

Chapter 10

Qualitative Research In Online Language Learning: What Can It Do?

Ursula Stickler

The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

Regine Hampel

The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT

This article explores the theoretical foundations of qualitative research in online language learning. It will look at the distinction between offline and online language learning and discuss whether different ways of knowledge generation are appropriate for those different learning environments. Quantitative and qualitative methodologies will be examined and their fit with various learning theories evaluated. Fundamental theoretical differences between epistemologies supporting a realist ontology and those favouring relativist ontologies will be presented and set in the context of online language learning research. Finally, an argument will be presented that in a sociocultural framework, going beyond quantitative research approaches is necessary to adequately understand the experiences of learners and teachers who share a common interest in novel digital environments.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article we consider the potential of qualitative research in the context of exploring computer-mediated communication (CMC) in language learning. This article lays the theoretical foundations and argues for necessary changes in research practice as certain more traditional computer-assisted language learning (CALL) approaches are shown to be unsuitable.

Many researchers in the field of language learning use qualitative methodologies, working from a sociocultural episteme. Applying these well-established approaches to computer-assisted language learning and teaching settings allows us to examine a range of areas, from trying to understand how learn-

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ers develop a second language using digital environments as mediating tools to how they co-construct knowledge with others. However, we would also like to suggest that the processes that can be observed, described and analysed in online language learning settings (e.g. in relation to communication and interaction) are different from those in face-to-face language classrooms and that research into face-to-face language learning and research into computer-mediated language learning are substantially different forms of knowledge generation. We therefore need to determine how they differ and why different methods of investigation are required.

The different materiality of online environments compared to face-to-face classrooms means that learning happens in different ways. We will thus be looking at the distinctiveness of computer-mediated language learning online and claim three key differences to face-to-face language learning: Firstly, the physical and often temporal distance in online environments has implications on learners' shared understanding and successful communication. Secondly, the online medium affects the modes used for communication and meaning-making. And thirdly, language learners today have access to different potential interactants through the new digital media. These key differences relate to the kind of learning potential that the different materialities afford in terms of time and space as well as in terms of modes of communication and interaction and in terms of interactants – materialities that have shaped (and continue to shape) the assumptions about learning and the practices in particular learning contexts. We will explore how this impacts on research and the ways of knowing enabled by researching online communication.

In the following section we will start off by examining different ways of knowing and how they link to different philosophies and scientific paradigms. We will discuss the predominance of positivist approaches to computer-assisted learning in general and CALL in particular and outline our critique. In Section 3 we explore the foundations of research into CALL in terms of epistemology and ontology. In Section 4 we will extend the argument for going beyond quantitative methods to researching online language learning and in Section 5 we will link this to a sociocultural approach to language learning and teaching. In Section 6 we will focus on language learning in online environments where we will discuss the material differences between face-to-face and online language learning outlined in the paragraph above and the implications these have on learning. In Section 7 the focus shifts to examples of research into online language learning and teaching. We will examine what kind of information we need in order to make claims about meaning making online and how our understanding of online environments as learning spaces shapes the direction of research. We will critically evaluate whether a shift in understanding temporality necessitates a change in claims about causality and how this influences our understanding of learning, learners, and an online teaching culture. We conclude the article by summarizing what qualitative approaches to CALL research can offer.

2. QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES TO RESEARCHING ONLINE LEARNING

Online activity provides the researcher with a plethora of data, recorded in ever-increasing detail. So it is tempting to choose quantitative approaches, collecting as much detailed information as possible and relying on at least partially automated data analysis and interpretation processes, using for example learning analytics. As Buckingham Shum and Fergusson (2012) explain, learning analytics goes back to business intelligence and data mining – methods that businesses started to use in the early 2000s “to understand internal organisational data, and external consumer behaviour” (Buckingham Shum & Fergusson, 2012, p. 3). Educational institutions soon recognized the potential of these methods for exploring

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