1 Introduction: qualitative approaches to research on plurilingual education

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1.   Introduction

This handbook has been conceived as a guide for young researchers embarking on the exciting journey of investigating different aspects of plurilingual education. The text can also serve to review ideas previously encountered, and perhaps as a means of interrogating research methodologies in plurilingual contexts for those who already have ample experience under their belt. The idea of carrying out research can seem daunting at the beginning for those who are not immersed in the world of investigation. This handbook hopes to calm some of those qualms by offering descriptions of different methodologies together with case studies that exemplify those methodologies, as well as chapters that provide practical tips to help the researcher in the compilation, organization and analysis of research data.

The notion of plurilingualism is central to the research described in this handbook, and is a term we use to refer to the entire "repertoire of resources" (Lüdi & Py, 2009, p. 159) that speakers and hearers have at their disposal for accomplishing different goals, including communicating and learning (Nussbaum, 2013). Our use of the term plurilingualism is similar to how other researchers use the term multilingualism (e.g. Conteh & Meier, 2014) or dynamic bilingualism (e.g. García, 2009). It encompasses more recently coined notions that describe particular plurilingual practices, such as translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014). It is testimony to several decades of research carried out by members of the

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Research Group on Plurilingual Interaction and Teaching (GREIP), many of whom are authors of the chapters that make up this handbook, as well as by researchers in other linguistically diverse regions of the world.

Plurilingual educational contexts are those in which whole repertoires are available to educators and learners as part, or in spite of, an explicit language policy. Qualitative research in plurilingual educational contexts has allowed for an array of hidden and often stigmatized ways of communication, often from members of linguistic minority groups, to be brought to the forefront of theory. It has also helped open up spaces of freedom and possibility for teachers, learners and their communicative repertoires, in particular through collaborative engagements by researchers, teachers and students. In this way, it has helped shape approaches to language education that are appropriate to the social reality of linguistic diversity and inclusive of all students.

Undertaking investigations in plurilingual educational environments can present unique challenges for researchers. These include the need for constant reflexion of one's own emerging ideologies in relation to language and language education, and the plurilingual competences required for establishing rapport with participants and for handling research data in different languages. The authors of this handbook present some of the ways in which they have navigated through the challenges that their particular research in plurilingual educational contexts entailed.

Our understanding of research is quite wide; we do not restrict our definition of the word to the strictest definitions of 'scientific method'. We hold with an idea of educational research as a systematic inquiry into one or more aspects related to our education world – systematic not because the inquiry is based on a positivist[3] framework or methodology, but because the inquiry, stemming from whatever

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3. As Thomson (1995) explains, positivism is an approach to research that is based on a belief in universal laws and always aims to be objective and neutral. This implies that the researcher usually has a pre-established hypothesis before beginning the study, based on assumptions of universality. A possible problem with this approach is that this may limit the researcher to interpreting the social world as objective or absolute, whereas a qualitative approach opens the researcher to other interpretations that emerge from the context and the participants themselves. It also does not assume that research can be entirely neutral as the researcher is inevitably a participant in the interaction being studied and will have an impact in some way (small or large).

method that is chosen, follows specific and meaningful steps in the research design, data collection and analysis. Research is viewed as an inquiry because it departs from an interrogation of a specific phenomena or phenomenon (in our case related to teaching and/or learning languages in plurilingual contexts) that we, as educators-investigators want to know more about. This does not mean that we will always find a definitive answer to our questions, but the inquiry begins with a need to know more. Research in education quite often deals with seeking results that are applicable to educational practice, although the focus of the study can cover many diverse sites – both formal and informal contexts.

Many new researchers wonder if there is a particular methodology they should apply to their study. However, qualitative research is not limited to only one approach. Because qualitative research is principally interpretive (and flexible to the context and the needs of the study), it can draw from many different approaches such as ethnography, phenomenology, discursive psychology, participant observations, case studies, conversation analysis or grounded theory (to name a few). The best method for a study is, therefore, the approach that will help the researcher answer their research question.

The methodologies presented in this textbook fall within the framework of qualitative research, entailing an interpretive, naturalistic approach towards the object of study. Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings – this immersion in the setting can help researchers produce a thick description (Geertz, 1973). Researchers then attempt to make sense of observed phenomena through the meanings people bring to them. A qualitative approach aims to 'interpret' how the social world is experienced and understood by individuals within their social context.

> "Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others. Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories. It often involves synthesis, evaluation,

> interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern finding. It always involves what H. F. Wolcott calls 'mindwork'. […] Researchers always engage their own intellectual capacities to make sense of qualitative data" (Hatch, 2002, p. 148).

These mental processes also imply that data generation methods will be flexible and sensitive to the social context in which they are compiled and that the data will not be dealt with in a decontextualized manner (e.g. data will not be produced in laboratory settings). Because qualitative research often includes a complex and large data corpus, it is not always easy to know how to begin the analysis. Creswell (2009) proposes this general outline of procedures to help guide the new researcher. First, carefully organize and prepare the data for analysis (e.g. saving videos into files and labeling them by dates or participants, creating folders of multimodal data collected such as homework assignments, etc.). Next, go through all the data completely in order to get the big picture of what is happening and to draw some first impressions of the meaning-making taking place in the interaction. Next, approach the data through the theoretical approach that you have decided, for instance, someone following a 'nexus approach' (Scollon & Scollon, 2007; see Dooly, this volume) would begin to look for examples of intersection of data to create coded sub-sections. Eventually this will lead to visible connections that will help the researcher find and argue for a more holistic vision of what is occurring in the interaction.

Interpretation of qualitative data implies that the researchers seek to make connections between events, perceptions and actions through holistic and contextualized analysis. That said, it is important to bear in mind that there are multiple possible frameworks within the paradigm of qualitative research and may employ many diverse tools. Indeed, because so many terms have been used to define qualitative research, it can be quite confusing for new researchers to understand exactly what it is or how it is applicable to the study site. In 1990, Tesch found that 46 different terms have been applied to qualitative research.

With such a wide panorama of what constitutes qualitative research, someone new to investigating contextualized data may easily be overwhelmed. Creswell

(2009, pp. 175-176) provides a useful overview of what can be considered some key features of good practice in qualitative research. Summarizing these points, the most significant is that qualitative research should include fieldwork – there should be interaction between the researcher and the participants in the study. Accordingly, the data will be gathered *in situ*, and that the data collected is natural – the interactions take place where they would naturally occur, and they are not re-constructed (as in laboratory conditions) or taken out of context. This implies that most data is collected through observation of the participants' behavior. This may include close and direct interaction with the participants – for instance when the researcher is also the teacher in the study or in cases of collaborative or participatory research (see chapters by Nussbaum, this volume, and Unamuno & Patiño, this volume; also Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

Also, collected data often consist of multiple sources (e.g. several video recordings of different classes, focus groups or interviews, and perhaps even collected output from the interactions such as essays or posters). This underscores an important aim of qualitative data, which is to describe, reflect and provide insight into the complexity of human behavior (Creswell, 2009).

As discussed earlier, qualitative research does not usually begin with pre-established notions or hypotheses of what will be found in the data, including pre-conceived ideas about what constitutes 'language'. Researchers take an 'emic' approach; that is, methods are used to try to provide insights from the perspective of participants, to see things as their informants do (Harris, 1976). This has particular implications for data transcription and analysis in plurilingual settings as the researchers must be aware of their own language ideologies and how this may have an impact on the study (see Moore & Llompart, this volume).

This brings us to another point made by Creswell (2009). Qualitative researchers must be fully aware of the impact they may have on both the collection and interpretation of the data. The study does not take place in a vacuum and the researcher brings their own baggage to the investigation, which may have an effect on how they perceive what is taking place during the observed interaction (including, as stated above, language ideologies).

So what should a qualitative researcher bear in mind? The investigator should ensure that the research design is clearly linked to the research questions and to the methodological approaches used for collecting the data. These are, in turn, plainly integrated into the analysis as well as the delineated purposes of the research. The research design should take into account the context in which the data is collected while maintaining sufficient flexibility to adapt to situational changes – changes which often lead to unexpected but highly relevant new issues and lines of inquiry. Flexibility is needed because human beings do not always act logically or predictably; our social world is not orderly or systematic. This also implies that qualitative methodology is not completely precise but does not mean that the researcher should not proceed in a well-structured and systematic way.

The qualitative researchers should always be aware of their role in the research process and how this may have an impact on the study. This requires constant, critical self-reflexive scrutiny. Qualitative researchers need to make sure that the chosen approach, tools, and analytical framework are appropriate to the aim of the object of inquiry. Above all, qualitative research should be conducted as an ethical practice (see Dooly, Moore, & Vallejo, this volume). In contexts of plurilingual education, such ethical practice may involve activism, including working towards alternative models of language education together with teachers and students in the face of emerging linguistic inequalities and injustices (Piller, 2016).

It is often argued that qualitative research lacks the 'rigor' or reliability of quantitative research, often based on the argument that the data extracts are 'cherry-picked' (selected to show the 'best' results) and that there is no statistical or numerical supporting data. But this is not necessarily true. In qualitative research, reliability is ensured through an examination of the consistency of responses. Reliability stems from a thorough documentation of all procedures, checking and re-checking of transcripts for errors, avoiding 'drift' in the coding (for instance, more than one coder going through the data), working with a team of researchers (e.g. data sessions) in order to cross-check the transcriptions, the code-checking and comparing results and interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2009, p. 191).

2. What is included in this handbook?

We have endeavored to cover all of the aspects of qualitative research that can 'entangle' the newly initiated researcher, specifically focusing on plurilingual contexts of language teaching and learning. Thus, we include here ethnographic studies, studies that use interviews, action-research studies, studies based on conversation analysis and studies within school and digital environments. The foci are also diverse: plurilingual student interaction, teacher collaboration and development, and task- and project-based learning. We also include more practical chapters that discuss how to write up your research, deal with ethic issues that emerge from conducting educational investigations, describe processes of collecting, organizing and analyzing plurilingual and multimodal corpora, and give ideas about how to elicit data through interviews, surveys, tasks and other instruments.

The first section of the handbook aims to give the researcher examples of research in the field of plurilingual education, as it has been undertaken by members of the GREIP research group. The chapter by **Nussbaum** (Chapter 2) provides the researcher with an overview of the complexities of carrying out research in a school, especially when the focus endeavors to include plurilingual resources in learning process in classrooms. The author gives a brief overview of the main features of action research before showing how this framework can be used for collaborative research between teacher and researcher, using ethnography and conversational analysis as tools for gathering and analyzing data. Next, **Pascual** (Chapter 3) offers a different angle on action research. This author describes the ways in which the action research framework can be applied to data gathered during a teaching intervention, in a situation in which the researcher is also simultaneously the teacher, in order to 'interrogate' whether proposed outcomes were achieved or not. In this case, the outcomes are related to integrating intercultural dimensions in foreign language teaching. **Unamuno and Patiño** (Chapter 4) present research in a secondary school setting, which aimed to describe how teenagers categorized their language practices at school and beyond. The authors describe a collaborative and interdisciplinary research process as it emerged, discussing approaches such as linguistic ethnography,

language socialization and linguistic landscapes that were central to the study. The chapter shows how the youths became researchers of their own realities through the project design and presents an analysis of visual data collected by them. This is followed by **Corona**'s (Chapter 5) longitudinal ethnographic work, involving secondary school students in both school and non-school environments. The study aimed at understanding youth's identity construction as discerned through their use of language varieties and other aspects of their repertoires. The author presents a fine-grained analysis of data from a focus group discussion that helps illuminate his findings. Also including interactional analyses in her chapter, **Dooly** (Chapter 6) outlines the application of Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) to data gathered through 'blended learning' environments (interaction carried out in both the classroom and online), giving a short case study to illustrate the principal features of this approach. The following chapter by **Antoniadou and Dooly** (Chapter 7) places special emphasis on the particularities of collecting and managing multimodal data taken from digital, educational environments, based on a study in teacher-education. Finally, **Masats** (Chapter 8) presents a research project conducted in a primary school that involved task-based language learning, in order to introduce some basic notions of conversation analysis.

The second section of this book provides the researcher with practical resources and knowledge needed for efficiently setting up and carrying out studies in language education. The first chapter in this section, by **Dooly, Moore, and Vallejo** (Chapter 9), summarizes ethical points that all researchers should bear in mind, and provides practical ideas for anticipating and dealing with ethical and legal issues that might arise. **Canals**' chapter (10) gives the researcher a detailed synopsis of some of the issues to bear in mind when designing a data collection framework, including (but not limited to) tips on how to know what kind of data is appropriate for the anticipated study, as well as different means of eliciting that data. Next, **Moore and Lompart** (Chapter 11), outline the process of recording, transcribing, analyzing and presenting interactional data, referring to different software to aid in the process, and in particular to CLAN and ELAN. Chapter 12, by **Antoniadou**, discusses the practicalities involved in collecting and analysing multimodal data and offers guidelines for working with the Transana, Atlas.ti, and NVIVO software packages. Finally, to wrap up

this section, **Borràs** (Chapter 13) describes the intricate process of writing up, adequately and professionally, the research report.

Each chapter has been conceived to stand on its own, providing sufficient background for the reader to follow the argument without referring to other chapters (although references to other chapters are made). Thus researchers can selectively choose those chapters that are most relevant to their current research or issues they may be dealing with. The chapters also include recommendations for further readings and links to resources that may assist in the research process. It is our hope that this handbook will serve as a practical, empirically-informed guide that can help researchers in contexts of plurilingual education plan, implement and write quality research.

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Qualitative approaches to research on plurilingual education (English)
Enfocaments qualitatius per a la recerca en educació plurilingüe (Catalan)
Enfoques cualitativos para la investigación en educación plurilingüe (Spanish)

Edited by Emilee Moore and Melinda Dooly