

Introducing qualitative data analysis

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Before you start collecting qualitative data for your action research project, it is important to give some thought about how you will analyse it. This is intended to be a brief introduction to qualitative data analysis. There is a great deal of research literature in this area which can support your work (see references).

Qualitative data can come from a range of different sources, for example:

- Interviews
- Open-ended questionnaire items
- Teacher diaries
- Observation notes
- Log of researcher reflections
- Memos
- Personal accounts

Qualitative data usually becomes text for analysis, e.g. an interview become a transcript. Analysis usually involves working with words (Dörnyei, 2007).

Analysing your qualitative data is an interpretive process which involves getting to know your data really well. It is a good idea to summarise your data as soon as possible after you have collected it (Feldman, Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 2018). It is important to be transparent about how you analyse your data so that others can see exactly what you have done and can replicate it if they wish.

You will need to read through the data that you wish to analyse (e.g. interview transcript, open questionnaire item) several times in order to familiarise yourself with it. What are the key themes and ideas that strike you as you read?

Categorising and coding your data

You can then move on to categorising and coding your data which is an important step in qualitative analysis. Here you will allocate all sentences or utterances a category (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). This is called coding and a code is *“a label attached to a chunk of text intended to make the particular piece of information manageable and malleable.”* (Dörnyei, 2007: 250). You can use categories that have been developed by other researchers or you can allow your codes to emerge from the data in a manner that is sometimes referred to as grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Many researchers use a combination of these approaches where they employ

existing categories from the research literature as far as possible but where these do not fit with their data, they create new categories.

Categorising your data is an interpretive and subjective process and you are likely to need to do it several times. Others may look at your data and make different decisions about coding and about your emerging themes. This is why it is important to be transparent about what you have done.

Example of data coding

What follows comes from some questionnaire research about attitudes to reading among languages undergraduates at UK universities. It is not action research but is included to show an example of coding.

Open question: What was your experience of reading in another language before you came to university?	
Example responses	Code
<p><i>At A-level* we read 2 set texts which I really enjoyed and I read Bonjour Tristesse in my own time.</i></p> <p>(*the University entrance exam in England, Wales and Northern Ireland)</p>	Literature
<p><i>...Mostly read magazines such as Stern, der Spiegel and so on. I would often buy women's magazines in German when I was in the 6th form, e.g. Cosmopolitan.</i></p>	Newspapers and magazines
<p><i>Had read road signs...</i></p>	Abroad (in the target country)
Source: Gallagher-Brett, A. (2006: 19-20)	

It is also a good idea to write definitions of your categories (Feldman, Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 2018).

When you have completed the coding process, you can look for emerging patterns and themes. What are the common categories? Do you have themes which occur several times? Can you cluster any of your themes together under broader categories? Can you make connections between categories? As you are doing this, write notes of all your ideas. How do you interpret the themes in your data?

In a larger project, codes can then be counted for frequency and presented numerically. So, in the research cited above (Gallagher-Brett, 2006), literature appeared 198 times, newspapers and magazines 139 times and abroad 24 times. Counting may not be appropriate in a small-scale project. You can write vignettes, a story or description of participant experiences (Dörnyei, 2007). Stories are powerful in qualitative research.

Once complete, go back and check your analysis:

- Are your findings grounded in data?
- Does your coding make sense?
- Can you justify your decisions?
- Have you got a critical friend to look at your data? How far do they understand your coding?
- Have you answered your research questions?

(Schwandt & Halpern, 1998).

References

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