

Trends of Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics Since the New Millennium

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Abstract

This article aims to make an overview of qualitative research in western applied linguistics in the new millennium. It finds that the role of qualitative research for applied linguistics has grown to be as important as that of quantitative research, for the research method and perspective it brings in. Besides, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research has gained currency.

Key words: Applied linguistics; Qualitative research; Ethnography

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INTRODUCTION

From the 1970s on, there have been a large discussion about research paradigms in the area of applied linguistics. As research paradigms of applied linguistics shifted from post-positivism to cultural construction, scholars began to rethink their research methods. The introduction of qualitative research to applied linguistics brought a new theoretical basis and a new research perspective. Based on statistics and analysis from linguistic core journals, the article studies qualitative research of contemporary western applied linguistics, hoping to provide possible enlightenment for Chinese academia.

1. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

1.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative Research is a rising research method in the field of Social Science in the 20th century. Different from quantitative research, which based on the methodology of natural science, qualitative research is mainly based on the methodology of humanities and social sciences. This kind of research is deeply influenced by the phenomenology, hermeneutics and psychology and it has developed a close relationship with disciplines such as cultural anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

Many Scholars have different views about the definition of the qualitative research. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), "Qualitative research is a situational activity. It puts observers in an objective world and thus the world can be understandable through a series of explanations and practices. These practices transform the world into a series of statements, including study notes, interviews, dialogues, photography, recordings, memos and other forms. That is to say, qualitative researchers take research objects from the natural environment to confirm its given meaning, based on it, they further explain and analyze objective phenomenon" (Denzin and Yvonna, 2000, pp.4-5). In international scale, their definition is relatively common accepted but not the absolute one. Scholars such as Burgess, Hudelson, Creswell, Ratner, Krathwohl, Stratuss and Corbin also have put forward their own versions. And Chinese scholars Chen Xiangming hold his standpoint that "the researchers will use themselves as the research tool, aiming to an integral exploration of the society through different data collected methods under a natural environment, usually with an inductive method to analyze collected materials and to form theories, it is an activity acquiring understandable explanations about the subjects action and meaning construction through interactions" (Chen, 2000, p.12).

The Western academic community still has roughly the same understanding on the connotation and characteristics of qualitative research. It is admitted that qualitative research focuses on the essential attributes of things. Besides, compared with the traditional quantitative research that emphasizes on measurement, experiment and statistics, qualitative research gives the priority to analysis on meaning, experience and description. Moreover, researchers mainly obtain research data through observation, interview, literature analysis, historical review and other methods rather than experimental quantitative methods. In addition, the qualitative research pays particular attention to case studies, often using thick descriptive to analyze specific phenomena, emphasizing the subjective initiative of the research object as well as the understanding and interpretation of meaning.

In a certain sense, qualitative research is actually a reaction to the over-emphasizing quantitative research. Just as Albert Einstein said, not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts. "The purpose of qualitative research is not to pursue the assumptions that do not exist in reality, but to reveal the interest relationships, value choices, and value conflicts behind the facts seeming to be natural" (Lao, 2000). It is generally believed that the significance of qualitative research lays on revealing the research object's nature in quality, not just in quantity, through the thick description and interpretation.

1.2 The Rise of Qualitative Research

The rise of qualitative research in applied linguistics can be related to the *paradigm shift* (Kuhn, 1962/1970, p.150) in humanities and social sciences. It was the Chicago School represented by Mead that firstly utilized qualitative research methods into the social sciences. This school had studied social phenomena using interviews and participation observation methods, and had already touched on related topics of applied linguistics. In the 1970s, new trends in linguistics such as post-positivism, deconstructionism, and cultural criticism promoted the paradigm shift in humanities and social sciences. So some scholars began to reflect on quantitative research. They found that quantitative research is too formalized, static and simple, failing to make a detailed observation of social phenomenon in detail. In contrast, qualitative research, which emphasizes on research integrity, natural scene, conclusion and analysis, can just make up for these shortcomings of the quantitative research.

The popularization of qualitative research also due to the development of anthropology, sociology and psychology. The introduction of research methods and perspectives in ethnography provide the foundation in ontology and methodology, at the same time, the application of symbol interaction theory and ethnomethodology in sociology as well as psychoanalysis and action research in psychology promote the development of qualitative research.

In general, qualitative research is most influenced by the ethnography in cultural anthropology. The word "Ethnography" is derived from the Greek words "ethnos" and "graphein", describing a certain group or a certain minority. The early ethnography was mainly the travel notes made by travelers or the investigation reports written by the missionaries. After the establishment of cultural anthropology, it became the core research method and was seen as "an empirical and theoretical approach inherited from anthropology whose central purpose is to generate detailed holistic description and analysis of cultures based on intensive fieldwork" (Barker, 2004, p.64). Ethnography lays the foundation for qualitative research by using certain methods such as observation and interview as well as unique descriptions from emic and etic perspective. The detailed, vivid and contextualized descriptions to a particular individual or group of people were increasingly valued by scholars in applied linguistics.

After the 1980s, as academic circles became more critical on quantitative research, qualitative research was gradually adopted by more and more researchers. And articles about qualitative research have published in core journals in linguistic and applied linguistic. In the new millennium, the role of qualitative research for applied linguistics has developed to be as important as that of quantitative research in both qualitative and quantitative aspects. Therefore, it can be inferred that the rise of applied linguistics research is the result of interdisciplinary research in applied linguistics.

1.3 The Review of Qualitative Research

Research methods used by qualitative research in applied linguistics mainly includes discourse analysis, ethnography, historical research, personal narrative, action research, thematic presentations and interactive analysis, etc. But different researches will adopt different methods in certain cases. For instance, there are five qualitative research methods commonly used in foreign language teaching and research: "basic or genetic qualitative study, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory and case study" (Merriam, p.8).

In general, applied linguistics had considerable progress using these methods. As early as 1995, Lazaraton believed that the prospects of qualitative research in linguistics was promising, and she pointed out that "Whether the qualitative research can win an equal status with the quantitative research in 10 years, and with enough attention and recognition, we are just waiting to see" (Lazaraton, 1995, p.467). Then Lazaraton collected all papers published on four relative core journals in applied linguistics (*TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Learning*, *The Modern Language Journal* and *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*) from 1992 to 1997, basing on them, she wrote *Current trends in research methodology and statistics in applied linguistics* (Lazaraton, 2000, p.178) to explain "now already 10% papers belong to qualitative research".

In 1999, Chinese scholars such as Gao yihong also did researches on all papers from four core journals in applied linguistics (*TESOL Quarterly*, *The Modern Language Journal*, *Applied Linguistics*, *International Review of Applied Linguistics*) from 1985 to 1997, resulted in a paper named *Developments Trends of Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, presenting their conclusion: "Material research is relatively developed in Western linguistics, and in 1970s, qualitative methods began to challenge the status of quantitative methods" (Gao, Li, & Lü, 1999, p.8). Based on it, we can know that at the beginning of the new millennium, the qualitative research in applied linguistics had developments to establish its discipline basis.

Since then, scholars such as Benson and Richards have also made statistical analysis on the status of Western qualitative research. In 2009, Scholars represented by Benson did researches on all relative papers published from 10 core journals (included *Applied Linguistics*, *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, *Foreign Language Annal*, *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, *Language Learning*, *Language Testing*, *The Modern Language Journal*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *System*, *TESOL Quarterly*) in the past 10 years, their finding shows that "477 papers belong to qualitative research, accounting for 22% of the total number of papers" (Benson, et al., 2009, p.82). They also found that in the new millennium, the number of qualitative research papers published every year maintain a stable increase, reflecting the important role of qualitative research played in language teaching and research.

In the same year, Richards published his paper *Trends in qualitative research in language teaching since 2000* (Richards, 2009, pp.150-153), based on 15 Western Applied Linguistic core journals (*TESOL Quarterly*, *The Modern Language Journal*, *RELC Journal*, *JALT Journal*, *Prospect*, *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, *System*, *ELT Journal*, *Language Teaching Research*, *Language Learning*, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *International Journal of Bilingual Education & Bilingualism*, *Applied Linguistics*, *English for Special Purpose* and *International Review of Applied Linguistics*) from 2000 to 2007. He put forward that although the qualitative research has not exceeded the quantitative research, and there was no trend it will shift to quantitative research as predicted by Gao Yihong in 2001, but the qualitative research has appeared in the core journal of foreign language teaching with great stability and is very influential. Richard also divided these journals into two groups: the first group are journals represented by *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, *Language Learning*, and *ELT Journal*, etc., of which the number of qualitative research papers does not exceed 10%; the second group are journals represented by *The Modern Language Journal*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Prospect*, *ELT Journal*, and *Language Teaching Research*, etc., and the number of qualitative research papers is between 20%

and 25%. In the second group, *Prospect*, *ELT Journal*, *JALT Journal* and *Journal of Second Language Writing* witnessed the growth of papers in qualitative research. According to the analysis, Richards pointed out that the current research types of qualitative research are mainly case studies, conversational analysis and ethnography, as for other research types such as action research and inquiry research are still need to be developed. Qualitative research in applied linguistics in the new millennium have made leapfrog development, and the role of qualitative research for applied linguistics has grown to be as important as that of quantitative research, though now it is small in quantity, it is growing rapidly. In fact, many scholars used to focus on quantitative research now begin to pay attention to the qualitative research.

1.4 The Influence of Qualitative Research

The influence of qualitative research in applied linguistics mainly on diversifying the research methods in language teaching and enhancing researches on identity in applied linguistics.

"In qualitative research, ethnography is one of many approaches that can be found with social research today, and it now spans to a wide range of disciplines and sub-fields" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.129). In recent years, it is common agreed that the most common method using in language teaching research is also the ethnography. For example, *Evaluative criteria for qualitative research in applied linguistics: Whose criteria and whose research?* published in 2003 by Lazaraton explains that "Existing criteria are inadequate for evaluating even the two forms of qualitative research—ethnography and conversation analysis—in which applied linguists currently engage" (Lazaraton, 2003). And statistic data collected by Benson et al. in 2009 also shows the principal status of ethnography. Just as mentioned earlier, ethnography is a detailed, dynamic, and contextual depiction of individuals or groups of people and their culture. It adopts two views(emic and etic)to observe the individuals or groups lifestyle. Ethnography requests researchers spending long time with the subjects to understand a certain culture. So in language teaching research, teachers who spend long time with students and have profound self-experience, are therefore suitable to conduct researches using ethnography. In fact, teachers always play a dual role, that is, they are both planners and performers of teaching activities, and researchers of teaching activities.

The application of ethnography into the language teaching research means the teacher adopts emic and etic to do observations and interviews. It behaves as the teacher using extensive teaching forms to encourage students taking part in class activities, at the same time, teachers can use observations and situational dialogues to do researches about dynamic language teaching, thus meeting the demands of the students and better conducting

interactive activities, finally brought deep analysis on educational activities and situations. The interaction ultimately leads to a deeper analysis of teaching activities and scenarios. For example, "A teacher intends to take a problem student as his research object in class. He observes the student's class performance and writes an observing diary. Through in-depth observation and communication, the teacher gradually can view problems standing on the student's status, therefore understanding student's behaviors and improving the teacher-student relationship" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982/2003, p.232). This is a common case in anthropology that a emic researcher can shift to etic. The research methods of mutual conversion between the emic and the etic now is being used by more scholars in language teaching.

In research prospective, the main contribution of qualitative research is to promote the research on identity in applied linguistics. The identity research is always a hot topic in social science since the middle of the 20th century, after the introduction of qualitative research, it also has become suitable for applied linguistics. For this reason, Richard pointed out in his paper "Trends in qualitative research in language teaching since 2000", explaining that the identity research has become an important topic in applied linguistics since 2000. Due to qualitative research, we can understand the language learning from different aspects.

For example, teachers, as the subject of language teaching, their identity recognition is the core of identity research in applied language. In essence, teachers' identity recognition is the result of socialization. Socialization has brought the diversification of students and teachers, giving them cultural symbols to differentiate from each other. Just as Bourdieu said "actors distinguish things through cultural symbols, while cultural symbols distinct the actor at the same time...Culture is a sign of social hierarchy, and the hierarchy of culture and the hierarchy of social space are structurally with homology. Culture can never be separated from social domination" (Zhang, 2005, pp.123-126). The emergence of distinction will inevitably raise people's concerns to identity. Especially as the growth of migration number and population flow, it is almost common for students and teachers with different mother tongues and different cultural backgrounds to enter the same classroom. And comparing with traditional acknowledges and experiences, differences can be found in students' approbation and recognition for teachers as well as teachers' own identity recognition. In response to these phenomena, qualitative researchers used methods like observations, interviews, and conversational analysis to study the different contexts' influence on teaching, and they combined teachers' family background, educational experience, and religious beliefs to do longitudinal research, aiming to analyze teachers' identity recognition.

CONCLUSION

While the Western applied linguistics circles continue to promote qualitative research and have already made many achievements, the domestic applied linguistics circles still seem to focus on quantitative research. It is an indisputable fact that qualitative research has and must have the same status as quantitative research. The development of qualitative research in applied linguistics in the West can provide enlightenment to foreign language teaching research in China. Therefore, it is believed that learning from the achievements of qualitative research in Western applied linguistics circles will have a far-reaching impact on the applied linguistics research in China.

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