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Master One

Research Methodology

Syllabus

Section of English, Faculty of Letters and Foreign Languages

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Lecture Nine:

Theme 5, Sections: 1 to 3

Objectives

At the end of the theme, you should be able to:

- understand what a research approach is;
- identify the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of the available research approaches;
- shed light on the historical background of each one of the common research approaches;
- explain the main characteristics of these studied research approaches; and
- examine some strengths and weaknesses of the three research approaches.

Content

1. The Philosophical Background.
2. The Quantitative Approach.
3. The Qualitative Approach.

1. The Philosophical Background

Research approaches are plans and procedures for research that span the steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This plan involves special decisions. The overall decision involves which approach should be used to study a given topic. Informing this decision should have philosophical assumptions that the researcher brings to the study. These assumptions are a basic set of beliefs that guide action. In other contexts, such assumptions have been called paradigms: epistemology and ontologies, or broadly conceived research methodologies. These basic philosophical assumptions arise based on discipline orientations, students' advisors, students' inclination, and past research experiences. The types of beliefs held by individual researchers based on these factors will often lead to embracing a particular type of approach in this research.

Although there is a great deal of an ongoing debate about these philosophical assumptions or beliefs that researchers bring to inquiry, four examples are available and common on the literature in research methodology. These are stated as follows: Post-positivism,

Constructivism, Transformative, and Pragmatism. The major elements of each position are presented in the table below:

Post-positivism	Constructivism
Determination Deductionism Empirical Observation and Measurement Theory Verification	Understanding Multiple Participant Meanings Social and Historical Construction Theory Generation
Transformative	Pragmatism
Political Power and Justice- oriented Collaborative Change-oriented	Consequences of Actions Problem-centred Pluralistic Real-world Practice- oriented

(a) Post-positivism Paradigm

The post-positivist assumptions have represented the traditional form of research, and these assumptions hold true more for qualitative research than quantitative research. This world-view is sometimes called the ‘scientific method’, or ‘doing-scientific research’.

Post-positivists hold a deterministic philosophy in which causes (probably) determine effects of outcomes. Thus, the problems studied by post-positivists reflect the need to identify and assess the causes that influence outcomes such as found in experiments.

(b) The constructivist Paradigm

The constructivist assumptions believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for complexity of views rather than narrowing meaning into a few categories or ideas. The role of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied.

(c) The Transformative Paradigm

The transformative assumptions hold that research inquiry needs to be interfered with politics and political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever level it occurs. Thus, the research contains an action agenda for reform that may change lives of participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher's life.

(d) The Pragmatic Paradigm

The pragmatic assumptions arise out of actions, situations, and consequences rather than antecedent conditions (as in post-positivism). There is a concern with applications and solutions to problems. Instead of focusing on methods, researchers emphasise on the research problem, and use all the approaches available to understand the problem. As a philosophical understanding for mixed methods, researchers convey its importance for focusing attention on the research problem in social sciences research, and using pluralistic approaches to derive knowledge about the problem.

2. The Quantitative Approach

Quantitative social research was originated by the progress of the natural sciences in the nineteenth century. Such a progress was set out by social researchers who adopted at that time what was called the 'scientific method' in their investigations.

In applied linguistics, a number of researchers pointed out that the period, which went between 1970-1985 saw a significant increase of quantitative research. These researchers also highlighted that also a short time after this period, particularly in the 1990's, a growing sophistication of quantitative studies confirmed the coming of the age quantitative research in applied linguistics.

(a) Main Characteristics of Quantitative Research

In below, some characteristic features of quantitative research are stated:

1. Using numbers: It is the most important feature of quantitative research.
Naturally, all quantitative researches are centred around numbers.
2. A Prior categorisation: Because the use of numbers already dominates the data collection phase, the work required to specify the categories and values needs to be done prior to the actual study.

3. Variables rather than cases: Quantitative researches are less interested in individuals than in the common features of groups of peoples. That is, quantitative research is centred around the study of variables that capture common features and which are quantified.
4. Statistics and the language statistics: This is the most salient of quantitative research.
5. Standardised procedures to assess objective reality: quantitative researchers have sought to eliminate any individual-based subjectivity. The procedures were done through standardising research to ensure that these procedures remain stable across researchers and subjects.
6. Quest for generalisability and universal laws: Numbers, variables, standardised procedures, statistics and scientific reasoning are all parts of quantitative quest for fact that are generalizable.

(b) Strengths and Weaknesses of Quantitative Research

Supporters of the quantitative approach usually emphasise that it is systematic, rigorous, focused, and tightly controlled, involving precise measurement, and producing reliable and replicable data that is generalizable to other contexts.

Contrarily, the opponents of this approach view that quantitative research as overly simplistic, decontextualized, reductionist in terms of its generalisation and fails to capture the meanings that actors attain to their lives and circumstances.

3. The Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research has been around for about a century in social sciences. Thus, the basic ideas and principles of qualitative research are not now new at all. Rather, in recent years, this research methodology has seen an explosion of texts, reflecting a growing interest in the approach across the disciplines of social sciences. In applied linguistics, there has been an increasing visibility and acceptance of qualitative research since the 1990's. This is related to the growing recognition that almost every aspect of language acquisition and use is determined or significantly shaped by social, cultural, and situational factors. Therefore, qualitative research is ideal for providing insights into such contextual conditions and influences.

(a) Main Characteristics of Qualitative Research

In below, some characteristic features of qualitative research are stated:

1. Emergent research design: The emergent research design means a qualitative research study is kept open and fluid so that it can respond in a flexible way to new details or opinions that may emerge during the process of investigation.
2. The nature of qualitative data: Qualitative research works with a wide range of data, including interviews, documents, and even images.
3. The characteristics of the research setting: Because of the qualitative approach nature that seeks to describe social phenomena as they occur naturally, qualitative research takes place in natural setting, without any attempts to manipulate the situation under study.
4. Insider meaning: Qualitative research is concerned with subjective opinions, experiences, and feelings of individuals. In this respect, the goal of qualitative research is to explore the participants' views of the situation being studied.
5. Small sample size: Qualitative research typically relies on the necessity to use smaller samples of participants.
6. Interpretive analysis: Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive, which means that the research outcome is ultimately the product of the researcher's subjective interpretation of data.

(b) Strengths and Weaknesses of Qualitative Research

Supporters of this research approach claim that the main advantage of such a methodology is that it has been seen as an effective way of exploring new uncharted areas. Besides, qualitative methods are seen to be very useful for making sense of highly complex situations. That is, the background of qualitative research helps to distinguish real phenomena from intellectual fabrications.

As opposed to these merits, the qualitative approach is often criticised on the role played by the researcher in analysing the data. This may have negative impacts on the final results. For the proponents, this approach is not comprehensive since it lacks methodological rigour and appears to be unprincipled and fuzzy. To these, they add the problem of consuming time in that researchers agree on that the processing of qualitative data takes too much time in the analysis process.