

Research Article

# The Transformative Role of Qualitative Research in ELT and Applied Linguistics

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the transformative impact of qualitative research on English Language Teaching (ELT) and Applied Linguistics. It highlights how qualitative research can reveal complex insights into classroom dynamics, teacher attitudes, learner identities and societal factors. This study adopted a basic descriptive qualitative approach and collected data through semi-structured interviews with active, experienced university educators in teacher education programs. The findings revealed that qualitative research effectively addresses underexplored areas, such as the impact of cultural and social factors on language acquisition and learner engagement, while also providing actionable insights for teacher training, curriculum design, and classroom practices. Participants emphasized the adaptability and depth of qualitative methods, despite challenges such as time-intensive data collection and the need for ethical rigor. This study contributes to the field by bridging theory and practice, showcasing the role of qualitative methodologies in fostering culturally responsive and inclusive teaching practices, advancing teacher professional development, and addressing real-world educational challenges. Ultimately, the study highlights the enduring relevance of qualitative research in shaping innovative pedagogical strategies and advancing theoretical knowledge in ELT and Applied Linguistics.

**Keywords:** qualitative research; applied linguistics, teacher beliefs; learner identities; sociocultural influences

## 1. Introduction

Qualitative research in applied linguistics aims to understand and interpret language, language learning, or use in specific contexts, as well as social phenomena, within natural settings like social and school environments. Qualitative research involves data collection procedures that result primarily in open-ended, non-numerical data, which is then analyzed primarily by non-statistical methods. Dornyei (2007) states, “qualitative data which usually involves recorded spoken data (for example, interview data) that is transcribed to textual form as well as written (field) notes and documents of various sorts” (p. 19). This definition aligns with Leavy’s (2014) description of qualitative inquiry as a way of “understanding, describing, explaining, unraveling, illuminating, chronicling, and documenting social life-which includes attention to the everyday, to the mundane and ordinary, as much as the extraordinary” (p. 1). These methods of research are frequently employed in the social and behavioral sciences to investigate, describe, or clarify social phenomena; to unpack the meanings that individuals assign to activities, situations, events, or artifacts; to develop a deep understanding of a particular aspect of social life; and to create “thick descriptions” (Leavy, 2014). They both emphasize the deeper understanding of social phenomena. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) define “qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 3). For Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participants’ setting, data analysis inductively building from particular to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data (p. 41).

Adding to this discussion, the American Psychological Association (2019), characterizes qualitative research as “scientific practices that are used to generate knowledge about human experience and/or action, including social processes” (p. 4). In the same vein, Mackey and

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Gass (2005, p. 2) state, “Qualitative studies, on the other hand, generally are not set up as experiments; the data cannot be easily quantified.” Thus “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 3). Qualitative researchers, in contrast to their quantitative counterparts, do not seek to exert control over the research context. Qualitative researchers assert that human behaviors, such as language acquisition and usage, as well as actions, are inherently influenced by the specific circumstances in which they take place. Hence, the interpretation of social reality in cultures, institutions, and values differs from that of physical reality. Qualitative researchers emphasize the significance of meaning and holistic considerations over discrete variables, statistics, and standardization. Qualitative researchers actively engage in the process of generating meanings and interpretations based on their observations. Findings in certain circumstances are interpreted based on the perspectives of study participants, as observed in ethnographic research. Qualitative researchers utilize methods such as individual or group interviews, naturalistic observations, and various forms of qualitative data to get insight into the research topic. In addition, researchers may utilize various research methods, including notes and audio or video recordings, to gather data. Case studies, ethnographic research, and narrative inquiry are common examples of qualitative research designs.

Qualitative research bears significant value in English Language Teaching (ELT) and Applied Linguistics because it offers detailed views into how language is taught and learned. These processes are influenced by various social and cultural factors. It helps experts look into the real experiences of teachers and students, revealing how teaching methods, motivation, identity and interactions in the classroom relate to each other. Qualitative study helps us understand different learners, teaching methods, and the social and cultural aspects of how people learn languages by looking at how individuals make sense of their experiences. This method is really helpful for real-world issues in language education. It helps to improve understanding between cultures, tailor teaching to individual student needs, and create open lesson plans. Qualitative research uses interviews, notes, and storytelling to provide useful information that helps improve policies, teacher training, and classroom practices. This eventually makes language education more effective in different situations

## 2. Theoretical Paradigms and Methodological Approaches

### 2.1. *Interpretivist Paradigm*

The interpretivist paradigm is a cornerstone of qualitative research since it focuses on understanding human experiences and social events by taking into account the subjective meanings of the participants. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative research is a situated activity that places the observer in the world. The goal of this type of research is to produce rich, detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of participants. Creswell (2016) discusses a number of different techniques, including narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study, which are important for examining the intricacies of social interactions in applied linguistics and language instruction.

### 2.2. *Sociocultural Theory*

Sociocultural theory emphasizes the significance of social contact and context in the process of acquiring a language. The theory is based on Vygotsky’s (1978) idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and explains how teamwork and scaffolding help people learn new abilities. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) apply Vygotsky’s concepts to second language acquisition, illustrating how conversation and interaction co-construct meaning and facilitate language growth in ELT settings.

### 2.3. *Critical Theory*

Critical theory looks at how power, equality, and social justice interact with one another in language instruction. Pennycook (2001) argues in favor of critical applied linguistics, highlighting the ways in which language is used to negotiate power and identity. In a similar vein, Canagarajah (1999) examines how learners in postcolonial contexts reject and appropriate English, placing emphasis on the voices of underprivileged learners and their ability to influence language practices.

### 2.4. *Ethnography and Discourse Analysis*

Researchers can gain a better understanding of cultural and linguistic practices by using ethnographic methodologies and discourse analysis, which allow them to immerse themselves

in observations that are rich in context. In 1974, Hymes presented the ethnography of communication and communicative competence as important frameworks for understanding how language is used. Gee (2014) expands on discourse analysis by concentrating on the ways in which language both reflects and shapes social identities, power dynamics, and cultural practices.

### 2.5. *Phenomenology*

Phenomenological study investigates the experiences that people have throughout their lives in order to discover the fundamental nature of such experiences. According to Van Manen (1990), phenomenology is important for understanding the educational aspects of teaching and learning. In a similar vein, Moustakas (1994) offers a systematic method for discovering the views and experiences of participants. This is especially important for understanding how language learners traverse complicated social and cultural situations.

### 2.6. *Grounded Theory*

Grounded theory offers a systematic methodology for developing theories grounded in data collected from participants. Glaser and Strauss (1967) pioneered this approach to provide an inductive framework for theory generation, particularly in unexplored or under-theorized areas of language education. Charmaz (2006) expands grounded theory with a constructivist perspective, focusing on participants' interpretive practices and contextual influences.

### 2.7. *Poststructuralism and Narrative Inquiry*

Poststructuralism and narrative inquiry examine the fluid and constructed nature of identity, language, and experiences. Foucault (1972) highlights the role of power and discourse in shaping identity, a concept that has influenced language education research. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) advocate for narrative inquiry as a method to understand the lived experiences of teachers and learners, enabling a deeper exploration of their personal and professional identities.

### 2.8. *Pragmatism and Mixed Methods*

Pragmatism emphasizes practical problem-solving and integrates qualitative and quantitative data to provide comprehensive insights. Dornyei (2007) highlights the value of mixed methods in ELT research, arguing for methodological diversity to address complex educational challenges. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) further develop mixed methods frameworks that are particularly suited for applied linguistics research, bridging qualitative depth with quantitative rigor.

### 2.9. *Research on Qualitative Research*

Qualitative research, despite its initial challenges in gaining acceptance, has now firmly established itself as a valuable approach, particularly in language teaching and learning. Qualitative research examines the construction of learning in classrooms and other environments through observations, records, and interviews. It utilizes interviews to investigate experiences and connections beyond the classroom, narrative inquiry to explore the histories of teachers and learners, and, more recently, autoethnography to record personal interactions with the learning process. Richards (2009) offers a comprehensive reference for qualitative studies in language learning. Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* (1983) exemplifies how ethnography may elucidate the link between community and language acquisition, specifically the impact of home-school dynamics on educational methods. Heath's comprehensive ethnographic analysis of the Trackton and Roadville communities illustrates the relationship between children's home experiences and their classroom education, demonstrating that these connections frequently outweigh the influence of overarching educational policy changes.

The amount of literature on qualitative research methodologies is as large as the amount of research that has been produced on the subject. However, there are still relatively few book-length treatments that are particular to language learning. Heigham and Croker's (2009) collection is an example of a resource that provides beginner-friendly overviews, with chapters that are straightforward and brief and cover a variety of techniques and methods for collecting data. Richards (2003) offers resources for beginner researchers, as well as sophisticated information for doctoral-level study. Holliday (2007) is not only focused on language learning, but it does provide a great introduction to qualitative research, especially for students who are seeking further degrees. For more general guidance, Silverman's *Doing Qualitative Research* (2013) remains a highly authoritative and accessible resource for researchers across disciplines. Equally indispensable is *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), which provides a comprehensive exploration of key

issues and remains a cornerstone for qualitative researchers. These resources collectively equip both novice and experienced re-searchers with the tools and insights necessary to conduct rigorous and impactful qualitative studies.

### 3. Research Questions

Key concerns in qualitative research within ELT and applied linguistics encompass its function in revealing sociocultural and pedagogical intricacies, assisting educators in examining classroom interactions, and tackling marginalized topics such as learner identities and sociocultural in-fluences. It aids in the development of curriculum, teacher development, and student in-volement, while presenting problems like time management, dependability, and ethical issues. Moreover, qualitative research connects theory with practice, promoting creativity and en-hancing comprehension in language instruction. To explore these issues, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do qualitative research approaches help English teachers explore complex classroom dynamics, teacher beliefs, and learner identities?
2. How do qualitative researchers navigate the challenges of conducting studies in ELT and Applied Linguistics, while addressing sociocultural impacts, student experiences, and curriculum development?

### 4. Materials and Methods

The study was designed to be qualitative and descriptive, as described by Merriam (2009) in order to investigate and evaluate the experiences and perspectives of participants in their real-world environments. This method is intended to present a simple and accurate explanation of phenomena as they are experienced by individuals, with an emphasis on the authenticity of their voices and a focus on their original expressions. During semi-structured interviews, open-ended questions were used to collect rich and thorough data, allowing participants to express their observations in their own words. The design makes sure that the viewpoints of the participants are accurately represented and that the conclusions are based on their actual experiences. This study uses this method to convey its findings in a way that is easy to understand and that accurately represents the unique sociocultural environment that is being studied.

#### 4.1. Participants

The participants in this study were university instructors who were actively participating in teacher education programs. More specifically, they were teachers who were educating pre-service or in-service teachers in ELT and Applied Linguistics. The chosen participants had at least 10 years of experience teaching in higher education to guarantee that their contributions were both relevant and thorough. In addition, they possessed doctoral degrees (PhD) in ELT, Applied Linguistics, or other relevant subjects, which demonstrated their academic and professional experience. Every participant had a minimum of two research publications that had been published in peer-reviewed journals. Both of these articles used qualitative research designs, such as case study, ethnography, or narrative inquiry. This profile guaranteed that the participants had a significant amount of practical experience in teacher education and a deep awareness of qualitative research methodology, which allowed them to contribute rich and informed viewpoints on the issue.

#### 4.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The basis for the collection of data in this research is a qualitative descriptive design since such a design will ensure the authenticity and accuracy of participants' experiences and views, as recommended by Merriam (2009). Semi-structured interviews containing open-ended questions were conducted with four university teachers who are practically involved in a teacher education program. Their experiences concerning training about ELT and Applied Linguistics both for pre-service and in-service teachers, were explored during the interviews. Written consent from participants was sought prior to interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded in order to capture their responses correctly. Recordings were then transcribed verbatim and checked several times to allow data to stay as close as possible to participants' experiences of living in reality and a given socio-cultural context. The data analysis process in the paper entailed verbatim transcription of semi-structured interviews and a systematic review conducted numerous times to ensure integrity to participants' experiences. An inductive thematic analysis was utilized to discern reoccurring patterns and topics pertinent

to qualitative research in ELT and applied linguistics.

## 5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings derived from the qualitative inquiry, followed by a discussion connecting them to existing theoretical perspectives and literature. The aim is to gain an understanding of the participants' attitudes towards and experience of qualitative research in the specific area of ELT and Applied Linguistics. Results offer a glimpse at the participants' conceptions on qualitative research, their experiences in qualitative research, and their challenges and opportunities perceived in this approach. Qualitative research is highlighted as playing an essential role in the ways in which sociocultural and pedagogical dilemmas can be dealt with in the context of language learning, emphasizing the ways in which qualitative research can capture deep human experience and behavior in natural settings. The paper synthesizes these results with traditional conceptualizing and theoretical and applied literature, and demonstrates the irreplaceable contribution of qualitative methodologies in ELT and Applied Linguistics theory building and practice.

### 5.1. General Understanding of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is defined by its focus on the necessity of understanding human experience and behavior in all their intricacy, in natural context (Creswell, 2016). In ELT and Applied Linguistics, it is especially applicable as it allows researchers to examine aspects such as classroom interactions, teacher beliefs and learner identities. Participants noted the importance of qualitative research for understanding the subtle processes of teaching and learning. P1 stated, "Qualitative research leads us to not just note down surface-level observations, but rather really delve into the underlying reasons for students' challenges and successes. It helps us to view their world through their eyes." P2 shared a similar feeling; "By way of interviews, by way of narratives, I can know how my students feel and think, which is something that a test score does not describe. It is about getting those voices and stories you miss in a lot of the quantitative work." So P2 views, "Those insights are really important for affecting actual changes in teaching practice."

Responses from the participants also reflected near-unanimity around the importance of context and adaptability in qualitative research. P1 noted, "Classrooms are dynamic and qualitative research allows us to modify our approach to reflect that reality." P1 further added, "Qualitative research allows us to go beyond surface-level observations and delve into the deeper reasons behind students' challenges and successes. It helps us see their world from their perspective." P2 highlighted how qualitative research can address under-discussed domains, explaining, "It allows me to explore sociocultural factors, such as how students' home backgrounds influence their language learning." "Through interviews and narratives, I can understand what my students feel and think, which is something no test score can reveal", added p2. P3 further explained, "Qualitative methods are particularly useful when exploring complex phenomena like identity and motivation which are central to language learning, but hard to quantify." Such a discussion points out that qualitative research not only collects data but also immerses itself into the environment and the conditions of the language class so that deeper insights can be achieved.

These findings are very much in-line with Creswell (2016), who argued that qualitative researchers tend to favour depth and context over generalizability, and Denzin and Lincoln (2018), who highlighted the interpretive and contextual essence of qualitative research. More recently, Paltridge and Phakiti (2015) highlight the significance of qualitative methodologies in the examination of the complex interrelations between language, identity and culture in applied linguistics. As Duff (2018) points out, qualitative methods and narrative inquiry offer us the ability to capture the richness of language learning as a social and cultural phenomenon. This perspective is further supported by Norton's (2019) focus on identity and investment in language learning, pointing to the essential role that qualitative research has in making sense of learner agency and participation. By integrating insights from established figures like Denzin and Lincoln (2018) and newer contributions, this study highlights the indispensable role of qualitative research in advancing both theoretical understanding and practical applications in ELT and Applied Linguistics.

### 5.2. Experience with Qualitative Research

Qualitative Inquiry engages researchers by allowing exploration of the complexity of language teaching and learning in various educational contexts. Participants shared their rich experiences of conducting qualitative studies highlighting their depths and insights. P1

elaborated, “I have been carrying out some qualitative studies, even narrative inquiry with teachers and it deepened my understanding about their struggles and success in multilingual classrooms”. P2 described how motivating qualitative methods were for him, explaining: “By using case studies, I was able to zoom into specific classrooms and examine the effect of teaching strategies on learner outcomes. “It is a process that immerses you in, and uncovers, things you would never see with just surveys”. “My ethnographic research in rural schools was instrumental in revealing how cultural practices shape the language learning experience - in a way that quantitative data could never fully capture,” P3 added. These settings underscore the participants’ contention that qualitative research serves as an essential instrument for tackling nuanced, real-world problems in ELT.

The participants also talked about the challenges they faced while doing qualitative research, ranging from methodological to practical constraints. P1 reported, “A major challenge was time management because collecting and analyzing qualitative data is a long and iterative process.” P2 had a similar concern when he elaborated, “Sometimes it is hard to make participants open up during an interview. It takes time to build trust, but it is important the responses feel authentic.” Giving higher weight to ethical considerations, P3 further said, “Maintaining the confidentiality of participants was difficult, especially in small communities where identity can be guessed easily. However, the participants reported that the experience of meeting those challenges consolidated their understanding of research ethics, adaptability and complexity of the overall research process.

Results and reflections from participants echo more general debates in the literature over the value of and difficulties presented by qualitative research. As recently noted by Denzin and Lincoln (2018) the interpretive and contextually flexible attributes of qualitative research make it an appropriate tool for tackling complex social phenomenon. According to Duff (2018), qualitative research helps understand the sociocultural aspects of language education, which relates to P3’s ethnographic insights. According to Richards (2021) the narrative and case study approaches they described provide nuanced perspectives of teacher identity and professional development that were similar to P1’s and P2’s experiences. Moreover, Paltridge and Phakiti (2015) argue that qualitative methodologies enable the study of contextually situated practices, a view echoed in P2’s account of culturally responsive curriculum design. These connections demonstrate how qualitative researchers in the field continue to move forward, generatively providing transformative accounts that engage both theoretical and practical spaces within ELT and Applied Linguistics and beyond.

### *5.3. Significance of Qualitative Research*

Qualitative research plays an important role in the development of any discipline, and ELT and Applied Linguistics are no exceptions; but why this successfully implemented in the field from past to present and how it serves the purpose of better understanding of the human and contextual aspects of the language education? Participants noted qualitative research can reveal subtle insights that quantitative approaches cannot capture. “Qualitative research means we can explore and really dig into the lived experience of teachers and learners which illuminates their pain points and winning moments in ways that statistics cannot”, said P2. P3 also stated, “We can observe how social and cultural issues play a role in language learning outcomes through interviews and classroom observations.” P4 corroborated this approach, stating, “The advantage of qualitative research is that it produces rich descriptive accounts of how language policies and teaching practices influence different stakeholders.” These responses underscore the role of qualitative research in unveiling the complex landscape of language education.

Participants also talked about qualitative research in terms of the contribution it makes to addressing practical problems in ELT by placing emphasis on localized and context-specific issues. P2 commented, “Through my own research, qualitative methods identified obstacles that rural teachers encountered which resulted in meaningful suggestions for professional development programs.” P3 noted, “When we look at classroom interactions through qualitative lenses, we reveal under-reported dynamics that are closely linked to both teaching effectiveness and learner engagement. P4 shared “Qualitative findings generally have broader implications and can inform culturally relevant and accessible curriculum design that may help better reach specific and diverse groups of learners.” Such experiences demonstrate how theory and practice complement each other and how qualitative research can be used to provide concrete solutions to real educational problems.

The perspectives expressed by the participants fit within traditional and current conversations in the field. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) underline the ability of qualitative

research to explain the intricate social processes that reflect P2's concern for rural education. Qualitative approaches offer rich explorations of sociocultural influences (Duff, 2018), a theme echoed in P3's reflections on his classroom dynamic. Richards and Farrell (2021), more recently, have elucidated the purpose of qualitative research in teacher education and the need to consider professional growth and identity development as it unfolds. Qualitative methods, as explained by Paltridge and Phakiti (2015), offer valuable insights into the relationship between policy and practice (as reflected in P4 regarding the processes of curriculum design). As a whole, these interpretations underline the imperative role qualitative research must continue to play in creating innovative policies, developing culturally responsive curricula and addressing the complexities within ELT and Applied Linguistics.

#### *5.4. Application in ELT and Applied Linguistics*

In order to grasp the subtleties of classroom realities and the interactions and interdependencies between teachers and learners the qualitative research approach becomes vital. Qualitative research is a valuable way for gaining insights into the complexities of communication, relationships, and behaviors that occur within schools and the education system. P1 remarked "Classroom dynamics are so complex only qualitative methods can capture the nuances in the teacher-learner interactions -such as the emotional responses of students to specific teaching techniques." P3 emphasized the importance of observation and interviews saying, "By studying video footage of my real classroom interactions, I was able to find trends that allowed me to change my teaching strategies to better engage my students." In a similar way, P5 expressed, "Qualitative research allowed me to understand how teachers' feedback styles affect students' confidence and motivation as it is crucial in creating a positive environment to learn in." These reflections show how qualitative research uncovers the layers of interaction that shape the learning process in ELT.

The use of qualitative research has also directly influenced teaching and teacher education. All participants shared instances of how qualitative findings have informed their approaches. P1 said, "I did a narrative study with teachers, and the data showed that they struggle to balance curriculum requirements and creativity in the classroom, so I developed workshops to help with this. P3 articulated, "The qualitative insights I generated helped me to create a professional development module for my organization to help build cultural competence with our teachers so they had better rapport with their multilingual students - and they did." The use of peer feedback strategies in classrooms was inspired by my qualitative research findings that produced a collaborative and supportive learning environment (P5). Such practical applications highlight the importance of qualitative research in deriving actionable recommendations from findings that improve teaching and learning outcomes.

Such insights resonate with both established and newer strands of thinking in the ELT and Applied Linguistics literature around the transformative potential of qualitative research. P1 and P5 specifically focused on emotional and motivational aspects, consistent with what Denzin and Lincoln (2018) describe as qualitative research which aims to access rich snapshots of everyday life experienced by teachers and students. Paltridge and Phakiti (2015, p. 269) emphasise the sociocultural and contextual influences which echoed on P2 and P3's interest in developing cultural competence. As Duff (2018) highlights about qualitative research, it examines multilingual classrooms, which connect to P3 when she espouses her experiences in different contexts on improving teacher training. In closer agreement with P1 and P5's descriptions of negotiating professional practices, Richards (2021) highlighted the role qualitative findings play on curricular design and teacher development. These contributions collectively show how qualitative research acts as a bridge connecting theory to practice, allowing for educators to respond to the sociocultural and contextual challenges of ELT.

#### *5.5. Challenges in Conducting Qualitative Research*

There are many specific challenges that qualitative researchers in ELT and Applied Linguistics must navigate to yield meaningful and reliable results. A notable challenge involves handling the time and resources needed for data gathering and analysis. "The transcription process alone may take weeks, especially with longer interviews," P1 stated. In a similar vein, P3 stated; "Analyzing qualitative data is quite time-consuming; one goes back and forth between themes and the data to detect patterns." Qualitative research requires meticulous planning for such contingencies to build in time for access negotiations and difficulties.

Another challenge is assuring rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative studies. The process of verifying findings and demonstrating credibility requires intentional actions from

researchers. Participant 2 stated, “Member checking is a must, but getting participants together to provide feedback is a logistic nightmare. P1 reiterated this point and stated, adding, “Triangulating data sources adds validity, but also the amount of work increases significantly.” P3 further noted that “it is critical to document every decision made during the coding process, but keeping such detailed documentation can seem overwhelming.” The above points emphasize the need for the use of different strategies such as member checking, triangulation and audit trail to promote credibility and transparency of qualitative research.

Participants reported many challenges during the qualitative research process which are consistent with findings in the literature regarding the complexity of conducting qualitative research. Creswell and Poth (2018), for instance, highlight that qualitative data analysis is iterative and that qualitative researchers return to the data several times to see if patterns can be discerned. In a similar vein, Guba and Lincoln (1989) also propose using methods such as member checking, and triangulation to establish the trustworthiness of qualitative research, but recognize that these methods require extra time and effort. Participants echoed Tracy (2010) by referencing ethical challenges, particularly in relation to relational ethics and building and maintaining respect and trust with participants through transparency and confidentiality.

### *5.6. Current Trends and Future Directions in Qualitative Research*

Emerging trends in qualitative research in ELT and Applied Linguistics indicate a move towards diversity, inclusivity and the impact of technology on language education. Participants noted a growing recognition and interest in examining the ways in which sociocultural and contextual elements influence language learning experiences. A qualitative consideration as part of language research would be one of a broader approach to understanding diverse learner populations and an understanding of qualitative research to better match equity and inclusion addressed within. In this connection P1 reported, “There is increasingly an interest in trying to understand multilingual classrooms, and how it is that learners’ linguistic repertoires can be drawn on, rather than viewed as barriers.” Likewise, P2 noted, “researchers are starting to think about how digital-tools, like online collaborative tools, can promote language growth and still maintain the depth of qualitative inquiry.” These insights underscore the dynamic nature of qualitative research, and its responsiveness to current educational challenges.

Qualitative research is equally important in understanding pressing issues in language teaching and learning through uncovering rich, contextualized understandings of classroom dynamics and learner behaviors. Participants emphasized its capacity to inform practical solutions for teachers and policymakers. P4 explained, “Qualitative studies provide nuanced understandings of how learners interact with content and how teachers adjust their approaches in response to learners’ changing needs.” P2 continued, “Qualitative research that centers on learners’ experiences can help shape interventions that foreground student engagement and well-being.” The inherent subjectivity of qualitative methods becomes strength in providing practical insights to address these complexities in real-world language teaching and learning situations.

The discussions resonate with recent scholarship (e.g., Richards, 2009) calling attention to the transformative potential of qualitative research in ELT and Applied Linguistics. Similar to that, Canagarajah (2019) emphasizes the necessity of qualitative methods for examining the intersections of language, identity and power across varied learning environments. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) also emphasize sociocultural lens in qualitative studies, which aligns with participants’ emphasis on contextual aspects. This shift in methodological priorities evidenced by the participants’ emphasis on digital tools and inclusion may bode well for the future of qualitative research, as it will likely continue to adapt to both technological advancements and shifts in global education. Qualitative research is capable of responding to emerging trends by developing theories that can simultaneously advance theoretical understanding and bridge the gap between research and practice, thereby driving more responsive and effective language education approaches.

### *5.7. Personal Reflections*

Engaging in qualitative research greatly affects participants’ growth personally as well as professionally as educators and researchers by developing a deeper understanding of their teaching practices and complexities of language learning. Qualitative research has promoted reflective practice which has facilitated participants to critically assess their pedagogical methodologies and highlight the nuances in learner experiences. “Qualitative research has



changed the way I perceived teaching from being a task to being a something that is doing in the interaction with the students and in their context including their backgrounds and aspirations,” said P2. Along the same lines, P5 elaborated on how the qualitative studies improved their lens of empathy for the learners, highlighting, “When I worked on interviews with students about the challenges they face in writing classes, I was able to see their struggles more clearly so I could give them better and more personalized feedback.”

The respondents also underscored their most important contributions to qualitative research in ELT and Applied Linguistics, which they see as a way of producing insights that are useful in the classroom. Many felt pride in bridging the research-teaching divide. P3 noted, “One of my biggest contributions is the work that I have done in terms of exploring the dynamics of teacher-student rapport in language classrooms because that has really impacted the way that we design teacher training programs. P2 stated, “I study classroom discourse so I’ve been able to share concrete strategies for creating more inclusive and collaborative classroom environments.” These reflections highlight the extent to which qualitative research allows educators to grapple with real world issues while also contributing to the theoretical development of ELT and Applied Linguistics.

The findings align with recent studies emphasizing the transformative potential of qualitative research in ELT and Applied Linguistics. Mann and Walsh (2017) argue that reflective qualitative research fosters professional growth by enabling educators to explore and improve their interactional practices. Similarly, Wyatt and Gale (2017) highlight that qualitative methodologies are instrumental in uncovering nuanced teacher and learner perspectives, particularly in dynamic classroom environments. The participants’ reflections also extend Dornyei’s (2007) focus on the importance of contextually rich studies for understanding language learning motivation. Furthermore, the emphasis on addressing real-world challenges resonates with calls by Larsen-Freeman (2018) for qualitative research to contribute to adaptive and transformative teaching practices in response to 21st-century educational demands. These insights reinforce the idea that qualitative research not only bridges theory and practice but also drives innovation in teaching and learning methodologies.

#### *5.8. Future of Qualitative Research*

The future of qualitative research in ELT and Applied Linguistics appears promising as it adapts to address emerging challenges and evolving contexts. Participants highlighted the growing importance of exploring innovative methodologies to capture the dynamic and interconnected realities of language teaching and learning. P1 observed, “The field is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary. Incorporating digital tools and combining methods like narrative inquiry with virtual ethnography can open up new avenues for understanding learner and teacher experiences.” Similarly, P3 remarked, “As technology reshapes classrooms, qualitative research needs to evolve to examine the impact of blended and online learning environments on language acquisition.” P5 added, “There is a need to focus more on global perspectives, especially from underrepresented regions, to ensure inclusivity and diversity in ELT research.” These reflections suggest a shift toward broader and more inclusive qualitative inquiry that embraces emerging technologies and diverse contexts.

Participants also discussed how qualitative research methodologies can evolve to better address challenges in the field. P1 emphasized the importance of methodological rigor, stating, “Researchers need to balance flexibility with systematic approaches, particularly when analyzing large datasets from virtual learning contexts.” P3 highlighted the need for more collaborative approaches, saying, “Collaborative research, where teachers, learners, and researchers work together, can provide richer and more authentic insights.” P5 focused on the ethical dimensions of future research, observing, “With the rise of digital and multimodal data, ensuring participant privacy and ethical use of data will become even more critical.” These perspectives underline the necessity of refining qualitative methodologies to maintain their relevance and credibility in addressing complex educational challenges.

The participants’ views align with contemporary discussions in qualitative research literature. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) highlight the adaptability of qualitative methodologies in exploring new research frontiers, which resonates with P1’s suggestion of integrating virtual ethnography. Duff (2018), Paltridge and Phakiti (2015) emphasize the importance of context and interdisciplinarity, aligning with P3’s focus on blended learning and collaboration. More recently, Norton (2019) underscore the role of qualitative research in examining global and diverse perspectives, reflecting P5’s advocacy for inclusivity. Furthermore, Eynon, Schroeder, and Fry (2017) discuss the ethical challenges posed by digital data collection, reinforcing P5’s concern about privacy. These linkages demonstrate that the evolution of qualitative research

will rely on its ability to innovate while staying true to its core principles of depth, contextual understanding, and ethical rigor in ELT and Applied Linguistics.

## 6. Conclusions

This research examined how qualitative research can change EL) and Applied Linguistics. It focused on how qualitative research can provide detailed information on classroom dynamics, teacher beliefs, learner identities, and sociocultural factors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced university educators who were actively involved in teacher education programs. The interviews were designed using a qualitative descriptive approach. The results showed that qualitative approaches provide researchers with the ability to explore the complexity of teaching and learning processes in depth, offering deep insights that go beyond surface-level observations. Participants stressed the significance of qualitative research in investigating areas that have not been well examined, such as the impact of cultural and social aspects on language learning and learner engagement. Furthermore, the research showed that qualitative methods can be adapted to capture the dynamics of real-world educational situations, providing significant insights into classroom reality and practical answers to educational issues. This work is important since it makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it supports current frameworks on the contextual and interpretative aspects of qualitative research, expanding its applicability to modern difficulties in ELT. In practice, it emphasizes how qualitative data can be used to improve teacher training, curriculum design, and strategies to increase student engagement. Qualitative research continues to influence the development of language teaching approaches that are inclusive, culturally relevant, and effective by bridging the gap between theory and practice.

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