

Final Thoughts

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In our introduction to this volume, we pointed out that many academic journals do not have enough space to enable the authors of empirical studies to discuss important methodological details of their projects. Simon Borg, in his methodological analysis, commented that ‘judgements about research rigour cannot be made if readers are not provided with adequate detail of how a study was conducted’. That is why each of the eight case study authors in this volume was asked to focus on only one of the several data-gathering methods that he or she employed. Even so, it was inevitable that the authors discussed some matters in more depth than others. It is very useful, therefore, that the commentators for each of the case studies drew attention to some of these lacunae, in addition to evaluating the approach and techniques adopted by the authors. In doing so, they have each made useful recommendations for the conduct of research within that particular approach, many of which apply to qualitative research methods more generally. In this brief conclusion to the book, we would like to draw together some of the key points made by our commentators that we believe should be taken into account by qualitative researchers.

Flexibility

Qualitative researchers need to be flexible as well as rigorous. As Susan Gass said about Jonathon Ryan’s use of stimulated recall techniques (Chapter 7), ‘meticulous piloting and constant thinking about a research tool can lead to beneficial and important changes’. A readiness to be flexible once they are in the field will enable researchers not only to achieve their intended goals but also to take advantage of sheer serendipity when things may appear to be, or actually are, going awry. In his commentary on Judy Ng’s use of questionnaires (Chapter 1), J.D. Brown said ‘it is the anomalies in my own

research over the years that I have found to be the most interesting and productive results – often leading to other research ideas that would never otherwise have occurred to me’. Likewise, Jerry Gebhard considered that it is the unexpected issues that arise which make research ‘an adventure in exploration’ (Chapter 5). All the case study authors knew that their initial research designs had to be carefully thought through in advance, data-gathering skills extensively practised and the selected tools and procedures carefully piloted. However, once they were in the field they came to realise that they had to be ready to fine-tune their instruments to meet the challenges imposed by unanticipated obstacles.

The Right Tool for the Job

Researchers need to use the most appropriate means to collect data. Martin Bygate put it this way in his commentary on Nguyen Gia Viet’s use of narrative frames (Chapter 2): ‘A fishing net is a useful piece of equipment if you go fishing, but we would use a different net for different-size fish’. Thus, new researchers would be well advised to use well tried methods to collect their data, building their own expertise on the validated experience of others. On the other hand, as Susan Gass pointed out, it is also important that the data-collection tool ‘can be made to do what it is intended to do’ and therefore researchers sometimes need to make changes to conventional tools to meet local factors. It is sometimes necessary, in other words, for innovatory approaches to be considered and adopted, especially alongside more conventional ones in multi-method projects. Thus Viet’s utilisation of narrative frames, Jenny’s use of oral reflective journals and Jonathon’s application of stimulated recall procedures not only extended their own repertoire of research skills but also pushed methodological boundaries of qualitative research in a more general sense. Inevitably, any new approach will have teething problems; yet there are often productive results. As Thomas Farrell said of Jinrui Li’s use of think aloud (TA) techniques, ‘it is the case that few studies have used TA in naturalistic settings to gauge the beliefs of markers’.

Precision of Terms and Constructs

Because of academic imperatives to work with abstract concepts, researchers frequently bring to their empirical studies knowledge of theoretical terms or constructs that may be unfamiliar to their research participants. For example, in the case of Viet’s interest in teachers’ views of using task-based language teaching, his research was underpinned by assumptions of teachers’

knowledge of current discussions about newer teaching approaches. As Martin Bygate stresses, if ‘TBLT is an innovation for teachers, they may not know much about it’. It is very valuable, therefore, for novice researchers to critically evaluate the terms – and the assumptions underpinning them – that they employ in their research from the perspectives of the participants they work with and to consider how these participants may interpret them. In a similar vein, researchers need to be clear about how they operationalise key terms and ensure they are consistent in their usage of such terms in constructing accounts of their research. At the beginning of this volume, Simon Borg’s careful scoping of the terms he intends to employ in his scene-setting review of teacher cognition research offers a useful illustration for novice researchers aiming to define the key constructs of their analyses.

Talking and Thinking

Donald Freeman prefaced his commentary on Andrew Gladman’s use of focus groups by asking ‘What does talking together reveal about thinking?’ (Chapter 3). In this case, he was thinking specifically about the different ways in which people use language in group situations, pointing out that ‘what participants say – or more importantly may not say – is influenced by the attributes of that particular group: who is in it, when and where it is happening and so on’. However, as he says, the relationship between speech and thought extends to all elicitation research. One way or another, all of the case studies relied on participants verbalising their thoughts, attitudes or beliefs – whether explicitly to the researcher, for example in interviews, or more subtly, by thinking aloud. But to what extent does what people say, or not say, reveal what they are thinking? For example, Thomas Farrell asks ‘can verbal reporting as represented through TA protocols provide a complete record of the individual’s thought processes in synchronous reporting or does this procedure actually distort the thinking–speaking process?’ Donald Freeman bluntly put it in this way: ‘As a researcher, I think it borders on the naïve to simply say that people are telling you what they think’ and therefore researchers need to consider carefully the issue of veridicality, mentioned by Susan Gass, at all stages of their project.

Choice of Language

Connected with the issue of talking and thinking is the choice of which language is to be used by both the researcher and the researched. As Judy Ng said, it is usually more efficient and courteous to use participants’ first language, but this may create problems in a multilingual society like

Malaysia. Of course, where the researcher does not speak the language(s) of the study participants, a common option is to elicit information in a second language, such as English. However, if one assumes that there is inevitably a filter between thought and language in one's mother tongue (thus raising issues of veridicality) one must ask how much thicker and stronger this filter might be when participants are asked to express complex thoughts or deep-seated beliefs in another language. For this reason, researchers may consider using narrative frames or perhaps email interviews, so that participants can express themselves in their written language, which could then be translated and interpreted by reliable bilingual research assistants – although this in itself can set up another filter that obstructs meaning. Perhaps researchers should constantly ask themselves, as did Nguyen Gia Viet in relation to his narrative frames, 'why should this person be telling me the truth?', and indeed question what they mean by 'truth'; statements that are not literally factual may reveal important 'truths' about a participant's beliefs and values.

Researcher Positioning

Commenting on Le Van Canh's discussion of interviews (Chapter 4), Alan Maley remarked that it 'is important to note how critical it was for the success of the project that Canh was an "insider" ... also he was a native-speaker of the teachers' language and a person who shared their culture and society'. In this case, it is difficult to imagine how a cultural and linguistic outsider could have obtained the quality of data collected by Canh. Like him, the other case study authors relied on their 'insider' status to gain and sustain access to their research settings and to cultivate interpersonal relationships with their participants, and they used their insider knowledge to interpret what they were told and what they observed. However, there may also be disadvantages to being an insider. For example, an insider's local knowledge may lead him or her to overlook contextual or cultural peculiarities that might immediately strike an outsider, thus preventing him or her from taking the ethnographic stance of 'making the familiar strange and the strange familiar'. Moreover, as Judy Ng noted in Chapter 1, because she was an institutional insider, 'A number of lecturers admitted to me that some viewed me as a threat to their professional face', a point also considered by Jonathon Ryan in Chapter 7. Such threats to face may be even more acute in studies involving classroom observation. Many teachers are nervous about their teaching being observed, and even more so audio- or video-recorded. This tension often results from previous observations used to evaluate (often negatively) the teacher's performance. If the observing researcher is a colleague, she or he will become aware of the inevitable shortcomings in the observed teacher's practice, and

this may lead to an uncomfortable professional and personal relationship between the two, especially if – wittingly or unwittingly – the observer reveals some of the uncomfortable truths to other people. Therefore it is incumbent on researchers, whether insiders or outsiders, to convince their participants of their honesty, impartiality and non-judgemental intentions, perhaps by taking what Jerry Gebhard referred to as a ‘one down’ position. If such sensitivity is manifested, then, as Jill Burton says in Chapter 8, ‘the research process can be educational for all participants’.

Ethical Considerations and the Researcher’s Agenda

Most researchers affiliated to ‘western’ universities are obliged to adhere to principles and procedures regulated by their university’s human research ethics committee. However, they also have to be sensitive to local cultural conventions and regulations, especially in what Alan Maley (Chapter 4) referred to as hierarchically organised societies where school principals may regard research ‘as a disruptive and potentially threatening intrusion into their domain’. Even when gatekeepers grant formal access, there may be problems in actually gaining consent from participants. One of the teachers in Simon Humphries’ observational study (Chapter 5), for example, felt like he was about to ‘donate a kidney’ after signing a consent form. This is because in many countries, such as Japan where Simon’s research took place, it is more culturally appropriate to give oral than written consent. But the issue of informed consent itself may be tricky: consent to what, exactly? In his commentary on Simon’s case study, Jerry Gebhard suggested that ‘each classroom observer carefully consider what and how much to disclose to the teacher and students, while at the same time trying sincerely to build trust and acceptance as an observer within the classroom culture’. In other words, a researcher must tell the truth, but not necessarily the whole truth – as he goes on to say: ‘too much disclosure about the goals of the research can cause observed people to behave in unnatural ways’. Such courtesy and ethical consideration is, of course, vital in all qualitative studies but, as Jill Burton remarks about Jenny Field’s project in Timor-Leste (Chapter 8), the ‘research processes must primarily address the research objectives and the data as well as the circumstances of their conception’.

Multi-Methods

In his commentary in Chapter 2, Martin Bygate made a point similar to that made by Jill Burton: ‘research involves someone seeking answers to questions or responses to puzzles.... This is just as important as the agency

and ownership of the teachers in providing the data.' In other words, there is little point in the researcher being so sensitive to issues of face or interpersonal relationship that he or she fails to obtain the appropriate quantity and quality of information to address the aims of the project. But this merely underlines the importance of using a variety of methods to collect data: any single method of data collection, however thoroughly conducted, can provide only a partial view of the complex reality of educational contexts and especially, as Simon Borg makes clear in his preliminary chapter on methodological analysis, when studying language teacher cognition. Obtaining data from different sources provides a variety of perspectives: for example, issues raised in interviews may be confirmed, clarified, refined or rejected in subsequent observations, stimulated recall sessions and so on. As Jill Burton stated in her commentary on Jenny Field's case study, 'For researchers, the interactive element of such research methods affords them opportunities to gather additional insights and revise their expectations. A research design which is also cyclical or one that is implemented in several stages, as this research was, allows them even more reflection time.'

Triangulation

In connection to the point about methods, in Chapter 1 J.D. Brown asks, rhetorically, 'is it sufficient to just use multiple data sources, or should researchers carefully triangulate two or three aspects of their research...?' and, indeed, most of the case study authors refer to 'triangulation' of data. The key word here, perhaps, is 'carefully', because, as Simon Borg pointed out, 'strategies such as triangulation and respondent validation may enhance, but not ensure, validity or trustworthiness'. It is worth exploring the construct of this term, now widely seen in discussions of qualitative research. The metaphor derives from the use by land surveyors of at least three points of reference in order to pinpoint a precise location; such triangulation is applied in quantitative research to permit the studies to be 'objectively' considered valid, reliable and generalisable. However, as J.D. Brown points out, 'in the qualitative research tradition researchers attend to analogous concepts like dependability, credibility, confirmability and transferability', and these concepts are inherently subjective. Thus the interpretations derived from qualitative case studies, however the data are triangulated, cannot be considered 'objective' and so Jerry Gebhard suggests that 'observers be careful about their interpretations of what the data mean'.

Grounded Analysis

Most of the commentators have drawn attention to the importance of a careful analysis of the data collected. Some considered the case study authors' accounts of their approaches to their data analysis to be inadequate, if they are to allow other researchers to examine and perhaps replicate the study (although it needs to be suggested that qualitative research cannot be truly replicated). This point was also made by Simon Borg in relation to most of the studies he reviewed, although he also notes that 'Word constraints often contribute to such brevity'. It is reasonable to point out such lack of detail, but the emphasis in this book is on the collection, rather than the analysis, of data. Had fuller attention been paid to the latter, the book would have been twice as long and would most likely still have left major questions unanswered. Qualitative data, and especially data collected from several sources, need to be subjected to thorough processes of 'grounded' analysis. This means constantly interrogating the data to find comparisons and contrasts among them, and the consequent identification from this process of categories and themes which will enable plausible interpretations to be made. These interpretations, in turn, will enable the researcher to seek explanations, more or less tentatively, of relationships within the context or setting of the project – in other words a *grounded* theory. The process involved in moving from the collection, collation and management of data, through grounded analysis to grounded theory is controversial as well as extremely complex and time-consuming. Readers wishing to explore these issues in depth are advised to seek advice from works devoted both to the theoretical basis and to the appropriate analytical software.

Last Words

As we anticipated in our introduction to the volume, we hope readers will have joined in these discussions, by using the reflective questions in the third part of each chapter as a way of thinking about and trying out their previous, on-going or future data-collection procedures. As the editors of this book, we have worked over time with the researchers and commentators who contributed most generously their time and energy to making this collection interesting and relevant to its readers. Ultimately, our hope is that these accounts will, above all, provide helpful insights at whatever stage you might be in conducting your research.