

## SOME ASPECTS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN RESEARCHING LANGUAGE

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### Abstract

In the academic world, research inquiry is ‘bitterly’ divided into two competing paradigms: quantitative and qualitative research. Both are competing to search for revealing certain phenomenon and each of them claims to be the most satisfactory way to thoroughly discover the answer of the phenomenon. Firstly the article tries to illustrate the tension between the quantitative and qualitative research, the nature of qualitative research such as its epistemological positions, summary of the recurrent elements in qualitative research. Secondly, it explains qualitative research in language learning. The third part is on the methods in qualitative research such as case study, ethnography, observation and field interview. The fourth part is on ethical issues. Fifthly, the article discusses reliability and validity. The sixth part is on sampling. The seventh part is on the dynamic nature of research questions and the role of theory. The eighth part is on qualitative data analysis. The ninth part is on teacher-researcher and action research. The tenth part is on the structure of qualitative research proposal and the last part is on the introduction of qualitative research in Indonesia. It is perceived that there are various aspects in language learning that can be explored with the use of qualitative research, ranging from foreign language acquisition and language teaching policy.

**Keywords:** quantitative and qualitative research, epistemological positions, case study, ethnography, observation, field interview.

### INTRODUCTION

According to Robert B. Burns (2000), research is “a systematic investigation to find an answer to a problem” (p. 3). In the academic world, however, research inquiry is ‘bitterly’ divided into two competing paradigms: quantitative and qualitative research. Generally speaking,

quantitative research refers to “empirical research where the data are in the form of numbers”, while qualitative research refers to “empirical research where the data are not in the form of numbers” (Punch, 1999, p. 4). Both compete to search for revealing certain phenomenon to satisfy the curiosity of the researchers and each of them claims to be the most satisfactory and effective way to thoroughly discover the answer of the phenomenon. This article elaborates the historical background of research inquiry and would focus on the emergence of qualitative research and its related aspects. Simultaneously, the article strives to explore the ways to conduct research in language learning using qualitative research.

## **QUANTITATIVE VERSUS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Historically, there are some crucial stages in the development of research. First, between the 1940s and 1970s quantitative was dominant. During that period it was generally held that ‘everything should and can be quantified’ and that the most reliable research is the one that has high degree of generalizability. Mathematics was regarded as the ‘queen of sciences’ and together with other sciences such as physics and chemistry were perceived as ‘hard’. On the other hand, others particularly social sciences were classified into ‘soft’ as they were regarded as having ‘low’ degree of precision and, therefore, lacking dependability. There was an array of statistical and mathematical models that eventually led to the belief that only quantitative data are ultimately valid with high quality. However, it was in the 1960s that researchers and academics began to feel that quantitative research was not able to answer all problems in the prevailing phenomenon (R. B. Burns, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Supriadi, 2002). In fact, not all researches can be carried out in laboratories or by involving statistics (Seliger & Shohamy, 2000). Since the 1960s, “a strong move towards a more qualitative, naturalistic and subjective approach has left social science research divide into two competing camps: the scientific empirical tradition, and the naturalistic phenomenological mode” (R. B. Burns, 2000, p. 3). Subsequently, the period between the 1980s and 1990s is the time when qualitative research enjoyed its golden age with its approaches such as naturalistic, constructionism, post-positivism and post-modernism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Supriadi, 2002).

In the beginning of the 1990s the competition between quantitative (scientific empirical tradition) and qualitative (naturalistic phenomenological) research started to become stiffer with one camp increasingly claimed as superior to the other. It is during this period that a ‘reconciliatory approach’ was embraced with the suggestion of combining the two paradigms when conducting researches (Guba & Lincoln, 1994;

Supriadi, 2002). This is perhaps in line with the argument that the distinction between the two is simplistic and naïve and that in many respects they are indistinguishable (Nunan, 1992; Reichardt & T. Cook, 1979), although for the sake of practicality this article touches upon the issues related only to qualitative research. The following table sums up the distinctions between quantitative and qualitative:

Table 1. The Features of Quantitative and Qualitative Research

Quantitative	Qualitative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• values objectivity through the discovery of facts or truths</li> <li>• tests pre-established hypotheses through the collection and measurement of data</li> <li>• establishes cause and effect relationships</li> <li>• intervenes in the research context and controls variables</li> <li>• reduces data to measurable quantities</li> <li>• ensures reliability through the consistency and replicability of methods</li> <li>• generalizes beyond the research population</li> <li>• focuses on research outcomes that confirm or disconfirm hypotheses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encompasses social subjectivity and relative interpretations of phenomena</li> <li>• draws on data to develop and refine research questions</li> <li>• interprets human behavior from participants' perspectives</li> <li>• explores naturalistic cultural settings without controlling variables</li> <li>• gather 'rich' data and interprets them through 'thick' description and analysis</li> <li>• ensures validity through multiple data sources</li> <li>• does not seek to generalize beyond the research context focuses on the process as well as the outcomes of research</li> </ul>

(A. Burns, 1999, p. 23, with modification)

## WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Qualitative research “originally developed from the methodologies of field anthropologists and sociologists concerned with studying human behavior within the context in which that behavior would occur naturally and in which the role of researcher would not affect the normal behavior of the subjects” (Seliger & Shohamy, 2000, p. 118). In an obvious contrast with quantitative research which appears to be ‘unified’ in terms of methodology notwithstanding its technical debates, qualitative research has complex, multiple and often overlapped methodologies and research practices (Punch, 1999). Among others, this is because qualitative researchers emphasize the socially constructed nature of reality, the close relationships between the researcher and what is studied, and the changeable circumstances that mold the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

In qualitative research, the “behaviour, . . . , thoughts, feelings and perceptions” (R. B. Burns, 2000, p. 388 ) are considered central in an effort “to get behind the curtain” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 297). For a qualitative researcher, the truth might not be a main concern; rather, how the respondents perceived the truth was more significant (R. B. Burns, 2000). According to Geertz (1973), this is what is well-known as a ‘thick description’ of a particular setting, “from which a grounded theory can emerge; there is no *a priori* hypothesis to verify or invalidate” (cited in Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001).

Accordingly, qualitative research is also regarded as useful when researching policy issues as is “done in naturalistic settings, and focused on the constructions of meaning developed by participants, [therefore it] is in unique positions from which to assess the possibility of tools [such as new regulation] having the impacts intended by policy makers” (Rist, 2000, p. 1014). It is this rationale that has encouraged Ester deJong (1994) to argue that because applied linguists “have tended to ignore the human side of language”, the qualitative research can also make a powerful contribution to the field of language policy.

### **Epistemological Positions**

The analytical process in qualitative research is navigated by two major epistemological positions: interpretivism and social constructionism. Interpretivism demands that the researcher “grasp the meanings that constitute” particular actions (Schwandt, 2000, p. 191). In other words, interpretivism contends that there could be more than just one social reality (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Another side of interpretivism is that the analysis should also explore “how members of society understand their own actions” (Travers, 2001, p. 10). Social constructionism is arguably inseparable from interpretivism, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) point out, a qualitative approach is “endlessly creative and interpretative” and the constructions are made based on the interpretations (p. 23). Social constructionism attempts to prove that the “historical and sociocultural dimension” is central to the construction of knowledge (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). To significant degree, qualitative research is therefore conducted inductively.

### **Summary of The Recurrent Element in Qualitative Research**

According to Huberman (1994), the intermittent elements in qualitative research can be summed up as follows: Qualitative research is carried out through an intense relationship with a life situation—such as individuals, groups, and societies; the aim is to attain a ‘holistic’ outline of the context under study; the researcher attempts to gather data based on the view of local actors through a course of deep attention, thoughtfulness and understanding; the researcher may discuss the impression s/he gathers with informants but should maintain originality; the main job is to elucidate the ways people in specific settings perceive or take action towards particular issues; while there are various possible interpretations, some could be convincing on the ground of internal consistency or for theoretical considerations; virtually no standardized instrumentation is used from the beginning, the researcher is actually the ‘research instrument’; and the analyses are done mostly with words, which can be managed in such a way to let the researcher compare, contrast, analyze and derive patterns from them (cited in Punch, 1999).

## **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

Donna M. Johnson (1992) classified correlational, experimental, and survey research into quantitative research (although not totally) and classified case studies, ethnography, and multisite, multimethod studies into qualitative research (although not totally). Just like in any other fields, at first quantitative procedure dominated a field of researching language, particularly with its well-known experimental approach. However, as the pendulum gradually swung towards qualitative and much research was conducted using qualitative procedure, the legacy left by quantitative research needs to be revisited, as Gass & Schachter (1996) state:

Furthermore, we claim that as more qualitative research is undertaken in classrooms with limited English-proficient students during times of rapid social change, many of our assumptions about the need to maintain the integrity of predetermined, static research designs and methods, perspectives derived from experimental, quantitative research paradigms, must be critically examined

(Gass & Schachter, 1996, p. 2).

## **METHODS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Methods in qualitative research are in practice often overlap and are not mutually exclusive; nevertheless, it is crucial to elaborate each prominent feature of the methods, and among others are case study, ethnography, in-depth interview and participant observation.

### **Case Study**

It is perceived that case studies are not always identical to qualitative research. However, while a case study may come in a form of either quantitative or qualitative or a combination of both—“most case studies lie within the realm of qualitative research. Case study is used to gain in-depth understanding replete with meaning for the subject, focusing on process rather than outcome, on discovery rather than confirmation” (A. Burns, 1999, pp. 459-460). In other words, the aim of a case study is to elucidate the case based on its context (Johnson, 1992).

Case studies, according to Stake (2001), are “down-to-earth and attention holding” (p. 131), and therefore appropriate to explore not only perceptions but also social interactions among participants. Three attributes characterise a case study: *particularistic*, *descriptive*, and *heuristic*. Particularistic is defined when the research focuses on special conditions, occasions, settings, and groups or circumstances (Berg, 1998; Meriam, 1998). Descriptive is defined as a ‘thick description’ of particular occasions or behaviour (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Geertz, 2001; Meriam, 1998). Heuristic is defined as the case study’s expectation of discovering new meanings (Meriam, 1998).

There are at least six types of case studies: historical, observational, oral, situational, clinical and multi-case studies. Historical case studies deal with the development of system or method or organization under a specific period of time. Observational case studies emphasize a classroom, group, teacher or student, mainly using observation and interview. Oral history is when the researcher collects data using extensive interviewing of one individual. Situational analysis is when particular events are researched. Clinical case study is to comprehend in-depth a particular individual, a child having problems with reading is given as an example. Multi-case studies consist of a collection of case studies (R. B. Burns, 2000, p. 463). Case studies are particularly suitable for longitudinal research and can be appropriate for projects in first-language acquisition, second/foreign-language acquisition and education (Wray, Trott, & Bloomer, 1998). Nunan (1992) gives an example of a case study that explores the relationships between social and interactional aspects on the acquisition of communicative competence.

### **Ethnography**

Early on, ethnography was prompted by “the interests of Westerners in the origins of culture and civilisation” (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 40), therefore it is often associated with anthropology. Berg (1998), Fetterman (1989), Tedlock (2000), and Vidich and Lyman (2000) and Sudikan (2001) indicate that with the use of ethnography patterns of social interaction, behaviour of actors, particular encounters, and events can be observed and put into meaningful perspective. Nowadays, ethnography has been widely used in researching educational policy (Acosta & Volk, 2001; Caronia, 2001) as well as in language learning (Carlson, 2001; Gass & Schachter, 1996; Hall, 2002; Johnson, 1992).

Johnson (1992) states that one of the most important contributions of ethnography in language research is to give information about “the ways that students’ cultural experiences in home and community compare with the culture of the schools, universities, and communities where they study, and the implications of these differences for second language and culture learning” (p. 153). She further states that this sort of information can help us understand how cultural assumptions and values are shaped that might cause miscommunication, leading to various attitudes towards the learning situation and various approaches to learning. For example, Willet (1987) conducted an intriguing ethnographic study of two young children who had just arrived in the United States and were acquiring English in a preschool (cited in Johnson, 1992). Vasquez (1988) pursued an ethnographic study of literate behaviours in Mexican American families (cited in Johnson, 1992). Honberger (1987) conducted an ethnographic study about a bilingual education project in Peru (cited in Johnson, 1992). Nunan (1992) likewise proposes ethnography as an alternative to psychometry in researching language.

## **Observation**

Observation studies generally deal with the efforts of collecting data in the absence of any manipulation, meaning that the researcher simply observes the continuing activities in the absence of any attempt to control, influence, determine or stimulate them (Punch, 1999; Wray *et al.*, 1998). There are four roles of field research that assist in the process of analyzing field notes: *Complete participant*: the researcher attempts to engage entirely in the activities of the researched group or organization and their role is made covert (hidden) *Participant as observer*: the researcher adopts an overt (open) role, and makes their presence and intentions known to the group. *Observer as participant*: this usually involves one-visit interviews, and calls for relatively more formal observation than either informal observation or participation. *Complete observer*: the researcher is detached, and passively records behavior from a distance (e.g., a researcher sitting in a classroom,

making observations of pupils and their teacher). In practice, these are often overlapped, but determine whether or not the researcher influences the ongoing behavior being observed (Adler & Adler, 1994; Angrosino & Perez, 2000; Punch, 1999).

One of the most common methods in qualitative research is participant observation which plays a role as a central ethnographic data collection techniques. As mentioned earlier, this requires that the researcher become a participant in the researched context and strive to be naturally accepted as a part of the context to ensure natural observations (Punch, 1999; Trochim, 2002). Nunan (1992) gives an example of a researcher doing some 'sort' of participant observation in a French as a foreign language classroom with the researcher's database consisting of lesson transcripts, fieldnotes, and interviews with the teachers and pupils. The research took a relatively long time with some collaborative involvement of some participants. Nunan (1992) further argues that participant observation is needed when one tries to understand and capture how the social events of the language in classrooms are enacted.

The observation method can also be used to observe in detail naturalistic interactions and verbatim utterances, usually using audio and video recording. Such interactions and utterances are "very valuable resources of accurate information on patterns of interactional behavior which may not be obvious during the actual teaching process" (Nunan, 1992, p. 94).

### **Field Interview**

According to Neuman (2000), field interview is usually unstructured, nondirective and in-depth with the researcher asking questions with attentiveness and friendliness. Nevertheless, it is also possible to use in-depth semi-structured interviews with an interview guide, in which "the content of the interview is focused on the issues that are central to the research question, but the type of questioning and discussion allow for" great expandability (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 2000, p. 65). The interview guide was "developed around a list of topics without fixed wording or fixed ordering of questions" (Minichiello *et al.*, 2000, p. 65).

Most interviews could be tape-recorded. Prior to interviews, appointments should be made, consent papers and subject information sheets are prepared and the interview guide is reviewed. During the interviews, the researcher should try to make the situation as relaxed as possible in order to minimise the interviewer's influence. This included not



taking notes during the interview by leaving it until the researcher returned home.

In researching language learning, Nunan (1992) proposed several situations than can be considered: “a teacher researcher interviewed other teachers at her teaching center in order to find out to what extent their strategies for planning course design processes were similar or different from the ones she had documented in her own classroom”; “a researcher interviewed students on their perceptions about being placed in a mixed-ability literacy class”; “a teacher interviewed two selected learners in her classroom .. in order to deepen her initial observations of the range of learning strategies”; a researcher interviewed students “about their responses to competency-based assessments”; a researcher interviewed students about “their current life situations, previous work and current learning experiences” (p. 118).

## **ETHICAL ISSUES**

Ethical issues are highly important in qualitative study. The researcher should therefore always emphasise to the respondents that their participation was voluntary, their names would be anonymous, and that they have the right to refuse or withdraw from the research process at anytime, without any consequences. In other words, the respondents’ life and career should not be harmed by any lawful, physical and emotional terms (Lincoln & Guba, 2001; Neuman, 2000).

## **RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY**

As Nunan (1992) asserts, proponents of quantitative research often bring up the issue of the reliability and validity of qualitative research, particularly in ethnographies. The criticisms are derived from the fact that ethnographies are based on detailed description and analysis of a particular setting or context. Due to the amount of data yielded in these studies, it is virtually impossible to provide anything but small amount of the data when the findings are published. Nunan provides us with the following tables to guard against threat to the reliability and validity of ethnographic research in language learning:

Table 2: Guarding Against Threat to Reliability

Type	Questions
Internal reliability	Does the research utilize low inference descriptors? Does it employ more than one researcher/collaborator? Does the research invite peer examination of cross-site corroboration? Are data mechanically recorded?
External reliability	Is the status of the researcher made explicit Does the researcher provide a detailed description of subjects? Does the researcher provide a detailed description of the context and conditions under which the research was carried out? Are constructs and premises explicitly defined? Are data collection and analysis methods presented in detail?

(Nunan, 1992, p. 62)

Table 3: Guarding Against Threat to Validity

Type	Questions
Internal validity	Is it likely that maturational changes occurring during the course of the research will affect outcomes? Is there bias in the selection of informants? Is the growth or attrition of informants over time likely to affect outcomes? Have alternative explanations for phenomena been rigorously examined and excluded?
External validity	Are some phenomena unique to a particular groups or site and therefore non-comparable? Are outcomes due in part to the presence of the researcher? Are cross-group comparisons invalidated by unique historical experiences of particular groups? To what extent are abstract terms and constructs shared across different groups and research sites?

(Nunan, 1992, p. 63)

## SAMPLING IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

According to Flick (1998), qualitative researchers tend to use nonprobability/nonrandom samples because “it is their relevance to the

research topic rather than their representativeness which determines the way in which the people to be studied are selected” (cited in Neuman, 2000, p. 196). There are several types of sampling: haphazard, quota, purposive, snowball, deviant case, sequential and theoretical—summed up in the following table:

Table 3: Sampling

Type of samples	Principle
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Haphazard</li> <li>• Quota</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get any cases in any manner that is convenient.</li> <li>• Get a present number of cases in each of several predetermined categories that will reflect the diversity of the population, using haphazard methods.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purposive</li> <li>• Snowball</li> <li>• Deviant Case</li> <li>• Sequential</li> <li>• Theoretical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get all possible cases that fit particular criteria, using various methods.</li> <li>• Get cases using referrals from one of a few cases, and then referrals from those cases, and so forth.</li> <li>• Get cases that substantially differ from the dominant pattern (a special type of purposive sample).</li> <li>• Get cases until there is no additional information or new characteristics (often used with other sampling methods)</li> <li>• Get cases that will help reveal features that are theoretically important about a particular setting/topic.</li> </ul>

(Neuman, 2000, p. 197)

## THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THE ROLE OF THEORY

Just like any other studies, qualitative research also demands that the researcher formulate research questions from the outset of the research process. Nevertheless, unlike quantitative research where research questions are detailed in advance and cautiously adhered to throughout the research process, research questions in qualitative research are formulated in broad questions but are refined and refocused during the course of the research process (Johnson, 1992; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001).

Many question the role of theory if new and redefined research questions come to the fore as the research advances. Indeed, the role of theory is still and always important to determine “what kinds of evidence are likely to be significant in answering research questions posed at the beginning of the study and developed while in the field” (Johnson, 1992, p.

140). This means that the researcher never comes to the field with 'blank mind'. However, these efforts are more inductive in nature, with the researcher attempting to build up a new theoretical understanding based on specific context of particular settings (Mulyana, 2002).

## **QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS**

It is important to note that the researcher conducts analysis throughout the research process. Such an ongoing analysis is important because in qualitative study the researcher is expected to continuously reflect on the collected field notes (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Subsequently, according to Neuman (2000), qualitative researchers code the data by organizing "the raw data into conceptual categories and creates themes or concepts" which will be used to analyze the data. There are three kinds of coding that should be followed: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. In open coding, "the researcher locates themes and assigns initial codes or labels in a first attempt to condense the mass of data into categories." In axial coding, "a researcher asks about causes and consequences, conditions and interactions, strategies and processes, and looks for categories or concepts that cluster together." Selective coding involves scanning data and previous codes. Researchers look selectively for cases that illustrate themes and make comparisons and contrasts after most of the data collection is complete." There are more techniques and methods in analyzing qualitative data. There are also many kinds of computer software that can assist the researcher in analyzing the data (Weitzman, 2000), such as N-VIVO.

## **TEACHER-RESEARCHER AND ACTION RESEARCH**

It has been proposed that the "teacher-as-researcher movement holds the greater promise for linking theory and practice in ways that are meaningful to teachers" (Johnson, 1992, p. 215). One of the ways is to do collaborative action research for English language teachers. According to A. Burns (1999) "the major focus of action research is on concrete and practical issues of immediate concern to particular social groups or communities. It is conducted in naturally occurring settings, primarily using methods common to qualitative research" (p. 24).

## **THE STRUCTURE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

In contrast to the conventional and positivist research (quantitative), there is no single accepted outline for a qualitative research proposal.

## INTRODUCING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN INDONESIA

In Indonesia, one of the most proponents in qualitative research is A. Chaedar Alwasilah of Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia in Bandung who wrote a book titled *Pokoknya kualitatif: Dasar-dasar merancang dan melakukan penelitian kualitatif* (*Nothing but only Qualitative: Foundations to designing and conducting qualitative research*), a book which draws both controversy and admiration as it was accused of spreading ‘sectarian’ paradigm in research, but at the same time enhancing understanding in and appreciation towards qualitative research (Alwasilah, 2002; Supriadi, 2002). Alwasilah completed his PhD. in Indiana University in Bloomington, USA. His qualitative-designed dissertation—*Cultural transfer in communication: A qualitative study of Indonesian students in US academic settings*— was praised as the best dissertation of the year. Another scholar is Deddy Mulyana of Universitas Padjajaran Bandung who wrote his dissertation *Twenty-five Indonesians in Melbourne: A study of the social construction and transformation of ethnic identity* when completing his Ph.D. in Monash University, Australia (Mulyana, 2002). It is also important to mention Siti Wachidah (2001) of Jakarta State University whose qualitative-oriented Ph.D. dissertation in Sydney University is entitled *EFL learning autonomy and output planning: A case in a Javanese-dominated general high school in Indonesia*.

## CONCLUSION

This article has strived to explore the tensions between quantitative and qualitative research and the emergence of qualitative research with its related aspects and roles in researching language learning. Nonetheless, this paper has not thoroughly explored ways to promote the use of qualitative research in researching language learning, particularly English as a foreign language. There are various aspects in language learning that can be explored with the use of qualitative research, ranging from language teaching policy to foreign language acquisition. Moreover, to what extent the qualitative research has been used in researching teaching English as a foreign language in Indonesia has not been deeply explored in this article. It is, therefore, recommended that further efforts are pursued to underpin the enhanced use of qualitative research in language learning and to explore the use of qualitative research in researching teaching English as a foreign language in Indonesia. The writer is of the opinion that qualitative research, together with quantitative research, could significantly contribute to the

development of English language teaching and learning. Features of the two paradigms of the research that complement each other need to be further investigated so that the two can be mutually inclusive, not mutually exclusive, leading to maximum benefits of the research findings.

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