Using Narrative Inquiry to Explore Teachers' Perceptions of Blended Learning —a Critique on Two Qualitative Studies

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ABSTRACT. *With the advancements of communication technologies and emerging online learning platforms, educational fields are at the foreground implementing technologies into teaching and learning. To date, studies on exploring teachers' attitudes, conceptions, perspectives in conducting courses in educational reform are in paucity as majority of studies in this line focused on the impact of teaching efficacy. Therefore, it is worthwhile to review relevant research on teachers' orientations towards new forms of teaching and learning. The two selected articles for this critique, added knowledge on teachers' perceptions of learning and teaching in blended learning (BL) settings.*

KEYWORDS: *Narrative inquiry, Qualitative studies, Blended learning*

1. Introduction

Considering the lack of studies of language teachers' ownership of BL, the first article by Mendieta & Barkhuizen set its focus on how two teachers in Colombia University managed the change and their ownership within a BL curriculum [1]. This qualitative research adopted narrative inquiry to present teachers' perceptions and their experiences in carrying BL within the timeframe of one full semester. The second article also resorted to narrative inquiry and discussed the development of teacher cognition in both distance and blended settings [2]. Same with the first research reviewed in the above sections, this study also focused on BL in tertiary education, with teacher participants from UK and Australasia. The researchers stated clearly that their aims were to reveal diverse experiences of responding to distance/BL classes by language teachers with different backgrounds.

2. Critique on Study by Mendieta and Barkhuizen

2.1 A Brief Review on Research Methodology

Mendieta and Barkhuizen quoted that using narrative inquiry can tell stories of instructional practices from teachers' perspectives and can explore our

understanding of teachers' construction of identity amid changes in the twenty-first century [2]. To clarify their data sources, researchers identified their data from two sources. One is the primary data, the transcript from interviews with two teachers and field notes on classroom observations. The secondary data source was policy documents. Their data analyses used "writing as analyses" identified in Benson's approach, combining commentary on themes they found by using a narrative thematic approach [3].

2.2 Defects of Methodology

Although this research contributes knowledge of teacher ownership in BL contexts, the description on the overall research and data collection process was not sufficient. In the methodology section, there is no description on the process of data transcription. Besides, the validation process of data is not mentioned. Readers might find the themes that the researchers identified from data were generated from their subjective perspective as they claimed 'We looked for instances (observed and reported) of accomplishment, conflict or tension, the emotions that these situations evoked, and the decisions that teachers adopted as a result [1]. Lack of further elaboration and justification of instances selected reduced the effectiveness and persuasiveness of the final findings.

3. Critique on Study by Shelley et. al

3.1 A Brief Review on Research Methodology

Compared with the above article being reviewed, the second article is more comprehensive in presenting theoretical framework and explaining its research methodology [2]. Before proposing the research questions, researchers first reviewed narrative inquiry on the conceptual level, followed by its applicability in educational settings. Researchers pointed out that narrative inquiry used in their research was derived from the previous framework proposed by Barkhuizen and Wette [4]. Then researchers reviewed issues of teacher development. Specifically, six issues identified in Borg were elaborated as these were deemed as the analytical framework of their research [5]. With the theoretical and analytical framework, the four research questions they framed became structured and relevant.

3.2 Merits and Demerits of Methodology

With regard to data collection and analysis, not only the collecting stages were stated, but also methods used in the validation process were described in detail. The researchers resorted to data analyzing tool NVivo 8 for data elicitation. To identify critical incidents and emerging themes, the researchers conducted a content theme analysis. They also mentioned that during this stage they were inspired in framing and developing their research questions. As identified by Creswell, the process of

qualitative research is emergent, which means the research questions are also subject to change during the process [6]. Each of the researchers also worked independently in categorizing themes and concepts. The data analyzing stage also involved discussions among researchers and they also conducted member checking among participants. Overall, a comprehensive description on the data collecting and analyzing stages with careful consideration on ethical standards and data validation can be a reference for beginning researchers.

However, a close examination of the methodology reveals some loopholes. Firstly, the duration of this research was not stated. Readers might doubt this research was based on casual evidence in a short period of time. After all, the experiences of teachers might be more comprehensive if researchers could observe for longer durations. As suggested by Swearingen, researchers might consider conducting longitudinal studies that help reveal more information with regard to language teacher identity [7].

Secondly, the participants' profiles were not sufficiently presented. The researchers stated that they explored teachers from different backgrounds, but too limited information was given to show the diversity as only gender information, linguistic profiles were presented. The researchers claimed that all participants were experienced teachers but more informative working backgrounds such as years of being in the teaching posts were not mentioned. Besides, the participants in this study were from UK and Australasia, but the researchers did not mention the reasons of choosing these teachers as participants. Limited information on participants' profile cannot justify the diversity of participants as claimed by the researchers. I think this shortcoming can be addressed by including information about the participants in a table. If the researchers were restricted to do so due to word limits, they may also consider adding the information in the appendix.

4. Conclusion

The two articles reviewed above are informative as they both contributed the knowledge on how language teachers perceive new modes of teaching practice. By reading and comparing the two studies, beginning researchers learn the applicability of narrative inquiry in exploring language instructional problems from teachers' perspective. The two articles also remind us to be mindful of research ethic and be more prudent in designing a study, with rigorous effort on determining conceptual framework and conducting data collection and elicitation.

References

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