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## **THE CONTRIBUTION MADE BY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TO TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Students and researchers of different disciplines — such as sociology, psychology, health care, nursing, education, arts and humanities, and so on — employ qualitative methods for their research project. In education, TESOL researchers increasingly use qualitative research enquiry. This study aimed to appraise the contributions of qualitative research to TESOL. In order to achieve this aim, the study demonstrated a critical understanding of theoretical debates in qualitative research. Then, two articles related to English language teaching to speakers of other languages were chosen with a view to arguing that qualitative research paradigm contributes to TESOL more than any other research paradigms. The key findings were characteristics of qualitative research: description-understanding-interpretation, dynamic, no single way of doing something- multiple realities, inductive thinking, holistic, in-depth study, words-themes-writing, and non-linear; existence of nexus between interpretivism and qualitative research; and positive impacts of qualitative research on TESOL.*

**KEYWORDS:** Qualitative research, Interpretivism, TESOL, Contribution, Meaning, Perspective

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Qualitative research is an increasingly important aspect in the sociology and anthropology of education. Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p. viii) argued that, “This is a growing enterprise worldwide.” The past few decades have seen rapid advances to a greater extent in the field of qualitative research. Merriam (2014) states that qualitative research has become a sophisticated area of study based on its literature, special interest groups, research journals, and constant scheduled conferences. This evolution of qualitative research has taken place from a belief that in highly controlled settings quantitative research overlooks the respondents’ experiences and perspectives (Ary *et al.*, 2013). However, the use of qualitative research is seen in various disciplines such as nursing, arts and humanities, education, second language learning and acquisition, and TESOL. According to Carter and Nunan (2001, p.1), “TESOL is an acronym which stands for Teaching English to speakers of other languages and is a ‘blanket’ term covering situations in which English is taught as an L2, as well as those in which it is taught as a foreign language.” This study seeks to evaluate the contributions of qualitative research to TESOL. The study will be divided into three parts. The first part will explore the definition of qualitative research, its key characteristics, and its strengths and weaknesses. The second part will investigate and analyse the underpinning theories of qualitative research: interpretivism and its schools of thought— symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, ethnography and grounded theory. Finally, the study will present the benefits of applying qualitative research to TESOL.

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## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

### Definition

It is necessary to clarify what is meant by qualitative research as this term is central to this study. But it is challenging to provide a clear definition of this term (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013) because it has neither theory or paradigm nor a distinct set of methods or practices which are entirely of its own (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). This term also covers a vast array of methods and approaches within the various subjects of research. Therefore, the following writers have defined the term distinctively. Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.17) noted that, “By the term qualitative research we mean any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification.” That is to say, qualitative research is non-statistical and non-quantifiable. However, Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p.2) argued that “Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter.” This definition highlighted on methods. Then, the definition of Flick (2014, p.542) has put an emphasis on subjective-meaning: “Qualitative research interested in analysing the subjective meaning or the social production of issues, events, or practices by collecting non-standardised data and analysing texts and images rather than numbers and statistics.” All these definitions appear distinct from one another. This means that the scholars have put multiple perspectives under the umbrella of qualitative research—although some issues overlap, for example, Flick and Strauss and Corbin use the idea of number and statistics in their definitions. It is also evident that qualitative research involves varied perspectives when Van Maanen (1979, p.520) defines qualitative research as “an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world.” The overall discussion so far suggests that qualitative research refers to how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world— to understand the meaning the people have shaped (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013).

### Characteristics

Given the definitions of qualitative research, the delineation of its main characteristics, as opposed to quantitative research, elucidates its meaning further. Qualitative research produces THICK description (Greertz, 1973); the researchers describe, analyse, and interpret actions and perspectives in society rather than provide a THIN description: simply reporting facts and situations surrounding an action (Denzin, 1989). This means that the researchers provide detailed description of participants’ experiences, opinions, feelings, and the meaning of their actions. Likewise, Hancock (1998) stated that qualitative research tradition digs deeper by exploring the answers to questions beginning with: why? How? in which way? However, Ponterotto (2006) points out that the concept of thick description still does create confusion among scholars and students alike. In spite of this confusion, thick description is significant to extend the validity of research as it even includes nonverbal data for analysis (Denham and Onwuegbuzie, 2013).

Qualitative research highlights an understanding of social actors’ words, actions and records (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). On the one hand, this kind of understanding process helps researchers explore the reality; on the other hand, it builds up a rapport

with the participants especially during the period of conducting in-depth interviews (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). This rapport is important because researchers may reveal any sensitive issue, for example: Ojeda, et al. (2011, p.114) mentioned that one of the reasons for which the participants shared the sensitive issues like drug and immigration is that “our interviews...and have established a positive rapport with study participants.”

Establishing an inductive reasoning, together with in-depth analysis, is very common in qualitative research (Truker, Powell and Meyer, 1995). Hayes, Heit & Swendsen (2010, p.278) stated, “Inductive reasoning entails using existing knowledge or observations to make predictions about novel cases.” Thorne (2000) claims that the inductive reasoning processes of interpreting and structuring meanings make a study qualitative.

Next, the data in qualitative research have first priority as they create new theoretical ideas, and/or help adapting the existent theories (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013). The researchers work as human instruments in the data collection process (Hoepfl, 1997). Beyond this, in order to obtain data the researchers employ different techniques such as observation, interviews, describing records, and others. During data collection, researcher’s interaction with participants is direct. Hence, data gathering becomes subjective. Moreover, qualitative research normally takes place in natural settings such as the home, schools, hospitals and the street (Willig, 2013).

Now the above discussion can be summarised by incorporating the key facets of qualitative research which are: description-understanding-interpretation, dynamic, no single way of doing something: multiple realities, inductive thinking, holistic, in-depth study, words-themes-writing, and non-linear (Lichtman, 2012).

However, quantitative research characteristics are also needed to take into account in order to have a better understanding of qualitative research. The quantitative research tests hypotheses and relationship: cause and effect, and assesses variables. The data in quantitative research are numeric and analysed using statistics (LoBiondo-Wood and Haber, 2013). Then this research paradigm involves deductive approach in which theories are tested (Bryman, 2012). Lastly, the quantitative research attempts to find out the answers to the questions beginning with how much, how many (Rasinger, 2013). All these characteristics have resulted in distinction between qualitative and quantitative research traditions.

Not only distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research are apparent, but some similarities also do exist. An example of this is that both traditions attempt to explore the same result: the truth. Moreover, qualitative research method generates new theories and variables, and subsequently quantitative research method verifies them (Thomson, 2011). There seems a joint-venture operation taking place between these two research traditions.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

Like other types of research, qualitative has had its merits as well as shortcomings. Qualitative research helps us understand the embedded actions of people’s everyday lives in detail. It also de-mystifies problems through detailed interpretation of social actors’ experiences (Barbour, 2013). Then, qualitative research presents data from a

number of sources of evidence, and becomes a ground in which new concepts are developed (Yin, 2010). In a nutshell, it develops and examines theories (Ezzy, 2013). However, there are some limitations of qualitative research. Firstly, qualitative research is considered to be fluid and ever changing. For example, in a semi-structured interview any incidental issues may come up, and those may be worthy of investigation. Secondly, smaller samples always raise questions of research validity (Harry and Lipsky, 2014). Generalizability is also problematic in qualitative research (Thomson, 2011a) because the findings from smaller samples may not be applicable to other larger groups of people. Furthermore, as has been mentioned earlier in the preceding section, the researchers are part of the research process. Hence, they may become bias, and influence the research results (Thomson, 2011b). Despite these limitations, the qualitative research has a greater importance especially in terms of eliciting reality of everyday human life and knowledge of the world.

In light of the discussion so far, suffice it to say that the overarching goal of qualitative research is to explore the meaning of reality through in-depth analysis and interpretation of compiled data. The next section contains a discussion of interpretivism research persuasion which consolidates underpinning theories of qualitative research.

## **UNDERPINNING THEORIES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

### **Interpretivism**

The Term ‘interpretivism’ emerged with the view that there are fundamental distinctions between the theme of social sciences (people and their organisations, culture, social practices, and so on) and of natural sciences. Due to these distinctions, the social world was not possible to understood and examine through the research procedure that the natural scientists employ. Therefore the social scientists had found out the interpretive research paradigm, alternative to positivism, in order to identify the subjective meaning of social action (Bryman, 2012a). In addition, Sandberg (2005) claims that the dramatic growth of interpretive approach is chiefly from an unhappiness with the procedures used for generating knowledge within positivistic research. This discussion suggests that the interpretivism has appeared to be an anti-positivistic research paradigm.

The interpretivism differs from the positivism with the respect to various viewpoints. First, the positivistic researchers believe that the social world is comprised of concrete and unchangeable reality which can be measured and observed objectively. In contrast, interpretive researchers reject this positivistic belief of reality, and they subscribe to the view that the reality is socially constructed by human which can be changed and understood subjectively (Sparkes, 1992: 20-25; Corbetta, 2003:284; Marcon and Gopal, 2005 and Kroeze, 2012). Second, the positivism is a nomothetic research which produces law-like or general actions — can be used for making further predictions (Bryman, 2012b). Conversely, the interpretivism is an ideographic research: the study of individual cases or events (Kelin and Myers, 1999). Third, in positivism knowledge is derived from empirical testing; while knowledge in interpretivism is obtained from the meaning of events (Richardson, 2011). Another distinction is that the interpretive research uncovers the meaning and understanding of social phenomena (Young, 2009 and Kroeze, 2012), whereas the positivist research leaves out the common meanings (Denzin and Lincoln (1998). This analysis indicates that the researchers are profoundly polarised.

However, some scholars oppose the above differences between interpretivism and positivism. Weber (2004), for example, claims that the notion of positivism versus interpretivism is vacuous, and it just divides the scholars into groups. He makes this claim focusing on that the researchers' goal is to build up a deeper understanding of phenomena as well as strengths and limitations of different research methods, and to acquire a repertoire in conducting research. Kelin and Myers (1999 cited in Kroeze, 2012) have also attempted to prove that no difference exists in between positivism and interpretivism. They have disputed the claim of interpretivists— the reality is always changeable. They state that sometimes the reality in interpretivism also becomes concrete artifacts made by societies. In other words, both positivism and interpretivism represent passive reality

The main weakness of Weber's claim is that his arguments seem to be rather perplexing as he identifies himself a positivist, such as—"As a positivist, I am surprised..." (P. xii). His argument is principally based on emphasising upon the research method, and the aim of improving knowledge through research. But he overlooks other issues for instance —meaning, events, experience, belief, research method characteristics, validity, and reliability. Arguably, interpretivism is an umbrella term which has diverse theoretical and methodological positions (Potrac, Jones and Nelson, 2014), and it also includes a wide range of paradigms (Williamson, 2006). As has been noted, by contrast, positivism is not multi-focused. Therefore, it might be right to refute Weber's claim.

### **Interpretivism Schools of Thought**

The interpretivism includes some schools of thought: symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, ethnography, grounded theory, and so on. Comparison and contrast between these schools are discussed below:

Initially, differences and similarities between schools of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology can be taken into account. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the interaction that takes place between human beings (social actors). Furthermore, this interaction produces meanings through using symbols such as language and gestures (Mead, 1934 and Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The symbols, if not all, are social objects (Carry meanings) which are used for communication (Charon, 1992). Goffman (1959) claimed and illustrated that the communication is possible to carry out using even non-verbal symbols particularly gestures. But Charon (1992) argues that using only a non-verbal sign for communication generates a lot of spaces for misunderstandings, for instance one's body language indicates one thing but somebody may understand something otherwise. On the other hand, the key focus of phenomenological research methodology is on interpreting human experiences (Heiddeger, 2004). This is also emphasised by Tuohy *etal.* (2013) and Wilson (2014) that the phenomenological approach suits the research which attempts to uncover, interpret and understand the participants' experience.

Another difference between these two paradigms is that the 'direct examination' of empirical world, in symbolic interactionism, is used as a methodology of research (Blumer, 1969) although Denzin (1992) claims that interactionists apply different interpretive qualitative approaches. By contrast, in phenomenological research, no empirical justification is seen to be applied (Abrams, 2014). In-depth interview is usually used as a primary tool of data collection (Cresswell, 2007 cited in Slown and Bowe, 2013).



Apart from the differences between above two schools, there are some similarities. Notably, interaction is a common activity which is used in both approaches. In symbolic interactionism, the social actors communicate with one another and give meanings to the objects. Likewise, the social actors in phenomenological research gain experience through direct interaction with social phenomena such as various events, concepts, situations (Hancock, 1998).

The next school of thought is ethnomethodology which was first coined by Harold Garfrinkel (1967). Corbetta (2003:258) noted that, "Ethnomethodology is the study of methods and practices used by the ordinary people to decipher the world, to give it a meaning, and to perform any action; it is the study of 'practical reasoning', the science of everyday life". This means that people interpret the world and attach meanings to it by means of gathering experience of everyday life. Dowling (2007a) stated that ethnomethodology has stemmed from previously indicated two research traditions: symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. In support of this statement, many presented different arguments, for example— Lee (2014) argues that symbolic interactionism and phenomenology are explicatory in nature, and ethnomethodology even more as all of these three paradigms involve in meaning making. Another argument is that Garfrinkel himself has left evidence in his writing when his work is regarded as an integration of sociology and phenomenology (Dowling, 2007). Moreover, ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism are associated with studying interaction among social actors (Dowling, 2007b). However, Eberle (2012) has pointed out that several issues in ethnomethodology are not as clear as in phenomenology such as in ethnomethodology it is not elucidated how general and abstract ethnomethods need to be described. The evidence highlight that there are more similarities among these three schools rather than dissimilarities. The subsequent sections emphasise on the analogy and difference between ethnography and grounded theory.

Ethnography is a methodology of descriptive studies in which the researcher participates in studying an entire cultural group in a natural setting over a longer period of time. Data is collected through fieldwork: observation and interview (Creswell, 2009). It is also added that ethnography involves the researcher in describing a cultural group and its activities from the view point of members in that group as well as from the analysis of group patterns of social interaction (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989 cited in Deem and Brehony, 1994). However, according to Charmaz (2014, p.1), "grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves." The main characteristic of this theory is that the researcher collects data and analyse at the same time (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

There are several differences between grounded theory and ethnography. First of all, from ontological perspective, the ethnographers concentrate on investigating reality partly rather than focusing on entire context (Charmaz and Michell, 2001). Conversely, grounded theorists attempt to expound the key concern as well as other related issues of participants. That is to say, grounded theorists seek to obtain a thick description of the whole reality. The second difference is that grounded theorists use theoretical sampling technique, while ethnographers apply purposive or multi case sampling—describing participants' characteristics such as age limitation, parents of certain group of children, or teacher of a particular group of learner (Grossoehme, 2014). Third, for data collection, whereas ethnographers employ observation,

interview, diaries and journals containing people's lived experiences; grounded theorists use interviews and a variety of spoken communication (Grossoehme, 2014). Finally, the end product of ethnographic research is a rich description of cultural meaning of the phenomenon in a specific culture. However, the grounded theory research produces a substantive theory—defines the shape of the phenomenon (Aldiabat and Le Navenec, 2011).

Despite the differences between ethnography and grounded theory outlined above, there are also some similarities to be considered. First, both ethnography and grounded theory methodologies have been evolved from symbolic interactionism (Wuest, 2012 and Glaser, 2004) because the basic assumption of grounded theory is: symbolic interaction guides human beings to shape the world they live in. Prus (1996) stated that symbolic interactionism and ethnography share some assumptions. One of them, for example, without understanding the communication procedure it cannot be possible to achieve the familiarity with phenomenon. Second, grounded theory and ethnography share few common ontological and epistemological assumptions (Aldiabat and Navenec, 2011). Third, both these researches are carried out in naturalistic contexts (Pettigrew, 2000). Lastly, these methodologies are alike in terms of the research aim. Omery (1998 cited in Aldiabat and Navenec, 2011) has stressed that the normal goal of ethnography and grounded theory is to interpret the phenomenon by describing a plenty of data.

### **Link between interpretivist perspectives and Qualitative Research**

Having outlined qualitative and interpretivism research perspectives, this section of the study will highlight the relationship between these two. Some analysts partially disagree with the statement that qualitative research has links with interpretive research perspectives. Goldkuhl (2012), for example, argues that qualitative research and interpretivism are often linked to each other, but alternatives do exist. This is supported in line with the view held by Lapan, Quartaroli and Riemer (2012) that qualitative researchers apply either interpretivist or critical perspectives in their research. Myers (1997 cited in Ritche *et al.*, 2014) argued that qualitative research may be interpretive or may be not—depends on the researcher's basic philosophical assumptions. All these authors' stance on the link between interpretivist perspectives and qualitative research seems vague as they support the link partly.

On the other hand, some other researchers agree that the interpretive perspectives are the foundations of qualitative research. Mason (1996, p.3), for example, points out that "Qualitative research is normally associated with the interpretivist sociological intellectual traditions." A similar view is held by Holloway and Wheeler (2013) that the root of qualitative research exists in interpretive approach which focuses on social reality and lived experience of human life. Merriam (2009) agrees with Mason, Holloway and Wheeler when she says that there is quite often an existence of qualitative research in interpretive research.

There seems to be a clear, obvious and important link between interpretivist perspectives and qualitative research. There are several reasons why this link is. First of all, as the definitions imply, subjective meaning is the common view of interpretivist perspectives and qualitative research. Then both research held in naturalistic settings. Randles (2012) stated that the common peripheries of qualitative research approach are ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, case study and historical research.



Finally, according to Crofts, et al. (2011), “Interpretivism is a qualitative research paradigm.” So, this is evident that qualitative research is analogous in many respects with interpretivist perspectives. The essay will next consider the contribution of qualitative research to TESOL.

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TO TESOL

In order to examine the contribution of qualitative research to TESOL, two articles have been chosen. A careful investigation requires to see whether these two articles are of qualitative research in nature or otherwise. This part of this paper also demonstrates that the qualitative research best fits in with revealing problems associated with TESOL.

Article one: Chowdhury, R. and Le Ha, P. (2008) ‘Reflecting on Western TESOL training and communicative language teaching: Bangladeshi teachers' voices’, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 28(3), pp.305-316.

Article two: Chang, M. and Goswami, J. S. (2011) ‘Factors affecting the implementation of communicative language teaching in Taiwanese college English classes’, *English Language Teaching*, 4(2), p3.

First, the article one aimed to explore the phenomena of Bangladeshi teachers’ pedagogical concerns of ethics as well as compatibility of communicative language teaching although some teachers are Western-trained. It also investigates the teachers’ perceptions of ‘tactics followed by Western teachers of TESOL industry’. The article two attempted to explore the factors which help or impede Taiwanese college teachers to implement CLT. Similarly, qualitative research interprets social actors’ experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and facts (See Section 2.2). Second, as has already been discussed in section 2.2, the qualitative researchers use data collection instruments such as observation, interview, describing records. Both the articles mainly have employed the common qualitative data collection tool: interviews. Third, the researchers of both articles have maintained a direct interaction with the participants when collecting data. For example, the researchers in article two organised face-to-face and semi-structured interviews with the participants. Four, qualitative research sample is not as large as quantitative. The article one involves six teachers as participants, and the article two engages eight. Lastly, collected data in both articles have been interpreted and analysed in words, not in numbers and statistics like quantitative research.

Unlike the above points, from the ontological and epistemological point of view, each of these articles deals with multiple perspectives concerning TESOL, for example article one concentrates on student-centred teaching, democratic classroom, recasting, explanation of materials, adapting, politics relating to TESOL, and others. Similarly, article two incorporates factors in connection with teacher, student, educational system, CLT, teacher training, lack of knowledge and skills, and so on. The researchers (in article one and two) unearthed multiple realities or truth through interpreting participants’ experiences. One of the realities explained by a participant in article one is that ‘student-centred teaching’ is not feasible within the context of Bangladesh.

Both the articles are also considered to be phenomenological research: interpreting human experiences. This claim merits a closer look at the data analysis section of both articles. One of the participants named Osman in article one has presented his own

experience that he was conservative of watching English movie prior to living in Australia. Besides, it is evident that the social actors (teachers) gather experiences through confronting situations (problems) directly. Moreover, as has already been pointed out, the researchers have interpreted the participants' (teachers) experiences. Therefore, the articles are thought to be phenomenological studies too.

As far as the above arguments are concerned, both the articles are of qualitative research in nature. The suitability of qualitative research to figure out the TESOL problems is now to be considered. Qualitative research is appropriate to explore problems associated with TESOL; there are several reasons why this can be claimed. The first reason of deploying qualitative research for a TESOL study is that it is possible to interact directly with teachers who can share their real life experience of TESOL. Consequently, researchers can get an opportunity to observe and understand the realities or problems the participants encounter. Chowdhury and Phan, for example, elicited problems related to TESOL through direct interaction with the participants (Article one). These problems are: inappropriate teaching materials, cultural issues, and teacher's knowledge of English language, insufficient training, and so on. The second reason is that the diverse perspectives of TESOL are brought together when qualitative research is applied, and that helps us understand the problems deeply. For instance, Chang & Goswami (Article two) focus on a number of factors (mentioned before) pertaining to CLT implementation in Taiwan. Thirdly, as qualitative research concerns thick-description (Greertz, 1973; Denzin, 1989 and Hancock, 1998), the experiences, feelings, opinions, concerns, comments, and remarks of actors in TESOL can be interpreted in detail. Another reason is that now-a-days TESOL researchers across the world are increasingly applying qualitative research method in order to elicit problems existing in TESOL. Some of them are Shah and Harthi (2014), Lam (2013), Wyatt and Borg (2011), and Pishghadam and Saboori (2011). This analysis suggests that qualitative research tradition supports the researchers to obtain TESOL problems than any other traditions.

As an example, quantitative research method does not contribute to understanding the TESOL problems as extensively as the qualitative research does. One of the salient reasons is that quantitative research does not always investigate the answers to the question with why. Rather, it looks for the answer to the questions with how much, how many, how often, to what extent (Hancock, 1998 and Rasinger, 2013). In other words, quantitative research generally probes the problems superficially rather than thoroughly. Another reason is that quantitative researchers believe that social issues are stable (See Section 3.1). This is the objective way of looking at problems. Nevertheless, it is evident that the issues with TESOL are dynamic rather than static as culture and environment across the world influence English language teaching. For example, Nasrin (2008) claims that communicative language teaching is hard to implement in overpopulated settings. So, the use of qualitative research is more appropriate to identify problems relating to TESOL than quantitative.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to discern the value of employing qualitative research approach in TESOL. Now, it is reasonable to claim that qualitative research has contributions to TESOL as this study has argued that qualitative research benefits when

seeking problems in TESOL. These benefits are: the qualitative research focuses on multiple areas of research; researchers can accumulate participants' experiences and opinions directly and subjectively; the interpretation of accumulated data is thick and deep. In addition, qualitative research eases the difficult situations for better understand. Another significant finding is that qualitative and quantitative research, arguably, are not identical though the aim of both research is almost same: exploring the truth. However, the study has indicated some important limitations. In particular, the study has lack of specificity: No discussion of what specific qualitative research approach could bring what specific contributions to TESOL. Therefore, this essay has thrown up these issues in need of further investigation.

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