

Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	vii
<i>List of Figures</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xiii

Part I Overview

1 An Introduction to Qualitative Research <i>Robert A. Croker</i>	3
2 What Makes Research ‘Qualitative’? <i>Donald Freeman</i>	25

Part II Qualitative Research Approaches

3 Narrative Inquiry <i>Garold Murray</i>	45
4 Case Study <i>Michael Hood</i>	66
5 Ethnography <i>Juanita Heigham and Keiko Sakui</i>	91
6 Action Research <i>Anne Burns</i>	112
7 Mixed Methods <i>Nataliya V. Ivankova and John W. Creswell</i>	135

Part III Qualitative Data Collection Methods

8 Observation <i>Neil Cowie</i>	165
9 Interviews <i>Keith Richards</i>	182
10 Open-Response Items in Questionnaires <i>James Dean Brown</i>	200

vi *Contents*

- 11 Introspective Techniques 220
Sandra Lee McKay
- 12 Discourse Analysis 242
Anne Lazaraton

Part IV Practical Issues

- 13 Ethics and Trustworthiness 263
Sharon F. Rallis and Gretchen B. Rossman
- 14 Writing Up Your Research 288
Christine Pearson Casanave
- Glossary of Qualitative Research Terms* 306
- Subject Index* 325

Part I

Overview

1

An Introduction to Qualitative Research

Robert A. Croker

Overview

Starting out in qualitative research

Qualitative research – when you first heard the term, your initial thought might have been, ‘What do qualitative researchers actually do?’ It may come as a surprise to you that you are already familiar with many of their activities, and you actually do them yourself – every day – as you watch and listen to what happens around you, and ask questions about what you have seen and heard.

For instance, think back to the first class you took as a university student. When you walked into the classroom that day, you probably checked out the room, noting the arrangement of desks and where people were sitting. You also watched the other students and the teacher to try and work out what sort of people they might be and what relationships might already exist between them. During the class, you listened to what the teacher and other students said; you probably talked to a few people in the class as well, asking them questions to help you understand the developing culture of the class. You might even have jotted down a few things about whom and what you had seen and heard. In this first class, then, you were doing something similar to collecting data, and practicing two of the basic skills of qualitative researchers – observing and interviewing.

And that is not all: as well as doing the things that qualitative researchers do, you probably also think in many of the same ways. For example, during your first semester at university, you might have begun to notice regularities of behavior: some students seemed to know each other already; students who did not know anybody tended to reach out to others who dressed and talked in a similar way; a few students did not seem interested in making friends yet and stuck to themselves. As you considered all of this, you were doing what all qualitative researchers do when they think about, or analyze and interpret, their data, which is to reflect on and explore what they know, search for patterns, and try to create a full and rich understanding of

4 *Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics*

the research context. Furthermore, when you described your new class to a friend, depicting your new classmates and capturing the sense of the class using carefully chosen, descriptive **vignettes**, you were doing in part what qualitative researchers do when they present their findings. So, although you may never have conducted a qualitative research project before, it is probably safe to say that the process of doing one will not be altogether new to you.

Of course, observation of everyday life is different to research. Research requires sound data collection skills and a methodological approach that provides a framework for the research process. It should be driven by some kind of theory, and have a clear research purpose. The goal of *Qualitative research in applied linguistics: A practical introduction* is to help you develop these data collection skills, and to understand the principal qualitative research approaches. More importantly, it will acquaint you with how qualitative researchers think about and see the world, and also the ways in which they address the common challenges they face. This is to prepare you to study language classrooms and other contexts in which language is used – not just as an everyday observer but as a trained researcher.

Qualitative research in applied linguistics

Applied linguistics is a broad and exciting interdisciplinary field of study. It focuses on language in use, connecting our knowledge about languages with an understanding of how they are used in the real world. Applied linguists work in diverse research areas including second-language acquisition (SLA), teaching English as a second or other language (TESOL), workplace communication, language planning and policy, and language identity and gender – to name just a few. Many applied linguists also work in related fields such as education, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

One important area of applied linguistics research is *language analysis*. SLA researchers, for example, look at what language errors learners commonly make at different stages in their language development, or TESOL researchers consider how a writing textbook helps students develop their composition skills. A second important area in applied linguistics is investigating the *contexts and experiences of language use*. For instance, researchers specializing in workplace communication could examine how immigrant women with differing degrees of language proficiency use the target language to communicate with co-workers, or TESOL researchers might investigate how the classroom milieu affects students' attitudes toward language learning. Similarly, language identity researchers might consider how sexual minorities structure their identity through language.

How do researchers approach such issues? In essence, they have three choices: to use quantitative research, qualitative research, or to use both in what is termed mixed methods research. In very broad terms, **quantitative research** involves collecting primarily numerical data and analyzing it

using statistical methods, whereas **qualitative research** entails collecting primarily textual data and examining it using **interpretive analysis**. **Mixed methods research** employs both quantitative and qualitative research according to the aims and context of the individual project and the nature of the research questions.

In the following chapters, we mainly focus on qualitative research, first exploring what it is, then illustrating how it is used to investigate the manifold contexts and experiences of language in use; however, there is also a chapter that provides a thorough introduction to mixed methods research.

What is qualitative research?

An umbrella term

The term ‘qualitative research’ is an umbrella term used to refer to a complex and evolving **research methodology**. It has roots in a number of different disciplines, principally anthropology, sociology, and philosophy, and is now used in almost all fields of social science inquiry, including applied linguistics. A plethora of **research approaches** has been developed within qualitative research, including narrative inquiry, case study, ethnography, action research, phenomenology, and grounded theory. These approaches use a wide variety of **data collection methods**, such as observation, interviews, open-response questionnaire items, verbal reports, diaries, and discourse analysis; all of these approaches and methods will be discussed in this book. And within each of these research approaches and methods, a number of **research techniques** and strategies have been developed to help qualitative researchers do their day-to-day work – conceptualizing the research project, collecting and analyzing data, and writing up findings. The number of terms and concepts used to define these approaches and methods and their associated strategies and techniques has grown to the point where there is now even a *Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry* (Schwandt, 2007).

Two important questions

Given that qualitative research is such a vast field, let us begin our exploration by considering two simple but fundamental questions that all researchers face, ‘What is reality?’ (see **ontology**) and ‘What is knowledge?’ (see **epistemology**). How researchers answer these questions is shaped by their view of the world, and also informed by how other academics conceptualize research. In the social sciences, a number of generally accepted models have been developed that articulate these conceptual frameworks, and they are called **paradigms**. Paradigms have profoundly affected the development of research in general and qualitative research in particular. This can be illustrated by comparing two that are often given as examples of opposite perspectives – positivism and constructivism.

Positivists believe that there is only one, fixed, agreed-upon reality, so research must strive to find a singular, universal ‘truth’. They see the world as real, as something that exists independently of themselves. They believe that this reality can be quantified, and that the purpose of research is to measure it as precisely as possible. Since positivists believe that there is one universal reality, they also presume that any truths they discover about that reality are equally applicable to other groups or situations, regardless of the context. For researchers who take a positivist approach, one of the primary aims of investigation is therefore to formulate hypotheses that will allow them to make predictions about what will happen in the future, or inferences about other contexts. According to the positivist school of thought, the role of the researcher is to be detached and ‘objective’ both in the gathering of data and the interpretation of the findings.

Some readers may recollect having been taught many of these points in high school science classes. Indeed, positivism has its roots in the nature of inquiry that was developed for the physical sciences, where ‘truths’, ‘laws’, and ‘axioms’ wait to be discovered. During the early stages of the development of research in the social sciences, this dogma was generally accepted without question because of its historical respectability. However, as the nature of research in the social sciences became more multifaceted, and the complexity of the questions it sought to answer increased, the shortcomings of the positivist approach became more and more apparent. Now, not many researchers subscribe to a strict notion of positivism, but it provides a useful contrast to another important perspective that developed in the social sciences, constructivism, which profoundly influenced the development of qualitative research.

In contrast to positivists, **constructivists** believe that there is no universally agreed upon reality or universal ‘truth’. Rather, ‘meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world’ (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). That is, each individual creates his or her own unique understandings of the world, so there are multiple constructions and multiple interpretations of reality. And these constructions and interpretations change, depending upon time and circumstances, so reality is not universal but person-, context-, and time-bound.

To illustrate constructivist ideas, let us think about the people who were sitting in that classroom when you walked in on your first day. Partway through that first class, if you had asked each of them the simple question, ‘What is happening now?’ it is likely that you would have gotten a range of quite different answers. You would probably have found that each person was attending to different aspects of the lesson, and interpreting what was going on in terms of their own expectations and learning experiences. The classroom context would also have been influencing each person differently, as their experience of the class would have differed depending on

where they were sitting and with whom they were interacting. If you were to have repeated this process at the end of class by asking your classmates, 'What happened in our class today?', you would most likely have gotten a completely new set of responses that may not have borne much resemblance to the earlier ones. You would have found that each student had constructed her own understanding of the lesson, and was in fact (re)constructing it for herself as she talked about it with you. This is the key point of constructivism: that the reality of this class for the students present would certainly not have been a one-size-fits-all assessment but rather a person-, context-, and time-bound experience. The task of a constructivist researcher, then, is to understand these multiple ways of looking at the world – a fascinating, and intriguing, challenge.

As constructivist ideas became more popular in the social sciences in the latter half of the twentieth century, researchers sought better ways to understand these person-, context-, and time-bound experiences. Although many researchers continued to use quantitative research, qualitative research based upon a constructivist view of the world began to emerge as a rigorous and systematic methodology to help researchers explore people's worlds. Now, most – but not all – researchers who use qualitative research approaches and methods would state that their views of the world are closer to the constructivist one than the positivist. Ultimately, its tenets came to underpin much qualitative research.

But what exactly does 'understanding multiple ways of looking at the world' mean, and how do constructivist qualitative researchers achieve this? In the next few pages, I am going to give you a whirlwind overview of the essential characteristics of the constructivist account of qualitative research, then review three other perspectives that have spurred further development in qualitative research methodology – critical theory, postmodernism, and pragmatism.

A focus on the social world

As qualitative researchers believe that meaning is socially constructed, their research focus is on the **participants** – how participants experience and interact with a **phenomenon** at a given point in time and in a particular context, and the multiple meanings it has for them. They are interested in the ordinary, everyday worlds of their participants – where they live, work, and study. These **natural settings** include such places as homes and workplaces, staffrooms, classrooms and self-access centers, and online chat rooms. 'Qualitative researchers go to the people; they do not extricate people from their everyday worlds' (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 9). They recognize that these settings are complex, dynamic, and multifaceted.

Unlike quantitative researchers, who emphasize the importance of measuring outcomes, qualitative researchers focus on understanding the process

8 *Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics*

of what's going on in a setting. Here is a simple illustration:

Wimbledon 0 – Liverpool 0

There was more excitement in the car park than on the soccer pitch

Source: Dey (1993, p. 9).

The left box succinctly summarizes the outcome of the soccer game, but does not provide a sense of what actually happened there that day; the right box captures this much better. To give another example, this time from applied linguistics, quantitative researchers often measure gains in proficiency over a period of time – the outcomes of learning. However, qualitative researchers focus on the process, by trying to understand how those gains were made, what the participants thought about improving their proficiency, and how the setting – and the other people there – influenced them. This kind of research is often longitudinal, and a lot of qualitative inquiry requires researchers to spend a relatively prolonged period of time in the research setting to develop deep and comprehensive understandings of what goes on there. With a more detailed and intensive focus on each participant, working even in one setting is very time and labor intensive so the number of participants is usually small and they are carefully chosen.

Qualitative researchers ask particular types of questions about a setting (Patton, 2002), such as: What's going on here? What does the world look like for participants? What meanings do they make here? How does this setting influence participants' perceptions and behavior? Researchers ask these sorts of questions because they want to comprehend the subjective meanings and understandings that participants create about their own social and personal worlds. To do so, researchers 'position' themselves closely to the participants, to endeavor to see the world as their participants do – from the participants' angle. This participant or 'insider' point of view is termed the **emic** perspective; the researcher or 'outsider' point of view is termed the **etic** perspective. Developing an emic perspective usually means directly interacting with the research participants in the research context, 'in the field, face to face with real people' (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 9). It also means using the participants' own terms and concepts to describe their worlds when analyzing data and presenting findings.

The research process

In a qualitative study, researchers often use multiple data collection methods, including observations, interviews, open-response questionnaires, and diaries. Each of these 'makes the world visible in a different way' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4), so a fuller, richer picture of the participants' perspective can be explored and represented. All of these data collection methods create

data that is primarily textual not numerical: researchers doing observations create written notes, called field notes; researchers using interviews generate written transcripts or summaries; and the other data collection methods such as questionnaires and diaries use text that the participants themselves have written. That is not to say that numerical data is not used, but that its purpose is supplementary not central. A vast amount of textual data is created in a qualitative research study, and managing it is often challenging.

The textual data that researchers create in their field notes and interview summaries should be richly detailed and descriptive of the participants and the research setting – capturing what researchers have seen, heard, smelled, and touched. As they create this data, and later as they think about them, researchers add their own thoughts and reflections. Taken together, this creates a **thick description** of the participants and setting. Qualitative researchers then use interpretive analysis to sift through their data and group similar ideas together, to discover patterns of behavior and thinking.

The data that researchers collect permits them to paint a richly descriptive picture of their participants' worlds – the participants themselves, the setting, and the major and minor events that happen there. A well-written qualitative research study will carefully use the participants' own words to augment the researcher's vivid description and clear interpretation. It should give readers a sense of entering the participants' worlds and sharing the experience of being there with them. The process is, in a sense, like film-making – the researcher assembles data into montages by blending images, sounds, and understandings together to create a compelling composite creation (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, for a fuller explanation).

The nature of qualitative research

When little is known about a phenomenon or existing research is limited, qualitative research is a very useful research methodology because it is *exploratory* – its purpose is to discover new ideas and insights, or even generate new theories. This research is not necessarily done to predict what may happen in the future or in another setting – what is learned about the phenomenon, participants, or events in the setting can be an end in itself. That is, qualitative research mostly focuses on understanding the particular and the distinctive, and does not necessarily seek or claim to generalize findings to other contexts. Some qualitative researchers do consider the extent to which their findings may be generalizable, but many leave it up to the readers to decide to what degree the features of the research setting are relevant to their own context. The richer the description the researcher provides in the study's report, the easier it is for readers to envisage the research setting and thus make a judgment about the relevance of the research for them.

As qualitative research is often exploratory, most researchers do not define specific research questions at the outset of the study, as doing so would likely impose their own framework on the research context. Rather, they usually

begin the study with only a research purpose and conceptual framework, and a sense of the initial focus of interest. They then prefer to enter the research setting and become familiar with the context and the participants, and ascertain what participants think the main issues and problems are, before determining their specific research questions. These questions are modified and refined, and the research design developed, as their understandings of the research setting, participants, and research focus mature. This reflects what is called the emergent nature of the qualitative research process – understanding emerges as the research proceeds. Donald Freeman explores this in Chapter 2.

The quantitative research cycle is usually characterized as being linear, each stage being carried out one after the other: research questions are formulated, data is collected then statistically analyzed, and findings written up. By contrast, qualitative research is more simultaneous, nonlinear, and iterative. That is, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data are done largely at the same time, with researchers constantly moving back and forth between all three until new information does not add to their understanding of a topic, a point called **data saturation**. In fact, **data analysis** will often steer data collection, as ongoing analysis indicates what avenues of research to pursue – who to observe or interview next, what questions to ask, and what documents to request – so the emergent nature of qualitative research is also evident throughout the research cycle.

Although emergent, qualitative research is systematic and rigorous. As Gretchen Rossman and Sharon Rallis illustrate in Chapter 13, for readers and other researchers to trust your research, there must be a strong conceptual framework to guide your study, and congruence between the research approach that structures your study and the data collection methods that you employ. Moreover, you need to demonstrate that your research practices are sound and that you have used clear logic, provide strong evidence to substantiate the claims that you make, and diligently document the process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting your data.

While qualitative research is systematic, it is not formulaic, so there is no requirement that researchers follow a set of prescribed research steps. This point is stressed by Rallis and Rossman (2003):

...inquiry proceeds through a complex, nonlinear process of induction, deduction, reflection, inspiration, and just plain old hard thinking. This can be characterized as *researcher praxis* (Jones, 2002), that is, an iteration between theoretical ideas, data, and the researcher's reflection on both. A... feature of qualitative research... is a reliance on sophisticated reasoning that is multifaceted and iterative, moving back and forth between the parts and the whole. (p. 11).

Qualitative research also requires you to be intuitive, to see links and patterns in the data, and to build these into themes that simultaneously fulfill

your research purposes and also express both the particular and the essential nature of the setting and its participants. Qualitative research is a discipline that calls for a balance between order and insight.

The subjectivity of the researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary research instrument. This has two aspects. First, researchers themselves collect the data, by directly observing or interviewing the participants, for example. The advantage of researchers doing this is that they can be responsive and adaptive to the participants and research setting and can quickly begin to explore unanticipated avenues of research. They can also collect a wide range of data and begin to think about it immediately, allowing them to clarify ideas promptly for accuracy of interpretation (Merriam, 2002). The second dimension is that observation field notes and interview snippets do not speak for themselves (Rossman & Rallis, 2003); nor do questionnaire answers and diary entries magically indicate to the researcher underlying patterns of reality. Rather, the researcher has to interpret them, so analysis in qualitative research is often called interpretive analysis.

But when researchers go into research settings, they also take their own intellectual baggage and life experiences with them. Inevitably, their gender, age, ethnicity, cultural background, sexual orientation, politics, religious beliefs, and life experiences – their worldview – are the lens through which they see their research. This may color their perceptions of the research setting and also the constructions of reality that they develop with the participants. This is a major concern in qualitative research, so it is important for researchers to be constantly aware and systematically reflect on their own personal identity and impact on the participants and research setting, and state that they have done so in the study's final report. Qualitative researchers can also handle this through a process called **triangulation** – obtaining different perspectives on a phenomenon by gathering data from different participants, and using a variety of data collection methods like observations, interviews, and questionnaires. On the other hand, some qualitative researchers see subjectivity as a virtue, the 'basis of researchers making a distinct contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected' (Peshkin, 1988, p. 18, cited in Merriam, 2002, p. 5). Each researcher's perception, 'like light hitting a crystal, reflects a different perspective' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 6, from Richardson, 2000).

Different ways of looking at the world

This diversity in qualitative research illustrates an important point – that the constructivist approach to qualitative research is now by no means universally accepted. It has been criticized for assuming that the interpretive reconstruction of reality is essentially 'unproblematic'; that is, that researchers can

preserve a completely impartial and unbiased perspective, and that qualitative research itself is politically and socially a neutral activity.

Many qualitative researchers strongly agree with this critique – they argue that truth is never value-free. Rather, they assert that all research is necessarily political and so fundamentally value-laden, involving issues of power in society. They also believe that social science research, including constructivist qualitative research, has often contributed to the silencing of marginalized and oppressed groups in society, by making them simply passive objects of inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

From these concerns developed **critical theory**, which views society as fundamentally conflictual and oppressive. Critical theory seeks ‘not merely understanding but change’ (Richards, 2003, p. 40); it is openly ideological, emancipatory, and transformative. Because critical theorists are interested in the power asymmetries that underlie society, they explicitly want to empower marginalized groups, often by doing research together with members of these groups. Critical theory has made major contributions to qualitative research, as it has forced researchers to question the meanings of concepts that they had taken for granted, and also examine the assumptions underlying their work. Critical theory encompasses an array of theories and perspectives, such as critical race theory and **feminist theory**. In qualitative research, a critical lens can be applied to a number of research approaches (explained below) to create critical discourse analysis, **critical ethnography**, or critical action research.

Although Lazaraton (2003) notes that qualitative research in applied linguistics does not yet have a ‘clear sociopolitical agenda’ (p. 3), marginalized groups that could be researched by critical applied linguists include new immigrants from non-English speaking countries, hearing-challenged students, or language teachers who teach a language other than their mother tongue. In fact, within applied linguistics as well as in the broader social sciences, critical approaches are becoming more common. ‘We want a social science that is committed up front to issues of social justice, equity, nonviolence, peace, and universal human rights. We do not want a social science that says it can address these issues if it wants to. For us, that is no longer an option’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 13).

Postmodernism is another perspective whose ideas are included under the umbrella of qualitative research, yet its basic assumptions are significantly different from the constructivist paradigm. It is an ideological perspective that questions the early twentieth-century emphasis on science and technology, rationality, reason, and positivism. This perspective is challenging constructivist-interpretive qualitative research, so it is important that researchers also understand some of its basic notions. Merriam and Associates (2002) provide a useful summary:

A postmodern world is one where the rationality, scientific method, and certainties of the modern world no longer hold....In the postmodern

world, everything is 'contested.' What has been considered true, real, or right can be questioned; and there are multiple interpretations of the same phenomenon depending on where one is standing. There are no absolutes, no single theoretical framework for examining social and political issues. ...

Postmodernists celebrate diversity among people, ideas, and institutions. By accepting the diversity and plurality of the world, no one element is privileged or more powerful than another. ...

'Most postmodernists do not talk about methodology' (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 184), and the 'literature provides only the vaguest indication of what ideals of multiple voices mean concretely in empirical studies' (p. 185). Indeed, it would be congruent with this worldview to *not* come up with a singular approach to doing research. Instead, postmodern research is highly experimental, playful, creative, and no two postmodern studies look alike. (p. 375)

Richards (2003) notes that the broad topic of the hegemony of English as a world language provides a rich environment for postmodern researchers in applied linguistics.

Another perspective in social research, one that encompasses both qualitative and quantitative research, is called **pragmatism**. As outlined by Creswell (2009), pragmatism is not based on a particular ontological or epistemological stance; there is no predetermined view of what reality or knowledge is. Pragmatic researchers may start collecting and analyzing data without necessarily giving any thought to philosophical issues such as the nature of truth and reality. Instead, they focus on the impact or consequences of their research, choosing the qualitative and quantitative research approaches, methods, and techniques that best meet their research purposes. '[P]ragmatism opens the door to multiple methods, different worldviews, and different assumptions, as well as different forms of data collection and analysis' (p. 11). It represents the philosophical underpinnings of mixed methods research.

The constructivist paradigm, and critical theory, postmodernism, and pragmatism, are the maps that illustrate the terrain of the broad and increasingly disparate field of qualitative research. Understanding them will help you assess the relevance and importance of published research that you will read in the course of your studies. Also, understanding your own view of the world will help you to 'position' your research appropriately within or across paradigms and to create a more coherent research design. For a somewhat dense but thorough introduction to different paradigms in qualitative research in the social sciences, see Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Merriam and Associates (2002). In our book, most authors have positioned their chapters within the constructivist paradigm but make reference to the other three perspectives.

Qualitative research approaches and methods

Now that you have a general understanding of the essential features of qualitative research, let us take a closer look at what this book offers you. To complete Part I, Donald Freeman explores the nature of the qualitative research cycle, to help you understand what distinguishes it as 'qualitative'. Part II introduces five qualitative research approaches commonly used in applied linguistics – narrative inquiry, case study, ethnography, action research, and mixed methods – and Part III presents several of the most commonly used qualitative data collection methods – observation, interviews, questionnaires, verbal reports and diary studies, and discourse analysis. Finally, ethics and trustworthiness, and writing up your research report are considered in Part IV. The book concludes with a glossary of key terms used in qualitative research, and a subject index.

Qualitative research approaches

To provide a snapshot of the five qualitative research approaches presented in Part II of the book, here is a brief description of each of them:

- **Narrative inquiry** (Chapter 3) provides a storied analysis of a person's life. It assumes that people use narrative to make sense of who they are and how their lives change (Bruner, 1990). As Garold Murray notes in his chapter, it takes the perspective of the participant(s) and uses first-person accounts of life experiences as data, mostly gathered through interviews.
- **Case study** (Chapter 4) creates an in-depth description and analysis of a 'bounded system' – one individual, institution, or educational context. By concentrating on a single (or few) case(s), this approach can describe a particular learning or teaching process or research setting in great detail. Case study uses multiple sources of data and data collection methods, and it is often combined with other qualitative and quantitative research approaches, as Michael Hood explains in his chapter.
- **Ethnography** (Chapter 5) refers to both a research process and also the product of that research. It describes and interprets the common patterns of a culture-sharing group through prolonged observation. Juanita Heigham and Keiko Sakui in their chapter observe that ethnography is not defined by how data is collected, but rather by the lens through which data is interpreted; the goal is to recreate for the reader the shared beliefs, practices, artifacts, knowledge, and behaviors of a group of people (Merriam, 2002). Whereas narrative inquiry and case study often look at the individual, ethnography, with its focus on culture, looks at groups.
- **Action research** (Chapter 6) is a systematic and self-reflective approach to collecting and analyzing information to help teachers explore issues that they face in their classroom teaching in order to change or improve their current practice. In her chapter, Anne Burns notes that action research

employs a range of data collection methods that are flexible and open-ended. The outcome of action research is more often a change in understanding and behavior than some form of a published report, partly because this is often its principal purpose.

- **Mixed methods** (Chapter 7) combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods in a single study. For example, language proficiency test scores are used along with student interviews to create a more multidimensional view of a language learning process, or a teacher questionnaire is combined with classroom observations and teacher diaries to generate a fuller understanding of one aspect of language teaching. In their chapter, Nataliya Ivankova and John Creswell illustrate the procedures for collecting, analyzing, and mixing qualitative and quantitative data at different stages in the research process. A mixed methods study could emphasize qualitative and quantitative data equally, or give one type greater emphasis. It is an emerging field of study and is becoming more commonly used in research in applied linguistics.

To help you get a better understanding of these approaches, their main characteristics are summarized in Table 1.1, and, of course, they are further elaborated in the text.

Beyond the scope of this introductory text are a number of other qualitative research approaches that do have application in the field of applied linguistics, but are less commonly used by novice researchers. Phenomenology and grounded theory are the two most significant, and as you will come across these terms in the literature, they are introduced here:

- **Phenomenology:** Whereas a narrative inquiry explores the life of a single individual, a phenomenological study describes the meanings that several individuals make from experiencing a single phenomenon. In our field, that could include understanding the experience of adult learners trying to create and negotiate meaning in a new foreign language, or the experience of long-term immigrants who are beginning to learn the language of their adopted home. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to reduce individual experiences of such phenomenon to a description of the basic ‘essence’ of that experience, by creating a composite description of that experience for all of the participants. Having a deep understanding of such a phenomenon can help teachers be more aware of their students’ language learning experiences, or help language program administrators more sensitively structure courses. In a broader sense, phenomenology as a school of philosophical thought underpins all qualitative research, because of its interest in understanding and representing the subjective experience of participants.
- **Grounded theory:** While phenomenology describes the meaning of an experience, a grounded theory study goes beyond description to generate

Table 1.1 The main characteristics of five qualitative research approaches

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Narrative Inquiry</i>	<i>Case study</i>	<i>Ethnography</i>	<i>Action research</i>	<i>Mixed Methods</i>
Focus	To explore the life of one or more individuals, using in-depth interviews	To provide an in-depth description and analysis of a case (or cases), using multiple data sources	To describe and interpret the common patterns of a culture-sharing group through prolonged participant observation	To explore problems or questions in your teaching or learning context by systematic data creation and analysis	Combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods in a single study, to provide a fuller understanding of the research focus
Foundation disciplines	Anthropology, literature, history, psychology, and sociology	Psychology, law, political science, medicine, and education	Anthropology and sociology	Management studies, organization development, education, and health	Social sciences, especially education
Unit(s) of analysis	One or more individuals	An individual learner or teacher, a class, school, education area, or country; a class activity or language program	A group that share the same culture – a group of learners with the same first language, a class or year of students, the students or teachers of one department or school	An individual or group of learners or teachers, one group or class of students, the teachers in a department or language program	An individual or group of learners, teachers or language users
Data collection methods: main forms	One main source: interviews	Multiple sources: interviews observations diaries and verbal reports discourse analysis documents and records	Two main sources: interviews observations	Multiple sources: interviews observations recordings of classrooms or natural settings questionnaires diaries and verbal reports documents, such as textbooks and class materials, or examples of learners' writing	Multiple sources: interviews observations questionnaires diaries and verbal reports
Data collection methods: other forms	Documents and records	Questionnaires	Documents and archival records	Recordings of learner and teacher discourse for analysis	Quantitative data, including: proficiency and achievement tests

or discover a theory. This theory is 'grounded' in data that has been systematically collected from participants who have experienced the process being studied, and then methodically analyzed by the researcher. This theory is usually 'substantive' (a relatively narrow, limited theory about just one facet of learning or teaching) but can be 'formal' (a more extensive theory that combines a number of substantive theories together to make a broader theory). Like the other qualitative research approaches outlined above, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, and qualitative data collection techniques such as interviews and observation are used. Grounded theory was first outlined by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967 in their ground-breaking book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, which was in fact crucial in the broader development of qualitative research methodology. Glaser and Strauss did not offer a prescribed set of research procedures in their original work, but these have gradually been developed over time, principally by Strauss and his new co-author, Juliet Corbin (1990, 2008). Glaser has criticized Strauss and Corbin's approach to grounded theory as being too prescribed and structured (Glaser, 1992), but their approach has come to be commonly used in the social sciences and health. In applied linguistics, grounded theory is rarely used by novice researchers due to its complexity, but research procedures like **theoretical sampling** and the **constant comparative method** of data analysis are often used by qualitative researchers employing approaches other than grounded theory.

For a more substantial introduction to phenomenology and grounded theory in the social sciences, particularly in comparison with ethnography, see Creswell (2007) and Richards and Morse (2007).

Qualitative data collection methods

In most qualitative studies, researchers use a variety of **research methods** to collect data, in order to obtain as many perspectives as possible on the phenomenon being researched. In this book, six data collection methods most commonly used in qualitative research in applied linguistics are addressed in Part III:

- **Observation** (Chapter 8) occurs when researchers carefully watch participants in the research setting with the aim of understanding their experience of being there, as Neil Cowie explains in his chapter. It is used to collect information about participants' external behavior, which can be further explored casually in conversation or more formally in interviews, with questions about participants' inner ideas, beliefs, and values. Researchers can choose to be 'complete observers' and not take part in the learning or teaching phenomenon being studied, or they can choose to take part as 'participant observers'. Data is created in the form of field

notes, which include explanations of what researchers observed as well as their reflections.

- **Interviews** (Chapter 9) offer a way to explore people's experiences and worldviews and the meanings they bring to them, as Keith Richards illustrates in his chapter. Interviews can be carefully structured by pre-determined questions to elicit specific information, or be more open to allow for generating richer insights. The greatest challenge in interviewing is getting the interaction with the participant right, by recognizing that interviews are jointly constructed encounters.
- **Open-response items on questionnaires** (Chapter 10) are questions on a survey that do not require respondents to select their answers from a limited list or selection; rather, participants answer in their own words. They are commonly used when researchers would like to quickly and efficiently collect textual data from a relatively large number of participants. James Dean Brown in his chapter provides guidelines for writing good questions, and for how to administer and analyze data.
- **Verbal reports** (Chapter 11) are oral records of a participant's thought processes, provided by individuals when they are thinking aloud either during or immediately after completing a language learning or teaching task. **Diaries** (Chapter 11) are another way of accessing participants' inner worlds; they are an account of a language experience as recorded in a first-person journal. These accounts may be analyzed and published by the diarists themselves or by an independent researcher. Both verbal reports and diaries are particularly important in applied linguistics, and their use is discussed by Sandra Lee McKay in her chapter.
- **Discourse analysis** (Chapter 12) looks at how language is used in spoken and written communication. It uses authentic language that has been produced spontaneously in naturally occurring events, that were not elicited experimentally specifically for the sake of research. The researcher should analyze this data with few or no preconceived notions, but allow the patterns of language use to emerge. Anne Lazaraton explains how to collect and analyze such spoken data in her chapter.

These six data collection methods can be conceptualized by placing them along two intersecting continuums. The first of these continuums expresses the amount of control researchers have over the research setting as they collect their data. In most qualitative research, researchers do not control the research setting at all, as they are interested in authentic behavior in natural settings. However, researchers using verbal reports do control what participants do during the research process, as you will learn when you read Chapter 11. By comparison, with research done outside qualitative research, most language analysis also involves researchers carefully controlling the research environment: researchers try to control the language that participants use when they complete a language task, and they also collect

data in settings specified for the purposes of collecting data, like a researcher's office or a language laboratory, rather than in natural settings.

The second continuum indicates the degree to which the researcher structures the actual collection of data. Some qualitative data collection methods allow the researcher to structure data collection carefully, like structured interviews, or observations using observation checklists. Many qualitative data collection methods, however, are less structured, permitting researchers to be more adaptive and responsive to the research setting. In fact, most methods can be both. For example, with the collection of diary data, researchers may ask participants to respond in their diaries only about a specific topic, or they may ask respondents to write on any topic with no set format. The advantage of more structured data collection is that information from different participants or in different periods of time can be compared; the disadvantage is that fertile insights that the participants might have otherwise offered could be lost. These two continuums are represented in Figure 1.1.

Probably your first questions after you have established your area of research interest are which approach and methods you should use in your study. The answers are straightforward: the ones that best suit your research

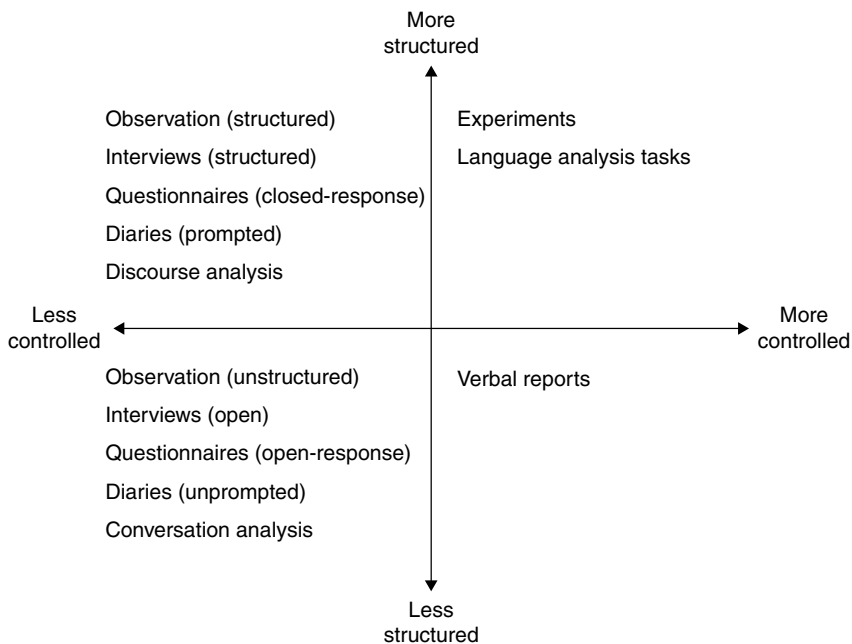


Figure 1.1 Qualitative data collection methods

Source: Adapted from van Lier (1988, p. 57).

purpose and research questions. That is, there must be congruence between your research purpose and research questions on the one hand, and the research approach and data collection method that you use on the other. This important issue is explored further in each chapter.

Practical issues

Qualitative researchers often work closely with participants for extended periods of time, and in trying to understand their participants' worlds they inevitably become part of them. In entering the worlds of others, researchers must recognize the significant ethical responsibilities that they have to the people there – to honor them as individuals, respect their decisions to participate (or not) in a study, and also protect them from any damage or harm that may stem from their participation. In their chapter on ethics and trustworthiness (Chapter 13), Sharon Rallis and Gretchen Rossman emphasize that being an ethical researcher demands vigilance and thoughtfulness throughout the entire research cycle. Researchers make many decisions, both when planning their research and also on the spot, which affect the participants and other people in the research setting. These decisions must be thought through ethically, based upon codes of ethics and also moral principles. Rallis and Rossman's chapter will help you reason through these choices, so that when you leave the research setting, you will not have harmed the worlds that you have tried to understand.

Another practical – and challenging – aspect of qualitative research is the process of recording and writing up your study. Much of the data that qualitative researchers create is textual – written field notes and interview summaries, and transcripts of interviews. In addition, the qualitative research report itself should bring the realities of the participants' worlds to the printed page. Clearly, working well with text is an important skill for qualitative researchers to develop. Christine Pearson Casanave (Chapter 14) explores how to do this, encouraging researchers to write early, revise regularly, and get frequent feedback. She also suggests that novice researchers read widely and find 'textual mentors' – writing that they would like to emulate in their own. In her chapter, Casanave gives six tips to help novice researchers – and writers – create text that is engaging and accessible, and stresses that writing eloquently and creatively can be a compelling and rewarding process.

A guide to this book

Chapter organization

This book is designed to be a classroom text for qualitative research in applied linguistics and TESOL courses, as well as a user-friendly reference or

self-study book for those already practicing in the field. All of the chapters include the following sections:

- *Pre-reading questions*, to start you thinking about the chapter's topic
- A *chapter summary* that concisely reviews key information from that chapter
- *Post-reading comprehension and discussion questions*, to help you go over and explore the chapter's main points
- *Tasks* that give you hands-on practice working with each chapter's topic
- A list of accessible *further readings*, to help you independently explore the aspects of qualitative research that interest you most.

As the chapters in Part I (Overview) and Part IV (Practical Issues) explore very different facets of qualitative research, each has a unique chapter format. However, the ten central chapters of the book in Part II (research approaches) and Part III (data collection methods), follow the same basic format:

- An *illustrative example* begins each chapter and is then woven throughout it, to help you visualize how the approach or method is used 'in action' in applied linguistics research
- An *overview* provides an outline of each approach or method and the research contexts in which it is commonly used
- The section *What is...?* provides a succinct explanation of each approach or method
- The section *Why use...?* explains the advantages of using the approach or method in applied linguistics
- *Collecting your data* illustrates how to collect data, guiding you through the process
- *Organizing and interpreting your data* provides matter-of-fact explanations on how to manage data, and analyze and interpret what you have collected
- *Presenting your findings* summarizes how to effectively present your research study
- *Improving the quality of...* provides a succinct outline of how you can avoid common mistakes and how to improve the quality of your research.

As there are many terms that may be unfamiliar to you, those that are important in qualitative research are bolded throughout the book, listed at the end of each chapter and defined in clear and straightforward English in the *glossary* at the back of the book.

Ways to use this book

If you are an independent reader, you could think of this book as a reference text, dipping into the chapters that are most relevant for your immediate research interests or needs and checking unfamiliar words in the glossary.

If you are a teacher using this book in your research methods class, you could go through the book sequentially, exploring what qualitative research is then moving through research approaches in Part II to research methods in Part III. Alternatively, you may find that your students need to get started on their research projects quickly, in which case you could start with the research methods first, referring individual students to the research approaches that most suit their research purpose. Whatever way you wish to approach it, we urge you to work through the chapters in Part I and Part IV near the beginning of your course because they provide important perspectives on the qualitative research process that students will need to learn early on. The glossary is also an excellent resource and should help readers develop a firm understanding of terms commonly used in qualitative research.

Finally, we hope that you find this book informative and easy to use, and that when you have finished reading it, you will have the knowledge and skill to study language classrooms and other contexts within the field of applied linguistics with confidence.

Key words

constant comparative method
constructivism
critical ethnography
critical theory
data collection methods
data saturation
emic
etic
epistemology
interpretive analysis
mixed methods research
natural settings
ontology
paradigm
phenomenon
positivism
postmodernism
pragmatism
qualitative research
quantitative research
research approaches
research methodology
research techniques

theoretical sampling
 thick description
 triangulation
 vignettes

Further Reading

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

A key text on qualitative research, it introduces narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study in a very thorough manner.

Lazaraton, A. (1995). Qualitative research in applied linguistics: A progress report. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(3), 455–472.

Lazaraton, A. (2003). Evaluative criteria for qualitative research in applied linguistics: Whose criteria and whose research? *The Modern Language Journal*, 87(i), 1–12.

Two articles by a leading researcher in the field, providing an overview of qualitative research in applied linguistics.

Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

A golden oldie, providing a thorough introduction to both qualitative research and a number of qualitative research approaches and data collection methods used in applied linguistics.

Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative inquiry in TESOL*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

An engaging exploration of qualitative research in the teaching of English as a second language field.

Richards, L., & Morse, J. M. (2007). *Readme first for a user's guide to qualitative methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

A very readable, practical, must-have guide to qualitative research.

Rossmann, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

A clear explanation of the qualitative research process, with a particular emphasis on ethical issues.

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24 *Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics*

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Subject Index

Note: Entries with page references of 306–324 refer to definitions in the Glossary. Please refer to the Glossary for terms boldfaced in the text but not listed in this Subject Index.

- action research, 112–34
 - action research cycle, 115
 - analyzing data, 122–4
 - collaborative action research, 116–17, 132, 168
 - collecting data, 117–22
 - definition, 14–15, 16, 113–14, 114–16, 306
 - improving the quality of action research, 127–8
 - presenting findings, 124–6, 131
 - reasons for doing action research, 116–17
 - research design, 115, 127, 128
- analyzing data, *see* data analysis
- applied linguistics, 4–5, 12, 13, 307
- action research, 116–17
- case study, 68, 71–2, 72–3
- discourse analysis, 244–6, 246–7
- ethnography, 92, 93, 94, 95–6
- interviews, 187, 194
- introspective techniques, 222–3, 229–30, 234
- mixed methods, 136, 139, 145–6, 155, 159
- narrative inquiry, 47–8
- observation, 166–7, 168
- open-response questionnaires, 213
- artifacts, 77, 93, 99–100, 103–4, 169, 307
- case study, 66–90
 - analyzing data, 78–82
 - boundaries of the case, 68–9, 72, 307
 - collecting data, 74–8
 - definition, 14, 16, 67–8, 68–72, 307
 - ethnography, comparison with, 71
 - improving the quality of case study, 84–6
 - presenting findings, 82–4
 - reasons for doing case study, 72–3
 - research design, 72–3, 74–5
 - sources of data, 77
 - types of case study, 69–71, 308, 311, 314, 315, 316
- coding, 308
 - in action research, 123
 - in case study, 78–80
 - in ethnography, 101–2
 - in interviews, 184, 191–2, 195
 - in mixed methods, 139, 142, 150–2, 154
 - in narrative inquiry, 51–6
 - in observation, 172–3, 173–4
 - in open-response questionnaires, 210–11
 - in verbal reports, 222, 224, 226, 235
- collaborative research, 116, 118, 168
- collecting data, *see* data collection
- communities of practice, 35, 37–8, 47, 57–8, 269, 284
- computers in data analysis, 79, 101, 174, 191, 211, 216, 231
- confidentiality, 101, 176, 188, 189, 213, 233, 275–6, 278–9, 285, 319
 - see also* ethical issues
- consent, 121, 169, 183, 247, 248, 271, 274, 276–8, 285, 311, 314
 - see also* ethical issues
- constructivism, 5–13, 309, 317, 318
- credibility, 154, 215, 252, 265–6, 269, 284, 291, 310
 - see also* quality in qualitative research
- critical friend(s), 118, 119, 126, 266, 269
- critical theory, 12–13, 310
- culture
 - cultural portrait, 92, 94, 103, 310
 - definition, 93–4, 310
 - diary studies, 229, 232
 - discourse analysis, 243, 245
 - ethnography, 14, 71, 83, 93–4, 95, 96, 97–8, 105, 167, 310, 312
 - narrative inquiry, 46, 47, 47–8, 315
 - researcher's culture, 11, 100, 102, 106

- data, 32–5, 310
- diaries, 228–34, 311, *also* 16, 18–19, 47, 68, 76, 77, 117–19
 - documents, 16, 76, 77, 100, 117
 - interviews, 182–99, *also* 16, 18–9, 46, 49–51, 51–6, 75, 77, 78–9, 99–100, 102, 117, 120–1, 123, 138–9, 139–45, 146–52, 184, 195, 209–10, 225, 266
 - observation, 165–81, 314, *also* 16, 18–19, 75–6, 77, 79, 92, 97–9, 113, 117, 118–20, 123, 184, 195, 225, 266
 - open-response questionnaires, 200–19, 317, *also* 16, 18–19, 117, 124, 139, 141, 142, 149, 166, 183–4, 184, 187
 - verbal reports, 220–7, 323, *also* 16, 18–19, 136
- data analysis, 310
- in action research, 122–4
 - in case study, 78–82
 - in diary studies, 231–3
 - in discourse analysis, 249–51
 - in ethnography, 101–3
 - in interviews, 191–3
 - in mixed methods, 139–45, 150–2
 - in narrative inquiry, 51–6
 - in observation, 173–4
 - in open-response questionnaires, 210–12
 - in verbal reports, 224
- data collection, 32–5, 311
- in action research, 117–22
 - in case study, 74–8
 - in diary studies, 230–1
 - in discourse analysis, 247–9
 - in ethnography, 96–101
 - in interviews, 187–91
 - in mixed methods, 139–45, 149–52
 - in narrative inquiry, 48–51
 - in observation, 168–73
 - in open-response questionnaires, 205–10
 - in verbal reports, 223–4, 225
- diary studies, 228–34
- analyzing data, 231–3
 - collecting data using diaries, 230–1
 - definition, 18, 228–9, 311
 - improving the quality of diaries, 233–4
 - vs. other data collection methods, 18–19, 201
 - presenting findings, 233
 - reasons for using diaries, 229–30
 - types of diaries, 228–9
 - use in research approaches, 16: action research, 117, 118, 119; case study, 68, 76, 77; narrative inquiry, 47
- discourse analysis, 242–59
- analyzing data, 248–51
 - collecting data for discourse analysis, 247–9
 - definition, 18, 244–6, 311
 - improving the quality of discourse analysis, 252–4
 - vs. other data collection methods, 18–19, 195, 221
 - presenting findings, 251–2
 - reasons for using discourse analysis, 246–7
 - types of discourse analysis, 244–5
 - use in research approaches, 16, 114
- document analysis, 76, 77, 100, 117
- emic perspective, 8, 97–8, 104, 312
- entering the field, 169, 312
- ethical issues, 263–87
- in action research, 312
 - competent practice, 264, 265–9
 - consent form, 276–7
 - culture differences between researchers and participants, 264, 277
 - deception and consent, 276–8, 311
 - ethical codes of conduct, 273–4, 312
 - ethical decision-making, 279–81
 - ethical issues, 273–9
 - ethical practice, 270–3
 - ethical principles or theories, 280–1
 - ethic of care, 272–3
 - ethic of rights and responsibilities, 271–2
 - ethic of social justice, 272
 - ethics of consequences (consequentialism), 270–1
 - informed consent, 314
 - intuition, 280
 - non-consequentialism, 271–3
 - privacy and confidentiality, 275–6, 319

- trust and betrayal, 278–9
- trustworthy practice, 264–5, 323
- ethnography, 91–111
 - analyzing data, 101–3
 - case study, comparison with, 71
 - collecting data, 96–101
 - definition, 14, 16, 92–3, 93–4, 312
 - improving the quality of ethnography, 105–7
 - presenting findings, 103–5
 - reasons for doing ethnography, 92, 95–6
 - research design, 96–7
- etic perspective, 8, 97–8, 99, 104, 106, 313
- feminist theory, 12, 278, 286, 296, 313
- field notes, 51, 96, 98–9, 167, 171–3, 313
- fieldwork, 92, 96, 313
- grounded theory, 15–17, 314
- improving the quality of qualitative research
 - in action research, 127–8
 - in case study, 84–6
 - in diary studies, 233–4
 - in discourse analysis, 252–4
 - in ethnography, 105–7
 - in interviews, 194–5
 - in mixed methods, 153–4
 - in narrative inquiry, 58–60
 - in observation, 176–7
 - in open-response questionnaires, 214–15
 - in verbal reports, 226–7
- informants, 99, 105, 106, 191, 314
- informed consent, *see* ethical issues
- institutional review boards (IRBs), 247, 276–7
- interpretive analysis, 5, 9, 11, 68, 93, 253, 315
- interviews, 182–99
 - analyzing data, 191–3
 - collecting data using interviews, 187–91, 315
 - definition, 18, 19, 183–6
 - improving the quality of interviews, 194–5
 - interaction in interviews, 189–91, 194–5, 315
 - vs. other data collection methods, 18–19: observation, 184, 195, 266; open-response questionnaires, 209–10; verbal reports, 225
 - presenting findings, 193–4
 - reasons for using interviews, 187
 - types of interviews, 184–6, 317, 321, 322
 - use in research approaches, 16: action research, 117, 120–1, 123; case study, 75, 77, 78–9; ethnography, 99–100, 102; mixed methods, 138–9, 139–45, 146–52; narrative inquiry, 46, 49–51, 51–6
- life history research, 47, 47–8, 49–51, 58–9, 315
 - see also* narrative inquiry
- literature review, 184, 224, 226, 291, 296, 315
- member checks, 53, 127, 215, 269, 310, 316
 - see also* quality in qualitative research
- mixed methods research, 135–61
 - analyzing data, 139–45, 150–2
 - collecting data, 139–45, 150–2
 - definition, 15, 16, 137, 138–9, 316
 - improving the quality of mixed methods research, 153–4
 - mixing, 138–9, 316
 - notation, 138
 - presenting findings, 152–3
 - reasons for doing mixed methods research, 145–6
 - research design, 146–50
 - timing, 138–9, 322
 - types of mixed methods research, 139–45, 150–2
 - weighting, 138–9, 323
- narrative inquiry, 45–65
 - analyzing data, 50–6
 - collecting data, 48–51
 - definition, 14, 16, 46–7, 316
 - improving the quality of narrative inquiry, 58–60
 - presenting findings, 56–8
 - reasons for doing narrative inquiry, 47–8
 - research design, 48–9

- observation, 165–81
 analyzing data, 173–4
 collecting data using observation, 168–73
 definition, 16, 17–18, 19, 166–8, 317, 318
 improving the quality of observation, 176–7
 observer's paradox, 177, 253, 317
 vs. other data collection methods, 18–19: interviews, 184, 195, 266; verbal reports, 225
 presenting findings, 174–6, 294
 reasons for using observation, 168
 types of observation, 166–7, 317, 318
 use in research approaches, 16: in action research, 113, 117, 118–20, 123; in case study, 75–6, 77, 79; in ethnography, 92, 97–9, 312
 observer's paradox, 177, 253, 317
- paradigms, 5–13, 317
 phenomenology, 15, 17, 318
 pilot study, 49, 188, 209, 213, 318
 positivism, 5–7, 73, 317, 319
 postmodernism, 12–13, 278, 319
 pragmatism, 13, 319
 presenting your findings, 288–305
 in action research, 124–6, 131
 in case study, 82–4
 in diary studies, 233
 in discourse analysis, 251–2
 in ethnography, 103–5
 in interviews, 193–4
 in mixed methods, 152–3
 in narrative inquiry, 56–8
 in observation, 174–6
 in open-response questionnaires, 212–14
 in verbal reports, 226
 privacy, *see* ethical issues
- qualitative research, 3–24, 25–41, 71, 81, 137, 264–9, 275–9, 320
 quality in qualitative research, 25–41, 263–87
 confirmability, 215, 309
 credibility, 154, 215, 252, 264–6, 269, 284, 291, 310
 dependability, 215, 252, 311
 documenting, 265–7, 271–2, 276, 284, 291–2, 311
 generalizability, 34, 127, 215, 268, 322
 member checks, 53, 127, 215, 269, 310, 316
 reliability, 141, 153–4, 215, 267
 thick description, 9, 57, 83, 99, 102, 171, 215, 252, 322
 transferability, 215, 322
 triangulation, *see* triangulation
 trustworthiness, 58–9, 82–3, 127, 154, 263–87, 323
 validity, 34, 35–8, 69, 81, 83, 127, 141, 153–4, 215
 warrants, 37–9, 323
 quantitative research, 4–5, 10, 13, 69, 73, 137, 215, 292, 295–6, 320
 see also mixed methods
- questionnaires, open-response items, 200–19
 analyzing data, 210–12
 collecting data using questionnaires, 205–10
 definition, 18, 19, 201, 201–4, 317, 320
 guidelines for writing good items, 206–9
 improving the quality of questionnaires, 214–15
 vs. other data collection methods, 18–19: observations, 166; interviews, 183–4, 184, 187
 presenting findings, 212–14
 reasons for using questionnaires, 204–5
 types of items on questionnaires, 201–4
 use in research approaches, 16: action research, 117, 124; mixed methods, 139, 141, 142, 149
- reliability, 141, 153–4, 215, 267
 see also quality in qualitative research
- research approaches, 14–17
 action research, 112–34
 case study, 66–90
 ethnography, 91–111
 mixed methods, 135–61
 narrative inquiry, 45–65
- research design, 26–32
 in action research, 115, 118, 127, 128

- in case study, 72–3, 74–5
- in ethnography, 96–7
- in mixed methods, 138–9, 139–45, 145–50
- in narrative inquiry, 48–9
- pilot study, 49, 188, 209, 213, 318
- researcher
 - position (emic and emic roles), 77, 87, 97–8, 99, 104, 105–6, 290, 318
- research questions, 9–10, 19–20, 26, 27–39
 - in action research, 113–14, 114–16, 118
 - in case study, 69–71, 72–3, 74–7, 78, 82
 - in ethnography, 94, 95, 96
 - in mixed methods, 148–9, 150
 - in narrative inquiry, 48–9, 57, 59
- research setting, 26, 31–2
- retrospective reports, 321
 - see also* verbal reports
- sampling, 94, 149, 205–6, 213, 252, 268
 - in mixed methods, 139, 141, 142, 146–7
- subjectivity, 11, 102–4, 106, 108, 191, 229, 306
- surveys, 322
 - see also* questionnaires
- teacher-researchers, 71, 106, 167, 170, 177, 226
- thick description, 9, 57, 83, 99, 102, 171, 215, 252, 322
- think-alouds, 322
 - see also* verbal reports
- transcription, 50–1, 78–9, 123, 192–3, 210–11, 246, 248–9, 251, 252–4, 272, 322
 - examples of transcription, 236–8, 249–50, 256
 - transcription notation system, 257
- transferability, 215, 322
 - see also* quality in qualitative research
- triangulation, 11, 215, 265–6, 266–7, 284, 310, 323
 - use in data collection methods: diary studies, 229, 230; interviews, 195; observation, 168, 177
 - use in research approaches: action research, 124, 128, 129; case study, 81–2, 84, 85; ethnography, 100, 105
 - see also* quality in qualitative research
- trustworthiness, 58–9, 82–3, 127, 154, 263–87, 323
 - see also* quality in qualitative research
- validity, 34, 35–8, 69, 81, 83, 127, 141, 153–4, 215
 - see also* quality in qualitative research
- verbal reports (verbal protocols), 220–7, 323
 - analyzing data, 224
 - collecting data using verbal reports, 223–4, 225
 - definition, 18, 222, 323
 - improving the quality of verbal reports, 226–7
 - vs. other data collection methods, 18–19
 - presenting findings, 226
 - reasons for using verbal reports, 222–3
 - types of verbal reports, 222
 - use in research approaches, 16: mixed methods, 136
- warrants, 37–9, 323
 - see also* quality in qualitative research

