

SO YOU ARE CONSIDERING BECOMING A QUALITATIVE RESEARCHER: SOME INITIAL THOUGHTS FOR PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS INTENDING TO ENTER THE FIELD

ENTONCES ESTÁS CONSIDERANDO CONVERTIRTE
EN UN INVESTIGADOR CUALITATIVO?: ALGUNAS
REFLEXIONES INICIALES PARA PROFESORES DE
INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA (EFL) EN
FORMACIÓN Y EN SERVICIO QUE TIENEN LA
INTENCIÓN DE INGRESAR AL CAMPO

Original Article




✉ JHON EDUARDO MOSQUERA PÉREZ*


Submission: june 08, 2024

Accepted: august 07, 2024

Published: august 09, 2024

How to cite this article:

Mosquera Pérez, Jhon Eduardo. "So You Are Considering Becoming a Qualitative Researcher: Some Initial Thoughts for Pre-Service and in-Service EFL Teachers Intending to Enter the Field". ENLETAWA Journal, vol 17, n° 2, July de 2024,  <https://doi.org/10.19053/uptc.2011835X.17102>

* Holds a bachelor's and master's degree in ELT from Universidad Surcolombiana and a master's degree in learning and teaching processes in second languages from Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana. jhon58745@hotmail.com  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4027-3102>

✉ **Correspondance:** Carrera 2#42 a 67 del barrio 15 de mayo, Tunja, Boyacá, Colombia

Abstract

Doing research within the qualitative paradigm can be a challenging task sometimes. However, when well designed and implemented, research itself and being engaged in research related activities offers a myriad of opportunities for personal and professional growth. Considering these aspects, through this reflective article I provide some thoughts on initial aspects I consider pre-service and in-service EFL teachers should bear in mind if intending to enter the qualitative research field. In doing so, firstly I provide a general overview of what qualitative research is while also making an analysis of what it implies. Second, I reflect upon some elements which should be considered at the moment of beginning a formal research endeavor. Finally, the final remarks derived from the practical considerations given to pre-service and in-service EFL teachers willing to work with qualitative inquiry are presented.

Key words: English teachers, qualitative research, thoughts for English teachers intending to enter the field

Resumen

Hacer investigación dentro del paradigma cualitativo es a veces una tarea desafiante. Sin embargo, cuando está bien diseñada e implementada, la investigación en sí misma y la participación en actividades relacionadas con la investigación ofrecen una gran cantidad de oportunidades para el crecimiento personal y profesional. Teniendo en cuenta estos aspectos, a través de este artículo reflexivo se proporcionan algunas reflexiones iniciales sobre los aspectos iniciales que los profesores de EFL en formación y en servicio deberían tener en cuenta si tienen la intención de ingresar al campo de la investigación cualitativa. Para ello, en primer lugar, se brinda una visión general de lo que es la investigación cualitativa y, al mismo tiempo, se presenta un análisis de lo que ello implica. En segundo lugar, se reflexiona sobre algunos elementos que deben ser considerados al momento de iniciar una investigación formal. Finalmente, algunos comentarios finales derivados de las consideraciones brindadas a los profesores de inglés en formación y en servicio que deseen trabajar con la investigación cualitativa son presentados.

Palabras clave: investigación cualitativa, profesores de inglés, recomendaciones para profesores de inglés quienes intentan ingresar al campo.

Introduction

Getting immersed in the qualitative paradigm and structuring a research project to take it to good terms is undoubtedly a challenging action because of the scarce experience that novice researchers entering the field have, and because of the need of developing trustworthy and rigorous processes which will eventually lead to the realization of a research study. In fact, in most of the cases people have to undergo qualitative inquiry only to fulfill a university requirement, and not as a personal decision. However, what is commonly ignored is that whereas qualitative inquiry undeniably constitutes a paradigm which sets the ground for developing projects in fields such as education in general, and applied linguistics, and English language teaching (ELT) in particular, carrying out studies framed within the qualitative realm might offer opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Despite the increasing need of conducting qualitative research in today's world, current handbooks, articles, and books revolving around this theme mostly focus on discussing theoretical stances of what it means and implies doing qualitative-oriented research. Unsurprisingly, such materials rarely seem to center their attention on sharing with initial researchers intending to enter the field practical knowledge and suggestions/recommendations that may give them a sense of horizon of how to more adequately navigate the uncertainties that arise when getting started. This is the reason why this article was conceived.

As an ELT professor and researcher that has been immersed in the qualitative paradigm for some years already, I became aware of the fact that having less theory-driven initiatives is an action urgently needed. By having more advice-related initiatives, we, more experienced researchers, can ensure that our successors can undergo a more rewarding and less traumatic experience with research. Similarly, by having less theory centered initiatives, in this case an article, we can continue to contribute to demystifying the action of carrying out research. In a few words, to encourage the consolidation of more humanistic, democratic, and fairer perspectives in academia, which is with no doubt one of the missions we are facing in this 21st century.

That said, esteemed reader, in the following parts of the document you will be able to find a series of actions/recommendations I deem as crucial if one is interested in having a positive initial experience with the qualitative realm. Although my thought, and I must acknowledge it here, is unavoidably and grounded on and heavily influence by distinct sets of theories and schools of thought because of

the type of academic preparation I have been through in both, undergraduate and graduate education, in the following lines I heartily share a series of aspects I would have liked being told before, when I was a novice researcher learning about the fundamentals of the qualitative paradigm. I have come up with these particular sets of directions to provide a sense of direction, as entering the qualitative realm is definitely difficult. I hope that you find reading this material interesting, enlightening, and that, like me, you learn to see in the qualitative paradigm the perfect opportunity to let your voice and overall self be heard.

Before directly moving to the recommendations and practical suggestions regarding qualitative research I have been referring to until now, I provide a short yet meaningful contextualization of the qualitative paradigm.

Qualitative research: Comprehending what it is and what it is not

I would like to start this section by sustaining that one of the very first things that students are taught in research classes and seminars is that the qualitative paradigm is one of the three predominant approaches for doing research. Although this fact is partially true, we need to be careful and also be aware of the fact that even if the qualitative constitutes one of the most employed approaches for conducting research studies, because of the continuous progression of knowledge, where fairer, more democratic, critical, and less colonialist actions are gaining relevance, now there exist more than 40 distinct approaches. All of them fulfill a different purpose, and are moved by a different intention, such as empowering women (through feminist approaches) or using arts (arts-based methods) to examine and better understand human phenomena. What is clear, however, is that qualitative research merely constitutes one of the multiple lenses through which we, researchers, can comprehend the world.

Originally developed in the United States and Germany with the passing of the years, qualitative research has turned into one of the most powerful tools for analyzing social phenomena at large, and educational phenomena in particular (Stake, 2010). When used in social sciences (eg. anthropology, sociology) the qualitative paradigm allows the deep examination and explanation of attitudes, behaviors, actions, and overall experiences which characterize the human condition. When employed in education, it sets the ground not only for understanding phenomena, but also for defying and even improving situations affecting educational agents involved (e.g. action research). Hence, because of its capacity and potential to understand diverse human spheres, qualitative research can be defined as both: as a lens

through which to study society, and as a tool to influence it and improve it. The language education field is not exempt to this.

In the last few years language education in general, and English language teaching (ELT) in particular has been closely connected to the qualitative realm. Due to the sociocultural turn that took place in such a dimension of knowledge, scholars from all over the world have been expanding the area by means of qualitative research. By analyzing how sexism, linguistic violence, racism, and other harmful structural and hierarchical deeds and forms of oppression affect the field, qualitative ELT academics are pushing for a change; a transition which, according to a considerable number of critical decolonial scholars, is being urgently needed.

Once again, and as explained above, the qualitative paradigm is a powerful mechanism not only for studying human subjectivity but also for challenging the Status Quo. This depends on how people assume its implementation. If a more, let's say, formal definition of qualitative research is desired, in a previous article on the matter I defined it as following:

QI (qualitative inquiry) is one of the three dominating paradigms in research. Exploring and studying phenomena is the main axis for the development of QI, different from the quantitative approach which tries to analyze and categorize the world throughout statistical methods and analysis. In this sense, the former has been said to follow an inductive approach (a bottom-up), while the latter has been associated with a deductive methodology (top down). This means that both research processes take place differently. Qualitative researchers formulate a guiding question (s), go to places to observe a reduced sample for a determined period of time (maybe 4, 5, 6 individuals to have a richer panorama of the phenomenon) gather information through at least two data collection instruments and provide an analysis (most of the time, though, we (novice researchers) associate data analysis with the action of starting analysis itself from scratch. In fact, Hills (2007) vividly illustrates what it signifies to do analysis in terms of research (which is something more related to observation, analysis, and patterns association in order to respect what has been said and shared by participants). (Mosquera-Pérez, 2021, p. 279-280).

According to myself, Mosquera-Perez (2021) qualitative research comprises one of the predominant approaches to research (something I had already treated above). However, in this definition I highlighted the fact that while quantitative research mostly relies on numbers, statistics, as well as on a top-down perspective (that is generalizing everything), the qualitative paradigm seeks to analyze and understand

human phenomena, subjectivity, and experiences at large in detail even if the number of participants is small (it could be even one, for a case study for instance). These ideas were immediately followed by another affirmation I made regarding qualitative research in that same article. It said like this:

What is ignored most of the time is that more than differing from each other, the two paradigms are rather associated (Duff, 2010, p. 13). This association of paradigms, according to the author, comes to be known as the “paradigm dialog” (Denzin, 2008 as cited in Duff, 2010, p. 13) which is the evolution of the paradigms war that took place decades ago. Mixed methods, for example, is the best exemplification of the association of research paradigms. In Duff’s (2010) perspective, qualitative research may require use from time-to-time quantitative techniques, and vice versa (Mosquera-Pérez, 2021, p. 278).

So considering everything that has been discussed so far, and to finally move onto the next section, I sustain that qualitative research is not only limited to a set of procedures and analytical tools researchers can employ with the intention of examining and understanding experiences embedded in human life across diverse spheres. Instead, qualitative research is a set of attitudes, skills, actions, as well as methodologies and procedures that researchers utilize with the purpose of making the world a better place to live in. Although a little bit idealistic, that is, and should be, the ultimate goal of qualitative inquiry. I hope you enter the field with this intention, and remain willing to defend it, as we have the power to balance what has remained unbalanced.

After this very personal appreciation of what I deem signifies qualitative research, now I turn to the central axis of this paper, that is, the elements every initial researcher, be this a pre-service or in-service EFL teacher, should have in mind to join the field.

Elements to Have in Mind When Intending to Enter the Field, and/or When Planning Your Research

A lot of articles and books revolving around qualitative research and research in general have been written and published in the last decades. However, because of the nature of the current article, I draw on the work of qualitative theorists such as Creswell (2013; 2015), Hills (2007); Jameel et al. (2018), Kalman (2019), Pfeifer (2023), Saldaña (2011), Silverio et al. (2022), Stake (2010) who are scholars with

extensive experience in the field, to elaborate the steps I deem are necessary for any beginner qualitative researcher to follow. I hope any potential reader of this article finds these 17 items truly valuable, as by doing them all I myself have been able to successfully navigate and survive the qualitative realm.

1. Establish solid knowledge foundations about QI, and remain willing to learn about it all the time

Even though this first aspect may sound kind of obvious and seemingly meaningless at first glance, when putting it into perspective, it encapsulates an undeniable truth: QI is a field which is in continuous evolution. Even if we are not aware nor interested in knowing it, QI is changing all the time. Every day, emerging as well as already senior established scholars engage in discussions on how to make QI research more efficient, fair, and trustworthy. A notable example of this is the annual qualitative related meeting organized by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), and the World Conference on Qualitative Research, where qualitative theorists from around the world gather.

Bearing this situation in mind, it is advisable then to remain open towards QI and keep reading and getting acquainted with its latest tendencies. By staying up to date with the most recent academic contributions to this field of knowledge, it is possible to enrich research studies where qualitative research is the selected paradigm to follow. Similarly, by engaging in the reading of up-to-date literature, more reliable, rigorous, and less invasive research practices can be held in both, inside and outside classroom contexts.

2. Listen to more experienced researchers, and be also disposed to also learn with/from others less experienced

Continuously reading, studying, and staying up to date is an essential action if someone wants to become a good qualitative researcher. However, empirical, and conceptual materials, books, handbooks, although useful, do not always have the last word. In order to develop a good attitude towards qualitative research and projects derived from the implementation of this paradigm it is also necessary to listen to researchers who count on more experience than you, as they have certainly developed “tricks” and strategies to remain and survive in the field. By sharing with them, you will surely be able to learn about the kind of actions they have performed to navigate the qualitative realm world.

If learning from more experienced researchers is always positive, you should not be reluctant to learn from/with other less experienced qualitative researchers. By engaging in talks, discussions, and the likes with other novice researchers one can develop a sense of community and support, as novice researchers frequently share about their experience, and, in turn, provide strategies and tips for surviving when being involved in the qualitative realm. Thus, active listening and a positive attitude constitute two of the most important skills one should possess when initially walking into the qualitative paradigm.

3. Be humble, and stay humble

This third aspect is directly connected to the first and second. Sometimes, as researchers become more experienced in the field, and gain notoriety because of their academic work and contributions, they lose a sense of horizon, and their ego guides their actions instead. If this is your case, make a pause, and reconsider the path you are following. Considering that one possesses knowledge and the ultimate word regarding academic processes or seeing oneself as an “expert” in the field, just because we have been able to write and publish an article or a set of them, only stops our capacity to keep learning and growing. Having a positive attitude and humble approach towards research, on the other hand, is more beneficial because knowledge is built collaboratively. If we are willing to create community, and expand our networks, we will be able to make more and possibly more efficient research processes that, in turn, will benefit our immediate community, and society in general.

4. Do not take anything for granted

The reason why quantitative researchers long believed that qualitative research is not valuable is because it mostly centers its attention on human subjectivities and experiences. Although working on these two dimensions is not something impossible, nor something simple, studying human experiences and the likes requires effort, dedication, rigor, and systematicity, and open-mindedness. Do not take anything for granted because even if a qualitative research study is about to end, modifications (such as having to change the guiding research question, even if the project is about to finish) may arise.

Besides what was just mentioned, it is also crucial not to take for granted your participants’ perspectives and experiences (if you have them, as some qualitative

research does not need to have people directly involved). As a qualitative researcher, you need to make sure that your transcriptions, data analysis, and even results make justice to the participants' own voices and experiences. Thus, continuously talking to them to make sure that they feel well represented also constitutes one of the aspects we should have into consideration at the moment of beginning a qualitative oriented research study.

5. Study other's work (s), and progressively become acquainted with the journals available in your field

Although qualitative research is one of the most common paradigms to research that exist, it is not the most important one. Some years ago, Creswell (2016) affirmed that there are more than 40 research paradigms, including those based on arts and participatory and critical decolonial in nature; meaning that diverse current paradigms may fulfill different functions depending on the needs of the researchers, and on the particularities of the study. What can not be denied though, is that in social science dimensions, as it is the case of education, and applied linguistics, and English language teaching (ELT), or the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) as it has also been denominated, qualitative research is the predilect paradigm for carrying out research related processes internationally and in Colombia.

Since it is important to also learn from the work of other researchers in the field, it becomes necessary to learn about the journals where they publish their respective work. Because of the nature of this article, that is motivating pre-service and in-service English language teachers intending to enter the qualitative spectrum, here I center my attention on national as well as international leading ELT related journals. In a few words, I highlight journals where English language teaching-oriented contributions are made. When making an analysis of academic journals spanning applied linguistic and ELT/TEFL, it is observable in that Colombia we have the following: Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development (Universidad Nacional de Colombia), Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura (Universidad de Antioquía), How Journal (the Colombian Association of Teachers of English), Enletawa (Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia), Folios (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional), Colombian Applied Linguistics (Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas), Gist (Institución Universitaria Colombo-Americana), Lengua (Universidad del Valle), and Signo y Pensamiento (Universidad Javeriana). All these journals are either focused on ELT/TEFL or

allow the publication of articles revolving around ELT/TEFL in English, even if this is not their scope, or if most of their articles are written in Spanish.

Contrary to what I personally believe is a rather limited number of journals related to ELT/TEFL in Colombia, in the international scenario there is a substantial number of international journals that cover these two dimensions. Some of these are: TESOL Quarterly, Applied Linguistics, Language Teaching Research, English Teaching: Practice and Critique, ELT Journal, Modern English Teacher, TESL Canada Journal, Asian EFL Journal, English Teaching Forum, Journal of Second Language Writing, System: An International Journal of Educational Technology and Applied Linguistics, The Internet TESL Journal, TESOL Journal, Language Learning & Technology. Getting acquainted with all these resources will undoubtedly help you learn and know about the latest developments in the field, as well as the different contexts from which such contributions come from. Additionally, it is worth considering contacting scholars who contribute to these journals, whether national or international, to engage in online communities to grow professionally together by participating in professional development opportunities or through collaborative interinstitutional, and, why not, transnational, writing projects.

6. Discover your own writing style

One of the hardest issues that arise when beginning to delve into the qualitative field, and when writing your first research studies, is definitely finding your own voice. At the very beginning one will judge one's own writing based on the style of other (typically, more experienced) authors. This action is not necessarily negative, as observing how other academics write and illustrate their respective ideas may indeed help us understand how academic writing works. Nevertheless, it is also vital to comprehend that although English is the language that scholars use globally as a vehicle of communication because of its current lingua franca status (see Macias & Mosquera-Pérez, 2004; Mackenzie, 2014 for a more detailed discussion about this aspect) developing an authentic writing style will help to spread our insights and overall academic work.

Here I also deem it relevant to add that when intending to write academically, it becomes necessary, if not urgent, to leave aside multiple myths, misconceptions, and ideologies, often imbued by ourselves and by English teachers and practitioners surrounding us, about academic writing. Writing academically does indeed require effort, time, extensive reading, and a lot of drafting and revisiting. However, writing is an activity that all of us can perform, not only genius or individuals fully

immersed in the academic world. After all, even they have been through various difficulties and challenges when developing their own writing.

7. Expect the unexpected, and be prepared for it

This item has a high degree of affinity with the item #4 which is “Don’t take anything for granted”. However, while the former aspect openly invites to have a positive mindset and attitude towards research in general, without minimizing any of the processes that may derive from it, this fifth element calls to plan in advance, and anticipate any potential situation that may take place when carrying research within the field.

This is possibly one of the most crucial aspects to have in mind when embarking on the qualitative research journey because, believe it or not, research is a path filled with contradictions, and encountering difficulties is a common occurrence. One must be well-prepared with a comprehensive plan, including contingencies like Plan A, B, C, and even X, Y, and Z, in case the research participants inadvertently stop collaborating without any communication, or data loss due to technical issues, among others.

Following I share a list of unexpected situations that may happen at some point during the realization of your study, as well as some strategies to which you can recur to navigate these difficulties in case they inevitably happen:

A) Participant dropout:

Strategy: Clearly communicate the participant (s) your expectations from the very beginning. Also, if it is within your possibilities and consider offering incentives to people involved in the study to enhance participant engagement.

B) Trust and commitment:

Strategy: To establish rapport and ensure that your participants will be really committed to the project, spend time building a positive relationship with them. Demonstrate sincerity, be transparent about the purpose of your research, and also address participant concerns through open and honest communication.

C) Recruitment difficulties:

Strategy: Diversify recruitment methods and channels. To put it simply, utilize multiple recruitment avenues such as extending a formal invitation via social media, or writing emails to peers you consider might be willing to collaborate. Moreover, implementing the snowball strategy (Marshall, 1996) is highly beneficial as this way participants themselves could help you get other potential participants, by inviting their peers, colleagues, friends, to cooperate.

D) Access to participants:

Strategy: If your study requires the involvement of a large number of people (school students, for example) you should build in advance relationships with the gatekeepers and community directors (e.g. the principal, and academic coordinators). By getting in contact with them, and letting them know the purpose of your study, you can ensure their collaboration to get the research to good terms. It is not advisable to disregard the role they play in such an immediate context, as doing research is about building trust while also respecting the formal procedures that establishments, be these educational or governmental, have determined for those cases.

E) Scheduling and availability:

Strategy: Be flexible in scheduling and consider participants' availability. Offer them a variety of time slots, including evenings or weekends, and use scheduling tools to accommodate participants' preferences.

F) Unexpected events:

Strategy: Develop contingency plans for all the possible scenarios (ranging from participant dropout to data loss). Have backup data collection methods and be prepared to adapt the overall research plan in response to unexpected events.

The elements I highlighted above are some of the most important and common issues that might occur when doing research. However, and in order to finish with this specific section, the best recommendation I think I can give new researchers intending to enter the field, is definitely: be open minded and attentive to how the research goes. Follow your intuition, and feel free to adapt/accommodate your

plan at any point if you have the sentiment that things are not going nor working well. Having a positive attitude will unquestionably help to find other issues that may appear along the way, as these also vary according to the type of study/initiative you are undertaking. Now I continue with the next item, that is:

8. Be strategic, organized, and consistent with your own writing

One of the most problematic situations when beginning to delve into the qualitative research endeavor is that despite being involved in the educational setting, most of the time we have not fully developed a writing habit or are not used to writing extensively. Consequently, writing becomes a heavy task for initial (and even for more experienced) researchers.

To more efficiently write we should have in mind a set of characteristics which consists of being strategic, organized, and consistent. Firstly, organize your schedule, making sure you find a time you are comfortable with, in which your thoughts flow smoothly (maybe at night, or early in the morning, when there is no much noise). Secondly, begin crafting the sections of the project/research study you would like to initially center your attention on, and do not deviate from that. For example, today in the morning I will write the introduction of the research study, whereas at night I will move forward to the justification/rationale. Finally, be consistent. Consistent in the sense that you are really devoted to writing and finishing segments you are intending to work on. By following these actions one can ensure a nonstop writing which will eventually lead to a steadier advance of the parts of the study being elaborated. Similarly, ensure that every time you revisit the document you are working on, you advance with the writing of at least 300 to 500 words. By having this number in mind, and by putting it into the paper, it becomes easier and possible to move forward with your research study (ies) at a firm step.

9. Be open to the need of revisiting your draft a good number of times

However, even if you fulfill the minimum number of words required for your project, do not be convinced that what you have written is the best version of what you can do. Writing efficiently implies being open to revisiting your drafts three, four, five, or even more times to really ensure that your ideas and overall arguments are well established and logically connected. Do not see this aspect as a difficulty for properly finishing your research. See it instead as an opportunity to

keep polishing and improving your segment so that you can send/submit the best possible version of your research document.

10. Develop a qualitative researcher skills

In the book “30 Essential Skills for the Qualitative Researcher” John Creswell, one of the leading figures in the qualitative field, discusses a set of skills that, according to him, every qualitative researcher should possess. According to Creswell (2015) qualitative scholars should enjoy writing, be capable of making connections easily, see unusual in the usual, that is, observe things people do not commonly see in everyday life, and must also be curious about the world surrounding them. Although I do not deny by any means that these initial skills constitute some of the characteristics every beginning qualitative researcher should have, I bring to the fore the skills I really consider to encapsulate the role that qualitative researchers fulfill, and conform the skills every qualitative academic should aim to develop.

In general, they should be able to:

- Tell and retell stories about the phenomenon/phenomena studied
- Describe the experiences involved in and derived from the phenomenon/phenomena under examination
- Position themselves in the place of others
- See and interpret what was beneath the participants’ experiences
- Draw some conclusions based on the aspects examined

Or, in the words of Creswell (2015, p. 39-40) they should develop the abilities to:

- Report the voices of participants
- Go out to the setting (or context) to collect data
- Look at how processes unfold.
- Focus in on a small number of people or sites
- Explore in an open-ended way.
- Develop a complex understanding
- Lift up the silenced voices of marginalized groups or populations.
- Create multiple perspectives or views of the phenomenon.

- Contrast different views of the phenomenon.
- Study sensitive topics
- Reflect on our own biases and experiences.

If you think you do not count on any or many of the skills outlined above, do not worry, as any other skill and type of knowledge in life, these features can be developed through practice. On the Internet and in research-oriented handbooks and articles available on the web you will surely find many exercises you can do with the intention of developing the set of skills I have been referring to until now. However, in the following lines I will share a couple of specific activities (one proposed by Creswell, 2015, and the second one proposed by myself) that novice researchers can employ to achieve such a purpose. Let's start with Creswell's task:

In the book, Creswell shares the picture I have attached below and asks the students to describe what first comes to their minds, based on what they see. Possibly some of the first descriptions given by the students will consist of mentioning the existence of the boats, while also highlighting the color of the picture (which is mostly black and gray) as well as the objects (trees, the sun, the sea) and other elements they can notice. Notably, this would be the kind of description that many of us in their situation would make. Nevertheless, Creswell pinpoints that if we provide such a type of description, we are not definitely thinking like qualitative researchers. We would be conceiving the world as quantitative researchers instead. Interesting, no?



Retrieved from Creswell (2015, p. 36)

More explicitly, Creswell (2015, p. 37) affirms this aspect in the following way “Those who approach the picture in a more quantitative way have described in their paragraphs these features:

- They report measures such as water level or distance of the boats from shore.
- They describe the time of day on the basis of the sun’s position.
- They describe the topography of the land.
- They describe the dimensions of things in the picture, such as the large hills, the small boats, and the
- small sticks in the water.
- They enumerate the types of colors they see, such as the oranges, the browns, and the blacks”

So, what would a qualitative description look like? Well, following Creswell’s perspective, a qualitative stance should be less numeric in nature, and more profound in terms of description and positioning. The students should be able to see what is “beyond” is in front of them, and if they can not observe it, they should be able to infer it. As such, individuals who think qualitatively should have the competence to:

- Tell stories about people who were fishing during the day and are now resting at home with their families.
- Describe a hush over the lake as the boats rest for the night.
- Describe all aspects of the picture—the sun, the trees, the lake, the boats. A panorama unfolds.
- Discuss the contrasts of light and dark.
- Create poems or songs about the lake.
- See themselves sitting on the shore looking at the calm boats and feeling at peace with
- themselves.
- Place themselves on the boats, sitting there peacefully at sundown.
- Talk about what is not in the picture, such as people or children playing on the shore.

- See the disturbance in the water—something unusual or unexpected” (Creswell, 2015, p. 38).

For this reason, and even if sometimes we may be convinced that we are really thinking and acting like qualitative researchers, the best a novice researcher intending to enter the field can do is continuously reevaluate the process he/she is currently developing and ask for the guidance and advice from more experienced researchers. This involvement with other members of the academic community will enrich their perception and will similarly contribute to setting the ground of solid bases when it comes to the field. Besides, collaboration is indispensable when undergoing research. It does not mean though that a researcher can not work independently, but one of the main takeaways I would definitely like the readers of this article to have is: Knowledge is built collectively. By working with others, we can keep nurturing our practices and thoughts, and really contribute to consolidating the field.

The second exercise I propose here is, as I mentioned earlier, one I use for my research classes in the university where I work. Having taught the research seminar for a couple of semesters I became aware of the fact that to keep advancing in the field, it is necessary sometimes for the students to revisit the bases and initial notions of what it means and implies doing qualitative research. That way, I designed the following activity.

In broad terms, in said exercise the students are asked to walk around the campus and find a graffiti (the one that had called their attention the most). Once they have selected their own, they must provide an initial analysis of the images/artistic representations embedded in it. For doing so, they must try to position themselves in the shoes of the artist who painted the graffiti, while trying to interpret the intention she/he had at the moment of displaying it. Thereafter, they have to ask a couple of passersby (students, teachers, or any kind of observer that may arise) what they see in the same graffiti, and take notes of this, or audio record them (with their respective consent, of course), and without explicitly detailing who they were (so that privacy and other ethical issues features can also be practiced and fully understood).

An additional step the students are required to take is providing an analysis of the graffiti they selected based on their own positioning and understanding, but also taking into account those perspectives of the passersby who were willing to collaborate. In this way, the students can practice data analysis while also

supporting their statements with data retrieved from those who they interviewed/ audio recorded. Finally, they must hand in a written report. This, with the purpose of becoming familiar with the writing style and format in general they must follow when submitting either an academic article, or a thesis project.

Following I provide a more detailed account of the steps of such activity in case anyone wants to apply them. Needless to say, they can also be modified/adapted depending on the context where the task takes place:

Research-related task

“Our UPTC is characterized by a beautiful landscape full of graffities and other artistic pieces displayed throughout the whole campus. As you already know, graffities and the other previously mentioned pieces of art were thought of and designed by a person bearing some ideas in mind. We can not overgeneralize (as this is not part of the qualitative paradigm) but possibly the artist in question was trying to share (or maybe not) a message with people exposed to the piece of art. However, it is essential to clarify that art is not conceived by everyone in the same way (s) because, like everything in life, it depends to a large extent on the viewer’s perspective, and experiences”.

Having the above highlighted aspects in mind, this in-class task consists of the following:

1. Walk around the campus/university in general and choose a graffiti/wall paint/artistic representation (the one that calls your attention the most). Once you have chosen yours, record a photo of it with your cell phone and keep it in your files (**for the written report you have to make and hand in**). Then proceed to analyze with your peers its colors, shapes, intention, audience to which it was intended, and everything related to it (it is fine if you decided to work by yourself).
2. As soon as you have finished the previous steps, approach 2 passersby and ask them to also let you know what they think of the piece of art selected by you. Audio record the person and ask him/her for a pseudonym he/she (they) would like to be assigned for when you have to report the data gathered and your overall work. Warning: Ask the persons (your participants) to give you a very detailed account of their demographic information (age,

origin, bachelor's degree they are currently undergoing), but do not reveal these peoples' names/identity under any circumstances.

3. Keep all the information safe and prepare a report based on how everything went. Be as detailed as possible, and when reporting how the analysis and overall tasks took place, try to weave your understanding of the piece of art analyzed along with those of your "participants".
4. Upload the written report, and the audio recording to the link indicated by the teacher. In the report you should also attach the photo of the piece of art/graffiti you work on. Do not miss any important details. **Your grade will be assigned depending on the quality of your work.** Pd. You can not repeat the piece of art selected. Since the U is a large place, there should be at least 5 or 6 different graffiti/wall paints, etc, from which to choose. The length of the document should be minimum 1 page and a half (without including the picture) and so as to the font to use for writing it, it should be Times New Roman 12. Including citations is optional.

5. Understand the temporal and ongoing dynamics of qualitative research:

Patience becomes paramount when one grasps the temporal dynamics inherent in qualitative research. Unlike its quantitative counterpart, qualitative research does not yield quick numerical results but involves a meticulous exploration of human experiences and subjectivities. Accepting this inherent characteristic of qualitative inquiry is the first step towards developing the patience needed for a thorough investigation.

6. Beyond money or academic recognition, have a real motivation for doing research and for disseminating it

One of the purposes of doing qualitative research, and research in general, should be that of helping knowledge at any field advance. Thus, do not write departing from the idea of improving your salary and gaining more money, or for mere academic recognition. Although these aspects undeniably constitute some of the elements we all would like to achieve at some point in our lives and careers, doing research should, and must be conceived as a mechanism for improving society and the world at large.

Let's imagine this example: In a really remote and underprivileged area of the country, a scientist was capable of finding a cure for an incurable type of illness (Aids) at a really advanced age. With no doubt, such a cure represents a life hope for thousands of people across the globe, but if the scientist does not publish his results, that is, the cure for the aforementioned illness, people undergoing such a situation will not be able to benefit from this advancement. Hence, and to summarize it, research should also be linked to altruistic motives.

7. Acknowledge the unpredictability of research progress:

Research endeavors seldom unfold as planned. Delays, unexpected turns, and the need for revisions are all part of the qualitative research landscape. As an aspiring qualitative researcher, you should approach your project (s) with an open mind, recognizing that the journey may take unexpected detours. It is crucial to maintain composure when faced with unforeseen challenges and view them as opportunities for growth.

8. Build a realistic timeline:

Crafting a realistic timeline is an essential aspect of maintaining patience during the research process. Recognize that qualitative inquiry involves iterative cycles of data collection, analysis, and reflection. Establishing a flexible yet structured timeline will help manage your own expectations and prevent undue stress. Remember, the richness of qualitative insights often emerges over time.

9. Celebrate small victories:

Qualitative research is a gradual unfolding of insights, and it is essential to celebrate the small victories along the way. Whether it is successfully conducting an insightful interview or gaining a fresh perspective during data analysis, acknowledging these incremental achievements will contribute to sustaining your motivation and patience.

10. Foster collaboration, and expand your networks

Actively participating in research communities, both online and offline, provides a platform for collaboration and knowledge exchange. Join forums, attend conferences, and engage in discussions with peers who share an interest in

qualitative research. These interactions not only expand your network but also expose you to varied approaches and insights.

11. Embrace co-authorship opportunities:

Collaborative writing, especially co-authoring research papers, is a powerful way to strengthen professional ties. Do not be reluctant to co-authorship opportunities. Working with others on research publications not only enhances the quality of your work but also opens doors to broader audiences and networking possibilities.

12. Attend workshops and collaborative events:

Engaging in workshops and collaborative events provide valuable opportunities for interinstitutional and cross disciplinary collaborations. Attend events focused on qualitative research methodologies or interdisciplinary themes. These environments encourage networking, idea exchange, and the formation of collaborative partnerships that extend beyond the event itself. The biggest ELT related event in Colombia is the annual conference organized by ASOCOPI (the Colombian Association of Teachers of English) where scholars from diverse backgrounds meet to discuss the latest trends in terms of qualitative research applied to the teaching and spread of English. Attending this important event will undoubtedly enrich your professional endeavor. Regional events are also a good way to stay up to date.

13. Do not underestimate your work. Your experience is as valuable as that of others:

Qualitative research thrives on the diversity of perspectives. Your unique experiences either as a pre-service or in-service EFL teacher contribute a valuable viewpoint to broader discussions held in the field. Do not underestimate the relevance of your insights, as they may offer fresh angles and nuances to the understanding of educational phenomena.

14. Utilize social media platforms:

Leverage the potential of social media platforms dedicated to academia and research. Platforms like ResearchGate, Academia.edu, and professional groups on social networks can connect you with researchers worldwide. Actively sharing your

work and engaging with others' contributions fosters a higher sense of community and expands your digital network. Do not hesitate thus to share your work (s) via the aforementioned platforms.

Final Remarks

Embarking on the journey of qualitative research as a pre-service or in-service EFL teacher can be both challenging and rewarding. This reflective article aimed to provide pre-service and in-service EFL teachers alike with initial insights into the qualitative research field. As I conclude, it becomes crucial to emphasize some final remarks and practical considerations that novice researchers should have in mind when intending to initially enter the field.

Firstly, qualitative research is not a rigid set of principles but a dynamic and evolving field. It requires continuous learning and adaptation. Keeping abreast of the latest trends and engaging with the global qualitative research community through conferences and publications, such as those I mentioned earlier, is essential for personal and professional growth. Hence stay in contact with professionals around you equally interested in qualitative research, and do not hesitate to work collaboratively if the opportunity arises.

Secondly, through the article I stressed the importance of humility and a positive attitude. Regardless of experience, maintaining an open mind and a willingness to learn from both seasoned researchers and fellow novices is fundamental. A supportive community can provide valuable insights and strategies for navigating the qualitative realm.

Thirdly, the unpredictability of qualitative research demands careful planning and preparedness. Anticipating challenges, from participant dropout to unexpected events, necessitates a comprehensive plan with contingencies. Flexibility in scheduling and a transparent, trust-building approach with participants are key elements in overcoming hurdles.

Moreover, developing a unique writing style is highlighted as a crucial aspect. While drawing inspiration from experienced authors is beneficial, finding one's own voice is essential for effectively communicating insights. Additionally, the article encourages EFL teachers to explore reputable journals in the field, both

national and international, to stay informed about the latest research and to engage with scholars for professional development.

In conclusion, qualitative research offers a lens through which novice researchers can explore and contribute to the understanding of sociocultural and educational phenomena. By embracing the continuous learning journey, maintaining a humble and positive approach, and being prepared for the unexpected, novice teachers intending to enter the field, can not only enhance their own professional development, but also contribute meaningfully to the broader field of qualitative research in education.

Implicaciones éticas El autor manifiesta no tener ninguna implicación ética

Declaración de fuentes de financiación: El autor declara que este estudio fue autofinanciado.

Conflictos de interés: El autor declara no tener conflictos de interés.

References

- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE
- Creswell, J. W. (2015). *30 essential skills for the qualitative researcher*. SAGE Publications.
- Duff, P. (2010) Research approaches in Applied Linguistics. In R. Kaplan (ed). *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Linguistics* (2 ed.) (p.1- 19). Oxford: Oxford university Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxford hb/9780195384253.013.0003>
- Hill, L. H. (2007). Thoughts for students considering becoming qualitative researchers – Qualities of qualitative researchers. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 7(1), 26- 31. <https://doi.org/10.3316/qrj 0701026>
- Jameel, B., Shaheen, S., & Majid, U. (2018). Introduction to qualitative research for novice investigators. *Undergraduate Research in Natural and Clinical Science and Technology (URNcST) Journal*, 2(6), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.26685/urncst.57>

- Kalman, M. (2019). "It requires interest, time, patience and struggle": Novice researchers' perspectives on and experiences of the qualitative research journey. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 8(3), 341. <https://doi.org/10.17583/qre.2019.4483>
- Macías, D. F., & Mosquera-Pérez, J. E. (2024). English as a Lingua Franca, world Englishes, and the preparation of language teachers: An awareness-raising experience in an English teacher education program in Colombia. *TESOL Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.789>
- Mackenzie, I. (2014). *English as a lingua franca: Theorizing and teaching English*. London, England: Routledge
- Mosquera Pérez, J. E. (2021). Research approaches in applied linguistics. *Paideia Surcolombiana*, (26), 277-281. <https://doi.org/10.25054/01240307.2248>
- Pfeifer, M. A., & Dolan, E. L. (2023). Venturing into qualitative research: A practical guide to getting started. *Scholarship and Practice of Undergraduate Research*, 7(1), 10-20. <https://doi.org/10.18833/spur/7/1/2>
- Saldaña, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research*. Oxford University Press
- Stake, R. E. (2010). *Qualitative research: Studying how things work*. Guilford Press.
- Silverio, S. A., Sheen, K. S., Bramante, A., Knighting, K., Koops, T. U., Montgomery, E., November, L., Soulsby, L. K., Stevenson, J. H., Watkins, M., Easter, A., & Sandall, J. (2022). Sensitive, challenging, and difficult topics: Experiences and practical considerations for qualitative researchers. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221124739>