

The Nuts and Bolts of Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Although qualitative research has gained more popularity than before in the field of language education, we need to continue sharing the terms relating to qualitative research and discussing the interpretations about them. In this paper, I provide a brief description of fundamental issues surrounding qualitative research by introducing germane concepts (e.g., approach, paradigm and research methods) and by explaining relevant criteria to evaluate the research (e.g., credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability). To achieve this, I use a qualitative-oriented study that I conducted (Hiratsuka, 2014) as an illustrate example. I conclude this paper with recommendations for further qualitative studies.

1. Introduction

Qualitative research has recently gained more popularity than before in the field of language education, and considerable discussion surrounding it has taken place (e.g., Sumi, 2010, 2014). To this day, however, I still encounter situations in which researchers participate in heated debate about: (a) whether or not qualitative research is adequate as a method of inquiry, (b) which research method (i.e., qualitative or quantitative) is better, and (c) how we can appropriately evaluate the outcomes deriving from qualitative research. Although the debate itself should be encouraged, we need to be equipped with shared terms and common understandings relating to qualitative research so that the debate can be more fruitful. In this paper, I deal with these issues pertinent to qualitative research and aim to offer some clarifications on them. To that end, I use, as an illustrative example, a qualitative-oriented study I conducted for my PhD study (Hiratsuka, 2014) which explored perceptions and practices of teachers and students in Japanese high schools. I begin the following sections by identifying the ‘location’ of qualitative research by elucidating such terms as *approach* and *paradigm*. I continue with a description of qualitative research and case study as well as the relationship between them. I then discuss criteria for enriching the trustworthiness of qualitative research before I conclude this paper with implications for future research.

2. Research Approach

Designing and preparing a rigorous research study and choosing a proper method of investigation in the language education field can be a difficult task. Research does not happen in a vacuum, and researchers need to carefully match the methods they employ with their research questions in order to pursue appropriate data (Mackey & Gass, 2012). To accomplish this, researchers should, first of all, select and be well aware of the *research approach* they implement in the study. Research approach is an ‘angle’ from which researchers view their study and encompasses such concepts as ‘paradigm’ (see below) and research methods. Furthermore, one of the research methods, qualitative research, includes several different types of studies such as case study, ethnography and phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). In the qualitative-oriented study that I conducted (Hiratsuka, 2014), for example, I intended to tease out the nature and attributes of individual participants’ perceptions and practices from two particular classrooms in two high schools, as opposed to gathering data that would be measured as hard scientific evidence through controlled experimentation (Dörnyei, 2007; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). I therefore chose in the study (Hiratsuka, 2014) a research approach that can be referred to as ‘a qualitative case study situated primarily within a constructivist-interpretive paradigm’. What follows is a discussion of the constructivist-interpretive paradigm, the characteristics of qualitative research, and a rationale for the use of case study.

2.1. Constructivist-Interpretive Paradigm

Throughout all stages of a research project, the research paradigm – “a basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17) – can serve as a point of direction and a landmark for researchers. Once it is made apparent, the paradigm can also serve as a signpost for readers to determine how they should interpret and make sense of the research in front of them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). It is thus of paramount value for researchers to decide the research paradigm and make it as transparent as possible (Creswell, 2007). Although each paradigm has alternative names that are used by others in this “terminologically fluid field” (Richards, 2003, p. 37), Denzin and Lincoln (2011) state that qualitative research at present generally consists of four major paradigms: (post-)positivist, constructivist-interpretive, critical (Marxist, emancipatory), and feminist-poststructural. Each paradigm hinges on three interconnected constructs: ontology, epistemology and methodology. Researchers ask questions such as: “What kind of being is the human being? What is the nature of reality?”

(ontology), “What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known? (epistemology), and “How do we know the world or gain knowledge of it?” (methodology) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 12). Influenced by the traditions in the physical and social sciences, the (post-)positivist paradigm had historically prevailed in language education, and those who work within this paradigm view the world within a realist ontology and objective epistemology. In other words, they tend to collect data through experimental and quasi-experimental methodologies. The constructivist-interpretive paradigm, on the other hand, holds: (a) a relativist ontology, i.e., proposes multiple realities, (b) a subject epistemology, i.e., provides for knower and respondent to co-construct experience, and (c) a naturalistic set of methodologies, i.e., relies on natural ways of finding and knowing. The critical paradigm looks in depth at power, race, class, and gender issues and treats the findings of research as value-determined rather than as true, or probably true. It privileges subjectivist epistemologies and applies naturalistic methodologies (usually ethnographies). It often leads to emancipatory results and implications. Lastly, researchers who advocate feminist-poststructuralism, mindful of the experiences of oppressed people, are likely to explore problems through a social lens, attempting to deconstruct a social world logic, and bring people to critique a social text’s inability to represent the world of lived experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The underlying theoretical perspective employed in the study (Hiratsuka, 2014) was the constructivist-interpretive paradigm. In the milieu of this paradigm, no reality, ontologically speaking, can be generated by itself, and all realities show different faces at different times even within the same person, phenomenon or environment. Researchers working within this paradigm have attempted to represent and explain the complex experiences of other people through the lenses of these people (Creswell, 2007; Schwandt, 1994). In terms of epistemology, constructivist-interpretive researchers believe that participants and researchers create and co-construct realities, rather than discover them. Two (or more) people are ‘actively’ involved – consciously or unconsciously – in the process of generating, interpreting and understanding data, and their interactions lead to the co-creation of collaborative experiences (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Methodologically, researchers in the constructivist-interpretive paradigm keep an eye on the complexity of views in the natural world when entering a research site. In other words, researchers are immersed in research sites interpreting and reinterpreting meanings that participants have about the world in natural settings (Creswell, 2007). Guided by the constructivist-interpretive

paradigm, during the course of the study I viewed any reality occurring around me and the participants as multi-layered and complex (e.g., I did not try to find absolute answers but attempted to constantly look for alternative interpretations for data). I also adopted a transactional epistemology and realized that my participants and I often generated co-created findings (e.g., I asked questions in interviews in relation to what my participants told me). Finally, I adopted a naturalist methodology and sought a complexity of views in the natural world, rather than in controlled environments (e.g., I included research activities in usual classes without changes of the curriculum or the class schedule). These conceptual stances in light of the constructivist-interpretive paradigm enabled me to navigate the study and aided my understanding of the experiences of the participants in a holistic, ethical and dynamic sense.

2.2. Qualitative Research

The term *qualitative research* was first used in the social sciences in the 1960s (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Since then, qualitative research and quantitative research have been compared, contrasted and juxtaposed in a number of basic and applied disciplines, including the field of language education. Generally speaking, qualitative researchers emphasize “the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10), while their quantitative counterparts stress “the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). Debates concerning which method to choose for a research project continue. However, Brown and Rodgers (2002), for example, deny a clear-cut dichotomy of these research methods and view them as a matter of degree or falling along a continuum (see also Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Along the continuum, qualitative research always means different things to different researchers at different times. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue that the field of qualitative research “crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matter” and is surrounded by a “complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions” (p. 3). As Denzin (1997) puts it: “we are in a moment of discovery and rediscovery as new ways of looking, interpreting, arguing, and writing are debated and discussed” (p. 19). It therefore comes as no surprise to know that there is no single definition available to explain the multi-dimensional nature of qualitative research.

Nonetheless, there are certain recurring characteristics of qualitative research to which researchers can refer. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) discuss the following five broad points, which I relate to my study.

- *Naturalistic: Qualitative research considers actual settings and particular contexts as the most direct and important source of data.* In my study, I spent more than four months in the research sites with the participants both inside and outside the school, thereby allowing myself to directly observe and interact with the participants (Creswell, 2009). The prolonged contact with the participants in natural settings helped me reach a “comprehensive, valid explanation of the participants’ social meanings” (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 256) and reinforce the understanding of the cultural and social standards by which the participants operated within their contexts.
- *Descriptive data: Qualitative research is mostly descriptive and the data collected take the form of words, pictures or videotapes. Qualitative researchers try to interpret and present the data with all of their richness as closely as possible to the form they collected.* My data ranged from recorded interviews to various types of texts, images and videos to capture complex details, thus achieving *thick description* (Geertz, 1973). Thick description “is an effort aimed at interpretation, at getting below the surface to that most enigmatic aspect of the human condition: the construction of meaning” (Eisner, 1998, p. 15). It enables researchers to look into “the complexities and conundrums of the immensely complicated social world” (Richards, 2003, p. 8). I described the details of the participants as well as the contexts of the research sites and presented a description of the data as fully as possible.
- *Concern with Process: Qualitative researchers are concerned with processes rather than products. Focusing on processes has been particularly beneficial in educational research in clarifying teachers’ and students’ daily activities.* I concur with this emphasis on processes. In my study, I attempted to interpret to what extent, how and why the participants came to understand their experiences, accounted for their practices, and took action in their settings in the way they did (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I offered detailed descriptions of the data collection procedures to highlight the process of the study.

- *Inductive: Analyzing qualitative data tends to be inductive rather than deductive. Qualitative researchers do not attempt to confirm (or disconfirm) hypotheses they predicted before they set out their study.* Although I had tentative research questions and goals at the initial stage, my research process was primarily inductive, interpretive and iterative. I was prepared, to a degree, to adjust the focus of the study in order for the participants and the data to direct the research. Both my positionality, vis-à-vis participants' positionalities, and our subjective interpretations of the phenomenon, which I could not foresee before collecting data, consistently influenced the data and data analysis.
- *Meaning: A qualitative approach deals with how different people make sense of their lives. It focuses on their 'meaning' or their 'perspectives' of particular phenomena. Some researchers go back to their participants with videotapes, audiotapes or drafts of research reports in order to capture the participants' meaning-making more accurately.* In relation to my study, I aimed to discover the participants' meaningful experiences as richly as possible in the specific settings of their everyday goings-on from their individual points of view (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). The focus of qualitative research in general, and mine in particular, has been "on the construction or co-construction of meaning within a particular social setting" (Davis, 1995, pp. 433-434). I therefore checked the collected data with my participants in order to understand our meaning-making experiences together.

These recurring characteristics of qualitative research have been particularly valuable for guiding several aspects of the research processes in my study.

2.3. Case Study

In spite of the fact that case study can include quantitative analyses and historical data (Merriam, 2009), it is generally presented as a particular exemplar of qualitative research. Like any qualitative study, case study means different things to different researchers and different disciplines (Simons, 2009; Stake, 2000; Swanborn, 2010).

Yin (2008) defines case study, focusing on the whole process of inquiry, as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 18). Likewise, the definition, highlighting a type of case itself, can be understood as follows: "Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to

understand its activity within important circumstances” (Stake, 1995, p. xi). Drawing upon many examples of qualitative case study research in the education field, Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) define case study as the in-depth study that attempts to reflect the perspective of the participants involved in one or more instances of a phenomenon in its real-life context. Looking at the above definitions, at least one underlying similarity is apparent. As Duff (2008) notes: “most definitions of case study highlight the ‘bounded,’ singular nature of the case, the importance of context, the availability of multiple sources of information or perspectives on observations, and the in-depth nature of analysis” (p. 22). Similarly, for Flyvbjerg (2011), the crucial elements of case study is the selection of the individual unit of study and the setting of its boundaries. Taken together, as long as a case or cases being studied can be bounded by a certain period of time and place within a certain context, the study is likely to be referred to as a case study.

Based on these ideas, my study can be understood as a multiple-case study of teachers and students in two high schools in Japan. There were three different levels of cases for teacher participants and two different levels of cases for student participants within a total involvement time of four months. The first level concerned four individual teachers and four individual students – eight different cases. The second level involved two different contexts, i.e., two public high schools (two teachers and two students from each school) – two different cases. Lastly, the third level looked at two different *types* of teachers, i.e., two local Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) and two foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) (two different cases). Gall et al. (2007) posit that case study is probably the most widely used approach in qualitative research and that it can be used to investigate a wide range of topics and phenomena. In the field of education, it has been suggested that qualitative case study is a particularly useful and appropriate strategy in the exploration of educational practices (Simons, 2009). Research specific to language education has also effectively employed case study (e.g., Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001). Since the aim of my study was to describe particular aspects of teacher and student perspectives of their practices as well as their development over time as fully and incisively as possible, case study turned out to be an appropriate method. Having described selected theoretical underpinnings implemented in my research (i.e., constructivist-interpretive paradigm, qualitative research and case study), I would now like to give consideration to various criteria for evaluating the study in the next section.

3. Criteria for Evaluating Qualitative Research

When it comes to evaluating research in social sciences, particularly in language education, there is a legitimization crisis that demands a considerable re-thinking of such terms as validity, reliability and objectivity. These terms are mainly used by traditional (post-)positivist quantitative researchers for internal and external evaluation of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The ideas of validity, reliability and objectivity cannot adequately be applied to constructivist-interpretive qualitative research such as the study I conducted. Lincoln and Guba (1985), however, argue that (post-)positivist quantitative and constructivist-interpretive qualitative criteria can, to a degree, correspond to each other as follows: credibility to internal validity (related to truth), transferability to external validity (related to applicability), dependability to reliability (related to consistency), and confirmability to objectivity (related to neutrality). The characteristics and goals of the qualitative research criteria I employed in the study along with the relevant quantitative terms are described in Table 1. I will discuss these criteria below one by one with a brief explanation as to how I achieved them in the study.

Table 1: A summary of the qualitative research criteria

Quantitative terms	Qualitative terms	Characteristics of the qualitative criteria
Internal validity	Credibility	To what extent did what I claim to have happened reflect the participants' points of view? The goal was not to seek truth in the sense of 'reality', but to be credible from the perspective of the participants.
External validity	Transferability	To what extent can what is found in my research be applied to other people or sites with modifications? The goal was not to make generalizations, but to enhance the possibility of transferring by providing rich contextual descriptions.
Reliability	Dependability	To what extent did I make clear the ever-changing processes of data collection, data analysis and theory generation? The goal was not to prove the research was completely repeatable, but to carefully describe the research processes and explain the changes that occurred during the study.
Objectivity	Confirmability	To what extent did I, as a researcher, bring my own

		<p>perspective to the discussions and results of the study based on the gathered data? The goal was not to seek complete neutrality, but to clarify how I influenced the outcome of the research.</p>
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3.1. Credibility

In the study (Hiratsuka, 2014), the first criterion, ‘credibility’, was sought through prolonged engagement and triangulation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) regard prolonged engagement as the investment of sufficient time which allows qualitative researchers to learn the ‘culture’ of a studied field. It makes the researchers become a member of the community and build relationships with their participants. Credibility can also be achieved by intimate familiarity with the setting and topic of the research (Charmaz, 2006). In this respect, I already had an advantage in conducting the study since I knew the research sites and the circumstances of the participants quite well as a native (born and grew up), a former student (of 14 years), and a former teacher (of 10 years) in the area. In addition, I spent more than four months at the research sites during the data collection period, which further increased my knowledge of the sites and developed collegial relationships with the participants. I communicated with my participants inside as well as outside the classroom through official and casual conversations a number of times (e.g., during morning meetings, lunch breaks, club activities and weekends) and in a variety of places (e.g., teachers’ rooms, hallways, gymnasiums, community centers, coffee shops and restaurants). The content of the conversations was recorded in the researcher logs whenever I could, and those data contributed to my gaining a fuller understanding of the participants’ experiences.

The use of different data sources and methods is instructive for improving the value of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is called triangulation and is defined as “the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 112). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) posit: “Triangulation is the display of multiple, refracted realities simultaneously.... Readers and audiences are ... invited to explore competing visions of the context, to become immersed in and merge with new realities to comprehend” (p. 5). I achieved triangulation in three ways. First, I accomplished source triangulation by recruiting two different pairs of team teachers from two different schools (of course, each JTE and ALT was also different from the other JTE and ALT), and many high school students from two different schools. Second, I

employed several kinds of data collection methods, some of which were individual interviews, pair discussions, focus group discussions and written stories (method triangulation). Third, the participants and I made different interpretations during the data analysis process (interpretation triangulation).

3.2. Transferability

To what extent can the findings from my study be transferred to other people and contexts? How can I increase the “usefulness” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 183) of the study? Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that the data must be rich enough, and the interpretation should be sensitive enough, to attain a high level of ‘transferability’. They state that attaining a high level of transferability allows other researchers and readers to decide whether or not the study is valuable for other occasions and situations. ‘Thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) is again useful here because it yields rich contextual and experiential information which can function as a guide for readers to assess an appropriate degree of transferability to their own contexts. Providing thick description is beneficial not only for readers but also for the researchers themselves because researchers can accommodate plausible interpretations in the later stage of the study as a result of their detailed descriptions of participants and research sites. In the study, I therefore attempted to produce thick description especially when describing the participants, geographical/socio-political contexts of the research sites, and myself as a researcher.

Duff (2008) contends that researchers can check the transferability of their study with their participants by asking how typical they think their experiences are compared to other teachers/students. I thus asked in the study how typical the participants thought their experiences were compared with other JTEs/ALTs/students in other contexts so that other teachers, students, policy makers and researchers in Japan as well as in other countries can decide to what extent my study is applicable to their teaching and learning environments.

3.3. Dependability

The level of ‘dependability’ hinges largely on how well researchers can describe and explain the research procedures and processes. To increase dependability, I documented the procedures and processes of my study as much as possible in my researcher log and drafts of the dissertation. I tried to retain all the data in easily retrievable form so that the data was

available for scrutiny should there be a request to check any part of the collection or analytical processes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). I kept the documents in my computer, an external hard drive, a USB flash-drive and folders of my email accounts for further reference. I was also open to the changes in the design and implementation of my study and committed to present the changes as they occurred and the reasons for them. Researcher logs were kept constantly – everyday during the period of data collection and at least once a month at other times in the process of writing the dissertation. The entire log enabled me to gather my thoughts in a systematic way and pace the progress of the study. As a result, the log and the draft of the dissertation made it possible for me to trace the research process and explicate each decision that my participants and I made.

3.4. Confirmability

In the study, I used a tape-recorder and video camera to collect most data, which increased the accuracy of data (i.e., the level of ‘confirmability’). Moreover, when I transcribed and translated the interview and discussion data, I made every effort to keep the transcriptions and translations as close to the original recordings as possible so that readers of the dissertation can readily grasp the participants’ experiences through the evidence I presented. I also provided numerous examples of the actual data (e.g., transcripts and field notes – some of them as appendices) in the hope that the participants and future readers can more easily understand and evaluate the results of my study. Lastly, I decided to employ a member checking strategy in order to gain higher confirmability. Member checking, as the words indicate, means that research participants, not researchers, check generated data and the results of data analysis based on their experiences and, if necessary, make suggestions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). This process was conducted in my study with all the teacher and focal student participants. The aim of applying member checking was not only for the participants to have the opportunity to make sense of their experiences, the data and the results of the study in order to increase “resonance” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 182), but also for me to understand to what extent I, as a researcher, included my own perspectives and interpretations in the study. The results of member checking were suggestions or comments mostly about either spelling or word order in the transcriptions and rarely about content or interpretation. Of particular significance here, though, is that I did not treat the suggestions and comments made by the participants as absolute truth or something I had to precisely follow. The reasons for that were: (a) it was possible that the participants did not accurately remember or reflect on what had happened; and (b) it was likely that the participants had their

own expectations, ideals and pre-conceptions as to what and why they said and did. Nonetheless, I considered all the suggestions and comments together with my participants in order to make the data and interpretations trustworthy.

4. Concluding Remarks

With the aim to provide a brief description of the nuts and bolts of qualitative research, in this paper I first elucidated relevant concepts (e.g., research approach, paradigm and research methods) and showed interrelationships amongst these. This was followed by an explanation about the criteria used to evaluate qualitative research (juxtaposed with those used in quantitative research). The criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. I used a qualitative-oriented study that I completed in a doctoral program (Hiratsuka, 2014) as an illustrative example so as to put all in perspective the abstract terms and concepts surrounding qualitative research. I cannot emphasize enough here that each term and concept appeared in this paper can be understood and used in a variety of ways by other individuals at any given time. My attempt in this paper has been to put forth my humble understanding and interpretation, as a qualitative researcher, about the essence of carrying out one type of qualitative study in the field of language education (in this case, using an example that inquired into the perspectives and experiences of language teachers and students in Japanese high schools). I hope that this paper will stimulate more lively conversations, rather than stifling them, about qualitative, quantitative and mixed (integrated) research methods in the future. In order to enhance the quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research, as Sumi (2014) argues, future qualitative researchers should *not* yield armchair theories or impractical propositions; *rather*, they should always understand the situations in which their participants live from the participants' points of view, cultivate keen awareness of issues in question, and unpack the phenomena through iterative processes of rigorous literature review and data analyses.

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