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Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics: Approaches Used for Research Projects Developed in Mexico

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Book reviewed:

Goodwin, D. & Mora, I. (Coord.) (2012). *Alternative Methods for Undertaking Qualitative Research.* México: Universidad de Guanajuato, 238 pp.

Applied linguistics, as a discipline, has been researched through quantitative and qualitative approaches; both are valuable and necessary in order to establish a solid foundation for understanding language learning and teaching processes. Based on the idea that reality is complex, my personal bias favours qualitative research approaches. From this standpoint, the understanding of teaching and learning processes may involve a research approach that allows us to unravel such complexity. This could be achieved through contextualizing the phenomena and using qualitative research approaches (Valsiner, 2012).

I have read extensively about qualitative research studies in our discipline and I have found that there are few reports of studies carried out within Mexican contexts. As a result, the contribution of this book to the field of applied linguistics in Mexican contexts is of relevance to first time researchers and students in this field. It is refreshing to find a book which describes a variety of qualitative research methods used for studies carried

out in Mexican contexts. As a researcher in a discipline that in Mexico is still incipient, I found that through its description of a series of exploratory studies of social phenomena and human behaviour, the book provides opportunities for students to understand how qualitative methods may be used within our culture.

Given that the most influential research paradigm favours deterministic views, the collection of articles in this book demonstrates that qualitative research approaches value cultural differences and participants' voices as well as the researcher's intersubjectivity. It allows readers to reflect on the idea of carrying out research not for the purpose of obtaining definite truths, but with the aim of constructing our understanding of reality, conceiving reality as entailing ever changing and evolving processes.

An aspect that seems to be a common thread in all the narratives of this book is the importance of ethical issues. This is a relevant topic given that our field of research deals with people's personal issues. We must ensure that participants' identity is concealed and that they have the right to decide if they want to participate or not, to continue or drop out of the study. Furthermore, it is necessary to make sure that our interpretation of the information shared with us by participants represents what they wanted to say.

In the first chapter, Martha Lengeling shows how the use of journals can enlighten our understanding of the complexities involved in becoming an English teacher. The use of journals as a research technique opens the door to participants' opinions, descriptions and experiences of their teaching life. This enables the researcher to construct narratives that encompass not only participants' professional lives, but the interconnection with the intricacies of their personal lives as well.

The second chapter describes how the researcher's understanding of reality evolved as she realized that the use of semi-structured interviews rendered superficial information. Thus, the use of narratives became the key to exploring participants' experiences. The process allowed her to conceive of research as a dialogue between participants and researchers that co-constructs an understanding of complex realities. Mora's use of different research techniques enabled her to construct a rich and deep thick description, in order to understand of the complexity of the issues faced by native and non-native speakers.

Basurto's studies in EFL learning processes in Mexican public educational systems describe the complex road a researcher needs to walk to establish research questions as well as ontological and epistemological positions. Her narrative suggests that researchers have to think simultaneously about a number of aspects related to research: how to gain entry and access, keeping field notes and keeping track of participants as well as finding a research stance that concurs with personal beliefs. Basurto's conclusion leads us to believe that research is not only a means for professional growth as we gain understanding of our field, but more importantly it is an opportunity for personal growth.

Crawford's chapter evidences the importance and complexity of adopting theoretical positions to understand the issues we set out to research. The use of a heuristic device allowed the researcher to unveil the complexity of a number of discourses that privilege certain writing communities, an issue that complicates the process of learning to write in a second language.

The chapter on the use of film in the ELT classroom uses a methodological approach that is substantially different from other chapters. The author describes it as experimental, even though it uses ethnographic techniques to understand the role of film in ELT classrooms. This approach enabled Goodwin to construct a thick description to unravel the phenomenon as well as to understand how his researcher-self was part of the research process.

Narvaez's chapter highlights the need to first understand that there are many alternatives for approaching qualitative research. According to the author, once researchers are informed, it is possible to adopt a standpoint and design a research project. Being informed as to the range of methodological approaches available allows the researcher to consider aspects such as whose voice one wants to hear, the researcher's or those of the participants. This may lead the researcher to decide on the suitability of the techniques available.

Montoro's narrative, which is based on a Vygotskyan Activity Theory paradigm, highlights the possibility of beginning a research project without first carrying out a literature review. This aspect is important given that it opens up opportunities to look at data from a position that Holliday describes as letting the unexpected emerge.

The use of a case study approach in the chapter by Lopez shows the value of a research project when the objective is to explore educational processes such as innovations, program evaluation or the implementation of different institutional policies. The chapter describes a number of research techniques used by the author and also provides a sample of data. These two aspects seem to be relevant for first time researchers who find it difficult to choose from a wide variety of research techniques.

Hyde's chapter exemplifies one of the challenges that qualitative researchers face and discusses the importance of cultural awareness. The author discusses the importance of constructing a research position that is culturally suitable as well as methodologically sound when exploring discursive practices. The chapter thoroughly describes a number of definitions given to discourse analysis and how each one of them calls for a different theoretical stance.

The last—although not the least—chapter of this book describes a conversational analysis approach to understanding second language learners' competence. It provides a clear theoretical background on traditional approaches as well as an innovative perspective for performing conversational analyses. Rubio also presents an example of the analyses she carried out to ensure that readers understand the demands of a conversational analysis research approach.

To conclude, I would like to mention that the variety of approaches described in this book should be part of the reading list for students or novice researchers who are about to start a research project in applied linguistics in a Mexican context. However, qualitative research paradigms involve a variety of positions and this book may be considered one of the resources first time researchers could rely on to have an informed view for carrying out research guiding "the researcher's educated intuition" (Valsiner, 2000, p. 99).

References

Valsiner, J. (2000). Data as representations: contextualizing qualitative and quantitative research strategies. *Social Science Information, 39*(1), 99-113.