Writing an EFL research report: a handbook for beginner

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Oscar Manuel Narváez Trejo, Gabriela Guadalupe Estrada Sánchez, Patricia Núñez Mercado, Alfredo Marín Marín: Coordinadores.
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Foreword

In the last five years, there has been a constant growth in the development of research projects, especially proposed by practitioners in the realm of education and English language teaching and learning. Accordingly, this book, which is a practical one indeed, aims to genuinely provide novice researchers with the necessary tools to conduct purposeful research. As a matter of fact, the phrase "Research for the sake of research" cannot be applied in the Mexican context for the simple reason that society really needs research, which contributes to solve not only educational but also social and economic problems through innovative approaches.

Under this premise, it is worth summarizing the different efforts to describe the characteristics of research in second language acquisition and learning. For example, Seliger and Shohamy (1989) describe three types of research: basic, applied and practical, and three research designs: qualitative, descriptive and experimental. More recently, Ellis (2012) presents a distinction between formal L2 classroom research and practitioner research. The former is typically conducted by devoted researchers and the latter is usually carried out by teachers. Hence, it can be suggested that this book is more concerned with practical and practitioner research with a qualititaive design.

Reading throughout this practical book, one confirms that this book attempts to fill the gap between theory and practice. Also it is important to bear in mind that becoming a researcher takes time and that some students would like to start their career as researcher, but others, simply, would like to teach a foreign or second language. All in all, this book can fulfill its objective: to help pre-service teachers to design their own research projects and, more importantly, to write a research report.

As a researcher, I consider this book of great value to novice researchers and undergraduate students since it guides them from the statement of problems to the writing up of the research report. In the process, students are involved completing carefully designed activities and tasks. Most importantly, this book can be used as a textbook in different Research Seminars, whose main objective is to help students in conducting research projects and presenting them in viva voce examinations to obtain a Bachelor's degree in the area of second language learning and teaching. Finally, I would like to congratulate the authors for their contribution to the field and making the concept of research more attractive and pleasant to students.

Mtra. María Isabel Hernández Romero

Introduction

This book has been designed to be useful for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at BA and MA level who need to embark upon the production of a research report as a pre-requisite for obtaining a degree. It may also be useful for practising English teachers who seek to develop professionally through small-scale research. The book is intended to provide an introduction to EFL research and we hope you find it helpful and each chapter both enlightening and useful. It should also expand your knowledge of educational research as you consider the different approaches that will be presented and discussed. However, this book is not intended to substitute more rigorous and specialised research handbooks.

One of the aims of this book is to engage you in further study and enable you to evaluate current EFL teaching practices with a critical eye. There are many plausible reasons why EFL teachers should get involved in the field of educational research within the Mexican context; for the sake of space, we will only refer to perhaps the two most important ones. First and foremost, teachers should carry out research to help identify possible causes of failure in Mexican education. Particularly problematic is low achievement and the high failure rate among English learners. Secondly, our teaching context differs a great deal from those where most research has been carried out, not to mention the contexts publishers have in mind when producing textbooks.

This poses a challenge and an opportunity for everyone in the field to investigate the real causes of this educational failure. Once these have been identified we will be in a better position to propose changes; we will also be better informed in order to design culturally appropriate interventions that are responsive to students' needs. We need to research our teaching contexts so as to devise learning theories and corresponding teaching methodologies that are relevant to our students.

The notion of teacher-researcher has been seen as an ideological movement aimed at democratising educational research, as an attempt to move away from the assumption that academics are the only legitimate generators of knowledge. Teacher-generated research is regarded as more meaningful and relevant to classroom practice than that which has been carried out by outside researchers and academics. In fact, there is growing interest in learning how appropriate and effective language teaching can be achieved by professionals who have encountered and mastered sensitive attitudes, skills, and behaviour.

We hope the following quotation proves inspirational:

> 'Anyone who has qualified as a teacher […] is perfectly capable of ... making real contributions to the teaching-leaning process.' (Verman and Mallick 1999, p. 184)

This assertion is based on the fact that the essentials of research are already in place [observation, application of questionnaires, interviews] and teachers are, in a general sense, already engaged in research. All that is required is a more rigorous approach to our activity and a system that ensures the results of our work are published for the benefit of our colleagues nationally and internationally.

We hope that as a result of the activities in this handbook, your research project will provide a voice for both teachers and students who do not have the opportunity to represent themselves.

Rationale

As a result of the professionalization process the teaching of English has undergone during the last few years, it is highly important that teaching professionals are not only familiar with language teaching methodologies and processes but are also competent enough to develop research projects. In this sense, this book will enable you to develop theoretically solid research projects of your own. In order to do this, you need to grasp different research theories underlying the traditions normally applied to investigating educational settings. Thus, you will not only develop an understanding of these research traditions but you will also have the opportunity to practice ways of generating and analysing research data: here are the guidelines for a hands-on learning experience in research. Considering that at this stage of your studies or teaching career you have gained an overview of the current state of affairs in teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), this book offers an opportunity to test some of the ideas thereby presented, while at the same time EFL research provides a chance for you to develop learning/teaching theories which are more contextually based.

Having highlighted the importance of teacher-led research, we have also considered the needs of hundreds of undergraduate and graduate students who every year are involved in the production of a research report. Even though there are many manuals available, none has been specifically designed for students undertaking a degree in English in the Mexican context, and written in English. Nor have any been produced as a result of a similar learning experience. The authors of this manual have been in the same situation as many of you: having to write a research report in English in order to obtain a degree. What is more, we also have vast experience in guiding people like you in the research and the production of a report as a graduation requirement. It is our aim, therefore, to fill this gap by providing guidance both in educational research and in the writing of a quality research report.

This book comprises six chapters to guide you through the process of designing a research project and writing the corresponding report. In order to accomplish this, we will concentrate on six important aspects of research in educational settings. The first defines educational research and introduces the main research traditions and methods of data generation. The second provides opportunities for you to develop a research project by means of formulating research questions closely related to your teaching situation. In chapter three, you will have the chance to practice different data generation techniques including, among others, interviewing, participation and involvement, and questionnaires. Chapter four is an introduction to the ways of analysing and categorising data in order to generate evidence for your own research project. Chapter five introduces the ways of discussing your findings. The last Chapter deals with forms of representing your research results and provides a panorama of the main issues concerning this.

All the basic information you may require in order to develop the competencies needed to produce a solid research project can be found in this handbook. The activities have been designed to let you experience not only the planning and implementation of a research project but also the writing of the research report. Furthermore, it contains references to other sources so that you can gain a clearer understanding of what research implies.

In short, the book aims to let you explore different theories/approaches used in educational research.

Objectives

It is expected that you develop the following competencies:

- identifying main issues of qualitative research and its applications to TEFL
- distinguishing main research traditions in education
- defining a research topic
- formulating research questions
- examining issues of validity and reliability
- considering ways of representing research
- writing a literature review

- considering design issues
- employing data generation techniques
- comparing approaches to data analysis
- analysing research data

The aim of this book is for you to develop a research project in the ELT field by using solid theoretical methodologies as well as appropriate methods of data generation and suitable research tools within the qualitative paradigm; this research should be aimed at studying and creating a description of an educational problem you are currently facing within your educational setting.

How to use this book

Through your analysis and discussion of the themes and topics included in each chapter you will develop the necessary skills, competencies and values involved in the design and implementation of a research project. In order to achieve this, the learning activities are all related to critical reading of texts, analysing research traditions, selecting the most suitable tradition for your research project, choosing appropriate method(s) of data collection, debating the topics selected for discussions, and finding more sources to the topics introduced in each chapter. It is important to keep in mind that you will have to carry out all the tasks in order to produce a final research report which evidences your work. At the end of each chapter you are expected to have a product resulting from developing the tasks and activities, which in turn will lead you to the realization of your research project at the close of this book. Therefore, it is important that you show you have grasped the contents of each chapter, focusing on a specific research topic of your choice.

Administration of your time is as important as carrying out the tasks and meeting deadlines established in your school. We strongly advise you make a schedule and keep to it rigorously.

Introduction References

Verma, G.K. and Mallick, K. 1999. *Researching Education*. *Perspectives and techniques*. Falmer Press: London

Chapter 1 Educational Qualitative Research

The aim of this chapter is to introduce you to educational research. In order to frame the introduction, we will begin by defining educational research. We will then look at qualitative research and some of the issues that surround it, before carrying out analysis and discussion of some of the main research traditions within an educational context. The activities in this chapter will help expand your research perspectives by providing you with grounded theoretical foundations to frame your research project. That is to say, this chapter may help you situate a project within a research perspective or paradigm so as to take informed decisions about which research methods are more appropriate for your research objectives.

Objectives

This chapter will enable you to:

- define educational research
- identify main issues of qualitative research
- distinguish the different main research traditions in education

Getting Started

Before we begin this chapter, we are going to take a moment to reflect on our own educational settings. We all have experience of an educational setting, be it as a student or as a teacher (for many of us, both may be true), but we rarely have the opportunity to analyse that setting. The following activity encourages us to consider what happens within the classroom and how that is linked to wider social and cultural themes.

Activity 1

Choose **one** of the tasks below concerning everyday procedures, activities and physical dimensions of your educational setting. How does it relate to your experience in the classroom?

Discuss the following regarding an institution you are familiar with (the school you are currently working at and/or the school you are enrolled at):

1. Who are the main participants (parents, teachers, students, administrative personnel, teaching staff, educational and government authorities)?

2. How are parents, teachers, students, administrative personnel, teaching staff, educational and government authorities involved in the everyday procedures, activities and relationships in the school? How is their involvement justified?
3. Using your school as the main setting, identify any assumptions and/or 'social facts' that inform or make sense of the everyday procedures, activities and relationships in the setting (e.g. assumptions about the characteristics of the learners and/or teachers)
4. What is the role of English in Mexico? At the school where you work/study? How do the main educational actors (parents, teachers, students, administrative personnel, teaching staff, educational and government authorities) perceive English? How does this perception affect its teaching and/or learning?

Feedback

At risk of stating the obvious, it is important to consider that education should be seen as a social and cultural practice; and, as such, education is embedded in deep social and cultural traditions that might influence teaching and learning practices within a classroom.

The above questions were designed to help you frame your research intentions into broader (external) issues that might influence what happens inside the classroom; i.e. educational issues. Freebody (2003, p. 1-2) has stated that educational research poses many challenges to researchers; these may arise from at least four aspects of education:

> Firstly, the importance of education is rarely denied. Governments regard education not only as a privilege and as a prize, but also as the means to solve larger social problems.
> Secondly, educational activities are inherently complex and dynamic, both within school settings and beyond those sites. This makes educational practices ever-changing, always debatable and thus object to contestation.
>
> Thirdly, education matured comparatively late as an institutionalized academic research area and thus has spent some decades drawing its conceptual and methodological sustenance from social disciplines (Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, History, and Philosophy, among others).
>
> Fourth, while many equate 'education' with 'schooling' it is nonetheless the case that just as much education goes on informally. Furthermore, when we consider the ways people learn and are taught, it becomes clear that the forms of knowledge and inquiry that people encounter impact on one another in important ways. Freebody (2003, p. 1-2)

Due to the complexity surrounding educational phenomena, we must find suitable ways of making sense of them. This book introduces a compilation of qualitative methodologies that are used in contemporary educational research. Throughout, we should consider that educational practice is fundamentally social and cultural in nature: the results of educational research may bear social and cultural implications.

1.1 Defining Educational Research

Activity 2

From your previous knowledge, and in the light of the information provided so far, how would you define educational research? Discuss your answer with your classmates.

'Educational research' is research conducted to investigate educational phenomena related to students and teachers as well as other stakeholders in schools and other educational institutions. This kind of research is often conducted by critically examining what educational actors do and the reasons why they undertake specific behaviour.

Since schools are social and cultural institutions, it is wise to regard them as social worlds, that is, we should look at them as micro-contexts reflecting (and affecting) the broader social world in which they are immersed. Carrying out educational research involves creating understandings of those socio-cultural practices as they occur within the school setting and how they affect the behaviour of educational actors within that setting.

Reflecting upon these issues, which may affect our performance as language teachers, should be accompanied by actions designed to solve them. Paulo Freire (1970) referred to this reflection plus action as *praxis,* which usually refers to the process of putting theoretical knowledge into practice. Furthermore, the current trend in education is to create theory out of teaching practice. This book will prepare you to investigate educational issues of interest by approaching them from different 'angles', considering the most immediate educational actors.

1.1.1 Fundamentals of Educational Research

Reflect

Before we continue, read the following statements and write your reaction to each one:

- research has to be scientific to be of any value.
- research has to be objective
- research has to involve some quantification
- research has to be generalizable

These aspects are particularly representative of the positivistic (quantitative) paradigm.

What other aspects are related to that paradigm?

Feedback

These issues were considered to be fundamental when conducting research, and influenced the way researchers went about doing their work. They are all related to the positivistic (quantitative) paradigm of research. Though they still influence research, the conceptualizations of each have changed over the last few years to suit more contemporary, qualitative views.

The following are some components of **quality** research, regardless of the approach selected.

- purpose
- design
- procedure
- analysis
- claim
- relevance and worth

To begin, let us consider some of the underlying principles of research as described by Richards (2003). Quality research can be characterized by the following components:

Purpose	One of the essential characteristics of research is that it is purposeful. The researcher sets out deliberately to discover something about the world with the intention of eventually making claims on the basis of the evidence gathered.
Design	Research is more than simply finding out: it has to be carefully and thoughtfully designed in order to produce the information we need to make reasonable inferences about the way things are.
Procedure	This takes us deeper into the research process itself. Even if the purpose and design of the project are acceptable, we still need to be reassured that the procedures adopted are appropriate. For example, if the researcher has used interviews as a source of data, I will want to be reassured they provide a realistic picture of the problem. Questions like this can prove quite heated in debate because different researchers have different ideas about the advantages and limitations of different procedures. Even if there are no fundamental flaws in the procedures adopted, there are always alternative approaches and sometimes these need to be aired. What matters is that a defensible case can be made, not that it should necessarily convince everyone.

Analysis	Once the data is generated, it will need to be analyzed, and here again appropriate and robust methods will be called for. Adequate analysis is the link that allows the researcher to respond confidently to the question, 'How did you come up with that claim on the basis of that?' I've included it here as a separate item because of its importance, but it could be subsumed under 'procedure'.
Claim	The desire to make the strongest claim we can is a perfectly natural one, but our success will depend on whether we can establish a link between evidence and assertion.
Relevance and worth	But there's more at stake than just acceptability of the claims. How would the researcher respond to the question, 'So what?' It's a simple one but potentially devastating, and it takes us back to the issue of purpose. When I suggested at the start of this section that research is distinguished by its purposeful nature, I side-stepped issues of value and relevance: the extent to which research represents a worthwhile contribution to our knowledge and/or understanding.

(p. 3)

Feedback

No matter which type of research you may choose, you have to make sure that you cover the above-mentioned components. Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of research is that it is about creating new knowledge, based on empirical evidence.

1.1.2 Natural-science research vs. Naturalistic research

Richards (2003) provides a vivid account of the main differences between the two most dominant research traditions.

Activity 3

Read the discussion on Natural-Science research vs. Naturalistic research and take notes on the following issues:

ISSUE	**CHARACTERISTICS**
Focus of research	
Philosophical roots	
Associated phrases	
Goal of investigation	
Design characteristics	
Sample	
Mode of analysis	
Findings	

Both 'natural-sciences style' and 'naturalistic' research are legitimate methods of research. You use the methods, and therefore the underlying philosophy, which are best suited to what you are trying to find out. The key question is: how appropriate is the method to the phenomenon you are dealing with? In other words, does the method used mean that important elements are missed out or constrained?

The main argument here is that 'experimental science' type approaches are ill-suited to the complexity, embedded character and specificity of real-life (educational, social) phenomena. Specificity is a key issue. Natural sciences research is aimed at generalizable findings: i.e. that may have general implications for theory. But in human behaviour, generalization from one group of people to others, or one institution to another, is often suspect—because there are too many elements that are specific to that group or institution. As you may well know, what is true about one group or school may well not be true of another.

Because of this unknown degree of specificity and the uniqueness of what are likely to be the facts the naturalistic researcher differs from the experimental investigator in another important way. In the natural-sciences style you study the literature and work out if existing findings and theories are adequate. If you feel that certain theories need testing or challenging, you set up an experimental procedure to yield new data to test existing theory. This is the deductive model, using a predetermined procedure of investigation.

The naturalistic researcher cannot work like this: the data and theories in the literature may have little bearing upon the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher needs to know what others have done but cannot be sure whether the findings are relevant. The first step is to review the context from which the research questions, the means of investigating them, and the likely explanations will emerge. An emergent design is characteristic of this style along with inductive theorizing, i.e. making sense of what you find after you have found it.

However, perhaps the major distinction between the two styles of research here described is the greater concern of naturalistic research with subjectivity: with phenomenological meaning. This doesn't mean that you ignore the objective (what people do, what records show, and so on) but that you are after the qualitative element. How people understand themselves, or their setting—what lies behind the more objective evidence. Nor does it mean that you ignore results, but that you seek to find the underlying reasons in people's feelings or perceptions, or their experiences of what is going on. This concern with process (leading to outcomes or 'results') can be key to understanding what needs to be done to change things.

All this means that the naturalistic researcher is not a detached 'scientist' but a participant observer who acknowledges their role in what they discover. A research investigation is not neutral; it has its own dynamic and there will be effects (on individuals, on institutions) precisely because there is someone there asking questions, clarifying procedures, collecting data. Recognizing this is part of doing good research. Ignoring it is bad 'science'.

Richards (2003, p. 13)

After reading this extract, we hope you have a clearer idea of why a positivistic view of research may be ill suited to investigating educational phenomena. The table below presents the answers to the previous activity and provides a point of comparison between the characteristics of Qualitative (Naturalistic) and Quantitative (Natural-science) research paradigms.

Point of Comparison	Qualitative Research	Quantitative Research
Focus of research	**Quality (nature, essence)**	Quantity (how much, how many)
Philosophical roots	**Phenomenology, symbolic interactionism**	Positivism, logical empiricism
Associated phrases	**Fieldwork, ethnographic, naturalistic, grounded, constructivist**	Experimental, empirical, statistical
Goal of investigation	**Understanding, description, discovery, meaning, hypothesis generating**	Prediction, control, description, confirmation, hypothesis testing
Design characteristics	**Flexible, evolving, emergent**	Predetermined, structured
Sample	**Small, non-random, purposeful, theoretical**	Large, random, representative
Mode of analysis	**Inductive (by researcher)**	Deductive (by statistical methods)
Findings	**Comprehensive, holistic, expansive, richly descriptive**	Precise, numerical

Reflect

What do you think are the three main reasons for undertaking qualitative research in educational settings?

Read about them in the following extract from Richards's (2003), which also provides an explanation of some misconceptions of Qualitative Research.

> There are at least three compelling reasons for rejecting the claim that we ought simply to build on the success of quantitative approaches by putting all our efforts into refining their

procedures. The first of these arises from the fact that experiments or surveys will only take us so far. They can explain many things and can provide us with valuable information and insights, but they are not designed to explore the complexities and puzzles of the immensely complicated social world that we inhabit. Even in more narrowly defined circumstances, there are situations where a qualitative approach offers the best source of illumination. For example, I can conduct experiments until I'm blue in the face in order to identify 'effective' procedures for designing language learning tasks, but if I want to know how successful task designers think and work, then I need to find other ways of exploring this. At least one leading researcher has identified this need to get close to practice as one of the main reasons for the recent growth of qualitative research:

One reason for change is that scholars have become attracted to the idea of getting close to practice, to getting a first hand-sense of what actually goes on in classrooms, schools, hospitals and communities. That kind of knowledge takes time. The one-shot commando raid as a way to get the data and get out no longer seems attractive. You need to be there. A clean research design with tight experimental controls might be right for some kinds of research, but not for all kinds. (Eisner 2001: 137)

A second reason for adopting a qualitative approach is that it is above all else a person-centred enterprise and therefore particularly appropriate to our work in the field of language teaching. This is dangerous territory for the experimental researcher for, as Peshkin (1993:27) notes, 'most of what we study is truly complex, relating to people, events, and situations characterized by more variables than anyone can manage to identify, see in a relationship, or operationalize'. Human beings are wonderfully adept at confounding the sort of predictions that operate in the natural world, which is why a different sort of investigative approach is needed in the human sciences, one that will seek to understand the patterns and purpose in our behaviour and provide insights that will enrich our understanding. As practising teachers, we operate in a professional context which is at best only loosely predictable but where we can draw strength from our shared understandings and experiences.

The third profound strength of qualitative inquiry is its transformative potential for the researcher. The claim to objectivity implicit in the representation of quantitative outcomes and explicit in experimental research allows the researcher to stand aside from the findings, but this is not an option in qualitative inquiry. Investigation depends on engagement with the lived world, and the place of the researcher in the research process itself is something that needs to be addressed. The investigation impacts on the person doing the research and may have profound effects upon them.

Richards (2003, pp. 8-9)

Feedback

You are now in a better position to state the main tenets of quantitative and qualitative research. It must be clear by now that most educational phenomena, because of the social and cultural nature of the settings in which they occur, are more likely to result in better understandings if approached from a qualitative, naturalistic perspective.

When deciding on a research project, the key question you have to ask yourself is: how appropriate is the approach (quantitative/qualitative) to the phenomenon you are dealing with? In other words, does the research approach used mean that important elements are missed out or constrained? The main argument in this book is that natural-science approaches are ill-suited to the complexity, embedded character and specificity of real life (educational, social) phenomena. In the following sections, the main characteristics and relevant issues on qualitative research will be discussed.

Activity 4

Before moving on, we will begin to consider what topics related to educational research we would be interested in exploring further.

Think of a research topic that interests you and then answer the following questions:
1. Why are you interested in this topic?
2. Who else might be interested in the research and why?
3. Will the research involve multiple settings or a single one? How many participants might be involved?
4. Will the participants be interested in the research findings? Why?
5. Where would you expect to share the findings of the research with others?
6. Explain your decisions.

Since you are about to undertake a study of an educational phenomenon, think about issues, problems etc. that might be of interest to you and/or teachers at the setting you are to investigate:
1. Describe the different kinds of information you could collect from the setting that should generate or support possible research findings. When, where and how would you collect the information?
2. Consider any of your ideas, beliefs, opinions, etc. about the issue that you have chosen and about the findings that could possibly be generated. Identify any personal or professional experience and/or theoretical perspectives that are informing these ideas, beliefs and opinions.

3. Describe how you could disseminate the information that you collect from the setting along with your analyses and research findings in ways that allow potential challenge.

Write a short text (400-500 words) stating your research intentions, including all your answers to the previous questions.

1.2 Methodological orientation

When studying or learning about research, it is useful to identify the methodological orientation that underpins your study. In this section, we will outline the premises underlying the interpretive or qualitative paradigm. You will be given the opportunity to discuss relevant issues regarding the epistemology that illuminates the theoretical perspective behind Qualitative Research. The relevance of such discussion lies in the fact that methods of data generation should match the premises of Qualitative Research.

1.2.1 Theoretical perspectives

In this section, we will introduce to you the foundations of qualitative research and briefly discuss relevant issues regarding the epistemological basis upon which its theoretical perspective lies. In our experience, defining the methodology was one of the most difficult parts in the research process. Therefore, this section intends to provide you, as a novice researcher, with a useful tool to sustain your qualitative research and encounter fewer problems along the way. We hope you will find this section a useful reference for future qualitative research.

We, teacher-researchers, need to depart from previous studies in which educational phenomena are reduced to figures and statistics; it should be the researchers' intention to obtain a different, in-depth account of the phenomena under study. Thus, an EFL researcher may be interested in revealing:

- how people interpret their learning/teaching experiences
- how they construct their worlds
- what meaning they attribute to their experiences

It is important to find an epistemology and a theoretical perspective that match your intentions as a researcher; it is necessary to have sound theoretical foundations on which to base the methods of data generation you wish to employ. A brief discussion on such issues is presented below.

Epistemological and ontological position

If your intention is to study the way educational actors interpret an educational phenomenon based on their lived experience, then you should consider that people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties for research purposes. Keep in mind that in order to gain access to informants' perspectives, it is imperative to talk to them, to ask them questions, and, perhaps more importantly, to listen to them. You should expect that through their accounts and articulations you could be in a position to construct a mutual (dialogic) understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Theoretical perspective

A theoretical perspective is, simply put, the philosophical stance that lies behind a chosen methodology, e.g. *interpretivism*. The interpretive approach to research emerged in opposition to positivism in an effort to provide more realistic understandings (and explanations) of human and social reality. This approach to research 'looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of social life-world' (Crotty, 1998, p. 67).

Interpretive Qualitative Research is nourished from different theoretical perspectives, mainly hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. In what follows, we will briefly outline how these influence qualitative research.

Hermeneutics

From hermeneutics comes the idea that in order to understand a situation, one must not only consider the intentions and histories of the actors but also the relationship of these actors to others, and thus the importance of being in the same situation, in the same setting where the phenomenon under study is taking place so that all things surrounding the scene are considered as a part of and influence on the phenomenon. Hermeneutics assumes a relationship connecting the two that make the exercise possible, placing emphasis on the sharing of meaning between persons, an indication that 'it has practical purposes in view… Determination of meaning is a matter of practical judgment and common sense, not just abstract theorising' (Crotty, 1998, p. 91).

Phenomenology

The notion that people interpret their daily experiences according to the meaning it has for them comes from phenomenology.

> What Phenomenologists emphasize, then, is the subjective aspects of people's behaviour. They attempt to gain entry into the conceptual world of their subjects (Geertz, 1973) in order to understand how and what meaning they construct around events in their daily lives (Bodgan and Biklen, 1992, p. 34, cited in Merriam, 2002, p. 37).

Because phenomenology as a school of philosophical thought underpins all qualitative research, some assume that all qualitative research is phenomenological, and certainly, in one sense, it is. However, Crotty (1998) points out: 'The phenomenology of the phenomenological movement is a first-person exercise. Each of us must explore our own experience, not the experience of others, for no one can take that step 'back to the things themselves' on our behalf' (1998, p. 83).

Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic interaction informs qualitative research by its interpretation of phenomena within the social context. According to this, meaning is derived from social interaction:

> It deals directly with issues such as language, communication, interrelationships and community … is about all those basic social interactions whereby we enter into the perceptions, attitudes and values of a community' (Crotty, 1998, p. 8).

Given the belief that humans act on the basis of meanings that things have for them, Crotty adds, 'the meaning of objects and acts must be determined in terms of the actors' meanings, and the organization of a course of action must be understood as the actor organizes it' (ibid. 75). Meanings are modified through an interpersonal process. In other words, meaning only emerges as a result of the interaction of a social actor with other members of that society. Thus, interpersonal meanings may be brought forth and shared by a process of dialogue, of interaction. It all derives from 'the emphasis on putting oneself in the place of the other and seeing things from the perspective of others' (ibid. 76). Crotty summarizes:

> This role taking is an interaction. It is symbolic interaction for it is possible only because of the 'significant symbols'—that is, language and other symbolic tools—that we humans share and through which we communicate. Only through dialogue can one become aware of the perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings and intent. Hence the term 'symbolic interactionism'. (Crotty, 1998, p. 75-76)

To symbolic interactionists, 'Even the self is a social construction, a self-definition generated through interaction with other people' (Merriam, 1998, p. 37). As a result of this ever-changing interaction, people can 'change and grow as they learn more about themselves through this interactive process' (Bodgan and Biklen, 1992, p. 37, cited in Merriam, 2002, p. 37).

Qualitative research adopts the idea that 'meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world' (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). Qualitative Research aims at understanding and making sense of experience from the participants' viewpoints. In order to do this, it approaches the phenomenon under study from an interpretive stance.

Interpretive qualitative approach to research is characterised by 'Learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world, [as well as] the meaning it has for them' (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). To practitioners, reality is constructed by varying interpretations that change over time. From a critical position, reality is the result of the interaction between the knower and the researcher: they construct reality during their dynamic interaction: 'The knower and the known are Siamese twins connected at the point of perception' (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 49).

Therefore, researchers using qualitative research aim to identify what these interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a particular context; what meaning a particular phenomenon has for the people involved since '…the world in general … is … a constructed, dynamic interaction of men and women organized and shaped by their race, class and gender' (ibid.48). Holliday explains this through the contrast between naturalists believing 'that meaningful social worlds can be discovered by 'being there'' and progressivists arguing 'that there is no 'there' until it has been constructed' (2002, p. 21).

Qualitative research is 'an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry that explores a human or social problem' (Crewswell, 1998, p. 255). Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p. 3) mention, 'Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials … that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives'. It is therefore the aim of qualitative research to 'study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them' (ibid.) Interpretive approaches see people, their interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings, as primary data sources.

> Interpretivists are concerned with understanding the social world people have produced and which they reproduce through their continuing activities. This everyday reality consists of the meanings and interpretations given by the social actors to their actions, other people's actions, social situations, and natural and humanly created objects. In short, in order to negotiate their way around their world and make sense of it, social actors have to interpret their activities together, and it is these meanings, embedded in language, that constitute their social reality. (Blaikie, 2000, p. 115, cited by Mason, 2000, p. 56)

Activity 5

In the previous section you were asked to think about an educational issue that interests you. Consider the following five questions that might help you define your methodological orientation:

1. What is the nature of the phenomena, entities, or social 'reality' you wish to investigate?
2. What might represent knowledge or evidence of these entities or social reality?
3. What topic, or broad area, is the research concerned with?
4. What do you wish to explore or explain? What is the intellectual puzzle you want to explore? What type of puzzle is it? What are your research questions?
5. What is the purpose of your research? What are you doing it for?

Write your answers in about 400-500 words. You will have to include these answers in the corresponding section of the research report.

Feedback

Your answer to question 1 lets you identify your **ontological** position. That is, it involves asking what you see as the very nature and essence of things in the social world. For example: understandings, interpretations, motivations, ideas, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, views, experiences, stories, narratives, biographies, texts, discourses, actions, reactions, and so on.

Question 2 sets out to establish your **epistemological** position. In other words, what you regard as knowledge or evidence of things in the social world; it concerns the principles and rules by which you decide whether and in what way social phenomena can be known and how knowledge can be demonstrated.

The third question implies identifying your **broad research area**, i.e. how your research question relates to other areas of knowledge.

Question 4 should help you identify the issue/phenomenon/**problem** (**puzzle** is a more general term) you wish to investigate. There are different types of puzzle to resolve: developmental, mechanical, comparative, and causal/predictive. Once you have been able to define whatever it is you want to investigate and explain it as a puzzle, you should be able to formulate research questions.

Your answer to Question 5 helps you clearly express the **aim** of your study: increasing or challenging existing theory, filling gaps in knowledge, extending debate, etc.

These five questions represent a rigorous way to define what your research is about and to know where you stand – **your methodological orientation**. This should be included in the methodology section of your research report.

Activity 6

Find at least three other sources on methodological orientation in order to develop a discussion of it for your research project. You will have to present an argument that supports your study.

Review what you wrote for the previous activity in the light of what you have read above. Re-write the essay, expressing your argument for your choice of methodology and add it to the corresponding section on your research report.
Don't forget to include references and their sources!

Feedback

Having a clear understanding of the theoretical foundations of Qualitative Research may prevent methodological problems. It is important to explicitly sustain, on solid theoretical grounds, each decision you make in your study: you need to provide arguments that explain the reasons for which you did something in your study, for example using written sources or interviews.

So far, we have presented a general overview of research as well as a thorough discussion of qualitative research, including its theoretical foundations and main characteristics. In the remaining part of this chapter, we will introduce the most prominent research methods by presenting a summary of the main 'traditions'.

Qualitative Research and Research Traditions

Qualitative research can be seen as an umbrella concept that covers a number of different forms of inquiry. These have been called **theoretical traditions** (Patton, 1990), **genres** (Wolcott, 1992), **major traditions** (Jacob, 1987, 1988), **paradigms and perspectives** (Holliday 2002), **traditions** (Richards, 2003) and **strategies of inquiry** (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). However, the term qualitative research is confusing because it can mean different things to different people (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 11). For example, qualitative research is used interchangeably with terms such as naturalistic inquiry, interpretive research, field study, participant observation, inductive research, case study, and ethnography (Merriam, 2001, p. 5).

Holliday (2002, p. 18-22) classifies qualitative research into naturalistic (postpositivism, realism) and progressive: case study, ethnography, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, grounded theory and participatory action research are *strategies* of inquiry. Within what he calls the Progressive paradigm (2002, p. 18), he places critical theory, constructivism, postmodernism and feminism. In this paradigm:

- reality and science are socially constructed
- researchers are part of research settings
- investigations use reflexive, self-critical, creative language
- problems and hidden realities are revealed, discussions are initiated

Holliday explains his position by stating:

> I have distinguished two major paradigms, naturalism and progressivism. … I have taken the liberty of imposing the term ‘progressivism’ because it seems a useful heading under which to group together a range of different paradigms … which have much in common with their opposition to naturalism (Holliday, 2002, p. 19).

Activity 7

Reading as many sources as you possibly can, list all the forms researchers/authors use to refer to what we are calling research traditions. For instance, Richards (2003) uses the term *traditions* while Merriam (2002) refers to *research designs*. What other terms are used? Write down your findings and compare them to those of your peers.

Feedback

It might have been confusing to find out that there are as many terms to refer to research *traditions* as authors! Nonetheless, they all refer to the same concept: **a positioned approach to research covering recognised territory and employing an accepted set of research methods** (Richards, 2003, pp. 20).

Reflect

Considering Richards’ definition above, consult a book on qualitative research and list all the traditions mentioned. *Action Research* is an example of a research tradition.

Feedback

Merriam (2002), from an educational perspective, mentions eight research traditions: basic interpretive qualitative research; phenomenological research; grounded theory; case study; ethnography; narrative analysis; critical research; and postmodern research.

In the field of TESOL, Richards (2003, p. 13-28), has identified seven core traditions in qualitative research that are relevant to TESOL practitioners: ethnography; grounded theory; phenomenology; life history; action research; conversation analysis; and case study.

To Holliday (2002) there are only six main traditions: case study; ethnography; ethnomethodology; phenomenology; grounded theory; and participatory action research.

The table below summarises these influential authors' descriptions of research traditions.

Richards (2003)	Merriam (2002)	Holliday (2002)
Ethnography	**Ethnography**	**Ethnography**
Grounded Theory (GT)	**Grounded Theory**	**Grounded Theory**
Phenomenology	**Phenomenological research**	**Phenomenology**
Case Study (CS)	**Case Study**	**Case Study**
Life History*	**Narrative Analysis (NA)***	
Action Research		**Participatory Action Research (PAR)**
Conversation analysis	**Critical Research**	**Ethnomethodology**
	Postmodern research	
	Basic Interpretive	

* Other terms used are life narratives, biographical research, oral history, auto-ethnography, and autobiography.

As you can see, we have clustered the traditions in which the three authors coincide. For the sake of space (and your mental health), we will only present the **six** traditions considered by at least two of the authors hereby presented.

1.3 Research Traditions in Educational Settings

Keep in mind that the research process will reflect the methodological approach you decide to adopt. Many methodological approaches are described in terms of the type of analysis implied, as can be seen from the list below. Different approaches also involve different sets of assumptions about what kind of information (or knowledge) is important.

This diversity often gives rise to lively discussion among qualitative researchers. The list below is intended to provide a general idea of each tradition; we strongly suggest you find other sources once you have decided which approach to employ in your research. At this stage, the most useful point to remember is that there are many different types of qualitative research.

Ethnography

Ethnography has a background in anthropology. The term means 'portrait of a people' and this is a methodology for descriptive studies of cultures and peoples. The cultural parameter is that the people under investigation have something in common. Examples of parameters include:

- geographical - a particular region or country
- religious
- social / familial
- shared experience

In educational settings, researchers may choose an ethnographic approach because they suspect that further understanding of the prevailing culture will throw light on the current situation. For example, the culture that prevails in a classroom, in the way that teachers habitually carry out their roles, may cause misconceptions which may affect learning. Ethnography helps researchers to elucidate the situation, uncovering practices and developing cultural awareness and sensitivity, thereby allowing the delivery of better teaching approaches.

Ethnographic studies entail extensive fieldwork by the researcher. Data collection techniques include both formal and informal interviewing, often repeated, and participant or non-participant observation. Ethnography is extremely time-consuming because it involves the researcher spending long periods of time in the field.

The researcher attempts to interpret data from the perspective of the participants (this is known as a phenomenological approach) at the same time acknowledging the difficulty of giving a 'true' account of a perspective other than one's own. This could be particularly challenging when working in a setting where the researcher has difficulty understanding the culture. This challenge can be present when both researcher and participant use the same language but use it differently. For example, if a researcher made an ethnographic study of adolescent subgroups they would need to know how young people communicate, how they use language; misinterpretation from an 'etic' (outsider) perspective could cause confusion. Instead, researchers try to adopt an 'emic' approach. This means that the researcher attempts to interpret data from the perspective of the population under study. The results are expressed as though by the participants themselves, often using their own language and terminology to describe phenomena.

Grounded Theory

This methodology originated with the work of Glaser and Strauss on the interactions between health care professionals and dying patients. The main feature is the development of new theory through the collection and analysis of data about a phenomenon. It is phenomenological (this means it attempts to understand how participants make sense of their experiences and does not assume that participants' accounts refer to some verifiable reality). However, it goes beyond phenomenology because the explanations that emerge are used to develop new theories. In educational settings, the new theories can then be applied, enabling us to approach existing problems in a new way, for example, using appropriate teaching methodologies for particular cultural groups. Various data collection techniques are used to develop grounded theory, particularly interviews and observation. Literature review and relevant documentary analysis also make important contributions.

Some key features of grounded theory are:

- **focus on 'emergence'**. In theory, research should start from a position where the researcher knows nothing about what they are studying so that all concepts truly 'emerge' from the data. However, in reality, you are more likely to have specific objectives for a project, although these are unlikely to be formulated as a hypothesis.
- **theoretical sampling**. This is based on theoretically relevant constructs enabling researchers to adjust their sampling procedure. In reality you are quite constrained by the conditions under which you are sampling and have to meet a deadline!
- **data collection and analysis proceed concurrently**. In theory, data analysis should occur at the same time as data collection to allow researchers to refine the research question and data collection procedures in the light of new findings, but in reality, this is hard to achieve (e.g. because transcribing recorded interviews takes time, and analysis takes even more time). However it is important to review transcripts as they are transcribed and to undertake informal modification of prompt guides.
- **constant comparative method**. This is a useful formulation of how to do qualitative analysis, and can be used separately from the other elements of grounded theory.
- **theoretical sensitivity**. This is the ability to recognise what is important in the data so that you can give it meaning. The pure grounded theory approach implies that you should not read any relevant literature before doing a research project; you should enter the field completely unaware. Reality is rather different, and there is no reason not to explore and test pre-existing theory, as long as you are sensitive to the possibility of emergent theory.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology or Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has two components. It is phenomenological, attempting to understand how participants make sense of their experiences (it does not assume that participants' accounts refer to some verifiable reality) but it recognises that this involves a process of interpretation by the researcher. It is an approach popular in psychology and in some fields of education. It looks at subjective states so takes an insider perspective. It is interpretative: it recognises negotiation between researcher and researched, so both are 'present', to produce the account of the insider's perspective. Researchers then code the account data for emergent themes, look for connections, and construct higher order themes. IPA is often combined with the constant comparison method and elements of content analysis.

Case study

A case study could involve studying an individual: if this were a student, a researcher might document their learning strategies, habits, learning environment, etc. More complex is the extended case study tracing events involving several people over a period of time, with the analysis reflecting changes and adjustments. Ethnography can be combined with case study in order to carry out an 'ethnographic case study'.

Case study research in educational settings has a range of uses. One of the most common is the evaluation of a particular teaching approach. For example, an alternative approach to teaching teenagers. In this instance, a case study may address the development of a new teaching methodology such as teaching through songs. This would imply studying the setting where this takes place, the participants, the materials, the teaching methodology and everything related to 'the case'.

One of the criticisms aimed at case study research is that the case under study is not necessarily representative of similar cases and therefore the results are not generalisable. This reflects a misunderstanding of the purpose of case study research, which is to describe that particular case in detail. It is particularistic and contextual. For example, the usefulness of teaching teenagers through songs—a particular approach—would be determined by a number of local factors and an evaluation of the course would take those factors into account. If the methodology works well it does not automatically mean it would work equally well in another location but the lack of generalisability does not lessen the value of the action in the area where it is based. The researchers or authors do however need to provide information about what they have done which is transparent enough to help readers decide whether or not the case being described is sufficiently representative or similar to their own situation.

Life History or Narrative Analysis

This focuses on people's narratives/stories about themselves or a set of events. Instead of looking for themes that emerge from an account, it concentrates on the sequential unfolding of someone's story so there is an emphasis on diegesis and characters. It is time-consuming and usually includes a very small number of cases.

Action Research

Action Research (AR) represents an interventionist stand: a key aim of this type of research is to understand better some aspect of professional practice as a means of bringing about improvement. There are as many definitions of Action Research as there are practitioners of it; nonetheless, they all seem to agree that it refers to ways of investigating professional experience which link practice and the analysis of practice into a single productive and continuously developing sequence and which link researchers and research participants into a single community of interested colleagues (Richards, 2003). In doing action research, the researcher seeks to bring about changes in their working practices by examining these practices systematically and carefully, understanding them and setting up intervention schemes aimed at solving identified problems.

The main idea of action research is that the best way to learn is to do, and the best way to do is to learn. In AR, learning and doing inform each other: research is not separate from practice but is woven into it.

Various types of AR have been suggested by different writers, each having a different understanding of who asks the research question and who is in the role of 'action researcher'. However, they all utilise a systematic process of observation, reflection, planning and action. This process is usually represented as a cycle (see Figure 1 below).

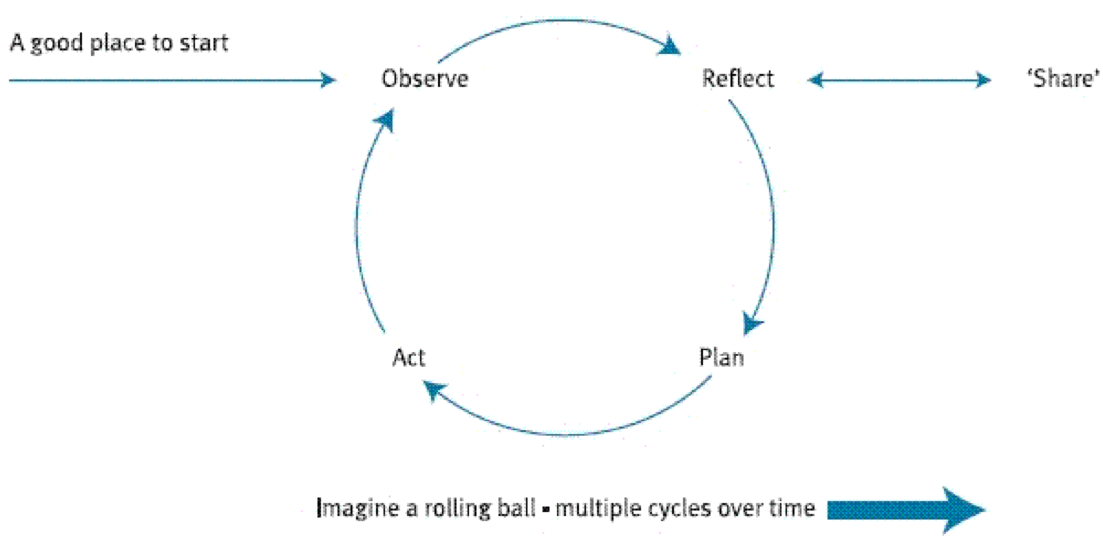

Figure 1: The basic Action Research cycle

This cycle of inquiry is repeated until the conclusion of the Action Research.

Warning about the use of terms

We have outlined several types of qualitative research approaches. They do not form an exhaustive list and some research methods can be applied from either a qualitative or quantitative position. Many qualitative approaches involve looking for themes, unfortunately this means that when reading about qualitative research you will often come across the term 'thematic analysis' without knowing exactly what type of thematic analysis was involved—it covers a broad range of possible methodologies. Similarly, you may find that researchers use the phrase 'content analysis' to refer to any sort of analysis of the content of, for example, an interview. Because of this potential confusion it is good practice to report exact details.

The differences between various qualitative research models can be difficult to understand at first. This is not helped by diversity in the terms used by writers. These differences are quite subtle and are often concerned with the philosophical or other stance of researchers and funders, the original research question, the people or situations being studied and the way the data are analysed, interpreted and presented. You need not be concerned if you do not fully understand the approaches outlined. The main purpose of this section is to familiarise you with the notion that there are different qualitative methodologies and to show what some of the terms mean.

Reflect

What are the similarities among the research perspectives/traditions? What are the main differences? How does qualitative research fit within the traditions described?

We strongly suggest that you find as many sources as you can to form a solid understanding of the tradition.

Activity 8

Using two or three references, complete the following table regarding core traditions.

Tradition	Focus of study	Main means of data generation	Basic position	Key concepts
Ethnography				
Grounded Theory				

Phenomenology				
Case Study				
Life History				
Action Research				

Feedback

These research traditions share the fundamentals of quality research and all of the features of Qualitative Research presented previously; however, each tradition has certain particularities that differentiate it from the others. For instance, Life History attempts to depict a picture of individual life experience whereas Case Study provides a detailed description of individual cases.

1.4 Qualitative Research

Qualitative Research (QR) adopts the idea that 'meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world' (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). Qualitative Research aims at understanding and making sense of experience from the participants' viewpoints. In order to do this, it approaches the phenomenon under study from an interpretive stance. An interpretive qualitative approach to research is characterised by 'Learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world, [as well as] the meaning it has for them' (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). To practitioners of this approach, reality is constructed by varying interpretations that change over time. From a critical position, reality is the result of the interaction between the knower and the researcher: they construct reality during their dynamic interaction. Therefore, researchers using Qualitative Research aim to identify what these interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a particular context; what meaning a particular phenomenon has for the people involved since '...the world in general … is … a constructed, dynamic interaction of men and women organized and shaped by their race, class and gender' (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 48).

Activity 9

Considering the basics of QR, some principles of this approach should be met in order to satisfy quality. List your ideas about the following questions in order to anticipate the discussion on the main features of a qualitative study.

1. How would you find out the ‘meaning’ that social or educational activities have for the individuals participating in them?
2. How can you find out participants’ viewpoints of the puzzle you want to solve?
3. Where should you, as a researcher, be positioned to generate data?
4. Should you use a ‘top-down’ or a ‘bottom-up’ research strategy?
5. How many people should inform your study? How should you select them?
   What type of ‘product’ should you produce?

Feedback

Qualitative Research presents the following features:

- the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning people have construed
- the researcher is the primary instrument of data generation and analysis
- research involves fieldwork
- it uses an inductive research strategy
- sample is purposeful or purposive
- the product is richly descriptive

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

> In conducting a basic qualitative study, you seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved, or a combination of these (Merriam, 2002, p. 6-7).

Even though there seems to be discrepancy regarding the labels attached to traditions or perspectives or paradigms of qualitative research, there appears to be consensus on the basic characteristics of qualitative research. We will now describe each of these in detail.

Any interpretive and descriptive qualitative research should contain these elements:

The researcher is interested in understanding the meaning people have construed

‘…the researcher must go back and forth between the observed situation and its meaning, as experienced by the participants and as grasped metaphorically. Meaning is not given in the situation, but emerges from the situation built on both observation and the researcher’ (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 39). ‘Ethnography is an approach which is grounded in a particular ontology. It is generally about the study of culture, and is based on an epistemology which says that culture can be known through cultural and social settings’ (Mason, 2002, p. 55).

The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis

Rather than using detached questionnaires or survey methods of data collection, 'The qualitative researcher has the added responsibility of being both the collector of relevant data … and the culler of meaning from that data, which most often is in the form of people's words and actions' (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 46). This presents both advantages and disadvantages and is perhaps the most disputed area for qualitative researchers. Among the advantages we should take into consideration is the immediately responsive and adaptive way of conducting an interview that allows the researcher to interpret both verbal and nonverbal communication. In addition, the researcher can process information immediately, has the ability to clarify and summarize material there and then and is able to check with respondents for accuracy of interpretation. There is also the possibility of exploring unusual or unanticipated responses.

One of the most controversial issues concerns bias. Naturalists warn about the risk of influencing studies, though identifying and monitoring bias can diminish this possibility. We will come back to this issue when discussing the role of the researcher.

Research usually involves fieldwork

Indeed, data is collected in the field, not in a created environment. This is one of the problems when trying to distinguish between, for example, ethnography and case study, as both involve data collection at the point of investigation. This is based on the belief that 'The natural setting is the place where the researcher is most likely to discover, or uncover, what is to be known about the phenomenon of interest' (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 46). To Brewer (2000), the 'Ethnographic case study is distinguished by the exploration of the case or cases as they present themselves naturally in the field and by the researcher's direct involvement and participation in them' (p. 77).

1. Inductive research strategy

In a 'pure' qualitative study, there are no preconceived hypotheses to be tested. On the contrary, much of the task of a qualitative researcher is to 'produce' hypotheses based on the data being analysed. In this regard it is an inductive process of generating 'theory', it is exploratory and descriptive in focus:

> … researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively deriving postulates or hypotheses to be tested … In attempting to understand the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved, qualitative researchers build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field.
>
> (Merriam 2002, p. 6).

Inductive means starting from a single unit of data and comparing it to another, and so on, looking for common patterns across all the data. These are coded (classified) and are refined and adjusted as the analysis proceeds. The purpose of such inductive processing of information might be an attempt to fill an existing gap in the theory or because there is no theory yet to explain the phenomenon.

2. The product is richly descriptive

What mostly distinguishes a qualitative study from a quantitative one is the type of report obtained. A qualitative research report may take many forms, depending on the particular strategy followed by the researcher, but they will all have something in common: they will be full of detail. The issue of quality versus quantity applies here. A qualitative study relies heavily on the richness of the description of the phenomenon under study, not in order to generalize from it, but to portray a thorough description of the people and/or situations involved. A quantitative study is based on the number of responses obtained, no matter how superficial they may be. Qualitative research sacrifices quantity of responses for quality, it usually involves a small number of 'cases' which are studied in depth. Importance is given to the perspectives of those involved in the phenomenon under study and not those of external individuals. The aim of this approach is to gain an account from an emic (insider) perspective. 'Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about the phenomenon. There are likely to be descriptions of the context, the participants involved, the activities of interest' (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). It is very likely that the researcher supports the findings by giving a voice to the participants through verbatim quotations obtained during interviews, descriptions of events from field observations and/or documentary evidence.

3. Sample is purposive or purposeful

The researcher is not in pursuit of a 'representative' group of people from which to generalize but rather a number of people who can provide information relevant to the study. As the aim is to provide a thorough description of the phenomenon, another principle applies here: less is more. Therefore, the researcher makes use only of people, documents and events that provide good accounts of the phenomenon.

> Since qualitative research seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which most can be learned (Merriam, 2002, p. 13).

The researcher should remain alert in order to detect 'information-rich' cases for study in depth (Patton, 1990, cited in Merriam, 2002, p. 12). This avoids *a priori* selection of informants, making sampling a constantly evolving activity. Meeting these requirements should assure an excellent qualitative study. Other conditions to satisfy the criteria for quality research are mentioned in section 1.1 above and are further discussed in chapter 3.

Summary

In this chapter we have established what is meant by educational research. We have described the underlying epistemology behind qualitative research and its connected theoretical perspective. We considered its characteristics, methodological orientation and the theory underpinning it. In the final part of the chapter, we identified and described the main research traditions used in educational contexts. In addition to establishing this theoretical framework, we also began to reflect upon our own experiences and explore the topics we may be interested in researching in further detail. In the following chapters, we will link these foundations to practice, building our skills to develop a relevant and complete research project.

The figure below provides a summary of the issues discussed in this chapter.

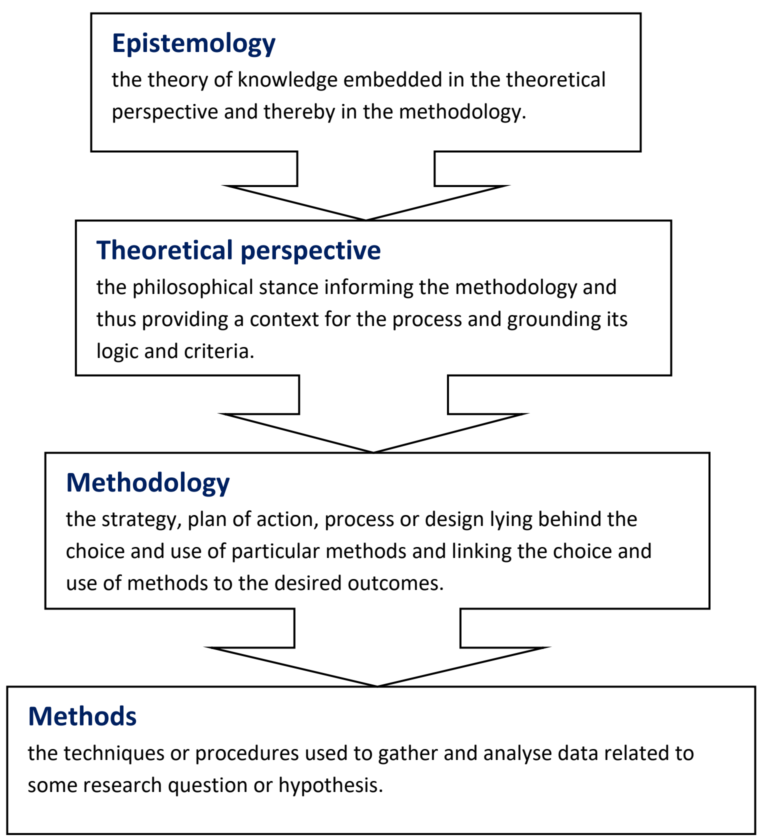

Figure 2: Summary of issues discussed in chapter 1

Suggested reading

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Chapter 2 Developing a research project

In this chapter, we suggest ways in which you can begin to transform your research ideas into a design. We examine the role of research design and identify key issues that you should consider while planning and designing a qualitative research project.

The activities should help you move smoothly from your research ideas and questions to the implementation of your study. Bear in mind that this handbook is designed to help you generate a research project and its accompanying report.

Objectives

This chapter will enable you to:

- define a research problem
- design research question(s)
- consider design issues
- carry out a suitable review of the literature

2.1 Defining a problem

It may appear to be stating the obvious, but before we can begin any research project it is essential to identify and define the topic that will be researched. In order to identify a research problem it is important to first consider your own experience. What catches your attention? What would you like to understand better? It is then a good idea to look into existing literature related to the area to discover what has already been written about the topic: this should help you define it. Remember, the wider the issue, the more complex the research will have to be, so it is an advantage to narrow your topic.

Following these steps will help you in the later stages of your research project, as they will encourage you to focus your efforts. And a final tip: only choose to research something that interests you. Research should be interesting, not a chore, and the reader can quickly identify a writer who is bored with their own topic.

Activity 1

In a previous chapter you were asked to consider a research topic and think about other issues related to researching it. Look back at your answers to that set of questions. Taking into account what you wrote at the time and what you have learnt since, identify a research problem related to your own experience that you would like to explore.

2.2 Designing Research Questions

Having defined a research problem, the next step is to develop the question(s) that need to be researched in order to understand it. Establishing research questions will provide you with the path to follow. As with research problems, it is important to make your question(s) specific so that the research will be more focused. Bear in mind that proposing a research question doesn't mean it is set in stone: it should act as a guide rather than a rule, and can be altered and adapted as the project develops.

It may be helpful to answer these questions, which could aid you in understanding your choice of project:

1. What is it that you want to know, understand or test?
2. How did you become interested in the topic?

Activity 2

1. Again, refer back to your answers to activity 6 in chapter 1 and use them as a guide to formulate a research question. Consider that you are approaching from a qualitative perspective; that is, avoid questions that could be answered in numerical terms (*What's the average grade of my second semester students? How many people drop out from English courses at my school?*) Instead, think more in terms aimed at finding out how people experience the phenomenon under study. (*Why do some students perform better than others? Why do people study English? What motivates my students? What do fellow teachers think of the evaluation system at our school?)*
2. Think of a tentative title for your research project, plus two or three aims of your study. State briefly what you wish to accomplish.
3. Here are some examples:
   - Teachers' beliefs about effective language instruction
   - Visual representation of people in 2 elementary English textbooks for global use
   - Strategies and techniques for teaching grammar to young learners
4. Explain why there's a need for the study. Cite relevant literature that calls for further research in this area, or that demonstrates a lack of attention to the topic. In your own words, describe how you think this study will be useful to the profession and to your institution.

Feedback

Considering how complex social and educational phenomena are, one research question that usually leads qualitative research is *What is going on*? For an inquiring mind such as yours, this question must be asked many times during a working day, and attempts to capture an essential understanding of any activity. Answers are invariably descriptive in nature and open to analysis in a variety of ways. You may not get a straightforward answer but you will be able to ask other, more specific questions next time you set out to do research.

We are sure there are many puzzles or questions in your everyday academic life that you would like to solve. Choose one you have always felt intrigued by, one you really want to find the answer(s) to. In due course, you will have the knowledge and research experience to investigate them all if you choose. For the time being, however, start with the one that most interests you.

Here are five magic words that may help you decide what to focus on: **observe**, **talk**, **listen**, **read** and **think**. Take your time to observe what goes on in your school setting, in your classroom or that of a colleague; talk to as many people as you can about your research interest (your research supervisor counts too!); listen to what they have to say and consider the questions they may ask; read as much as you can on the topic of your interest, you might find what other people have studied or a gap you wish to fill; think about your project based on what you have read, listened to and observed.

Having done this, you should have enough background information to formulate your research questions and aims. Thinking of a tentative title for your project may help you focus on the project. Now that you have your title and research aims, everything should fall into place. If you are not completely clear of your research questions or aims, keep reminding yourself of them and talk to your research supervisor.

One answer to the questions given in the activity might look like this:
Topic: **Language instruction**
Tentative title: **Teachers' beliefs about effective language instruction**

The aims of the study could be stated as follows:
- to understand what effective language instruction is
- to find out what teachers at university level think of language instruction
- to recognize students' beliefs about the characteristics that a 'good' language teacher should have

Activity 3

In the previous activity it was suggested you discuss your project with your research supervisor. You need to do this on a regular basis, so you should:

- plan your tutorials with him/her. Design a feasible schedule to discuss your progress throughout the length of your study (remember to consult your supervisor about this). Make a copy of the schedule for yourself!
- keep a record of your discussions. This is vital because interesting ideas may emerge and it is painful to lose them.
- stay in contact. Your meetings will help you remain focused on the aims of the project as well as allow you to discuss any emergent issue(s).
- use your research supervisor as a sounding board. S/he is highly experienced and can really help you finish your project in due course.

Feedback

As mentioned above, constantly talking about your research will help you sort out the difficulties that will surely emerge as you do your study.

2.3 Design Issues

Now that you have the research problem, question(s) and objectives more clearly defined, it's necessary to consider the implications of the research.

Activity 4

Using this table as a guide, write the research questions you have developed in the first column. For each question, complete the columns remaining.

Research question	Data sources	Justification	Practicalities (resources, access)

Feedback

Charts like this provide a fairly simple way of checking the consistency of your thinking at an early stage in the research process and will help you make certain fundamental choices. Make any necessary changes as you advance in your study.

Reflect

Now that you have clarified your research questions and aims of the study, it is time to consider other important research issues concerned with the practicalities.

There are several questions you need to ask in order to minimise potential problems:

1. Do I have time to do this?
2. Can I manage this project alone?
3. Who/what will inform my study?
4. Will I have access to the people/documents?
5. How many people/documents will inform my study?
6. How will I contact/have access to them?
7. What costs will this imply?
8. How will I get the funding required?
9. Will I have access to sources related to my study?
10. How will I assure the confidentiality of the participants?

Feedback

Although the questions may seem rather absurd, they are designed to make you think about research issues not typically considered but nevertheless important. You may have designed very specific research questions but if you overlook the ten questions above, problems may arise. Discuss your answers with your supervisor as well as your fellow students.

The first question is especially important: do not try to be overly ambitious with your study. Keep it specific, realistically attainable. Remember you will have opportunities later to carry out further studies or explore other issues emerging from this one. When thinking about costs you should consider copies of questionnaires and printing of drafts, transport expenses (if you have to move from one location to another), photocopying of documents, phone cards (if you need to call people) and so on. Equally important is considering how to access people and documents. For example, you may want to consult colleagues but must be mindful of their schedules and flexible enough to meet when they are available. The final question concerns the ethics of your research; it is important to guarantee that the identity of the people informing your study will remain anonymous to prevent any potential problems.

2.4 The literature review

One of the purposes of reviewing the literature is to understand the background of the topic you want to study. It should provide you with a perspective on how it has developed and become established. This is necessary because in your research report you have to include a panorama of how your topic has been approached in educational and/or TEFL research (this is your 'theoretical framework'). A review of literature can be seen as a preface to and rationale for engaging in your research. However, it is also constitutes a complete chapter of your research report.

Hart (1998, p. 27) has identified the following purposes:

- distinguishing what has been done from what needs to be done
- discovering important variables relevant to the topic
- synthesizing and gaining new perspective
- identifying relationships between ideas and practice
- establishing the context of the topic or problem
- rationalizing the significance of the problem
- enhancing and acquiring subject vocabulary
- understanding the structure of the subject
- relating ideas and theory to applications
- identifying the main methodologies and research techniques used
- placing the research in a historical context to show familiarity with state-of-the-art developments

A good literature review requires library and internet skills for exploiting the use of indexes and abstracts as well as the ability to conduct exhaustive bibliographic searches, organise the collected information meaningfully, describe, critique and relate each source to the subject of the study, and present the organised review logically. Last but by no means least, the ability to cite all sources mentioned correctly.

Tips for reviewing literature:

Find models

Look for other literature reviews of your topic or the discipline, and read them to get a sense of the types of themes you might want to look for in your own research, as well as ways to organize your final review. The references you have already seen are also excellent entry points into your own research and might provide patterns to follow. *ELT Journal* articles may be a good source of information and provide internationally accepted versions of reviews.

Narrow your topic

There are countless articles and books on ELT, Applied Linguistics and related fields. The narrower your topic, the easier it will be to limit the number of sources you need to read in order to get a good survey of the material. Your research supervisor is unlikely to expect you read everything there is on the topic, but it will make your job easier if you limit your scope from the beginning.

It is also wise to consult your supervisor's knowledge in the field. Ask questions which may guide you to core books or articles in order to help you find and determine as quickly as possible the seminal studies and most influential authors in the field.

Use current sources

Because of the ever-changing nature of our discipline, you will be required to use sources that are as current as possible. Since you are writing a review of a specific topic, a survey of the history of the literature may suffice because what is important is how perspectives have changed through the years or within a certain period of time. Try consulting other bibliographies or literature reviews to get a sense of what is expected in the field of ELT. You can also use this method to consider what is 'trendy' and what is not.

Use quotes sparingly

Since the nature of a literature review does not allow for in-depth discussion or detailed quotation from a text, avoid using direct quotes. Some short quotations are acceptable if you want to highlight a point, or if what the author said simply cannot be rewritten in your own words. However, check with your supervisor if you find yourself wanting to put in a number of them.

Be selective

Choose only the most important points in each source to highlight in the review. The type of information you include should relate directly to the review's focus, whether thematic, methodological, or chronological. However, if you have already invested time reading a suitable article or chapter it may be worthwhile capitalising on it by finding an interesting idea or phrase to use. This will help enlarge your reference list.

Summarise and synthesise

Remember to summarise and synthesise your sources within each paragraph and throughout the review. Recapitulate important features of the study you are reading, but then synthesise them by rephrasing the study's significance and relating it to your own work.

Use caution when paraphrasing

When paraphrasing a source, be sure to represent the author's information or opinions accurately in your own words. Either directly refer in the text to the author of your source, or provide ample notation in the text when the ideas mentioned are not your own.

Keep your own voice

While the literature review presents others writers' ideas, your voice should remain central. Weave references to other sources into your own text, but maintain your voice by starting and ending the paragraph with your own ideas in your own words. The sources only support what you are saying.

Referencing

You must cite all the sources mentioned. There are various standard ways of citing other people's work, such as American Psychology Association (APA), Chicago Style and Modern Language Association (MLA), to name but three. It is advisable to check with your supervisor and it is important to be consistent, don't mix styles. As you read, check how different journals require authors to write references and adopt one you feel comfortable with. Most word processors include a tool to help you do this.

APA referencing:

Booth-LaForce, C., & Kerns, K. A. (2009). Child-parent attachment relationships, peer relationships, and peer-group functioning. In K. H. Rubin, W. M. Bukowski, & B. Laursen (Eds.), *Handbook of peer interactions, relationships, and groups* (pp. 490-507). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

MLA referencing:

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research.* 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P,2003. Print.

Chicago Style

Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *The War: An Intimate History, 1941–1945* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 52.

One last piece of advice: remember to write down all the information needed on index cards, in a special notebook or word processing file. These should include: Author's name, year of publication, name of article or book, place of publication and name of publisher.

Activity 5

As suggested, finding models of literature reviews can be very useful. Look for a literature review in a research paper about a topic similar to the one you wish to investigate. Read the literature review carefully, and make a note of your answers to these questions:

1. What types of sources are referred to in the review? (e.g. journal articles, books)
2. When was the majority of the literature written?
3. How has the author included information from the sources used?
4. Has the author used any quotes? If so, how does the author link them into his or her own writing?
5. How are the sources referenced in the literature review? What system of citation has been used?

Write a brief summary of your findings for classroom discussion, and compare them with the answers of your classmates.

Note: You might also find it useful at this stage to consider whether any of the sources referred to in the literature review would be useful to you.

Chapter References

Hart, C. (1998). *Doing a Literature Review*. London: SAGE.

Chapter 3 Data Collection

This chapter presents the main data generation methods used in qualitative educational research. It is expected that you use the described appropriate methods and their corresponding instruments to generate data for your study. The contents included in this chapter should take you a step closer to completion.

Objectives

This chapter will enable you to:

- design interview guides
- develop interviewing skills
- develop observation skills
- mine data from written documents
- use diaries to generate data

Activity 1

From your own experience and from what you've seen in previous readings, think of the advantages and disadvantages of using questionnaires, interviews, diaries and documents as methods of data collection in your study, then complete the chart.

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Questionnaires		
Interviews		
Diaries		
Written documents		

What other methods could you use?

Explain your suggestions in class discussions and listen to your classmates' comments for any other plausible methods of data collection.

Feedback

Thinking about the suitability of methods to generate data for your study is a basic step. The method you choose will depend on the type of information you need to obtain and this, in turn, depends on your ontological and epistemological position. We saw these in chapter 1 but will explore these at length in the following activities.

3.1 Interview Techniques

The term interview seems inadequate for the number of ways you can persuade people to give you the information and insights you seek. In order to avoid misunderstandings, this chapter will clarify the main kinds of interviewing and what they involve so that you can place them in relation to your particular research study.

It is important to keep in mind that interviews are used to:

- access what is important to the interviewees and hear it expressed in their own words
- enable you to explore and examine the worlds inhabited by the interviewees
- provide you with rich data which are amenable to content analysis and so likely to reveal themes which can help explanation of problems
- guarantee 100 percent response rate

Interviews are usually regarded as part of the survey research method, yet are indispensable in qualitative research. Types of interview range from 'unstructured' to 'structured', but beyond this lies a range of possibilities. For example, when doing research on students' perceptions of school practices, data informing the study might come from 'eavesdropping' or listening to students' conversations as we participate in their activities. On the same note, using 'natural' conversations to ask research questions is also possible, a style that Burgess (1998) has named 'conversations with a purpose' or 'purposeful conversations'.

Open-ended interviews are also a preferred style among qualitative researchers; this implies asking participants key open questions in order to subsequently refine the research topic. Semi-structured interviews consist of asking interviewees open and closed questions around a specific topic. Structured interviews are those in which the researcher asks simple, specific, closed questions as if reading from a questionnaire.

The use of qualitative unstructured interviewing in place of more structured forms of is advisable because 'it is important to build into the normal patterns of interaction within the [researched] group, and probably getting better evidence as a result' (Drever, 2003, p. 16). Talking to informants in order to generate data comes very naturally in the ELT field; it is part of our everyday tasks. Drever succinctly justifies using this method of data collection with: 'in the teaching profession, when you want to get information, canvass opinion or exchange ideas, the natural thing to do is to talk to people' (ibid, p. 1). Furthermore, qualitative interviewing allows the researcher to capture people's language and behaviour, articulating their worlds. This comes from an ontological position in which people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality that research questions are designed to explore.

3.1.1 Designing an Interview Guide

An interview guide is not a questionnaire. As the name implies, it is a tool to help you carry out a research interview successfully. It is important you include the basic questions you want to ask as well as other prompts to help obtain the information you need. It is not intended to be followed blindly but to be used appropriately.

Activity 2

1. Imagine that you have decided to use interviews as your main method of data collection.
2. Write five key questions you would like to ask your interviewees. For each question, write two or three 'support' questions or 'prompts'.
3. Compare your interview guide with the following example:

Student Interview Guide
This investigation aims at identifying your perceptions regarding English teaching processes at the University. Your participation is very important. All information provided will be confidential and used for research purposes only. We appreciate your participation.

Key questions
1. Define a good English teacher.
2. What is a 'good' English teacher? Why do think this is important?
3. Are there any differences between a teacher of English and those of other school subjects?
4. Name something that English teachers do that others do not.
5. Think of a good English teacher. What made/makes him/her a good one?
6. What classroom activities does he/she do? What do you like about him/her?

What elements can you identify in this interview guide?
How is it different from the one you designed?
How can this example be improved?

The best way to learn about interviewing is by interviewing people.

This doesn't have to be face-to-face, but these are the steps to follow:
1. Record yourself asking the questions. Once you get going, ask additional questions in order to further expand the conversation.
2. Afterwards, ask your colleague/classmate for feedback giving 5 things they liked and five things they didn't.

3. Take notes on what you need to improve.
4. Now listen to the recording, do you notice any other aspects that should be altered? Again, take notes.
5. Make any necessary changes to the questions, in view of what you've learned.
6. Contact one potential participant and arrange to interview him/her. Plan interviews with others … and off you go!

Feedback

Interviewing is not a fast process. There are three main points to consider:

- practising interviewing per se
- developing and focusing the interview topics and questions
- rehearsing the interview itself

You can practice interviewing as part of developing the questions and format that you plan to use. You will need to rehearse (or pilot) the interview when you have it formulated.

The main elements in organising an interview are:

- identifying key topics (you may have more than one question for some of these)
- framing questions (between five and ten is about right)
- checking that these questions are genuinely open-ended, i.e. that they let the interviewee determine the answer and don't indicate a preferred answer
- deciding on prompts: things you may need to remind the interviewee about
- the use of probes: getting the interviewee to tell you more about a particular topic
- recording the interview (taking verbatim notes stalls the conversation and involves on-the-spot selection that may be doubtful. Writing it up afterwards can also miss key elements)
- keeping the interview moving, which means having all the above working efficiently

It is important to interview people in their 'natural' environments and in a manner in which both of you are at the same level. Go beyond the superficial answers you may get from a questionnaire by keeping a conversational style. Put your interviewee at ease and appear interested by referring back to points they have made earlier.

Gillham offers a very readable, thorough description of the art of interviewing, see the reference at the end of this chapter.

3.2 Involvement and participation

In our experience as researchers, we prefer the term involvement and/or participation to the more common one of 'observation' since the latter is connected with the natural-sciences research approach. Given the nature of human relationships, we must be cognisant of the fact that unless a certain period of familiarisation has occurred, we are reluctant to open up to strangers. The educational qualitative researcher has to gain social acceptance through sensitivity to and awareness of what is considered appropriate behaviour within a given group. For example, if a researcher wanted to investigate the *whys* of student behaviour they would have to earn a place within the students' culture or social life by becoming involved and participating in their activities and actions, and thus get a 'flavour' of what being a student implies.

As a result, involvement and participation means the information obtained will be chiefly descriptive and entails:

- watching what subjects do
- listening to what they say
- sometimes asking them clarification questions

Reflect

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using involvement and participation as the main method of data generation for your own study?

Feedback

Advantages:

- involvement and participation in the target community enables you to really look at what is going on and to see things you might otherwise not have noticed.
- it is probably the only way of studying naturally occurring behaviour.
- you can find out what actually goes on rather than what people say is going on.
- it reduces the influence of the 'observer effect' typical in experimental observation.

Disadvantages:

- it is time-consuming: getting to the core of your investigation is necessarily a slow process
- it might be the starting point for error or selective bias since it may seem deceptively simple
- you need to be aware of the effect of your presence. You must make a consistent effort to observe yourself and the effects you may be having on your subjects.

- data is difficult to collate and analyse. Write your observations as soon as possible to ensure they remain accurate.
- it involves extra effort since it implies simultaneous data collection and analysis in order to redefine your research focus.

In the ethnographic tradition, involvement and participation is the first step in getting to know the culture under study. It is used as an exploratory technique but may also be used as a supplementary method to provide an illustrative dimension. It can be used as part of a multi-method approach, which yields a more 'reliable' account of the phenomenon under study.

3.2.1 Field notes

Involvement and participation data takes the form of field notes. These should be annotated as soon as events take place. A good starting point is to write descriptive notes of the setting, people, activities, events, and visible feelings to form a general picture of what is occurring. As you gradually advance in the research process, focus on those elements that are particularly related to your research goals. These field notes should provide more detail, plus provisional explanations that seem plausible.

Writing field notes is essential and entails:

- running descriptions
- things you remember later
- ideas and provisional explanations
- personal impressions and feelings, first hints and hunches may be important
- things to check up or find out about later in the process

Your basic tools are a notebook and pen for taking on-the-spot notes but you will need to type these up later. This process will help you clarify ideas and remember the information. Being consistent about your note taking and typing may be helpful in narrowing down your research focus. Once you have reached this point, it might be wise to proceed to a more structured form of 'observation'.

Activity 3

Next time you find yourself at a social event (in a meeting, at a party, in a cinema queue and so on) pay attention to the setting, the people (relationships, interactions, feelings) and particular behaviours (routines, processes, events). Take mental notes or, if possible, actual notes on the way people behave. Reflect on this experience.

Share your notes and reflections with classmates, teachers and supervisors and consider how their experiences can help you when it comes to 'real' data collection.

Feedback

Opportunities for observing people's behaviour arise in all manner of situations. The best approach to developing your skills is to increase your awareness of observation opportunities and practice writing field notes.

3.2.2 Structured observation

Ideally, this data generation stage should come after you have spent enough time participating in the target culture to discriminate among the events that interest you. The information obtained using observation can be highly precise on key points of evidence but in order to conduct it properly, you must focus on specific behaviours, knowing exactly what it is you are observing. For example, if as a result of your involvement and participation with the student culture you discover they complain that teachers only address proficient students, you may want to further your findings by identifying how often teachers do so, who the teacher usually talks to, or how many students participate voluntarily.

The picture that emerges should be representative of the total reality. Two points are important:

- a clear specification of what is to be observed and why.
- a clear procedure for recording your observations.

3.2.2.1 Preparing an observation schedule

Imagine you are involved in a project that aims to increase opportunities for low-grade student participation. Observation of the number of low-scorer participations would be one kind of evidence. You could do this by counting participations by these students at ten-minute intervals. Over a given period you would have a given number of observations.

The schedule should contain the date, time of observation, the interval and observer's name. Consider the following example.

Appendix E: Field Notes Samples*

Álvaro Gómez Hurtado School

Date and Topic	General Observation	Comments
April 9th Topic: Alphabet	Students had a great response to the topic they had previous knowledge and they were practicing very exciting, teacher model the pronunciation and by group they pronounce good but when teacher ask individual they are very shy and they do not pronounce ok.	s1: She had a little problem pronouncing some letters like w, z, j. The others were ok. s2: She pronounces ok most of the letters. s3: He is not really interested. Teacher has to push him a lot, he feels ashamed at the time of pronouncing. s4: She did well with most of the letters but they had some difficulties trying to remember some of the pronunciation of the letters. s5: Still having problems with pronunciation and he misbehaves a lot in class, sometimes he is not focus and just forgets the correct way to pronounce and recognizing some letters.
May 13th Topic: Presentation Video	Today students were very nervous and excited, at the beginning we practiced together after that they decided to dress up for the presentation, some groups did a great job, some did not, but the most important point was the most of the group could accomplish the objective that was learning English through a song.	s1: She was really nervous, she sang all the song correctly, but she almost could not face the rest of the class because she is so shy. s2: She did great, she did not have any difficulty and she brought some material in order to do her presentation more interesting. s3: He did a good job he sang most of the parts of the song, but he had some difficulties in the colors part. s4: She did not sing in front of the class but she just stood there, just one of three of them sang the song. s5: Though he is not a really advanced student. He performed the song excellent. He danced and introduced in the song new interesting things that made all the class laugh. Also, he sang the song perfectly.

* The notes are presented as recorded in class by the teacher-observer.

Figure 2, from: Duarte Romero, Tinjacá Bernal, and Carrero Olivares, 2012, p. 28.

Reflect

How would you design an observation schedule for the project above? Make a sample schedule for your own reference using this one as a model.

Activity 4

What could you observe in order to collect useful data for your research project? Design an observation schedule that would be appropriate. Ask your supervisor to review it, and make any recommended changes.

Reflect

Set out to observe how people respond to unusual behaviour on your part by changing your approach to something in a way that challenges conventional routines. Observe how others respond.

Feedback

The essence of involvement and participation is systematic development. Practice and rehearsal are indispensable. You will need to concentrate fully to avoid procedural distractions on the day. You must be fluent and confident in your social and observational skills. Practical trials are key to mastering this approach.

3.3 Written Evidence

Written evidence is often the first type of data collection we consider using but as we have seen, in educational research there are many possible methods. Nevertheless, consulting written evidence can often prove indispensible for generating data.

Written evidence might come from three different sources:

- published evidence of what other researchers have done or found, or relevant government or other official publications, such as reports
- the usually unpublished documents and records found in schools, e.g. grade reports, programmes, syllabi, students' work, summaries of meetings, etc
- ex professo written evidence: asking members of the target group to write a diary, self description, life plan, or whatever is appropriate for your research purposes

The first has already been discussed in the previous chapter regarding literature review. Here we will concentrate on the others.

3.3.1 Researching unpublished documents

Educational institutions often have their own material, which is neither published nor available to the public. Printed matter may be available because it was created specifically, for example manuals and leaflets. However, cautions must be taken as these documents may be idealised in order to convince potential clients. This does not mean we should disregard them, as they can be part of research evidence.

Documents such as policy statements, summaries of meetings and reports, and **records**, such as detailed attendance rates, turnover, and changes in number are usually difficult to access. The first step is to locate them. In order to do so, it is important you state what information you require. People may be able to guide you to where the documents are. Be careful to check with management before asking staff to provide access: in most cases, permission must be granted.

Bear in mind that these documents were not created to answer your research questions, though they might be part of the evidence base. The importance you give them will depend on their relevance to the study. Once you obtain them, photocopying and then highlighting key passages will help in your later retrieval of the elements you may want to use. Approach them as if you were reading for a literature review.

Interesting findings often emerge from a researcher's painstaking analysis of official or other statistics; and getting around the constraints of the way the data is organised in order to extract answers of value is often testimony to a researcher's ingenuity.

Relevant data is collected by measuring how important the documents may be and assessing and selecting the evidence that has a bearing on the research issues. An interesting, document-based investigation into students' dropping out from a BA degree programme may serve you as an example of how this can be done and the results that could be obtained (Busseniers, Hernández, and Núñez, 2014). We suggest you read this and similar research reports in order to fully comprehend the kind of procedures and evidence document mining may offer.

Reflect

Are there any unpublished documents that might be useful for your own research? Where might they be kept? Who would you have to speak to in order to obtain authorisation to access these documents?

3.3.2 Ex professor written evidence

In social and educational settings, researchers have adopted the idea of using personal documents to construct pictures of social reality from the actor's perspective. Diaries or any other texts you ask your participants to write may be used as research instruments to collect detailed information about behaviour, events, and other aspects of an individual's daily life. Diaries present certain advantages over other data generation methods. Self-completion diaries (Corti, 1993) can provide a trustworthy alternative to the traditional interview for events that are difficult to recall accurately or that are easily forgotten. They can also help surmount the problems associated with collecting sensitive information by personal interview when there is insufficient trust and rapport. Ethnographers Pole and Morrison (2003) recognise the value of using diaries in ethnographic research:

> [A] diary provides access to particular, parochial and time bound data. … [it can] often provide a level of personal detail not available through other methods. … it may also offer a degree of reflexivity on the part of those responsible for writing the diary. (p. 58)

In the field of English Language Teaching diary writing has been widely used as a pedagogic devise aimed at encouraging authentic language practice and at initiating learning autonomy by increasing students' reflection on their learning. Thus, students may already be used to writing diaries at teachers' requests, which may facilitate the data collection process.

Advantages:

- diaries have been recognised as a particularly effective way of monitoring process and decisions in qualitative research. They allow participants to note details and explore their own feelings.
- they are not time consuming to produce
- they provide a record of immediate or near immediate responses to events and are therefore sometimes more useful than, for example, interview data which may be gathered after a longer time lapse.

Disadvantages:

- people are frequently unwilling or lack the motivation to keep diaries to pass on to researchers. It is prudent to think of this as supplementary to other methods.
- diary writing gives the subject ample opportunity to edit events.

3.4 Qualitative Questionnaires

Although questionnaires are not closely related with the qualitative paradigm, they can be useful, as long as the researcher is careful not to 'put words into informants' mouths'. At its best, questionnaires should be the product of a first phase in which you have collected data using other methods. Let me explain: if you already have enough data and this data clearly indicate certain 'patterns' or 'themes', you may want to expand your sample by designing a questionnaire grounded on what the data is telling you. This might be done only if you are interested in reaching a wider sample to check if your participants' information is shared by other people.

Keep in mind that designing good questionnaires is not an easy task; you will need to invest a considerable amount of time designing a good one. We hope to help you achieve this.

There are many reasons to use questionnaires to generate data for research purposes:

- they help obtain participants' factual information (age, experience, background).
- they are useful to discover opinions, e.g. attitudes, priorities.
- they are reliable; you can give the same questionnaires to different people before and after events and compare responses.
- they are easy to analyse.
- they can be designed to include open questions although these take more time to analyse.

However, you have to be careful when using a questionnaire since:

- questionnaires need to be trialled before applying them.
- people tend to resist them.
- people forget to give them back; you'll need to remind them constantly.
- questions can be interpreted in different ways, which can affect responses.
- questionnaires usually set the agenda and this can make it difficult to discover what people think and what is important to them.

The two golden rules of good questionnaire design are:
Keep it **short**
Keep it **simple**

Activity 5

Based on the information obtained in the mock interviews you performed**,** design a short questionnaire which covers the main issues that emerged. Ask 10 of your classmates or teachers to answer it. Make notes of your answers to the following:

- compare the response rate (how many people actually returned it) with that of interviews
- compare the answers to the questions with those obtained from interviews.
- what conclusions can you draw from this experience?
- how suitable would questionnaires be for your research purposes?

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Chapter 4 Data Analysis

This chapter looks at a key element of any research project: the analysis of the data that has been collected. We will begin by looking at analysis procedures in general, before looking at more specific details of the analysis process. We will then provide detailed instructions of categorising and coding techniques. At the end of the chapter you are asked to consider the links between your data and existing theory.

Objectives

This chapter will enable you to:

- become familiar with analysis procedures commonly used in qualitative research.
- develop skills needed for categorising and coding qualitative data.
- consider the relationships between your own findings and existing theory.
- identify how to present the findings of your research.

4.1 Qualitative Analysis Procedures

4.1.1. Analysis for Reliable Research

To begin, we should state that analysis occurs throughout the research process. In the initial stages, when we identify a research issue and set research objectives, we are analysing. When we collect data, it is a form of analysis that enables us to know which steps to take next. As we carry out analysis subconsciously, it is often unsystematic and as a result can become a complex process. This chapter provides information on how to make sense of the analysis process and make it a more organized practice.

An essential part of any research project is the analysis of the data. In qualitative research, the process of analysis is of particular importance as it enables us to reach reliable and valid findings. In chapter one we looked in detail at the issues that make a research project a quality one. While the data collection methodology helps ensure that research is reliable and valid, the analysis also plays a key role in this. Let us start by clarifying some concepts.

Validity

We would like to stress the discussion on the term 'validity' for social science. Ratcliffe (1988, p. 158, cited in Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995) puts it succinctly: 'It should be stated at the outset that there is no sure way of assuring validity but that there are only 'notions of validity'' (p. 324). Data does not speak for itself but only through the researcher who becomes the interpreter of meaning. One cannot observe phenomena without changing it some way; words and numbers are, after all, ways of representing realities. However, one way of making research 'valid' in the eyes of readers is by means of using a multi-method approach to data generation.

‘Qualitative research is inherently multi-method in focus’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 8), therefore it is highly advisable to employ a multi-method approach to generating data. In the main, it should be produced by spending time in the field within the selected culture (Crewswell, 1998). This ‘reflects and attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 8). A researcher may be sure of obtaining a full description of the phenomenon by using a ‘combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study … a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry’ (ibid).

The use of multiple research methods enables the researcher to explore the phenomenon from a number of different perspectives, ensuring a way of gaining validity. In this regard, Burgess (1984) asserts: ‘Many sociologists address these problems [of validity] by using … multiple strategies of field research in order to overcome the problems that stem from studies relying upon a single theory, single method, single set of data and single investigator’ (p. 144). Merriam (2002) adds: ‘If at all possible, researchers are encouraged to use more than one method of data collection as multiple methods enhance the validity of the findings’ (p. 117). Using a multi-method approach also serves to counterbalance the bias inherent in using a single method (Holliday, 2002).

Authors critical of the positivistic view of validity have come up with different views on how ‘validity’ of qualitative research might be reached. One of the most influential is that provided by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 289-331). To them, qualitative research should be judged in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability rather than in the more positivistic ideas of validity, reliability and objectivity.

Edge and Richards (1998) summarise this as:

- credibility: Is it a credible version of what happened, both in terms of description and interpretation?
- transferability: naturalistic inquiry seeks to produce understandings of one situation which someone with knowledge of another situation may well be able to

make use of, it demands and answer to the question 'Where to?'

- dependability is a matter of taking care that the inevitable changes in the situation being investigated, in the participants, and in the emergent design of research are properly documented, so that the decisions made and the conclusions reached are justifiable in their own contexts.
- confirmability is an issue of providing evidence which confirms the presence of the data according to the perspective, standpoint, or value system espoused by the researcher. (p. 348)

Edge and Richards also provide the following set of guidelines to ensure that research achieves validity:

- evidence of long-term experience of the context being studied (credibility)
- the adequacy of the data from the field, which should be drawing on different data types, gathered in different ways from different participants (credibility)
- the richness of description and interpretation offered (transferability)
- the documentation of the research, including records of reflection and decision making to which the steps of the research process can be reconstructed (dependability and confirmability)

In a more recent discussion of the issue, Holiday (2004) states:

> Validity in increasingly creative qualitative research has therefore a lot to do with success – in how far we are able to show the interconnections that make a successful thick description, and in how far we can show the workings of how we arrived there; and much of this is connected with the skill with which we write the research (p. 3).

An important aspect to keep in mind when carrying out qualitative data analysis is the level of generalizability of the study. We often want to believe that our research is widely applicable, but we need to recognise that due to the nature of qualitative research and the usually small-scale investigations we pursue, it is usually better to err on the side of caution and emphasise the fact that it represents one particular case. The same study carried out in a different setting or with different subjects may produce different results. Nevertheless, qualitative studies gain transferability from the principle that it is always beneficial to know what has occurred in other cases.

Richards (2003), proposes that there are six key characteristics for ensuring reliable data analysis in qualitative research:

- openness: don't get carried away by preconceptions. Be open to different interpretations. You might discover that what you believed to be true is actually not.
- inquisitiveness: keep asking questions even when you think the answer is obvious. You might find out that it's not so clear after all.
- honesty: very important in all research, especially qualitative research. Represent in an unbiased way, without distorting your findings. Can be done by accident, but if you are aware of it, easier to avoid.
- authenticity: ensure that your results are based on legitimate voices, backed up by well-kept records of data.
- legitimacy: make sure your evidence is based on clear links with data.
- transparency: explain every step of the research process and allow others to understand the study fully. This allows others to fully connect with the study.

(p. 267-268)

4.1.2. The Analysis Process

Unquestionably, of all of the phases of a qualitative project, data analysis is the most complex and mysterious and one that receives little discussion in the literature. For a novice educational researcher, many data collection strategies involved in a qualitative project may seem familiar; teachers have always based their educational practice on learning as much as possible about the students they work with, detecting commonalities and differences in order to provide individualised attention. However, in order to generate findings that transform raw data into new knowledge, a qualitative researcher must engage in active and demanding analytic processes through all phases of the research. Understanding these processes is therefore an important aspect not only of doing qualitative research, but also of reading, understanding, and interpreting it.

In a research project, analysis involves summarising the mass of data collected and presenting the results in a way that communicates the most important features. In qualitative research we are interested in discovering the big picture using various methods. Bear in mind that, for the most part, researchers are interested in using the data to describe a phenomenon, to articulate what it means and to understand it. Below you will find a brief description of the main approaches to data analysis. There are numerous sources on each and you are strongly advised to read as much as possible in order to take an informed decision as to which one to use in your study.

4.1.2.1 Analytic induction

Analytic induction refers to a qualitative research data analysis procedure that employs a systematic and exhaustive examination of a limited number of cases in order to provide generalizations. The stages of analytic induction are:

- defining the field;
- hypothesizing an explanation;
- studying one case to see if it fits the facts;
- modifying the hypothesis or the definitions in the light of this;
- reviewing further cases.

Methods of data generation (e.g. interviews and 'observations') can be carried out with pre-coded indicators in mind (based on previous studies); this makes data handling and analysis far simpler since what a researcher must do is to study a 'case', finding 'examples' of the phenomenon under study in the data to see if they fit the hypothesis. The chart below illustrates the process of analytic induction.

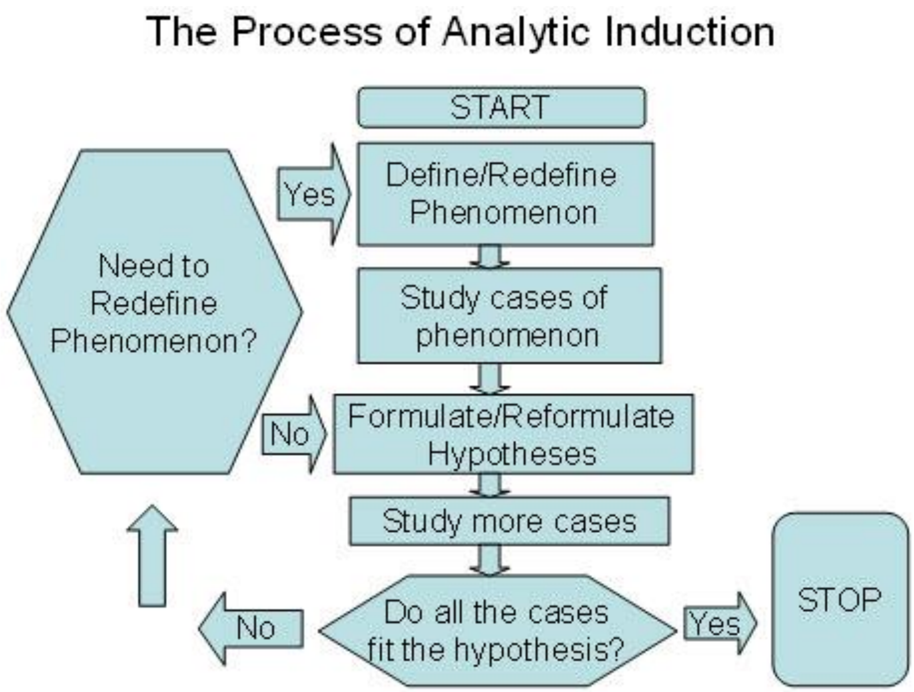

Figure 3: The Process of Analytic Induction. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, cited in Bazeley, 2013, p. 346.

4.1.2.2 Constant Comparative method

The Constant Comparative Method is used to develop grounded theory. A grounded theory consists of categories and properties and theories that are the conceptual links between them. Because the basic strategy of the constant comparison method is compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research, the constant comparative method has been adopted by many researchers not seeking to build substantive theory.

The basic strategy of the method is exactly what the name implies: constantly compare. The researcher begins with a particular incident from an interview, field notes or document and compares it with another incident in the same or another set of data. These comparisons lead to tentative categories that are then compared to each other and to other instances. Comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualization until a theory can be formulated.

4.1.2.3 Content Analysis

Data in qualitative research is often gathered on the basis of a few general questions rather than a hypothesis and followed by finely detailed analysis. This process is often preferred as it allows the voices or behaviour of the participants to direct the final analysis of the data and enables the researcher to keep close to the meanings of individuals or groups in specific contexts.

Content analysis involves examining the data so as to elicit themes and patterns of belief or behaviour, evidence that relates to your research questions. The content can be analysed on two levels. The basic level is a descriptive account of the data: what was actually said with nothing read into it and nothing assumed about it. The higher level of analysis is interpretative: it is concerned with what was meant by the response, what was inferred or implied.

4.1.2.4 Processes in Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative researchers are justifiably wary of creating an overly reductionist or mechanistic image of an unquestionably complex set of processes. Nevertheless, researchers have identified basic commonalities in the process of making sense of qualitative data. In what follows, we will describe the major phases of data analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

Data Reduction

First, the mass of data has to be organized and somehow meaningfully reduced or reconfigured. This is the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in field notes or transcriptions. Not only does the data need to be condensed for the sake of manageability, it also has to be transformed so it can be made intelligible in terms of the issues being addressed.

In qualitative analysis, the researcher decides which data are to be singled out for description according to principles of selectivity. This usually involves some combination of deductive and inductive analysis. While initial categorizations might be shaped by pre-established research questions, the qualitative researcher should remain open to new meanings from the data available.

Data Display

Data display is the second element or level in qualitative data analysis. Data display goes a step beyond data reduction to provide an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing. A display can be an extended piece of text or a diagram, chart, or matrix that provides a new way of arranging and thinking about the more textually embedded data. Data displays, whether in word or diagrammatic form, allow the analyst to extrapolate enough to begin to discern systematic patterns and interrelationships. At the display stage, additional, higher order categories or themes may emerge that go beyond those first discovered during the initial data reduction process.

Conclusion Drawing and Verification

Conclusion drawing involves stepping back to consider what the analyzed data mean and to assess the implications for the questions at hand. Verification, integrally linked to conclusion drawing, entails revisiting the data as many times as necessary to crosscheck or verify these emergent conclusions. The meanings emerging from the data have to be tested for plausibility, rigour and 'confirmability'. As we have seen above, validity in qualitative research encompasses a much broader concern for whether the conclusions being drawn from the data are credible, defensible, warranted, and able to withstand alternative explanations.

Richards (2003, p. 272) explains the process of qualitative analysis in more detail, as can be seen in the table below.

Aspects of Analysis

Collect	collect data/generate data
Think	think about the data, the aims of the project, other research, etc. in order to inform categorisation
Categorise	Code the data in order to assign it to categories
Reflect	Add notes, comments, insights, etc.
Organise	Arrange the categories in different ways in order to see the data from different themes, etc. perspectives, looking for connections, relationships, patterns
Connect	Link discoveries generated by these procedures to concepts and theories, seeking explanation and understanding
Collect	In the light of insights gained, collect further data

4.2 Categorising and Coding Techniques

4.2.1 Looking for patterns

It is time to look for patterns. This is something you have been doing, consciously or unconsciously, since the start of your research project. It is important that throughout the course of analysis, you ask and re-ask the following questions:

1. What patterns and common themes emerge in responses dealing with specific items? How do these patterns (or the lack of) help illuminate the broader research question(s)?
2. Are there any deviations from these patterns? If yes, are there any factors that might explain these atypical responses?
3. What interesting stories emerge from the responses? How can these stories help illuminate the broader study question(s)?
4. Do any of these patterns or findings suggest that additional data may need to be collected? Do any of the study questions need to be revised?
5. Do emerging patterns corroborate the findings of any corresponding qualitative analyses that have been conducted? If not, what might explain the discrepancies?

Reflect

Consider your own data and answer the questions above.

4.2.2 The Process of Coding

As we saw in the previous section, all analysis of qualitative data requires some form of coding and categorisation in order to make sense of what has been collected. First, in order to make it comprehensible, we code the data, often using information that has been collected throughout the research process in the form of memos, notes, observations and ideas from reading. This coded data then needs to be organised so that we can see the relationships that exist within it.

There are many techniques that can be used for coding. To start from the physical aspect of data coding, it's important to recognise that this is a very visual process. You will need to create tables or charts, and use different colours according to categories to help you locate sections of data more easily. Depending on your personal preferences, you may decide to do it on paper or a computer. In our experience, we find it easier on the computer as it means we don't have to write and rewrite chunks of text. Other researchers, however, say they prefer to write up their data on file cards so they can move them around on wall charts. The important thing is to experiment to find out what works best for you.

Now that we have established the logistical side of data coding, we are sure you are wondering: 'How exactly do I do this? How do I know what to code?' As you have probably realised by now, qualitative research is not clear-cut; nothing is as black and white as in the natural sciences. There are no rules or laws that our research must follow. And this applies also to the coding practices. There are, however, some guidelines that can be followed, and it is those that we will focus on next.

4.2.3 Coding Guidelines

Perhaps at the moment of typing your notes or transcribing interviews you start noticing that certain 'themes' are recurrent and on the basis of this decide to ask more questions about them. This is the first step in data analysis. The procedure of content analysis involves a series of steps, including looking for patterns and categorising and coding. These are listed as follows:

1. Take a copy of the transcript and read through it. When you see something that contains apparently interesting or relevant information, make a brief note in the margin about the nature of the information you have noticed.

2. Look through your margin notes and make a list of the different types of

information you found. If the transcript was typed using a word processor, a quicker way of doing this will be to highlight each item of data, copy it and paste it onto a list (make sure you keep an original copy of the whole transcript in your file!)

3. You now have a list of items excerpted from the text. Read through them and categorise each in a way that describes what it is about. You will find yourself using some of the categories several times because different items of data refer to the same topic. However, at this stage go for as many categories as you need and don't put an item into the same as a previous one if you even suspect that you may have identified a new category. The number of categories can be reduced later.

4. Now look at the list of categories you have identified from the transcript and consider whether any of them may be linked in some way. If so, you could list them as major categories and the original, smaller ones as minor categories. Some textbooks refer to these major categories as themes.

5. Look through the list of major and minor categories of data. As you do so, compare and contrast them. You may find that you change your mind about some of the minor ones. As you start to develop 'the big picture' you may perceive some items of data differently and see them as fitting better into an alternative category. Sometimes, an item seems to belong in two categories. If so, list it under both.

6. Move on to the next transcript and repeat the process from stages 1-5. As you work through the second and subsequent transcripts you will continue to identify new categories of information but will increasingly find that you recognise an item of data as belonging to a previously identified category. Eventually you will run out of new categories and find that all the items of relevant and interesting information can be accommodated in the existing categories.

   At this stage researchers sometimes like to colour code their categories, using a different colour for each to highlight items of data in the transcripts. This is a good idea as it makes recognition of data easier when reviewing the transcripts at a later stage. However, if working on paper with a highlighter pen, be aware that you could change your mind and want to move an item of data to a different category. Always keep clean copies of transcripts so that you can change them later.

7. Collect all the extracts from the transcribed interviews that you have put into one category because they appeared to bear some relationship to each other. Examine each of the extracts in turn. Do they belong together or are there any that now look as though they should really belong in a different category?

8. When all the relevant transcript data has been sorted into major and minor categories, look again at the data contained in each. As you review the data within the system of categorisation you have developed you may decide to move some items from one category to another. Or you may decide that information is in the 'right place' in that it fits together, but the terms used to name or describe the category need to be changed.

9. Once you have sorted out all the categories and are sure that all items of data are in the right one, look at the range of categories to see whether two or more seem to fit together. If so they may form a major theme in your research.

10. Go back to the original copies of the transcripts, the ones where you made your initial notes in the margins. Look at any text that you did not highlight at all because it did not appear relevant at the time. Now you have the themes, major and minor categories clearly sorted, consider whether any of the previously excluded data is relevant and should be included in your results.

This process may appear confusing, as though qualitative researchers keep changing their minds and have difficulty deciding what data belongs where. This is true to some extent: the process of content analysis involves continually revisiting the data and reviewing its categorisation until you are sure that the themes and categories used to summarise and describe the findings are a truthful and accurate reflection of the data.

4.2.4 What is a category?

A category is a label on a piece of information, based on its general content. According to Taylor and Gibbs (2010), a category can be based on any of the following:

- themes, topics
- ideas, concepts
- terms, phrases
- keywords

To a certain extent you will have to rely on intuition to establish coding criteria. It is essential that categories are meaningfully named and are clearly defined in order to ensure a reliable coding of data. It is also important to note that coding can be descriptive or analytical. Descriptive coding refers to summarising the data in order to describe the content. Analytical coding involves reflection, with the researcher going deeper into the data in an attempt to understand why it is the way it is. The importance of clearly defined coding categories can be seen in the diagram below.

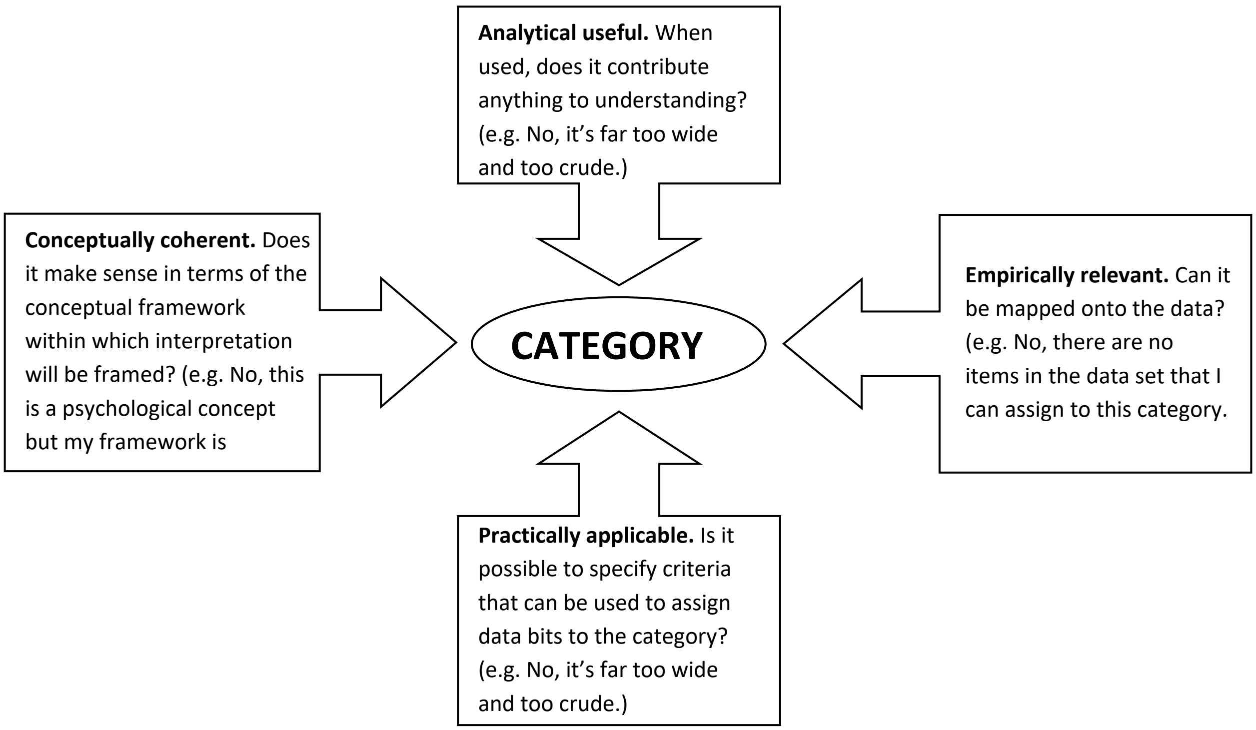

Figure 4: Essential features of an adequate category. From Richards (2003), p. 276

As we can see, it is not only clarity of category that is important, but also its applicability and usefulness in the analysis process.

Although at this point they may be difficult to conceptualise, the categories should become apparent once you begin to examine your data. You may want to form your categories according to those established in previous research (i.e. categories that were discussed in your literature review), or following the paradigm of grounded theory, you may want to form the categories according to what you identify in your own data.

Activity 1

Perhaps the best way to understand the practice of coding is with hands-on experience. Read extensively about this issue. We have found Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003) a very useful source since it exemplifies different types of data analysis. After reading the article, take one sample from the data you have collected and start analysing it. First identify its type. Select the most appropriate form of analysis as suggested by the authors. Follow the step-by-step process described above and in the article. Select the extracts you would use in your report. Prepare to share your analysis.

4.2.5. Overcoming prejudices in research

Human intelligence is, by its nature, selective. If we didn't select among all the things that surround us we would be overwhelmed. In that sense, then, an 'open mind' is impossible: in qualitative research the researcher is the (human) research instrument.

But there is a level of 'closed-mindedness' that we can deal with, and that is our preconceptions and expectations: our *prejudices*. These are pre-judgments of things we are unfamiliar with or do not know much about. They are common, and most of them are of little importance.

It is normal to come to the research process with preconceived ideas, and you need to ask yourself constantly: What do I expect to find? What do I think this is all about? Preconceptions are not necessarily wrong, and may be based on inadequate evidence. However, *preferences* pose a greater problem. Not just what you expect to find, but what you want to find. Ask yourself: what do I hope to uncover here? What is the preferred picture as far as I am concerned?

When you read research papers you can often see that people have found what they wanted to find, which is hardly surprising. But researchers of integrity are constantly challenging and scrutinizing themselves. The first stage in that process is to get your expectations and preferences out into the open. Acknowledge them and write them down. They are as much a part of the research process as anything else.

Reflect

What are your personal expectations of your research? What do you hope to uncover? What would your ideal findings be? Write them down and remember to keep in mind that they will influence you when analysing data.

Feedback

'Objectivity' in the absolute sense may be impossible but that doesn't mean you immerse yourself in uncritical subjectivity. You strive for a level of detached honesty that acknowledges your place in the scheme of things. In a sense, you decentre yourself. There are a number of ways in which you go about this, as we will now see.

Absorbing the culture

This is the heavy emphasis at the beginning of the research process; and it never stops entirely. You go in with your eyes and your ears open: you look and you listen. What is it like to be a student at this school? What is it like to work in a private English school? What is it like to be a probationer teaching in an urban school? You can only find out by spending time with people in their setting. In a sense, each location has its own culture, the conventions by which it works. It also has its own values and 'language': ways of judging, thinking and talking about the lived experience.

It takes time to penetrate that. Not least because we all have a 'front'—which we may truly believe in—that we present to outsiders. The value of being involved, perhaps becoming a temporary member of the setting, is that you are more likely to reach the informal reality. Outsiders of a perceived high or official status may never get there. Trainee teachers, for example, may get a better view of how a school works than a visiting inspector.

Looking for discrepant data

As you proceed, you will acquire a large amount of information and develop provisional explanations. But is there data that does not fit the 'theories' you are developing? Looking for negative (opposite or contradictory) evidence, or evidence that qualifies or complicates your emerging understanding is basic to research integrity. The temptation is to close your mind, to think that you have 'got it'. For example, you may have decided that the students at a public school are not to be blamed for their poor command of the language despite the amount of class-hours in their three-year course. This will have come about because you realised, after a series of interviews corroborated with classroom observation, that what are supposed to be fifty-minute lessons are reduced to almost half that time due to classroom management techniques and lack of proper material for teachers to use in class.

Triangulation: taking different bearings

We have constantly suggested that different kinds of data (or different sources) bearing on the same issue commonly yield contradictory or 'discrepant' results. If every kind of evidence agrees then you have simple, confirmatory triangulation. If what people say, and what you see people doing all concur then you have a straightforward picture. Often you do not, the straightforward 'fix' does not apply. It does not mean that one set of data is 'untrue', rather that the presumed relationship with the triangulation point either does not exist or has to be understood differently. A number of things that make straightforward sense, superficially, can be shown by research not to be or not to operate as expected. But you would have to look at other possible causes since different 'bearings' may qualify the picture.

The representativeness of data

Representativeness is different from triangulation. You listen to what people tell you, but are you listening only to some people? Or, to put it another way, is it that some people—knowing you are the 'observer'—are keen to get their case across to you? If they want to 'help' you, you need to ask yourself why. Others who are more cautions may have a quite different picture to present, either because they are more private in their habits or because they know that what they think does not fit the party line. So, is what you are getting representative of all shades of opinion?

This is the issue of 'accessibility'. In any area, some kind of information and/or some people are more accessible than others, making that information and the opinions of those people disproportionately apparent. This is one of the weaknesses of journalism where (usually) the most quickly accessible material is what gets published. But that does not mean that the picture presented is comprehensive or representative.

Whatever the kind of evidence—documents and records, what people say, what they do, the physical or social context they inhabit—an adequate picture involves a lot of digging. Even published documents, for example, go largely unread, or are read without an appreciation of their significance. Not all publications are high profile. The material is there but it is not known. Important data are not necessarily readily accessible, lying on the surface, so to speak.

This is true even with those people who are eager to talk to you. Some researchers have commented that the most important thing to note is not what people tell you about, but what they avoid. There may be parts of an organization that tend to be overlooked, aspects of professional practice that are not acknowledged, and so on. You must be alert to these limitations, and to signs of what is there but not visible.

Asking yourself how you know things

This topic links into the preceding one, but focuses on how researchers come to know their evidence. We know what we know, but knowledge is either tacit or explicit. If it is explicit we can explain how and why we know it, i.e. we can cite the evidence. Tacit knowledge (sometimes called intuition) is where we sense or feel something, often very strongly, but it is hard to explain or justify. There is nothing wrong with intuitive knowledge: your antennae may have picked up something important which needs exploring.

For example, a head teacher may be telling you about the school policy and practice in relation to bullying in the school, how incidents are dealt with, and so on. They are fluent and coherent, but somehow you do not entirely believe them.

You should ask yourself two questions:
1. Why? i.e. what doesn't ring true?
2. How would I check out what I've been told?

You neither accept your intuition as some magical divination of the truth nor reject it because it is not hard and fast evidence. Qualitative educational research is very much like detective work. Nothing is disregarded: everything is weighed and sifted, checked and corroborated.

Checking your ideas and explanations with those in the culture
You can do this in various ways. It may be that you give a presentation to the people in the setting where you are working. This can be important for various reasons: a number of people will have given you help of some kind, perhaps others are curious as to what exactly you are up to. Of course, you should be explaining the purpose of your research, informally, whenever the opportunity presents itself, but that can be a scrappy and incoherent process. A specially prepared presentation signals your wish to communicate, inform—and consult.

Peer consultation
Peers can be very helpful because they are doing the same kind of thing as you, are experts in the kind of research you are undertaking, or are experts in research methods. They can save you a lot of trouble. Your research supervisor may also help in this endeavour. Share whatever you believe needs checking; the supervisor's feedback, based on a shared understanding, has a special quality on its own.

Over time, peer consultation has a powerful disciplinary effect on your thinking. This does not mean that you should do everything you are told but that listening to other people's opinions and readings of your data might be illuminating.

Activity 2

We have covered seven different ways in which prejudices can be avoided while carrying out research. Researchers may be aware of the fact that they should do their utmost to prevent discrepancies resulting from prejudice, but it is not always at the forefront of their minds. Considering what you have just read, what will you, personally, do to help avoid prejudice in your research project?

Write a brief explanation (max. 250 words) of what you intend to do. This should be included in the corresponding section of the report.

4.2.6 Writing up the analysis process

It is important that the methodology section of your research paper includes a description of the analysis process you undertook. The account you write for the following activity should be added to your methodology section.

Activity 3

Now that we have looked at the process of coding qualitative data, it is time for you to begin analysis of your own data. By this stage, you should have collected your data and it should be in written form, with the exception of recordings and videos (note that you may find it useful to transcribe key sections of these).

As we saw in the presentation on coding, go through your data and code the texts. Remember you may want to use different colours to help you locate the categories you have established.

4.3 Linking Data and Theory

In addition to following an appropriate analysis process, another way of meeting research rigorously is your ability to connect your findings with the relevant theory or theories permeating your research topic. You have to be able to convince your readers, by providing evidence, that your findings are a contribution to existing theory in the field of applied linguistics and TEFL.

The relationship between the development of the categories and the emergence of theory was briefly discussed before, so we will not expand on it here. However, be aware that when presenting the findings of research it is common to make connections with theory but avoid doing so explicitly. This might be caused, to a great extent, by a tendency to see theory in terms of 'grand theory' and to demand of it a level and range of explanatory power far beyond what it will bear. This is why we should use Walford's proposal of *middle-range theory* as the most appropriate for work in qualitative research.

Walford (2001, p. 148) identifies *grand theory* as a way of interpreting the world and *micro-theory* as 'testable propositions that attempt to attribute causality to a particular phenomenon or activities'. Such theories can stand alone but may also connect to another level and are linked to model building. Models, Walford argues, are ways of simplifying and representing complex phenomena: human constructs that aid understanding.

Richards (2003) provides a more in-depth description of the role of theory in qualitative research:

> This straightforward view of theory fits in well with the approach of grounded theory, where theories are developed from concepts arising out of the data as the process of categorisation and constant comparison develops. A recognition of this intimate connection between concepts and theory does not commit us to the analytical canons of grounded theory, but it does reflect an important relationship: as researchers we bring our need to explain, connect and understand to our treatment of the data and it is through the interaction of thought and evidence that concepts emerge, models are constructed and theories discovered or developed. 'Theorising', as Woods (1996:70) observes, 'begins from the very first day of fieldwork with the identification of possibly significant events or words'. Theory, then, is not something that stands apart from the data or the process of analysis, it represents a level of explanations that allows us to make important connections among elements in the data and between our findings and others in the field. (p.290)

In a nutshell, when writing your research report, you should make explicit links between your findings and current teaching/learning theories. Do not be afraid of doing so. Provided you followed thorough research procedures, met quality research values and fulfilled 'validity' principles, you are in a position to contribute to learning/teaching theories. This contribution may come in the shape of contesting beliefs, adding to existing knowledge or even refuting established assumptions. You have gained your right to speak.

Activity 4

In your theoretical framework and/or literature review, you should have included details of theories that relate to your field of research. Now consider your findings. How does the data you collected and analysed relate to these theories? Does it add to them in any way?

Taking into account your responses to the questions above, write approximately 500 words discussing the relationship between your research findings and the existing theory on the topic.

4.4 Presenting your Results

Qualitative data has several features to take into consideration when planning the presentation of findings. The data are subjective, interpretative, descriptive, holistic and copious. It can be difficult to know where or how to proceed. A good starting point is to look at the themes and categories that have emerged and to use these to structure the results section of your research report.

This structure can be set out at the beginning, either as a list or in diagrammatic form. The themes are then presented in sections with the categories as sub sections. In this way, the categories of data are used to construct a case that the themes are the main findings of the study. Further 'evidence' to support the findings is provided by using direct quotes from respondents. Key quotations are selected to illustrate the meaning of data. Consider this example. It shows the part of the structure of themes and categories that emerged from an investigation into students' perceptions of effective English teachers.

Themes	Major categories	Minor categories
Perceptions of Teacher's knowledge	Knowledge of the topic they are teaching High level of English Good pronunciation and accent Wide vocabulary	Clarify students' queries Be updated Know about cultural aspects
Perceptions of Teacher's instructional practices	Good explanations Dynamism Preparation Communication skills	Confidence Vocation Clarify doubts Use English in class Promote participation
Perceptions of Teacher-student relationship	Patience Respect Responsibility	Provide time for students to assimilate Provide enough time to

	Honesty	answer Give feedback in homework Check the homework Be flexible and understanding Be in a good mood Be easy-going Be impartial when grading

A presentation of these findings would describe what was meant by 'perceptions' in general. This would be followed by identification and description of each of the broad categories of teachers' knowledge and instructional practices, and the teacher-student relationship. Each category of teachers' knowledge describes how a range of topics is included. Quotes are extracted from the transcripts of interviews with students to illustrate how or why this may be an issue about teachers' knowledge.

Quotations should be used because they are good examples of what people have said specifically about the category being described. A range of quotes should be selected to illustrate such features as: the strength of opinion or belief; similarities between respondents; differences between respondents; the breadth of ideas.

As the researcher works through the different categories, links between them should be made to demonstrate how the themes emerged and how conclusions about the findings were drawn. Many of the quotations will 'speak for themselves' as they are examples of the manifest level of analysis: what people actually said. However, as mentioned, some analysis of data is carried out at the latent or interpretative level which involves extracting the *meaning* of what was said. Careful selection of quotes will demonstrate the 'reliability' and 'validity' of the data analysis.

Some qualitative data can be dealt with in a quantitative way. If an idea appears in the data frequently it may be feasible to measure how often it appears. It may be feasible or even desirable to present some of the results quantitatively using tables and figures. Using qualitative and quantitative techniques for analysis of data can strengthen the analysis.

Activity 5

1. Following the example given above, consider what categories or patterns can be identified in your findings. How could you organise the presentation of findings in your results section?

2. Now look for key quotes from the data you have that help to illustrate each of the categories you identified. Why do you feel that these quotes are appropriate? Remember to take into account the points made about quotations in the text above.

Activity 6

Following discussion with your advisor, write up the results section of your paper.

Chapter References

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Chapter 5 Findings and conclusion

The findings section is, essentially, the part where you explain what has been learnt from the research by linking the findings to your research questions and existing theory. The conclusion is usually where recommendations are made, based on the findings of your research, although this could be included in the findings section instead. The conclusion, apart from summarizing your research and findings, should also include a reflection on the limitations of your research project and make recommendations on improvements or areas to focus on in future studies (further research).

Objectives

This chapter should enable you to:

- become familiar with the purpose of the findings section
- understand the structure of the findings section in a research paper
- identify the conclusions of your research
- develop recommendations based on your findings
- identify limitations of your study and ways in which the research could be continued or improved

5.1 The Findings Section: how and why?

The findings section requires a substantial amount of analytical thinking and organisation of ideas in order to make sense of everything that has been discovered through your research. As we saw in Chapter 2, the introduction and literature review are generally structured in such a way that they lead the reader from the general to the specific, in other words, they have an inverted triangular structure. Taking this model as a starting point, we can think of a research paper as having an 'hourglass figure'. This means that it starts by being broad (or general) and progressively becomes narrower (or more specific) to the point where the body begins. The body refers to the methodology and the results/findings section of the paper. Once we reach the discussion of the findings, however, the model begins to broaden again, returning to the general. This is demonstrated in the figure below.

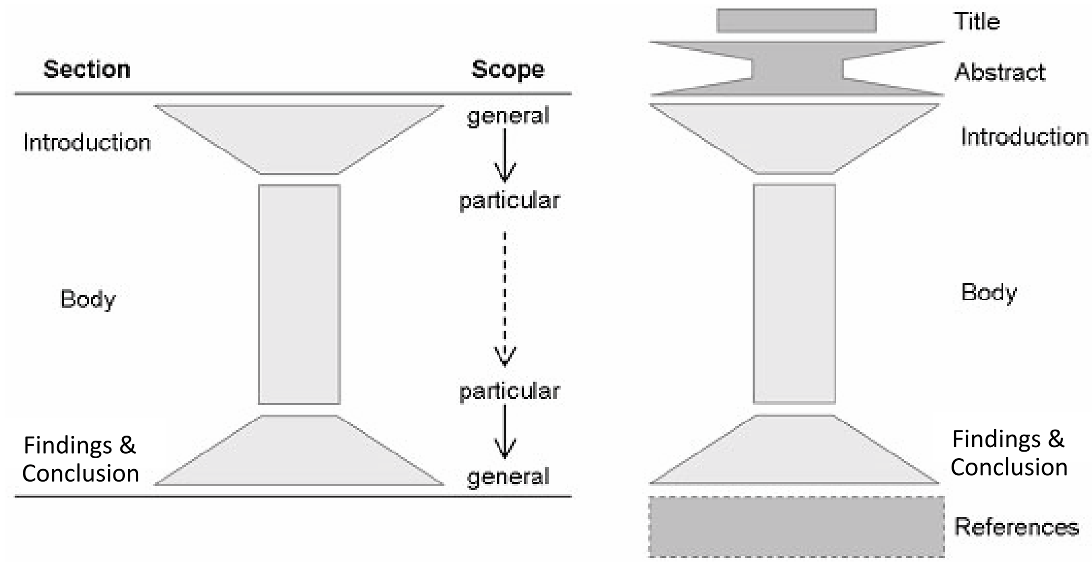

Figure 5: The Hourglass Model. Adapted from Derntl (2014), p.108

As may be deduced from the structure of the findings section, it is the part of the paper which leads from the specifics of your research and links it to the wider field and daily reality of your readers. In the previous chapter we began to consider the links between your paper and existing theory. Here you will further those links and identify what can be learnt from your own findings. You might also consider what recommendations should be made for teachers of English or other L2s based on your findings, or you could include this in the conclusion.

Lastly, the conclusion section is the point at which there should be some reflection on the perceived success of the research, and alternatives for future studies following on from your own should be mentioned. The findings and conclusion sections are sometimes referred to as discussion, as it originally appears in Derntl's model; however, BA and MA research reports usually present them separately, including the discussion in the same section for results and findings. Depending on specific requirements for research reports, however, results and findings/discussion may be separated into two chapters, and then there is a final section for the conclusion.

5.2 From results to conclusions

The results/findings chapter should not only present what you discovered, but also be an analysis of these results, considering how they impact on your research questions' existing theory. We have already mentioned the importance of the links between your research findings and their relationship with those of previous research. That information will prove very useful when developing the chapter.

In addition to identifying similarities and differences between your research and previous studies, it is essential to reflect on what you have learnt from your own study. In order to do this, it is a good idea to go back to your initial objectives and questions. Taking into account your results, and more specifically, the analysis of your results it should be determined whether or not the questions were answered and to what extent. Remember that you should support all your conclusions with evidence from your results.

At this point, you should also bring into discussion any other conclusions that may have been formed from the analysis you carried out. The main themes identified from your categorisation of data should be considered relevant findings, and you may want to explain these in relation to the research objectives. You should also identify whether or not your objectives have been met. If not, you should be able to explain in what ways they were not met, and suggest possible reasons why this occurred.

Reflect

Having seen the relationship between your findings and those of previous studies, what can be learnt from your study? What have you learnt about your specific question or context?
Were your initial hunches proved to be accurate? If not, what can be concluded from your findings? Were there any findings that you did not expect? Do you feel that your objectives were met with your research?

Activity 1

Take some time to think about these questions now, and keep a note of your thoughts. They will help you later when writing up the results/findings section.

5.3 Limitations

Considering whether or not your objectives were met, as suggested above, starts the process of reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of your research. In more scientific terms, research weaknesses are referred to as *limitations*. It is good practice when writing a research paper to include a brief section on limitations in the conclusion. Indeed, not mentioning them would be to assume that the research was flawless. In view of the fact that research is designed and carried out by human beings who, we can all agree, are not perfect, this would be an unreal expectation. Even papers by the most reputable of researchers must make reference to the limitations of the study. As Alexandrov (2004) points out, ‘If you do not discuss study weaknesses, the reviewers will’ (p. 137).

Reflect

- if you could do your research again now, what would you do differently?
- what would you keep the same?

Activity 2

Write a paragraph or two, explaining what the limitations of your study were.

5.4 Recommendations

Apart from the limitations of the study, the conclusion of a research paper usually includes recommendations based on the findings of the paper. Within a research paper in the context of educational research, there are two main types of recommendations that you might want to include:

- practical recommendations for teaching practice.
- recommendations for future research.

Your study most likely began from your experience as a language student, looking to achieve greater understanding of one area of your future work. Presumably, your topic was chosen for its importance in your future professional life, and it is likely that it is also of interest to other language students and teachers. Based on your findings, you should be able to establish recommendations for everyone, including yourself, to improve their teaching practice.

Recommendations for future research, rather than based specifically on your findings, may also be based on the limitations of your research project. Whilst you will, hopefully, have met your own objectives, you may have found that new questions have arisen from your research, or that some areas were not explored in sufficient detail. Mention these points, and make it explicit to the reader where this research could proceed. Somebody may be interested in carrying on where you left off, or perhaps you may want to pursue it in a Master’s or PhD degree in the future!

Reflect

We have looked at the links between your findings and existing theory. Now let’s think about how your findings add to that existing theory.

1. What can be deduced from your findings?
2. What are your conclusions?
3. What were the limitations of your study?
4. What recommendations would you now make for language students and teachers and future researchers?

Chapter References

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Chapter 6: Writing your research report

Now that you have reached conclusions, identified the limitations of your study and decided what recommendations can be made from your findings and limitations, you can start writing your research report in earnest. Naturally, there will be several drafts before the final version, but if you put together everything you have written so far, it will be a good beginning.

A research report will usually contain the following:
1. Title page
2. Abstract
3. Table of contents
4. Introduction
5. Literature Review
6. Methodology
7. Results/Findings (discussion)
8. Conclusions
9. References

This chapter looks at each of these parts and how they should be written, in general terms. It also gives some examples of how to include in-text references.

Objectives
This chapter should enable you to:
- write each of the parts in a research paper
- provide in-text referencing in APA style

Remember that a research paper is an academic text, so the style should always be formal. This chapter does not explain academic formal style in detail, and in any case, it is not something one can develop merely by reading an explanation. The best way to become acquainted and grasp its form is by reading similar written works, such as those you will have read for your research study.

6.1 Title page
The title page of a research paper will depend solely upon the specific requirements of the institution you are writing it for. Sometimes there are no special requirements, but it is common sense to include the title of your research paper (which should be concise but clearly representing what you did) and your name. As the type of research paper we are talking about is one to obtain a degree, the title page should also include which degree, as

well as the name of the institution. Other very common elements are the name of your advisor/supervisor and the date it was delivered.

There follow four examples of title pages for research papers:

Student attrition: factors and beliefs.

By **Names Surnames**

ii

Figure 6A: Research Paper 1

UNIVERSIDAD VERACRUZANA

FACULTAD DE IDIOMAS

TESIS

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR OWN WRITING ASSESSMENT CRITERIA
at the BA English Program, Language School, UV

QUE PARA OBTENER EL GRADO DE:

MAESTRÍA EN ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA

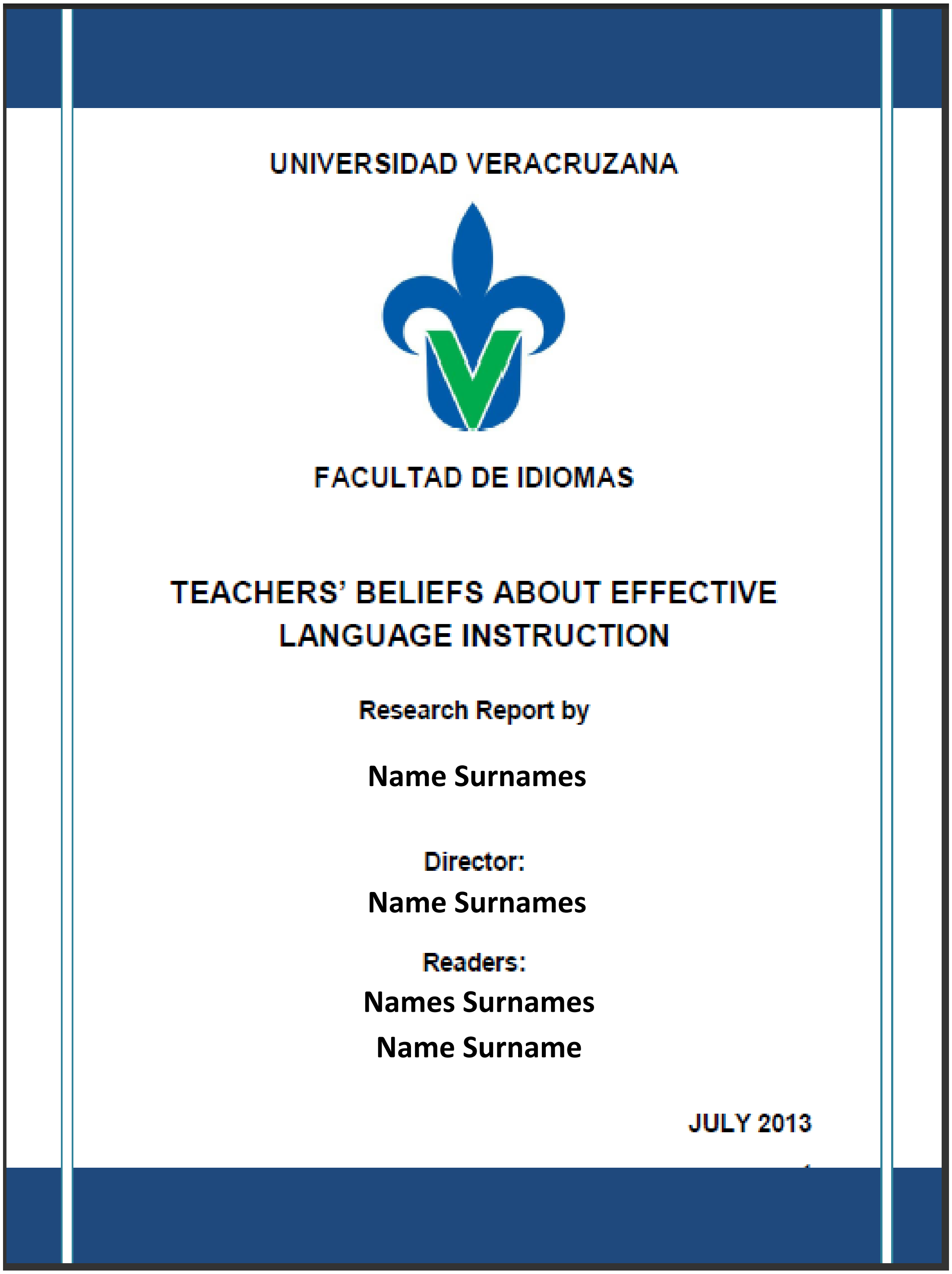
PRESENTA

NAME SURNAMES

DIRECTORA DE TESIS:
NAME SURNAME

Xalapa-Equez, Ver, Marzo de 2009

Figure 6B: Research Paper 2



UNIVERSIDAD VERACRUZANA

FACULTAD DE IDIOMAS

TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Research Report by

Name Surnames

Director:

Name Surnames

Readers:

Names Surnames

Name Surname

JULY 2013

Figure 6C: Research Paper 3

An Exploration into Student Early Leaving at a University
Language Department in Mexico: Voicing Students' Critical
Insights on Institutional Practices

by

Names Surnames

Canterbury Christ Church University

**Thesis submitted to the University of Kent at Canterbury
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

Figure 6D: Research Paper 4

In the first example you will notice that the only elements present are the title of the research paper and the name of the person who wrote it. You will also notice that it is page number 'ii'. This represents specific requirements of the University of Southampton, which for page number 'i' requires information on the student, the program and an signed statement of academic integrity.

Activity 1

What similarities and differences can you see between the four examples of title pages?

6.2 Abstract

Although this is the first section to appear in the research paper, it is the last one you should write. This is because 'An abstract is a greatly condensed version of a longer piece of writing that highlights the major points covered, and concisely describes the content and scope of the writing' (Bond, 2009, p.2). A research paper abstract should include the topic, context, purpose and type of study, the methods and participants, and the results/findings, typically in that order.

Its length may vary, but it is usually no longer than 350 words (Bond, 2009, p.3), depending on the word count of the research paper itself and any other possible requirements. Bear in mind that the abstract is a summary of the research paper, and so the use of key words is essential to condense the necessary information. Another important element to consider is that the general-specific-general structure that the research paper should have is usually also present in the abstract, as is represented in Derntl's model:

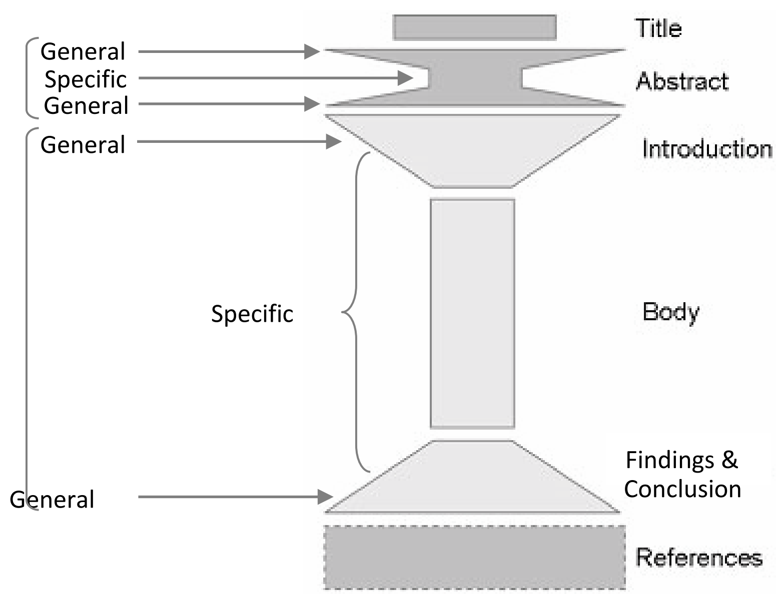


Figure 6E: Research paper model. Adapted from Derntl (2014), p.108

An abstract is not always a requirement for research papers. There are also cases in which a certain model must be followed exactly. Nevertheless, as the abstract provides a quick summary of the research paper, it is very useful for the reader to assess the paper and decide if it is of interest. There follow examples of abstracts that correspond to the research paper title pages in the previous section.

> Student desertion has become a problem in education for the last decades. Research on this matter show that there are many factors that would influence students to withdraw; these include dissatisfaction with both the courses and the institutions (Aldridge & Rowley, 2001); the academic performance and the students' commitment to the programmes (Bennett, 2003); socio-economical factors and family problems (Martínez & Munday, 1998; Audas & Willms, 2001); the students' normative and structural integration into the academic and social systems (Tinto,1975) and the peer relationships (Wing-Ling & Miu-Ling, 2003). These may be internal or external factors that would have a big impact on students' decision to drop out from the universities. It is the main aim of this study to understand why this phenomenon happens at the English Language BA in the University of Veracruz from the students' perspective. This was done through the use of semi-structured interviews. The awareness of this topic and giving voice to the students would hopefully lead to a better understanding of the factors that contribute to student attrition in this context.

Figure 6F: Abstract for Research Paper 1 (176 words)

This present qualitative case study explores sixth semester teachers' perceptions of their own writing assessment criteria at the School of Languages (University of Veracruz), and attempts to establish a relationship between what they state they assess when marking students' exam compositions and what they actually assess. The students' compositions are part of the English standardized exams at the School of Languages and the tasks for the writing section of these exams are usually taken from the Cambridge Examinations writing prompts according to the corresponding level. Although these examinations aim at homogeneity, the assessment criteria for the writing section have not been unified, which results in very marks by their two teacher-markers for the same exam composition.

The main tools for collecting the data for this study were seven students' exam compositions, five semi-structured interviews with the sixth semester teachers, and nine non-mediated, concurrent thinking-aloud protocols, in which the teachers were asked to say aloud what they were thinking while assessing the students' exam compositions. Both interviews and thinking-aloud protocols were recorded and transcribed and then analyzed and compared.

The results of the study showed that teachers assessed exam compositions differently. Although they sometimes considered the same aspects, the emphasis that they gave to each criterion was different, which was not unexpected. Nevertheless, there was some consistency in what they stated they assess and what they actually assessed. Moreover, the marks that the teachers gave to the exam compositions during this study were more consistent than the marks they had originally given, which indicates that the process of thinking-aloud protocols may have more to offer.

Figure 6G: Abstract for Research Paper 2 (264 words)

There has been an increasing interest in defining effective instruction in the field of language teaching. Language instruction can be considered effective from the perspectives of the different people involved in this phenomenon. The focus of this study is on teachers' beliefs, as they are the ones providing the instruction, and they are more likely to perform this task according to their own beliefs rather than to those of authorities or students. This study is based on Berlin's (2005) work on teachers' beliefs about effective language instruction in a multicultural language classroom, adapted to a foreign language context. It aims to look into language teachers' beliefs about effective language instruction in a Mexican public university, considering the same areas of belief presented in Berlin's study. Three teachers perceived by authorities and students as good language teachers were interviewed and observed while teaching language courses. The semi-structure interviews were adapted from Richards and Lockhart (1996), and these data was then analysed and compared to the one obtained from the observations. The teachers' insights are consistent with previous research indicating that teachers consider both language proficiency and pedagogy important aspects of effective language instruction, but in this case it seems that they also highly value and make special emphasis on interpersonal qualities.

Figure 6H: Abstract for Research Paper 3 (210 words)

This thesis investigates the students' perceptions of school and classroom practices in a university language department in Mexico. It utilises a voiced research approach to come to terms with students' real concerns regarding their education. The thesis suggests that in order to create suitable learning conditions the views and requirements of students should be given priority. The study focuses on disaffection and attempts to understand the ways in which the institutional culture and practices influence the phenomenon of early leaving. In the study, I suggest that institutional structures and expectations of teachers' roles resulting from students' previous academic experience have contributed to disengaging students from educational practices. I describe specific ways in which institutional structures help alienating students and how teacher-student relationships, within the classroom confines, contribute to this disengagement. This is problematic not only because of the nature of educational principles but also because of the poor education students are receiving. I suggest that adopted teaching methodologies are incompatible with the cultural context of the school investigated. The study concludes by calling for a more contextual-oriented approach to educational practices which aligns expectations of educational actors.

Figure 6I: Abstract for Research Paper 4 (187 words)

Activity 2

Analyse each of these abstracts and identify whether they have topic, context, purpose and type of study, methods and participants, and results/findings, and the order in which they are presented.

6.3 Table of contents

The table of contents should always be simple and clear. Word processors have an option to create the table of contents automatically but require you to know how to use this function and give the appropriate format to all headings and sub-headings.

Whether using this function or not, be sure to update the table of contents once the rest of your research paper is ready, so that the name of your headings and sub-headings and the page numbers actually correspond to the rest of the paper: remember they tend to change during the writing process. With a word processor a click will suffice to ensure this, but if you have not used the function, do not forget to revise your page numbers carefully.

Here are the corresponding examples of Table of contents for the sample research papers.

Table of Contents for Research Paper 1

Table of Contents

v

Table of Contents for Research Paper 2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents for Research Paper 3

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents for Research Paper 4

Contents

Activity 3

Analyse the structure of each example. In what ways are they similar and in what ways different?

6.4 Introduction

The introduction is another part, like the abstract and table of contents, which is fully written once the rest of the paper has been completed. There may be earlier drafts before completing the paper, which is actually a good idea as it can give you direction, but make sure you carefully revise it and work out the final details once you have decided your paper is ready. It is precisely the purpose of the introduction to present the research paper, so it must be rewritten when all the other the text is in place.

The introduction should begin by introducing the general topic and then proceed to the specifics of your research paper, following Derntl's model:

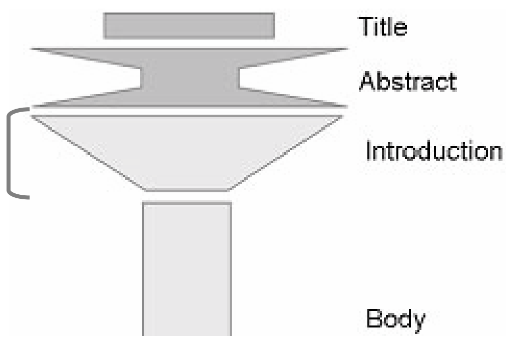


Figure 6N: Introduction following the Hourglass Model, from Derntl (2014).

Therefore, you could begin the introduction by 1) presenting the topic of the research paper and 2) mentioning what has already been said about it (previous research). In some cases, the literature review is included here rather than in a separate chapter. Next, you should explain 3) the rationale for your topic selection and 4) its significance in the setting where the research project will be carried out. After this, 5) the purpose of your research should be clearly stated, as well as 6) the research questions. Finally, you could include 7) a summary of each of the chapters, although this is optional unless it is a specific requirement of the institution.

It is important to mention that this is only one possible way to write an introduction. Nevertheless, it is consistent with the model we have been using for this handbook. If you decide to use another approach ensure it works for the way you have developed the rest of your research paper.

The corresponding introductions for Research Papers 1, 2 and 3 are as follows:

Introduction to Research Paper 1:

Chapter 1

Introduction

Student desertion has been seen as a serious problem in Mexican universities in recent years. According to the National Association of Universities and Higher Education (ANUIES) (2001:3), student desertion, a phenomenon which occurs when the students decide to withdraw from their studies due to different factors, is a problem recognised by most universities in Mexico, and which causes may not always be clear for the institutions. Due to the fact that the information provided by both, ANUIES and by the Ministry of Education (SEP, in Spanish) shows certain inconsistencies, it is difficult to know and understand this problem.

Students' decision to drop out from university affects not only the students themselves, but the society as well, since this may lead to lack of job opportunities, unemployment and poverty (Kortering, Hess, & Braziel, 1997. Mentioned in Doll & Hess, 2001:351). Therefore, it is essential, first of all, to study the possible reasons for student desertion and subsequently to take some measures that would lead to the more successful continuation and completion of courses.

According to Tinto (1987) there are three different features of dropping-out. The first one has to do with the withdrawal from all the courses in a university. This means, the students no longer belong to a university environment. The second feature has to do with dropping out from one university and moving to another, where they might start all the courses again; and finally the third characteristic of abandonment is related to the change of subject area. That is to say, a student who is enrolled in one of the university degree may change to study another course in the same institution. This research will explore the first form of Student attrition identified by Tinto. For this specific study, dropping out and early leaving will be understood as the phenomenon that occurs when students, for several reasons, no longer belong to the university environment. The phenomenon of early leaving can be observed at all levels of education, but it is my intention for this particular piece of research to focus on one higher education institution to which I have immediate access: The University of Veracruz.

The University of Veracruz is a public institution which has a strong impact in the south-east of the Mexican Republic and it is one of the five most important universities in Mexico. It is also considered to be the most prestigious institution of higher education in the State of Veracruz. It is located throughout the whole State, that is, students may find campuses in different cities. In more than six decades, the University of Veracruz has expanded and it is present in five of the most important economical regions in Veracruz with campuses in twenty seven municipalities. (information taken from: http://www.uv.mx/universidad/info/semblanza.html, my translation).

It is my interest to find out how the students of the English Language BA degree in the School of Languages at the University of Veracruz perceive the withdrawal phenomenon and what they consider to be the determining factors in this process. This is of great importance because I consider them to be vital in the life of a university and what they have to say is this matter would be very useful to help them succeed in their studies. Thus, this paper attempts to find out how the phenomenon is seen and, most importantly, to try to understand the root of the problem so that the information derived from this study can provide suggestions regarding how to plan and implement measures to improve the current situation.

In this inquiry I would refer to student attrition, withdrawal, early leaving and drop-out as synonyms to describe the phenomenon in which students do not complete their studies and leave college before graduation (Martínez & Munday, 1998:12; Bean, 1980:157; Audas & Willms, 2001:1). The main questions this research attempts to answer will have to do with what the participants think about early leaving, that is, how they would describe this phenomenon in their context, and why they think it occurs.

Student attrition is a phenomenon that can be experienced at all levels in institutions of education. In 2009, the School of Languages underwent a certification called COAPEHUM (in Spanish: Consejo para la Acreditación de Programas Educativos en Humanidades). The main objective of this organisation is to assess different areas of a BA program such as the students, the faculty, the installations and buildings, the kind of research teachers do and the curriculum among others. To evaluate the programs, this organisation follows what is established by ANUIES and the National Association for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CONAEVA). They indicate that the evaluation is an integral, continuous and cooperative process that allows the institutions to identify certain problems, to analyse them and to explain them through relevant information. With the information provided by the evaluation, the institutions may try to find actions that help them improve their situations. (Source: http://coapehum.org/evaluacion.html, my translation)

The results of this evaluation showed that almost 50% of the students at the English Language BA had dropped out from the cohorts 2004 to 2009 and this figure was a surprise for me as I knew student desertion was an issue, but I was not aware that the problem was this big. From the report given to COAPEHUM, they found out that the English Language BA had to work on different areas and in this matter the School of Languages reported the following:

> Regarding students' attrition and analysing the statistics kept in the school, it can be seen that 50% of the population of students drop-out due to the lack of or inaccurate information of the BA programs and due to the fact that the entrance examination is a general exam that includes sections suitable for any BA in the University. This exam does not have a specific section of English suitable for the English Language BA, but a general one. There is no level of English established for the students and there is no monitoring of the progress of the students in their first year at university. Besides, there is not a specific profile established for the students interested in the English Language BA. All of this would lead us to the promotion of this BA program

> throughout the State of Veracruz and also nationally; to ask for the level EXAVER 1 (A1) as an entrance requirement; to analyse and validate the profiles required to study the English Language BA so as to evaluate whether the candidates to this BA are suitable for it and finally, to implement the so-called period '0'. (Source: School report to COAPEHUM, my translation)

As it can be seen, the institution tried to explain what they thought were the reasons for the students to drop-out, but it was my interest to know more about this issue and try to find out what the actors of the dropping out phenomenon, this is the students, really thought about it.

Introduction to Research Paper 2:

INTRODUCTION

People write for many different reasons. They may want to express their feelings, keep in touch, remind themselves of others about something, entertain, inform, convince, request, complain, please... In most societies, writing has become essential and people are sometimes judged because of their writing. But what is good writing? William Kennedy, an American writer and journalist, once commented on television, "There's only a short walk from the hallelujah to the hoot," referring to the similarity between good writing and poor writing.

Being so important, writing is a research subject. Hyland (2002) tells us about the key research issues in writing, elaborating some major questions with respect to this topic. These questions include the difference between writing and speech, the relation between writing and literacy, genres, writing as the expression of identity and of social relationships, the impact of new technologies on writing, and writing instruction. It is precisely the latter that entails the necessity to establish what good writing is in order to teach it.

Leki (1995: 23-24) observes that institutions assume that they know exactly what good writing is and that it can therefore be taught to students in a non-discipline-specific writing course. If good writing can be taught, in consequence, it can easily be recognized and evaluated. However, in her study, Leki proved that not even teachers with the same stated criteria perceive good writing in the same way. What is more, Vaughan (1999: 112) tells us about a study by White (1984) in which it was demonstrated that the same teachers may grade differently the same piece of writing after some time. Moreover, Vaughan (ibid:113) carried out a research study on what goes on in trained raters' minds when grading essays by focusing on a holistic evaluation criterion.

But how do raters perceive their own writing assessment criteria? This is precisely the key research question that the present study intends to answer with respect to the sixth semester English teachers at the Language School of the University of Veracruz (UV). The Language School has been writing its own standardised English examinations for the English courses for more than ten years. One of the main reasons to implement standardised tests for the English course was the heterogeneity in language level that existed between different groups of the B.A. in English. As it is a standardised examination, the same test is taken at the same time by all the students from the same semester.

Students must take two exams during the semester: a partial exam and a final one. Currently, each of these examinations constitutes a ninety percent of the students' grades. The other ten percent for each of them is the so-called "participation point" given by their teachers. Their final grade is obtained by adding the grades from the partial and final exams and dividing them by two.

It is in the final exam that students' compositions are taken into consideration as part of their evaluation. From the ninety percent of the final exam, ten percent corresponds to the grade obtained in the writing section, which is the section that the present study focuses on. Although the weight established for this section appears to be minimal, it does play a decisive role in the students' promotion of the semester. As the standardised exams aim at a high degree of objectivity, a single item could make the difference between a passing grade (6.00 or more) and a failing one (5.99 or less). The writing section accounts for 10 out of 100 items in the final exam.

Now then, although these examinations aim at homogeneity, the assessment criteria for the writing section has not been unified among the teachers who mark the pieces of writing that students produce for this section. This has been one of the main problems that the exam committee and the faculty in general have faced. In the first place, teachers are hardly ever provided with the criteria to follow when they have to mark the aforementioned compositions. And even though teachers are supposed to follow Cambridge examinations grading criteria for marking the writing section, giving them a rubric or band is not enough to guarantee uniformity.

Every composition produced by students in standardised examinations is marked by two different teachers. The final result for this section is the average from these two marks. Cases in which one of the teachers gives a low mark and the other one gives a high one are quite common. Given that the students' promotion may depend on the average mark that they obtain in the writing section, it is imperative to reconsider the current marking techniques for writing assessment in standardised examinations at the Language School.

This research project does not intend to focus on any scoring technique to carry out the study, as it was in Vaughan's case (1999: 113). The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers perceive their own writing assessment criteria and compare it to what actually goes on in their minds when they are evaluating the students' compositions of the writing section in the standardised English examinations. The relevance of this study relies on the reliability, that is, on the consistent measurement (Hyland, 2003: 215) that should exist of the writing assessment tasks in this kind of examinations. Validity is another crucial element in writing assessment, but it has to do more with the writing prompt itself in two ways: assessing what it claims to assess and what has been taught (Ibid: 217). Therefore, validity and prompts will necessarily be considered in this study, but will not be the main purpose.

Ideally, teachers at the Language School should be trained to homogenise the criteria for assessing the writing section in the examinations. Nevertheless, prior to this training, it is first necessary to determine the level of reliability that is reached with the current marking practices. This is another reason why the present study is important, since the study explores the teachers' perceptions towards their own writing assessment criteria and compares the different marks they give to the same compositions. Admittedly, it is also necessary to examine the quality of writing assessment validity before moving to homogenisation, as well as a series of other studies emerging from the present one that would complement it to finally achieve uniformity in the writing assessment criteria used to mark compositions in standardised English examinations at the Language School.

In order to explore teachers' perceptions of their own writing assessment criteria, this study begins with a literature review (chapter 1), describing the writing assessment criteria to score compositions in the First Certificate in English (FCE) Cambridge Examinations, and discussing the criteria from a holistic, analytic and trait-based point of view. Then, different scoring guides for these different types of scoring are presented and compared. Next, the most common assessment criteria aspects are defined, and the writing tasks in the classroom and in examinations exposed. A section dedicated to studies that involve the exploration of perceptions is finally included. Chapter 2 contains the information about the context in which the research was carried out, the participants in the study, the research tools used to collect the data and describes how the study was carried out. In chapter 3 the findings of this study are organised according to the research questions of this study:

What is the teachers' general perception of their writing practice and its relation to the writing section in the exams?

What are teachers' perceptions of the writing tasks in the writing section of standardised English examinations?

What are teachers' perceptions of their assessment and marking of the writing prompts in the writing section of standardised examinations at the Language School?

Therefore, after presenting the teachers' perceptions of their writing practice and the writing section in the standardised examinations, there is a description of what teachers claim to take into account when marking the exam compositions, a comparison between this and what they actually did when assessing some exam compositions, and a comparison of their assessment criteria and procedures. Finally in chapter four, the conclusions of this study are presented.

Introduction to Research Paper 3:

Introduction

What is effective language instruction? The answer of this question embraces aspects such as teachers' proficiency and pedagogy, social and cultural contexts, and meeting students' aims or goals. It is also important that teachers have a high language level for being efficient. However, if they do not link their approach or method with the contexts of the classrooms and students' purpose, they will not be able to teach efficiently.

Language instruction can be considered effective from the perspectives of the different people involved in this phenomenon. For instance, we could take into consideration the school's authorities point of view on what they perceive as effective language teaching, as this will have an impact on what they demand from their teachers and what they offer to their students. We could also consider students' beliefs about the characteristic that a 'good' language teacher should have, as students are, after all, the ones receiving the instruction and the ones who should be learning through it.

In this study, however, the focus is on teachers' beliefs about effective language instruction. It is the teachers the ones who provide the instruction, and they are more likely to perform this task according to their own beliefs rather than to those of authorities or students. This is not to say that they do not or should not take into consideration these other beliefs, but, in the end, as Richards and Lockhart (1996, state, "what teachers do is a reflection of what they know and believe" (p. 29).

Berlin (2005) points out that "all effective teachers will have to possess a repertoire of skills available, but that true effectiveness lies in the ability to customize teachers' pedagogy to the needs of your students" (p.21). Likewise, in a study of Chinese conceptions of effective teaching in Honk Kong (Pratt, Kelly & Wong, 1999), teachers believe that they not only have to be experts in their discipline, but also need to be able to adapt what they know to their teaching context in order for their instruction to be considered effective.

To study the teachers' belief systems, Richards and Lockhart (1996) assert that it is necessary to look into what teachers believe about: English, language learning, language teaching, the program and curriculum, and language teaching as a profession. In his study, Berlin (2005) also addresses teachers' personal background and self-assessment, teachers' self-reflection on their own learning experiences, their notions about the student-teacher relationships and their definitions of effective language teaching.

This study is a replica of Berlin's (2005) work on teachers' beliefs about effective language instruction, which he reported in his book Contextualizing College ESL

Classroom Praxis. However, the context of Berlin's study was a multicultural ESL classroom. In this study, the context involves Mexican students learning English as a foreign language.

The purpose of this study is to look into language teachers' beliefs about effective language instruction in a Mexican public university, considering the same areas of belief presented in Berlin's study. The teachers that were interviewed and observed while teaching hold an MA degree and a high-language level certification. They teach language courses at the English B.A and at the Foreign Language Department of the School of Languages in this university, and are perceived by authorities and students as good language teachers.

The present study does not aim to evaluate teachers, but to explore their viewpoint of effective language instruction. In this way, students, authorities, as well as teachers in this School of Languages could use this information to analyze their own beliefs will about effective English teaching in our context, evidently only as a guide and a starting point for their own reflection on the topic, not as the one and only way to perceive effective language instruction.

Activity 4

Analyse each introduction and identify whether it follows the general-specific-general structure in Derntl's Hourglass Model, what type of information is included—which could be any of the elements 1) to 7) mentioned above—and in what order. Also, identify the difference in format they present.

6.5 Literature Review

Chapter 2 gave tips on how to prepare your literature review. One of these was to look for different reviews related to your area of interest. Doing so is very important because by reading these you can get a sense of how they are written and thus you'll have a model to follow. It is highly likely that you will also obtain information on your topic which you can include in your research paper.

Once you have the information and a general sense of how to write your literature review, you need to organise the order in which this information will be included in your paper. The literature review chapter is usually divided in sections dictated by the topic you have chosen. You can observe this in the table of content examples shown earlier.

Activity 5

Analyse the literature review sections in the table of contents in Research Papers 1, 2 and 3

and answer the following questions:
1. In what ways are the sections related to the research topic?
2. Why do you think they were given that order?

You should organise your literature review in such a way that one aspect leads logically to the next. For this reason, it is common to include general issues on the topic first, and then present previous research. Integrate your sources (preferably as current as possible), by summarising and synthesising them. However, as mentioned in Chapter 2, when writing the literature review you should always maintain your own voice: you have read the resources, you have decided what to include and the order in which they should be included, because they support what you want to say.

Therefore, you have to make clear when you paraphrase someone else's ideas, and when you are making your own point. As an example, here is an extract from the literature review section **What is effective instruction?** in Research Paper 3:

> To understand this aspect, a definition of diachronic fluctuation is necessary. 'Diachronic fluctuation refers to the history that you and students bring to the classroom context' (Berlin, 2005, p.3), in other words, it refers to the teaching and learning experiences that teachers and students had had in the past, and then, bring to their current classroom context. Therefore, if students bring to their current classroom these own experiences, this is going to influence them in what they are expecting from their teacher. So, it is inevitable that students will criticize certain teachers' behaviours; and they will compare their current with their former teachers.

You can see how the author first stated it was necessary to define a concept in order to understand a point previously mentioned, then provided a direct quote for a definition of the concept, then paraphrased the definition in their own words, finally making their own point. This example uses the APA style for referencing. Remember that it is very important to be consistent with the style you have chosen for this purpose.

6.6 Methodology

In the methodology section of your research paper you need to define the **type of the study** you have carried out, which was chosen according to its **purpose**, describe the **context** in which you carried out the study, provide information about the **participants**, describe the **data collection methods** you used, and explain the **procedures** you followed in order **to**

collect and analyse data. This information can be included and organised in different ways.

Activity 6

Analyse the methodology sections in the table of contents in each of the research papers and identify the similarities and differences between them. Consider if the necessary information was actually included and which sections it could be found in, as well as the absence of any information and if there was any reason not to include it.

The clearest way to organise the information is evidently by dedicating a section to each of the aspects to be included. None of the previous examples managed this completely, which does not imply they did not include the information. Neither does it mean they could not be improved. Some general advice on what to write about each of these aspects follows:

1. When writing about the **type of study**, you should include references defining it and the reasons to carry it out related to the **purpose** of the study. In other words, you have to justify that the type of study you carried out was the most appropriate to achieve its purpose.

2. For the **context**, you should include all relevant information to describe it, related to the purpose of the study but also covering the participants and data collection methods used. It will depend on the topic you have chosen whether references will be needed to describe the context.

3. In some cases, it may be necessary to mention the physical setting (institution, company, etc) where you carried out the study. However, depending on the type of study, its scope and implications, this specific information may be omitted and a general description provided instead. For example, instead of giving the school's name, it could be referred to as a public middle-school in an urban area of Mexico, or a private university in the State of Veracruz.

4. When providing information about your **participants**, make sure you keep their identities anonymous for ethical reasons. Once again, depending on the type and purpose of your study, you may need to write detailed descriptions of each of your participants or a general inclusive description.

5. When presenting the **data collection methods**, include a brief definition of each, providing the corresponding references and a justification as to why using these are appropriate for the type and purpose of your study.

6. For the **data collection and analysis procedures**, include a description of the process you followed to collect your data, which need not necessarily be very detailed

but should give a clear idea of every step of the process. Show how you decided to analyse your data and why you decided to do it in that way. Some references about data analysis methods might be necessary here.

6.7 Results/Findings

When reporting your results, apart from presenting the collected data you discuss it and highlight findings that might support, contradict or add to existing knowledge. This is what it means to analyse data. You must be careful, and try to be as objective as possible when analysing your data and drawing conclusions from it. When writing about it you should not assert everything categorically. This section, along with the conclusion, is probably where hedging is most important in order to maintain an open dialogue with your readers.

However, this does not mean you can never assert anything. Look at this extract from the introduction of the findings section of Research Paper 3:

> As an EFL teacher, how would you define effective language instruction? This question will be answered from the perception of three EFL teachers from a Mexican public university and their beliefs. These answers do not aim to give an all-embracing definition of effective language teaching in all Mexican contexts. It is only an exploration of how some participants, who are considered to be good language teachers, perceive language learning and teaching taking into account their own experiences as both language learners and teachers.

You can observe that there is no evident hedging here: almost all sentences are bare assertions. As the introduction to the section, it presents what will be included, and so no hedging is necessary. Nevertheless, the author was cautious enough to tell readers that findings are not meant to be conclusive or ultimate in any way by using expressions like 'only' ('It is only an exploration'), and by clearly stating that 'These answers do not aim to give an all-embracing definition'.

Apart from hedging, there are other elements you should take into account when writing your findings. Once again you need to decide how to organize the information. A common way is according to the categories resulting from analysing data. Or you might, for example, structure it according to the instruments used to collect data, and the results obtained.

Once you have decided how you will present your information in this section, you must also consider that you should link your findings to existing theory and illustrate them when necessary, always bearing in mind the use of hedging. There follows an extract from one of the subsections in the findings or Research Paper 3:

3.2 Beliefs about Language Teaching

According to Richards and Lockhart (1996, p. 36) 'teaching is a very personal activity, and it is not surprising that individual teachers bring to teaching very different beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes effective teaching'. Argerich stresses the teachers' language proficiency level as a main characteristic of a good English teacher:

> **Argerich**
>
> Qualities of a good teacher I think first of all the teacher has to know the language well, that's the first thing and that's probably what's not being taking into account enough, I mean, a lot of attention it's being paid to teaching techniques but all of that is going to fall short if the teacher doesn't have language well. The teacher has to really like the language and the teacher is also a learner, unless you are a native speaker, even if you are a native speaker, you always learn new things about the language. So I think the teacher has to know the language has to know that he or she is still a learner of the language.

Therefore, we could also say that for Argerich a good language teacher is willing to keep learning the language he/she teaches.

Borgia also agrees with the teacher's proficiency in the language as the first quality of a good instructor, for him, 'a teacher must be knowledgeable', but he adds that 'he must have the ability to […] share this knowledge'. He also considers that the 'skill in handling people' is important, as 'you have to be able to create decent relationship with students, parents and administrators'

Activity 7

After reading the extract, answer the following questions:

1. How do you think the findings section of this paper was organised?
2. Is it linking the findings to existing theory? How?
3. Is it illustrating the findings? How?
4. Is there any hedging? Where?

Remember, you should always keep in mind your objectives and research questions, and explain in what ways they were met or answered and why or why not. There are many ways in which you can integrate this information in your findings section; it will depend on how you have decided to organise it and present it.

6.8 Conclusions

In the conclusions section, you obviously need to include the most important findings of your research. It is a summary of what you did and found out; it is not a section for further analysis and new findings. You should start your conclusion by restating the purpose(s) of your study, and, very generally, what you did, and then to what extent you accomplished your aims by a summary of your findings.

Next, you should acknowledge the limitations of your study, including aspects that you might do differently if you carried out the same study again, as well as aspects that you did not go into in much depth because your data did not allow for it, or issues that were not the direct purpose of your study but that seemed relevant to the topic. You can then use these as suggestions for further research, which must also be included in your conclusion.

Finally, include recommendations that could emerge from your findings, along with a personal reflection about both your findings and the research process that you undertook to achieve them. You must keep your readers in mind at all times, but for your recommendations, pay special attention to them: they will most likely be language students and teachers, and perhaps researchers or future researchers. You should also take them into account for your personal reflection, since you will identify yourself as one of them.

Activity 8

Read the following conclusions to Research Papers 1, 2 and 3 and identify the elements mentioned above: restatement of purpose(s), summary of methodology, summary of findings, limitations, further research, recommendations, and personal reflection. Analyse any other information that they might have included.

Conclusion to Research Paper 1:

Chapter 5

Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The focus of this study was to attempt to understand the student attrition phenomenon from the students' voices. This was done by interviewing students enrolled in the last term of the BA as they are considered to be the ones that may have a better understanding of the problem and who may know people that have dropped out from this programme. This research study attempted to answer two main questions regarding the withdrawal phenomenon and tried to understand why this issue is presented in this context. This study was carried out in order to identify students' feelings, thoughts and suggestions from their own perceptions about the issue.

The first question had to do with students' perception of the problem and the results of this study appeared to agree with previous research in this matter which shows that early leaving may be provoked by financial factors (Martínez & Munday, 1998; Audas & Willms, 2001; Tinto, 1975). According to my experience, this is a problem that many students encounter nowadays. Unfortunately, there are more and more students who have to work to support their studies, which sometimes do not leave them room for studying or doing the school tasks. Dropping out also has to do with students' likes and dislikes (Martínez, P & Munday, F, 1998) and poor academic guidance or lack of it (Christie et al, 2004). Something should be done to assure that students know at least the basic information of the different BA programmes in order to take an informed decision when choosing their career. It also showed that the administrative process of the English BA, the level of English required in the programme (Christie et al, 2004; Davies, R & Elias, P, 2003) are important factors to take into consideration when designing new ways of enrolling students. And finally the students' personal decisions that make them drop out from their studies.

The second enquiry in this study had to do with what students thought were possible solutions to decrease the student attrition issue. In this regard, the students agreed on the fact that if the students decide to withdraw from their studies, there is no much that can be done by the institution. However, they also mentioned that the teachers should be more supportive and motivate students so that they do not take the decision to drop out.

The findings of the study were presented and discussed in chapter four and some examples and explanations of what students said were given.

5.2 Summary of the study

The main objective of this specific paper was to find out what students thought of the early leaving phenomenon. Two main questions were tried to be answered:

1. What do the students at the BA degree in English Language think about the phenomenon of student attrition and how do they perceive it?

2. What could be some of the possible solutions that would help decrease the dropout rates in this institution?

In order to know the answers to these questions, eight students were interviewed and tape-recorded with their permission to do so. This was a qualitative research study so semi-structured interviews were used as the main objective was to know what students really thought about the issue introduced to them. Mackey & Gass (2010:173) state:

> Unstructured interviews are more similar to natural conversations, and the outcomes are not limited by the researcher's preconceived ideas about the area of interest.

The interviews were carried out at the School of Languages of the University of Veracruz and students chose the time they could be interviewed. All the information gathered in the interviews was used to analyse the data in a descriptive way aiming at the research questions mentioned above.

5.3 Recommendations for future research

This study has addressed the issue of student attrition from the students' perspective and has come up with different factors that, according to them, influence this phenomenon to happen. Despite the fact that the results shown confirm what previous studies on this matter have found, certain limitations need to be taken into consideration when reading and analysing this paper. It must be said that as a first attempt to know why this is happening this study was conducted with 'real' students; this is, the study was carried out by interviewing active students at the School of languages. For further research or to enrich the outcomes of this study, it would be necessary to work with students who have dropped out from the English Language BA programme.

In addition, this study was conducted only with students enrolled in the last term of the programme as they were considered to be the ones that would have more information of the presented issue. It would be helpful to interview dropouts from different levels to know why they had to leave their studies early. In addition, for further research the use of other instruments to collect data might be helpful to gather more reliable information and to maybe try to triangle it to get a more complete report. It is also recommended that the researcher's knowledge and perspective on student attrition be explored in order to gain more meaningful insights that would help understand the phenomenon in this specific context.

There are two possible areas recommended for further research. 1) The first one has to do with the students' complaint about the fact that they did not have an idea of the level of English required to enrol the English Language BA. Thus, for further research, studies should focus on the level that students gain in high school to see if it is appropriate, or enough, to enrol in this programme and to come up with possible solutions so that the students have a better idea of what the programme is about. 2) The second area would be the way students are assessed in the English class. They mentioned that failing these exams have caused people to drop out. Thus, more attention should be paid towards the credit load of such exams.

5.4 Limitations and Conclusions

Student attrition is a complex phenomenon that comprises different factors that may or may not be clear for the institutions (ANUIES, 2001); I would say that this phenomenon may not be clear for the teachers, the parents and the students either.

The time when students were 'accused' of not being good students and that this would lead them to become dropouts are over. At present, there are many factors that contribute to this phenomenon. McWhirter et al (1998: 97, mentioned in Wing-Lin & Miu-Ling, 2003: 89) state that 'students who drop out are likely to be those who are unmotivated by their classwork; who have problems with either the school authorities, the police, or both; who skip classes or are often absent; who are pregnant or married; who are poor and must work; who have family problems; who have drug or alcohol problems'. All of these factors may apply to any student in risk of becoming a dropout.

Tinto mentions that 'individuals enter institutions of higher education with a variety of attributes (e.g., sex, race, ability), precollege experiences (e.g., grade-point averages, academic and social attainments), and family backgrounds (e.g., social status attributes, value climates, expectational climates), each of which has direct and indirect impacts upon performance in college. Thus, all of these aspects should be taken into account when studying the dropping out problem so as to have a better understanding of the problem. The intention of this study was to give voice to the students so that there is more information on the student attrition phenomenon and to understand better how the actors of such phenomenon may feel.

Despite the fact that this study was conducted as a first attempt to give voice to the students and to try to understand the problem of early leaving at the English Language BA, the present study is a small scale and has limited data to represent and guarantee any definite conclusion in terms of what influence students to withdraw from their studies. Nonetheless, the findings may be an approach to the answers of the original questions in this paper: what students think about dropping out and to obtain an insight of some of the possible solutions that would help decrease the dropout rates in this institution.

One of the main limitations was to gather the information as this is a topic that has not been studied before in this specific context. Another limitation was to travel to interview 'real' dropouts. Therefore, the researcher decided to work with participants that have not experienced this problem. However, these participants took the opportunity to express what they thought influence people to withdraw from their studies. Another aspect to take into consideration was the generalisations that this kind of research could depict.

As Mackey and Gass (2010:1729 stated 'from a single case study, it may be difficult to recognise idiosyncrasies as such, with the potential that they are misinterpreted as typical language learning behaviour'. It was never the intention of the researcher not to provide meaningful information; on the contrary, this paper was done with the purpose to help the actors in the classroom: our students.

Conclusion to Research Paper 2:

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the sixth semester English teachers' perceptions of their own writing assessment criteria in the Language School, UV. In order to explore their perceptions, firstly they were interviewed and asked about their writing instruction and practice in the classroom, the writing tasks in the writing section of the standardised exams, and the criteria they used to assess and give this section a mark. Secondly, thinking-aloud sessions were carried out with the teacher-markers in order to look into what they actually considered important when assessing exam compositions, for which they were given real exam compositions previously written by some sixth semester students. Then, after comparing the data obtained from the interviews and thinking-aloud sessions, it was concluded that, despite some inconsistencies, the teachers' perceptions of their own writing assessment criteria were not completely accurate, but they were not entirely different from their actual assessment of the compositions.

This study helped to broadly understand what is going on in the assessment of the writing section in the standardised exams at the Language School. The problem was already on the table and there has been a great deal of talking on the subject, but there were no concrete data about it. The results of this study confirm that teachers carry out very different teaching and assessment practices when it comes to writing, and that this is probably having a negative impact on the students' results in the writing section of the exam. Therefore, this study may be a first step to make teachers aware of the urgent need for unified writing assessment criteria when it comes to the standardised examinations. It may also set the basis to justify the necessary preparation on assessment of not only teachers, but also exam designers. In addition, it also serves as a reflection on the implications about writing instruction and the importance of covering all its corresponding issues in every semester with at least some common techniques to approach it.

It is true that this was a small-scale case study, making it impossible to reach statistical generalisations on the subject of writing assessment, but it was not its purpose to reach them at all. Its significance rests on the insights gained about the processes and reflections of some teachers when marking exam compositions. The fact that it was not possible for one of the informants to carry out the second thinking-aloud session made it even more difficult to reach some conclusions regarding the teachers' writing assessment perceptions and procedures, but the first session with her did provide some relevant information. I am also aware that the limitations of this study were not only with respect to its small-scale approach, but are also related to the fact that there is a great amount of relevant information and previous studies that I was not able to review, and which might have given more strength to the grounding, methodology and results of the present study. However, because of the time and resources constraints, I had to narrow my sources and procedures in favour of practicality.

For the same reason, there was much left unsaid about the teachers' assessment of the exam compositions, such as other teachers' perceptions of the same subject, the great absence of purpose and audience, the treatment of self-correction, the different teachers' backgrounds in testing and writing, and the different perceptions that teachers may have of each of the assessment criteria, among other issues. Nevertheless, we have to bear in mind that "L2 writing is a relatively new area of inquiry" (Polio, 2003: 36), and that these absences may set the basis for further studies. For example, this study could be repeated with teachers from other semesters or with other sixth semester teachers in order to explore their perceptions of their own writing assessment criteria and compare them to the results of this study. It could also be repeated with the same teachers in order to compare them with what they said and did in this study.

Also, given the great absence of these two essential elements in this study, research into the role that purpose and audience play in the teachers' writing instruction and assessment could be carried out in order to analyse if this has any impact on the students' writing ability development. Another possible study worth doing would be about teachers' and students' perceptions of self-correction and its implications in the writing process and final product. Furthermore, a variable that was not considered in this study was the teachers' backgrounds in testing and writing, and this could be the focus of a further study with respect to its implications in their writing instruction and assessment.

Another further necessary study is one looking into the teachers' perceptions of different writing assessment criteria, for instance, grammar and vocabulary, coherence and cohesion, or handwriting. This study proved that teachers considered different criteria when assessing exam compositions, but it did not look into their perceptions of these criteria. These variables, the perceptions of all the different criteria considered by the teachers in this study, could be the focus of different studies with the purpose to detect their implications in writing instruction and assessment. As can be seen, apart from the necessity to examine the quality of writing assessment validity before moving to homogenization, as stated in the introduction, there are several paths to follow from here, and this is probably one of the richest aspects of this study.

All in all, despite the limitations of this study, the exploration of teachers' perspectives of their own writing assessment criteria did provide interesting discussion material. By looking into their minds, it was possible to analyse several aspects regarding writing instruction and assessment at the language school. It was also possible to obtain concrete data on the writing assessment practices for the standardised exam. It is true that the scope of this study had its restraints, but it contributed with a range of possible further studies that may enrich the understanding of phenomena related to writing assessment.

Conclusion to Research Paper 3:

Conclusions

Based on a qualitative study that comprehends a group of three teachers from a Mexican public university, this investigation had as an objective to explore their beliefs about effective language instruction. In order to reach this concept from their perspectives, I looked into the perceptions of language learning and teaching, language teaching as a profession, program and its curriculum and self-reflection on their own learning experiences.

According to what the participants say and do, there are several aspects to take into consideration to define effective language instruction. First of all, the teacher, who must know well the language, has to be able to share this knowledge with his/her students, by creating in his/her classroom a relaxed atmosphere. At the same time, an effective teacher has to provide students a meaningful instruction and therefore encourage them to develop and keep improving their communicative and linguistic competence.

Also, an effective teaching involves taking into consideration students' needs and interests, and making them aware that learning a language requires a systematic and disciplined study. Hence, they are the true responsible ones for their own learning.

There are definitely many other factors that could be taken into consideration when we talk about effective language instruction. This is only part of what teachers believe and therefore do in their language classrooms, and it is certainly what the teachers in this study shared and were consistent with in their own classrooms.

It is important to recognize the limitations of the study. The first is about time constraints. With more time, perhaps, it would have been possible to interview more teachers. Although in a qualitative research we do not need a large number of participants, maybe three teachers for each department mentioned (the English B.A and DELEX) would have provided richer data about how effective teaching is perceived in this Mexican public university context. In addition to more interviews, more questions about the teachers' beliefs system would also have provided richer data, as well as eliciting more in-depth answers.

Another limitation was the number of observations. For this study, I did not include observations before the interviews. Observations during a longer period of time would complement better the teachers' beliefs data. Finally, it would be wrong to assume that the concept of effective language instruction of this public university is representative of the entire Mexican context, as no generalizations can emerge from a study if this type.

Nevertheless, this is a first step towards understanding how effective language instruction is conceived in similar contexts. There are other viewpoints in which this phenomenon can be approached. For example, authorities' beliefs about effective language teaching, including the requirements they ask from their teachers to be hired. Another viewpoint that is important to be considered, of course, is students' beliefs. The three perceptions, authorities, teachers and students, would provide a more complete scenario about this topic. Furthermore, it would also be interesting and relevant to look into the factors that can affect language acquisition, which, according to Berlin (2005), are affective, cognitive, developmental, environmental, and physiological.

6.9 References

For referencing, you must use the same style throughout your paper, and as long as you are consistent there is no problem as to which style you decide to use. Nevertheless, one of the most common ones is APA . In this style, the list of references at the end must be alphabetically ordered, and depending on the sources, there are different 'formats' to provide the reference. There follows an example for each of the most common types of references according to APA 6th edition, both for print and online sources (APA 6th edition & Purdue Online Writing Lab).

Print sources

For **books**, the general format presents first the author's surname, the initials of his/her first and middle names, the year, the name of the book in italics, the location and the publisher. It is important to use the correct punctuation after each of these elements. This is an example of the **general format**:

Author, A. A. (Year). *Title of work*. Location: Publisher.

(If the reference goes beyond one line, then all subsequent lines should be indented.)

An example of a book reference with **one author** would be:

Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Los Angeles: Sage.

If there is **more than one edition** for the book, this is indicated after the title, as in the following example:

Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd ed.). UpperSaddle River, NJ: Pearson.

With **two authors**, the reference should be:

Strauss, A., & Cobin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

If there are **several authors**, all of them should be listed, with an ampersand (&) for the final name only. However, if there are more than seven authors, the first six only are listed, followed by an ellipsis (...) and then the final name without an ampersand.

If the book has been written by several authors and has an **editor or editors**, or **coordinator(s)** then the names used are those of the editors or coordinators and this must be indicated between parentheses after the names:

Dzay Chulim, F., & Narvaez Trejo, O.M. (eds.) (2012). *La deserción escolar desde la perspectiva estudiantil*. México DF: La Editorial Manda.

When the author is **anonymous**, the name of the book is provided first with the number of edition if there is more than one, and the rest remains the same:

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (7th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

When the reference is specifically a **chapter in a book**, the information about the chapter appears first (author's name, year, and title of the chapter—no italics) and then the information of the book, but without repeating the year:

Narváez Trejo, O.M. (2012). An emic typology of teachers. In Lengeling, M. (Coord.) *Interpretación e Investigación Cualitativa: Selección de artículos del Tercer Congreso de Investigación Cualitativa*. Guanajuato: Universidad de Guanajuato.

Other common print sources are **journals** and **magazines**. Their reference is similar to that for book chapters: the author or authors are provided first, then the year in parentheses, followed by the title of the article (no italics) and then the name of the journal or magazine and the volume number, both in italics. If there is an issue number, it goes in parentheses immediately after the volume number but no longer in italics; and the page numbers appear at the end:

> Yunus, M. M., & Salehi, H. (2012). The Effectiveness of Facebook Groups on Teaching and Improving Writing: Students' Perceptions. *International Journal of Education and Information Technologies 6*(1), 87-96.

(Note that there is a comma separating the volume and/or issue number from the page numbers.)

Online sources

The most common source of this type are online **journals** and **magazines**. The same format as in printed sources is used, and then the DOI (Digital Object Identifier), which is most common in databases, or the web address is added:

> Young, S. (2010). Student Views of Effective Online Teaching in Higher Education. *American Journal of Distance Education 20*(2), 65-77. doi:10.1207/s15389286ajde2002_2

(doi.)

> Hackathorn, J., Solomon, E.D., Blankmeyer, R.E.T., & Garczynski, M. (2011). Learning by Doing: An Empirical Study of Active Teaching Techniques. *The Journal of Effective Teaching 11*(2), 40-54. Retrieved from http://uncw.edu/cte/et/articles/Vol11_2/Volume1102.pdf

(web address. Note the phrase 'Retrieved from' which must precede all web addresses.)

For **other type of online sources**, including theses and dissertations, the general format includes the name of the author(s), the year, the title of the work in italics and the web address:

> Walker, K.H. (2014). *Reflective assessment: Using reflection and portfolios to assess student learning in a writing center*. Retrieved from http://gradworks.umi.com/15/69/1569720.html

If no author is identified, in which case the date of publication is not usually available either, the source should be listed providing first the title of the document in italics, the initials n.d. (no date) in parentheses, and the web address.

> *Is it scholarly? Tips for critically evaluating your information resources*. (n.d.).
> Retrieved from http://www.library.illinois.edu/ugl/howdoi/scholarly.html

There may be other kinds of source which do not appear here, which you can check in the APA 6th edition online, or any later editions that appear after this book. You can also use the Word function for referencing, which includes the 5th and 6th editions for APA. Keep in mind that the APA constantly updates its editions, and as there are variations among them, you must also be consistent with the one you decide to use. Also, there might be some kinds of source that do not appear in the APA manual; in this case, look for the one that is most similar to the source you are consulting and use that format.

Finally, given that the field of educational research is constantly changing, it is highly recommended you use up-to-date sources wherever possible. Naturally, there will always be sources that are not so recent yet must still be included given their influence or impact on the field or area of research, but this type of source should not be predominant. Always look for the most recent writings on your topic

Activity 9

Revise your references and make sure they are all fully complete and consistent.

6.10 In-text references

There are also conventions that you should follow when citing your references within your text. For **indirect quotations**, that is, when you are paraphrasing what the author said, you should provide the author's surname and the year, both in parentheses, at the end of the paraphrasing. To illustrate this, see the following examples:

Literature Review extract, Research Paper 1:

> In Mexico, where the problem of student attrition is also serious, the factors that have shown a bigger impact in this issue have to do with the student's economical and working situation, the vocational guidance as well as the organization of the syllabus and the academic administration (Rodríguez & Hernández, 2008).

If the author is included as part of the narrative itself, then the surname is provided and it is only the year that appears in parenthesis:

Literature Review extract, Research Paper 4:

> Chain (2002), working at the Universidad Veracruzana, proposes the analysis of information for diagnosis and prediction purposes; that is to say, what it means to know the students, how to systematize and organize available information and how to analyse data. According to him, analysis of the data obtained from the entrance examination (average grade in High school, grade at the exam, and socio-economic information) could be used to predict who may find university studies more challenging or who may leave before completion.

For **direct quotations**, there are generally three ways to cite references. If the author is not included in the narrative, then the reference is cited at the end and between parenthesis, including the author's surname, the year, and the page number:

Literature Review extract, Research Paper 3:

> Teachers' perceptions of effective instruction mainly depend on the theory they have 'of what language is, a theory of how it is learned, and an understanding of which activities, tasks, and corresponding teaching best support its learning' (Berlin, 2005, p. 15).

However, if the author is included in the narrative, the surname and the year (in parenthesis) appear before the quotation, and the page number is provided in parenthesis at the end:

Literature Review extract, Research Paper 2:

> Raimes (2005) affirms that 'a good writer […] keeps readers in mind at all times, as in a face-to-face communication.' (p. 5).

Finally, if the quotation is very long (usually more than 40 words) it should be typed in a freestanding block, omitting the quotation marks, and the reference citation is provided in parenthesis after the closing punctuation mark. This citation may include the author's surname, year and page number. If both author and year have been included as part of the narrative, only the page number appears in the citation:

Literature Review extract, Research Paper 4:

> Critics of the educational system have called the attention to the recent marketable orientation of education in Mexico, devoted to the preparation of technicians and middle managerial posts, while Europe and the USA are preparing the top executives of international companies. Ibarra-Colorado puts it succinctly:
>
> > ... a new international division of university work has been consolidated during the last few years. In this new trend, the production of state of the art knowledge and the preparations of scientific and high level leaders has been in central Europe and the USA; taking translation and consumption of such knowledge to the 'underdeveloped' as well as mass production of technicians and professionals of middle level. (Ibarra-Colorado, p. 78, my translation)

Literature Review extract, Research Paper 1:

> According to Bennett (2003), student attrition may be voluntary or compulsory. He stated that:
>
> > Compulsory disengagement can result from, for example, failing too many units within a degree, from serious illness, from having to look after a family member or from not having enough money to continue (Medway & Penney, 1994). Voluntary drop out is the consequence of a conscious decision to withdraw, e.g. because the student feels bored or insufficiently challenged, dislikes fellow students or lecturers, does not enjoy the subject, etc. (p.124)

The APA 6th edition specifies indentation for direct quotations in the left margin only. This is not always adhered to, but when formatting your paper, the most important point to remember is consistency from beginning to end.

Activity 10

Revise your in-text references and make sure they are all cited correctly in the standardised style you have chosen.

6.11 Appendices

Appendices appear at the end of the paper, after the list of references. They can be organised in different ways (1, 2, 3 … A, B, C … etc.) and it is usual to differentiate between charts and pictures (Table 1: … Figure 1: … etc). Appendices are included only if you make reference to these within your text (usually in the methodology section). They are also included in the table of contents, where they can appear as a single section or listed separately within the appendices section.

Activity 11

Go back and check the examples provided for the research papers in the respective Tables of Contents. How were appendices organised? Think of the best way to organise your appendices and how to include them in your table of contents.

Chapter References

Alexandrov, A. V. (2004). How to Write a Research Paper. *Cerebrovasc Dis 18*, 135–138. doi: 10.1159/000079266. Retrieved from https://surgery.med.uky.edu/sites/default/files/how.pdf

APA format–6th edition. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://web.calstatela.edu/library/guides /3apa.pdf

Bond, G. (2009). *Writing Abstracts for Bachelor's and Master's Thesis*. Retrieved from http://www.th-wildau.de/fileadmin/dokumente/studiengaenge/europaeisches_management/dokumente/Dokumente_EM_Ba/Abstracts_in_English.pdf

Derntl, M. (2014). Basics of research paper writing and publishing. *International Journal of Technology Enhanced Learning* 6(2), 105-123. Retrieved from http://dbis.rwth-aachen.de/~derntl/papers/misc/paperwriting.pdf

Purdue Online Writing Lab. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/02/

A few last words

Congratulations! You have read to the end of this handbook (hopefully without skipping anything) and by now you should be fully equipped to write an academic paper that is well researched, well reasoned, interesting and succinct. That last adjective is very important. When writing in English you must always try to be as concise as possible. This means you should avoid repeating yourself, for example restating your argument or objective every time you begin a new section, and continually referring to what you've already said. Be aware that "as has been mentioned" is a Spanish construct, not an English one.

It is important to bear in mind that all academic writing in English is linear. In its simplest form, this means it begins with a general idea and proceeds, logically and economically, to a final, specific point. You might like to think of it as an arrow, rather than the more spiral-like figure of academic writing in Spanish. Remember that every word in your paper is there for a purpose: all good writing is crisp and precise. Don't make the mistake of padding your text with unnecessary verbiage (meaning 'speech or writing that uses too many words' from the obsolete French *verbeier 'to chatter.')* An academic paper is no place for chatter, instead think of words as currency, each one is valuable and none should be wasted.

This does not imply that you must write short, brutal sentences. It is important to use connectors such as however, furthermore, in addition, but equally important to use them sparingly. Avoid the use of 'besides' because it is too informal for academic writing, and 'on the other hand' has a slightly different connotation in English. Furthermore, a sentence such as 'On one hand the students enjoyed the activities, on the other hand some found them confusing' is a good example of overwriting. Changing it to: 'The students enjoyed the activities, although some found them confusing' makes the point faster and clearer and also saves you six words (words are currency) for better use elsewhere.

Personalisation

Personalisation should be kept to a minimum. Remember that academic writing is formal and objective so the use of 'I' should be controlled. The passive can be used (like that) to create a distance between writer and reader. However, overuse of passive constructs can be seen as making your paper wordy, overlong and pompous (rather like that). Use your judgement. When writing about data collection, for example, it is logical to use 'I' when what you did is the key information: 'I kept field notes,' but the passive when other actors are more important: 'The students were divided into three groups.'

Avoid using 'we' because this is invariably seen as an assumption that all of us (your readers) already agree with you. This is not the case at all; it is your job to convince your reader of your argument. Even when writing a thesis in collaboration with other people, 'we' is best kept to a minimum. Similarly, any use of 'you' in an academic paper will make readers respond personally, and probably react negatively. Do not tell them what to think, or to do the research for you: 'If you read xxx, you will see that…' You want the readers to be on your side, do not antagonize them. Using personalisation puts you and/or the reader constantly in mind at the expense of the subject.

Remember, words spent talking about you and I are words not being used to support your argument.

Gender

In English there is equality of the sexes (in the language at least) and you must respect that. You need to be very, very careful about using gender specific language. For example, if you write about fathers and sons it is clearly understood that there are no mothers and daughters involved. However, if you mean both you must use the appropriate vocabulary: parents and children.

Try to avoid politically correct but wordy constructs like ‘he or she’ and the ungainly s/he. In British English it is safe to use ‘they’ for a single person, but this is not widely accepted in the U.S.

You can usually bypass gender traps by using plurals. Look at the following sentences:

Unacceptable

Every student should decide if he wishes to attend, and bring his notes to the lecture.

Uncomfortable

Every student should decide if s/he wishes to attend, and bring his or her notes to the lecture.

Possible but not ideal

Every student should decide if they wish to attend, and bring their notes to the lecture.

Practical

Students should decide if they wish to attend, and bring their notes to the lecture.

Plurals get you out of trouble, so look for them wherever you need to, then the occasional use of ‘s/he’, ‘he or she’ and ‘his or her’ will not be seen as objectionable.

Format

Keep your paper as simple and straightforward as you possibly can. It is a common mistake to think that you must use a variety of typefaces, styles and sizes to add interest and emphasis. In fact the opposite is true, the more variety you include, the more confusion you add. Look at the pages of a novel if you don’t believe this, and look at this handbook. Remember that everything that gets in the way of the text—your message—only serves to dilute that message.

So don't do *any of* THIS, because it doesn't **actually** *work*.
The widely-accepted format for academic writing is to use either Times New Roman or Arial (one or the other, don't mix them up) in 12 point and double-spaced. You do not need any indentation but you should put a line space between paragraphs. There really is no reason to stray from this formula, it works. You are not designing a book, you're writing a paper and you want the reader to be able to absorb all the information you have spent so much time and effort accumulating and writing about so that your message is clear and well received.

Proofreading
Proofread carefully, first for sense and to be sure you have presented your argument well, then once more. This time you should ignore the content and read step by step for grammar (especially things like subject-verb agreement), punctuation (do not add unnecessary commas, especially between subject and verb) and spelling (Google is your friend here). Be careful of the grammar and spellchecker function on Word, it makes mistakes. If you are concerned, type your sentence into Google.

Finally, put your paper away and let it sit quietly for a few days. Do other things and try to put it out of your mind completely. When you are ready, return to your text and read it calmly for the last time. Be confident, it will be fine. In fact you will be pleased and surprised by how well you have achieved your objective.

Happy writing

Vargas, P.S. (2007) *Writing and Reading for Academic Purposes*, Licenciatura en la Enseñanza del Inglés, modalidad virtual, Universidad Veracruzana