RESEARCH PAPER

A Conceptual Review of Qualitative Research Inquiry in Applied Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual review explores the concept of qualitative research paradigm from a variety of angles in order to explain its defining qualities, philosophical underpinnings, scope, characteristics, and designs widely used in applied linguistics research. To highlight the value of qualitative methodology for researchers attempting to bring out various facets of truth pertaining to language learning, human behaviors, experiences, and actions, the study considers journal articles, book chapters and books published between 2007-2023 on digital databases and examines the defining characteristics of qualitative research and how qualitative research methods are conceptualized and manifested in applied linguistics research. The study helps new researchers who are attempting to learn concepts linked to qualitative research and their demonstration in actual research process to have a stronger comprehension of the qualitative research paradigm.

| **KEYWORDS** | Applied Linguistics, Qualitative Research Paradigm, Philosophical Underpinnings, Qualitative Research Methods |

Introduction

Finding an unambiguous definition of qualitative research is a complex undertaking as it is often described as the opposite of quantitative research (Klenke, 2017; Lazaraton, 2003). The intersectional nature of the qualitative paradigm allows coverage of a wide array of approaches and methods (Boog, 2005; Klenke, 2017; Yin, 2011). According to Aspers & Corte (2021), qualitative research enables researchers to observe and comprehend a phenomenon in a variety of ways while advancing knowledge through an iterative process that involves switching between theory and evidence. Qualitative research is defined by Fossey et al. (2002) as being concerned with the investigation and comprehension of human experiences and the social environment in which they occur. For Busetto et al. (2020), qualitative research focuses on the use of language to represent quality, manifestations, perspectives, and the context in which a phenomenon appears, unlike quantitative research which relies on numerical data such as test scores, Likert-scale questionnaire responses and grade scores (Paltridge, B., & Phakiti, 2015). Investigating the meanings of people's lives in the context of real-world situations, addressing the contextual circumstances in people's lives, offering fresh or illuminating perspectives on theories that explain human social behaviors, and using multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source are the five key characteristics of qualitative research (Yin, 2011) that can also be characterized as a naturalistic, interpretive strategy aiming to

comprehend the significance people give to social situations (Boog, 2005; Klenke, 2017; Lazaraton, 2003).

Literature Review

According to (Creswell, 2002), qualitative inquiry is best suited for research situations when factors are unknown and need to be explored from the perspectives of study participants. The purpose of qualitative research is to investigate and highlight the subjectivities that underlie actual phenomena as well as new, varied viewpoints that serve as representatives of individuals' diverse realities (Klenke, 2017). Understanding the philosophical tenets that guide the qualitative research paradigm is essential to comprehending the goal in its entirety.

Qualitative Research Paradigm and Philosophical Underpinnings

Paradigm refers to the way a researcher perceives and functions in the world (Kamal, 2019) which influences his actions and decisions during the research process (Fossey et al., 2002). According to Assalahi (2015), the three key components of a paradigm, also known as a philosophical viewpoint, are ontology, epistemology, and methodology. However, the meaning of these components varies depending on the theoretical framework, which is based on three primary research theories: positivist, interpretive, and critical paradigms (Assalahi, 2015). For Bleiker et al. (2019) and Oppong (2014), ontology serves as the starting point for inquiry where the researcher's overall approach to the question of what is true about the topic they are investigating determines the entire course of the research project from conception to conclusion. There are two ontological positions based on two different views of reality; objectivism and constructivism wherein objectivism aligns with the ontological stance of positivism (Assalahi, 2015), and takes reality as fixed, measurable, and independent of the individual viewing it, for constructivists, also known as interpretivists, reality is always evolving and can be constructed in multiple ways based on human subjectivity, opinions, and through interactions (Kamal, 2019; Chowdhury, 2019).

Epistemology, on the other hand, is about how we can get access to reality (Chowdhury, 2019). Al-Ababneh (2020) defines epistemology as the researcher's way of looking at the world in relation to the researched and making sense of it in order to construct valid knowledge (Klenke, 2017). Based on the two ontological positions explained above, there are two epistemological stances (Chowdhury, 2019); positivism and interpretivism. Assalahi (2015) asserts that positivism advocates unicentric nature of reality which is observable, verifiable, and independent of subjectivities and abstractions (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Positivists, according to Cohen et al. (2017), argue that social scientists should regard concepts as objective and real in order for them to be verifiable. In contrast to objective and statistical approaches required for quantitative research, the interpretive approach promotes the pluricentric aspect of reality derived through subjective and descriptive means (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Cooper & White, 2012).

Scope of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research lies at the heart of social sciences disciplines with its renaissance observed in the 1960s in the United States (Flick, 2002; MOHAJAN, 2018). According to Boog (2005), the aim of qualitative inquiry is to provide an in-depth understanding of the social world by learning about people's experiences and the meanings they attach to them. Owing to its emphasis on the social world and people's experiences, behaviors, and actions (MOHAJAN, 2018; Yin, 2011), the qualitative

paradigm is deemed more suitable for social sciences disciplines. Whereas, an increasing number of publications on qualitative research as well as conference programs pertaining to the validity of qualitative research indicate the popularity of qualitative inquiry especially in sociology and education (Flick, 2002). According to Neuman (2014), qualitative research for social scientists differs from quantitative inquiry due to underlying fluidity reflected in research methods and a less linear approach as compared to quantitative methods. For instance, qualitative research in social sciences relies more on personal beliefs, biography, or current issues to identify a topic of interest or importance, unlike quantitative analysis which begins with self-assessment and situating a topic in a socio-historical context followed by narrowing down the problem. Similarly, for qualitative researchers placing their inquiry within a specific theoretical-philosophical paradigm is important to adopt a perspective that determines the direction, and method for their inquiry followed by an iterative process involving moving back and forth between data collection, analysis, and interpretation happening simultaneously unlike quantitative inquiry (Busetto et al., 2020). According to Lazaraton (2003), qualitative research in applied linguistics remains popular. Paltridge, B., and Phakiti (2015) find qualitative applied linguistics research more concerned with language learning and language use in natural contexts, guided by the notion that human behaviors and language use are context-dependent.

Materials and Method

In order to examine the characteristics of the qualitative research paradigm and the qualitative research designs, the study takes into consideration empirical studies utilizing qualitative techniques in applied linguistics research. The search was conducted using the keywords "research methods," "qualitative research," "qualitative research philosophy," "scope of qualitative research," and "characteristics and designs" in digital databases such as Google Scholar, ProQuest, Sage, and Taylor & Francis. Different standards were established for the qualitative research characteristics and qualitative research designs' sections; the former took into account studies that included books, book chapters, and journal articles published between 2007 and 2023, while the latter only considered studies that were published between 2018 and 2023. It was ensured that the shortlisted studies related to applied linguistics, second language education, teaching & learning of languages, and contributed to an improved understanding of qualitative research paradigm and associated concepts. The analysis of the reviewed literature is given in the subsequent sections.

Characteristics of Qualitative Research Design

Researchers like Creswell and Poth (2016), Merriam (2009), and Aspers and Corte (2019) have outlined various concepts that have been found in qualitative research designs. The parameters shared by these authors seem to be coinciding at the periphery, yet their approach to these parameters holds fine differences. These differences are presented in the table provided below:

Table 1
Concepts related to the Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Merriam (2009)	Creswell and Poth (2016)	Aspers and Corte (2019)
P1: Exhaustive Explorations		
Focus on Meaning & Understanding / An inductive process	*Complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic/ Holistic Account*	*Distinction/ Process*
Qualitative research relies heavily on the *Emic view*	The qualitative process involves *reporting manifold*	The qualitative process is seen as a *significant*

(participant's point of view), rather than on *Etic View* (Distant view- Researcher view). Hence, the focus of qualitative research is on understanding ways that people use meaning-making in different situations. Researchers collect data from people to form theories and themes that could be later *tested through quantitative* research.	*perceptions* and *penciling in a larger perspective/theme* that emerges from the data to develop a *comprehensive set* of themes that would contribute to the research community. Hence, there is an interplay between inductive-deductive logic. Themes emerge, are explored further, and re-examined, more themes emerged until a comprehensive account is not established.	*contribution* to the community. This significance can be achieved through an in-depth examination of cases in society. The coding or theorizing in qualitative inquiries should open avenues for discussions and judgments that are based on logic and rationale (Goodwin & Horrowitz, 2002). These discussions and judgments lead to a re-evaluation of themes, and the process continues until a coherent whole of themes is achieved (Becker, 1998).
P2: Researchers' Proximity		
Researcher as Primary Instrument	*Researcher as key instrument*	*Closeness*
Understanding, being the target of the qualitative process renders the researcher as a *human instrument* to be responsive and adaptive in the research process. The human instrument could be best in the collection and analysis of data.	Qualitative *researchers engross themselves in research* by analyzing documents, people and their behavior, and the context/ situation of research. Qualitative researchers believe in developing their instruments for data collection.	Qualitative researchers tend to *get closer* to the phenomena/ people they are studying. The nature of qualitative research demands the researcher to get *closer to the subject of study*, i.e., be it human beings, texts, books, context, and situation (Goffman, 1989; Silverman, 2009).
P3. Subjectivity		
Subjectivities are Virtuous	*Reflexivity*	*Improved Understanding*
Peshkin (1988, p. 18) goes so far as to make the case that one's subjectivities "can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers making *a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration* of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected."	Researchers "position themselves" in the study (p. 97). The persona of the researcher is easily *uncovered by the reader* through the logical discussion of the study along with the insights and gains from the study, provided by the researcher (Wolcott, 2009)	To be qualified as "Scientific," the research needs to be "objective" and "reflexive" in nature. However, by virtue of its definition, scientific knowledge implies *understanding that is general and useful to many* (p. 154). Hence, qualitative and quantitative researches are subjective as the researcher conjectures an understanding of "raw data" based on his prior knowledge, theory, and life experiences (Heidegger, 2001).

Qualitative Research Designs

The general characteristics of qualitative research have given rise to specific qualitative designs in research. Researchers have contended that research designs in qualitative research are guided by the research questions being raised in the study (Agee, 2009; Austin & Sutton, 2014; Aspers & Corte, 2019; Creswell, 2018). Hence, qualitative

research questions are central to determining the focus of the study in terms of theoretical and methodological aspects. Creswell (2007) has identified ten approaches for data collection being used in social sciences research from the works of Wolcott's tree diagram for data collection (1992), Strauss and Corbin (1990), and Denzin and Lincoln (2005) for ethnography, and interpretive studies, Stake (1995) for the case study, and Moustakas (1994) for Phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). However, Creswell has narrowed down these designs into five main types; Narrative Research, Case Study, Ethnography, Grounded Theory, Phenomenology, and participatory action research as core designs customarily used in the fields of social sciences and humanities.

Case Study: originated from anthropology, "a case study can be defined as an intensive study about a person, a group of people or a unit, which is aimed to generalize over several units" (P 7). A researcher can also study multiple cases against an event or phenomenon for depth and brevity of the research (Takahashi & Araujo, 2020; Sy Diop & Liu 2020). The data collected from research participants is open to negotiation, revisions, and alterations. Since qualitative research uncovers a complex contextual problem, the data collection is carried out through multiple means, such as; interviews, field notes, observations, reflective journals, and narratives of the respondents (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Examples of case study research in applied linguistics are given in Table 1.

Table 1
Case study research in AL

Year	Title of Study & Authors	Purpose of Research	Data Collection	Quality Criteria
2022	A case study on the impacts of social contexts on a Chinese English as a foreign language learner's L1 and L2 identities development Xiao & Zhao	To study the impact of sociocultural context on the (L1 and L2) linguistic identity of a "Chinese" English Professor at a University in Chine	The data was collected through the narrative autobiography of the professor, followed by a semi-structured interview with the professor	Transferability
2022	Challenging dominant language ideology in the adult ESL classroom: A case study Constantin-Dureci	To investigate the manifestation of dominant language ideology in adult ESL Classroom by an ESL teacher in the US	The use of multiple sources and modes of data collection, including questionnaires, in-person observations, a semi-structured interview, and teaching artifacts, collected over multiple lessons, is a strength of this study.	Credibility
2022	Language Ideologies and second language acquisition: the case of French long-term residents in Sweden Lundell, Arvidsson, &Bouchard	explored the effect of language ideology on second language acquisition of French long-term residents in Sweden.	A group of ten participants were selected from a pool of 64 individuals. These participants were subsequently contacted and personally invited by the author to participate in a semi-structured interview.	Credibility
2021	The struggling English language learners: Case studies of English	Conducted a multi-case study focusing on the learning	Data collection was carried out through classroom	Transferability

	language learning difficulties in EFL context. Alharbi	difficulties of struggling English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at a university in Saudi Arabia.	observations, semi-structured interviews, and keeping a record of students' scores in EFL courses.	
2020	Learner Training in MALL: A Pakistani case study Rashid, Howard, Cunningham, & Watson	To enhance students' proficiency and self-assurance in using smartphones to create blog posts, to provide them with more opportunities to independently practice writing in English and extend their skills beyond the classroom setting.	The study utilized multiple sources of data, including pre- and post-program surveys, interviews, written feedback, and blogpost output	Credibility

Narrative research: originated from diverse fields of social sciences and humanities, the options for data analysis in this approach are manifold (Clandinin, Caine & Lessard, 2018). "The procedures for implementing this research consist of studying one or two individuals, gathering data through collecting their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences" (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p 240). Applied linguists can use narrative inquiry to understand how language and identity are intertwined and how individuals construct their identity through language use. Table 2. provides a sample of research carried out using narrative inquiries to understand linguistic phenomena.

Table 2
Narrative Research in AL

Year	Title of Study & Authors	Purpose of Research	Data Collection	Quality Criteria
2023	A narrative inquiry into the emotional effects of English medium instruction, language learning, and career opportunities Şahan & Sahan	To examine the emotional effects of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) on graduates who have completed engineering programs in Turkey under linguistic entrepreneurship.	stories from four EMI graduates about their experiences regarding their academic studies and professional careers during and after EMI study.	Credibility
2023	A narrative inquiry of translators' identities: A study of meaning-making in narrating knowledge Geng	a human-centered approach to the translator's knowledge	5 narratives of senior Chinese translators were analyzed for micro and macro themes	Reliability
2022	Lived Narratives: Female investment and identity negotiation in Learning English in Rural Pakistan	Understand the experiences of female English language learners	Interviews were conducted with female participants and narratives were generated	Confirmability

Year				
	Sharif & Channa			
2022	Unpacking the complexities of teacher identity: Narratives of two Chinese teachers of English in China Li	Shows the relationship between teachers' belief, identity, and emotion and their interplay in the language classroom	Interviews and teaching observation of two private English teachers	Reflexivity
2021	Recurrent restorying through language teacher narrative inquiry Golombek & Johnson	To present the theory of recurrent restorying as a tool-and-result methodology	Teachers analyzed their previous storied experiences of learning and compared past learning experiences with current teaching experiences to trace their development in themselves.	Reflexivity

Grounded Theory: originated by the sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theorists hold the belief "theories should be grounded in data from the field, especially in the actions, interactions, and social processes of people" (Creswell, Hansen & Clark, 2007, p 249). In Applied Linguistics, grounded theory research can be particularly important because it allows researchers to develop and refine theories that are based on actual language use and language learning experiences. Table 3 provided below presents the highlights of AL research carried out with grounded theory:

Table 3
Grounded Theory Research in AL

Year	Title of Study & Authors	Purpose of Research	Data Collection	Quality Criteria
2023	Towards a richer understanding of language and identity in the MNC: Constructing cosmopolitan identities through "English" Karhunen, Kankaanranta & Räisänan	Theorizing language and identity in relation to the socially constructed cosmopolitan identities of individuals working in MNC through the use of English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF).	Proposed three propositions from data of individuals interacting in BELF (their linguistic resources, national origins, and professions, & previous experiences). Along with the study of MNC context propagating interaction in BELF	Transferability
2021	Researching linguistic transitions of newly-arrived students in Germany:	To make a theoretical and methodical case for combining Institutional	Official policy documents of the school about newly arrived students.	Credibility

Year				
	Insights from Institutional Ethnography and Reflexive Grounded Theory Plöger & Barakos	Ethnography and Reflexive Grounded Theory to investigate the linguistic transition processes of newly arrived students in the German school system.	Documents carrying information about schools. Written products of students' work. Observations for 1 year. Interviews and informal conversations.	
2021	A qualitative inquiry of professionals' perceptions of bilingualism for children with language delay Hay, Tsourtos, & Bickford	To explore the views of early childhood health and education professionals regarding bilingualism and heritage language maintenance for children with language delay.	In-depth interviews with health professionals having experience in dealing with bilingual families. Used grounded theory approach for analysis.	Credibility
2020	Combining Case Study Design and Constructivist Grounded Theory to Theorize Language Teacher Cognition Alzaanin	To enable L2 teacher cognition researchers design qualitative multiple case study research and use constructivist grounded theory to data analysis to build theoretical models.	Teacher interviews, non-participant observation of classes, stimulated recall interview, document analysis	Transferability

Phenomenology: Edmund Husserl- a philosopher laid the foundation for descriptive phenomenology that caters to the experiences and perceptions of research respondents, restricting the immersion of the researcher's presuppositions towards the information shared by the respondent. "A variety of methods can be used in phenomenologically-based research, including interviews, conversations, participant observation, action research, focus meetings and analysis of personal texts" (Lester, 1999, p 2). Phenomenological research in applied linguistics can provide insights into how individuals perceive and experience language learning and use, and how language shapes their identity and worldview. It can also help researchers understand the cultural and social factors that influence language learning and use. Table 4 provides a few examples of phenomenological research carried out in applied linguistics from 2020-2023:

Table 4
Phenomenological Research in AL

Year	Title of Study & Authors	Purpose of Research	Data Collection	Quality Criteria
2023	The Linguistic Linkage Compulsion: A Phenomenological Account Ruthrof, H.	To explore the semantic compulsion exerted by language on its speaker.	Analyzed languages for compulsion in Coercion, Stufenbau in the meaning chain, meaning intention, verbal displacement, expressions, Bedeutung to sinn	Transferability

Year	Title of Study & Authors	Purpose of Research	Data Collection	Quality Criteria
2022	A Phenomenological Study of Educators' Experience After a Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic Annamalai, Rashid, Saeed, Smadi, & Yassin	Investigated educators' lived experiences of teaching online in higher institutions in Malaysia.	Semi-structured interviews with 20 lecturers from three universities in the country	Confirmability
2021	Peaks and Valleys: The Lived Experiences of International Students Within an English Immersion Program Using the Integrated Skills Approach Stegall	Examined the effectiveness of the English holistic approach used in English immersion programs for developing English language skills	Classroom observation and in-depth interviews with 11 participants	Credibility
2020	Managing Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback: Perspectives of Experienced Teachers Messenger, Evans, & Hartshorn	Studied the manageability of the innovative dynamic written corrective feedback (DWCF) strategy, which has a more comprehensive approach to error feedback,	In-depth interviews with 5 participants, observations and field notes, researchers' reflection	Reflexivity

Ethnography: Ethnography is a longitudinal research study that requires extended observations of culture-sharing groups. Therefore, the researcher needs to immerse in the culture himself for better understanding, first-hand observation of behaviors, and for interviewing the culture-sharing members (Whitehead, 2005; Sangasubana, 2011). Ethnography is an important research method in applied linguistics because it allows researchers to gain a deep understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which language is used. Through ethnographic research, linguists can gain insights into how language is used in real-world situations and how it shapes and is shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which it is used. A few examples of ethnographic research in applied linguistics are provided in Table 5 below:

Table 5
Ethnographic research in AL

Year	Title of Study & Authors	Purpose of Research	Data Collection	Quality Criteria
2023	Religious Identity Construction in Transnational Family Talks: An Autoethnographic Study	To showcase the impact of family experiences on individual family members' perception of social relations and structures and how they shape and present their identities.	The researcher/father studied his own family in this longitudinal study. The focus was on using referring expressions to talk about religious places related to two	Transferability

	Alasmari		different contexts, and frequently using religious phrases in different settings, affecting the parental language ideology, language planning, and identity construction in the FLP.	
2022	The role of multilingualism in the construction of social identity in a high social class family: A sociolinguistic ethnographic study Mansfield	To explore the language ideologies and language practices of a multilingual, high socioeconomic-status family, resident in the United Kingdom, from a critical sociolinguistic perspective	The study concentrated on the observation of the daily rituals and behaviors of the participating families.	Reflexivity
2022	Interpretive Frameworks for narrative inquiry studies of English language teaching in Asia: Displacing the research context? Loo & Sairattanain	To present a case that Interpretive frameworks may be helpful to understand narratives, yet they also risk displacing unique information of the research context.	Metaethnography was used as a research method. Using purposive sampling the research papers were selected. The sample included studies from 2019 to 2020 set in Asia that use narrative inquiry as the primary research method.	Reflexivity
2021	Multilingual Language Practices in Education in Pakistan: The Conflict Between Policy and Practice Ashraf, Turner, & Laar	This study examined the language practices in educational settings in Pakistan, taking the multilingual groupings in society into account.	Discourse ethnography method. In-depth interviews, document analysis, and unstructured observations.	Dependability

Conclusion

The paper synthesizes the key concepts related to the qualitative research paradigm along with several frequently cited definitions of qualitative research, its underlying philosophy, and its application to applied linguistics research. Furthermore, several qualitative methods used in applied linguistics have also been outlined with examples from actual investigations. Qualitative research approaches enable applied linguists to explore a problem in many ways in order to gain a variety of realities related to language acquisition and teaching or challenges emerging out of language use in specified social contexts.

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