are given on their first day and their dominant impression is of a school obsessed with discipline. An initial induction session with a greater emphasis on the school's ethos and support mechanisms might prevent the sort of misunderstanding (and consequent rejection) that is typical of the current situation. Ben's project has revealed that students' perceptions of what's involved in changing schools are very different from administrators' and teachers'. It also showed that the information that students need to ease their transition into their new school is not always what they are given. Ben is now preparing a paper for a teacher's conference and has ideas for taking his research further, seeking the views of parents and of teachers in the schools from which the students come.*

## Improving the quality of interviews

There is no substitute for practice, but this needs to be supported by time spent exploring aspects of interaction in your interviews. The easiest way of starting this process is to reflect on your performance with a view to identifying aspects that you wish to investigate. You can then go to your transcripts and recordings in order to examine these in more detail. Try to identify aspects that are typical of your own interactional style and see what effects these have on the development of the interview. For example, are you sticking too rigidly to your plan, interrupting respondents' turns or closing them down, or perhaps failing to pick up clues?

You can also ask a colleague to listen to one of your recordings and comment on it. For example, when I pointed out effects of one interviewer's use of 'okay' and how it tended to close down options, she adapted her approach, and as a result established a more conversational relationship that elicited richer and lengthier accounts. You can also ask questions designed to check specific aspects of your performance:

- Which questions worked best and why?
- What opportunities were missed and why?

- How varied and appropriate were your responses?
- Were there awkward passages and why?
- Do you rely too heavily on any particular responses/prompts?

All data collection methods have their drawbacks and interviews are no exception. The most obvious challenge of the interview is that it is easy to do but hard to do well, and the process of becoming an effective interviewer demands considerable sensitivity, self-critical awareness, and openness to change. Researchers must also meet the challenge of combining close analysis of interview discourse with conventional coding in order to avoid the trap of treating interviews as simply reports to be mined for information (for an excellent overview of analyzing interview talk, see Roulston, 2006).

Finally, there is the issue of the respondent deceiving the interviewer, something that seems to provoke excessive concern in some quarters. The simple fact is that deliberate deception is rarely detectable in any form of data collection (for a discussion of this issue in interviews, see Sikes, 2000), but a closely analyzed interview, especially where this is one in a series or part of a triangulated project involving other forms of data collection, offers as much protection as is necessary. In any case, instinct grows with experience, and the ability to press for significant detail puts telling pressure on respondents who are relying on invention rather than memory.

*Ben has worked hard on his technique and as identified some aspects of it that need attention. For example, he uses 'good' quite a lot and has noticed that this sometimes leads to a change in atmosphere. From his perspective it reflects satisfaction with having received a full response, but seen in the light of his relationship with the respondents, it comes across as far too evaluative and 'teacherly'. He will try to eliminate this and use 'I see' or a nonverbal equivalent.*

## Final thoughts

Interviews as a data collection method lie at the heart of qualitative research. Interviews helped Ben collect the data he needed to be able understand the problems new students were having at his school. And as in his case, sometimes they are used alone, but more commonly they complement other data collection methods, primarily those based on discourse analysis or observation. For example, Duff (2002, p. 311) introduces a summary of interview comments from students to throw light on aspects of their classroom interaction, while Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis (2004) combine interviews with observation to compare stated beliefs with classroom practice. Interviewing can also be an important element in action research and case studies (see Bragg, 2007, for an example of how interview data from a deputy head is combined with emails and conversations), and it is a valuable source of data

in linguistic ethnography (see, for example, Maybin, 2006). The nature of these links will become more apparent to you as you read other chapters in this collection, but whatever contribution interviews make, the need for careful planning, interactional sensitivity and rapport-building, and a willingness to examine in fine detail aspects of technique and construction remain constants.

No case needs to be made for the value of the interview as a method of data collection, but there are also incidental benefits. I found, for example, that in developing interviewing skills I had become a better listener and more aware of aspects of my own talk that needed work. Now, when students sit down in my office and look awkward, I feel more confident about being able to work toward an understanding of the issues that have brought them to see me. Quite apart from the research benefits, interviewing has helped me to a better understanding of myself and my professional world – and as far as I am concerned that alone makes it worth doing.

## Summary

- Interviews can provide important insights into people's experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and motivations.
- There are three types of interview: structured, open, and semi-structured. The semi-structured interview is the most common in applied linguistics.
- An interview guide should be prepared for semi-structured interviews. This involves identifying topics, subtopics, and key questions.
- It is important to prepare thoroughly for interviews. This involves piloting, preparing a realistic schedule, and paying attention to practical details such as timing and location.
- Interviews are jointly constructed encounters and the greatest challenge is getting the interaction right. Interviewers need to pay close attention to this.
- Interviewers can use a variety of techniques and probes to guide the development of the interview.
- The biggest challenge in analysis is combining coding of the data with close analysis of the way that the interview's interactions are constructed in order to avoid decontextualized 'mining' of the data.
- There are different ways of presenting interview data, but it is important to let the voice of the respondent emerge clearly.
- Interview technique can be improved by close attention to interactional aspects of transcripts.
- Interviews feature in many forms of qualitative research and may be combined with other methods such as observation and discourse analysis.

## Key words

accounts  
 indirect probes  
 interview guide  
 interview moves  
 open interview  
 reports  
 semi-structured interview  
 structured interview

## Post-reading questions

1. Why do you think the interview has been described as a conversation with a purpose?
2. What do interviews offer to the qualitative researcher that cannot be obtained by other methods such as observation or questionnaires?
3. Compare semi-structured interviews with open interviews and structured interviews.
4. Why is it important to 'just get on with interacting' in an interview?
5. What makes the analysis of interviews particularly demanding?
6. What qualities does a successful interviewer need?

## Tasks

### 1. The interview as conversation

Choose an older member of your family or an older friend and ask them if they would mind being interviewed about their life and experiences and are prepared to have the interview recorded. Don't go into the interview with any plan other than to elicit as much rich detail as you can about their early experiences. Begin with something they will be able to talk about at length (for example, while their earliest memory might be difficult to recall in detail, they will probably be able to describe the house they lived in as a child). Allow the interview to continue for as long as both participants want it to, then listen to the recording and try to understand as much as you can about the way the talk develops. How did you encourage the respondent to continue talking? How did you shift topics? How did you pick up on points raised by the respondent? and so on. What do you learn from this about yourself as an interviewer?

### 2. Interview styles

Record interviews from radio or television. You should aim to have at least two sorts: an interrogatory interview such as one where a politician is put under pressure, and a talk show interview where a guest is invited to talk about their life and work. Now compare these interviews with one another,

and look at the way the interview questions are designed and also at turn-taking. Is there competition for the floor? Are there attempts to interrupt? How are questions pursued, topics developed, and so on? Try to get a sense of the different sorts of interview and the interactional rules that apply to them. What do you learn from this about the sort of things you need to be aware of when you are interviewing? (If you want to learn more about broadcast interviews and extend your analysis further, Clayman, 2006, provides an excellent brief introduction.)

## Further reading

Arksey, H., & Knight, P. (1999). *Interviewing for social scientists*. London: Sage Publications.

If you want a bit more detail than Gillham (2005, listed below) and some very useful summaries, this is very readable and in some respects more informative.

Gillham, B. (2005). *Research interviewing: The range of techniques*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

There is no shortage of books on interviewing, but perhaps the most straightforward and accessible guide is the one provided by Gillham, who also explores focus group interviewing.

Halai, N. (2007). Making use of bilingual interview data: Some experiences from the field. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(3), 344–355.

I include this because language teachers may have to interview in one language and present their findings in another. This paper addresses the practical issues this raises.

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

For anyone interested in focus group interviewing, Krueger and Casey provide an excellent practical guide, with plenty of useful tips.

Rapley, T. (2006). Interviews. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. F. Gubrium, & D. Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 13–33). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

This is the best paper I know on the interview as an interactional event, so it should be essential reading.

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# 10

## Open-Response Items in Questionnaires

*James Dean Brown*

### Pre-reading questions

1. Have you filled out any questionnaires recently? What were they about?
2. Think about the questions – what types of questions were asked?
3. What kinds of information were the different types of questions looking for?
4. How about you – what experience have you had writing or using a questionnaire?
5. What do you think the steps are for using questionnaires in research?

### Illustrative example

*Kazuko has recently graduated from university and begun teaching English at a high school in Japan. She has noticed that some of her fellow teachers complain about the negative effects the university entrance examinations have on the students' attitudes toward the communicative activities they want to use in their English classes. These teachers argue that students prefer to focus on preparing for the predominantly grammar- and reading-based university entrance examinations that they will take at the end of their final year, rather than on developing their communicative competence, which is not directly tested. Not knowing anything about this issue, but curious, she decides to explore it by surveying her colleagues to find out their attitudes and beliefs about the university entrance examinations, particularly on how the attitudes and beliefs affect how much colleagues use communicative activities.*

*After getting approval from her school principal to investigate these issues, Kazuko decides to read up about university entrance examinations, write a questionnaire to collect the opinions of the teachers at her school about them, administer the questionnaire, and analyze the responses she receives. Kazuko chooses to write a questionnaire with mostly open-response items (questions*

*in which respondents write their own answers) and only a few closed-response items (questions which have options that must be selected by circling them, making an 'X', and so forth). She is focusing on open-response items because she wants to understand what her colleagues are thinking in their own terms. Kazuko's first efforts at writing open-response questions need quite a bit of revision, but after feedback from several colleagues, Kazuko is able to finish the questionnaire, which she then pilots on three teachers at a nearby high school. After some fine-tuning, she asks the teachers at her school to complete the questionnaire. Kazuko then analyzes her data, groups similar answers for each question into categories and labels them, and finally condenses all the categories down into a few themes.*

*Once Kazuko has completed her research project, she shares the results with her colleagues at a lunchtime meeting. Her colleagues are interested in what she has discovered, and a few encourage her to write up her research for publication in the local English teaching association newsletter.*

## Overview

Open-response items on **questionnaires** are those that require **respondents** to answer in their own words by writing in a space that is provided. Such items are best suited for exploratory research, where, at the beginning, the researcher may not know what the central issues are on a particular topic (as in the illustrative example above) or even what specific questions need to be asked. Open-response questionnaires provide a way to find out, in an unstructured manner, what people are thinking about a particular topic or issue. As such, open-response questionnaires often serve as the basis for further, more structured research.

Since open-response questionnaire items are primarily exploratory, they are commonly associated with qualitative research, particularly case study, ethnography, action research, and mixed methods, and often complement observation, interviews, and diary studies.

## What are open-response questionnaire items?

In a **questionnaire** there can be two types of items: **closed-response items** and **open-response items**. Many questionnaires contain both types, and they are usually seen as being complementary. Closed-response items only require respondents to select their answer(s) from a limited list or selection. Questions and responses for this type of item use categories that have been defined by the researcher beforehand. Such an item on Kazuko's topic might look like the following:

*The following is a list of communicative activities. Please circle how effective you believe each one is for language learning.*

<i>Classroom activities</i>	<i>Not at all effective</i>	<i>Somewhat effective</i>	<i>Fairly effective</i>	<i>Very effective</i>
Debates	1	2	3	4
Grammar drills	1	2	3	4
Group work	1	2	3	4
Pair work	1	2	3	4

The purpose of closed-response items is to collect numerical data to determine the differences and similarities among items and categories of items, using statistical analysis.

In contrast, *open-response* items call for the respondents to answer in their own words. Here is an example of an open-response item in Kazuko's questionnaire: 'What types of classroom activities do you think are best for effective language learning?' (followed by a three-line blank). Such items explore an issue deeply by not restricting the respondents to a set of answers but asking them to express their own ideas more fully or inviting them to elaborate or explain their answers to closed-response items in their own words.

Open-response items can take many forms in language studies because such items are often: (a) used for a variety of purposes (research, curriculum development, course evaluation); (b) applied at various levels (classroom, institutional, provincial, state, national, international); and (c) administered to various groups of people (students, teachers, administrators, parents). By far the most common types of open-response items are fill-in and short-answer items.

**Fill-in items** are those that require the respondents to provide relatively brief bits of information. For instance, *biodata items* (or demographic items) are usually fill-in. Consider the following biodata items (from Bailey & Brown, 1995) and notice how all of these fill-in items are relatively restricted in what they require the respondents to produce:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Sex \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_  
 Nationality \_\_\_\_\_  
 Office Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
 Institution \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_

Biodata items can be used to collect information about respondents' learning history (how many years they've been studying the target language, certificates obtained, standardized test results like TOEIC or TOEFL scores), professional history (highest professional qualification, number of years

teaching, publications), teaching situation (types and number of classes taught, number of students in each class), or students' learning context (types and numbers of language classes offered, classes streamed into levels or not).

Another type of fill-in item is *sentence completion*; this is an unfinished sentence (or prompt) that the respondent needs to complete. This has the advantage of helping the respondent focus on a clearly defined issue, so these questions can be answered relatively quickly; data analysis for this type of question is also fairly easy. Here is an example of a sentence completion item:

Three communicative activities that you often do in your classroom are:

\_\_\_\_\_ ,

\_\_\_\_\_ ,

and \_\_\_\_\_ .

Different from fill-in items, **short-answer items** require responses that may be a few phrases or sentences long, and there is no prompt. There are two types of short-answer questions: specific open questions and broad open questions. First, *specific open questions* ask about particular pieces of information and can usually be answered in one or two lines, often explicitly marked on the questionnaire with dots or lines. Below is an example of a specific open question:

What type of English activities are your students most receptive to?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ .

Second, *broad open questions* allow for a deeper exploration of one (and preferably only one) issue, and they generate more expansive, and often unpredicted, responses. Effective broad open questions prompt the respondent to write a succinct answer of more than a phrase and up to a paragraph (or two at the most). These questions should not require the respondent to write too lengthy a response – most respondents do not have the time to do so, and may object to such an expectation. Broad open questions are followed by a blank space where respondents can write their ideas in their own words. Examples of broad open questions could include the following:

Why do you use communicative activities in your class?

What do your students find most challenging in preparing for the university entrance English examinations?

The difference between fill-in and short-answer items is primarily in the length of what the respondents are required to produce. Fill-in items might call for responses of word or phrase length, while short-answer items usually call for responses involving a few phrases, sentences, or paragraphs.

Finally, it is also important to understand what open-response items are *not*. They are not tests; they do not have 'good' or 'bad' answers. They seek 'information about respondents... in a nonevaluative manner, without gauging their performance against a set of criteria or against the performance of a norm group' (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 7). Open-response items are also not 'discourse completion tasks' (sometimes called 'production questionnaires') that require the informant to produce some form of authentic language for pragmatic or grammatical analysis (Dörnyei, 2003, pp. 7–8). Thus, in qualitative research, open-response items are used to collect data that will be analyzed for its content (that is, 'content analysis') and not for its language (or 'language analysis').

### **Why use open-response questionnaire items in applied linguistics research?**

There are a number of advantages to using open-response items rather than closed-response items. Most obviously, they are relatively easy to write. Consider the example above about communicative activities, and compare the closed-response item with an open-response item.

- Closed-response item:  
The following is a list of communicative activities. Please circle how effective you believe each one is for language learning.  
(followed by a chart)
- Open-response item:  
Which two or three communicative activities do you think are most effective for language learning? Please write a reason for each one.  
(followed by several empty lines)

To write a good closed-response item, you would need to think of all the relevant classroom activities and write them in a way that will be clearly understood by all respondents; however, an open-response item leaves all the thinking to the respondents. The open-response item is much easier to write; indeed, respondents would probably think of responses that the researcher might miss. Nevertheless, there is a downside: open-response item answers are generally more difficult and time-consuming to analyze.

Open-response items are comparatively flexible. Since you do not need to know what all the possible responses are, open-response items can explore

issues that closed-response questions cannot get at. Such flexibility is bound to produce a relatively wide range of potential responses so open-response items are especially good for exploring issues and contexts which have not been previously investigated. More interestingly, the responses are often surprising. I would argue that the exploratory nature of open-response items and the unanticipated responses they sometimes evoke are crucially important. As one of my colleagues (Kathy Davis) once put it, 'If you do not find surprises in your research, you're not doing it right.'

Answers to open-response items can also provide striking examples and illustrative quotes, so they offer a far greater richness, adding more depth and color to the data than answers to closed-response items. Furthermore, for questionnaires with mostly closed-response items, open-response items give the respondents the chance to elaborate on their answers to closed-response items; this is especially useful when you want to know the 'why?' about the answers respondents give.

By allowing respondents to answer questions in their own words, you can develop and deepen your understanding of the research issue, particularly from the respondents' own emic perspectives. Open-response items can serve as good precursors to closed-response items for a more quantitative questionnaire you could administer later in your research to check or confirm concepts and similarities and differences that you have found in your data. Because of this, I find that I often end up using open-response items to help me gather the ideas I need in order to formulate narrower, more easily interpretable closed-response items in future surveys.

*Kazuko considers collecting data through a questionnaire or interviews. She finally decides to use a questionnaire with mostly open-response items for a number of reasons. First, since she is still a new teacher, she does not feel comfortable interviewing her colleagues. However, she does want to understand what they are thinking about this issue in their own terms. Open-response questionnaire items allow for that. Moreover, as a beginning researcher, she feels that it is faster and easier to collect and analyze data from open-response items than from interviews.*

## Collecting your data

When setting out to collect data using open-response questions, there are important things to consider. Here I discuss a number of these and provide some guidelines for how to make open-response questions.

### Step 1: Selecting your sample

Deciding who you will investigate is one of your first and most important decisions. Questionnaires composed mostly of closed-response items can be answered relatively quickly and analyzed using statistical methods, so

they can be administered to a large number of people. However, questionnaires with mostly open-response items are more time-consuming to complete, and to analyze, so the number of people who complete them is usually much smaller. Because of the small sample size, selecting who will answer your questionnaire becomes particularly important.

## **Step 2: Writing items**

You must decide on your sample before writing any questionnaire because only then will you know who will be responding to it. The process of writing open-response items can start in a number of different ways depending upon the qualitative research approach you are using, but whatever approach you are using, you should begin by reflecting on and building your own knowledge and ideas about the issues you are exploring. You can do this by informally chatting to other researchers and colleagues, casually interviewing people knowledgeable about your research topic, observing in the field or keeping a teaching journal – all the while maintaining a record of your new ideas. You should also read what other researchers have written about your research topic, and if possible, look at open-response questions that other researchers have written.

Naturally, you should write the best possible questions you can. Here I will provide 12 helpful guidelines (adapted from Brown, 1997), a number of which have been illustrated using example open-response items that Kazuko wrote. These 12 guidelines should help you to write good open-response items.

### *Guideline 1: Avoid overly long questions*

It is tempting to write overly long questions in an attempt to get your point across clearly; however, avoid this. One rule of thumb is that you should be able to read a question in one breath (about 30 words), but Stacey and Moyer (1982) suggest keeping question length below 20 words. The point is to write questions as concisely as possible. Here is an example of one of Kazuko's questions before and after revision:

Original: Do you think the university entrance examinations are a problem for high school teachers because they are only administered once per year, because they use very difficult reading passages, because they mostly use multiple-choice items, because they require translation or because of other factors?

Revision: Why do you think that university entrance examinations might be a problem for high school teachers?

### *Guideline 2: Avoid putting in superfluous information*

One way to keep questions short is to avoid writing superfluous information into questions by carefully reading each question to make sure it is direct and as precise as possible.

*Guideline 3: Avoid double-barreled questions*

Avoid writing **double-barreled questions** by checking to be sure that your questions address only one issue at a time. Here is an example of a double-barreled question:

How do cram schools affect students' attitudes toward their high school classes and help them prepare for university entrance examinations?

Each issue here should be broken into a separate, precise, single-focus question:

How do cram schools affect students' attitudes toward their high school classes?

How do cram schools help students prepare for university entrance examinations?

*Guideline 4: Avoid sentences in the negative form*

Be wary of writing grammatically negative questions (especially those with double negatives). The negative form may not be noticed by respondents who are reading quickly. Also, double negatives tend to be very confusing in English (especially for nonnative speaker respondents). Remember, negative words in English come in many forms including *no*, *not*, *never*, *nothing*, *none*, as well as words beginning with prefixes like *no-*, *un-*, *ir-*, *il*, *im-*, *non-*, *dis-*, and so on. For example, here is an open-response item that Kazuko wrote that has two negatives – notice how difficult it is to process:

Why don't more teachers dislike the entrance examinations?

This problem was solved by restating the question in a positive form:

Why do you think that most teachers accept the university entrance examinations?

*Guideline 5: Avoid leading questions*

Carefully examine all of your questions to make sure you are not using **leading questions** (ones that indicate a particular answer to the respondents). Here is an example of an obvious leading question:

Given that the university entrance examination system in Japan is immoral in the way it treats young people, do you think it should be reformed?

Your leading questions may not be quite so obvious, but they can have the same effect on the quality of the responses you will get. A better question

would be:

How could university entrance examinations be improved?

*Guideline 6: Avoid prestige questions*

Be sure to examine the degree to which any of the questions are **prestige questions** (questions that people are likely to answer one way or another because it will make them look better). For example:

Do you think you are good at conducting communicative activities in the classroom? Why?

This is a prestige question because the teachers' self-esteem would be heavily involved in answering it. Instead, this question could be re-written as two:

Are you comfortable using communicative activities in the classroom? Why?

What would you like to work on to improve your use of communicative activities in the classroom?

*Guidelines 7 and 8: Avoid embarrassing and biased questions*

Steer clear of **embarrassing questions** (questions that include swear words or might otherwise be embarrassing to some respondents) and **biased questions** (questions that put one group of people in a bad light based on gender, religion, ethnicity, and so on). I will not provide an example of an embarrassing item because it is too embarrassing to even write here (but that does not mean people never write them). However, this is an example of a question that could be considered biased, in this case against foreign teachers working in Japan:

Do you think that foreign teachers are capable of adequately preparing students for university entrance examinations?

A less biased version of this question would read:

What challenges do foreign teachers face preparing students for university entrance examinations?

*Guideline 9: Avoid getting respondents to answer extraneous questions*

Avoid making respondents answer questions that do not apply to them. To steer clear of this sort of problem, consider having different questionnaires for different groups of people (separate questionnaires for students, teachers, and administrators) or providing branching within the questionnaire (using directions like 'If you are teaching only first-year students this year, please skip to question 9').

*Guideline 10: Avoid irrelevant questions*

Do not use irrelevant questions. They make the questionnaire longer and increase the probability that people will start skipping questions or give up entirely. To avoid this problem, ask yourself what you are going to use each question for. If you cannot answer that question for a particular item, delete it. At the same time, be sure not to leave out important aspects of the research topic because it may be difficult to go back and get further data.

*Guideline 11: Grade your language appropriately*

Think carefully about which language you want respondents to answer in, and grade your language appropriately. Remember, you want to know what the respondents actually think, not just what they think in English. In English as a Second Language (ESL) situations where respondents come from a variety of language backgrounds, use simple and clear English. However, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) situations where respondents all speak the same language, a questionnaire in their native tongue may be more appropriate.

*Guideline 12: Pilot your questionnaire*

Finally, pilot your questionnaire and get feedback from other researchers, colleagues, and potential respondents. Because they look at the questions from different perspectives, they may be able to tell you which questions violate these guidelines. Be sure you ask them to actually write out their answers for each question (you should do this as well) to make sure that you will be getting data that will help you address your research focus.

**Step 3: Formatting the questionnaire effectively**

It is not only important to write clear open-response items but also to create an organized questionnaire. It is wise to order the questions carefully; question sequence is significant because the way the respondents answer one question can affect the way they answer subsequent questions. Also, you should group questions together into sections that are all about the same topic, format the questionnaire for clarity, write clear directions, and edit very carefully. For more on formatting your questionnaire, see Brown (2001, pp. 55–68) and Dörnyei (2003, chapter 2).

**Step 4: Administering your questionnaire**

How you administer your questionnaire will depend upon your sample, research topic, and timeframe. There are a number of ways you can choose from – sending your questionnaires out by mail or e-mail, posting them online, popping them in colleagues' mailboxes, or giving them in person to an individual or a group in a classroom, a teachers' room, an office, a school lobby, or any other suitable location. Alternatively, open-response items could also be administered as a structured or semi-structured interview;

see Brown (2001, pp. 74–79) for a comparison of using questionnaires and interviews.

A number of guidelines are available about mailing surveys out (for example, use a cover letter, keep the questionnaire short, and so on) and administering them to large groups at one time, for example in a classroom (establish the purpose of the questionnaire, check the space and time, prepare all participants, check logistics, properly conclude the session, and thank the respondents suitably). See Brown (2001, pp. 85–92) and Dörnyei (2003, chapter 3).

*Since Kazuko is interested in her own teaching context, her sample is easy to define. She reads as much as she can about teaching English in Japanese high schools, the communicative language teaching approach and Japanese university entrance examinations. She also looks at questionnaires other researchers have used in similar studies. Kazuko drafts a questionnaire with over 30 open-response items. Two colleagues give her feedback indicating that the questionnaire is too long and suggest which items she should cut and which ones she should re-write. After she revises the questionnaire, she pilots it on three colleagues from a nearby school that is similar to her own school. They complete the questionnaire and give her additional feedback on it. Based upon their responses and comments, Kazuko fine-tunes the questionnaire. Once finished, she puts a copy in each of the teacher's mailbox at her school with a cover letter briefly explaining the purpose of the questionnaire and asking that they answer it and put it in her mailbox sometime within the following week.*

## Organizing and interpreting your data

The ultimate goal of interpreting your data is to discover patterns that are revealing and interesting. This process will involve coding, analyzing and interpreting your data. First, however, you should do a little data organization. Giving each questionnaire an identification number and photocopying the original response sheets is a good place to start. The numbers can help you keep things in order more easily, and using copies instead of your original questionnaires can protect you from unforeseen disasters down the road.

I find that it is *relatively difficult to code* open-response data. Coding open-response items typically involves **transcribing the data** (getting the data down on paper for analysis). One of my colleagues likes to record the data by hand on large sheets of butcher paper. I myself have used 3×5 cards to record my data, so I can later get down on the floor and move them around in the process of sorting through and analyzing my results. Other times, I have found it useful to type the open-response item answers into my computer and use word processing software to create a separate document file for the responses to each item.

Open-response items are *relatively difficult to analyze and interpret*. Basically, the task in analyzing and interpreting such data is to find the useful and interesting patterns and reduce what is usually a large amount of data to a relatively small number of patterns. To do so, I find it useful to do three things: (a) create categories while transcribing and analyzing; (b) use whatever analysis tools work best for me; and (c) take the time necessary to do a proper analysis.

To *create categories while transcribing and analyzing*, it is necessary to be on the lookout throughout the data transcription and analysis processes for clusters or categories of things that go together. Clustering information into categories will help reduce the data to patterns. Some people find it necessary to touch their data in order to see patterns; other researchers find it useful to read through the data over and over again. I myself often prefer to use the computer to tell me what the high frequency words are and use the computer to further investigate those words or phrases by searching down through the data and reading what people are saying about those words or phrases. For examples of such analyses, please see Brown (1992a–d).

To use whatever tools work best for you, you need to know what is available. Some researchers like to use lexical count software, such as Web Frequency Indexer, Word Counter and Frequency Tool, Hermatic Word Frequency Counter, Georgetown University Word Frequency Counter, and Write Words Frequency Counter, all of which are available on the internet.

Other alternatives include **concordancing software**, software that lists occurrences of any word or phrase along with the context on either side of it, such as *MonoConc for Windows*, or qualitative analysis software like *CHILDES*, *NVivo* or *Atlas/ti* (all of which require the data to be compiled and/or coded in specific ways). In using such software, the transcribing of data is directly connected with the analysis. Thus, knowing the coding options and planning ahead for the analyses is a sensible strategy.

Be sure to *take the time necessary to do useful analysis*. I find it especially helpful to visit my data repeatedly for short periods over a relatively long span of days. I have found this to be a much better approach than spending long hours pouring over the data for a relatively small number of days. When I use my repeated-short-exposure approach, I find that ideas about patterns come to me, at odd moments, even when I am not looking at the data. Regardless of the time that you spend on your analysis, it is important to develop the habit of building in opportunities to reflect on your analysis throughout the data coding and interpretation process. It is not a process that can or should be hurried.

*When Kazuko receives the questionnaires back, she gives each of them an ID number, photocopies them, and puts the originals away for safekeeping. Because her sample is small, she decides to use the straightforward paper approach using the photocopies to organize the data. She reads over her data repeatedly,*

*and as she does this over several weeks, categories begin to emerge. Kazuko labels them using both her respondents' terms such as 'care for students' and 'help students achieve goals' and her own 'teacher values'. She finds that most teachers in her school do feel that the university entrance examinations have a considerable negative washback in their classroom for three reasons: they feel a strong obligation to help students prepare for these examinations; there is societal pressure to do so; and due to students' usual passive role in the high school classroom, they are often reluctant to participate in the communicative activities. However, she notes that some teachers feel that some of the influence of the examinations is positive, and she concludes that these teachers think that the examinations motivate students to master difficult grammar and a broad vocabulary.*

## **Presenting your findings**

Probably the most common way to present your findings for open-response items is to separate the data into categories and explain the findings in terms of each one. The reader will rely on your analysis of the data, but brief relevant quotes taken from respondents to illustrate salient points are useful to emphasize particularly interesting points. For example, in answer to one open-response question in her questionnaire, 'How do you think university entrance examinations could be improved?' Kazuko noted that responses fell into two broad categories: those who believed that the university entrance examinations could not be improved, and those who felt that they could be improved if some measure of communicative competence were included. For this second category, Kazuko summarized teachers' responses in this way:

*Some teachers wrote that university entrance examinations could be improved by including some measure(s) of communicative competence, such as an interview. Mr. Takahashi, a second-year teacher, wrote:*

*'The entrance exams often make students think of English not as a tool for communication but as a 'hurdle' they have to jump over to get into university – the better the university, the higher the hurdle. Including an interview test would change the way that students see English – they could look beyond it in relation to the entrance exams and realize that it was truly a means to communicate. I think that this would make students more interested in doing communicative activities in the classroom.'*

*However, most of these teachers recognized that adding this new section to the test would demand that they conduct their classes more communicatively, and two teachers revealed that they were concerned that they would not be able to do so effectively because they lacked confidence in their own level of spoken English.*

Once categories and patterns like these emerge, data displays may help you understand and explain them. Data displays can take the form of summary webs of things such as related ideas, comments, and observations; outlines showing the categories, hierarchies, and supporting details; simple grids (see table 2 in Kikuchi, 2004, p. 36); and more complicated matrices (for example, the 'site dynamics' and 'effects' matrices used by Lynch, 1992, pp. 84–87). Such displays are very helpful when you are trying to understand your data, but they can also serve as a useful means of displaying and explaining your results to others in subsequent presentations or publications.

To convince readers that they can trust your research, you should include a concise summary of the main aspects of your questionnaire, including the following:

- A description of the respondents.
- The sampling method used.
- An explanation of and rationale for the main focus.
- A factual description of the questionnaire such as how many questions and sections it has (attach the actual questionnaire in an appendix if possible).
- Details about piloting the questionnaire.
- Procedures used to administer the questionnaire.
- Limitations of the study.
- An explanation of how ethical issues were addressed, particularly anonymity or confidentiality. (For a complete checklist, see Dörnyei, 2003, pp. 122–124).

The following articles illustrate the use of open-response items in questionnaires that explore topics related to applied linguistics:

Brown, J. D. (1992a). The biggest problems TESOL members see facing ESL/EFL teachers today. *TESOL Matters*, 2(2), 1 & 5.

This is an entire article based on the single open-response question in the title. Brown (1992b–d) are similar articles that address the following open-response questions, respectively: What is research? What roles do members want TESOL to play? What research questions interest TESOL members?

Brown, J. D., & Bailey, K. M. (2008). Language testing courses: What are they in 2007? *Language Testing*, 25(3), 349–383.

This paper describes a survey administered to people who teach language testing courses with the goal of finding out what is taught in such courses; the paper illustrates strategies for reporting open-response items (pp. 365–370).

Gorsuch, G. (2001). Japanese EFL teachers' perceptions of communicative, audiolingual and yakudoku activities: The plan versus the reality. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 9(10). Retrieved November 4, 2008, from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v9n10.html>

This article provides an excellent example of how to write up a questionnaire project.

*Kazuko writes up her research into a short paper for a local English teaching association newsletter that briefly explains the attitudes of the teachers at her school toward the university entrance examinations and their views on the impact of the examinations on the development of students' communicative competence. Where appropriate, Kazuko uses quotes from teachers to explain each of the categories she found in her research. However, she does not use teachers' names, instead creating pseudonyms to protect their identities. Kazuko's report includes a concise summary of the questionnaire and its development, administration, and analysis as well as a summary web to help clearly present her results.*

### **Improving the quality of open-response questionnaire items**

Most respondents will find it relatively difficult and time-consuming to respond to open-response items because such questions require them to produce written answers. They are more likely to skip questions that they find difficult, or worse, they may get frustrated or discouraged by the amount of time the questionnaire is taking and abandon it altogether. To minimize these potential problems when using questionnaires that contain both open- and closed-response questions, try to (a) limit the number of open-response items; (b) make open-response items optional; and (c) put the open-response items at the end of the questionnaire so that respondents who quit will still have filled out the earlier parts of the questionnaire.

Also, it is important to realize that not all respondents answer all questions. This becomes a problem because the researcher has no way of knowing if the answers coming from those who did respond are representative of the whole group answering the questionnaire, or if instead, those who responded were a particular kind of people. This is called the 'squeaky wheel syndrome' because it is only those who respond to a given question that get any attention. The respondents who take the trouble to answer open-response items may be the unhappy ones, the ones who are complaining, so their responses may represent only that type of person. The other people, those who did not answer the questionnaire or who left a question blank, may be perfectly happy. Unfortunately, this 'happy' group is not included in the analysis because they did not respond.

It is also true that some responses in questionnaires may be irrelevant. Researchers have every right to ignore, or at least minimize the impact, of any responses that are irrelevant, off-topic, unrelated to the question, or just plain crazy. Stray comments may also appear in the margins of the questionnaire that reflect what the respondents think of the quality of the questions themselves. You might want to consider summarizing such responses in any write-up of the results in terms of how many responses of this sort there were and what types of things they were saying. That can be done in

a brief sentence or two, or in a footnote if you want to avoid breaking the flow of your prose.

One major problem that is often discussed with regard to open-response items is that reliability, validity, replicability, and generalizability are difficult to demonstrate. In several places, I have argued that these concepts, which are appropriately applied to quantitative research, should not be applied to qualitative studies (Brown, 2001, 2004), but rather should be replaced by the analogous qualitative concepts of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (for an even broader set of options, see Lazaraton, 2003).

Briefly, **credibility** is the notion that researchers should maximize the accuracy of how they define concepts and how they characterize the people they are investigating – with a particular focus on how the various participants feel about the interpretations; credibility can be enhanced by using prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential analysis, and member checks (for more on all the strategies listed in this paragraph, see Davis, 1992, 1995, or Brown, 2001, 2005). **Dependability** is the idea that researchers should account for any shifting conditions in their research related to the participants and any modifications made in the design of the study while it was going on; dependability can be enhanced by using overlapping methods, stepwise replications, and inquiry audits. **Confirmability** is the concept that researchers should fully disclose the data they are basing their interpretations on, or at least make those data available; confirmability can be improved by maintaining precise data records and keeping all data for additional scrutiny. **Transferability** is the notion that researchers should carefully describe their research design, as well as the context and conditions of the study so readers can determine for themselves whether the results relate to their own institutional contexts; transferability can be enhanced by using thick description.

*Kazuko wrote her questionnaire carefully, using feedback from colleagues to help improve the overall quality of the data she collects. After analyzing their responses, she presents and discusses the study results with the teachers before presenting them in her report; in fact it is some of the respondents who encourage her to write it. Her report is published, and she believes that it provides useful information for teachers both at her own school and other teachers in similar contexts.*

## Final thoughts

This chapter has demonstrated that there can be good reasons for using open-response items on questionnaires and that any problems in using them can be minimized with some careful thought and planning that

focuses on writing good quality items (following the 12 guidelines provided here), formatting the questionnaire, administering the questionnaire, organizing and interpreting the data, and presenting the findings. This sort of research method is within the reach of all trained teachers. Using the steps and guidelines provided in this chapter and a healthy dose of commonsense, teacher-researchers should be able to learn a great deal about their students, their teaching, their problems, or the learning that is going on around them. Certainly, such research involves considerable work, but as the saying goes: 'nothing that's worth doing is easy'. So give it a try!

## Summary

- In a questionnaire, open-response items require respondents to answer questions in their own words by writing in a space that is provided on the questionnaire. Closed-response items require respondents to select their answers from a limited selection of choices, such as from a list or by ticking boxes.
- Open-response items can be fill-in type (biodata or sentence completion) or short-answer type (specific open questions or broad open questions).
- Open-response items are used to help understand what people are thinking in their own terms using their own words. They are often used to complement or elaborate on answers to closed-response items.
- Open-response items have a number of advantages: they are comparatively easy to write and relatively flexible, they produce a wide range of rich and often surprising responses, and they are exploratory in nature so they can serve as precursors to more precise closed-response questions.
- Decide who will be in your sample before writing your questionnaire so you know who will be answering it.
- It is essential to write the best possible items you can. You should avoid questions that are overly long, unclear or ambiguous, and stay away from double-barreled, leading, prestige, or embarrassing questions. Also, make sure that all questions are in the appropriate register or style, relevant to your research, and do not include superfluous information.
- Remember to format your questionnaire effectively and administer it professionally.
- Data analysis involves coding, analyzing, and interpreting your data. You can either work with paper or use a computer, depending on the amount of data that you have to work with. Lexical count, concordancing, and special qualitative research analysis software can be useful.
- When presenting your findings, include a concise summary of the main aspects of your questionnaire research – respondents, sampling, main focus, piloting, administration, data analysis, and ethical issues. If possible, include a copy of the questionnaire in an appendix.

## Post-reading questions

1. Describe the main differences between closed-response items and open-response items?
2. What are the advantages of using open-response items?
3. What are the 12 guidelines for writing good open-response items?
4. What are the main steps in organizing and interpreting data?
5. When writing a report on a research project that included questionnaires, what information should you include?
6. How can you improve the quality of open-response items in questionnaires?

## Key words

biased questions  
closed-response items  
concordancing software  
confirmability  
credibility  
dependability  
double-barreled questions  
embarrassing questions  
fill-in items  
leading questions  
open-response items  
prestige questions  
questionnaire  
respondents  
short-answer items  
transcribing the data  
transferability

## Tasks

1. Find a questionnaire that includes open-response items. Evaluate these questions in terms of the 12 guidelines outlined above in this chapter. Re-write those that do not meet the criteria for being a good question.
2. a) Think of a research topic that you are interested in and information that you'd like to find out about that topic. Then, write eight to ten open-response items to explore that topic. When you've finished, exchange questions with another student, and together evaluate each other's questions using the 12 guidelines.  
b) Ask another two or three students to answer your questions. Cut and paste their answers for each question onto a single page. Read over

their responses. Can you see patterns beginning to emerge? Try to group and label their responses.

- c) Now, go back and edit your questionnaire. Are there any superfluous questions? Are there any questions that you should have worded differently? Are there any further questions that you'd like to ask? Add them to your questionnaire, checking again that they conform to the 12 guidelines.

## Further reading

Brown, J. D. (2001). *Using surveys in language programs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

I discuss the place of survey research in applied linguistics, how to design sound interviews and questionnaires, how to administer such instruments effectively, how to analyze the results quantitatively and qualitatively, and how to report such results.

Dörnyei, Z. (2003). *Questionnaires in second language research: Construction, administration, and processing*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

This book provides a comprehensive overview of both open-response and closed-response questionnaire questions in very clear and practical terms. It is focused particularly on second language research.

Graham, B. (2008). *Developing a questionnaire* (2nd ed.). London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

This book is a very practical and easy-to-read introduction to writing questionnaires, but does not focus specifically on second language research.

Lynch, B. K. (1997). *Language program evaluation: Theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This book shows how to combine qualitative and quantitative data in a program evaluation study; particularly, it illustrates how to use cite dynamics and effects matrices to understand and report qualitative results.

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# 11

## Introspective Techniques

*Sandra Lee McKay*

### Pre-reading questions

1. What do you think the term 'introspective techniques' refers to?
2. How could we find out what language learners are thinking as they do a language task like reading or writing?
3. Why would you use diaries in a qualitative research project? What data could you collect using them?
4. What are some ways you can encourage your research project respondents to tell you about their real opinions and attitudes rather than telling you what they think you, as the researcher or their teacher, want to hear?

### Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce you to two **introspective techniques** used in qualitative research that can be valuable in providing insight into the thought processes of language learners and teachers – verbal reports and diary studies. Although techniques such as surveys and interviews are effective in learning more about teachers and students and their behaviors and concerns, both of these techniques are limited in that there is often a significant time lapse between the phenomenon under focus and the data collection. Moreover, these techniques only provide researchers with what teachers and students *report* they do and think; they provide little assurance that this is what teachers and students *actually* do and think. Respondents' answers also tend to be structured according to the questions they are asked and the way those questions are phrased. On the other hand, introspection increases the possibility that researchers are getting a record of what subjects actually think. As Nunan (1992), points out, **introspection** is 'the process of observing and reflecting on one's thoughts, feelings, motives, reasoning processes, and mental states with a view to determining the ways in which these processes and states determine our behavior' (p. 115).

Given the fact that respondents may report certain behaviors and thoughts in order to come across in positive terms to the researcher, it is possible that what is said in a survey and interview may not be what actually happens. For example, if teachers interview their students about their attitudes toward peer editing, it may be that students report attitudes that they believe their teacher wants to hear rather than what they actually believe. Introspective methods can minimize, though not completely eliminate, this problem by having respondents report their thoughts while actually engaged in a learning task or shortly after they complete that task.

This chapter examines verbal reports and diary studies, two of the most commonly used introspective methods. Verbal reports are often used with action research and discourse analysis; diary studies can be more broadly used in narrative inquiry, case studies, ethnographies, action research, and even mixed methods research.

## Verbal reports

### Illustrative example

*Mika is teaching a college reading class at a US community college. She decided to implement sustained reading in her class. In a sustained-reading class students read a number of articles dealing with the same topic, such as globalizaton, rather than reading one or two articles each on a great variety of topics. The theory behind sustained reading is that students will find it easier to process a reading text when they are familiar with the topic rather than when each article introduces a new set of concepts and vocabulary. It is believed that as students read articles on the same topic they develop a schema or background knowledge that helps them process other texts on the same topic.*

*She decided to see if this belief is warranted by having several students in her class do a verbal protocol, or a think-aloud, in which they talked about how they went about understanding the text. She decided to have them do think-alouds while reading two different articles – one on the topic they were presently dealing with in their sustained reading class and the other on a topic they had never dealt with. She hypothesized that students would find it easier to process the sustained-reading text topic since they would be able to draw on their background knowledge of the topic.*

*After she had several students do think-alouds on both familiar and unfamiliar topics, she transcribed the students' think-alouds, separated the transcript into thought units and categorized the kinds of reading strategies that were used. What she found was that indeed students did use their background knowledge on the topic they were familiar with in processing the reading text. This provided Mika with data that showed the advantages of using sustained reading with her students. She decided to use this data to convince other teachers in her department to use sustained reading in their classes.*

### What are verbal reports?

**Verbal reports** (or '**verbal protocols**') are oral records of an individual's thought processes, provided by the individual when thinking aloud either during or immediately after completing a language learning or teaching task. These tasks are usually relatively specific and bounded, for example, reading a short text. The verbalized thoughts of the participants are usually free-form, since participants are not provided with preformatted choices of answers (Brown & Rodgers, 2002, pp. 69–70).

There are two kinds of verbal reports, differentiated by when the data is collected. The first, a **think-aloud**, asks respondents to verbalize their thought processes while they are involved in processing language, typically *while* reading a text or writing an essay. The second type is a **retrospective report** in which respondents verbalize their thought processes *immediately after* they process the language. Retrospective reports can be used with listening and speaking tasks or also after a think-aloud to explore some of the comments made during the think-aloud. It is important to understand that verbal reports do not mirror the thought process. As Kasper (1998) puts it:

Verbal protocols [reports] are not immediate revelations of thought processes. They represent (a subset of) the information currently available in short-term memory rather than the processes producing the information. Cognitive processes are not directly manifest in protocols but have to be inferred, just as in the case of other types of data. (p. 358)

To help researchers comprehend respondents' thought processes, a number of different data coding systems have been developed to analyze verbal reports. For example, to examine strategies readers apply to understand a new piece of text, Block's (1986) system codes responses as being either reflexive or extensive:

Reflexive responses are those in which readers direct comments away from the text and towards their own thoughts and feelings, usually in the first or second person, whereas extensive responses are those in which readers attempt to deal with the messages conveyed by the author, usually in the third person, rather than relating the texts to themselves. (Brown & Rogers, 2002, p. 64)

You will have a chance to work with these two strategies in the first task at the end of the chapter.

### Why use verbal reports in applied linguistics research?

Many criticisms have been leveled against verbal reports, the major one being that it is highly unnatural and obtrusive to verbalize one's thoughts. In addition, as Kasper notes above, verbal reports do not elicit all of the

cognitive processes involved in an activity and thus are incomplete. Furthermore, the analysis of verbal report data is subject to the idiosyncratic interpretations of the researcher and hence may not be valid. For second language learners, there is also the problem that respondents may be asked to report on their thought processes in a second language. Although few dispute the limitations of verbal reports, at this point, the method is one of the few available means for finding out more about the thought processes of second language learners. In addition, as you will see from reading some of the studies cited in the Further Reading section, verbal protocol research has yielded a comprehensive overview of some of the typical reading and listening strategies used by second language learners. In their book, Brown and Rodgers (2002) identify other ways that verbal reports have also been used in SLA research: to provide feedback to text and materials writers about the readability (Jacobs, 1997) and to understand how task types (Skehan, 1997) and learner strategies (Chamot, 1999) can be classified. They have also been used as a catalyst for learners to share effective ways to learn (Rodgers, 2000).

### **Collecting verbal report data**

Brown and Rodgers (2002) list several principles that should be adhered to in conducting verbal reports. These principles include the following:

- Time intervening between mental operations and the report is critical, so minimize it as much as possible.
- As verbalization places additional cognitive demands on mental processing, think carefully about what you want respondents to report on, and make sure that it is doable.
- Get the respondents to self-report, to just talk to themselves, not report to you or another researcher or respondent. This will provide much better data, as respondents can concentrate on reporting on the task without being distracted by the demands of social discourse conventions or influenced by their perceptions of the expectations of the other person.
- There is a lot of information available while respondents are doing verbal reports aside from the words themselves. Researchers should not only listen but also watch respondents and take notes of body language while respondents are doing verbal reports, and include them in their analyses. In fact, video-record them if possible.
- Be aware that you cannot use verbal reports to collect information on some tasks and processes. For example, verbal reports of automatic processes are not possible, as respondents are not aware of them and so cannot explain them. Automatic processes include visual and motor processes and low-attention, automatized linguistic processes such as the social chat of native speakers. (p. 55)

Several of these principles have important implications for how to conduct verbal reports. The first principle suggests that respondents' verbal reports should be recorded either while the activity is occurring or as soon as possible afterwards. Principle two is especially significant for individuals conducting the verbal report in their second language. It suggests that, if possible, respondents should be allowed to use their first language if this reduces the cognitive demands of the process. Principles three, four, and five suggest that the role of the researcher should be as unobtrusive as possible, that the researcher should take note of the nonverbal as well as the verbal behavior of the respondent, and that verbal reports cannot be used to report automatic thought processes. The main procedures for conducting verbal reports are summarized in Table 11.1.

### Organizing and interpreting verbal report data

One of the most challenging aspects of using verbal reports as a research tool is categorizing the data. The following are some procedures that can help you in organizing and interpreting the data:

- First, transcribe your data (see Chapter 9, Interviews, and Chapter 12, Discourse Analysis, for suggestions on how to do this).
- Then, review existing studies on language learning that make use of verbal protocols in data collection. One of the main reasons for undertaking this review is to determine whether or not there is an existing category or coding system (see below) that could be used when you analyze your data.
- Next, divide your data of what respondents said into **thought units**, that is, segments of the transcribed text that reflect a particular thought or idea. These units are not necessarily the same as a sentence or clause.
- Fourth, sort each thought unit into one of the categories you have decided to use based either on an existing **coding system** or one you have devised. A coding system provides a list of categories into which the researcher places each thought unit. The coding system itself should be so clear and unambiguous that two researchers would come up with similar results in coding the data. The advantage of using an existing coding system is that you can compare your findings with other studies; the disadvantage is that an existing coding system may not fit your data.
- Have a second reader also code the data so that you can determine whether or not you have been objective in categorizing the data.
- Look for patterns in your categorization. For example, you may find that students who are generally strong readers or listeners in your class use particular strategies, while those who are typically less proficient use others.

In order to make this explanation more meaningful for you, do the first task at the end of this chapter.

Table 11.1 Main procedures to conduct verbal reports

<i>Procedure</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Provide respondents with a practice activity	To begin, provide respondents with a practice activity to get them familiar with verbal reports. You might begin by having them do a simple multiplication task and asking them to think aloud as they do it. You could also have them do a task similar to the one they are going to do (see Brown & Rodgers, 2002, p. 58 for another example). For example, if they are going to do a think-aloud on a reading text, you might give them a short reading passage for practice. You could also begin the session by modeling a think-aloud or retrospective report for them as you read a passage. See the verbal report in Task 1 at the end of this chapter for an example.
Give simple directions	Give simple directions. Basically you need to tell the respondents to verbalize everything they are thinking as they complete a task. They should imagine that they are talking to themselves about what they are thinking. You should also point out that occasionally you may be reminding them to think out loud.
Be as unobtrusive as possible	During the think-aloud or retrospective report, be as unobtrusive as possible. This means that after you acquaint respondents with the process and give them directions, you should recede into the background as much as possible, speaking only at the pre-planned point for retrospective reports, or when the respondent lapses into silence during think-alouds by giving a gentle reminder such as, 'Remember to think aloud.' Since you want respondents to focus on reporting on their cognitive processes, it is helpful to sit behind the students so as to discourage them from talking to you.
Ask respondents to report their thought processes at particular points	If respondents are doing a think-aloud on a reading text, you might ask respondents to report their thought processes at particular points in the text after they have read the passage. This can be done by having respondents read the text out aloud. Then place a signal such as an asterisk or a short prompt like 'What are you thinking now?' at specific points in the passage where you want them to stop and talk about what they are thinking.
Do not ask leading questions	When you are prompting respondents to think aloud, be certain to simply remind them to verbalize what they are thinking and do not ask leading questions. The use of leading questions can be a particular problem in conducting retrospective reports when you are encouraging students to report on the thoughts they just had while they were completing the activity. For example, if you are using a listening task, when you stop the tape, you should get students to verbalize what they are thinking by saying, 'What are you thinking now?' or 'What do you think is going on?' and not ask questions like 'Did you find the tape confusing?'
Record the session	Whether you are conducting a think-aloud or a retrospective report, it is essential that you record the session since this data will provide the basis for your analysis. As with an interview it is important to check your equipment before you begin the session and to put the microphone in a central position.
Pay attention to respondents' nonverbal behavior	Since nonverbal behavior can often signal cognitive processes, pay attention to respondents' nonverbal behavior, for example, if they stop writing during a writing task. Note this in an observation log or even better video-record the session, although using a video-camera can be distracting for the respondents. The goal is to collect 'rich' data.

### Presenting findings of verbal reports research

Typically, reports on verbal reports include a review of relevant literature (for example, previous studies on reading or listening strategy research), followed by the overall research question with an explanation of why it is important to examine this question. Next, there is generally a discussion of the coding system that has been used and how it was devised. Finally, there is a presentation of the data analysis, often in table form, in which the researcher describes the kinds of strategies most commonly used by the respondents they studied. To see some models of how to write up verbal reports, you might look at the following articles:

Block, E. (1986). The comprehension strategies of second language readers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20(3), 463–494.

This study reports on the use of think-aloud protocols to examine the reading comprehension strategies of native and nonnative English speakers enrolled in a remedial reading class.

Gu, Y. (2003). Fine brush and freehand: The vocabulary learning art of two successful Chinese EFL learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(1), 73–104.

This study reports on the use of think-aloud protocols to examine the vocabulary-learning strategies of two Chinese learners of English.

Goh, C. M. (2002). Exploring listening comprehension tactics and their interaction patterns. *System*, 30, 185–206.

This study examines the retrospective reports of two students from the People's Republic of China while undertaking listening tasks.

Johnson, K., Kim, M., Ya-Fang, L., Nava, A., Perkins, D., Smith, A., et al. (2008). A step forward: Investigating expertise in materials evaluation. *ELT Journal*, 62(2), 157–163.

This article reports on a materials evaluation project that asked language teachers to think aloud while assessing an ESL text.

### Improving the quality of verbal reports

As with any technique, we face some challenges when we use verbal reports to collect data. In a study of learning strategies used by successful primary students in Singapore, my colleagues, Gu, Hu, and Zhang (2005) identified the following problems, summarized in Table 11.2, that they experienced in using verbal reports with young learners, along with some possible solutions.

You may not have the problems these researchers faced, but be prepared for such challenges. Also, if you are a teacher-researcher collecting data in your classroom, students will likely still recognize you as their teacher and hence may feel that they should provide answers that please you. It is important to keep this fact in mind in analyzing and explaining your data.

While verbal reports provide the most immediate recounting of an individual's thought processes, there is another technique that can be used to access students' thoughts and attitudes, namely, diary studies.

Table 11.2 Common problems with verbal report procedures

<i>Problem</i>	<i>Solution</i>
Respondents may produce unreliable verbal reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before doing the verbal reports, explain the purpose of the research to the respondents and emphasize its importance; also, get respondents to practice verbal reporting a number of times on similar tasks before collecting data.</li> <li>• Collect information as soon as possible, while it is still available.</li> <li>• Ask respondents to describe, rather than explain or interpret, what is in their mind.</li> <li>• Ask respondents to report only on information being attended to in their short-term memory.</li> </ul>
Verbal reporting has intrusive effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Again, get respondents to practice verbal reporting a number of times on similar tasks before collecting data, to the point where they feel very comfortable doing them with little cognitive demand.</li> <li>• Create task conditions that resemble as closely as possible those without verbal report.</li> <li>• Ask respondents to perform the way they would normally perform if they were not doing the verbal report.</li> <li>• Use simple reporting tasks that do not require excessive concentration or effort.</li> </ul>
(1) Respondents may differ in their ability to verbalize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give clear instructions before verbal reporting.</li> <li>• Provide practice verbal report opportunities.</li> <li>• If possible, give subjects a choice of language in which to respond. To collect better quality data, respondents should report in their more proficient language.</li> </ul>
(2) Weaker students may find it difficult to verbalize in the L2	
(1) Respondents may be too engrossed in the task and forget to verbalize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get respondents to verbalize regularly, such as after each sentence, each episode, at signaled spots, after every 2 minutes, at the end of the text, and so on. You could provide regular reminders such as red dots or beeps.</li> </ul>
(2) Respondents may not be able to remember mental events after the performance and may give faulty reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prompt without leading the subjects to answer in a particular way – use concrete examples and contextual cues.</li> <li>• Minimize the time between doing the task and reporting on it.</li> </ul>

Source: adapted from Gu, Hu, and Zhang (2005, p. 283)

## Diary studies

### Illustrative example

*Sookyung is a graduate student in a TESOL graduate program in California. She has recently learned about the advantages of diary studies in her research class. She is convinced that learner diaries can provide valuable insights into*

*the attitudes, learning strategies, and motivation of language learners. She has just read Schmidt and Froda's (1986) classic article on Schmidt's experience of learning Portuguese in Brazil.*

*Sookyung has to undertake a research project for her master's thesis. As it turns out, Sookyung has kept a diary since she was quite young. She remembers that one of the things she talked about in her diary was her experience struggling with learning Korean, Chinese, and Japanese. She decided to review her diary entries to see what she could learn about her own attitudes and learning strategies as she struggled to learn those three languages. What she discovered was that at times she approached her language learning as a game, trying to create situations where she could use a new word or phrase that she had discovered in listening to her classmates. In these instances she was clearly a high-risk learner. On the other hand, she also found that she dreaded to be called on in class for fear she would make a mistake and be looked down upon by her peers. She decided to analyze her data using the theories of language learning she had been reading about in her graduate class and to use her diary analysis as her thesis.*

### **What are diary studies?**

The use of diary studies to investigate L2 teaching and learning is a relatively new method. One of the first definitions of **diary studies** was offered by Bailey and Ochsner (1983):

A diary study in second language learning, acquisition, or teaching is an account of a second language experience as recorded in a first-person journal. The diarist may be a language teacher or a language learner – but the central characteristic of the diary studies is that they are introspective: The diarist studies his own teaching or learning. Thus he can report on affective factors, language learning strategies, and his own perceptions – facets of the language learning experience which are normally hidden or largely inaccessible to an external observer. (p. 189)

According to Bailey (1991), diary studies are often direct first-person case studies in which the research method is defined by the data collection procedure: 'A language learner keeps an intensive journal using introspection and/or retrospection, as well as observation, typically over a period of time. The data analysis may be done by the diarist himself or by an independent researcher using the learner's diary (or some "public" version of that diary) as data' (pp. 60–61). Although many diaries are reported in unpublished manuscripts or theses, some language learning and teaching diaries have been published. One of the most cited language learning diaries is that undertaken by Schmidt and Froda (1986) in which Schmidt, a linguist himself, described his struggles in learning Portuguese.

On the other hand, some language learning diary studies have involved a third person analyzing the diaries of language learners or teachers. These

are called indirect or nonintrospective studies. Bailey (1983), for example, examined 11 diaries of adult L2 learners to investigate the competitiveness and anxiety of these learners. These are useful when the researcher is interested in studying the learning process of a group that she does not belong to, such as young learners or learners of particular languages or cultural backgrounds.

Diary studies can be used as the sole form of data collection in a research project, or as just one form in a broader study, possibly to triangulate the information collected using an array of data collection techniques (for example, diaries, interviews, observations, surveys, class recordings, and so on), or different sources (students, teachers, administrators) to provide a broader and richer perspective.

### **Why use diary studies in applied linguistics research?**

Because diary studies are based primarily on introspection, some have questioned their value. An excellent discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of diary studies is in Bailey (1991). In this article Bailey applies the doubting and believing game to diary studies. In the doubting game, one takes a critical stance toward what is being investigated. In reference to diary studies, the following doubts can be raised:

- First, most diary studies involve a small number of learners or teachers looking at different aspects of the L2 learning process. Hence, it is difficult to compare the findings of the studies.
- Second, most studies published so far have been based upon diaries kept by linguists, experienced teachers or language teachers in training, rather than typical learners. Because of this, they may not be representative of average language learners.
- Third, diary studies are based on subjective data, based entirely on the researcher's interpretation of the teachers' or learners' perceptions, with no other data that allows for verification of the conclusions drawn.
- Finally, one can question the extent to which individuals can analyze all of the processes involved in their own language learning and teaching experiences.

In the believing game, on the other hand, one accepts the assertions of diarist and the idea that all experience is subjective. In applying the believing game to diary studies, Bailey maintains that for both teachers and learners, keeping a diary can provide a great deal of self-awareness of the processes they are involved in. In addition, Bailey argues that diary studies can provide the following benefits for L2 teaching and learning research:

- First, like other introspective methods such as verbal reports, diary studies can provide information about L2 learners and teachers and their

perspectives on the affective and instructional factors that affect L2 learning and teaching.

- Second, diary studies allow researchers to see factors identified by teachers and learners that may not be readily identified by researchers as worth studying.
- Third, when used with other sources of data diary studies can provide a vehicle for data triangulation.
- Finally, the data collection process itself is more accessible in that it is ‘“low-tech,” portable, and trainable’. (p. 88)

Unfortunately, at this point there are few published target language learning and teaching diary studies to look to for models and insight. Nevertheless, the use of diary studies within qualitative research projects is not uncommon.

While the procedure for diary studies is less complex than some other methods, there are nonetheless particular procedures that are typically followed.

### **Collecting diary study data**

A diary study must involve more than just making regular introspective entries regarding L2 learning and/or teaching. The diary is only the data. In order to be a study, there must be a careful analysis of the data, either by the diarist herself or himself (in first-person diary studies) or the researcher (in third-person diary studies). In conducting any diary study, Bailey (1990) recommends that the following steps be taken:

- First, like other introspective methods such as verbal reports, diary studies can provide information about L2 learners and teachers and their perspectives on the affective and instructional factors that affect L2 learning and teaching.
- The diarist keeps an account of his or her personal language learning or teaching history, systematically recording events, details, and feelings about the current language learning or teaching experience in the diary.
- At some point, either on an ongoing basis or when the last diary entry has been made, the diarist revises the journal entries for the public version of the diary (for the researcher and/or other readers), clarifying meanings of the entries in the process.
- The researcher, who may be the diarist, studies the journal entries, looking for patterns and significant events. Also, other researchers may analyze the diary entries.
- The factors identified as being important to the language learning or teaching experience are interpreted and discussed in the final report. Ideas from the literature may be added at this stage. (p. 219)

Although Bailey suggests that ideas from the literature not be added until the final stage, if you are doing a first-person diary study you may find it

valuable to reflect on what you have read in the literature as you analyze the data, looking for patterns and significance.

Bailey (1990) makes some other suggestions regarding the process of undertaking a diary study. She maintains that diary entries must be candid if they are to be of benefit. She also suggests that you set aside a time each day immediately following the learning or teaching experience to write in the diary and that the time allotted to writing should at least equal the time spent in class. In addition, you should concentrate on getting the information down without worrying too much about style or grammar – the diary can be revised and edited later. A diary could be handwritten, typed into a computer (which makes data analysis much easier, so if it is possible this is recommended), or even recorded into an audio-recording device and later transcribed. It is also sensible that you always keep a pad handy to make notes when you do not have your diary with you – or post-it notes can always be stuck on lesson plans or in a textbook during class.

What is written in a diary will largely depend upon the research focus. Although this may be unclear at first, it will become more focused as the study continues. If you are not sure where to start, use a lens of a camera as a metaphor; initially pan out to provide a broader overview, then zero in onto significant events and feelings, then zoom back out again to connect these to the teaching or learning context. Another metaphor is the spiral; the places that you often find yourself coming back to indicate the major issues in the research. Most diarists find that they write about facts and feelings on the one hand and their interpretation of these on the other. Bailey (1990) strongly recommends you consistently ask yourself what evidence you have to support the statements you make and wherever possible support your reflective comments with concrete examples from class sessions or language data, noting specific details of the teaching or learning experience such as when, where, and what occurred. If possible, keep copies of teaching or learning materials, and clearly and systematically label everything. Finally, make it a habit when you finish each diary entry to write down questions or ideas that you did not have the time or capacity to address, and would like to reflect on later.

### Organizing and interpreting diary studies data

One of the challenges of analyzing diary data is knowing what to do with the often large amounts of data that are created. A major danger in organizing and interpreting the data is to merely *summarize* the stories or themes that are contained in the diary. However, in order to undertake a comprehensive interpretation of the data it is important to *analyze* the following aspects of a diary:

- The *content* or what is said.
- The *context* or where it is set.
- The *form* or how it is said.

Let's look at each of these in turn. As Pavlenko (2007) points out, it is important in looking at narrative data to 'consider not only what was said or written but also what was omitted and why' (p. 274). For example, one of my students in looking at her own language learning diary found that she very rarely talked about her learning experience in the language classroom; rather, her primary focus was on analyzing how she used language outside the classroom. In reflecting on why this might be, she found that she learned best by applying what she learned outside not inside the classroom and that often she was annoyed by the slow pace of her language learning classes. This is an important finding that was only discovered by her considering what was not included in her diary.

In summarizing what is contained in the diary, be certain to include what is typical or representative of the diary entries. On some occasions, you may also want to include an atypical event because of its special significance. However, be certain to make clear that the example is atypical and explain why you have included it.

The second focus of your analysis can be on the context of the diary entries, both on a macro- and micro-level (Pavlenko, 2007). On a macro-level, you can examine the political, economic, and cultural circumstances of where the diary was written, while on a micro-level you can consider factors such as the actual location where the diary was written and the age of the narrator. For example, the same student I mentioned in the previous paragraph collected her diary in three different countries – Korea, China, and Japan. She found that the nature of the country, as well as her own age and physical and social circumstances, affected her motivation in learning the language. In Korea she was young, living with her mother and writing the entries in her mother's apartment where there were many Korean speakers. Her mother was anxious that she improve the Korean she had learned in the United States. In Japan, on the other hand, she was much older and had no Japanese speakers living with her. She was greatly motivated to learn the language because she loved the Japanese environment and culture. In this study, then, the macro-level factors were the various countries she lived in and the status of the languages she studied. The micro level factors were her age, motivation, motivation level, and whether or not she was living with a speaker of the target language.

Finally, you need to consider the form of the diary. Some excerpts of a diary might be written in full sentences in paragraph form while other excerpts might be written far more informally. Some excerpts may use more complex and formal lexical items than others. Also some sections might be written in the target language and other sections in the first language. Lastly, there may be writing conventions such as exclamation points and caps that are used in some sections but not others. It is important to consider why the narrator might have used these features in the manuscript. What do they suggest about the writer at that moment of writing? In order to make this

explanation of writing conventions more concrete, it would be helpful for you to complete the task on diary studies at the end of the chapter.

### Presenting the findings of diary studies

As was pointed out earlier, unfortunately, there are few examples of published diary studies. While many learners and teachers do keep a diary of their language learning and teaching experiences, they frequently feel that this data is not appropriate for a serious study, as happened with several of the graduate students I worked with. However, often the diaries can contain valuable insights into the perceptions and challenges of language learners and teachers.

Typically, published diary studies begin with a rationale for the study and a description of how the data was gathered and analyzed, followed by a presentation of the findings. Usually, the findings sections contain carefully selected excerpts from the data to clearly exemplify recurring themes. Sometimes just one excerpt is presented to illustrate one theme or sub-theme; however, often three or four excerpts are presented together. Your account should include an analysis not only of the content but also the context and form of the diary, to add more depth to the data analysis. You need to carefully consider ethical issues of confidentiality or anonymity (see Chapter 13).

For some examples of diary studies, you might look at the following studies:

Bailey, K. M. (1983). Competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language learning: Looking at and through the diary studies. In H. W. Selinger & M. H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition* (pp. 67–103). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

In this study Bailey analyzes the diaries of ten other learners of English to determine how competitiveness and anxiety influenced their language learning.

Numrich, C. (1996). On becoming a language teacher: Insights from diary studies. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(1), 131–154.

Numrich analyzes the diaries of 22 novice teachers discussing their practicum experience to illustrate their common concerns.

Schmidt, R. W., & Froda, S. N. (1986). Developing basic conversational ability in a second language: A case study of an adult learner of Portuguese. In R. R. Day (Ed.), *Talking to learn: Conversation in second language acquisition*. (pp. 237–326). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

This study reports on Schmidt's use of a diary to analyze his experiences learning Portuguese.

### Improving the quality of diary studies

A common problem in doing diary studies is collecting data from language learners that are originally written simply as a diary rather than as a journal required in a language course. One way to minimize this problem is to initially encourage learners to keep diaries in your class with no

indication that the diary might be used at some later date for self or other analysis. The second problem that arises mainly in self-analysis diary studies is trying to objectively look at the data. This problem can be minimized by first, using the system for analysis described above and second, having a peer also look at the data to uncover insights that may not be available to the person who kept the diary. Finally, in analyzing the data, look for representative and salient themes that are in the data to formulate your analysis. Your themes should emerge from the data itself rather than be imposed on it.

## Final thoughts

As was pointed out throughout the chapter, there are many limitations to both verbal reports and diary studies. However, these are two of the major qualitative research techniques available to applied linguistics researchers that provide insight into the thoughts and strategies of language learners as they are participating in the language learning process. Such insights are evident in many of the published studies using introspective techniques. Because of this, they are definitely worth pursuing.

Mika and Sookyung in the examples at the beginning of the sections on Verbal Reports and Diary Studies are pseudonyms for two graduate students I had who used qualitative research techniques in their dissertations. In the case of Mika, she found that indeed sustained-content reading did aid the learners she studied in comprehending reading texts. She went on to present her findings at a yearly graduate conference in which she convinced many of the reading teachers at the institution to use sustained-content reading in their classrooms. Sookyung, on the other hand, went on to use her diary as the basis for her master's thesis. She used the thesis as evidence of the kind of research she could undertake when she applied for a doctoral program. She was successful in her application in graduate school and is now pursuing her Ph.D.

## Summary

- The value of introspective techniques is that they can provide better insight into the thought processes and mental states of teachers and learners than other applied linguistics research techniques.
- Verbal reports or protocols are oral records of an individual's thought process. They are recorded either while the individual is completing a task or shortly thereafter. The former is called a think-aloud and the latter a retrospective report.
- Think-alouds are most successful when respondents are given a practice activity first, the researcher is as unobtrusive as possible, and when the think-aloud is audio-recorded and, if possible, audio-visual recorded. It is

also best if respondents are given a choice of target or first language for the think-aloud.

- Retrospective reports are most successful when they occur as soon as possible after the task is completed, when the researcher does not ask leading questions, and when they are recorded.
- Coding systems for the data analysis for verbal reports can come either from the data itself or from an existing coding system. The most important criterion is that the coding system is comprehensive enough to account for all of the data.
- Diary studies are case studies in which language learners or teachers keep an intensive journal using introspection or retrospection and self-observation over a period of time.
- Diary studies are usually first-person research, but some third-person diary studies have been completed.
- Because there are so few published diary studies looking at different aspects of the learning and teaching process, it is difficult to compare the findings of the studies.
- In analyzing diary data, it is important to consider the content, context, and form of the narrative.

### **Key words**

coding system  
diary studies  
introspection  
introspective techniques  
retrospective reports  
think-alouds  
thought units  
verbal protocols/verbal reports

### **Post-reading questions**

1. What are the benefits and limitations of verbal reports? Of diary studies?
2. What are some principles and procedures that should be adhered to in conducting verbal reports?
3. What are some ways you might reduce the power differential while conducting verbal reports with your students?
4. One of the most challenging aspects of verbal reports and diary studies is analyzing the data. What are some principles that can be applied in analyzing verbal report data? In analyzing diary studies data?
5. Would you ever consider conducting verbal reports or diary studies with your students? Why or why not? With yourself as a teacher? Why or why not?

## Tasks

**Verbal reports:** Block (1986) used think-aloud protocols with six nonnative speakers of English (three native speakers of Spanish and three native speakers of Chinese) and three native speakers of English, all college freshmen enrolled in a remedial reading course. The students read two passages taken from a textbook used in an introductory psychology course that most students took, and completed the think-alouds. Block transcribed these think-alouds, segmented them into thought units, and then categorized the thought units into the categories listed below. She then compared how often each of the students used specific strategies in order to characterize the reading processes of each student. Listed below is a description of four of the categories she used.

Many of these descriptions indicate if the strategy is generally used in what Block calls the reflexive or extensive mode. In the *reflexive mode* students think affectively and personally about the text, directing their attention away from the text. In the *extensive mode* students attempt to deal more directly with the message conveyed by the author.

- *Interpret the text:* The reader makes an inference, draws a conclusion, or forms a hypothesis about the content. Responses, though more frequent in the extensive mode, did occur in the reflexive mode, such as, 'I think that's why some people are doing this.'
- *Monitor comprehension:* The reader assesses his or her degree of understanding of the text. This strategy occurred in the extensive mode. 'Now I see what it means.' 'It doesn't seem like what I'm thinking of.'
- *Correct behavior:* The reader notices that an assumption, interpretation, or paraphrase is incorrect and changes that statement. This is a combination of the strategies of integration and monitoring, since the reader must both connect new information with old and evaluate understanding. This strategy occurred in the extensive mode. 'Now I read this part I understand...I misunderstood in a way.'
- *Use general knowledge and associations:* The readers in this study used their knowledge and experience (a) to explain, extend, and clarify content; (b) to evaluate the veracity of content; and (c) to react to content. Responses were frequently in the reflexive mode: 'When they talk to a baby, they just sing little songs which brought to mind again my little nephew because when he hears sounds he just open his eyes and he looks and he'll try to clap and sing with them.' However, some readers used information from their own lives to clarify or extend ideas in the passages, and these responses were considered to be in the extensive mode. 'That's true. It's not easy to hold baby's attention.' (adapted from pp. 472–473)

Listed below is a transcript of one of the verbal reports gathered by Minami (2003) in a study of sustained-content reading and its effect on

reading comprehension. In the following protocol, the student is doing a think-aloud on a reading selection that appeared in the *New York Times* in February 1985, written by Robert Palmer, entitled 'What pop lyrics say to us today.' Read the transcript and using the four categories describe above, see if you can find examples in the transcript of any the categories:

### Student's transcription

Note: The sections in bold italics are the student's verbal report regarding the preceding section of the reading text.

What pop lyrics say to us today.

***Does pop lyrics mean pop singer? I don't know ... maybe, let's see.***

Appeared in slightly different form in the *New York Times* February 24, 1985. By Robert Palmer.

***Ok, so that means 'slightly different'. They changed it a little in this article. 1985. That's really old article. Robert Palmer. The author is maybe a White. Okay.***

Bruce Springsteen became the first rock lyricist to be courted by both of the major candidates in a presidential election last fall.

***Ummm (pause) So, Bruce Springsteen...is he a rock star? 'Courtied by' What does this mean? I don't know. I'll continue. Maybe I can figure it out.***

First Ronald Reagan singled him out as an artist whose songs instill pride in America. ***Ummm, so his songs...still very influential in American? It means he's still big?***

Walter Mondale retaliated,

***'Retaliated'? I don't know this. 'Re'...okay, so say something repeat again.***

asserting that *he* had won the rock star's endorsement.

***Okay, so this guy wanna make ...uh... put emphasis on he had won rock star's endorsement. What is 'endorsement'? Is this a price?***

'Bruce may have been born to run,' Mr. Mondale quipped, quoting the title of a Springsteen hit, 'but he wasn't born yesterday.'

***Ummm, 'born to run'...what does this mean? (reread) I don't understand this part. Let me read more.***

Rock is part of adult culture now, to an extent that would have been unthinkable in the mid-1970s.

***What's that? 'Rock is a part of adult culture now' May be...because I feel like rock is culture of...that's an expression of youth culture. Never been an adult culture. Maybe because Americans in those days become old now, so rock becomes adult culture. Okay, that can explain why 'to an extent that would have been unthinkable in the middle 1970s.' Okay so in middle 1970s, everyone think rock'n'roll only kids listen to that. But now most middle aged men listen to that.***

It is no longer the exclusive reserve of young people sending messages to each other.

*Okay, the same meaning again.*

**Diary studies:** Shown below is an excerpt from a language learning diary study (Choi, 2006). The diary begins with an overall description of the narrator's life and language learning experience. This is followed by several excerpts from her diary. Using this data, analyze the excerpts from the standpoint of content, context, and form:

**Subject:**

Julie Choi, 28, Born in Queens, New York

**A Brief Summary:**

My parents immigrated to the United States in 1977. I was born in New York and raised there for a total of 14 years. My half sisters and brother from my father's side arrived in New York from Korea when I was six. I grew up bilingually speaking Korean at home and English at school. Due to my parents' divorce, I lived mostly with my father and my siblings in NY until the age of 15 but moved to Korea for one year attending Seoul International School at the age of 14. During my childhood, my mother lived in Korea and then moved to China to start her business. At the age of 15, to be with my mother who was already there, I moved to Beijing where I learned Chinese. I stayed for seven years and attended a Chinese language school, a local Chinese high school, then Beijing University. I also worked for approximately 18 months in a French company mostly speaking English and Chinese. I moved to Tokyo to learn Japanese, in a Japanese language institute for one year when I was 22. I have lived in Japan for six years working as an English teacher, education administrator, and a personnel manager.

**Japan Years (Adult years 23–28):**

**Diary Entry 1**

Source: Julie's Diary

Setting: *November 2, 2000, Tokyo*

*Sat in the huge bathtub in the shower room today. They put this really nice lemony thing in the tubs. Wondered what it was... It was just me and this other Japanese girl. I felt kinda silly sitting there naked with her in the bathtub without saying anything so I squeezed out the few words I knew and said something like kore wa [this is] (pointing to the yellow water) nani [what]? Of course that made no sense whatsoever. I felt even more stupid asking a stupid question like that. But since I brought it up, I had to work it out so I said yellow mizu [water], nandesuka [what is it?] And thank god! She understood. She said it was le mon pa u da. Took me a while to figure that out but okay so it was lemon powder. And*

*of course there was nothing else to say and a wave of silence and awkwardness in the air. Shortly after, she left without saying anything. I MUST hurry up and learn to speak.*

#### Diary Entry 2

Source: Julie's Diary

Setting: December 6, 2000, Tokyo

*God, there is NO way I am going to be able to speak this language. There are WAY too many vowels in one phrase like kochira koso yoroshiku onegaishimasu. I just can't get it to roll off my tongue smoothly and it's really starting to ANNOY me! Tomorrow is the stupid test. What if I don't pass? That would be so embarrassing. I'm so stressed out that I actually cried in the showers today. There's something wrong with me. I've just been talking to the wall in Japanese that makes no sense at all. Could I be turning into a psycho? I have to straighten myself out. Okay I can do this. Sigh...I feel so insecure. There's so much pressure for me to do well. But to whom? To me? To my classmates? My teachers? I don't know. God, I've been lip syncing JR train announcements every morning and recording Maruchan [Japanese cartoon] and listening to it every day. Totally useless! I'm down to my last 10,000 yen and I bought Ayumi Hamasaki's [Japanese pop singer] CD for 1700 yen today. Don't understand a word but I asked Yuriko to help me write out the sounds in hiragana today.*

#### Diary Entry 3

Source: Julie's Diary

Setting: February 28, 2002, Tokyo

Characters: Shinya (Japanese ex-boyfriend), Chisato (Japanese colleague)

*I learned a new word today. Actually it's not a word, I'm not sure what it is but I noticed that Japanese people add the 'sa' sound at the end of their sentences sometimes continuously. I wasn't sure what it was but when I asked Shinya, he said it didn't have a meaning. It was more like a sentence cushion to make the sentence more natural when it's spoken. I wasn't satisfied with that answer so I was a bit nervous trying it out but I tried it with Chisato today and when I said it, she didn't seem to think it was strange so I kept using it. I think I kinda get it. And it makes me feel more Japanese when I use that.*

#### Diary Entry 4

Source: Julie's Diary

Setting: November 7, 2004, Tokyo

Characters: Takahiko (former Japanese student)

*Takahiko said I sound completely different when I speak in different languages. He said I'm more quiet and gentle in Japanese, more professional and intellectual in English, loud but playful in Chinese and more emotional in Korean. He said my voice changes and the way I move also changes... Come to think*

*of it, I guess I do have shifting personas but I don't really make an effort to be that way.*

## Further reading

Bailey, K. M. (1991). Diary studies of classroom language learning: The doubting game and the believing game. In E. Sadtono (Ed.), *Language acquisition and the second/foreign language classroom* (pp. 60–102). Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Center.

This article presents the benefit and limitations of undertaking diary studies.

Brown, J. D., & Rodgers, T. S. (2002). *Doing second language research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chapter 3 is a very readable chapter on verbal protocols. It discusses coding systems and provides some practice activities on coding.

Ericsson, K. A., & Simon, H. A. (1993). *Protocol analysis*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

This is the seminal book on protocol analysis which provides a comprehensive description of verbal protocols.

Faerch, C., & Kasper, G. (Eds.). (1987). *Introspection in second language research*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

A must-have book that provides an overview of the ways introspective techniques have been used in second language studies.

Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chapter 6, Introspective Methods, deals with diary studies and verbal reports. It contains data from both a diary study and a retrospective reflection by a teacher, as well as a summary of a published verbal report study.

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# 12

## Discourse Analysis

Anne Lazaraton

### Pre-reading questions

1. Think about a language classroom where you were either the teacher or a learner. What can you recall about the nature of interaction between the teacher and the students, and among the students in that context?
2. What aspects of classroom interaction interest you most?
3. What do you think are the most important features of ordinary conversation?
4. What are some ways that oral language can be represented visually?
5. What do you think 'discourse analysis' means?

### Illustrative example

*Ellen is a graduate student and ESL teacher in an intensive English program at a large American university. She teaches an intermediate-level oral skills class, in which she has noticed that there is a lot of miscommunication that takes place – either she cannot understand her students, her students cannot understand her, or the students cannot understand each other. She decides that she would like to have a better grasp of these **repair** episodes in her class, where teachers and/or students correct their own or others' speaking errors. Here is an example from her ESL class, where she corrects the student's grammar, 'was made':*

*Example 1:*

- 1 TE: when was jaws: (.2) made.
- 2 (1.0)
- 3 ST: it made in nineteen seven five.
- 4→ TE: it was made in nineteen seventy five

*She arranges to have her class videotaped so that she can pay closer attention to what is taking place. To her surprise, watching the videotape is not very helpful, because hearing the repair instances is too fleeting – she needs a visual representation of the misunderstandings she hears. She decides that*

*she will have to transcribe some of the classroom talk to have a better idea of what is happening, and she does so by using a very detailed **transcription notation** system that she learned about in a discourse analysis class she took during her graduate studies. She also refers to several influential papers on repair in conversation, which provide her with some terminology to use for analyzing the repair episodes in her classroom. She finds that the structure of these misunderstandings and the ways in which they are resolved in her classroom are in many ways like those that take place in conversation. Ellen decides that she can use examples from her data as the basis for a classroom lesson on communication strategies that focuses on self-correction and asking for clarification. She does this and finds that the miscommunications in her class decrease somewhat as a result. Finally, she plans to present these data and her findings at a local language teachers' conference.*

## Overview

When we are interested in understanding how language is used in communication – spoken, written, or both – we can employ **discourse analysis** to gain that understanding. Discourse analysis can answer a myriad of interesting questions such as the following:

- How do my ESL/EFL students perform telephone openings and closings? How do they write e-mail openings and **closings**?
- What do my students know about compliments or complaints in English? If I ask them to role play a situation that requires one of these ‘speech acts’, will they perform in the same way that native speakers of English do?
- My ESL/EFL students are required to write a research paper for our composition class. What types of ‘cohesive markers’ (for example, *however* and *finally*) do they use so that their papers read coherently?
- Students in my ESL/EFL class have a lot of trouble knowing when to use *will* and *be going to* to talk about future time. If I analyze a **corpus** of English, will I be able to determine the **contexts** in which native speakers prefer one form over the other, or when they use them interchangeably?
- How is meaning negotiated in peer writing feedback sessions in my advanced composition class?
- Using a critical perspective to look at talk in my ESL/EFL classroom, how do my ESL/EFL students display their gendered, racial, and cultural identities through their talk?

Happily, each of these questions really can be answered using discourse analysis, which is often used in case study, ethnography, and action research. Let’s look at what this exciting approach involves.

## What is discourse analysis?

At the outset, it is important to define what we mean by **discourse**. According to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), ‘a piece of discourse is an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning (for example, words, structures, and cohesion – the ways in which pronouns and conjunctions connect parts of text) that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience/interlocutor’ (p. 4). As Celce-Murcia and Olshtain point out, competence in the production and interpretation of discourse is crucial for language learners; by extension, language teachers must understand how discourse is structured and how it can be analyzed so that they are better equipped to teach effectively, and also so that they can foster their own professional development by using discourse analysis to analyze the nature of language use for themselves.

Discourse analysis as a domain of study traces its roots to various disciplines – anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and sociology, to name a few. As a result of its multidisciplinary nature, there is no one ‘right’ way to do discourse analysis; there are many approaches to studying authentic language use. In TESOL and applied linguistics, for example, in order to answer the above questions, we could employ **conversation analysis** to look at openings and closings in telephone talk or e-mail. Conversation analysis is ‘a sociological approach that attempts to uncover the systematic properties of sequential organization of talk and the social practices that are displayed by and embodied in talk-in-interaction’ (Lazaraton, 2002, p. 29). I will have more to say about this discourse analytic approach shortly. *Speech act analysis* has a long history in TESOL and applied linguistics, where the ideas of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) regarding performative acts have been employed to examine the construction of and responses to, for example, compliments, complaints, and excuses. *Cohesion analysis* (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) focuses on how texts ‘stick together’, both at the phrase and sentence level through cohesive markers (pronouns, conjunctions) as well as more holistically via discourse markers like *in conclusion* and *to reiterate*.

To determine how certain language forms are used in different contexts (spoken vs. written, planned vs. unplanned) *contextual analysis*, as described by Celce-Murcia (1980), can be used. Summaries of a number of such studies conducted by graduate students at my institution can be found in Tarone and Lazaraton (2005). A coding scheme that details important features of classroom communication forms the basis for *interaction analysis*, an approach perhaps best exemplified by the work of Allen, Fröhlich, and Spada (1984, as cited in McKay, 2006), that looks into how various learning outcomes are impacted by classroom activities and their communicative features. Finally, *critical discourse analysis* endeavors to detail the sociopolitical nature of classroom discourse, based on the assumption that classrooms are

a microcosm of and embedded in the sociopolitical and sociohistorical context of society (see Pennycook, 2001). Although I cannot cover each of these discourse analytic approaches in detail in this chapter, I will outline some general unifying principles (for a comprehensive discussion of these and other approaches, see Brown & Yule, 1983; Levinson, 1983; Markee, 2000; Schiffrin, 1994).

First, discourse analysis as it is practiced in TESOL and applied linguistics examines *authentic* data – authentic in the sense that it is produced spontaneously rather than elicited experimentally. That is, we analyze the discourse of naturally occurring events, not language that is produced solely for the sake of research. Whatever approach to discourse analysis we choose, context – the setting in which the discourse occurs, the participants who produce the discourse, and the roles, identities, and relationships that are involved in these settings and with these participants – is of critical importance in the approach. This is because our goal is to provide a rich description of language use in a particular setting, not to make sweeping claims across every possible context.

Second, discourse analysts, for the most part, focus on interaction between and among speakers rather than on monologic talk. An important concept in this regard is **co-construction**, which is defined as ‘the joint creation of a form, interpretation, stance, action, activity, identity, institution, skill, ideology, emotion, or other culturally meaningful reality’ (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995, p. 171). The importance of this idea for understanding classroom talk may be obvious, but for many years linguists, second language acquisition researchers, and language testers have analyzed and assessed learner language as if it were solely the cognitive product of a speaker, with no important influence from those with whom the speaker is interacting.

Third, for discourse analysis of speech, data must be collected for analysis and a conventionalized system employed for representing the data visually. These transcription notation systems take various forms, from simple orthography to finely detailed notations of pronunciation, breathing, loudness, pitch, and the like. Transcription is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Furthermore, discourse analysis is grounded in the data. That is, the researcher may have ideas about how some feature of language works, from experience or theory, perhaps, but the notions that we bring to our data should really only guide us in our analysis. They should not dictate or restrict the way that we look at our data. Whatever we think we already know, we must try to remain open-minded about what we are seeing. Of course, it is impossible to come to any analytic task with *no* preconceived notions, but many discourse analysts attempt to let findings emerge *from* the data, rather than imposing an *a priori* framework *on* the data.

Finally, discourse data are presented in papers or reports in the form of data fragments or examples taken from spoken or written text. Although

some researchers code, quantify, and count certain discourse features (for example, the number of turns or average pause length), most discourse analysts rely on relevant examples from the actual language data to shed light on the ways that communication is structured in certain settings or with certain speakers. That is, discourse data are not usually combined and reported in terms of means or percentages; rather, the researcher needs to present enough data examples that exhibit the relevant features under study to convince readers that her analysis is explanatory and comprehensive.

Although discourse data may come in a variety of forms, in the remainder of this chapter I will primarily focus on the analysis of oral (or spoken) language data, which is my own area of expertise.

### **Why use discourse analysis in applied linguistics research?**

The simple answer to this question is that in research using discourse analysis we do not have to rely on intuitions about language and communication because we have actual data to look at. We avoid the analysis of forced language use gathered using experiments (where conditions for speaking are tightly controlled to account for different characteristics of the speakers – gender, proficiency, and so on, for example), acceptability judgments (where respondents are asked to rate, perhaps, the grammaticality of sentences or naturalness of speech acts), and questionnaire responses. Many discourse analysts would also avoid working with data produced in role-plays. By looking at authentic language use in context, we do not have to worry about the reliability of what people *think* they would do or say in a given situation or context; we have access to what they *actually* do or say.

The results of discourse analysis are also readily observable. There is no need for training in statistics to understand findings. Yes, the transcription notation can be a little hard to follow for one who is new to the system, but even then, words, phrases, and sounds are usually obvious to the reader or listener. In fact, if transcripts are produced carefully, we can even understand discourse in other languages or with explanations of accompanying nonverbal behavior.

Perhaps the best reason to engage in a discourse analytic study is to generate a rich, contextualized description of language use in a particular setting. Although not always the case, discourse analysis studies tend to focus on a small number of speakers and/or texts in order to make possible these rich descriptions. Some studies may focus on just one short **sequence** of talk. Sometimes the goal of such research is to define or delineate a system or systems of language use at the discourse level – for example, how turns are allocated in conversation, how stories are constructed of narrative components, or, in Ellen's case, how repair is accomplished in a language classroom. Discourse analysis is well suited to these aims.

*Ellen decides to try her hand at discourse analysis because she is interested in what her students actually say. She is also keen to attempt transcribing speech and analyzing it using the principles she learned about in her discourse analysis course.*

## Collecting your data

The first step in this research process should be to read whatever you can on the topic being investigated. Some ways to find these readings include doing a Google Scholar search using important keywords, looking at your university library's holdings catalog for relevant journals and books, and asking colleagues. Reading this existing work can build your knowledge of the topic, introduce you to the terminology that is often used to describe your target structure and suggest other sources you can consult for even further clarification. In Ellen's case, she reads one of the seminal articles on repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977), in which she better learns what the terms 'repair' and '**correction**' mean, what they look like in actual data and how the system of repair functions as a machinery of talk. The main idea she takes away from this article is that self-correction is overwhelmingly preferred when speakers make errors, at least in adult, native-speaker conversation. She also reads parts of Schegloff's (2007a) book on sequence organization for the most up-to-date thinking on these issues and the chapters of repair in Diane Larsen-Freeman's (1980) classic book, *Discourse Analysis in Second Language Research*. Finally, she accesses the recent exchange in *The Modern Language Journal* (Hall, 2007a, 2007b; Seedhouse, 2007) in which these two scholars debate the role of correction and repair in classroom-based second language learning.

*Ellen pays particular attention to the way these authors present their data and make arguments for their claims. After this background reading, Ellen feels prepared to collect her own data.*

Next, whether you are using written discourse or recorded speech be sure to get permission from the people who produced the language before you analyze anything. Universities in many countries require a formal proposal to be approved by an institutional review board before faculty and students can conduct research with human subjects. Even after approval is obtained, the researcher must obtain informed consent from participants to collect and analyze the data. Along with the informed consent process, you will need to ensure the anonymity of the participants. This can easily be accomplished by using initials or roles ('T' for teachers, 'S' students) for speakers or writers in your data. Specific references to particular institutions, cities, and the like should also be altered in some way.

*In Ellen's study, she would first need to get university approval to analyze talk produced in her classroom, and then she would need to ask each of her students to sign a consent form agreeing to be taped for research purposes and to have the data analyzed and reported. In her transcription, she decides to label the participants as T (teacher) and S1 (student 1), S2 (student 2), and so on, and to refer to her institution as 'a large Midwestern university'.*

An increasing number of discourse analysis studies are based on data contained in large corpora of recorded and transcribed language. The advantages of corpus analysis are several: you do not have to record and transcribe data; you can often specify certain features for your search; and, in working with a large, publicly available resource, you are working with a data source that many others are using as well. A number of my students have answered their research questions about language use by searching the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (University of Michigan English Language Institute; <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micase>), an 'on-line, searchable...collection of transcripts of academic speech events recorded at the University of Michigan'. The corpus totals 1,848,364 words in a total of 152 transcripts, and is searchable by many criteria – speech event type (lecture, office hours, and so on), discipline and participant gender, age, and native speaker or nonnative speaker status, to name just a few.

However, you may find that you would really prefer to collect your own data, perhaps because you are interested in your own language or the language used by your students. If this is the case, it must be recorded in some way. The researcher will need to arrange for the speaker(s) to be audiotaped, videotaped or both. There are a number of factors to consider when recording discourse data (see Lazaraton, 2002, for details), but the most important considerations are to test the equipment before the real recording takes place and to be sure the equipment is working properly during the recording itself. Once the discourse data are recorded, the researcher should make a copy of the recording and then store the original data in a safe place.

Once the oral language data have been collected, they need to be transcribed, or represented visually. Edwards and Lambert (1993) is a very good source for descriptions of various transcription techniques, each of which is tied to a different approach to discourse analysis. However, transcription of discourse data is a large and contentious topic. It is important to realize that transcription itself is theoretical, in that what one chooses to represent and how it is done reflects a view of the world, the speakers, and their relationships. As Ochs (1979) points out, transcription may (even unconsciously) privilege information located top- and left-most on the transcription page (as it is the first material readers usually attend to), adult native-speaker speech (as it is considered standard English), and verbal rather than non-verbal behavior (as much nonverbal behavior is not noted in the transcription). We will return to this issue at the end of the chapter.

Ellen, in her study of classroom repair, employs the conversation analysis system (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984), which details sound production, **turntaking**, and intonation. Appendix 12.1 contains a list of notation symbols for this transcription system. Here is a short transcribed example from Ellen's data:

*Example 2: Transcription sample*

- 1 S: in Korea=
- 2 T: =uh huh=
- 3 S: =uh (.) we (.) say (.) the man (.) is (.) wolf.
- 4 T: o::h.

Notice that the words are represented orthographically rather than phonetically, that 'latching', where one person's turn is immediately followed by another's with no intervening silence, is indicated by an equal sign (=) (lines 1–3); that S speaks rather disfluently, with a very short **pause** called 'micro-pause' (.) between almost every word he says (line 3); and that T draws out her 'oh' with a sound stretch, indicated by colons (::) in line 4.

Notice also that because of anonymity concerns, Ellen masks the identities of speakers in this transcription – the teacher is simply labeled as T while the student is labeled as S rather than with his or her real name or even initials.

Although technological developments have made transcription easier than it was in the past, it is still a very time consuming process. Digitized audio can be controlled by buttons on an audio player, which is better than manipulating a cassette player, but it still requires time out from typing to control tape playback. It helps to have a transcriber, which is a nifty machine with a foot pedal that allows you to type and rewind or forward the tape by foot. But even with these gadgets, a carefully detailed transcription can take hours to produce. A rough rule of thumb for conversation analysis transcription is that it takes an hour to transcribe 5 minutes of talk. For a 50-minute class, that could total 10 hours! For those new to transcription, an online transcription module that introduces the notation and gives you practice using it can be found on Schegloff's (2007b) website.

*Ellen does some transcription practice using Schegloff's website. Then she transcribes about a minute of her classroom tape. She shows it to her graduate advisor, who checks it for accuracy. Ellen is pleased that she and her advisor basically agree, and she then transcribes the remainder of the tape.*

## Organizing and interpreting your data

Once you have your oral data transcribed (or are ready to go with your written data), you need to decide how to interpret what you have. Some useful guidelines

for analyzing the discourse of conversation can be found in Pomerantz and Fehr (1997). These ‘analytic tools’ help the researcher describe what they term a ‘conversational practice’ – everyday interactional events like complaining, apologizing, and explaining. Returning to Ellen’s data, her interest lies in the conversational practice of classroom repair. Let’s see how she could use these tools to come up with an analysis of a single instance of repair.

**Step 1: Select a sequence of interest by looking for identifiable boundaries.**

*Example 3: Repair sample*

- 1 S: yeah ohkay, teacher (.2) what’s mean (.2) the job like
- 2 (.5) jesy futoura (.8) jesy futoura
- 3 (.8)
- 4→ T: jesse ventura? governor.
- 5 S: >yeah yeah yeah<
- 6 T: governor

**Step 2: Characterize the actions in the sequence by answering the question, ‘What is the participant doing in this turn?’**

In lines 1–2, the student’s **turn** contains a question about the job title for a specific, named person. This named person, ‘Jesse Ventura’, was the governor of Minnesota at the time the data were collected. The student gets his name wrong, calling him ‘Jesse Futuora’. This error is called the *trouble source*, or the *repairable*.

In line 4, the teacher repairs the trouble source by saying it correctly, ‘Jesse Ventura?’ Her questioning intonation indicates that she is ‘checking’ this is what the student meant. This correction is the repair. The teacher then answers the student’s question: his position is governor. This question-answer sequence is called an **adjacency pair**.

**Step 3: Consider how the ways the actions are accomplished suggest certain identities, roles, and/or relationships for the interactants.**

This is the last and usually the most difficult step in describing the practice. Relevant identities for Ellen’s study include, for example, teacher-student, Minnesota state resident-international student, and the like. This fragment seems to show the student seeing the teacher as both a language expert and a culture expert, roles that the teacher demonstrates successfully in her answer. Here is how this fragment is ultimately analyzed by Ellen:

The teacher demonstrates a propensity to repeat student utterances; this seems to be a recurrent teaching strategy she uses with her intermediate-level ESL students. The repetitions may be of correct utterances; these seem to serve the dual purpose of a confirmation check to the speaker

and a second saying for the other students in the class. If the utterance is incorrect, the teacher will repeat it with an embedded correction. For example, the teacher corrects the student's pronunciation, 'jesse futuora', while at the same time answering his content question.

*Ellen finds many examples of repair segments in her classroom data. Then she chooses four segments which are the most interesting to her. She makes notes about what she hears on the tape in these segments. Then she writes up a short analysis of each segment.*

## Presenting your findings

The researcher must put careful thought into presenting discourse findings because 'the most distinctive feature of discourse analytic studies is the method of argument from example' (Jacobs, 1986, as cited in Lazaraton, 2002, p. 101). Decisions about how much data to present – for each segment and the total number of segments – in what format and with how much analysis are sticky issues. One suggestion would be to look at published discourse analysis studies to see how the research is reported; three studies on repair that exemplify data presentation are mentioned at the end of this section.

One fact about discourse analysis research is that it produces large amounts of data, too much to fit in one paper or one presentation. This means that the researcher will need to choose examples to illustrate the findings of the study. *Quality* of data analysis is always more important than the *quantity* of data presented! Remember that the examples are presented to explain and support your empirical claims. There are two aspects to data presentation: one is mechanics and the other is organizing examples.

'Mechanics' involves numbering fragments (consecutively throughout the paper), choosing contrasting or different sized fonts for the actual data as opposed to prose analysis (to improve readability), keeping data fragments on one page whenever possible, and numbering lines. Some clues about mechanics can be seen in the three examples given earlier. It is also crucial that the researcher provides a transcription notation key so that readers can understand the transcript. This information is usually given in an appendix, as it is in this chapter.

'Organizing examples' involves a number of considerations. Generally speaking, the researcher should:

- State empirical claims clearly
- Present evidence in the form of examples
- Account for exceptions.

That is, the discourse analyst puts forward an empirical claim about some feature of interest, presents a sufficient number of prototypical examples

that support the claim and finally attempts to account for examples that are contrastive, ones that *do not* fit the claim being made. Specifically, think about which fragments or categories should be presented first, and where the contrastive cases should appear in the report. Always draw connections between fragments and categories, and tie these connections to the empirical claim being made. Some questions the researcher should ask herself as she writes up her findings include (from Jackson, 1986, as cited in Lazaraton, 2002, p. 106):

- What alternative claims could the data support?
- What reason is there to prefer the claim as stated over its alternatives?
- What additional data would be required to rule out the alternatives?
- What effect could the selection of cases have had on the conclusion?

These and other questions will ensure that the write-up of discourse analysis findings is robust, coherent, and interesting.

*Ellen decides to order her fragments so that the two that are the clearest examples of teacher repair come first. Her third fragment is a little different and she explains this. She is not sure what to make of her last fragment, so she writes up her analysis of it in terms of questions that could be answered in a future study. Before she prepares her research report, she goes back and rereads Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977), the seminal article on repair, to see how they presented their repair fragments. She also studies the published article by Wong (2000) on repair in native speaker–nonnative speaker conversation as well as Seedhouse's (2004) book on interaction in language classrooms, especially the sections on repair, for ideas on structuring her paper and presenting her findings.*

## Improving the quality of discourse analysis

As I hope I have made clear, discourse analysis has much to recommend itself as a tool for understanding language and communication. However, there are some potential difficulties with the approach.

Because the sample size in discourse analysis research is usually quite small, it is very important for the researcher to be clear in selecting and reporting about the context under study and the participants who engage in the interactions. Qualitative research, in general, strives for credibility and dependability in ways that differ from quantitative research. One way to approach this task is to provide a 'thick description' of the context and the participants, so that readers can decide first, if the results seem trustworthy, and second, if they would be transferable to other similar contexts and/or similar speakers.

As mentioned earlier, transcribing discourse data can be a very overwhelming task, especially if long stretches of talk have been recorded. Then, once

the transcripts are produced, there can be an immense amount of discourse to analyze. But these procedural concerns of transcription are perhaps secondary to the 'politics of representation', as discussed by Green, Franquiz, and Dixon (1997) as well as by Roberts (1997). These authors propose that transcription is a political act, where the transcription is not merely representational but also interpretive. Roberts reminds us 'that we are transcribing people when we transcribe talk' (p. 170). We need to be aware that the use of certain orthographic and punctuation features is also a choice about how to represent speakers as social and moral beings.

Another issue that we must take note of here is what is often referred to as the '**observer's paradox**'. This term is attributed to William Labov (1972), who points out that we would like to observe how people talk or behave when they are not being observed, but we have to observe them to see how they talk or behave! Because surreptitious recording of data is generally against the law (we cannot legally or ethically record phone conversations without getting approval of some sort), it is best for us to acknowledge that our tape recorders or videocameras may influence communication. However, if we record unobtrusively, speakers seem to forget about the presence of the equipment at some point.

An additional problem that both the discourse analyst and the consumer of this research face is the vagueness of the approach. How exactly do you analyze discourse? It may be fairly straightforward to conduct sentence-level analyses of text, looking for correct past tense '-ed' use, but it is much less so when looking for something like 'misunderstandings'. Once again, I strongly recommend engaging in some background research before doing any analysis, or even collecting any data. These prior studies can be very valuable for getting ideas about all phases of the discourse analysis endeavor.

A final observation, and something I hear from my graduate students all the time, is that there is often a sense of regret that 'no generalizations can be made' based on the narrow (but rich) contexts from which most discourse data are collected. What I tell them, and what I suggest here, is to think of discourse analysis as a small first step in a very long process of understanding all the ways in which language is used in communication. Numbers and percentages do not by themselves guarantee that our results are reliable (that the same results would obtain if we did the study again), valid (that the results truly represent the phenomenon we are interested in), or generalizable (that we can make claims about other people or settings we did not study from those we did). And isn't it better to start out by understanding one language phenomenon well rather than several superficially?

*Ellen could improve her research next time in a number of ways. She could start out by transcribing only parts of her videotape, which would result in a much smaller amount of data to deal with (she can, of course, go back and transcribe more at a later time, if she needs more examples to work with). She could*

*also ensure the accuracy of her transcription by having someone else check it. Finally, she should also have a colleague look at her repair segments and tell her if he or she agrees with Ellen's analysis.*

## Final thoughts

Discourse analysis is an umbrella term for a wide variety of approaches to understanding the nature of authentic language use in particular social contexts. As such, a chapter such as this one can only introduce you to some of the main precepts of the approach; you will certainly want to read more about the particular analytic methods you wish to employ. However, these published resources will only take you so far, especially if you are looking at new forms of discourse data. For example, a recent graduate of our MA program successfully applied the conversation analytic framework for telephone openings and closings to a dataset of voicemail messages. The nature of her data required her to extrapolate from the original conversation analysis work. I am currently supervising two students who are interested in analyzing openings, closings, and turntaking in text messages. Another student is trying to understand the nature of language produced in an online writing session between a tutor and an ESL writer. Not only does she have the 'interaction' between the two participants, but she also has the essay with written comments made by others. We are not sure how to go about making sense of these different text sources! In any case, now that you know something about discourse analysis, think about what happens when your students speak (or write), come up with a question that you would like to answer, and consult some of the books listed below for guidance on how to proceed. Have fun, and good luck!

## Summary

- Discourse analysis is a tool for understanding authentic spoken (and also written) interaction. It generates a rich, contextualized description of natural language use in a particular setting and usually focuses upon spoken interaction rather than monologic talk.
- Studies in discourse analysis usually concentrate on a small number of speakers and/or texts, although the number of studies using large corpora of recorded and transcribed language is increasing.
- After getting permission from pertinent institution(s) and your participants to record and analyze their speech, spoken data are collected using audio recording, video recording, or both.
- Before analysis, data is transcribed – or represented visually – using a conventionalized transcription notation system.
- Analysis is grounded in the data; that is, the researcher must remain open-minded about what they are seeing and let the findings emerge from the data, rather than imposing an a priori framework on the data.

- Analysis begins by selecting an interactional sequence, identifying boundaries and analyzing what participants are doing in each turn, considering how this suggests certain identities, roles, and/or relationships for the interactants.
- When you present your findings, state your empirical claims early, present evidence in the form of a few carefully select examples to illustrate your argument and account for exceptions.
- To improve the quality of your discourse analysis study, provide a thick description of the context, carefully consider how the transcription system you use represents the interactants, and be aware of observer's paradox.
- There are many approaches to studying authentic language use which complement discourse analysis – conversation analysis, speech act analysis, cohesion analysis, contextual analysis, interaction analysis, and critical discourse analysis. They are all based upon similar principles to discourse analysis.

### Key words

adjacency pair  
closing  
co-construction  
conversation analysis (CA)  
context  
corpus  
correction  
discourse  
discourse analysis  
observer's paradox  
pause  
repair  
sequence  
transcription notation  
turn  
turntaking

### Post-reading questions

1. What kinds of classroom questions can discourse analysis help you answer?
2. What are the key features of a discourse analysis approach?
3. What are the benefits and drawbacks of a discourse analysis approach?
4. Why should you do background reading before engaging in discourse analysis?
5. What are three procedural steps you want to remember when you engage in discourse analysis research?

## Tasks

1. For some additional practice with transcription and discourse analysis, log on to Charles Antaki's website (<http://www-staff.lboro.ac.uk/~ssca1/sitemenu.htm>). Pay special attention to the videotaped examples and how they are transcribed.
2. Tape five minutes of a conversation or a class (make sure that you get permission first!). Transcribe about one minute of it using the transcription system in Appendix 12.1. Find an interesting feature of talk, make some notes about it, and prepare to explain your discoveries to a classmate.
3. Look at this fragment from another discourse analysis project which studied how interviewers help ESL learners in an oral proficiency interview. How would you explain what is taking place here, in terms of repair?

### *Example 4: Interview*

IN: which country would you like to go to.

CA: I: want to go: (.) in Spain.

IN: to Spain. [ah. (.) why? Spain.

CA: [yah

4. Below are two segments, one of a NNS telephone opening and the other of a NNS telephone closing. In both cases, ESL students were asked to call the native speakers to discuss an outside-of-class learning opportunity. What can you claim about their ability to negotiate these conversational sequences?

### *Example 5: Nonnative speaker telephone opening*

((ring))

NS: hello?

NNS: good evening? may I speak to G-?

NS: yes? this is G-.

NNS: hi? I'm R-.

NS: hi R-!

NNS: how are you. I talked yes (.) I called yesterday but I couldn't find you. nobody answer the phone.

### *Example 6: Nonnative speaker telephone closing*

NS: right. right. well it'll come. don't worry.

NNS: okay. thank you. (.5) oh alright. I will (.8) finish my conversation.

NS: okay,

NNS: okay? uh have a good time.

NS: okay,

NNS: bye bye

NS: bye

((clicks))

## Appendix 12.1

### Transcription notation system (adapted from Atkinson & Heritage, 1984)

1. *unfilled pauses or gaps* – periods of silence, timed in tenths of a second by counting ‘beats’ of elapsed time. Micropauses, those of less than .2 seconds, are symbolized (.) ; longer pauses appear as a time within parentheses: (.5) is five tenths of a second.
2. *colon (:)* – a lengthened sound or syllable; more colons prolong the stretch.
3. *dash (-)* – a cut-off, usually a glottal stop.
4. *.hhh* – an inbreath; *.hhh!* – represents strong inhalation.
5. *hhh* – exhalation; *hhh!* – represents strong exhalation.
6. *hah, huh, heh, hnh* – all represent laughter, depending on the sounds produced. All can be followed by an (!), signifying stronger laughter.
7. *(hhh)* – breathiness within a word.
8. *punctuation*: shows intonation rather than clausal structure; a period (.) is falling intonation, a question mark (?) is rising intonation, a comma (,) is continuing intonation. A question mark followed by a comma (?,) represents rising intonation, but is weaker than a (?). An exclamation mark (!) is animated intonation.
9. *equal sign (=)* – a latched utterance, no interval between utterances.
10. *brackets ([ ])* – overlapping talk, where utterances start and/or end simultaneously.
11. *percent signs (% %)* – represent quiet talk.
12. *asterisks (\* \*)* – creaky voice.
13. *carat (^)* – a marked rising shift in pitch.
14. *arrows (> <)* – the talk speeds up, *arrows (< >)* – the talk slows down.
15. *psk* – a lip smack, *tch* – a tongue click.
16. *underlining or CAPS* – a word or SOUND is emphasized.
17. *arrow (→)* – a feature of interest to the analyst.
18. *empty parentheses ( )* – transcription doubt, uncertainty; words within parentheses are uncertain.
19. *double parentheses (( ))* – non-vocal action, details of scene.

### Further reading

Celce-Murcia, M., & Olshtain, E. (2000). *Discourse and context in language teaching: A guide for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The authors suggest ways in which language teachers can use a discourse perspective to support the teaching of language skills, as well as to inform curriculum development and language testing, and to generate ideas for classroom research.

Cullen, R., & Kuo, I-C. (2007). Spoken grammar and ELT course materials: A missing link? *TESOL Quarterly*, 41, 361–386.

This article discusses the role of spoken grammar in conversational English and the degree to which corpus-generated features of spoken grammar appear in ELT textbooks.

Hatch, E. (1992). *Discourse and language education*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hatch covers a number of approaches to discourse that are valuable for language teachers, using data from native and nonnative speakers, adults and children, and speech and writing.

McCarthy, M. (1991). *Discourse analysis for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This book describes ways of teaching and understanding the grammar, vocabulary, and phonology of English from a discourse perspective.

Riggenbach, H. (1999). *Discourse analysis in the language classroom. Volume 1: The spoken language*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Riggenbach suggests ways the ESL/EFL teacher can use discourse analysis in teaching oral skills and in training learners to analyze their own spoken language in systematic ways.

Wennerstrom, A. (2003). *Discourse analysis in the language classroom. Volume 2: Genres of writing*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Wennerstrom also proposes techniques for the ESL/EFL teacher to use discourse analysis in teaching writing and training learners to analyze their own written language in systematic ways.

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## **Part IV**

### **Practical Issues**

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# 13

## Ethics and Trustworthiness

*Sharon F. Rallis and Gretchen B. Rossman*

### Pre-reading questions

1. Imagine that you are reading a qualitative research study. Given that the natural – and appropriate – attitude to take is to be skeptical of any research study:
  - a) How could the researcher convince you that she has fairly and honestly represented the research context, participants, and events?
  - b) How could she persuade you to accept her research findings?
  - c) How could the researcher show you that this research is useful and meaningful for you in your own research or professional context?
2. Next, imagine that a teacher working at the same school as you is doing a qualitative research study. He has asked you if he could observe you teaching, and then interview some of your students. Consider the following questions.
  - a) What kind of assurances would you like him to make to you so that you would feel comfortable participating in his study?
  - b) What assurances do you think that your students would want?

### Overview

Emiko, a high school English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in the United States and a master's student in applied linguistics at the state university, would like to learn how her students use their newly acquired skills in English within their Korean families. As an intensive English instructor for an export business in Maçau, José is fascinated by how his adult learners mediate between three languages: their native Cantonese, Portuguese, and English in their business dealings between Maçau and mainland PRC. Sherry, a doctoral student in applied linguistics, believes that students in her ESL classes (from Indonesia, Peru, and El Salvador) develop a sense of empowerment in dealing with the US Immigration and Naturalization Services agency as they build competence in oral and written English. These

language teachers are all embarking on research studies and have decided to use qualitative approaches because their studies focus on the sociocultural context of language teaching and learning, and using this research tradition is especially valuable for exploring and building a deeper understanding of these contexts.

This chapter discusses ethical issues and trustworthiness in the conduct of qualitative research. Because we have argued elsewhere that both ethical practice and technical competence are crucial for the trustworthiness of qualitative studies (see Rallis & Rossman, 2004, 2007; Rallis, Rossman, & Gajda, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2003), we begin by laying out our conceptual framework for understanding trustworthiness and then move into an in-depth consideration of ethical practice – how can you be sure that the participants in your study are honored, respected, and protected from harm?

### **Trustworthiness: Competent practice and ethics**

The first overarching consideration in designing and conducting a study, as well as critiquing the results of any study that you read, should be considerations of **trustworthiness**. Qualitative researchers, both beginners and veterans, confront the question of what constitutes trustworthy practice. They should ask two sets of questions:

- What is competent practice?
  - Is the study credible? Does it ‘ring true’?
  - Is the study systematic and rigorous?
  - Is the study potentially useful?
- What is ethical practice?
  - What assurances must researchers give to the participants?
  - How are participants honored and protected from disclosure?
  - How are differences across cultural backgrounds respected?

We suggest that competent practice and thoughtful, sensitive ethics contribute equally to a study’s trustworthiness. Thus, we define trustworthiness as a set of standards that demonstrates that a research study has been conducted competently and ethically. Observing these standards convinces the reader that the study has merit and worth and that the results are credible and therefore potentially useful to guide further research and practice. Standards for judging trustworthiness must take into consideration the accepted principles and procedures for rigorous research methodology *and* accepted principles and practices for ethical engagement with participants. In short, a trustworthy study is one whose findings are ‘worth paying attention to, worth taking account of’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290).

The trustworthiness of qualitative research is judged by two sets of standards. First, does the study meet general guidelines in the field for acceptable and competent practice? Second, does it demonstrate sensitivity to ethical issues? These are intimately linked because a study might meet accepted standards for practice, but, if it was not ethically conducted, it falls short. Our position is that an unethical study is not a trustworthy study. ‘Bad science makes for bad ethics’ (Rosenthal, 1994, p. 128), and bad ethics makes for bad science. To help you begin to understand these important ideas, we next discuss standards for practice then move into the discussion of ethics. These standards are summarized in a checklist that you can find in Appendix 13.1 at the end of this chapter, which you can use throughout your research project.

### **Standards for competent practice**

Emiko, José, and Sherry are conducting small-scale qualitative research projects. Whether their work – and yours – is for academic credit (an applied linguistics master’s thesis or PhD dissertation, for example), to satisfy professional curiosity, or for the purpose of publishing the results (or all three), you may well need to respond to legitimate questions that readers of the research reports pose. These questions focus on the credibility of the study, its rigor, and its potential usefulness to others.

#### **Question 1: Does this research seem credible?**

Qualitative researchers are interested in multiple perspectives about the topic that they want to learn more about. You will search for many truths, not one single Truth. You assume that different people have different viewpoints about their realities. Your task then is to provide rich descriptions of the participants’ standpoints – as honestly and fully as possible. But you will also come to recognize that you are the author of these descriptions – so your viewpoint is integral to what you learn about and what you write about. In judging whether a qualitative research project seems credible, readers rely on an intuitive sense about the ‘face value’ of a report: Does it ‘ring true’? Does it ‘make sense’? Does it resonate with my own experience? Looking for a moment at the case of one of our own researchers, would immigration activists believe Sherry’s discovery that, when her students learn American English colloquialisms, they are more assertive in demanding their rights from the INS (US Immigration & Naturalization Service)?

In conducting a qualitative study, several strategies help establish this credibility. One is to design the study so that data are gathered over a significant period of time, or if over a short period of time, very intensively; superficial one-shot data collection is definitely insufficient. This is important because it shows that you have spent a great deal of time learning about, learning from, and learning with the participants. A second is to triangulate – that

is, to gather data from several data sources, through different data collection methods (interviewing, observing, and document review, for example), possibly with a team of coresearchers, or to use various theories or concepts to shed light on the topic you are interested in. **Triangulation** through multiple data sources, data collection methods, coresearchers, and/or theoretical perspectives strengthens the conclusions that can reasonably be drawn from the analyses. Historically, triangulation required that data gathered in multiple ways (or from multiple sources) should corroborate – that is, the data should confirm one another. This notion, however, has been critiqued as unnecessarily narrow. Rossman and Wilson (1994) have argued for a more expansive understanding of triangulation, one in which data gathered from one source or through one method can serve to elaborate on data gathered from other sources. Thus interview data could elaborate data gathered through observation, deepening the conclusions that can be drawn.

A third strategy is to share the descriptions and analyses of what you are learning with the participants to see if they agree, argue with, or want to add to what you are writing about. This strategy, called '**member checking**', also shows respect for the participants – you have not grabbed the data and run; you honor their viewpoints and want to be sure they are written up well. A fourth strategy is to design the study to be as participatory as possible from beginning to end, thereby ensuring that the participants are coresearchers with you all the way. We also strongly recommend using a colleague or peer as a 'critical friend' who will ask you difficult questions about your insights and your descriptions. And, in your final report, you might want to include some (modest and humble) writing about your perspective – your personal biography with its interests, potential biases, strengths, and unique insights. This can help the reader explore how and in what ways you as the researcher have shaped the project and the findings you report. Finally, a stance of humility in what you claim you learned – your findings – helps the reader see that you are not making claims about finding 'Truth', but that you understand that there are many viewpoints about reality. Reminding the reader that your study took place in a particular setting during a particular time lets the reader know that you understand that what you have learned is unique to that time and space.

### **Question 2: How carefully was the study conducted?**

Another way that readers consider the trustworthiness of a research study is whether they think it has been carefully conducted. Veteran researchers often use the word 'rigorous' to capture this idea. However, rigor implies inflexibility and uniformity, qualities that may be important for quantitative studies in which replicability is usually very important. We remind you that the purpose of qualitative research is not to replicate what has gone before; in fact, such replication is impossible, given the dynamic nature of the social world and given that the researcher is not an *instrument* in the

experimental sense but rather a participant in the process of creating qualitative data. As Merriam (1988) notes:

Because what is being studied [in qualitative research] is assumed to be in flux, multifaceted, and highly contextual, because information gathered is a function of who gives it and how skilled the researcher is at getting it, and because the emergent design of a qualitative study precludes a priori controls, achieving reliability in the traditional sense is not only fanciful but impossible. (p. 171)

Instead, for qualitative studies, the traditional criterion from quantitative research – replicability – shifts to consideration of how carefully and transparently you reasoned through the design, and, focusing on implementation, how dependably you conducted the study: Was the study well conceived and conducted? Is there a strong conceptual framework to guide the research? Is the conceptual framework explicated fully and clearly? Does the chosen data collection method fit the framework; that is, will the method provide data that inform the questions? Are decisions that you made as you carried the study out clear to the reader? Was good, strong evidence gathered and presented? Are the descriptions rich enough to give the reader a clear picture of what you studied? Were you diligent in searching for alternative explanations for what you learned? Have you put these forward and weighed them carefully?

Rather than judging whether replication would yield the same results, this standard for practice is concerned with whether an outsider would agree with your findings, given the data you have collected and written up. Can someone else understand your logic and the assumptions you brought to the study? Can someone else see how the data you present – the evidence – led you to the interpretations and conclusions you put forward? Are these interpretations sound and grounded in the data? Have you made clear how you went about analyzing the data to develop themes and categories?

One strategy to help ensure that your qualitative study is carefully conducted is to make your own position clear to the participants and readers, a demand we have stressed throughout this chapter. Another is to rely on multiple methods for gathering data by triangulating. A third is to diligently document the process of gathering, analyzing and interpreting the data. Erickson (1986) refers to this as the natural history of the inquiry. Keep a log or journal. Write analytic memos. This documentation serves to record the intellectual journey of your study and help you convince readers and potential users that it was carefully and thoughtfully done.

### **Question 3: How will the study be useful?**

A final standard for conducting a qualitative study is its potential usefulness for others, in your case, other language researchers and teachers. This

is similar to the quantitative concern for generalizability. Strict generalizing, based on a randomly selected sample, however, can only be applied to the population from which that sample was drawn. Qualitative research, in contrast, relies on purposeful (or purposive) sampling; not to be redundant, you have a purpose for asking particular people to participate in the study. Qualitative research, as you recall, is not searching for Truth or 'abstract universals' but rather 'concrete universals' (Erickson, 1986, p. 130), working hypotheses (Cronbach, 1975, p. 125), or working understandings. The notion of working hypotheses or working understandings captures the assumption that what we know is preliminary, elusive, tentative, and context-bound, thus generalizing in the statistical sense is not a goal. In fact, the standard of generalizability is not found in the qualitative research vocabulary; still, what is learned in one study can still be useful for other settings, especially since the rich detail presented through qualitative research allows readers to decide what learning they can apply in other settings. Our position is that thinking about the potential usefulness of your study is an important consideration in any research. For José, it is important that he think about how his findings will be useful to language teachers in human resource departments of multinational corporations.

To enhance the usefulness of your study, provide complete descriptions of your conceptual framework, the design of the study, the data collection methods you used, and details of the implementation. We suggest that you also provide detailed descriptions of the themes and categories you have discovered, and then the interpretations and conclusions you have reached. These descriptions should include good, solid details about the context of your study. After reading your research report (or learning about it through other mechanisms), potential users can determine for themselves if your conclusions are useful for them. They can compare and contrast the specifics of your study with their own setting and judge if the two are sufficiently similar for your findings to be insightful for them. This logic is different from generalizing when you have randomly selected a sample; it is the same, however, as applying findings about one population to another. The reasoning requires careful assessment about the similarities and differences of the participants, context, and evidence.

These standards for practice and for judging the integrity and value of your qualitative study – truth value, rigor, and usefulness – are important considerations as you think about designing and implementing your study. In the cases of our three language teacher-researchers, Emiko will need to consider how collecting her data might infringe on the privacy of her students' homes, José will think about the language/s he might use in his interviews and how his translations might affect meanings, and Sherry must find ways to ensure that students who choose to participate in her study actually understand her purposes and do not hold false expectations for what she is doing. You will learn more about these standards as you read and

discuss the many writings about the theory and practice of doing qualitative research. And it has been our experience that you will learn even more when you actually implement your own study. The experience of grappling with all the decisions you need to make and struggling with real implementation issues ('My interviewee just cancelled? What do I do?' 'I can't get a meeting scheduled with the most interesting participant – now what?') are the best teachers. As you conduct your study, you should constantly be thinking about what constitutes good practice.

### **Overview: Strategies to help your study be credible and carefully conducted**

This chapter has suggested several strategies to help ensure that your study has credibility and was carefully conducted. These include:

- 'Being there': also known as 'prolonged engagement'. Being present for a long period of time in the setting or spending a substantial amount of time with participants also helps ensure that you have more than a snapshot view of the phenomenon.
- Triangulation: obtaining multiple sources of data, multiple points in time, or a variety of data collection methods are used to build the picture that you are investigating. This helps ensure that you have studied more than a small fraction of the complexity that you seek to understand.
- Participant validation: also known as 'member checks'. You take emerging findings back to the participants for them to elaborate, correct, extend, or argue about. This can be done with interview transcripts as a strategy for eliciting further information and with emerging analyses.
- Using a critical friend: also known as a 'peer debriefer'. This person serves as an intellectual watchdog for you as you modify design decisions, develop possible analytic categories, and build an explanation for the phenomenon of interest.
- Using your community of practice: engaging in critical and sustained discussion with valued colleagues in a setting of sufficient trust so that emerging ideas, tentative hypotheses, and half-developed ideas can be shared (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 69).

However, just as important as the credibility of your report, the care with which you implemented your study and its potential usefulness is whether you undertook the study with sensitivity to the ethical issues that arise in all qualitative research. In fact, each of these standards for competent practice – truth value, rigor, and usefulness – are qualities of ethical practice as well. Thus the final, overarching standard of trustworthiness for qualitative research is that a study be conducted ethically, with deep sensitivity to the needs and interests of the participants whom you have invited to give of their time and thoughts. We discuss these issues next.

## Theories of ethics

Being an ethical researcher demands vigilance and thoughtfulness throughout the entire research cycle. From the beginning to the end of a study, you make many, many decisions: How to approach key gatekeepers (Marshall & Rossman, 2006)? How to select your participants? What to do when participants are reluctant? How to manage requests to help out when observing in a classroom? These are just a sample; throughout a study, you will make on-the-spot decisions that affect your participants, you, and others in the research setting. A very important consideration is how you will think through these decisions ethically. We propose that you reason through them according to a code of ethics or standards for conduct that are based on moral principles, such as a university or professional code of ethics or your own personal ethics standards.

The word ethics comes from the Greek *ethos*, or ‘character’. A researcher’s moral principles – what you consider to be good or bad, right or wrong – define your ethics and thus, your character, which guides your actions. Put simply, moral principles provide the rules that tell you how to act in any given situation. It is widely known, however, that not everyone agrees on a common set of moral principles. Philosophers and ethical theorists have put forward various theories to analyze or direct ethical behavior, and these theories can be grouped into two broad categories – **consequentialist** and **non-consequentialist** – according to the criteria each uses to decide which behaviors are right or wrong. We’ll now look at these theoretical categories and the moral principles underlying each that provide a valuable and worthwhile foundation for sound ethical reasoning.

### Theory 1: The ‘ethics of consequences’

Consequentialist ethics use the results of actions to determine their rightness or wrongness. Such reasoning implies that ends justify means. Any particular action is neither intrinsically good nor bad; rather, it is good or bad because of its *results* in a particular context – its consequences. From this perspective, telling a lie might, in some cases, be considered the ethically correct course of action, as long as the result of the lie is not harmful. Just how one judges the effects of one’s decisions or actions prior to knowing those effects, however, remains somewhat of a mystery. Still, consequentialist ethics have strong philosophical roots, as well as direct application for ethical behavior in practice.

The best-known example of this category is Utilitarianism, ‘the doctrine that the greatest good for the greatest number should be the guiding principle of conduct’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 3534). Explicated by late eighteenth and early nineteenth century European philosophers like Hume and Mill, the moral principle of utilitarianism declares ‘that actions are right if they are useful or for the benefit of a majority’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*,

p. 3534). Among themselves, utilitarian philosophers debate questions such as, 'What is good?' and 'Whose good?' From a utilitarian rationale, Emiko, José, and Sherry could justify their studies as leading to discoveries that would allow them to improve their teaching, and thus benefit all their students.

### **Theory 2: 'Non-consequentialist ethics'**

Non-consequentialist ethical theories, on the other hand, derive from the moral principle that universal standards exist to guide all behavior, regardless of the consequences in a specific situation. This perspective counters the consequentialist position that a lie could be ethical in some cases. Non-consequentialists assert that if telling a lie is wrong, it is wrong in all possible cases. The Bible's Ten Commandments illustrate non-consequentialist ethical theory; they are not recommendations or suggestions – they are commandments for all persons in all situations. We believe that non-consequentialist ethics are powerful to guide the moral reasoning that qualitative research demands. Three non-consequentialist moral principles are individual rights and responsibilities, social justice, and care.

The **ethic of individual rights and responsibilities** upholds the unconditional worth of all human beings and the respect to which they are entitled. This ethic also mandates the corresponding obligations that we all have to protect those rights. It follows the doctrine that all people have fundamental rights that may not be denied even for the greatest good for the greatest number, and each person must be treated as an end in herself, not as a means to an end. Using this moral principle, a researcher judges actions by the degree to which they respect a person's rights, not by its outcomes or consequences. The European philosopher Kant (1788/1956), among others, directs us to act as we would want everyone else to act. Examples of fundamental rights include the right of free consent, to privacy, to freedom of conscience, of free speech, and to due process. These statements of fundamental rights are not only philosophical theories but have gained some degree of international legal stature in United Nations' human rights documents. Drawing on this ethic, our three researchers must consider how their interviews and observations of their students might invade the students' privacy or bring discredit to their reputations.

Sherry's research documents how her students become more assertive in dealing with the US INS because of their newly honed language skills. While she applauds their activism, she is worried about the potential consequences to them, especially since she has tape-recorded their interviews and written a research report – a document. Sherry must consider the implications of this activism and the possible harm that might come to them because of her documentation. Could their activism that she reports on bring attention to them that might influence their visa status? How will she protect their identities and their privacy from potential scrutiny by government

agencies? Is she morally culpable? Sherry is scrupulously careful to clean the transcripts of her interviews and to never save tape-recorded interviews (and certainly not electronic copies). However, she continues to have concerns about whether she has done all she can to protect their rights and to uphold her moral responsibility to them. Sherry talks with her students at length about their involvement in her study and about their emerging activism.

The **ethic of social justice** argues for the redistribution of resources and opportunities to achieve equity above equality. It relies on principles of fairness and equity to judge which actions are right and wrong. Its goal is to ensure that everyone is better off, even though the allocation of a benefit may differ across groups. Such apparently unequal treatment is justified because not attending to the least is to hurt the whole. Rawls (1971), a European philosopher who espouses a social justice perspective, goes beyond recognition of individual rights to identify fundamental liberties. He supports the redistribution of resources and opportunities, especially in circumstances of social and economic disadvantage. Specifically, the purpose is to benefit those who have been excluded or deprived (less to the privileged; more to the needy). This redistribution is likely to be unequal and yet equitable. This perspective would encourage our three researchers to pay extra attention to voices of participants they consider to have been marginalized or previously silenced.

As José's study unfolds, he discovers the complexities of the power dynamics across three languages and cultures. Portuguese, the language of the former colonial power, holds an elite status in business dealings with the mainland. Cantonese is crucial for understanding the perspectives of mainland corporate bosses and workers in their factories in Maçao. English, the language of commerce, holds economic power and market status. José is concerned about how language determines how deals are made and contracts are secured. He learns that, as his students gain fluency in all three, their stature in negotiations rises. No one language is sufficient in this complex economic arena. He sees that fluency in all three gives each of his students a much better chance at success, thereby helping to right historic inequities.

Drawing on another non-consequentialist moral principle that emphasizes the interdependence of people, the **ethic of care** addresses the effect any action is likely to have on human relationships in the specific context of a given dilemma. Rather than focusing on the individual as a moral agent, this ethic honors and respects the intimate connections inherent in human interaction. Drawing on this ethic, the qualitative researcher recognizes that her choices are not abstract or generalizable. Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984) are two *caring* theorists who first defined the *relational* self in contrast to the *individual* self. Because they see individuals through their relationships with others, actions have multiple meanings depending upon the particular attachments we form. 'Our goodness and our growth are

inextricably bound to that of others we encounter' (Noddings, 1995, p. 196). Universal laws or principles may be irrelevant for *this* setting with *these* people. Instead, a decision for action considers what meaning the action would have for the individuals actually involved. This perspective, however, glosses over the difficult questions about how assertive the researcher should be to gather data (see Patton, 2002, for a discussion). For example, one decision that the researcher makes is how to handle the 'reluctant participant', a question noted above. How persistent should one be to encourage participation? How hard should one press? What are the ethical issues involved? And is the quality of the resulting data (should they be gathered) compromised by such strategies?

Let's consider the ethic of care more closely. As a *caring* researcher, Emiko will be alert to the relationships she develops with the families of her students. She will ask what sense the families make of her questions and what effect her questions might have on family members' relationships. Do the family members consider that her presence at dinner brings them honor? How does her presence change their interactions (both with her and among themselves) and the language they use? Because Emiko is there as both a researcher and a guest, she must be attuned to the uniqueness of those interactions. These interactions are the central focus of her study. Therefore, she must honor the graciousness of the students and their families in any descriptions and analyses that she might include in a report. Given her stance as a caring researcher, Emiko creates opportunities for reflective dialogue with her students about the research process, specifically her interactions with their families.

Because people have the capacity to make moral choices, qualitative researchers must weigh sometimes competing ethical principles. While different ethics do exist, we are quite firm in our belief that the ethical researcher should not exploit any person in any circumstances regardless of differences in status, race, gender, language, and other social identity considerations. Put simply, one person should never exploit others to his own advantage.

## Ethical issues

Professional groups such as Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL, [www.tesol.org](http://www.tesol.org)) and social science disciplines have established formal **ethical codes of conduct** to guide their fields' research activities. So, too, have the United States and other national governments. Specifically relevant here is the statement on the TESOL website that addresses ethics:

TESOL expects authors of books or articles in our serial publications or contributors submitting chapters or units to any collective TESOL publication to adhere to ethical and legal standards for work with human

subjects. Although TESOL is aware that such standards vary among institutions and countries, TESOL requires authors and contributors to meet, as a minimum, [certain] conditions...before submitting a manuscript for review. TESOL recognizes that some institutions may require research proposals to satisfy additional requirements. (TESOL, Informed Consent Policy Statement and Release, p. 1).

Deceptive and downright harmful research conducted earlier in this century led to the development of ethical codes. These codes are intended to serve as guidelines for practice to ensure that participants in research projects are protected from harm and are not deceived. We argue that each researcher develops his own standards for ethical practice as he encounters situations that demand complex moral reasoning. These personal guidelines, however, cannot be wildly idiosyncratic; they must recognize the formal codes that exist in the discipline or profession and the writings of qualitative researchers about the ethical dilemmas and issues they have grappled with in their own practice. Some ethical considerations are generic; others are study-specific.

It may be useful to think of ethical issues on two levels: established procedures or protocols on the one hand and the specific ethical dilemmas encountered in the conduct of a study on the other. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) describe these as 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice'. As they note, 'procedural ethics, which usually involves seeking approval from a relevant ethics committee to undertake research involving humans' (p. 263) are the formal standards or procedures required by universities and other oversight bodies. In contrast are ethics in practice or 'the everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research' (p. 263). While these are clearly related to one another, novice researchers often assume that taking care of the procedural ethics will be sufficient to manage 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2006) as the study is conducted. However, researchers need to keep both clearly in mind throughout the study. The discussion below describes generic ethical issues and gives some specific examples.

Bear in mind that ethical dilemmas are not solvable, but are reasoned out through moral principles. You must be able to explain your reasoning, although it may not agree with the prevailing dominant principle. For example, undercover investigators for a news network who sought to expose conscious mis-handling of food in a supermarket chain lied on their applications for work in the stores. The supermarket chain sued for damages resulting from the exposure of information gathered through the deception. The investigators justified the lie as being for the greater good of society (utilitarian principles). The courts made the news network pay damages and fines because, they reasoned, lying violated a preeminent principle (Barringer, 1999).

The following issues of privacy and confidentiality, deception and consent, and trust and betrayal are generic to qualitative research. They suggest dilemmas that the researcher must reason through with thoughtfulness and sensitivity to the uniqueness of the setting. Relevant ethical principles may conflict, hence they are called dilemmas. The dilemmas lie in how you choose to apply the principles.

### **Issue 1: Privacy and confidentiality**

Qualitative research takes place in the field, with real people who live and work in the setting. They are not anonymous to the researcher; she knows who her participants are and who said what. Thus, she cannot promise anonymity, and if she promises confidentiality to the participants (that is, that she will not reveal who they are or who said what), she must be sure that she can deliver it. Qualitative researchers must carefully consider how to treat the identities of participants. This challenge has two elements: protecting their privacy (identities, names, and specific roles) and holding in confidence what they share with you (not sharing it with others using their names).

A current counterargument is that making people anonymous deprives them of agency in the work of the study. Those holding this position argue that the participants themselves should decide if they want to be named in a written report or if the organization or setting should be named. We acknowledge the persuasive politics of this argument but urge caution, particularly for the beginner. The ways that written reports can be used go well beyond the control of either researcher or participants. Through reading and experience, the researcher may well have a more subtle view of potential hazards when an organization or individuals have been specifically identified. We urge that the default position should be to mask specific identities unless a compelling reason is put forward not to.

Sherry's participants have come to want very much to be named in anything she writes because, as activists, they believe that their voices must be part of this political process. They reason that immigration law reform is more important than any potential danger they may be facing. Sherry is unsure. She decides to write composite portraits of her participants, leaving the participants to disclose their identities to the news media, should they choose to do so. Emiko's participants, in contrast, would be shamed if their names and the names of their families were used because her study looks at things that are intensely private and intimate. Emiko agrees with this stance so her dilemma is how to present the details and subtleties of language interactions in the families without betraying who they are. She writes case studies of each family then shares them with the students to ensure that identifying information is masked.

We remember studies we conducted as beginners when we unwittingly came close to breaking our promise of confidentiality. Participants sometimes ask what others have said to us in their interview. In the spirit of conversational give-and-take, our reflex then was to begin to answer. Fortunately, we realized that the promise of confidentiality was to all participants. Our response was similar to the following: 'We said we wouldn't share what you tell us with others, so we can't tell you what anyone has said, either.'

Over time and with experience, the response to protect becomes the reflex rather than the reaction to tell. A cautionary note, however; it is also important to remind participants that you will use their words in direct quotes in a written report. Although you will do all you can to protect their identities, an organizational sleuth might be able to figure out who said what, or perhaps worse, think he has recognized the identities of participants (false identification can be just as damaging as accurate identification). Sharing this conditional aspect of confidentiality is a more ethical (and accurate) stance than pretending that you can be omniscient and powerful and can protect their identities no matter what.

## **Issue 2: Deception and consent**

Gaining the **informed consent** of participants is crucial for the ethical conduct of research. (A model consent form can be found on the TESOL website.) In fact, university human subject review committees (often called institutional review boards, discussed more fully below) require a sample informed consent form with each dissertation and research proposal that is conducted under the university's auspices. Although often codified in a standardized form, there are four basic ethical principles underlying informed consent:

- Participants are as fully informed as possible about the study's purpose and audience.
- They understand what their agreement to participate entails.
- They give that consent willingly.
- They understand that they may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice.

This means that the participants are not deceived about the study and that their participation is voluntary. Informed consent also serves to protect the participants' identities and privacy of participants. Thus, participants are aware that their names and/or identifying information such as specific roles will not be used in any discussions or written documents about the research. Institutional review boards require informed consent for research involving human beings (and, increasingly, for similar assurances about

protection from harm for research with animals). This has evolved because of deeply disturbing research with human subjects in previous decades where participants were explicitly deceived, leading (in some cases) to psychological damage.

We are often asked how to manage informed consent with participants who do not speak English as their first language, who are not literate, or for whom such an act is considered highly inappropriate (because of history or cultural norms). The first condition can be easily met by translating the form into the participants' first language. The second can be addressed by explaining orally the intent of informed consent and then asking the participant to make her mark on the form. This may need the facilitation of a cultural liaison or translator. The third, however, is a bit more tricky. In some cultural contexts, having to sign one's name or put one's mark on a piece of paper is highly suspect. If previous colonial powers or current authoritarian regimes required such action and then used it against citizens, the threat to people or the fear it might create would be quite clear. How does the ethical researcher conform to the (quite appropriate) demands of an institutional review board but still respect the cultural values (equally appropriate) of participants? Our advice has been that researchers must observe the ethical intent of informed consent. They can, quite naturally, explain the assurances of informed consent and obtain agreement orally. This can be tape-recorded or noted in the researcher's field notes. This has often been sufficient.

All this seems quite clear. On closer examination, however, the precise implementation of informed consent and its considerations of privacy and honesty get a bit murky. Some deception may be involved in much research: Just how much can we fully tell participants about our conceptual framework (how much do they care)? Do we deceive them when we briefly summarize it? If we take on a role, for example as a volunteer in a program, are we masking our full identities? What if the purpose of the study shifts? Do we inform everyone we have interviewed already? Can participants fully understand what their words will look like in a written report before the report is written? Your task is to be as open and honest as you possibly can be as you move through a study and build relationships with members of the setting. The key is that the researcher must take every possible precaution to ensure that no harm will come to the participants as a result of participation.

Another aspect of deception needs mention. At times, in some circumstances, the potential benefits of a study may outweigh the demand to be open and forthright (utilitarian principles). Studies of classroom interaction patterns in the United States, for example, have shown the persistent, subtle, and complex ways that otherwise well-intentioned teachers privilege boys and white children (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Those researchers might

not have learned about this inequitable treatment of students in such detail if the teachers had known that sexist and racist actions were the focus. The researchers simply told the teachers that they would be observing teacher-student interactions. Was this really deception? If so, was the deception worth it? Would the possible deception have caused any harm? Punch (1994) comments on this as follows:

One need not always be brutally honest, direct, and explicit about one's research purpose, but one should not normally engage in disguise. One should not steal documents. One should not directly lie to people. And, although one may disguise identity to a certain extent, one should not break promises made to people. (p. 91)

He takes a pragmatic position that some dissimulation is intrinsic to social life, and therefore, also to fieldwork (p. 91), but he cautions that care must be exercised so that participants come to no harm. This is a delicate balance.

### **Issue 3: Trust and betrayal**

Qualitative research involves building and sustaining relationships with people. The long, in-depth interview can be quite intimate and disclosing; people often tell more than they know they are telling and the researcher often learns more than she wishes. Ethnographic fieldwork entails becoming part of the fabric of the participants' social world, a true albeit unusual member of the community. When the research is over, what happens? The researcher ends the interviews, leaves the field and writes up the study. One could argue that the very role of researcher involves some deception: you are deeply interested in people's stories, but that interest is only for a specific time period (while you are conducting the research) and for a particular purpose (to gather data). Siskin (1994) calls this the 'seduction and abandonment' inherent in much qualitative research. The image is that you seduce the participants into disclosing their worldviews, then abandon them when you have gotten what you want – data.

Punch (1994) reasons that this may be particularly painful for those who seek 'solidarity in the field' but then must 'depart and start writing up their experiences for academic consumption' (p. 94). Some feminist and postmodern researchers challenge this one-night-stand view of qualitative research as unethical. They argue for participatory, shared, and purposeful (other than research purposes) engagement with participants. Our researcher Sherry becomes an activist along with her students. She finds that she cannot 'abandon' their fight, even though they have graduated from her class. As her research comes to a close, Emiko is troubled that her

close relationships with the families may end. She makes a point of staying in touch, coming to dinner on occasion.

Betrayal may come in other guises. Recall the previous quote from Punch (1994) in which he says that you should not break promises made to people. For example, you promise confidentiality to a student but learn, in the course of several in-depth interviews, that the student may be the victim of child abuse. If you are a mandated reporter (those with legally defined roles relative to children, such as teachers or counselors), you must report this information to appropriate authorities. In so doing, do you put the child at risk from further abuse? Do you violate your promise to protect her from harm and to respect her privacy? In a less dramatic example, suppose you observe unethical or illegal practice. Do you report this to authorities and, in so doing, break your promise of confidentiality to the participants? You will have to reason through the potential consequences for the actors in the setting, yourself, the profession, and the larger social concerns of whatever action you take. Your personal ethical code determines the decisions you reach and the actions you take. Be aware that your code may not fully align with the prevailing one. While conducting his research, José uncovers illegal labor practices. Revealing specifics about the activities might endanger his students as the whistle-blowers – they might lose their jobs. José is deeply troubled by this, but not surprised. Should he disclose, he would be violating the prevailing norms of ‘doing business’; should he not, would he be complicit in these illegal actions?

As we have noted throughout, ethical dilemmas and decision-making occur throughout the research cycle. From the earliest conceptualization of a possible study, the researcher must consider whether the study is ethical to conduct – what we refer to as the ‘should-do-ability’ of a study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Then, during implementation, ethical issues can arise in dealing with gatekeepers to obtain permission to enter a site or inviting participants while respecting the demands on their time or even dealing with illegal practices. In addition, ethical issues come to the foreground when writing up a study such as ways to truly protect the confidentiality and privacy of participants (see Flick, 2007, for further discussion). Thus, applying the principles of reasoning through ethical practice in the design, implementation, and writing up of a qualitative study is an ongoing process. Below we offer considerations in this reasoning process.

## **Reasoning toward ethical practice**

In this chapter, we have defined a trustworthy study as one that is ethical, and presented competence as a facet of ethics. As a qualitative researcher, you make ethical decisions in design and in implementation – but you can hardly plan for every ethical situation you may encounter in the field. So,

what's a researcher to do? Ethical dilemmas have no easy solutions. There is no template or clear set of rules to use as you weigh the risks and benefits for the many actors and groups that surround your research. We are suspicious of beginning researchers who identify thorny and troublesome ethical situations and tell us they have solved them. Solutions are ephemeral, and someone else might argue for a radically different course of action. Instead, we look for sensitivity to the generic and specific ethics in a study. We propose that you engage in complex and subtle moral reasoning that identifies a range of risks and benefits for those involved, just as Sherry, José, and Emiko have done throughout this chapter. Such subtle argumentation stands you in good stead for justifying decisions made in the field.

While no template for resolving ethical dilemmas exists, we do believe that people move through generic levels of thinking about the ethical decisions they make. Four levels can be identified, adapted from an excellent and thorough discussion of ethical decision-making in Newman and Brown (1996.) We present these four levels in order here: intuition; rules, standards, or codes; principles or theories; and personal values.

**Intuition** guides the first level; we have an intuitive response to a situation: 'What's wrong here?' 'Why am I uneasy?' 'I'm not sure how to act in this situation.' 'I feel very uncomfortable.' This level of thinking is intuitive because it is not necessarily rational or logical – it is more about feelings the researcher has in a situation. The result of this thinking is either to proceed as planned – or to decide that a potential ethical dilemma exists and, therefore, to stop and conduct further analysis.

The next level draws on existing resources for decision-making. What rules, standards or codes might apply to this situation? Professional associations, business organizations, government regulatory agencies, and laws all provide guidance. You reason, 'Does any one of these rules, standards, codes, or laws fit this dilemma?' As for José, he turns to the international charitable organization, Business & Human Rights (2008), to learn what others have done in research situations similar to his own.

The third level identifies the **ethical principles or theories** underlying the dilemma. At this level, we deliberate on criteria (consequences/rights and responsibilities/social justice/care) that the theories suggest should be used to determine action. In determining when to apply which principle, we ask:

- What are the possible consequences to individuals and groups?
- What rights must be protected? What are my responsibilities to protect these rights?
- Are participants' needs and interests considered equitably? Am I aware of the needs and interests of the less powerful participants?
- What unique needs, interests, rights, or consequences play into this specific setting?

- How will the actions of the researcher and the reactions of the participants affect the relationships among the people in the setting?

The final level of ethical thinking relies on our own **personal values** to mediate our decision for action. This values level is the point where we ask ourselves: What kind of person am I? What is important to me as a researcher? We explore the alternatives, assessing the risks and rewards of each and then take action. While it might be useful to stipulate what actions are taken, given the complexity and idiosyncratic nature of ethical dilemmas that we have discussed, each action is unique to the situation.

Sherry's research process illustrates this ethical reasoning. Early on, her intuition tells her to be mindful of potential effects of the students' activism on their own lives, which she learns about through her research. Her intuition serves as a touchstone as she considers standards, theories, and values. Although her research is not strictly an evaluation, she is aware of the American Evaluation Association's Guiding Principles, which remind her to attend to the 'security, dignity and self-worth of respondents [and] program participants' (AEA, 2008). Next she clarifies the moral principle that drives her decisions: the ethic of individual rights and responsibilities. She asks herself, 'What rights are relevant? Whose rights are they? What is my responsibility to protect them?' In her case, she considers the rights of her students as learners, as community members, as activists, and as immigrants. She believes they have the right to voice but is concerned that, in exercising this right, they may be harmed. She discusses these dilemmas with them. And finally, she relies on her own values that undergird her commitments to working with adult learners in the hope of their ultimate empowerment.

## Final thoughts

Emiko, José and Sherry each confront ethical situations in striving to make sure that their research is trustworthy. They must reason through these situations to take action. Whether the guiding ethics draw on consequentialist or non-consequentialist theories, their moral reasoning should be clear and grounded in the specific research setting. Whenever possible, they engage in ethical dialogue with their participants to establish a relationship of trust. Whether conducted alone or collaboratively, their reasoning moves through intuition, rules, principles, and values to reach decisions they believe they can live with, and they take action accordingly. Ethical action often demands courage, and the result is a study that is deeply trustworthy; it not only produces useful, credible knowledge, but most importantly, also *respects the rights* of the participants, is *socially just*, and is *caring*. As they strive to meet the standards of trustworthiness,

Emiko, José, and Sherry enact the principles and practices of ethical qualitative researchers. We hope that this chapter will guide you to do the same.

## Summary

- The trustworthiness of a study depends on meeting standards for methodologically competent practice and ethically sensitive practice.
- Standards for competent practice include demonstrating that the study has credibility, was conducted rigorously, and has potential usefulness for policy, research, and practice.
- Strategies for ensuring competent practice are triangulation, prolonged engagement, participant validation, using a critical friend, and using a community of practice.
- Standards for ethical practice rest on consequentialist or non-consequentialist ethical principles.
- Non-consequentialist ethical principles include the ethic of rights and responsibilities, the ethic of social justice, and the ethic of care.
- Ethical dilemmas are not solvable; they are dealt with through moral reasoning.
- Ethical issues focus on privacy and confidentiality, deception and consent, and trust and betrayal.
- Procedural ethics require informed consent from participants.
- There are four levels of thinking about the ethical decisions: intuition; rules, standards, or codes; principles or theories; and personal values.
- Ethics in practice are daily dilemmas that confront the researcher.

## Post-reading questions

1. Credibility, rigor, and usefulness are three ways that you can ensure that a qualitative research study is methodologically competent. How can you increase the credibility of your study? The rigor? The usefulness?
2. How would you ensure that your participants fully understand the purpose of your research and their potential role in it so that they can give their informed consent to be part of your study?
3. When asking participants to sign informed consent forms, what cultural issues might arise? How might you deal with those issues?
4. When faced with an ethical dilemma, how might you reason through to a decision? Where might you turn to for advice?
5. How do consequentialist and non-consequentialist ethical principles differ?
6. Which of the three non-consequentialist ethical principles do you feel most comfortable with? Why?

## **Key words**

consequentialism  
deception and consent  
ethic of care  
ethic of rights and responsibilities  
ethic of social justice  
ethical codes of conduct  
ethical principles or theories  
informed consent  
intuition  
member checks  
non-consequentialism  
personal values  
privacy and confidentiality  
triangulation  
trust and betrayal  
trustworthiness

## **Tasks**

1. Imagine that you are teaching writing in an intensive language program at a university. To help you evaluate how different strategies for giving instructions in class impact students' written work, you decide that you would like to video-record yourself giving directions in one of your classes over a six-week period, then interview three students, and also include these students' papers and grades in your study. Considering what we discussed in this chapter, what might you do to prepare for this research project? Write a page detailing your decisions and your reasoning.
2. Write a short example of an ethical dilemma that you have encountered (or might encounter) in a research study. Share this with your community of practice (or your classmates) and explore how you could resolve it.

**Appendix 13.1 Checklist for competent and ethical practice***Actions taken In process*

<b>Competent practice</b>		
<p>Credibility – What have you done to ensure the credibility of your study?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prolonged engagement: Was the data gathered over a significant period of time (or intensively over a shorter period of time)?</li> <li>• Triangulation: Have you elaborated on your data through using multiple data sources, methods, or theoretical perspectives?</li> <li>• Participant validation: Have you shared descriptions and analyses with the participants (if possible and appropriate)?</li> <li>• Community of practice: Have you engaged in critical and sustained discussion with your research supervisor, other researchers, or colleagues?</li> <li>• Personal perspective: In your findings, have you included a short personal biography, indicating your interests, potential biases, and strengths?</li> <li>• Humility: Have you been careful to make only reasonable claims, and acknowledged that there are many possible viewpoints?</li> </ul> <p>Rigor – What have you done to ensure that your study is conceived and conducted rigorously?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conceptual framework: Is there a strong conceptual framework to guide the study? Is it explicated fully and clearly?</li> <li>• Research approach: Do the chosen research approach and data collection methods fit your study? Do they provide sufficient and appropriate data that will allow you to answer your research questions?</li> <li>• Evidence: Was good, strong evidence gathered and collected? Are the descriptions rich enough to give the reader a clear picture of what you studied?</li> <li>• Assumptions and logic: Is the logic that you used strong, clear, and understandable?</li> <li>• Data analysis: Have you made clear how you analyzed your data to develop themes and categories?</li> <li>• Documenting the research process: Have you diligently documented the process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting the data, through logs, journals, or analytic memos? Do these adequately log your intellectual journey?</li> <li>• Conclusions: Is it clear how the data led you to the interpretations and conclusions you put forward? Are these interpretations sound, and grounded in the data?</li> </ul>		

Continued

Appendix 13.1 Continued

*Actions taken In process*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Searching for alternatives: Were you diligent in searching for alternative explanations for what you learned? Have you put these forward and weighed them carefully?</li> </ul> <p>Usefulness – What strategies will help intended and potential users determine whether and how your research is useful?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research context: Have you provided good, solid details about the context of your study, so users are able to establish if your conclusions are relevant to their own context?</li> <li>• Research process: Have you provided comprehensive information about your conceptual framework, design of your study, and data collection methods, so users can see how they are relevant to their own research?</li> <li>• Research outcomes: Have you provided a thorough description of the themes and categories that you have discovered, and the interpretations and conclusions that you have reached?</li> </ul> <p><b>Ethical practice</b></p> <p>Respect – How have you conducted the study to respect participants’ well-being?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privacy and confidentiality – Did you protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants’ identities?</li> <li>• Or, if they chose to have their identity revealed, did you give them the authority to negotiate how their identity would be represented?</li> <li>• Did you obtain informed consent from participants?</li> <li>• Did you obtain institutional approval for your research?</li> <li>• Did you take every precaution to ensure that no harm came to participants?</li> </ul> <p>Benefits and burdens – How have you balanced the benefits of participating with any burdens?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you identified potential benefits to participants?</li> <li>• Have you identified possible burdens to participants?</li> <li>• Have you carefully reasoned through the moral principles guiding your actions?</li> <li>• Have you carefully reasoned through issues of trust and responsibilities to the participants? Have you faithfully kept that trust?</li> </ul>		
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## Further reading

Flick, U. (2007). *Designing qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications.

A highly readable and concise discussion of the qualitative research cycle, this book highlights ethical issues throughout the inquiry cycle.

Mauther, M., Birch, M., Jessop, J., & Miller, T. (2002). *Ethics in qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

With grounding in feminist research, this book discusses the ethical issues and dilemmas associated with qualitative research, providing very useful examples throughout.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

A comprehensive discussion of case study research. Chapter 10, 'Dealing with Reliability, Validity, and Ethics', addresses issues of trustworthiness in some detail.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

A highly readable and engaging text by one of the foremost qualitative researchers. See especially, chapter 9, 'Enhancing the Quality and Credibility of Qualitative Analysis', for a discussion of trustworthiness and ethics. Throughout his fieldwork chapters (chapters 6 and 7), he raises the everyday issues of ethics in practice. Chapter 7 includes an ethical issues checklist.

Rossmann, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Using three student-learners as examples throughout the book, this introductory text foregrounds ethical issues as central to the rigorous and trustworthy conduct of qualitative research studies.

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This 'student-friendly guide to qualitative research' deals with issues of representation and social responsibility and thus is infused with considerations of ethics and trustworthiness.

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# 14

## Writing Up Your Research

*Christine Pearson Casanave*

[The] hyper-formality and lack of experimentation in academic writing is unfortunate and dulls both the representations and the mind. (John Van Maanen, 1988, p. 144)

### **Pre-reading questions**

1. What have been your experiences with academic writing, including writing up research projects?
2. What research reports have you read that really held your attention? That bored or irritated you? What distinguishes them?
3. What do you consider to be the characteristics of a good qualitative research report?
4. What aspects of your own writing do you find especially challenging? If you do not consider yourself a good academic writer, what do you think you can do to improve your writing?

### **Getting started: Envisioning readers of our writing**

The editors and I had originally envisioned separate chapters in this final section for a discussion of reading and writing qualitative research, just as many second and foreign language programs divide instruction in reading and writing into different classes. But in both cases it is barely possible to discuss issues in academic writing without addressing issues in reading. They are two sides of the same coin. At the very foundation of our writing activities we are writing for other readers, as well as for ourselves as readers of our own texts. This point comes through clearly when we begin to examine readings that resonate with us and ones that do not. Effective writers are able to identify what characterizes readings that they are drawn to as examples of good writing in their fields and to imagine how their own audience of readers will respond to their written work. So as you write up your qualitative studies of language learning and teaching, it is wise to adopt the perspective of a reader from the start and

consider why you as a reader connect with some readings and not with others.

There are many reasons for writers to consider their readers as they write, of course, not the least of which is that those of us who write up our research findings want to pass muster with the **gatekeepers of our fields' research journals** – editors and reviewers – so that our research can be shared with a critical public. For this audience, our writing needs to be clear, well substantiated, and authoritative yet accessible. At a humbler level, most of us hope to keep our readers awake and interested in what we have written. If readers fall asleep before turning the page or cease reading because they are frustrated at unclear or overly dense and pompous prose, we have lost the chance to communicate our research findings to anyone. This is the case for writers and readers of quantitative work as well as for work that is qualitative, but seems especially pertinent for writers in the latter category: effective writers of qualitative research fill their reports with descriptions, narratives, and accounts of lived experiences. We owe it to ourselves, our participants, and our readers to make the phenomena we have studied come alive on the page. To do this, we need to be able to write well. It is hard but not impossible to pull this off, as Belcher and Hirvela (2005) have pointed out, even for writers whose mother tongue is not English.

The remainder of this chapter will be divided into two parts, and both parts are directed to writers of qualitative research in applied linguistics. In what follows, I first talk about paying attention to what we read as a way to inform our writing. A well-written qualitative research article can teach us a great deal about our own writing. In the second part, I focus in more detail on issues we face in writing up our qualitative research.

### Readings as 'textual mentors': Lessons about and from reading

The first step in writing up your own qualitative research is to locate some examples of well-written qualitative work in your area of interest, particularly from journals you hope to submit your own work to some day. Though perhaps not plentiful, these readings are easy to identify. Start with articles or books that have held your interest and then ask yourself what it is about the work that keeps you turning pages. Pay attention not just to the content of what you read, but also to the many features of well-written readings that can teach you about how to write up your own qualitative study. Because readings can teach us so much about writing (both what to do and what not to do), I refer to them as **textual mentors**.

First, as an overall impression, it is likely that you will find that such readings are clearly **framed**, that goals and purposes are stated early, that the writing exhibits both clarity and enthusiasm, that you have a sense of who the authors are even if the pieces are not written in the first person,

and that the tone is respectful of you as a reader – you have the sense that these authors really want to communicate with you, not just to add another item to their C.V.

Next, begin to examine the reading in more detail. For instance, in an engaging reading, we are likely to learn something about the authors. Why are they interested in this topic? What are their curiosities and questions? What is the authors' background, either as summarized in a bio-statement or as placed in the text of the reading itself? What can you learn about the authors by looking carefully at the references at the end of a reading? The readings that the authors themselves have done provide a window on their identities as scholars by showing which researchers they draw on and feel aligned with, or which ones they critique. We can also ask what position the authors take in their own study. Are they openly involved in their own research, such as in the role of classroom teachers, or do they take a distanced back seat position? All of this information can help give us a fairly clear picture of the authors as real people, contribute to our willingness to engage with them and their ideas and help us make decisions about how to represent ourselves in our own writing.

Look as well in your readings for evidence of the authors' assumptions and philosophies of what can be known and researched. For instance, what are the authors' underlying assumptions about their topics, research approach, and implied or explicit philosophy of teaching and learning languages? What **epistemological stance** does the author take about what can be known and how we can know it? There may be evidence that she views knowledge as constructed rather than as something waiting to be discovered or as something that already exists that is transmitted from experts to novices. And what does the author believe about 'reality' and what aspects of that reality are available to the researcher's methods of inquiry? This is the author's **ontological stance**, and will influence how she conducts and interprets her research. If she believes that 'facts' exists in a real world that is separate from her own construction of it, she will work to discover those facts and represent them accurately, with a minimum of influence from her own beliefs and personal interpretations. If she believes that the real world can never be known except through our own filters, constructions, and interpretations, she will conduct and interpret her research from a different stance. Whatever an author's stances, we can ask whether the author's stated or implicit beliefs about knowledge and reality suit the research approach and methods. In short, authors who engage our attention help us learn something about themselves, their beliefs, and their assumptions, and present a consistent match between this information and the research project itself.

A related aspect of an engaging reading is the clarity and sensibility of the approaches and methods used to investigate a topic. An exemplary research article does not leave readers guessing about what approaches and methods have been used and on what assumptions about knowledge and reality they

are based. The approaches and methods are clearly explained and suit the subject matter and the questions that the researcher has laid out. As readers of exemplary works we are easily able to paraphrase what approaches and methods the authors have used, including the authors' roles and relationships with participants. In this last regard, we can also note that effective authors make clear their ethical stances in honoring and protecting their participants from any risk they might face as part of their participation in a research project.

An engaging research report will also be situated clearly in a body of literature that is relevant to the topic. **Literature reviews** are hard to write, and it is not often we see ones that hold our attention well and that come together as a whole both to demonstrate authoritatively what work has already been done on a particular topic and to reveal the gap that the researcher's work will fill (Swales, 1990). Many are written in the style of **annotated bibliographies** in which the authors and works that are **cited** are fronted and the issue or summary is then added as a comment. However, an engaging literature review is about ideas, not about the authors of cited literature. The subjects and topics of the paragraphs in a literature review thus need to front ideas, not authors. The engaging literature review as a whole flows from start to finish as coherent discussion of these ideas. In some ways it can be seen as a narrative of what others have studied and learned about a topic and as a rhetorical argument designed to persuade readers that the author's own research needs to be done (Maxwell, 2004).

Next, when you read a research report that holds your attention, you will, in one way or another, be transported to the worlds of the participants and their contexts. You will be able to see, hear, feel what the participants have experienced. For example, sufficient data will be presented, in any number of ways – descriptive passages, short and long direct quotes, dialogue, documents, and even visuals. Details will be rich and inviting. Descriptions may include references to colors, sounds, and smells in addition to what can be seen. The point is that the background descriptions and the data will be clear and ample enough to convey credibility and trustworthiness to you as reader, convincing you that the author knew her participants and their contexts well enough to write a report that represents their experiences as truthfully and respectfully as possible. The details will be presented in a way that allows you to experience what the author and the participants experienced.

In addition, a reading that keeps you engaged will present findings not only clearly but in a way that does not display arrogance or certainty or closure. The analyses and interpretations will be clear and well **documented**, but will leave open possibilities for other views and for future work. You can note, for instance, whether a work ends with answers, statements of certainty and 'proof', or with further questions and curiosities that arose for authors as they wound up their studies. Authors who do not profess to know

everything invite readers to join in on conversations about the work and to pursue more aspects of the work themselves. In so doing, readers are not put off by false certainty but are drawn into further conversation and inquiry.

Finally, when you read an engaging write-up of qualitative research, there may be something about the writing itself, as hinted at in the previous paragraph, that holds your attention. It is likely that there is not too much **jargon**, that the syntax and vocabulary are rich but not overly complex or dense and difficult to process, that the work flows comfortably from section to section, from paragraph to paragraph, and – within paragraphs – from sentence to sentence. There may be also elements in the writing that break the monotony that plagues some writing in the social sciences. These may include surprises such as small, seemingly inconsequential details, shifts in sentence length, unusually rich and expressive vocabulary, or personal inserts and asides. In other words, there may be a literary quality to the writing that engages you. Without feeling pressed to become Nobel Prize winners in literature, you can adopt some of these literary strategies in your own writing.

In short, competent authors of qualitative works keep us with them in a number of ways. They give us a clear sense of who they are, including a sense of their epistemological and ontological beliefs: they match their beliefs with their approaches and methods; they hold our attention from start to finish, by reporting in sufficient detail and clarity; and they allow us not only to enjoy what we are reading but also to evaluate the work without having to struggle to figure out what the research consisted of. These are goals all of us can strive for in writing up our own qualitative research projects.

## Issues in writing up your research

This part of the chapter focuses on issues in writing, in particular on writing for publication, and will be a companion to the discussion above on reading.

### Issue 1: The importance and challenge of writing

Clear writing is important in the write-up of any kind of research, whether you are writing for a dissertation, for a local publication, or for an international journal. But there is a well-justified reason to think that writing up your qualitative research project requires a greater, and different, kind of attention to writing than for a conventional **experimental, quasi-experimental, or survey study**. Laurel Richardson (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) makes an interesting point about the roles of writing in quantitative and qualitative research. In quantitative research, she claims, the messages of the work are often carried in the abstract and in tables and figures. In qualitative research, on the other hand, the text itself is the message. Readers need to connect with the entire text as a way to construct meanings

and messages from the work. Not just details of the prose are important, but also the representation of the research in a form that will bring human experiences alive for the reader, such as in narratives. Writing lies at the heart of effective reports of qualitative research.

If you are a second language speaker of English, as most ESL and EFL teachers in the world are, you might be intimidated into thinking that the challenges of writing up a qualitative study in English are so much more daunting than they are for native speakers that you do not want to consider doing a qualitative project. This belief is a myth. Some of the worst writers I have known are native speakers of English, and some of the best are native speakers of other languages. Writing, and writing well, are simply hard for everyone, in any academic genre, let alone the ambiguous and more literary genre of the qualitative research write-up. In the L2 field, Diane Belcher and Alan Hirvela (2005) acknowledge the difficulty of writing up the 'fuzzy genre' qualitative research. However, they are optimistic about the capabilities of second language speakers of English to write in ways that describe richly, that narrate compelling stories, and that engage readers, particularly if the L2 writers are guided by competent mentors. Mayumi Fujioka (2008), a native speaker of Japanese, similarly narrates how she shifted her dissertation topic and approach from a primarily quantitative study to a qualitative one, finding to her surprise that her writing was described approvingly by her dissertation committee members as accessible and clear.

Teachers who conduct classroom research may also be attracted to qualitative research in order to capture the richness of the lived experiences of the people they study. However, like students who are writing qualitative dissertations, they, too, may be intimidated by the challenge of writing up their work in ways that communicate this richness to readers without sacrificing the rigorosity of their research. Classroom teachers may not only be deterred from doing a qualitative research project in the first place because they believe they lack expertise in doing this kind of research; they may also lack confidence in writing up their findings for publication. But even well known scholars in our field struggle to write for publication. The behind-the-scenes experiences of L1 and L2 English speakers writing in English for publication and writing doctoral dissertations in English are documented in two collections of essays that I coedited and that may inspire all writers of academic research (Casanave & Vandrick, 2003; Casanave & Li, 2008; see also Braine, 1999). Native-English speaker or nonnative speaker, you will find that writing up your qualitative project is challenging, but doable. Start with an expectation of possibility and of success, find models ('textual mentors') in your readings, and seek inspiration from published writers.

Let me turn now to the heart of this section to discuss specific issues and tips in writing up qualitative research projects.

## Issue 2: The early stages of writing up qualitative research

In this section, I discuss four, of many, issues that you need to consider fairly early when writing up qualitative research: the type of project you are doing; your purpose; your intended audience; and your level of expertise in writing.

Many kinds of projects are possible for language teachers. You may conduct **action research** projects, **case studies** of an individual or a group, long-term naturalistic studies in an **ethnographic tradition**, **conversation analysis**, or even **autoethnographies**, or studies of the self (see Burdell & Swadener, 1999; Ellis, 1997). You may collect data over a relatively short or very long period of time. Many language teachers conduct various kinds of classroom research with their intact classrooms. Projects include studies of an entire class over a term or school year, studies of one or more individual students and studies of teachers or teacher–student interactions. Because interviews and observations lie at the heart of qualitative research, you face the challenge of writing about classes, students, colleagues, and yourself in ways that portray them accurately (in ways they would recognize as ‘true’), fairly and ethically, and comprehensibly. In all these cases, your projects can focus on the experiences of individuals or groups, their attitudes, people’s processes of learning or teaching over time, their changes and developments, or events and interactions in particular institutions or programs. Hence, choosing an appropriate project in the first place, and then searching for a fitting home for it in a suitable publication – such as a publication that publishes similar kinds of projects – are things to consider early on.

Another issue to consider is what your purpose is in writing up your project. Not surprisingly, your attitude toward your writing will differ if you feel forced to write for publication as a way to get or keep a job on the one hand, or if you feel driven by curiosity to do research and then compelled to share important messages with other teachers and researchers. In the first case, you may have limited choices about how to write up your project or where to publish it. It is wise to check with your university to find out what kinds of publications are acceptable for their purposes, for instance, whether qualitative research is even considered a legitimate form of research, and whether an evaluation committee will be receptive to descriptive or first-person writing, both of which are common in write-ups of qualitative research. On the other hand, if you can get your message out to the public without university constraints, try to identify possible journals before you begin writing, not after, so as to angle your topic and writing style to fit the journal. Consider at the very least whether a journal primarily publishes work on theory and research or on pedagogy and classroom research. In short, ask yourself why you are writing, and let decisions follow from your answers.

The need to consider your audience is related to the last point. Are your readers going to be mainly university evaluators? Other researchers?

Practicing teachers? Here, too, your decisions about structure, style, and tone should be made early on in the writing process depending on who you want your readers to be.

A fourth issue to consider early in the writing process is your level of expertise and interest in writing. Although anyone, with practice and hard work, can learn to write clearly and accessibly, it would not make sense to immerse yourself in a major qualitative research project that requires an enormous commitment to a lengthy write-up if you hate to write, and if you believe your attitude will not change. At the very least, you need a love-hate relationship with writing (this is my case), so that the love of achievement balances out the hardship of production.

### **Issue 3: Conventional and unconventional writing in qualitative research**

In writing up your qualitative project, you will need to decide whether to follow or bend **conventions**. A brief and therefore necessarily overly simple description for reporting several kinds of conventional quantitative and qualitative research appears in the spring 2003 issue of *TESOL Quarterly* (Chapelle & Duff, 2003), and full articles on qualitative research were published in 1995 (Davis, 1995; Lazaraton, 1995). For novice writers who wish to publish, these overviews are a good place to begin as long as you recognize that the authors have made the processes of researching and writing seem far more clear cut than they actually are. The authors' reference lists can lead would-be writers to other sources that deal in more depth with the complexities and confusions of qualitative research, and much has been published since that time. One of my favorite books since then is the second edition of anthropologist Harry Wolcott's *Writing Up Qualitative Research* (2001).

Regardless of the kind of study you do and whether you are a novice or seasoned writer, you will need to make decisions about how to represent yourself and others in your writing as well as how to discuss your interpretations of your findings. Underlying these decisions is the broader decision of whether to follow conventions or to expand or bend them. For instance, in conventional reports of quantitative research, the self (author) may not appear at all as a 'character' in a study, and others may be represented impersonally. Contexts, when described, are written in straightforward ways. Literary flair that includes colorful details is rare. In addition, the conventional quantitative report is supposed to include enough detail about how you set up your study, chose your participants, and designed your procedures and methods so that your study can be replicated.

A few of these conventions from the quantitative tradition have seeped into some qualitative work. In conventional write-ups of qualitative work, it may also be the case that the author is invisible and that the report itself is structured in a predictable way that follows the structure of reports of

quantitative work, with sections that parallel the introduction-methods-results-discussion-conclusion format. Purpose, contexts, and research questions are presented, literature reviews are placed and argued appropriately somewhere close to the introduction, methods for collecting and analyzing data are laid out, and interpretations are tied to a conceptual framework (Creswell, 2003). (For a summary about how literature reviews are placed within qualitative and quantitative research and mixed methods, see Creswell, 2003, pp. 30–33). Some genres conventionally allow for more flexibility, such as critical ethnographic reports, which may be built around narratives, and include multiple interpretations and voices, author reflexivity, and greater presence of participants (Chapelle & Duff, 2003). In all cases, quotes from participants are usually presented in block form or in short phrases in quotes within the text. Your entire published article may contain only a few excerpts from your mountain of transcribed interviews. The author, if not invisible, is at least backgrounded, and first person accounts in the active voice may be rare. Graduate students and novice writers who hesitate to risk rejection in the school and publishing world ordinarily seek to present their research findings in such conventional ways.

However, there seem to be no fixed rules for writing up qualitative studies, and ethnographers as well as poststructural and feminist writers have been stretching even further the somewhat flexible boundaries of writing conventions (Ellis & Bochner, 1997; Merriam, 1998; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). But you can look closer to home to identify challenges to convention; if you consider which readings keep you turning pages, you may find that authors of such works are writing outside of, or beyond, conventions. There may be details present that are novelistic in character in the sense that they open readers' eyes to more than just information. Such details help readers see, hear, and fully sense the presence of people and places in the qualitative project, including the authors themselves. Authors may include personal first-person anecdotes that help explain why they became interested in their projects or personal asides that add colorful commentary (Casanave, 2002). Emotion may become the central theme of the writing and be reflected in the writing style (Ellis, 1997). Dialogue rather than just quoted excerpts may be included, or interview data may be presented in poetic form as stanzas (Gee, 1999; Riessman, 1993) or even performed, as sociologist Laurel Richardson (1997) described in her autobiography of her academic life.

Whether you choose to write up your qualitative study in conventional or unconventional ways, your challenge is to write in a way that connects with readers, that keeps them turning pages. In your work you are representing yourself, others, places, and events in textual form in which you control every word choice, every syntactical structure, and every firsthand example from your data. Your choices, in other words, are not about representing truth (too elusive!), but about constructing plausible representations of versions of events and people that will convey impressions and messages to

your readers that you believe are important. It may be that pushing at the boundaries of convention will help you do this. In any case, readers of your work will appreciate your making your professional writing 'engaging and accessible' (Casanave & Vandrick, 2007).

## **Suggestions for novice writers of qualitative research**

I end this section with some very basic suggestions to writers of qualitative research – advice that has more to do with tips for writing itself than with conducting qualitative research. In addition to finding some 'textual mentors' in the form of exemplary readings, choosing a project that fits your interests and purposes and deciding how and where you might like to write it up, the following six tips can help you construct a piece of writing that will, it is to be hoped, keep your readers turning pages.

### **Tip 1: Begin writing early**

One of anthropology's most engaging writers, Harry Wolcott (2001), tells us that it is never too early to begin writing. He even suggests that we can probably write a first draft of our study before we even begin collecting data. But we must remember that Wolcott considers himself at heart more of a writer than a reader – for him, too much reading tends to get in the way of his writing. Not all of us are writers at heart, nor do many of us look forward to daily writing sessions. But Wolcott is right; writing is not something that you should wait until the 'end' to do. Writing is also not something that is done merely to create text that will go in a finished publication. Writing, from the earliest stages, is done to record experiences and impressions while they are fresh, to sort out thoughts that guide decisions and directions, and to comment on relevant readings. Moreover, writing gets better with practice, as does any difficult skill.

Some parts of a qualitative study actually can be written up very early, just as soon as you know the setting and participants for your research project and know how you will collect data. Writing up descriptions of contexts, participants, and methods very early will give you a sense of accomplishment and help you envision what the final write-up will look like. It is also very likely that early in a project you have a strong sense of what the project is about and what your goal is in doing it. This part of your write-up may change and evolve over time as you conduct your research, but it should be one of the first efforts you make at writing. Maxwell (2004) recommends writing research memos for just this purpose. These memos are usually first-person reflections, kept in the style of a personal journal, on your decision-making processes, evolving questions and interpretations, and commentaries on readings and theories (see below a related genre, research/teaching journals).

**Tip 2: Keep a research/teaching journal**

This piece of advice relates to the first suggestion. It is also about the importance of writing early and often. The nice thing about a research or teaching journal is that you can write in any form and style you want and use your journal for many different purposes: commentary on readings; confusions and decisions; personal reactions to fieldwork or to interactions and events in your language classes; descriptions of people and places; rantings and ravings. Many people find that some material from their research/teaching journal can eventually be incorporated into the write-up of their qualitative study. Even if this does not happen, writing in a journal regularly will provide you with needed writing practice in styles that often appear in qualitative research reports: descriptions, narrated stories, and commentary. Whether you write by hand or word-processor, keep one wide margin for reflective commentary later, or devise some other system for adding reflective commentary.

**Tip 3: Attend to details**

One feature of good writing that will help your qualitative research report come alive is the inclusion of details. As I mentioned above, in the section on reading, rich details enliven prose and help transport readers into the world that you and your participants experienced. But to include lively details, you need to see them. Merriam (1998) talks about how important it is to observe well and closely in doing qualitative research, and how difficult this is to do. We tend to be overwhelmed by the details in a new environment and not know what to focus on. On the other hand, in a familiar environment we simply do not see many details. If you are observing a language class and wish to describe the classroom and its atmosphere as the context for your study, what do you see in the room, beyond chairs, tables, students, and a teacher? If you are doing a case study of one student or one teacher, what features and behaviors do your participants exhibit that can be included in your prose to help us see each person and feel his or her presence? You can practice observing closely and attending to details at any time, regardless of whether you are currently involved in a research project. Within your research project, your research journal is an ideal place for such writing.

**Tip 4: Ask what readers need to know to be able to vicariously share your experiences**

By putting yourself in the shoes (eyes) of a reader, you will be able to figure out what kinds of descriptions and details you need to include in order to transport a reader to your world. From the example above, how do you feel sitting and observing in a particular classroom? A classroom will have an atmosphere that emanates from features of the room that may miss your attention at first. Is the room cheery or gloomy? What makes it so? It is not enough to use adjectives such as 'cheery' or 'gloomy'. Your writing needs to

paint concrete details that will allow readers to conclude on their own what the atmosphere is like. Does light come through the windows, and if so, what kind of light and what patterns does it make on floor and walls? Is sunlight hazy and filtered or sharp and glaring? Do you see dust motes in the air or shadows that lend contrast to the quality of light in the room? What color are the walls and in what condition are they? Gray, cracked and marked with years of use? Or plastic and pristine? And are students hunched and silent or attentive and chatty? Are surreptitious communications going on between students? And what is the kind and quality of noise in the room, beyond the voices of teacher and students? If your readers know such details through the power of your writing, they will be able to share your experiences more effectively.

**Tip 5: Write accessibly, with flair and grace; use strong verbs and an active voice**

In spite of the prevalence of dense, passive voice and **nominalized writing** (heavy use of nouns and noun phrases) in the social sciences (and legal writing and government writing), the most vivid writing is characterized by none of these things. Accessible writing reveals its messages rather than hiding them behind what Joseph Williams (1997, p. 5) has labeled ‘pretension and intimidation, a kind of exclusionary language that a democratic society cannot tolerate as its standard of civic discourse’. We should not tolerate such writing as a standard of academic discourse either (see also the guidelines for clear writing in the social sciences in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 2001). But teachers and scholars learn to write in these exclusionary ways by imitating this style from their readings, beginning early in their graduate school years. ‘People who get published write like this, so I have to write this way too’, the feeling goes. This is why I urged you in the first section of this chapter to seek exemplary readings as models for your own writing, not readings that make you feel distanced and excluded.

Accessible writing, writing that communicates, may be complex and may express difficult ideas, but it is not overly dense. It may, in fact, be deceptively simple in grammar and syntax. In accessible writing, it is clear who is doing the actions expressed in verbs – the agent is not hidden behind needless passive voice. The passive voice, when used judiciously and appropriately, will front a topic and help you organize new and old information in your sentences. But most of your writing will benefit from an active voice and clear agents of those actions.

Accessible, engaging writing also uses strong verbs wherever possible, rather than lengthy noun phrases. Every Latinate noun, for instance, (those ending in *-ion*), and many others, can be turned into a verb: For example, ‘The teacher made a determination that the students lacked an understanding of the use of the passive voice’ could be written as, ‘The teacher

determined that the students did not understand how to use the passive voice.' Other empty verbs – be, get, have – can be replaced with more colorful and expressive verbs. For example, 'The student was late to class, with the result that the teacher, who had a scowl on his face, got upset' could be noted as, 'The student arrived late causing the teacher to scowl and speak to her sharply.'

Accessible writing also does not pack a million ideas into one sentence (unfortunately, lengthy nominal phrases, popular with social science writers, help writers commit this stylistic error). Long sentences can be unpacked and rewritten as several sentences, connected if needed by appropriate connecting words and phrases. All research report writing benefits from such unpacking, but reports of qualitative research in particular improve stylistically if readers do not have to struggle to do the unpacking that you as a writer should have done in the first place.

Finally, attend to the quality of your vocabulary, and choose the concrete and colorful over the generic. A flower becomes a fuschia, a hot crowded room becomes a steamy room packed with people whose foreheads are beaded with sweat. A student who reacted with embarrassment becomes a student whose face and neck reddened all the way to his collar line and whose gaze fell into the pages of his textbook.

If you are not able to write your first drafts with clarity and expressiveness, you can go back later and edit, looking for the many places where a rich vocabulary word and an expressive verb can be substituted for passionless prose. In this way you bring your readers into the world of your research project. You do not have to be a literature major, or a native speaker of English, to do this. As Williams (1997, p. 4) tells us, it is good to write clearly, and anyone can do it.

#### **Tip 6: Share writing with critical but sympathetic readers; revise often**

Finally, you will know if you are effectively communicating your qualitative research findings to your readers if you share drafts with readers before you submit the work for publication or for review by another group such as a thesis or dissertation defense committee. A good reader, someone you trust to be both honest and supportive, will tell you whether your writing is clear and evocative, the pieces are in place, and your interpretations make sense. A good reader will be able to see whether you are conveying the persona you hope to convey, for example, a researcher whose voice is authoritative but not arrogant, who is confident but not certain of all the answers, and who is respectful of readers. Some of the best readers come from self-styled writing groups, if you are lucky enough to belong to one or can start one with like-minded colleagues (Stephanie Vandrick, personal communication). A writing group, or even a single supportive peer-reader, will help keep you writing regularly and will let you know if your portrayals of people, places,

and events in your language teaching-learning project come across as vivid and believable.

While these tips should be helpful, they do not begin to cover the vast territory that could be discussed about reading and writing qualitative research. In the Further Reading section below, I conclude this chapter by adding a few resources, which themselves will lead to others.

## Further Reading

If you decide to conduct and write up a qualitative study, you will be joining a growing trend in education, which has roots in sociology, anthropology, psychology, and linguistics, to expand our stock of rigorous studies of the experiences of human beings beyond the conventional survey or quasi-experimental study. This writing tends to be more personal (Nash, 2004; Spigelman, 2004), more narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Tierney & Lincoln, 1997), more flexible, and more stylistically experimental (Eisner, 1997; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) than much conventional writing in the language education field. More specifically, from dissertation research to classroom research and other scholarly work, qualitative research, with its premium on accessible compelling writing, has increasingly been gaining a foothold in the second language field (Lazaraton, 2003). Some sources for guidance such as the following exist for those who wish to read more.

Although Keith Richards (2003) has written a textbook especially for TESOL (see also the second edition of Holliday's 2007 book), and Chappelle and Duff (2003) have published a short article on guidelines for conducting and reporting quantitative and qualitative research in TESOL, we still need to turn mainly to sources outside applied linguistics for guidance in carrying out qualitative projects, such as Creswell (2007), Marshall and Rossman (2006), and Maxwell (2004). We also need to look outside TESOL and applied linguistics for guidance in writing. The last two editions of the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2005) are rich but rather dense resources, and both include chapters on writing and representation, including sociologist Laurel Richardson's article, 'Writing as a method of inquiry' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). In other work, Richardson (1990) discusses writing strategies, and her work is itself a model of beautiful, unconventional writing (for example, Richardson, 1997). Wolcott (2001) may have written the most accessible book on writing up qualitative research, from his perspective as an anthropologist, and anthropologist Van Maanen's (1988) small volume, *Tales of the Field*, is still a classic. Both these authors write with wit and humor. Howard Becker's 1986 book is still a valuable resource, written in a very engaging style, as are basic books on clear writing such as Williams's (1997) and Zinsser's (1998). And of course, do not forget any edition of Strunk and White. The point is that we need to learn how to write, and to write well, perhaps not quite with

the style of a literary genius, if we are to represent our qualitative research in ways that are rich, persuasive, and that do justice to our topics and our research participants. Our readers will appreciate our efforts.

## Summary

- Reading and writing are closely connected. Use examples of good readings as models for your writing.
- Both L1 and L2 speakers of English can learn to write clearly, accessibly, and even elegantly.
- Develop awareness of your underlying assumptions about what you think 'knowledge' and 'reality' are, and how your assumptions connect to your choices of methods and interpretations.
- The type of research project you do and your purpose in doing it will influence the way the project is carried out and written up.
- You will need to decide whether to write up your research in a conventional way, emulating the style of the natural sciences, or in a less conventional way that may be more suited to qualitative research.
- Your qualitative research project will require you to observe and record many details and to describe your interactions with people and places in a way that holds readers' attention.
- Your research report needs to honor and protect your participants.
- The most engaging research reports avoid pretension, jargon, and unnecessary linguistic complexity.
- Writing is best done if started early, done and revised regularly, and shared with trusted critical readers.

## Key Words

action research  
annotated bibliography  
autoethnography  
case study  
citing  
conventions  
conversation analysis  
documenting  
epistemology  
ethnography  
experimental study  
gatekeepers of journals  
framing a study  
jargon

literature review  
nominalization  
ontological stance  
Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association  
quasi-experimental study  
survey study  
textual mentor

### Post-reading questions

1. After reading this chapter, what are your views on using readings as ‘textual mentors’? What readings, if any, have become your textual mentors? What are their characteristics and how have they influenced your own writing?
2. What are your views on whether your own write-ups of research should follow conventions or bend those conventions? What factors would influence your choices?
3. In addition to the advice given in this chapter, what other suggestions can you think of for novice writers of qualitative research?

### Tasks

1. With several other people, observe a setting closely. Make notes, and then write up a detailed description of what you saw and heard. Compare these descriptions with those of the others in your group. Then discuss how your descriptions could be improved if they were to become part of a research report.
2. Discuss with others your views about the benefits and characteristics of a teacher-research journal. What kinds of things would you put in such a journal? How would you use it to assist your writing up of a qualitative research project?
3. Locate two or more qualitative research articles. Discuss the writing styles and qualities of each. What features of the writing do you hope to emulate in your own work? What features do you wish to avoid?
4. If anyone in your group has written up a qualitative research project and is willing to share the report, discuss its features and query the author about his or her decisions about the writing.

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# Glossary of Qualitative Research Terms

The definitions in this glossary define key words commonly used in qualitative and mixed methods research. Throughout the book, these key words are indicated in **bold** when they are particularly relevant to the topic of the chapter, and are also listed at the end of that chapter.

The words are listed alphabetically. In the definitions, words in *italics* are also listed in the glossary. The chapter in which the key word is primarily addressed is noted in parentheses at the end of each definition; however, many of the terms can be found in additional chapters as well; please refer to the subject index for these.

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Key Word	Definition
accounts	In an <i>interview</i> , an account is a representation of a situation. Successful analysis depends on treating what the participants say as subjective accounts that the researcher must interpret, rather than factual <i>reports</i> than can be simply accepted at face value. (Interviews, p. 192)
acting	Acting refers to the second step in the <i>action research cycle</i> . Acting means putting practical strategies in place to change and improve a teaching or social situation; the next step is <i>observing</i> these changes. (Action Research, p. 115)
action research	Action research is a <i>research approach</i> . 'Action' refers to the process of identifying issues relevant to a teaching or social situation; 'research' refers to the processes of systematically collecting, documenting, and analyzing data. <i>Data</i> can be numerical as well as textual. In the field of <i>applied linguistics</i> , action research is often used by teachers when they investigate their own classrooms. (Action Research, p. 114)
action research cycle	The action research cycle is the process or spiral of research in <i>action research</i> . It involves four steps: <i>planning</i> , <i>acting</i> , <i>observing</i> , and <i>reflecting</i> . (Action Research, p. 115)
adjacency pairs	In <i>discourse analysis</i> , adjacency pairs are paired utterances such as question-answer and compliment-response. The nature of the first-pair-part (for example, how the question is asked) conditions the structure of the second-pair-part (for example, how the question is answered). (Discourse Analysis, p. 250)

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Key Word	Definition
analytic memos	Analytic memos are personal notes (including ideas, questions, hunches, and speculations) a researcher makes during the <i>research process</i> about the collected <i>data</i> , and includes the researcher's ideas and <i>interpretations</i> . (Ethnography, p. 102)
annotated bibliography	Annotated bibliographies are summaries and brief commentaries of individual published works. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 291)
applied linguistics	Applied linguistics is the study of language in use. It can be divided into two broad areas. The first focuses primarily on language itself, and is called language analysis. The second investigates the contexts and experiences of language use. Both areas employ qualitative, quantitative, and mixed research methods. (Introduction, p. 4)
artifacts (also artefacts)	Artifacts are things that people within a <i>cultural group</i> make and/or use. (Ethnography, p. 93)
autoethnography	An autoethnography is a study of the self over a long period of time. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 294)
axiology	Axiology is the study of value. In <i>qualitative research</i> , there is an assumption that all research is value-laden, and includes the value systems of the researcher, the theory, <i>research methodology</i> , and research <i>paradigm</i> , as well as the social and cultural norms of the researcher and <i>participants</i> .
behavior	In <i>ethnography</i> , behavior refers to what people within a cultural group do and the acts that they perform. (Ethnography, p. 93)
biased questions	Biased questions are <i>questionnaire items</i> that put one group of people in a bad light based on gender, religion, ethnicity, and so on. (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 208)
boundedness	Boundedness is a term used in <i>case study</i> to refer to the parameters of a case. These could include the individual or entity, for example a school, under investigation and the <i>settings</i> in which social action takes place. (Case Study, p. 68)
case study	Case study is a <i>research approach</i> . It creates an in-depth description and analysis of a <i>bounded system</i> – one individual, institution, or educational context. By concentrating on a single (or few) case(s), this approach can describe a particular learning or teaching process or research <i>setting</i> in great detail. The focus of a case study can either be on the case itself or on an issue which the case(s) illustrates. Case study uses multiple sources of <i>data</i> and <i>data collection methods</i> , and it often combines both <i>qualitative</i> and <i>quantitative research</i> approaches. (Case Study, p. 68)
categorical content analysis	Categorical content analysis is a method of <i>data analysis</i> that identifies <i>categories</i> by selecting utterances from a text, which are then classified and grouped together. (Narrative Inquiry, p. 51)
category	Researchers create a category in the <i>data analysis</i> process by grouping together related codes, either as examples or components of a particular concept. (Narrative Inquiry, p. 52)

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Key Word	Definition
citing	Citing means referring to the work of an author by name (and usually by year of publication, depending on stylistic conventions) in the body of a research report. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 291)
claim	A claim is a new understanding or finding in research. It is a term that tries to capture both what the researcher feels definite about stating and the gaps or limitations in this new knowledge. (What Makes Research 'Qualitative?', p. 26)
closed-response items	Closed-response items are <i>questionnaire</i> items in which <i>participants</i> select from a limited list of options provided by the researcher by circling them, making an 'X' and so on; participants are not requested to respond in their own words. (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 201)
closing	In <i>discourse analysis</i> , closing is the action which shuts down an interaction. It is composed of at least one adjacency pair, such as 'see you later' – 'bye'. (Discourse Analysis, p. 243)
co-construction	Co-construction is the idea in <i>discourse analysis</i> that language use is a product not just of its speaker but also those who are interacting with that speaker. (Discourse Analysis, p. 245)
coding	Coding is one aspect of <i>data analysis</i> . When researchers <i>code</i> , they are trying to make sense of the <i>data</i> by systematically looking through it, clustering or grouping together similar ideas, phenomena, people, or events, and labeling them. Coding helps researchers find similar patterns and connections across the data. It helps researchers get to know the data better and to organize their thinking, and it also makes storage and retrieval of data easier. (Narrative Inquiry, p. 51)
coding system	A coding system is created during <i>data analysis</i> . It is a list of the labels of the <i>categories</i> created when the researcher is <i>coding</i> . Frequently these labels are derived from the data itself (in which case they are called <i>emic</i> terms), but often they are terms created by the researcher (in which case they are called <i>etic</i> terms). In <i>verbal reports</i> , these labels attempt to capture the intentions of all of the thought units mentioned by the <i>participants</i> . (Introspective Techniques, p. 224)
collective case study	In a collective case study the researcher uses more than one case, so as to better shed light on a particular issue. A collective case study often focuses on exploring an issue rather than describing one case in detail, by comparing and contrasting different cases. (Case Study, p. 70)
concordancing software	Concordancing software is software that lists occurrences of any word or phrase from a given text, along with a certain number of words on either side of it. (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 211)

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Key Word	Definition
confirmability	Confirmability is the concept that researchers should fully explain or disclose the <i>data</i> that they are basing their <i>interpretations</i> on, or at least make those data available. Confirmability can be improved by maintaining precise data records and keeping all data for additional scrutiny. (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 215)
consequentialism	Consequentialism is the belief that ends justify means; that is, that the results of actions determine their rightness or wrongness. Any particular action is neither intrinsically good nor bad; rather, it is good or bad because of its <i>results</i> in a particular context – its consequences. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 270)
constant comparative method	The constant comparative method is a method of <i>data analysis</i> from <i>grounded theory</i> in which the researcher constantly compares new <i>data</i> to data already placed in existing <i>categories</i> , to help develop and define that category and decide if a new category should be created. (Narrative Inquiry, p. 51)
constructivism	Constructivism is the belief that there is no universally agreed upon reality or universal ‘truth’. Rather, meaning is socially constructed by individuals interacting with their world. Through that interaction, each individual creates his or her own unique understandings of the world. As a result, there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality, so multiple ‘truths’ exist. These interpretations change, depending upon time and circumstances, so reality is not universal but person-, context-, and time-bound. (Introduction, p. 6)
context	Context refers to the physical, psychological, social, and/or temporal factors of authentic language in use. (Discourse Analysis, p. 243)
conventions	Conventions are customary stylistic choices in writing that scholars within disciplines agree upon as a group to use, such as ways of citing sources and formatting a reference list. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 295)
conversation analysis (CA)	Conversation analysis is a sociological approach to <i>discourse analysis</i> which attempts to describe the systematic properties of conversation. It focuses upon the sequential organization of ‘talk-in-interaction’, in terms of machinery, rules, and structure. Example topics include <i>openings</i> and <i>closings</i> in telephone talk or e-mail. (Discourse Analysis, p. 244)
corpus/corpora	A corpus is a collection of authentic spoken and/or written texts created so that researchers can see how language is commonly used. Some corpora are extremely large and are stored electronically; this allows researchers to easily search the corpora for individual words or phrases. Detailed information about the context of collection and/or of use is also usually provided. (Discourse Analysis, p. 243)

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Key Word	Definition
correction	In <i>discourse analysis</i> , correction is the actual remedy of a language error. (Discourse Analysis, p. 247)
credibility	Credibility is the concept that researchers should maximize the accuracy of how they define concepts and how they characterize the people they are investigating – with a particular focus on how the various <i>participants</i> feel about the <i>interpretations</i> the researcher makes. Credibility can be enhanced by using prolonged engagement, careful <i>observation</i> , <i>triangulation</i> , peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and <i>member checks</i> . (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 215)
critical ethnography	Critical ethnography is a type of <i>ethnography</i> that examines cultural systems of power, prestige, privilege, and authority in society. Critical ethnographers study marginalized groups from different classes, races, and genders, to advocate the needs of these participants (adapted from Creswell, 2007). (Introduction, p. 12)
critical theory	Critical theory is a perspective that views society as fundamentally conflictual and oppressive due to historical problems of domination, alienation, and social struggle, so critical theory is openly ideological, emancipatory, and transformative. Because critical theorists are interested in the power asymmetries which underlie society, critical theory explicitly wants to empower marginalized groups, often by researchers and members of the marginalized group collaboratively doing research together. (Introduction, p. 12)
cultural portrait	A cultural portrait is a term used in <i>ethnography</i> to refer to a detailed and rich holistic description of a cultural group. (Ethnography, p. 94)
culture	'Culture is an abstract concept used to account for the beliefs, values, and behaviors of cohesive groups of people. It is a narrower term than race (which accounts for biological variation); a racial group may contain many different cultures, and a cultural group may contain members of different races. Although a cultural group may refer to a particular nationality, cultures may cross political boundaries and a nation may contain many cultural groups.... Within a cultural group, behaviors are patterned and values and meanings are shared.' (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 53) (Ethnography, p. 93)
data	Data is information created in or collected from a <i>setting</i> (from <i>participants</i> , <i>observations</i> , <i>artifacts</i> , and so on, about people, phenomena, ideas, events, or the context) in response to a <i>research question</i> . (What Makes Research 'Qualitative'?, p. 27)
data analysis	Analysis is a major aspect of the <i>research process</i> . There are many ways to do data analysis in <i>qualitative research</i> , but the goal is largely the same – to understand the data that has been collected, and organize it into groups or <i>categories</i> , to prepare for data <i>interpretation</i> . (Introduction, p. 10)

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Key Word	Definition
data collection	Data collection refers to the process of collecting information systematically through <i>data collection methods</i> . (Action Research, p. 117)
data collection methods	Data collection methods in <i>qualitative research</i> include <i>observation, interviews, open-response questionnaire items, verbal reports, diaries</i> , and so on. (Introduction, p. 5)
data saturation	As researchers collect <i>data</i> and simultaneously create <i>categories</i> through <i>data analysis</i> , they will get to a point at which these categories are 'saturated' – no new information adds to their understanding of the category. (Introduction, p. 10)
deception and consent	Deception and consent are universal ethical concerns about the rights of <i>participants</i> to be informed honestly and openly, and not to be coerced into participating in a study. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 276)
deductive thinking	Deductive thinking is a way of reasoning that works from the more general to the more specific. It begins with a general theory, which generates predictions about specific phenomena. These theories can be tested empirically by seeing if the predictions are true. The opposite is <i>inductive thinking</i> .
dependability	The idea of dependability emphasizes the need for researchers to account for the ever-changing context and shifting conditions within which research occurs. In their published accounts, the researcher should describe the changes that occur in the <i>setting</i> and how these changes affected the way the researcher approached the study. (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 215)
descriptive case study	In a descriptive case study, the researcher presents a detailed, contextualized picture of a particular case or <i>phenomenon</i> . The <i>research purpose</i> is simply to gain a deep understanding of the case or phenomenon itself, not to generalize this case to other cases or contexts. (Case Study, p. 70)
diary studies	Diary studies are first-person or third-person <i>case studies</i> in which individuals keep a reflective journal using <i>introspection</i> and/or <i>retrospection</i> . (Introspective Techniques, p. 228)
discourse	Discourse refers to authentic spoken or written language produced in a particular context. (Discourse Analysis, p. 244)
discourse analysis	Discourse analysis is an umbrella term for a variety of approaches to understanding authentic language use in particular social contexts, including cohesion, contextual, interaction, speech act, and <i>conversation analysis</i> . (Discourse Analysis, p. 243)
documenting	Documenting means providing evidence for an assertion or a finding in a research report. (Writing Up, p. 291)
double-barreled questions	Double-barreled questions are <i>questionnaire</i> items that include two or more issues in the one question. (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 207)

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Key Word	Definition
embarrassing questions	Embarrassing questions are <i>questionnaire</i> items that include swear words or might otherwise be embarrassing to some <i>respondents</i> . (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 208)
Embedded Design	Embedded Design is a <i>mixed methods</i> design. One type of <i>data collection</i> and <i>analysis</i> (quantitative or qualitative) is embedded or nested within a larger study with a different form of <i>data</i> as the primary database. The embedded database plays a secondary, supporting role. (Mixed Methods, p. 143)
emerging theories	Emerging theories is a term used in <i>observation</i> to refer to theories that explain <i>behavior</i> that is seen during the observation process. (Observation, p. 174)
emic	Emic is a special term that refers to the <i>participants'</i> insider viewpoint of a <i>phenomenon</i> , <i>setting</i> , or cultural group. This is in contrast with an <i>etic</i> view, which prioritizes the researcher's outsider viewpoint. (Ethnography, p. 97)
entering the field	Entering the field refers to the research activity of choosing a research <i>setting</i> and gaining access to the site. (Observation, p.169)
epistemology	Epistemology is the study of knowledge. It addresses questions like, 'What is knowledge?', 'How is knowledge acquired?', and 'How do we know what we know?' (Introduction, p. 5)
ethic of care	The ethic of care addresses the effect of any action on the human relationships in a given context. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 272)
ethic of rights and responsibilities	The ethic of rights and responsibilities upholds the unconditional worth of human beings and the respect to which they are entitled. It recognizes that these universal rights impose corresponding responsibilities on the researcher to respect and uphold them. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 271)
ethic of social justice	The ethic of social justice is an ethical theory that argues for the redistribution of resources and opportunities to achieve equity and to overcome prior discriminatory practices. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 272)
ethical codes of conduct	Ethical codes of conduct are codes written to guide ethical practice in a profession or in the conduct of a research study. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 273)
ethical principles or theories	Ethical principles or theories are guiding principles or theories that inform <i>ethical codes of conduct</i> . (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 280)
ethics in action research	Ethics in action research means ensuring that research is done in an educationally and morally responsible way that does not affect the educational aims of the classroom. (Action Research, p. 121)
ethnography	Ethnography is a <i>research approach</i> . It is the in-depth study of a cultural group that typically includes extended <i>observation</i> of that group 'in the field'. The aim of the study is to develop a detailed cultural picture, or cultural portrait, of the group. (Ethnography, p. 92)

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Key Word	Definition
etic	Etic is a term that refers to the researcher's outsider viewpoint of a <i>phenomenon</i> , <i>setting</i> , or cultural group. This is in contrast with an <i>emic</i> view, which prioritizes the <i>participants'</i> insider viewpoint. (Ethnography, p. 97)
experimental study	An experimental study is a research study that follows strict scientific methods and procedures. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 292)
explanatory case study	An explanatory <i>case study</i> is used to explain cause-effect relationships related to a <i>phenomenon</i> . It is often used as the basis for comparing a case to other cases. An explanatory case study is frequently a long-term, or <i>longitudinal case study</i> , and often uses <i>quantitative research</i> approaches. (Case Study, p. 71)
Explanatory Design	Explanatory Design is a <i>mixed methods</i> design in which quantitative <i>data</i> is collected and analyzed first and qualitative data is collected and analyzed second. Qualitative data and <i>data analysis</i> are used to help elaborate on or further explain the quantitative results. (Mixed Methods, p. 139)
exploratory case study	When little is known about a case, the researcher can use an exploratory <i>case study</i> . This helps to define the boundaries and the main aspects of the case and lays the groundwork for subsequent, possibly more quantitative studies by helping define questions and hypotheses. (Case Study, p. 70)
Exploratory Design	Exploratory Design is a <i>mixed methods</i> design in which qualitative <i>data</i> is collected and analyzed first, to lay the groundwork or to inform subsequent quantitative <i>data collection</i> and <i>data analysis</i> . (Mixed Methods, p. 140)
feminist theory	Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into the academic field, looking at women's roles and lives in society. The goal of feminist research is to understand the nature of inequality, and it focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality, to promote women's rights, interests, and issues. Feminist researchers endeavor to establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships with <i>participants</i> and avoid objectification. (Introduction, p. 12)
field notes	Field notes are detailed notes written or recorded while observing in the research <i>setting</i> , or made during or after interviewing research <i>participants</i> . Some researchers also include their own personal ideas in their field notes, while others put them in <i>analytic memos</i> . (Ethnography, p. 96)
fieldwork	Fieldwork refers to the research activity of collecting <i>data</i> through <i>observation</i> (and other means) in the 'field', the designated research <i>setting</i> or settings. (Ethnography, p. 96)
fill-in items	Fill-in items are <i>open-response questionnaire items</i> that require the <i>respondents</i> to provide relatively brief bits of personalized information, such as name and address. (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 202)

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Key Word	Definition
foreshadowed problems	Foreshadowed problems are issues or obstacles that you anticipate that you will face when you observe in the research <i>setting</i> . They help you to plan your <i>observations</i> . (Observation, p. 169)
framing a study	Framing a study means introducing and concluding a study with the conceptual or theoretical issues that the writers have used to explain their findings. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 289)
gatekeeper	A gatekeeper is a person whose permission or approval is necessary for a researcher to gain access to a research site or <i>setting</i> . (Ethnography, p. 97)
gatekeepers of journals	Gatekeepers of journals are editors of print and electronic journals and the reviewers who evaluate submissions. Their job is to select the best quality articles they can for their publications. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 289)
grounded theory	Grounded theory is a qualitative <i>research approach</i> . The researcher uses qualitative <i>data collection methods</i> like <i>interviews</i> to collect information until <i>data saturation</i> is reached, then groups ideas together into <i>categories</i> using the <i>constant comparison method</i> , to develop a context-specific, or 'substantive' theory. (Introduction, p. 15)
indirect probes	Indirect probes are indirect questions used in interviews when using more direct questions could be problematic. (Interviews, p. 191)
inductive thinking	Inductive thinking works from the specific to the more general, taking specific observations or instances, noting patterns, then extrapolating from them to create general conclusions or a general theory. The opposite is <i>deductive thinking</i> .
informant	An informant is a person from within the <i>cultural group</i> being studied who provides the researcher with 'insider' information. (Ethnography, p. 99)
informed consent	Based on the principles of beneficence and respect for persons, informed consent helps to ensure that <i>participants</i> understand their role in a study, agree to participate voluntarily, and can withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 276)
inquiry	An inquiry refers to an orientation of wondering, questioning, and being off-balance about a <i>phenomenon</i> or situation; this orientation then propels the <i>research process</i> . (What Makes Research 'Qualitative'?, p. 27)
instrumental case study	An instrumental case study is a <i>case study</i> conducted with the goal of shedding light on a particular issue, problem, or theory, rather than with the goal of simply understanding the issue or research <i>setting</i> for its own sake. (Case Study, p. 70)
interpretation	An interpretation is the researcher's explanation of why <i>participants</i> behave or think in the way that they do. In <i>qualitative research</i> , this is usually based on the <i>data</i> , and is developed through <i>inductive thinking</i> . (Observation, p. 173)

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Key Word	Definition
interpretive analysis	Interpretive analysis emphasizes the role of the researcher as an interpreter of the <i>data</i> , and the self-reflective nature of <i>qualitative research</i> . (Introduction, p. 5)
interview guide	An interview guide, or interview schedule, is a list of topics and questions that the researcher writes before an interview. It helps the researcher prepare for the interview, ensuring that all of the important areas of interest are being considered, and it can also guide the interview itself. (Interviews, p. 186)
interview moves	Interview moves are actions taken by an interviewer during the interview, such as checking/reflecting a <i>respondent's</i> reply, following up that reply with further questions or probing aspects of it more deeply. (Interviews, p. 190)
intrinsic case study	An intrinsic case study is a <i>case study</i> conducted out of interest in the case itself, without the goal or expectation of illuminating any particular issue. They tend to be primarily descriptive. (Case Study, p. 69)
introspection	Introspection is the process by which individuals reflect on their thoughts, feelings, motives, and reasoning processes. (Introspective Techniques, p. 220)
introspective techniques	Introspective techniques are <i>data collection methods</i> , such as <i>diaries</i> and <i>verbal reports</i> , which are used to find out what <i>participants</i> think about something as they reflect on their experience with it. (Introspective Techniques, p. 220)
intuition	Intuition is the researcher's instinctive or common sense response to an ethical issue that has arisen in the course of the conduct of a study. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 280)
jargon	Jargon refers to insider or technical vocabulary related to a particular field that can be used pretentiously or because there are no other suitable terms. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 292)
leading questions	Leading questions are poorly written <i>questionnaire items</i> that suggest or indicate a particular answer to the <i>respondents</i> . (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 207)
life history research	Life history research is a genre of <i>narrative inquiry</i> that distinguishes itself from other genres by the extent to which it takes into account the social, historical, and cultural contexts within which the story is situated. While life history research may focus on a particular period or aspect of a person's life, these are usually considered within the context of the person's whole life. (Narrative Inquiry, p. 47)
literature review	A literature review is the section in a research report in which published works related to your study are synthesized and discussed. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 291)
longitudinal case study	A longitudinal case study is a <i>case study</i> conducted over a relatively long period of time. The length of this period may vary depending on the nature of the case and the researcher's interest in it. (Case Study, p. 71)

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Key Word	Definition
making the familiar strange	Making the familiar strange is a mental attitude held by researchers of trying to see well-known, taken-for-granted settings afresh or in a novel way. (Observation, p. 171)
member checks	The term member checks refers to the process of researchers taking the <i>data</i> back to the <i>participants</i> and asking whether their <i>interpretations</i> fit with what the participant intended to say or do. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 266)
memoing	As researchers collect, analyze, and interpret <i>data</i> , they write up thoughts, ideas, reflections, and insights about the <i>participants</i> , research <i>setting</i> , <i>phenomenon</i> , and also the <i>research process</i> and study itself; this is called memoing (Case Study, p. 76)
mixed methods research	Mixed methods research is a <i>research approach</i> . It is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and ‘mixing’ quantitative and qualitative <i>data</i> at some stage of the <i>research process</i> within a single study in order to understand a <i>research problem</i> more completely. (Mixed Methods, p. 136)
mixing	Mixing refers to the way quantitative and qualitative <i>data</i> and results are integrated during the <i>research process</i> in <i>mixed methods research</i> . (Mixed Methods, p. 137)
multiple case study	In a multiple case study the researcher uses more than one case, so as to better understand a particular issue. A multiple case study often focuses on exploring an issue rather than describing one case in detail, by comparing and contrasting different cases. (Case Study, p. 70)
narrative inquiry	Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach. It employs a variety of <i>data collection methods</i> , particularly <i>interview</i> , to elicit, document, and analyze life experiences as they are recounted by the individuals who live them. (Narrative Inquiry, p. 46)
natural settings	Natural settings refer to the ordinary, everyday worlds of <i>participants</i> – where they live, work, and study. These natural settings include such places as homes and workplaces, staffrooms, classrooms and self-access centers, and online chat rooms. These settings are complex, dynamic, and multifaceted. (Introduction, p. 7)
nominalization	Nominalization refers to strings of nouns and noun phrases that can often be unpacked into nouns, verbs, and prepositional phrases. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 299)
non-consequentialism	Non-consequentialism is the belief that ends do not justify means. Rather, universal standards, such as individual rights and responsibilities, social justice and care, exist to guide all behavior, regardless of their consequences. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 270)
nonobservational methods	Nonobservational methods refer to <i>data collection methods</i> , like <i>interviews</i> or <i>diary studies</i> , which researchers use to obtain <i>data</i> that they cannot acquire through <i>observation</i> . In <i>action research</i> , these methods are used to respond to the question, ‘What do I need to know about this situation?’ (Action Research, p. 117)

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Key Word	Definition
nonparticipant observation	Nonparticipant observation is the technique of observing the research <i>setting</i> without taking an active role in it. (Observation, p. 167)
observation	Observation is a <i>data collection method</i> . The researcher watches and makes detailed notes of the research <i>setting</i> . The researcher could be a <i>participant observer</i> or a <i>nonparticipant observer</i> . (Observation, p. 166)
observational methods	Observational methods refer to <i>data collection methods</i> , like <i>observation</i> , which researchers use to obtain <i>data</i> empirically by observing the research <i>setting</i> . In <i>action research</i> , these methods are used essentially to respond to the question, 'What do I need to see in this situation?' (Action Research, p. 117)
observing	Observing refers to the third step in the <i>action research cycle</i> . It means collecting information about the changes the teacher has made, and their impact on the classroom or social situation; the next step is <i>reflecting</i> about these changes. (Action Research, p. 115)
observer's paradox	Observer's paradox refers to the idea that any observation of authentic communication (by researchers, video cameras, and so on) influences that communication, making it less authentic. (Observation, p. 177)
ontology	Ontology is a set of beliefs about the nature of reality, and considers the question, 'When is something real?' For example, <i>positivists</i> believe that there is one universal reality, independent of people. On the other hand, <i>constructivists</i> believe that reality is constructed in the minds of the <i>participants</i> . (Introduction, p. 5)
open interviews	Open interviews are interviews that develop naturally, rather than being guided by a pre-prepared <i>interview guide</i> or list of questions. They are also known as 'open-ended', 'in-depth', and 'unstructured' interviews. (Interviews, p. 185)
open-response items	Open-response items are <i>questionnaire</i> items in which <i>respondents</i> write their own answers, rather than selecting responses from a limited list of options provided by the researcher. (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires , p. 201)
paradigms	Researchers, explicitly and implicitly, develop conceptual frameworks which fashion how they carry out their research. These frameworks are shaped by each researcher's view of the world, and are also informed by how other academics conceptualize research. In the social sciences, a number of generally accepted models have been developed that articulate these conceptual frameworks, and they are called paradigms. They are often distinguished by their beliefs about <i>ontology</i> ('What is reality?'), <i>epistemology</i> ('What is knowledge?') and <i>axiology</i> ('Is truth value-free or value-laden?'). <i>Positivism</i> and <i>constructivism</i> are two examples of paradigms. (Introduction , p. 5)

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Key Word	Definition
participants	Participants are the people in the research study. They are also called <i>respondents</i> (particularly when data is collected using <i>interviews</i> or <i>questionnaires</i> ); in <i>quantitative research</i> , they are often referred to as 'subjects'. (Introduction, p. 7)
participant observation	During participant observation, the researcher fulfills two roles simultaneously – being both a <i>participant</i> in a social <i>setting</i> and also an observer studying the interaction taking place there. (Observation, p. 167)
pause	In <i>discourse analysis</i> , a pause refers to the silence that occurs within a speaker's turn. (Discourse Analysis, p. 249)
personal values	Personal values are deeply-held values that inform one's practice and center on the kind of person one is and hopes to be in the world. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 281)
phenomenology	Phenomenology is a <i>research approach</i> . A phenomenological study describes the meanings that several individuals have of experiencing a single <i>phenomenon</i> . The purpose of a phenomenological study is to reduce individual experiences of such phenomenon to a description of the basic 'essence' of that experience, by creating a composite description of that experience for all of the participants. In a broader sense, phenomenology as a school of philosophical thought underpins all <i>qualitative research</i> , because of its interest in understanding and representing the subjective experience of <i>participants</i> . (Introduction, p. 15)
phenomenon	A phenomenon is a term used to describe something that can be seen or experienced by the human senses. It could be something physical like an object or something constructed like an event or feeling. (Introduction, p. 7)
pilot study	A pilot study is a preliminary study in which a researcher tests and refines <i>data collection</i> and <i>analysis methods</i> and <i>procedures</i> . (Narrative Inquiry, p. 49)
planning	Planning refers to the first step in the <i>action research cycle</i> . It means identifying an issue or focus area for which change or improvement is desired; the next step is putting practical strategies in place to change and improve a situation through <i>acting</i> . (Action Research, p. 115)
positionality	In the <i>constructivist paradigm</i> , positionality refers to the idea that researchers can locate themselves close to or far from the <i>participants'</i> way of seeing the world. In <i>critical theory</i> , positionality refers to the notion that researchers implicitly or explicitly locate their research within society through the beliefs and attitudes that underpin the study. (Case Study, p. 73)

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Key Word	Definition
positivism	<i>Positivism</i> is the belief that there is only one, fixed, agreed-upon reality, so research must strive to find a singular, universal 'truth'. Positivists see the world as real, as something that exists independently of themselves. These people believe that they can measure this 'reality'; in fact, the purpose of their research is to measure it as precisely as possible, so as to make predictions about what will happen in the future. To create accurate predictions, the researcher should be detached and 'objective'. (Introduction, p. 6)
postmodernism	Postmodernism is an ideological perspective that questions the early twentieth-century emphasis on science and technology, rationality, reason, and positivism. In this postmodern world, everything is contested. Multiple interpretations of the same <i>phenomenon</i> are possible, depending upon where one is standing. There are no absolutes, and no single theoretical framework for examining social and political issues; rather, diversity and plurality should be celebrated, and no one element privileged or considered more powerful than another. (Introduction, p. 12)
pragmatism	Pragmatism is a perspective in social research that encompasses both <i>qualitative</i> and <i>quantitative research</i> . It is not based on a particular view of what 'reality' or 'knowledge' is – instead, pragmatic researchers focus on the impact or consequences of their research, choosing the qualitative and quantitative <i>research approaches, methods, and techniques</i> that best meet their <i>research purposes</i> . Pragmatism represents the philosophical underpinnings of <i>mixed methods</i> research and more broadly much practical qualitative research that is carried out without the researcher considering too deeply what truth or knowledge are. (Introduction, p. 13)
prestige questions	Prestige questions are <i>questionnaire</i> items that people are likely to answer one way or another because they think that it will make them look better. (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 208)
privacy and confidentiality	Privacy and confidentiality refers to the notion that the rights of <i>participants</i> to have their privacy protected through assurances that the data they offer, as well as their identities, will be held in confidence. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 275)
Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association	This is a major handbook used in some fields of social science that explains how to write up research reports for publication. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 299)
qualifying data	Qualifying data is the statistical process of transforming quantitative <i>data</i> into qualitative data through cluster or factor analysis. (Mixed Methods, p. 142)

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Key Word	Definition
qualitative research	In qualitative research, researchers try to understand participants' experiences with the central <i>phenomenon</i> (the focus of the study) in a <i>natural setting</i> , using <i>research approaches</i> such as <i>ethnography</i> or <i>case study</i> . Instead of numbers, researchers collect words (text, such as <i>interviews</i> or <i>observation notes</i> ), and images (pictures or audio-visual footage) about the <i>phenomenon</i> of the study. As much as possible without preconceived hypotheses or ideas, they analyze the <i>data</i> for common patterns (themes) in order to allow multiple <i>interpretations</i> of participants' individual experiences. (Introduction, p. 5; Mixed Methods, p. 137)
quantifying data	Quantifying data is the process of transforming qualitative <i>data</i> into quantitative data by counting <i>codes</i> , <i>categories</i> , and themes. (Mixed Methods, p. 142)
quantitative research	Quantitative research is a <i>research methodology</i> in which numeric data is collected and statistically analyzed in an objective and unbiased manner to prove or disprove a hypothesis so that the results can be generalized from a sample to a larger population. (Mixed Methods , p. 137) Quantitative research refers to <i>research methods</i> that draw on numerical (often statistically based) <i>warrants</i> like frequency and probability, and therefore make use of numerical or countable <i>data</i> . (What Makes Research 'Qualitative?')
quasi-experimental study	A quasi-experimental study is one that follows scientific methods and procedures to the extent that it can, but not fully. For example, in classroom research existing groups and teaching processes often cannot be changed for the sake of research. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 292)
questionnaires	Questionnaires are instruments for the collection of <i>data</i> , usually in written form, consisting of <i>open response items</i> (or questions) and/or <i>closed response items</i> (or questions), which require a response from <i>respondents</i> . (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 201)
reflecting	Reflecting refers to the fourth and final step in the <i>action research cycle</i> . Researchers think carefully about what they have observed, and consider planning further <i>action research</i> in the next cycle. (Action Research, p. 115)
reflexive	Being 'reflexive' means critically thinking about the <i>research process</i> and your role in it. (Observation, p. 176)
repair	In <i>discourse analysis</i> , repair refers to the sequentially organized system for clearing up problems of speaking, hearing, and/or understanding in talk. (Discourse Analysis, p. 242)
report	In an <i>interview</i> , a report is a neutral description of a situation. (Interviews, p. 192)

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Key Word	Definition
research approach	A research approach is a tradition such as <i>narrative inquiry</i> , <i>case study</i> , <i>ethnography</i> , <i>phenomenology</i> , <i>grounded theory</i> , and <i>action research</i> , which employs generally accepted <i>research methods</i> . (Introduction, p. 5)
research method	A research method is a systematic and rigorous way of collecting and analyzing information. In <i>qualitative research</i> this includes <i>observation</i> , <i>interviews</i> , <i>open-response items in questionnaires</i> , <i>verbal reports</i> , <i>diary studies</i> , and <i>discourse analysis</i> . (Introduction, p. 17)
research methodology	A research methodology is a theory of how inquiry should occur. It defines the kinds of problems that are worth investigating and frames them, determines what <i>research approaches</i> and <i>research methods</i> to use, and also how to understand what constitutes a legitimate and warranted explanation. (Schwandt, 2007) (Introduction, p. 5)
research narrative	A research narrative is a way of organizing a qualitative research report to reflect the story of the <i>research process</i> . (Observation, p. 175)
research process	The term research process refers to what you actually do in carrying out a research project, compared with the research cycle, which is a formalized description of that process. (What Makes Research 'Qualitative?', p. 29)
research question	A research question is a question that orients, shapes, and provides direction for a research study, which may be refined or changed during the <i>research process</i> . (What Makes Research 'Qualitative?', p. 26)
research techniques	A research technique is a specific procedure for obtaining information. The same research technique, such as asking open-ended questions, could be employed by a number of different <i>research methods</i> . (Introduction, p. 5)
respondents	The term respondents is used in <i>questionnaires</i> and <i>surveys</i> to refer to the <i>participants</i> who respond to or answer the questions. (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 201)
retrospective reports	Retrospective reports are types of <i>verbal report</i> in which individuals reflect on their thought processes after they complete a task. (Introspective Techniques, p. 222)
semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews are interviews based on a plan or <i>interview guide</i> , which aim to cover key topics and questions, but which are allowed to develop as naturally as possible and not necessarily in the planned order. (Interviews, p. 185)
sequence	In <i>discourse analysis</i> , a sequence is an episode of talk, composed of at least two <i>turns</i> , with identifiable boundaries of action. (Discourse Analysis, p. 246)
setting	The setting is the place where the research study is carried out. 'Place' here refers to more than just the physical location; it also includes the people, <i>artifacts</i> , language used, and intangible aspects (like beliefs) of that location. (What Makes Research 'Qualitative?', p. 26)

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Key Word	Definition
short-answer items	Short-answer items are open-response <i>questionnaire</i> items that require responses that are a few phrases or sentences long, but not as long as a paragraph. (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 203)
structured interviews	Structured interviews are interviews in which all the questions are written out in advance, often using an <i>interview guide</i> . (Interviews, p. 184)
survey study	A survey study is a data collection method which uses questionnaires and is typically distributed to many people. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 292)
textual mentor	A textual mentor is an exemplary piece of writing that models aspects of good research and writing. Other writers can learn to improve their own writing from it. (Writing Up Your Research, p. 289)
theoretical sampling	Theoretical sampling is a procedure in <i>grounded theory</i> for selecting <i>participants</i> on the basis of whether or not they will contribute to the development of the theory. (Introduction, p. 17)
thick description	Thick description refers to the rich, vivid descriptions and <i>interpretations</i> that researchers create as they collect <i>data</i> . It encompasses the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, and motivations that characterize the <i>participants</i> , research <i>setting</i> , and events. Thick description helps researchers paint a meticulous picture for the reader. (Ethnography, p. 99)
think-alouds	Think-alouds are a type of verbal report in which <i>participants</i> report on their thought processes while they are completing a task. (Introspective Techniques, p. 222)
thought units	In <i>discourse analysis</i> , thought units are segments of the transcribed text that reflect a particular thought or idea. (Discourse Analysis, p. 224)
timing	In a <i>mixed methods</i> study, timing refers to the sequence or order of collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative <i>data</i> . (Mixed Methods, p. 138)
transcribing data	Transcribing is the process of converting verbal <i>data</i> to written data for <i>analysis</i> . (Interviews, p. 192)
transcription notation	Transcription notation refers to transcribing conventions, used for systematically representing features of talk in a visual format. (Discourse Analysis, p. 243)
transferability	Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of <i>qualitative research</i> can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or <i>settings</i> . That decision is made by the reader; the qualitative researcher can enhance transferability by thoroughly describing the research <i>setting</i> using <i>thick description</i> , and clearly stating the assumptions that were central to the research. (Open-Response Items in Questionnaires, p. 215)

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Key Word	Definition
triangulation	Triangulation refers to the process of using multiple sources for <i>data</i> gathering, multiple methods, multiple researchers, and/or multiple theoretical perspectives to build richer and deeper analyses and understandings of the topic under inquiry. (Introduction, p. 11)
Triangulation Design	Triangulation Design is a <i>mixed methods</i> design in which quantitative and qualitative <i>data</i> are collected and <i>analyzed</i> concurrently and then compared, in order to understand the research problem more completely. (Mixed Methods, p. 141)
trust and betrayal	There are universal ethical concerns that building trust with participants may entail some betrayal of that trust once the data gathering is complete. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 278)
trustworthiness	The term trustworthiness refers to standards for judging the quality and usefulness of qualitative research studies, which are composed of criteria for methodologically competent practice and ethically sensitive practice. (Ethics and Trustworthiness, p. 264)
turn	In <i>discourse analysis</i> , a turn refers to one person's allocation of talk. (Discourse Analysis, p. 250)
turntaking	In <i>discourse analysis</i> , turntaking refers to the organizational system of talk where one person speaks, stops, another starts, stops, and so on. (Discourse Analysis, p. 249)
verbal reports or verbal protocols	Verbal reports or verbal protocols are oral records of an individual's thought processes. (Introspective Techniques, p. 222)
vignette	A vignette is a short narrative description that captures the essential characteristics of a person or event. (Case Study, p. 83)
visual diagram	A visual diagram is a graphical representation of the research procedures used in a <i>mixed methods</i> study. (Mixed Methods, p. 150)
warrant	A warrant is a reasoned justification for accepting and believing in a research <i>claim</i> or finding. (What Makes Research 'Qualitative?', p. 26)
weighting	Weighting refers to the relative importance or priority given to each type of <i>data</i> in a <i>mixed methods</i> study. (Mixed Methods, p. 138)

Sources: Each contributor, and also Brown & Rodgers (2002), Creswell (2007, 2009), Mackey & Gass, (2005), Nunan (1992), and Schwandt (2007).

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