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## Qualitative Research : What Is It and How Can It Be Used in TESOL in Thailand?

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Because qualitative research is not very well known in TESOL circles in Thailand and because there is much potential for using it here, it seems worthwhile to describe what it is and to mention a few areas it could be used to explore. In this paper, the authors briefly describe its basic characteristics, give examples of its methodology, cite differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches, mention established uses and possibilities for use in Thailand, and finally note a couple of cautions to overeager readers.

The key characteristics of qualitative research revolve around a natural setting, the researcher as main instrument, the descriptive quality of the data, concern for process over product, the use of inductive analysis, and the paramount importance of meaning. Types of methodology include participant observation, in-depth interviewing, document analysis, diary study, and so on. The differences between qualitative and quantitative research are many, including the key concepts, the goals, the approaches to design, types of data collected, samples used, instruments used, ways of analyzing the data, and the types of problems that researchers have.

### **Introduction**

Qualitative research does not seem to be very well known in Thailand. That is most unfortunate because there is much work that needs to be done and can be done that does not fit into the more familiar quantitative framework. So what is qualitative research? Briefly, it is the type of research that is concerned with what goes on in natural settings with the data being obtained by observation, in-depth interviewing, and other techniques that deal more with meaning than with measurement.

Qualitative research is usually associated with the fields of anthropology and sociology, where researchers have often used themselves as the research instruments to study various social and cultural patterns. In education, where numbers sometimes seem all-important, qualitative research has been slow in being accepted. However, the times are changing. In recent years, some researchers have been rethinking their previous views on research (Miles and Huberman, 1984). In addition, skepticism has increased among some clients of educational research about using approaches that are too narrow. In the U.S., for example, more and more research and evaluation in education that is sponsored by the U.S. government is either qualitative or a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The reason for this is the realization that quantitative research, as good as it sometimes is, cannot be expected to provide all the insights necessary in implementing and evaluating education. Both types of research are needed.

## Characteristics of Qualitative Research

The characteristics below are taken from Bogdan and Biklen (1982), an excellent source book for anyone interested in finding out more about the approach.

1. **The natural setting is used for getting the data.** Much time is spent in the setting and with the people in it. The context of the data is very important; data without the context often loses much of its value.

2. **The researcher is the key instrument.** There are no preprogrammed questionnaires to hand out or experiments to run. Rather, the researcher's ability to observe carefully, to elicit meaningful responses from the target group, and to gain insights into what actually goes on in the setting are the keys. It can be said of any study that the research is only as good as the researcher; this is especially true in qualitative research. It takes time and effort to get beyond personal biases to focus on what is going on rather than what we expect or desire to be going on. There are many techniques of observing and interviewing and so on. People who try to do the research without learning the techniques usually end up with sloppy research.

3. **The research is descriptive.** Words, not numbers, are at the center of qualitative research. Data comes from documents, photographs, field notes, interview transcripts, etc. As such, the data can be used to draw vibrant pictures of what actually goes on; statements of statistical significance are not given. Because the focus is descriptive, it "demands that the world be approached with the assumption that nothing is trivial, that everything has the potential of being a clue which might unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what is being studied" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982 : 28).

4. **The concern is with process, not merely product.** We can count products, if they can be measured by numbers, but we often cannot figure out exactly what causes different products to be attained. Qualitative research seeks to find out *how* things happen so that we can better interpret *what* actually happens. For example, in the U.S., the education of ghetto children is a continuing problem. It is easy to document through numbers that the students do not achieve at levels comparable to the vast majority of children in the U.S. But analysis of the test scores only tell us that there are differences, but not what cause the differences. Since one of the key concerns of educators, like evaluators, is "not to prove, but to improve" (Stufflebeam, 1971), getting at the causes is crucial in order to improve the quality of education.

5. **Data tends to be analyzed inductively.** Testing hypotheses is NOT part of the qualitative tradition. Rather, "theory developed this way emerges from the bottom up... You are not putting together a puzzle, whose picture you already know. You are constructing a picture which takes shape as you collect and examine the parts" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982 : 29).

6. **Meaning is a must.** The various participants in any study invariably have different perspectives on the matters involved. These multiple perspectives have meaning to the researcher. "By learning the perspectives of the participants, qualitative research illuminates the inner dynamics of situations -- dynamics that are often invisible to the outsider" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982 : 30).

## Qualitative Methodology

The most widely known of qualitative strategies seem to be participant observation and in-depth, or open-ended, interviewing. Also included under the qualitative umbrella are non-participant observation, document analysis, diary study and other lesser known techniques. Questionnaires, sometimes thought of as qualitative, are generally NOT qualitative, and as part of the survey research tradition, fit in better with the quantitative approach, or at least in the middle of the spectrum between the two approaches.

Participant observation involves the researcher in two roles: participant and observer. The actual level of participation varies a lot, depending on the conditions and aims of each particular study, but the observer must 1) know its dual purposes, 2) be aware of as much as possible that is usually ignored in day-to-day interaction, 3) be able to use oneself as the research instrument, and 4) "keep a detailed record of both objective observations and subjective feelings" (Spradley, 1980: 58). Non-participant observation involves systematic observation but without actually participating in the activity being observed. Zamel (1983) used this in her study of the writing process of advanced ESL students.

Interviews are of at least four different types: 1) informal conversational, 2) interview guide, 3) standardized open-ended, and 4) closed quantitative. The first three all fit under the rubric of qualitative research, though each one is more structured than the one preceding (Patton, 1980). "The common characteristic of all three qualitative approaches to interviewing is that the persons being interviewed respond in their own words to express their own personal perspectives" (Patton, 1980: 205).

Document analysis is self-explanatory, i.e., it entails the analyzing of documents for relevant insights. It has often been overlooked in some research circles, but can sometimes be very important as part of a broader research project (see Guba and Lincoln, 1981 for a thorough discussion).

Diary study remains an approach full of potential, but rarely used, especially in TESOL. It can mean the study of other people's diaries or, as Bailey (1980) and Schumann (1980) have done, the study of oneself as one experiences something over a period of time. Both Bailey and Schumann kept diaries as they learned a foreign language and then later studied their own diaries for insights into the process of learning. As with much qualitative research, the idea here is NOT to test hypotheses but rather to generate them. Insight is the key, not control. Brown (1985) compares the use of diary studies with participant observation in TESOL for those interested in specific applications for our field.

There are other methods that fit into the qualitative approach to research and much more to say about those already listed. Readers interested in looking at the broad picture or in diving deeper into the field should consult the references.

### **Differences Between Qualitative and Quantitative Research**

There is NO one best method for research. Each type has its proper place in the big world of trying to learn more about language, learning, teaching, testing, and everything else that language teachers are concerned about. What follows here, then, is a general description of the differences of the two types of research, adapted from Bogdan and Biklen, 1981: 435-48. The aim is to clarify what each is and isn't by showing their differences.

	<b>Qualitative</b>	<b>Quantitative</b>
<b>1. Key concepts</b>	meaning, everyday life understanding, process common-sense	variable, hypothesis, reliability, validity, statistical significance
<b>2. Goals</b>	grounded theory, describe multiple realities	theory testing, describe statistically, prediction
<b>3. Design</b>	evolving, flexible	structured, formal
<b>4. Data</b>	descriptive, people's own words	operationalized variables, statistical
<b>5. Sample</b>	small, nonrepresentative theoretical sampling	large, random selection, control groups

6. Instruments	researcher is often the only instrument, tape recorder, etc.	inventories, test scores, questionnaires, scales, etc.
7. Data Analysis	inductive, models, themes concepts, ongoing	deductive, statistical, occurs at the end of data collection
8. Problems	time-consuming, data reduction difficult, nonstandard procedures, reliability	controlling other variables, obtrusive nature of research, validity.

As can readily be seen by the points above, reports of the two types of research tend to be quite different. What is important for any researcher to keep in mind, however, is to tie the methodology to be used to the overall aims of the research.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Because the methodology is geared toward meaning, not measurement, the analysis of the data and the drawing of conclusions becomes an intensive process. It is intrinsically messy. As Miles and Huberman (1984 : 16) note, "we have few agreed upon canons for qualitative data analysis, in the sense of common ground rules for drawing conclusions and verifying their sturdiness". At the same time, it is obviously essential. And despite the difficulties, there ARE many ways of getting at the meaning of the data. This one aspect of the approach is much too complex to go into here, but Miles and Huberman's (1984) sourcebook is extremely helpful for anyone doing this kind of work. Detailed study of the ways of analyzing the data is critical.

### **Established Uses of Qualitative Research in TESOL**

Three areas in language teaching that have seen the use of qualitative studies are classroom-centered research, needs identification or analysis, and program evaluation. Qualitative classroom-centered research has included language learner diary studies, e.g. Schumann and Schumann (1977), Schumann (1980), and Bailey (1980), language teacher diary study, e.g. Telatnik (1978), and non-participant observation, e.g. Zamel (1983). Examples of needs identification include Jupp and Hodlin (1975), Munby (1978), and Rajatanavin (1987). Qualitative program evaluation has been done by Castillo (1986), and Swan (1986). Obviously, the field has not rushed to the doorsteps of the qualitative approach. However, some language researchers are calling for the same kind of methodological combinations that are gaining momentum in other areas of education. Long (1983 : 27), for example, has called for a combined approach using interaction analysis and observation which would avoid "some of the weaknesses of each, and taking advantage of the strengths of both. It will be argued that a combination of methods plus some modifications in commonly used research designs is necessary if the field is to achieve its ultimate goal of testing a theory of second language acquisition with the aid of formal instruction".

### **Possibilities for Qualitative Research in TESOL in Thailand**

Stating possibilities for others can sometimes be counter-productive, especially when the others take the general ideas but then forget all the important specific concerns and neglect to be careful in their studies. However, we hope that by listing a few possibilities, some readers interested in doing research may consider doing that research from a different, but no less important angle than has been traditionally followed.

**Needs identification/analysis.** Despite the common pattern of studying needs through quasi-quantitative survey research, e.g. by sending out questionnaires and tallying the results, it is possible to study needs by observing language use and/or learning situations and also by interviewing key people involved. Though it is time-consuming and may require much discipline and persistence by the researcher, this approach can sometimes lead to insights not easily attained by conventional survey methods. In a study just completed at Mahidol, questionnaires were sent to every faculty member in the university to see what English they actually required of their students, but only 17% completed the forms and returned them, leaving the researchers with a general knowledge of trends but with gaping holes in the data. In the second phase of the same study, interviews were conducted with most of the content-area teachers in one particular track. What has happened is that the ratio of respondents became much higher, the general trends have been confirmed in one track, the amount of specific data received has increased a great deal, and the ESP teachers involved have met and gotten to know the content area teachers--a development that can perhaps aid in further professional cooperation at some later point.

**Classroom observation.** Studying the process of Thai students reading, writing, studying, etc. can lead to insights into the teaching/learning process. In some cases, teaching might be adapted to better fit student characteristics. In others, when problematic student patterns can be identified, more work can be focused on getting them to change those particular patterns.

**Program Evaluation.** In evaluating a program, whether it be a language teaching program or a graduate program for teacher training, qualitative methods can be used. Especially in small programs, such tools as observation, document analysis, and interviewing of teachers (both language and content area), administrators, students, former students, etc. can give the researcher a very well-rounded and fairly deep understanding of some of the key issues involved and problems to be solved. Even in larger programs, however, qualitative methods, when combined with quantitative measures, can help to round out the picture--to contextualize the data received by the other measures.

**Diary studies.** Keeping diaries, or journals, is of interest for at least a couple of reasons. First, they can be used to identify variables important to language learning. For example, Chaudron (1986) notes that diary studies have been used, sometimes in conjunction with other methods, to identify such variables as turn-taking, communicative negotiation, and feedback, which may be very important in language learning.

Second, any study that causes us to reflect on ourselves as teachers or as learners seems worthy of our effort. To be professionals takes commitment which means we need to care about how we do our work. If we care, we will reflect on what we do and how we do what we do. By noting our reflections down on paper and then studying them months (or even years later), we can gain insights into who we are and use those insights to improve ourselves. Studying a new language, e.g. Japanese, and keeping notes on everything related to that study and one's life at the time of the study, can yield insights to the researcher as teacher, i.e., by struggling at learners we can more easily remember what our own students are facing, and perhaps at some broader level. Studying one's own teaching is something that does not seem to have been done in our field, but could yield the same type of personal insights and perhaps generate new hypotheses.

### **Cautions and Conclusions**

Qualitative research is not based on statistics. Based on that alone, many teachers who are afraid of complicated numbers might be attracted to it. However, the difficulties associated with qualitative research can be even more subtle than those associated with quantitative research. Whatever tool is used, the possibility for abuse is great. Many people can go to the scene of a crime and see nothing of importance while a Sherlock Holmes can go to the same scene and

through observation and analysis come up with the solution. In the same vein, many can observe in TESOL, but it is much more difficult to "see". The same caution applies to interviewing. Many people just sit down, write a few questions, and run off to the nearest subject, unaware of all the subtleties involved in framing questions, let alone asking them (Patton, 1982). Of course, the same cautions can be given against the abuse of statistical measures, especially when so few TESOL professionals actually are familiar with statistics (Gaies, 1987). The fact that the researcher is the key instrument in qualitative research demands excellent perceptive skills as well as a healthy dose of skepticism.

There seems to be no really easy way, i.e., non-thinking way, to conduct good research. To do it well, no matter what the approach, takes a lot of thought. At the same time, however, it would appear that detailed study using qualitative approaches may be less threatening to TESOL-ers than quantitative approaches. That may help the field come together, i.e., teachers and researchers might become more able to communicate with and understand one another. Gaies (1987: 22), the editor of the *TESOL Quarterly*, has noted that:

"The sad irony here is that the trend in applied linguistic research has been toward *more* quantitative analysis and the use of increasingly elaborate research designs and more complex statistical procedures. In the process, research may very well have become increasingly difficult for our field to do well."

As such, exploring the waters of the large sea of qualitative research may help greater numbers of us to understand more of what goes on in language learning and to become more willing to do more research.

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