

Quality Standards of Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics: A Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

This study inspects different dimensions of ensuring standards in qualitative research within the field of applied linguistics. It presents a conceptual review of already established key quality standards of qualitative research, their application, their significance followed by the recommendations to ensure quality standards in applied linguistics qualitative research. For this purpose, the researchers have considered journal articles, book chapters and books published between 2002 and 2023 on digital databases to examine the key standards of ensuring trustworthiness and their application in the field of applied linguistics qualitative research. The study presents recommendations for novice researchers who are attempting to conduct qualitative studies ensuring the maximum level of trustworthiness and credibility and making their studies sound in terms of quality standards.

KEYWORDS

Applied Linguistics, Qualitative Research, Quality Standards, Trustworthiness, Ethical Concerns

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1. INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research in the field of applied linguistics plays a pivotal role in uncovering the intricacies of language use, acquisition, and pedagogy. It provides a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex phenomena within real-life contexts, exploring the dynamic interactions between language, culture, and society (Giles & Yazan, 2023). As the significance of qualitative research grows, so does the need for establishing robust quality standards to ensure rigor, transparency, and validity in the research process.

The purpose of this research paper is to critically examine and present a comprehensive overview of the quality standards that underpin qualitative research in applied linguistics. By doing so, this study aims to address the pressing need for a unified framework that researchers can utilize to guide their investigations and enhance the credibility of their findings.

Qualitative research methodologies, such as ethnography, case studies, phenomenology, and discourse analysis, offer unique insights into the multifaceted nature of language-related phenomena. However, the subjective nature of qualitative research can pose challenges to maintaining rigor and ensuring the validity of findings (Tavakoli, 2020). Researchers must grapple with issues related to bias, reflexivity, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Consequently, the field of applied linguistics calls for a comprehensive understanding of quality standards that can guide researchers in navigating these challenges effectively.

This research paper aims to fulfill the following objectives:

1. Provide an in-depth analysis of the key quality standards in qualitative research within the context of applied linguistics.
2. Evaluate the application of these quality standards in different qualitative research methodologies commonly employed in applied linguistics.
3. Highlight the significance of trustworthiness with reference to transparency and reflexivity in qualitative research to enhance its impact and contribution to the field.
4. Present a practical framework that can serve as a guideline for researchers conducting qualitative research in applied linguistics.

By establishing clear quality standards in qualitative research within applied linguistics, this paper aims to enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of studies conducted in the field. This, in turn, will foster the growth of knowledge, facilitate evidence-based decision-making, and contribute to the development of effective language teaching methodologies and policies.

Ultimately, this research paper endeavors to provide researchers, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in applied linguistics with a solid foundation for conducting rigorous and valid qualitative research. By embracing these quality standards, we can ensure that future studies in the field have a significant and meaningful impact on our understanding of language, language learning, and language pedagogy.



2. METHODOLOGY

The study considers empirical studies utilizing qualitative approaches in applied linguistics research in order to analyze the implementation, frequency and pattern of quality standards. The key terms “qualitative research”, “quality standards”, “validity and reliability in qualitative research” “measures of trustworthiness in qualitative research” and “credibility in qualitative research” were used to search the relevant literature from online databases like Google Scholar, Elsevier, ProQuest, Springer, Sage, and Taylor & Francis. A specific criterion for the selection of literature was established for this review. The studies including journal articles, books, book chapters published between 2002 and 2023 were considered for the sake of analysis. It was also ensured that the studies from the particular disciplines of language, linguistics, applied linguistics and second language learning and teaching are selected for the purpose of data analysis.

3. KEY QUALITY STANDARDS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Qualitative researchers spend a lot of time in the field and sometimes visit the participants personally but still strive to obtain the deep structure of the knowledge. They remain unsure of the idea that they are going in the right direction or not. Therefore, validation and evaluation processes are more important in qualitative research rather than in other types of research (Stake, 2005; Thomas, 1993). The degree to which qualitative data accurately reflect what we are attempting to measure is known as validity in qualitative research. Numerous authors who have written on research methodologies have shown how qualitative researchers might include metrics that address these problems to directly address the problems of validity and reliability in their own qualitative studies (Pitts, 1994; Silverman, 2001; Shenton, 2004).

Quantitative research with a numerical foundation has historically been associated with validity. However, as qualitative research gained popularity in the late 1970s and early 1980s, researchers were under pressure to support the veracity and legitimacy of their work. On the other hand, two terms that are regularly used to describe validity in qualitative research are trustworthiness and credibility (Grey, Mills & Airasian, 2012). Korstjens and Moser (2018) supported the same viewpoint by asserting that qualitative research cannot be evaluated using the same criteria as quantitative research, such as internal validity, generalizability, dependability, and objectivity. The question of whether the findings can be trusted is what qualitative researchers refer to as "trustworthiness" (Gunawan, 2015; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). There are a number of criteria that define what is trustworthy, but Lincoln and Guba's definitions of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity/reflexivity are the ones that are most frequently applied (1985). The basic interpretation of these terms is best summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Quality Criteria for Qualitative Research based on Lincoln and Guba (1985) (Adapted from Korstjens and Moser, 2018)

Criteria	Description
Credibility	The research's findings are: Accurate A valid interpretation of the participants' original perspectives Represent plausible information derived from the participants' original data
Transferability	Findings can be applied to different settings or contexts with different respondents.
Dependability	The consistency of results over time. Participants' judgment of the study's conclusions, interpretation, and suggestions in order for all of them to be supported by the data.
Confirmability	Additional researchers could validate the research study's conclusions. The data and interpretations of the findings are obviously drawn from the data and not the inquirer's imagination.
Reflexivity	Reflecting on one's own conduct as a researcher

4. APPLICATION OF QUALITY STANDARDS IN AL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

4.1. Ensuring Credibility in Qualitative Studies

Credibility is considered the most important criterion and refers to ensuring congruency and confidence in qualitative studies (Coleman, 2022). There are many provisions available that qualitative researchers apply in order to ensure the credibility of their research. One of them is the researcher's prolonged engagement in the study whether it is being an active member during observation, playing a vital role while conducting interviews, or spending a lot of time in the field in any sense. This ensures avoiding misinterpretation of the data and achieving rich data by interacting with the participants and building a direct understanding of the culture and the context. Another relevant measure taken by qualitative researchers is persistent observation, which helps to identify the relevant cases and then apply measures to them to achieve credible data (Cypress, 2017).

Triangulation also acts as a useful source for ensuring the credibility of qualitative research. It can be practiced in the forms of data, investigator, and method triangulation. Fusch, Fusch & Ness (2018) suggested that within data triangulation, researchers collect data multiple times, from multiple places by multiple participants. Through investigator triangulation, they

utilize the opportunity to collect, code and interpret the data by multiple researchers. Furthermore, method triangulation helps them to collect data by applying multiple methods. Another critical technique to incorporate credibility in qualitative studies is member checking which helps to take feedback from the involved participants on the collected data. It helps to cross-check the information presented in the data and ultimately makes the study congruent (Brit et al., 2016). Table 2 cites studies from the domain of applied linguistics in which measures for ensuring credibility have been taken.

Table 2: Credibility in Applied Linguistics (AL) Research

Year	Title of Study & Authors	Data Collection	Sub Criteria for Maintaining Credibility
2023	Exploring peer support among young learners during regular EFL classroom lessons Tomas Kos	Unstructured classroom observation, pair work exchanges, and notes from three lessons were all captured on video and audio.	Triangulation
2023	Emotions, perspectives, and English language teacher identity construction: A phenomenographic-narrative study Mostafa Nazari & Sedigheh Karimpour	Seventeen Iranian ELTs were first given four emotionally charged prompts, which featured teachers expressing anger, despair, fear, and delight. They were then questioned to learn how they interpreted the prompts in relation to the development of their own identities	Prolonged Engagement
2023	Analysis of Discursive Translation Strategies in the Rendition of the U.S. Image: Findings From FM Zarif's Twitter Diplomacy Alireza Rasti & Yaser Khajavi	The study examined 137 tweets that were sent throughout President Trump's tenure in office to determine whether, if at all, their translations may have helped to uphold or develop the image of the United States that was depicted in the Source Texts.	Persistent Observation

4.2. Transferability of Qualitative Research

It refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts. Researchers ensure (as mentioned in Table 3) this criterion by offering rich and thick descriptions of the involved participants and the setting (Gray, 2018). This enables the readers to apply the findings to many other similar contexts due to the shared characteristics and the physical and context-based descriptions presented by the researchers. Another way to guarantee transferability in qualitative studies is through the use of purposeful sampling, as opposed to random sampling, which is often employed in traditional studies to produce an aggregated picture of the population (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). By selecting places and informants that are different from one another on purpose, naturalistic research tries to increase the variety of specific knowledge that can be acquired from and about that context.

Table 3: Transferability in AL Research

Year	Title of Study & Authors	Data Collection	Sub-Criteria for Maintaining Transferability
2022	Regulative Discourse for Pre-Schoolers: Should English Language Teachers Be Polite? Otilia Martí & Laura Portolés	Three distinct times—November, March, and May—were used to videotape six sessions: three from GA and three from GB. The two authors separately recorded and coded naturalistic classroom conversations. With the help of a senior researcher, they reached an agreement on ambiguous cases. Students' names were altered to pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity.	Rich and thick descriptions
2020	An Analysis of Deixis in the Song Lyrics of Justin Bieber's "My World" Album Ratri Yuliningrum, Zulfa Afis Sunani Anginna Birochmatika	To fully comprehend the words, the researchers listened to Justin Bieber's "My World" album tracks. Following that, they looked up the lyrics to Justin Bieber's song "My World" online and analyzed the data. The deixis types—person deixis, geographical deixis, and temporal deixis—were determined by the researchers after their analysis of the data.	Purposive Sampling

4.3. Dependability in Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, dependability is synonymous with reliability, which stipulates that an inquiry must also give its audience proof that if it were replicated with the same or comparable respondents (subjects) in the same (or a similar) setting, its findings would be repeated (Janis, 2022). Lincoln and Guba (1985) made the case that dependability and credibility are closely related and that, in reality, demonstrating the former helps to ensure the latter and ensure the stability of findings over time. Table 4 provides an example of research in the field of applied linguistics using this technique of stability of findings over time. This could be accomplished by combining techniques like focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

One measure for maintaining dependability in a qualitative study is an audit trail which clearly states the processes that were performed in a research endeavor from the first stages of conception through the reporting of the results (Carcary, 2009). The investigation is conducted while keeping track of the research path. In addition to it, a code-recode strategy also works for the researchers. To further diversify code meanings, the researchers examine and improve the codebook. After a few more transcripts are processed, they review the codebook and do a fresh analysis of the portions that each researcher classifies to see if they use the same or different codes.

Table 4: Dependability in AL Research

Year	Title of Study & Authors	Data Collection	Sub Criteria for Maintaining Dependability
2017	A Longitudinal Study of Motivation in Foreign and Second Language Learning Context Eser Ordem	A Turkish participant in the study who went by the pseudonym Nil learned German in order to study architecture in Germany. The participant was instructed to keep a time-based and event-based diary during stage one. To conduct semi-structured interviews about the participant's motivation in stage two, the researcher met with her almost monthly.	Stability of findings over time

4.4. Confirmability of Qualitative Research

Confirmability is the degree to which the results of an inquiry should be confirmed by other researchers. This concept can be compared to objectivity in quantitative research studies. Triangulation performs a key role in promoting the confirmability of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998; Morse, 2015). As discussed earlier, method, researcher, participant, and instrument triangulation help in confirming the results of the study and helps in enhancing its trustworthiness. Audit trails practiced through maintaining reflexive journals can also play their part in confirming the findings (see Table 5 for examples of the research studies in the field of applied linguistics practicing confirmability).

Table 5: Confirmability in AL Research

Year	Title of Study & Authors	Data Collection	Sub Criteria for Maintaining Confirmability
2023	The interface of explicit and implicit second-language knowledge: A longitudinal study Kathy MinHye Kim and Aline Godfroid	Five linguistic knowledge tests, a self-reported Language Exposure Log (LEL), and two questionnaires (i.e., background and motivation questionnaires) were given out. Based on the findings of the survey, researchers employed metalinguistic judgment tests (MKT) and untimed written grammaticality judgment tests (GJT) to gauge learners' explicit L2 English knowledge. The objective was to validate the survey results.	Triangulation
2018	Complex adaptive systems, language advising, and motivation: A longitudinal case study with a Brazilian student of English Eduardo Castro	There were three stages of content analysis. In order to understand the participant's learning's temporal progression, the initial stage entailed chronologically organizing data from all instruments. During the second stage, theoretically, resonant themes were created by coding the initial notes and ideas, taking into account the connections between the various participant voices. These themes were subsequently organized into categories in the third step.	Audit Trail and Code Recode Strategy

4.5. Reflexivity of Qualitative Research

Qualitative researchers must be self-aware and thoughtful about their own involvement in the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes as well as the preconceived beliefs they bring to their research (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2007). Therefore, interviews, observations, focus group discussions, and other analytical data must be accompanied by the researcher's reflective notes (see Table 6 for example). The researcher's own impressions of the setting and their interaction with the interview subjects are also included in reflexive notes (O’Kane, Smith, Lerman, 2019).

Table 6: Reflexivity in AL Research

Year	Title of Study & Authors	Data Collection	Sub Criteria for Maintaining Reflexivity
2020	Second Language Acquisition: A Framework and Historical Background on Its Research Fahad Hamad Aljumah	The qualitative methodology used in this study was used to gather information about past studies on SLA as well as perspectives and opinions. By making comparisons between the differences between language acquisition and SLA on various opinions of many researchers and academics, the author has effectively reflected on the findings and summarized the primary objectives of SLA research.	Reflexive Notes

5. SIGNIFICANCE OF TRUSTWORTHINESS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

According to Yin (2011), the first step in establishing trust and credibility is to conduct qualitative research in a way that is open to the public. The research methods ought to be open and transparent, In order for others to review and make an effort to comprehend your qualitative research techniques, you must describe and document them. Additionally, all data must be accessible for scrutiny. The overall notion is that your work and the evidence you utilized to support your results and conclusions should be open to scrutiny by others. This may lead to criticism, encouragement, or improvement. Furthermore, anyone should be able to conduct such a review, whether they are a peer, a coworker, or a participant in your qualitative research study. In this way, the finished study ought to stand up to close scrutiny by others.

Another objective is to do qualitative research methodically. There needs to be ample room for experimentation and preparation for unanticipated events. Being methodical involves following some systematic set of research protocols and minimizing pointless or unreasonable effort, regardless of whether a study is based on a formally established research design or a more informal but rigorous field routine. Being meticulous when conducting research also entails avoiding unexplained bias or deliberate distortion. Not least of all, being methodical means making a study effort seem finished and double-checking the procedures and outcomes. Similar approaches that can be used were covered by Eisenhart (2006). She cites fieldwork stories as an example where a researcher should be able to show that they were "really and utterly present—physically, cognitively, and emotionally—in the settings of action under study" (Eisenhart, 2006, p. 574). Further encouragement for qualitative researchers to show that the data and interpretations are accurate from some point of view has led to the sensitiveness about the need to report, in a self-reflexive manner, the presumed interaction between the researcher's positioning (as a research instrument) and the events and participants in the field. In this situation, keeping a study diary may be useful for keeping track of experiences, thoughts, facts, errors, perplexity, breakthroughs, and much more.

The final objective for credible qualitative research is to be supported by a clear body of evidence. The actual language used by participants as well as the context in which it is conveyed will serve as the evidence, particularly those where the participants' own decision-making processes are intended to be described (Van Manen, 1990; Willig, 2009). Regardless of the type of data being gathered, conclusions from a study should be made in light of that data. Anderson-Levitt (2008) points out that analysis may entail interpreting each viewpoint in order to reinforce the conclusions even further. It may also entail assessing the consistency of the data from various sources.

6. ETHICAL GUIDELINES TO ENSURE TRUSTWORTHINESS

Due to the fact that their study entails direct contact with people and communities, qualitative educational and social researchers face particularly challenging ethical dilemmas. In quantitative research investigations, relationship-related ethical concerns typically receive less attention or are not addressed. However, the idea of the researcher as an instrument puts these concerns at the forefront. Additionally, social scientists and educators operate in environments where diversity-related challenges are more prominent than ever.

Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer (2012) stated three ethical principles to maintain credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research. **Beneficence** should be the very first priority for qualitative researchers. They should aim to minimize risk

or harm to individuals while maximizing positive outcomes for science and humanity. Researchers should treat the subjects of their studies with **consideration and respect**, paying special attention to children and those who are elderly or mentally retarded. Researchers should make sure that the participants in the study are the ones who gain **justice** from it. They should do this by employing practices that are acceptable, non-exploitative, well-thought-out, and impartially applied.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENSURING QUALITY STANDARDS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN AL

The above mentioned review of the relevant and qualitative studies in the field of Applied Linguistics recommends the following guidelines to ensure quality standards in qualitative research of applied linguistics:

1. **Establish credibility and trustworthiness:** Enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings by employing strategies such as prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Prolonged engagement involves spending sufficient time in the research context to develop a deep understanding of the participants and the phenomena under investigation. Triangulation involves using multiple sources of data, methods, or researchers to corroborate findings. Member checking involves seeking feedback from participants to validate the accuracy of the interpretations. Peer debriefing involves seeking input from other researchers or experts to gain different perspectives and ensure rigor (Tinggie, Tan, & Muslim, 2023).
2. **Ensure transparency and reflexivity:** Clearly document and describe the research process, including data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and the researcher's own biases and assumptions. Transparent reporting enhances the ability of others to evaluate the research and enhances the trustworthiness of the findings. Reflexivity involves critically reflecting on the researcher's own background, biases, and preconceptions that may influence the research process and findings (Hunderson et al., 2022). By acknowledging and addressing these influences, researchers can enhance the validity of the research.
3. **Employ rigorous data collection techniques:** Use systematic and rigorous data collection techniques such as interviews, observations, focus groups, or document analysis. Develop a detailed plan for data collection, ensuring that data is collected from a diverse range of participants and contexts, as appropriate for the research objectives (Patterson et al., 2023).
4. **Thoroughly analyze and interpret data:** Engage in a rigorous and systematic process of data analysis. This may involve techniques such as coding, thematic analysis, or discourse analysis. Ensure that data analysis is transparent, well-documented, and guided by the research questions. Engage in a process of constant comparison and refinement of emerging themes to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.
5. **Address ethical considerations:** Adhere to ethical guidelines and principles when conducting qualitative research. Obtain informed consent from participants, ensure confidentiality and anonymity, and consider potential risks and benefits associated with the research. Ethical considerations contribute to the trustworthiness and integrity of the research process.
6. **Engage in reflexivity and researcher positionality:** Continuously reflect on the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and biases throughout the research process. Acknowledge and critically examine how the researcher's background, experiences, and beliefs may shape the research process and findings. This reflexivity contributes to transparency, enhances the researcher's understanding of the research context, and promotes a nuanced interpretation of the data.
7. **Seek feedback and peer review:** Engage in regular discussions and seek feedback from peers, mentors, or experts in the field. Peer review can provide valuable insights, identify potential biases or weaknesses in the research, and contribute to the overall quality of the study.
8. **Disseminate research findings and reflections:** Finally, share the research findings and reflections through scholarly publications, conferences, or other appropriate channels. Transparently report the research process, methods, and limitations to contribute to the broader academic community's knowledge base and promote further dialogue and research in the field.

By following these practical recommendations, researchers can ensure the quality, rigor, and validity of their qualitative research in applied linguistics.

8. CONCLUSION:

This study synthesizes the crucial role of qualitative research in applied linguistics and emphasizes the need for robust quality standards to enhance the rigor, transparency, and validity of such research. By critically examining and presenting an overview of these quality standards, this study aims to provide researchers with some recommendations to guide their investigations and strengthen the credibility of their findings.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS:

It is declare that all authors don't have any conflict of interest. It is also declare that this article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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