

THE CRITICAL REVIEW OF DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO QUALITATIVE
DATA ANALYSIS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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Abstract: *This article provides a critical review of six major qualitative data analysis (QDA) approaches commonly used in applied linguistics: Thematic Analysis, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Analysis, Conversation Analysis, and Content Analysis. It examines the theoretical foundations, procedures, advantages, and limitations of each method, offering comparative insights into their relevance for investigating complex linguistic, social, and educational phenomena. The review emphasizes the importance of aligning research questions with appropriate analytical strategies, maintaining methodological rigor, and being critically reflective throughout the research process. This synthesis aims to support emerging researchers and practitioners in making informed methodological choices that contribute to credible and impactful applied linguistic research.*

Keywords: *Qualitative research, data analysis, applied linguistics, thematic analysis, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative inquiry, conversation analysis, content analysis, methodology, linguistic research.*

Qualitative research has become increasingly prevalent in applied linguistics due to its capacity to explore meaning-making processes, social contexts, and learner experiences that are not easily quantifiable. While quantitative methods often focus on measuring language proficiency or usage through standardized metrics, qualitative methods aim to interpret how and why language is used in particular ways, across diverse sociocultural contexts.

As the field of applied linguistics expands into areas such as identity construction, multilingualism, discourse practices, and classroom interaction, researchers have turned to qualitative data analysis (QDA) techniques to capture the richness of human communication. However, selecting an appropriate QDA method is not always straightforward. Researchers must consider the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of each approach, as well as their practical implications.

This paper provides a critical examination of six widely used QDA approaches—Thematic Analysis, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Analysis, Conversation Analysis, and Content Analysis—evaluating their application, relevance, and limitations within applied linguistics. The goal is to guide emerging scholars and practitioners in making informed methodological choices that align with their research goals and theoretical orientations.

Applied linguistics research has adopted several interpretive traditions from broader social sciences. Dörnyei (2007) and Richards (2009) provide overviews of major qualitative methods in language education, while scholars such as Duff (2008) emphasize the need for methodological rigor. Creswell and Poth (2018) offer detailed explanations of how to analyze qualitative data across disciplines. The literature suggests that the choice of a QDA approach must align with the research question, context, and data type.

This study employed a comparative review method by analyzing academic sources, methodological textbooks, and empirical studies in applied linguistics. Each qualitative data analysis approach was examined in terms of:

- Epistemological basis
- Analytical steps
- Type of data commonly analyzed
- Strengths and limitations
- Relevance to applied linguistics

Key methods reviewed include:

- Thematic Analysis
- Grounded Theory
- Discourse Analysis
- Narrative Analysis
- Conversation Analysis
- Content Analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA)

One of the most commonly used methods in applied linguistics. TA focuses on identifying recurring patterns or themes in qualitative data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model is widely cited.

- **Strengths:** Flexible, accessible to novices, useful across paradigms.
- **Limitations:** May lack depth if not theoretically grounded.
- **Use cases:** Language attitudes, classroom interaction studies.

Grounded Theory (GT)

GT is aimed at developing theory grounded in data. It involves coding, constant comparison, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling.

- **Strengths:** Systematic and theory-generating.
- **Limitations:** Demanding in terms of data saturation and iterative coding.
- **Use cases:** Identity construction, motivation research in SLA.

Discourse Analysis (DA)

DA investigates how language constructs social realities. Includes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), mediated discourse, and genre analysis.

- **Strengths:** Sociopolitical depth, reveals ideology in language use.
- **Limitations:** Interpretations may be subjective; requires solid theory.
- **Use cases:** Policy documents, media discourse on multilingualism.

Narrative Analysis (NA)

Focuses on how individuals construct meaning through storytelling. Emphasizes temporality, plot structure, and identity.

- **Strengths:** Deep insight into learner experience and identity.
- **Limitations:** Not generalizable; time-consuming.
- **Use cases:** Learner autobiographies, teacher narratives.

Conversation Analysis (CA)

Micro-level analysis of spoken interaction, rooted in ethnomethodology. Focuses on turn-taking, repair, sequence organization.

- **Strengths:** Empirical rigor, detailed analysis of language-in-use.
- **Limitations:** Time-intensive, not suitable for large datasets.
- **Use cases:** Classroom interaction, institutional talk.

Content Analysis (CA)

A systematic technique for coding textual data into categories. Can be quantitative or qualitative.

- **Strengths:** Structured, replicable.
- **Limitations:** May overlook context and meaning.
- **Use cases:** Textbook evaluation, policy documents.

The diversity of qualitative data analysis approaches in applied linguistics reflects the multifaceted nature of language learning, teaching, and use. Each method contributes unique insights: while thematic analysis allows researchers to organize large datasets efficiently, discourse and narrative analyses provide socio-cultural depth and interpretive richness.

However, researchers must be critically aware of the epistemological assumptions behind each method. For example, grounded theory assumes the possibility of emerging theory from data, while discourse analysis often begins with a theoretical lens. Furthermore, the integration of software tools such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti has enhanced the capacity for rigorous qualitative analysis but should not replace interpretive reflexivity.

Importantly, the critical challenge lies in balancing methodological flexibility with analytical rigor. In applied linguistics, where research often aims to inform pedagogical practice and policy, transparency and trustworthiness in data analysis are paramount. Reflexivity, triangulation, and clear documentation of coding procedures are essential regardless of the approach used.

Qualitative data analysis offers powerful tools for exploring complex phenomena in applied linguistics. This review underscores the importance of aligning analysis methods with research questions and theoretical frameworks. By critically engaging with different approaches—ranging from thematic analysis to conversation analysis—researchers can produce nuanced and impactful findings that enrich both theory and practice. Continued methodological training and interdisciplinary dialogue will further strengthen the role of qualitative research in applied linguistics.

In conclusion, this review underscores the multiplicity and depth of qualitative data analysis approaches available to researchers in applied linguistics. Each method carries specific epistemological assumptions and analytical techniques, offering different pathways to understanding language-related phenomena. Thematic Analysis is flexible and widely applicable; Grounded Theory supports theory-building from the ground up; Discourse and Conversation Analysis reveal the fine-grained structures of interaction; Narrative Analysis uncovers lived experiences; and Content Analysis offers a structured way to categorize data.

However, no single method can be considered superior in all contexts. The appropriateness of each approach depends on the research question, data type, and theoretical framework. Furthermore, methodological rigor, transparency, and researcher reflexivity are essential to ensure credible and trustworthy findings. Researchers must also be cautious about over-reliance on software tools or superficial coding, and instead engage deeply with the data and context.

Ultimately, qualitative data analysis in applied linguistics should not only aim to describe patterns but also interpret meanings, reveal power dynamics, and contribute to pedagogical and social change. As applied linguistics continues to evolve in response to global multilingual realities, the thoughtful application of **QDA will remain a cornerstone of impactful and ethical research.**

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