Research Article

Designing and Conducting Qualitative Studies in ELT: Methods and Practices

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Abstract

Qualitative research (QR) in ELT provides an essential lens for examining the complexities of language learning, teaching practices and classroom interactions in natural contexts. This study explores the significance, theoretical foundations and methodological approaches of qualitative inquiry, emphasizing its focus in interpretivist and constructivist paradigms. It examines key research methods, including case studies, ethnography, and narrative inquiry, while situating qualitative research within its historical and epistemological context. Using a document analysis approach, the study systematically reviews existing literature and applies inductive thematic analysis to identify emerging trends and methodological advancements. The paper discusses the key characteristics of QR along with the guiding principles of qualitative data analysis in ELT and applied linguistics research. The findings highlight the increasing relevance of qualitative research in understanding teacher-student interactions, second language acquisition, and pedagogical decision-making, as well as the growing integration of digital tools like Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) to enhance analytical rigor. This study contributes to the broader discourse on qualitative methodologies in ELT and Applied Linguistics by reinforcing their theoretical depth and practical applicability. Further, it advocates for continued methodological innovation and interdisciplinary research to expand the impact of qualitative inquiry on language education.

Introduction

The term 'qualitative research' serves as an overarching term for a complex and dynamic research process. It originates from several disciplines, primarily anthropology, sociology, and philosophy, and is currently utilized in nearly all domains of social scientific research, including applied linguistics (Croker, 2009). Qualitative research (QR) in applied linguistics seeks to comprehend and interpret language, language learning, or language use within specific contexts, as well as social phenomena in natural settings such as social and educational environments. Pandey (2025) states that "qualitative research involves data collection procedures that result primarily in open-ended, non-numerical data, which is then analyzed primarily by non-statistical methods" (p. 87). Dornyei (2007) explains that "qualitative data which usually involves recorded spoken data (for example, interview data) that is transcribed to textual form as well as written (field) notes and documents of various sorts" (p. 19). This perspective aligns with Leavy's (2014) characterization of qualitative inquiry

as a means of "understanding, describing, explaining, unraveling, illuminating, chronicling, and documenting social life-which includes attention to the everyday, to the mundane and ordinary, as much as the extraordinary" (p. 1).

These research methods are commonly used in the social and behavioral sciences to examine, describe, or clarify social phenomena; to explore the meanings individuals attach to activities, events, or artifacts; to develop an in-depth understanding of particular aspects of social life; and to create "thick descriptions" (Leavy, 2014). Both perspectives underscore the importance of deep insight into social phenomena. Denzin and Lincoln (2017) define qualitative research as "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (p. 3). They further make it clear, concluding 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. 3). A more concise, though several years older, definition that stands out is by Van Maanen (1979), who describes qualitative research as "an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (p. 520). Creswell and Creswell (2018) further define qualitative research as:

> *an approach for exploring and understanding the individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participants' setting, data analysis inductively building from particular to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. (p. 41)*

Similarly, Mackey and Gass (2005) note that "qualitative studies, on the other hand, generally are not set up as experiments; the data cannot be easily quantified" (p. 2). Denzin and Lincoln (2017) emphasize 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. 3).

Unlike quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers do not attempt to control the research setting. Instead, they argue that human behaviors, including language acquisition and usage, are shaped by the specific contexts in which they occur. Consequently, the interpretation of social reality-shaped by cultures, institutions, and values-differs from the interpretation of physical reality. As Mirriam (2002) states, "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 14). Building on this perspective, qualitative research seeks to explore these meanings by adopting

specific methodological approaches. As Flick (2011) explains,

> *qualitative research addresses the issues by using one of the following three approaches. It aims (a) at grasping the subjective meaning of issues from the perspectives of the participants. Often (b) latent meanings of a situation are in focus. In many cases, (c) social practices and the life world of the participants are described. The aim is less to test what is known than to discover new aspects in the situation under study and to develop hypotheses or a theory from these discoveries. (p. 12)*

In qualitative research, meaning and holistic perspectives take precedence over discrete variables, statistics, and standardization. Researchers actively participate in the process of generating meaning and interpretation through observation. In certain research contexts, findings are understood through the perspectives of study participants, as exemplified in ethnographic research. To gain deeper insights into research topics, qualitative researchers employ various methods, including individual or group interviews, naturalistic observations, and different forms of qualitative data collection. Additionally, researchers may use a range of techniques, such as written notes and audio or video recordings, for data collection. Some widely used qualitative research designs include case studies, ethnographic research, and narrative inquiry.

Underlying Assumptions and Paradigms

Qualitative research in applied linguistics "typically seeks to make sense of language, language learning or use in context, or a social phenomenon as it occurs in natural settings such as social and classroom settings" (Phakiti & Paltridge, 2015, p. 25). A diverse array of methodologies exists for qualitative data analysis. The discipline is progressively shifting towards a postmodern recognition of the inherent subjectivity of qualitative research (Walford 1991, as cited in Holliday, 2015). In quantitative research, the focus is on controlling factors to limit the researcher's effect, whereas qualitative research aims to obtain the most comprehensive data possible. The researcher's concepts and presence will significantly impact the appearance of data and its interpretation. Postmodernism recognizes that 'truth' is influenced by ideology. Consequently, the results of the investigation will invariably be affected by the researcher's convictions. Quantitative research is progressively acknowledging these factors and adopting a more sophisticated perspective towards data.

A positivist perspective posits that reality exists outside, is observable, stable, and quantifiable. Knowledge obtained from the examination of this reality is termed "scientific" and entails the formulation of "laws." Experimental research is consistent with a positivist perspective. The inflexibility of this viewpoint has resulted in the rise of

logical empiricism and postpositivism. Logical empiricism aims for coherence in research and claims that there are no essential methodological distinctions between the scientific and social sciences (Patton, 2002, p. 92). Postpositivism recognizes that knowledge is "relative rather than absolute" yet asserts that "it is possible, using empirical evidence, to differentiate between more and less plausible claims" (Patton, 2002, p. 93). Interpretive research, where qualitative research is most commonly situated, operates on the assumption that reality is socially constructed. In other words, "there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event". Researchers do not discover knowledge; instead, they construct it. The term constructivism is frequently used interchangeably with interpretivism.

Qualitative research in applied linguistics often aims to elucidate language, language acquisition, or usage within contextual frameworks, or to examine social phenomena as they manifest in natural environments, including social and educational contexts. Qualitative researchers emphasize the significance of meaning and holistic considerations above discrete variables, statistics, and standardization. Researchers in qualitative inquire engage in the construction of meanings and interpretations based on their observations.

The primary objective of qualitative research is to thoroughly understand the intricacies of social behavior. This phenomenon typically occurs in certain social environments, like schools, industries, and hospital wards, which are regarded as cultures of activity, raising fundamental anthropological inquiries on power dynamics, implicit behavioral norms, and organizational frameworks. Its origins are therefore intricately linked to social and cultural anthropology, as well as the related discipline of ethnography which is specifically focused on depicting human societies, yet from which it derives much of its methodology. In applied linguistics, qualitative research has historically focused on the linguistic dimensions of communication, resulting in a narrow application; however, it is now being utilized across diverse contexts, including the politics of language instruction and the non-linguistic contexts of language behavior (Holliday, 2015).

Epistemology and Ontology in Qualitative Research Methods in Applied Linguistics

Each research methodology is shaped by a theoretical perspective that informs its understanding of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) (Crotty, 2009, as cited in Lew *et al*., 2018, p. 81). In studies employing quantitative methodologies, these perspectives often remain implicit, as they generally adopt a realist ontology that assumes the existence of an objective reality independent of human perception. This aligns with an objectivist epistemology, which holds that "truth and meaning reside

in their objects independently of any consciousness" (Crotty, 2009, as cited in Lew *et al*., 2018, p. 81).

In qualitative research, however, epistemological and ontological considerations are more explicitly acknowledged due to the range of theoretical perspectives regarding the types of knowledge that can be generated and the ways in which findings should be interpreted. Some qualitative researchers in applied linguistics may, like their quantitative counterparts, hold a realist ontological stance. However, in the social sciences, realist philosophers and methodologists differ in their epistemological views on how much access researchers have to reality, recognizing the "partiality and fallibility" of human knowledge, which is mediated through semiotic representations.

Researchers influenced by post-structuralist thought may adopt an antirealist ontology, aiming "to obtain knowledge of entities that are conceived as not 'given', that is, not independent of human action or of embeddedness in human culture" (Crookes, 2013, p. 1). These differing perspectives have implications for research methodology and the claims made based on findings. For instance, even within the qualitative approach of grounded theory, some researchers adhere to a realist ontology and positivist epistemology, emphasizing "a method of discovery," "a method of verification," "an objective external reality," "a passive, neutral observer," "categories as emergent from the data," and "a direct and, often, narrow empiricism" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, as cited in Lew *et al*., 2018). On the other hand, researchers who take an antirealist ontology with a constructivist epistemology may apply grounded theory in a way that emphasizes "the flexibility of the method," "a multiple, processual, and constructed" social reality, and "researchers' reflexivity" about their "position, privileges, perspective, and interaction" (Charmaz, 2014, as cited in Lew *et al*., 2018).

The Objectives

The main aim of this study is to examine the importance, methodologies and theoretical foundations of qualitative research in ELT and Applied Linguistics. The study aims to (1) investigate the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of qualitative inquiry in applied linguistics, (2) scrutinize the principal characteristics and methodological frameworks employed in qualitative research, such as case studies, ethnographic studies, and narrative inquiry, (3) examine the significance of qualitative research in comprehending language acquisition, language utilization, and social phenomena within authentic environments, and (4) assess the relevance of qualitative research in analyzing pedagogical practices and teacher-student dynamics in English Language Teaching contexts. This paper further aims to enhance the larger conversation regarding the significance of qualitative approaches in

furthering knowledge and practice in language teaching and applied linguistics research.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research methodology, aligned with interpretive and constructivist frameworks, to investigate the role and significance of qualitative inquiry in ELT and applied linguistics. The study used a document analysis methodology, meticulously evaluating scholarly literature, research papers, and methodological manuals to investigate the philosophical underpinnings, principal characteristics and methodological uses of qualitative research. The data collection emphasizes the analysis of primary and secondary sources, encompassing theoretical frameworks and empirical studies, to discern trends, difficulties, and emerging viewpoints within qualitative research traditions. The study employed an inductive thematic analysis to classify and interpret data, highlighting significant topics such as epistemological orientations, research designs (e.g., case study, ethnography, and narrative inquiry), and their implications for language education research. Reflexivity is maintained throughout the analysis, ensuring critical engagement with the literature and methodological rigor in interpretation.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings obtained from the qualitative analysis of data, offering insights into the historical development, key characteristics, and methodological significance of qualitative research in ELT and applied linguistics. The discussion interprets these results in relation to existing literature, highlighting the role of qualitative inquiry in understanding language learning, teaching practices, and social phenomena in natural settings. Key themes such as the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of qualitative research, methodological approaches, and the evolving trends in the field are examined. The analysis further contextualizes the impact of qualitative research on pedagogy, policy, and practice, emphasizing its transformative role in applied linguistics.

Historical Development

Qualitative research in ELT and applied linguistics has been characterized as "research that relies mainly on the reduction of data to words (codes, labels, categorization systems, narratives, etc.) and interpretative argument" (Benson, 2013, p. 1). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative findings are typically shaped by specific methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation within particular contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Lew *et al*., 2018).

One key distinction between Qualitative inquiry and quantitative research lies in researchers' differing

Table 1: *Meaning and Focus of Qualitative Research*

perspectives on social construction and mental models regarding numerical data (Lew *et al*., 2018). Maxwell (2010, as cited in Lew *et al*., 2018) explains that while quantitative research conceptualizes the world using variables and correlations, Qualitative research focuses on events and processes. Furthermore, whereas quantitative approaches aim to establish regularities and causal relationships by demonstrating consistent associations between changes in different entities, qualitative researchers tend to interpret causality through an understanding of the mechanisms and processes underlying changes over time in specific events (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Richards (2009) notes that in recent years, scholars in applied linguistics have increasingly moved beyond the strict dichotomy of qualitative and quantitative research, adopting pragmatic approaches that emphasize practical and contextual concerns over theoretical debates.

Benson (2013) points out that applied linguistics was slower than many other social sciences in adopting QR methods. Major journals such as *Applied Linguistics, Language Learning, Studies in Second Language Acquisition,* and *TESOL Quarterly* only began publishing QR studies in the early 1990s, and it took another decade before qualitative methodologies appeared in research manuals in the field (Richards, 2003). A significant milestone was the publication of QR research guidelines in *TESOL Quarterly* (Chapelle & Duff, 2003, as cited in Lew *et al*., 2018). Since then, QR has become more prominent in applied linguistics research and has attained mainstream recognition.

Meaning and Focus of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a methodological approach that seeks to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of those experiencing them. According to Merriam (2002), qualitative research focuses on meaning, understanding, and process, aiming to comprehend how individuals construct and interpret their worlds. Creswell and Poth (2016) describe qualitative research as an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem, involving emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in participants' setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. Aspers and Corte (2019) emphasize the study of meaning-making processes and participants' lived experiences within social and cultural contexts. Gay, Mills, and Aiasian (2017) highlight the significance of subjective experiences and the co-construction of knowledge, employing comprehensive narrative and visual data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest. Table 1 summarizes the meaning and focus of qualitative research as described by prominent scholars.

Source	Meaning	Focus
Merriam (2002)	Focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data. Seeks to understand meaning, process, and interpretation in real-world settings.	Emphasizes how individuals construct and interpret their realities.
Creswell & Poth (2016)	Explores meanings individuals or groups assign to social or human problems.	Uses emerging questions, naturalistic data collection, inductive analysis, and researcher interpretation.
Aspers & Corte (2019)	Studies meaning-making processes and participants' lived experiences.	Focuses on understanding human behavior within social and cultural contexts.
Gay, Mills & Aiasian (2017)	Highlights subjective experiences and co-construction of knowledge. The collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual (i.e., nonnumerical) data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest.	Investigates social interactions, participant perspectives, and researcher reflexivity.

Characteristics of Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative research is fundamentally contextual, concentrating on human beings in natural environments rather than on large populations, utilizing naturally existing data while recognizing the importance of context. It is participant-centric, emphasizing the viewpoints of participants rather than researcher-defined categories which influences data collection, analysis, and display. Furthermore, it is sensitive to the researcher which requires reflexive engagement. A comprehensive approach is crucial, guaranteeing that social phenomena are examined within their context rather than in isolation. Finally, qualitative research is inductive, promoting an interpretive and exploratory approach that retains flexibility, enabling ideas to arise organically rather than being constrained by predetermined analytical categories. Richards (2015, p. 62) outlines the key characteristics of qualitative research as follows:

Locally Situated

Qualitative researchers focus on human subjects in natural environments rather than on larger groups. This indicates that such study typically concentrates on the social realm, utilizing naturally occurring data while deliberately avoiding artificially created scenarios. In light of these considerations, it is imperative to consider contextual aspects; nevertheless, the methods of their determination and their role in future analysis will differ.

Participant-Oriented

The focus of qualitative research on human behavior inherently prioritizes participant engagement, which has both methodological and relational consequences. The researcher aims to comprehend the social world through the perspectives of participants rather than through researcher-imposed categories. Consequently, data collection must be structured to elicit these perspectives, analysis must be rooted in the data itself, and representation must endeavor to authentically convey participant voices.

Researcher-Sensitive

The reflexive interaction between the researcher and the data is crucial in qualitative research. The researcher's active involvement in data collection and representation, typically through direct interaction with participants, necessitates careful consideration of their role in the research process. This may include, for instance, an examination of field relations or a study of interactional posture in research interviews.

Holistic

The quest for a comprehensive knowledge of the social realm necessitates a holistic approach, wherein specific elements are examined within their context rather than being abstracted and analyzed in isolation.

Inductive

The holistic viewpoint entails an interpretative process that requires deep engagement with the material and is inherently exploratory, permitting flexibility as insights arise from the information. The degree to which concepts, categories, and themes are regarded as entirely emergent is contentious; however, while qualitative research (QR) does not prohibit the preliminary formulation of research questions or familiarity with a conceptual framework, it also does not permit the preordained selection of categories for analysis.

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data collection is a fundamental aspect of qualitative research, allowing researchers to capture rich, descriptive, and context-sensitive insights into social phenomena. This process involves gathering information

through various methods, including interviews, focus groups, observations, case studies, introspective methods and document analysis, each of which provides unique perspectives on participants' experiences and social realities. As part of this process,

> *you collect data to learn from the participants in the study and develop forms, called protocols, for recording data as the study proceeds. These forms pose general questions so that the participants can provide answers to the questions. Often questions on these forms will change and emerge during data collection. (Creswell, 2016, p. 17).*

The goal is to explore the complexities of human behavior, language use, and educational practices in natural settings, ensuring that the collected data reflect authentic, lived experiences. In applied linguistics and English language teaching (ELT), qualitative data collection enables researchers to examine teacher-student interactions, classroom discourse, and pedagogical decision-making through an interpretive lens. By employing open-ended, flexible data collection techniques, qualitative researchers ensure that their findings are not constrained by predefined categories but emerge organically from the participants' perspectives.

Interviews
Qualitative interviewing is a common and versatile data collection method in qualitative research. According to Dornyei (2007), qualitative interviews range along a continuum from highly structured to completely unstructured formats. Structured interviews are characterized by a fixed set of predetermined questions, asked uniformly across all participants, allowing for easier comparison. Semi-structured interviews, however, combine predefined guiding questions with flexibility, enabling researchers to probe deeper into emerging themes and allowing participants greater freedom to express their views. Unstructured interviews, conversely, adopt a conversational, open-ended approach, driven by participant responses rather than researcher-driven agendas. These are beneficial in capturing rich, detailed narratives and uncovering previously unforeseen insights into participants' perspectives and lived experiences.

Focus Group Interviews
Dornyei (2007) describes focus groups as interactive group interviews usually consisting of approximately 6-12 participants. This method facilitates spontaneous discussion, interaction, and negotiation of views among group members. The dynamic nature of focus groups generates data that reflect collective perceptions and shared cultural or social understandings. Researchers typically introduce a theme or guiding questions, allowing the conversation to flow organically while monitoring group dynamics. A key advantage is the ability of the groups to stimulate participants' ideas, memories, or insights through interaction, offering perspectives that individual interviews might not elicit. However, managing group interaction to ensure balanced participation and avoiding dominant voices is an essential skill for researchers employing this method.

Observation
Observation involves systematically watching and recording behavior, interactions, or events within their natural contexts. Dornyei (2007) categorizes observation into two main types: non-participant and participant observation. Non-participant observation allows the researcher to remain detached, recording behaviors and interactions objectively without directly influencing the events. This approach minimizes researcher interference but may limit insight into participants' internal experiences or motivations. Participant observation, in contrast, involves the researcher actively engaging in the social setting, becoming part of the community or group under investigation. Through immersion, researchers gain firsthand experience and insights into participants' interactions, behaviors, and cultures. However, participant observation demands careful reflexivity and ethical considerations, as the researcher's involvement could influence the behaviors observed.

Introspective Methods
Introspective methods, as explained by Dornyei (2007), involve participants examining and describing their inner experiences, thought processes, feelings, or reflections. Common introspective techniques include diaries, journals, think-aloud protocols, and stimulated recall procedures. Diaries and journals enable participants to regularly document experiences, perceptions, or emotional reactions over extended periods, allowing researchers access to ongoing internal processes. Think-aloud protocols require participants to verbalize thoughts and decision-making processes as they occur, providing direct insight into cognitive operations. Stimulated recall involves prompting participants to recall and discuss their mental processes during previously recorded tasks or interactions, usually aided by video or audio playback. Such methods are invaluable for understanding cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning and use, yet rely heavily on participants' ability and willingness to accurately and openly report their inner experiences.

Case Studies
Dornyei (2007) characterizes case studies as intensive, detailed examinations of single cases or limited groups within their real-life contexts. Typically, a case study employs multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, documents, and artifacts, to construct a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Case studies are especially useful in applied linguistics research for exploring complex, context-specific

phenomena such as classroom practices, learner development, or institutional processes. The depth and contextualized nature of data gathered through case studies facilitate nuanced analysis, highlighting intricacies and interactions often overlooked by broader quantitative research. Despite their depth, case studies pose challenges in generalizability, demanding clear justification for case selection and transparency in methods to enhance credibility and transferability.

Document Analysis

Document analysis involves the systematic review and interpretation of written materials to derive meanings, themes, or insights related to research questions. According to Dornyei (2007), documents relevant to applied linguistics research may include curricula, textbooks, policy papers, learner writings, teacher reflections, transcriptions of classroom interactions, and online or digital materials. Researchers analyze documents to identify recurring patterns, ideologies, underlying assumptions, or discourses embedded within texts. Document analysis is particularly valuable because it allows for unobtrusive data collection, reducing potential researcher influence or participant reactivity. It complements other qualitative techniques by providing historical or contextual background, validating findings from interviews or observations, or illuminating implicit aspects of language teaching and learning practices. Effective document analysis requires rigorous, systematic coding procedures, critical interpretation, and awareness of the broader socio-cultural context influencing text production.

Overview of Qualitative Research Designs

Researchers, students and practitioners in several disciplines, such as education, social work, anthropology, and management science, participate in qualitative research. Given this diversity, it is expected that different disciplines pose distinct questions and develop unique strategies and procedures. Qualitative research, or qualitative inquiry, is an umbrella term under which researchers have classified its numerous manifestations in diverse manners. Patton (2002) discusses sixteen "theoretical traditions," which include prominent classifications such as ethnography and grounded theory, alongside less prevalent ones like semiotics and chaos theory. Creswell and Creswell (2018) present five methodologies in qualitative research: a) narrative research, b) phenomenology, c) grounded theory, d) ethnography, and e) case study. Tesch (2013) lists forty-five approaches, classifies them into designs (e.g., case study), data analysis methods (e.g., discourse analysis), and disciplinary orientations (e.g., ethnography). Denzin and Lincoln's (2017) six QR research techniques include Case study; ethnography; grounded theory; life and narrative approaches; participatory research; f) clinical research. This summary demonstrates that no unified framework is available for categorizing the myriad options or

methodologies in qualitative research (Cresswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 49). Mirriam (2002) defines six forms of qualitative research design: a) basic qualitative research, b) phenomenology, c) grounded theory, d) ethnography, e) narrative analysis, and f) critical qualitative research. These approaches have shared traits that classify them as "qualitative," however each has a different focus that influences the design of research questions, sample selection, data collection and analysis, and presentation of results. Lew *et al*. (2018) acknowledge seven approaches to qualitative research within applied linguistics: a) case study b) ethnography c) conversation analysis d) grounded theory e) narrative inquiry f) critical discourse analysis (CDA), and g) action research.

Qualitative Data Analysis in Applied Linguistics

Dornyei (2007) provides a detailed discussion on qualitative data analysis (QDA) and its significance in applied linguistics research. He emphasizes that qualitative research is not about numerical calculations but involves a systematic process of interpreting textual or verbal data to gain deeper insights into language learning, teaching, and use. The process is iterative and subjective, requiring researchers to engage deeply with their data, refine their interpretations, and develop meaningful conclusions. Dornyei (2007) also stresses the need for systematic procedures in qualitative research to maintain credibility and ensure findings are justifiable. Dornyei (2007) presents several fundamental principles that guide qualitative data analysis in applied linguistics.

Language-Based Nature of QDA

Since qualitative research primarily deals with words rather than numbers, the analysis must focus on language in context. This means researchers analyze spoken or written discourse, examining how meaning is constructed through interaction, cultural background, and individual experiences. Unlike quantitative research, where statistical patterns dominate, qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, uncovering the complexities of communication rather than just measuring it.

Iterative Process

One of the defining features of qualitative data analysis is its cyclical nature. Unlike in quantitative research, where data are analyzed in a linear manner, qualitative researchers revisit the data multiple times. This iterative process allows for refinement of themes, reassessment of initial assumptions, and deeper engagement with the data. As new insights emerge, the researcher modifies, expands, or refines categories, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding.

Subjective Intuition in Analysis

Qualitative research embraces the subjectivity of the researcher as part of the analytical process. Since interpretation plays a central role, researchers must engage

critically and reflexively with their data. While intuition is valuable, Dornyei (2007) emphasizes that qualitative analysis should still follow a systematic and disciplined approach to minimize bias. Reflexivity, or the researcher's awareness of their own influence on the analysis, is essential for maintaining credibility.

Formalized Procedures to Ensure Rigor

To enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative findings, researchers need to apply structured and transparent procedures. These may include using coding frameworks, thematic analysis, and clear documentation of the decision-making process. Dornyei (2007) acknowledges that qualitative research allows for flexibility, but having a structured methodology ensures that findings remain reliable and reproducible by others.

Phases of the Qualitative Analytical Process

Dornyei (2007) outlines a systematic approach to qualitative data analysis, involving key stages such as transcription, coding, and interpretation. Each phase is crucial in transforming raw data into meaningful insights.

Transcription of Data

The first step in qualitative analysis is transcription-converting spoken data into written text. Since many qualitative studies rely on interviews, focus groups, or classroom observations, researchers must create accurate textual records to facilitate analysis. Transcription can be verbatim (including all speech details, pauses, and hesitations) or selective (focusing on key elements relevant to the research question). The choice of transcription method depends on the research focus and the level of detail required.

Coding the Data

Coding is an essential phase in qualitative research, allowing researchers to methodically categorize various segments of data to discern repeating patterns and themes. Dornyei (2007) outlines several types of coding: open coding, which involves breaking down the data into meaningful units and assigning descriptive labels; axial coding, which focuses on establishing relationships between different categories; and selective coding, which develops a core narrative by integrating themes into a broader conceptual framework. Through this process, researchers can effectively organize, categorize, and analyze large amounts of qualitative data, forming the foundation for meaningful interpretation.

Idea Development and Theory Generation

After coding, researchers progress beyond categorization to interpret their findings and develop theories. Dornyei (2007) highlights the significance of memos, vignettes, and data displays in this process. Memos serve as researcher notes that capture emerging ideas, interpretations, and reflections during the analysis. Vignettes provide illustrative excerpts that offer real-life examples from the data, adding depth to the interpretation. Additionally, data displays, such as matrices, concept maps, and tables, help researchers visualize connections between themes. These tools play a crucial role in refining ideas and constructing theoretical insights from qualitative data.

Grounded Theory and Its Role in Qualitative Research

Dornyei (2007) highlights grounded theory as a powerful approach to qualitative data analysis, particularly in applied linguistics research. This inductive methodology allows theories to emerge from the data rather than being imposed beforehand. Instead of testing pre-existing hypotheses, researchers systematically collect and analyze data, developing theories through constant comparison. The grounded theory process involves three key stages: open coding, where initial themes are identified; axial coding, which links these themes together; and selective coding, where a core theory is refined and finalized. By continuously revisiting the data and refining categories, researchers ensure that their findings remain closely tied to real-world observations. This approach is especially valuable in applied linguistics, where language use and interaction are context-dependent and cannot always be predetermined by theoretical frameworks.

Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS)

Dornyei (2007) acknowledges the growing role of technology in qualitative research, particularly through Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). Tools such as NVivo, ATLAS.ti, and MAXQDA assist researchers in efficiently storing, coding, retrieving, and analyzing large amounts of qualitative data. CAQDAS offers several advantages, including efficient organization of large datasets, automated coding to expedite pattern identification, visualization tools to help researchers see connections between categories, and easy retrieval of key data segments for further analysis. Although CAQDAS does not replace human interpretation, it significantly enhances the accuracy, organization, and efficiency of qualitative analysis, making it a valuable asset in applied linguistics research.

Conclusions

This study sought to investigate the function, importance, and methodological approaches of qualitative research in ELT and Applied Linguistics, highlighting its theoretical foundations and practical applications. It looked into epistemological and ontological foundations that shape qualitative inquiry, the interpretivist and constructivist perspectives that inform research design, and the methodological tools that allow researchers to investigate language learning, language use and classroom interactions in depth. The study employed a document analysis approach to synthesize insights from existing literature, identifying key themes such as the historical evolution of qualitative

research, its defining characteristics, and its methodological diversity, which encompasses case studies, ethnographic research, and narrative inquiry. The findings indicated that qualitative research is crucial for understanding the intricacies of linguistic and pedagogical phenomena, since it allows researchers to investigate language in genuine, contextually relevant settings. In contrast to quantitative research, which aims for generalizability and statistical patterns, qualitative research emphasizes meaning-making, participant perspectives, and the collaborative building of knowledge, providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics.

The findings further outlined the growing influence of qualitative research in applied linguistics, particularly in response to the increasing recognition of the social and cultural dimensions of language learning. The research emphasizes that qualitative methodologies are especially effective for examining teacher-student interactions, classroom discourse, second language acquisition processes, and language policy matters. The study revealed that the incorporation of digital technologies, such as Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), has improved the efficiency and rigor of qualitative analysis, allowing researchers to handle extensive datasets. This study enhances the current discussion on qualitative approaches in ELT, promoting their sustained application in analyzing language education via an interdisciplinary and context-aware lens.

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