

A Study of Qualitative Research Method Used in Language Teaching

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Abstract—Language, as a tool for communication, serves as an important bridge for human beings to exchange information. Language teaching research, no matter at home or abroad, has always been a hot topic for researchers. Research topic on language teaching may usually focus on traditional applied linguistics research, such as second language acquisition, discourse analysis. In a narrow sense, applied linguistics research is equal to language teaching research. With a further discussion on language teaching and research method, more and more researchers began to combine these two research field into one study to explore application and features of qualitative research method in real research. This thesis aims at providing guidance for scholars at home, on the basis of academic journals published on TESOL Quarterly in 2001 to 2015, to further explore qualitative research method used in language teaching research

Index Terms—language teaching qualitative research method TESOL quarterly

I. INTRODUCTION

‘Qualitative research’ (QR) has opened dimensions of insight into the process of language teaching and learning that were not even discernible on the horizon twenty years ago, and developments in the new millennium promise even richer understandings in the future (Lazaraton, 2003a) [1]. Compared with qualitative research in language teaching in western countries, there appears to be more quantitative research in language teaching research. Holliday(2007:1) [2] notes that it is traditional to begin to distinguish QR from quantitative research, an ‘unadventurous’ if necessary approach since this is how most people see it. In fact, the distinction between quality and quantity is just one of many convenient but rather crude alternatives such as words/numbers, subjective \objective, or specific/generalisable (Freebody, 2003:3). However, this thesis aims to analyze the application of QR in language teaching. It is of vital importance to study the characteristics and applying trend of QR in a academic journal like TESOL Quarterly. With the booming of “the third methodological movement” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) [3], many researchers seems to care more about “the third research paradigm” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2003) [4] in real research. The enthusiasm for new

research method to gain a more accurate conclusion is likely to ignore research tradition, such as qualitative research and quantitative research. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate traditional approach used in language teaching.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Research Tradition-Qualitative Inquiries at Abroad

From Kuhn's theory of "paradigm shift" (Kuhn, 1977) [5] to Mead's research method which combines objective observation with interview of the phenomenon in society are all studies of the qualitative research used in applied linguistics. In the 1970s, with the great changes in the environment of applied linguistic studies, the qualitative research of applied linguistics has gradually expanded from traditional linguistic research to some subjects, such as psychology, social communication and cultural anthropology.

Compared with quantitative research, qualitative research is more likely to give a deep and subtle analysis of phenomena in society with its obvious advantages. In the mid-1990s, Lazaraton put forward his attitude towards the development trend of applied linguistic research. In his Current trends in research methodology and statistics in applied linguistics, the researcher found that qualitative research in applied linguistics from 1992 to 1997 accounts for 10% of core journals. The content related to the qualitative study of the applied linguistics, Lazaraton chose TESOL Quarterly, Language Learning, The Modern Language Journal and Studies in Second Language Acquisition as his research sample. At present, the main purpose of qualitative research on applied linguistics in the West is to explore the essential attributes and intrinsic laws in the description of content.

Relative research on qualitative inquiry continued in the 21st century. In 2009, Benson and Richards (2009) [6] in their own research argued that qualitative studies in applied linguistic was further increased from 1997 to 2006. Based on the study of 477 thesis published in Applied Linguistics, of which 105 thesis are related to qualitative research. His research results are all shown in Qualitative Research in Language Teaching and Learning Journals, 1997-2006. Similar to Benson's study, Richards found in his own research, in the 21st century, qualitative research in applied linguistics has not only been weakened, but showing a sustained upward development trend. From the practical perspective to analyze, language

teaching played an important role in the development of qualitative research. In the Trends in qualitative research in language teaching since 2000, Richards made detailed analysis and interpretation of his research results based on samples on TESOL Quarterly from 2001 to 2008, of which qualitative research accounted for 25% of all the articles.

At present, studies on qualitative research on applied linguistics in the West is mainly focused on the two aspects: connotation and practice. From the connotation perspective, qualitative research intends to explore the nature of things, the value of the research, the acquisition of experience, objective description as a way to achieve its research objectives. From the practice perspective, compared with quantitative research in applied linguistics, qualitative research is mainly based on the observation and interview of the case, the analysis and summary of relevant literature, the historical review and conclusion, however, the experimental method has not been applied into the qualitative research. In particular, it is worth noting that case studies are one of the most distinctive means of applied linguistic studies. Besides, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative research, and phenomenology are common qualitative research methods in language teaching research (Creswell, 2002). [7]

B. *Qualitative Research in Language Teaching at Home*

Qualitative research in China is also progressing. Chinese scholar Chen takes qualitative research as a research tool, in the author's view, the natural situation of data collection is the most objective and scientific, because the natural scene is closest to the reality of society. Therefore, to use data collection in the natural sense and inductive analysis of the method will be easier to interact with the object being studied, and then reveal the basic laws of the development of research questions.

In the late 1990s, GAO Yihong Et Al (1999:9) [8]. Conducted a statistical study of the qualitative research in applied linguistic studies. The samples were TESOL Quarterly, The Modern Language Journal, Applied Linguistics, International Review of Applied Linguistics published in 1985-1997. After the study finished, Gao et al and others believe that the applied linguistics research has been gradually transited from quantitative research to qualitative research, which will have a positive impact on Chinese related research.

Yan Li is from the the perspective of qualitative research in applied linguistics to further analyze. In her article, she points that applied linguistics has become a new subject in linguistics, which is an important trend in the development of linguistics in the new era, involving topics such as linguistics, psychology, natural sciences, and social communication disciplines, making qualitative research in applied linguistics become a hot academic topic. The applied linguistics qualitative research is on early stage of academic research, and the argumentation of basic concepts and application standards exist there, which has become the focus of domestic language teaching research.

Liu Yi (2015:62-63) [9], in his *The qualitative research report in applied linguistics: Definition, Norms*

and Challenges" first makes discussion on the basic concept and qualitative research methods, and then focuses on the analysis of ethnography. The research process used three international qualitative research report as samples, to explore the key concepts on qualitative research. Finally, the analysis of the challenges faced by the research report is carried out, and the concrete solution strategy is also put forward.

The research of data sources occupies a large position in the qualitative study of applied linguistics, because such as case studies, discourse analysis, observation studies, and ethnography need to consider the problem on data sources. Based on above, the data source shows the basic principle of qualitative research method, especially in discourse analysis and corpus research, which provides a sound support by data collection. As a result, the data source provide the research context support. In *Recent Development in Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics*, Zhang Pei (2010:64-67) [10] concluded that the human, context, process are the three elements in qualitative research in applied linguistics.

To sum up, Chinese scholars pay more attention on comparative research on development trend of qualitative research between China and West Countries. Besides, some scholars focus on specific analysis on qualitative research methods, which will offer sound support to the development of language teaching.

III. MAJOR FINDINGS IN TESOL QUARTERLY

A. *The Significance of Selected Journal*

TESOL Quarterly (TQ) is one of the most respected publications in second and foreign language teaching, with an annual acceptance rate of 8% of all article submissions. This scholarly journal serves as forum for researchers, linguists, and teachers. The journal is both academic and professional, and it is an authoritative magazine in the field of TESOL (teaching English as a second language). The full name of TESOL is Teaching English to Speakers of Other languages, and its Chinese translation is English teaching as second language (foreign language). The subject of this academic field is "English for non-native speakers, which emphasizes English teaching rather than English". It was founded in 1966, headquartered in the United States at the university of Washington's Georgetown TESOL International Association. The research institutions aims to probe into the method, theory and practice of English teaching, enhancing the level of English teaching practice worldwide, providing English teaching communication experience or education resources with non-native speakers, as well as offering broad platform for English teachers, experts and scholars from all over the world to provide to exchange information, and improving the International professional level of English teaching and learning.

As a peer-reviewed journal, TQ's primary focus is to link theory with practice and to address the practical concerns of English language educators. The contributors influence the development of the profession by bridging research, scholarly discourse, and practice.

Approximately 3,600 TESOL members and 1,700 academic institutions subscribe to TQ. Each September TQ produces a special issue on current hot topic. TESOL quarterly is a comprehensive collection of the following topics: Psychology and sociology issues in language teaching and learning; Language assessment and evaluation; Professional preparation; Curriculum design and development; Language planning; Professional standards and so on. The standing columns of the periodical include: In this Issue, current edition, Research Issues, Teaching Issues, BBS Forum, etc.

B. Data Collection and Analysis

1) Data collection

This thesis based on English journals-TESOL Quarterly to further analyze qualitative research method used in language teaching. Due to the limitation of get these journals, the author mainly collect data online as research samples. Since we entered into 21st century, this research is on the basis of previous studies on qualitative research method in language teaching.

According to the classification of qualitative tradition by Creswell (1998:37), in which he classified qualitative methods as ethnography/biography, case study, grounded theory and phenomenology; however, compared with Creswell's opinion on qualitative approaches, Richard (2009) took qualitative categories featured as ethnography, case study, conversation analysis, introspective methods, life history, and action research.

This study will on the basis of Creswell and Richard's idea on qualitative research tradition. The author mainly classified qualitative research methods in language teaching as five traditional approach: ethnography, case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, and narrative inquiry (research/study).

2) Data analysis

Based on the specific analysis of 205 articles of TESOL Quarterly from 2001 to 2015, the author classified qualitative research methods into five traditional categories, which is shown as follows.

As is shown in the Fig. 1, it is not difficult for us to find that there's no article about phenomenology in the study. The reason why of this is mainly because phenomenology is not a very convenient method for English language researchers to do their study.

Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture (Taft, 1997) [11]; Campbell and Lassiter regard ethnography as "engagement with a particular kind of storytelling informed by ethnographic theory and method", which is always ongoing and emergent, of course (Campbell, Lassiter, 2016) [12].

Ethnography in education is the transdisciplinary application of ethnography served as a research method for education researchers (Zeng; 1989, 80) [13]. Throughout the educational research, researchers usually apply this method onto micro level. As for what happened in school or in class, the mutual interaction between researchers and participants is often conducted indeed. Ethnography in education is a typical micro-ethnography research method in which participants are usually studying at school.

TABLE I. STATISTICS OF COLLECTED DATA

Traditional Type	Number	Percentage
Ethnography	23	11.2%
Case Study	149	72.8%
Narrative Inquiry	32	15.6%
Grounded Theory	1	0.4%
Phenomenology	0	0

According to the statistic table, ethnography is often used by language teaching researchers, from 2001 to 2015, there are 23 articles (in total) on ethnography in TESOL Quarterly. Some of them are relative to classroom education, and some are about methods adopted by researchers, even some are related to how to conduct ethnographic research for second language researchers in a classroom. And ethnography is showing a stable trend in language teaching in recent years.

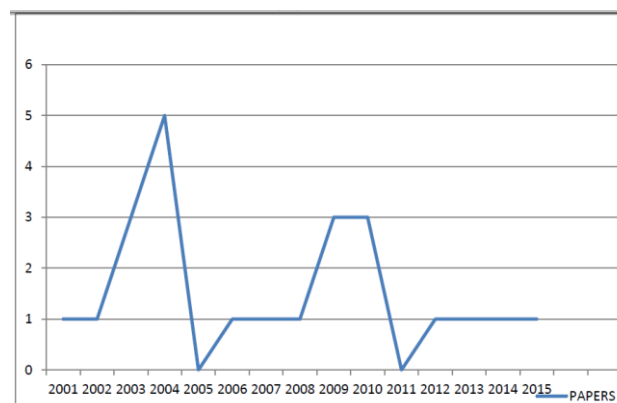


Figure 1. Ethnography method used in TQ (TESOL QUARTERLY)

A case study is relevant the more your research questions seek to explain some present circumstances: how and why some social phenomenon works or if your research questions require an "in-depth" description of some social phenomenon. The focus is none understanding these social phenomenon. (Yin, 2009) [14].

A common misinterpretation is that the various research methods should be arrayed hierarchically. Many social scientist still believe that case studies are only appropriate for the descriptive phase, that surveys and histories are appropriate for the descriptive phase, and that experiments are the only way for doing explanatory or causal inquiries. So case studies are only a preliminary research method and can not be used to describe or test propositions.

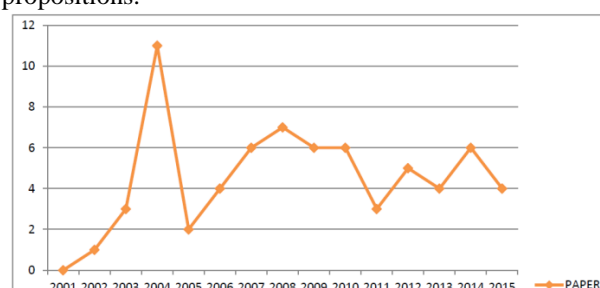


Figure 2. Case study used in TQ

Case study has the highest percentage in TESOL as is reflected in Fig. 2. In other words, case study seems to be common approach used by language teaching researchers. Many scholars prefer to use this method to conduct their research. Case study do not have periodical limitations like ethnography, it is more flexible than other qualitative traditions; However, the data source must be multiple in the process of conducting research.

The key point about case study is to answer the question on 'how' and 'why' to a certain phenomenon in society (Yin, 2003) [15]. At present, due to the flexibility of case study, we should not forget the limitation of multiple data source, which is different from case study research conducted in China.

Perhaps the greatest concern has been the lack of rigor of case study research. Too many times, the case study researcher has been sloppy, has not followed systematically procedures, or has allowed equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the directions of the findings of the conclusions.

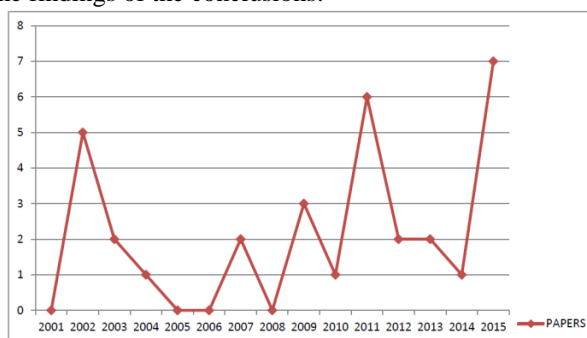


Figure 3. Narrative inquiry used in TQ

Narrative inquiry is based on the premise that we understand or make sense of our lives through narrative (Bruner, 1990) [16]. Narrative methods can be considered as "real world measures" that are appropriate when "real life problems" are investigated. Narrative research is set out by the validation of the audience. While some types of qualitative analysis have a standard set of procedures, narrative research is questionable in this regard. One of the weaknesses of studying narratives is that the text is by its own nature linguistically subjective.

Compared with other qualitative traditional research methods, narrative inquiry is another useful method used by researchers. In the investigation on qualitative method used in language teaching during the year from 2001 to 2015, this method is widely used in recent years, especially in 2011 and 2015, as is vividly shown in Fig. 3. To some extent, within this range of methodological possibilities, I position myself as a life history researcher. While the distinction between narrative and life history research is not always obvious, Connelly (2008) [17] see 'life history research as taking narrative one step further; that is, life history research goes beyond the individual or the personal and places narrative accounts and interpretations within a broader context'.

Narrative study (is also called narrative inquiry or narrative research), life history is another kind of narrative inquiry. During the process of data collection,

the author also pay attention to this question to further enlarge the research scope of narrative inquiry.

There's only one article about grounded theory in TESOL during the research period. Since the research is based on a certain theory to finish the author's research. Relative research on grounded theory is still rare in language teaching research.

C. Further Discussion

1) Ethic problems

Almost every researchers should or must think about ethic problems under qualitative background research which aims at people and any activities related to themselves. Maybe very a few researchers don't take it too seriously, the importance of noticing these problems just being there no matter you care that enough or not. It just like we breathe everyday, and we cannot admit the existence of air.

The first important thing is to respect participants totally. (Bai; 2008, 2) [18] Even if participants are likely to be nervous and behave uncommonly at the beginning, what a researcher need to do is to tell the fact of their research to the participants to respect them totally, not just for avoiding absolute subjective to choose not to tell them the the truth instead. Secondly, to keep the result true to researcher's data is also worth to recommend here. Qualitative research method used language teaching is not only always related to social phenomenon, sometimes it is just like a trace study to investigate a certain group of students or teachers who are relevant to a researcher's topic. No matter how big or small the research topic is, the research shall be related to education, and the result will be certainly related to a How to interpret the primary date depends on researcher's viewpoint, but to keep data original to itself is every researcher should do even if the result perhaps go against with your theoretical assumptions. Only under these restricted principles yet just and true data environment, can every researcher conduct a meaningful and beneficial research on language teaching in which will let each researcher improve the International professional level of English teaching and learning. And make the research go further finally.

2) Validity of qualitative research

Mainstream qualitative research is thus moving quickly beyond the confines of a post-positivist, naturalist paradigm. Now we are in deep discussion about creative moves in data collection and analysis, such as pursuing meaning through successive, sometimes opportunistic conversations; describing rather than recording interactions; fictionalizing and reconstructing observed experience; using personal narrative both to help us focus on data and find entries into realities; borrowing from other disciplines of primary research, such as fine art, to explore new ways of seeing; allowing critical incidents to drive research categories; designing new forms of these generally reassessing the boundaries of subjectivity and representation, and the interplay of researchers' and research participants' identities. We are doing this because we have burning critical questions

about social life that drive us in these directions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) [19].

Qualitative research must also provide thick description (Geertz, 1973 cited in Holliday, 2002) [20], which also requires transparency. The description must be convincing, and it must demonstrate how the connections were made and where they came from. The current guidelines do not explicitly mention thick description, but they do imply it in the statement, under "Data," about "bringing together (triangulating) multiple perspectives, methods, and sources of information" (p. 165).

The validity of qualitative research is different criteria of quantitative research, however, the criteria of qualitative research is mainly on the consideration of data. Thus, the description, interpretation and analysis of data makes up of the validity of qualitative research.

IV. CONCLUSION

'Qualitative research'(QR) has opened dimensions of insight into the process of language teaching and learning that were not even discernible on the horizon twenty years ago, and developments in the new millennium promise even richer understandings in the future(Lazaraton,2003a). It is of vital importance to study the characteristics and applying trend of QR in an academic journal like TESOL Quarterly.

This thesis based on English journals-TESOL Quarterly to further analyze qualitative research method used in language teaching, on the basis of Creswell and Richard's idea on qualitative research tradition. The author mainly classified qualitative research methods in language teaching as five traditional approach: ethnography, case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, and narrative inquiry (research \study).

After analyzing the data collected in TESOL, the author find that expect for grounded theory and phenomenology, the other three qualitative research method used by researchers stably. Language Researchers tends to use narrative inquiries in their later researches research in recent years, case study is most often used in language teaching research.

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