

QUALITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Introduction

When people describe qualitative research as ‘soft’, they have a point: its data sets have a plastic quality that yields to easy moulding. Far from making life easy for the researcher, this demands a particularly rigorous approach and constant vigilance in order to resist the seductive appeal of the superficial. At its worst, qualitative research does little more than state the obvious; at its best, it takes us close to the heart of things.

It’s hardly surprising, then, that considerable effort has gone into developing procedures and criteria designed to promote quality research. Vernon Trafford and Shosh Lesnem (this issue) provide an excellent introduction to quality issues in the research process, and a number of helpful overviews are available (e.g. Seale 1999, Lazaraton 2003), so my focus here will be different: I shall argue that, valuable although such treatments are, the achievement of quality in qualitative research is possible only if the personal dimension is properly addressed.

The challenge

Another criticism of qualitative research is that it is ‘subjective’, as though there exists the possibility of purely ‘objective’ research. The response to this is not to deny subjectivity, but to approach projects with a proper understanding of its place in the research process. The challenge this represents is captured by Angrosino and de Pérez (2000: 689), writing from the perspective of ethnography:

[T]he ethnographer may need to realize that what he or she observes is conditioned by who he or she is, and that different ethnographers — equally well trained and well versed in theory and method but of different gender, race or age — might well stimulate a very different set of interactions, and hence a different set of observations leading to a different set of conclusions.

Any researcher adopting a qualitative orientation without building this understanding into the fabric of the research process is heading in the wrong direction. By seeking to understand and honestly represent our place in the process, we enable our readers to judge the relevance of our findings to their own situation. In practical terms this means that keeping a research diary is essential: it enables us to reflect on our decisions, make connections with ideas and concepts, and expose aspects of our thought processes. However, more than this is needed.

A response

A research diary establishes an essential relationship between researcher and project, but our efforts will ultimately be judged on the extent to which they meet the criteria for adequate research. In qualitative research a useful way of conceptualising this is to think in terms of trustworthiness, or ‘the ways we work to meet the criteria of validity, credibility and believability of our research — as assessed by the academy, our communities, and our participants’ (Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg 2005: 324).

The key terminology here varies, but what underlies these terms or their equivalents is fairly constant. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) characterisation seems to me to capture this well:

Credibility The adequacy of data from the field, which should involve drawing on different data types, gathered in different ways from different participants.

Dependability The documentation of the research, including records of reflection and decision making according to which the steps of the research process can be reconstructed.

Transferability The richness of description and interpretation offered.

I said at the outset that the personal dimension is central to qualitative research and will now explain how this bears on the above criteria. Experience in reading and assessing such research has led me to suspect that novice researchers often seem to think that these criteria can be met by using 'triangulation', providing plenty of relevant documentation and swamping the reader with detail. The quality of research, though, lies in content rather than form, as I now illustrate using the example of interviewing, chosen because of its popularity as a data collection method.

Adequacy and dependability of data, for example, will be grounded not just in the variety of methods and sources, but in the practical skills of the researcher. A poor interviewer can collect just as many interviews as a skilled one, but the quality of the data will be thinner: because responses are not probed, they will remain superficial; lack of sensitivity will mean that potential avenues are not explored; and the interviewer may even dominate the interview to the extent of driving responses towards predicted outcomes. A good interviewer will prepare properly, understand and sensitively employ the variety of questioning strategies available, and analyse interview transcripts in order to identify areas where skills need to be refined (see Richards 2003, Chapter 2). Interviewing, as Kvale observes, is a craft resting on the researcher's judgement rather than 'content- and context-free rules of method' (1996: 105).

The same goes for analysis, which is so important in terms of transferability. This should be methodical and rigorous, but it also demands sensitivity because, as Coffey and Anderson note (1996: 10), it is 'not about adhering to any one correct approach or set of right techniques; it is imaginative, artful, flexible, and reflexive.' As analysts we develop particular strengths but also have our areas of weakness, and the good analyst needs to develop craft skills that will respond to this. Just as sensitivity to our place in the data gathering process might be important when responding to deviant cases, so an awareness of our analytical strengths and weaknesses will matter when we assess the adequacy of the evidence upon which our claims are to be based (see Erickson 1986:140 for different kinds of evidentiary inaccuracy).

Evaluation

Quality in qualitative research, then, demands more than mere adherence to correct procedures and attention to relevant criteria, though these are certainly necessary. It calls for awareness of ourselves as researchers, not just in terms of how we are

positioned in relation to the data and their analysis, but also in respect of the craft skills we are continually honing.

Bearing this important qualification in mind, I recommend Howe and Eisenhart's (1990) list of criteria for adequate research (one of many available) as a succinct summary of the essential qualities of sound qualitative research:

- Data collection and analysis techniques must be appropriate to and driven by the research question.
- These techniques must be competently applied.
- Studies must be judged in the context of current knowledge and aspects of the researcher's subjectivity must be made explicit.
- Overall warrant for any claims must be established and will include consideration of disconfirming evidence and justification for the theoretical position.
- The researcher must be able to demonstrate internal and external value. The former relates to research ethics and the latter to the relevance of the research to educational practice as well as its accessibility to actors in the relevant setting and to other researchers.

All of these except the last have been covered, albeit briefly, in this paper. The last is dependent on these but extends the range of quality into larger questions of value, and in so doing it points to the contribution that qualitative research can make to our professional development. Language teachers know that there are no easy answers to pedagogic challenges, but there can be an illuminative sharing of understanding, and this is what qualitative research offers – provided it is done properly.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to highlight the aspects of quality in qualitative research that I think are sometimes neglected, and in so doing I have pointed to the importance of the following:

- recognition of the challenges facing qualitative researchers;
- awareness of the self as a researcher;
- knowledge of the criteria by which research is to be judged;
- familiarity with relevant data collection and analytical procedures, and dedication to the craft of research;
- understanding of what qualitative research can offer.

In the final analysis, whether our research is predominantly quantitative or qualitative, its success or failure will depend ultimately not on the procedures we follow but on ourselves as researchers:

It is in the person, rather than the paradigm, that the potential for corruption or frailty lies. This is as true for the informants or respondents participating in the research as it is for the researchers who are doing it.
(Sikes 2000: 285)

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