3 Methodology

(In this unit I use the word *Methodology* as a general term to cover whatever you decide to include in the chapter where you discuss alternative methodological approaches, justify your chosen research method, and describe the process and participants in your study).

The Methodology chapter is perhaps the part of a qualitative thesis that is most unlike its equivalent in a quantitative study. Students doing quantitative research have an established conventional 'model' to work to, which comprises these possible elements:

- Overview of the Experiment/Design
- Population/Sample
- Location
- Restrictions/Limiting Conditions
- Sampling Technique
- Procedures
- Materials
- Variables
- Statistical Treatment

(If your research adopts a mixed-methods approach, then you will also find that model useful for the quantitative chapters).

However, for students writing up an exclusively qualitative thesis, the shape of the methodology chapter is less clear-cut:

"the straightforward character of a quantitative methods chapter unfortunately does not spill over into qualitative research reports. At first sight, this simply is a matter of different language. So, in reporting qualitative studies, we do not talk about 'statistical analysis' or 'research instruments'. But these linguistic differences also reflect broader practical and theoretical differences between qualitative and qualitative research. More particularly, in writing up qualitative research, we need to recognise:

- the (contested) theoretical underpinnings of methodologies
- the (often) contingent nature of the data chosen
- the (likely) non-random character of cases studied

(Silverman 2000: 234)

Task 3.1

Can you explain what Silverman means by 'contested underpinnings', 'contingent data' and 'non-random cases'?

Do those terms apply to the methodological approach you have adopted in your research?

Silverman's advice on the best way to deal with these three potentially problematic aspects of writing up qualitative research is to:

- Make explicit what your theoretical assumptions are
- Spell out the factors that made you choose to work with your particular data
- Explain how you can extrapolate from your study site to other contexts

Murcott (1997) argues that the key questions for the qualitative methodology chapter are:

> *How did you go about your research?*
> *What overall strategy did you adopt and why?*
> *What design and techniques did you use?*
> *Why those and not others?*

In his map *Written study, structure and functions*, which we looked at (page 3) in Unit 1, Adrian Holliday says qualitative writing requires coverage of the following issues:

In the 'Research Methodology' section:
- How you position yourself in relation to current and past discussion within which your research methodology is located

In the section on 'Description of Research Procedure':
- How you chose your core setting and relevant peripheral data sources
- What the readers need to know about the research setting
- How you developed a research strategy that is appropriate for the setting
- How you proceeded in gaining access and collecting data
- What you did as research activities and what data you collected
- How you have structured your analysis and arrived at your choice of themes and headings
- What your system is for representing the data, e.g. coding, referencing, anonymising

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Task 3.2
Study Murcott's and Holliday's questions. Do you think all of Murcott's questions are covered in Holliday's list?

Task 3.3
On the next two pages are the headings used by two PhD students in their qualitative Methodology chapters. (The 'practices' mentioned in the second thesis refer to medical practices, or health centres, where she carried out her study)

Decide whether you think the students have addressed Holliday's questions.

Has either of them covered *other* issues that were not included in Holliday's list?

Chapter 3. Research methodology and method

Task 3.4

The first student's *Research Methods* chapter was 34 pages long; the second student's *Research Methodology and Method* chapter was 47 pages.

Compare their coverage with what <u>you</u> have drafted, or plan to include, in your Methodology chapter. Do you think they wrote <u>too much</u>?

Have you discussed chapter lengths with your supervisors?

On this issue of length and detail, Holliday (2007: 53, underlining added) has written:

Qualitative researchers… can easily underestimate the need for detail in their description of procedure, thus overlooking an important aspect of the demonstration of rigour. One area that requires such detail is the <u>degree of engagement with the setting</u>… Honarbin-Holliday, in her study of two Iranian art departments, demonstrates the rigour of her engagement in the section of her thesis entitled 'Deconstructing the researcher's methodological behaviours' as follows:

"The process of collecting data depends on meticulous timekeeping and constant planning and re-planning, always looking ahead in order to be ready for diversions. It is my experience that diversions do emerge and no matter how well prepared, events do not necessarily develop according to plan… The fact was that I felt privileged to be a researching artist, and since I had been given the permission to be at these institutions I wished to adopt strategies that would enable me to use my time in the best possible way. Making sure that I would arrive a few minutes earlier, and leave when the staff and students did, helped my status as a colleague, and a co-worker. I kept to a schedule of two full days per week at Tehran University and two mornings, or one morning and one afternoon, at Al-Zahra University. These could not always be the same days, since different tutors came on different days. I did try to keep at least one day per week at Tehran University, and one afternoon at Al-Zahra University, as a constant. These became my days when the students or the tutors could locate me on the campuses, should they wish to discuss particular issues".

(Honarbin-Holliday 2005: 47-48)

Task 3.5

Do you plan to describe your research setting in such detail?
Which part of your Methodology chapter will be the most detailed – and why?

Language in the qualitative methodology chapter

Different use of language in the Methodology chapters of qualitative and quantitative theses reflects the different assumptions of the two broad approaches to academic research. In their book on writing up experimental research, Weissberg & Buker (1990) were able to state that "several grammatical conventions <u>govern</u> the method section… These concern choosing the correct verb tense and verb voice" (1990: 97, underlining added).

Notice that the word *govern* implies a fixed and strict set of rules. They went on to say:

> The procedures you use in carrying out your study should be described in the Simple Past tense. Sentences included under Method that are not written in the Past tense usually do not refer to the procedures used in the study being reported. Instead, they may describe standard procedures that are commonly used by others…
>
> You can use either the Active or the Passive voice when you describe the procedure:
>
> - *We applied stress to the rubber segments in gradually increasing increments*
> - *Stress was applied to the rubber segments in gradually increasing increments*
>
> The Passive voice is used to describe procedure in order to <u>depersonalise</u> the information. The Passive construction allows you to omit the agent (usually "I" or "we"), placing the emphasis on the procedure and how it was done.
>
> (Weissberg & Buker 1990: 101)

Since qualitative research recognises, and even <u>foregrounds</u>, the role played by individuals – the researcher, the informants and other participants – we might expect that the verb voice used in the methodology chapter will be Active rather than Passive, in order to make the description **less personal**.

A second important function of the Passive in English is to do with **information sequence**. In written English it is the norm for <u>old</u> (or *known*) information to come towards the beginning of the sentence and for <u>new</u> information to come later. The Passive voice provides a mechanism for doing that. Compare these two versions of the same text – which seems to flow better?

Version A:

> *There are 188,000 lakes in Finland. Many people are now very concerned about them. Chemicals have polluted most of the larger lakes. A Finnish government report recently confirmed this.*

Version B:

> *There are 188,000 lakes in Finland. They are now a cause of concern to many people. **Most of the larger lakes** <u>have been polluted</u> by chemicals. **This** <u>was recently confirmed</u> by a Finnish government report.*

The reason why Version B sounds more natural is that all four sentences have the old information before new; in the case of the third and fourth sentences that is achieved by making the old information the Subject of <u>a Passive verb.</u>

> **Task 3.6**
> In the Methodology section below, the student was writing about issues of access to the health centres where she carried out her research.
>
> Did she use the Passive at all? If you can find any cases of verbs in the Passive voice, <u>underline</u> them, and decide why you think she chose to use that voice.

3.4.2 Access

The problem of access was twofold. First there was the question of physical access to practices, which have tight security and are designed to keep out intruders. For example, arriving at the first practice I attended early on a mid–December morning, I found myself in a cold, wet car park before daylight, unable to get in to the practice to set up my equipment before the front doors opened to patients because the back door was also locked and had no bell. This also happened at the second practice, though in better weather conditions. By the time I approached the third practice, experience had taught me that it would be better to begin recording just after the front door was opened.

The second problem of access related to when it was appropriate either to ask questions of receptionists which would clarify work practices or simply to engage in rapport–building chit–chat while present at the front desk. At the first practice I began by asking questions during periods when the receptionists were not occupied with patients, either directly or on the telephone. However, I quickly realised that the receptionists had to use these quiet periods to complete paperwork and other tasks resulting from encounters with patients and, thereafter, remained silent unless spoken to, listing questions to ask when receptionist were off duty. This was made easier by the fact that both practice and reception managers at the first two practices had allocated large amounts of their time to giving me detailed explanations of how reception desks were run and also invited me to seek further information from them whenever I wished. This extensive coverage also proved useful later at the third practice, where only a short explanation of practice procedures was given in advance by the practice manager, although one of the receptionists at the practice also provided a running commentary on work practices.

> **CAUTION!**
> **Although in this unit I have chosen extracts from successful PhD theses where the student writers adopted a personal style in the methodology chapter, you should bear in mind that even the qualitative researchers, such as Silverman, who advocate this style recommend that <u>you check with your supervisors</u> whether it is advisable to adopt it, in the context of your particular study, your School's norms, and the conventions of the field:**
>
> "Some universities… still have a pretty fixed idea of what a methodology chapter (or section) should contain. Therefore it is worth discussing with your [supervisors] whether a 'natural history' format is appropriate to describe the methodology that you have chosen".
>
> (Silverman 2000: 236)

Writing up your thesis

You have now reached the end of the Tasks for this unit on the Methodology chapter. You can now apply the ideas and language from this unit to drafting or revising that chapter for your thesis.

You may also find it helpful to visit this website for further examples of written academic English relevant for describing and discussing your methodological approach:

http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/methods.htm

Appendix to Unit 3

Methodology chapter sample

The extract below illustrates a PhD candidate's use of a mixture of 'personal'/Active and 'impersonal'/Passive in the *Procedure* section of her methodology chapter. I have highlighted the Active expressions and put the Passives in bold.

In each case, decide whether you think it would be <u>possible</u> to replace the expression with a first-person Active verb (with "I").

Then decide whether you think it would be <u>necessary</u> or <u>more appropriate</u> to do so.

4.3.3 Procedure

My research adopted a case study approach. The 12 voluntary participants **were divided into three groups** (Group 1, 2, 3). Four of them **were paired with** a partner they were not familiar with before the study.

At the beginning of week 4, all the participants **were required to** do the first task with their assigned partner through instant exchanging in an online text-based CMC environment. Then, they saved their MSN 'written' exchanges by copying and pasting them to a word processing program and sent me the file at the end of the week 4. I corrected and marked their written exchanges and sent them back individually by email. I also provided the learners with explicit feedback with explanations of the errors they made in written records in a later face-to-face session.

After receiving feedback, students in Group 1 and 2 carried out the first task orally with their partner in voice-based CMC environments (Group 1 with the use of microphones and webcams; Group 2 with the use of microphones only); students in Group 3 carried out the same oral activities in a face-to-face environment in week 6.

All the participants had to record their spoken performances. Participants in the two synchronous groups recorded their online spoken practice using Audacity software, which was free for downloading and **was provided** on the class website. They **were required to** familiarize themselves before the study with the software by following the user instructions given on the website. Participants in Group 3 **were asked to** record their face-to-face spoken practice by using an MP3 player. All the participants needed to submit their sound files to me by email. And then they **were invited to** repeat their spoken activities publicly in the subsequent face-to-face sessions.

After listening to the files of each pair, each pair **was given** their marks and feedback by email, pointing out each learner's pronunciation and grammar errors. I also asked the learners to practise those common pronunciation errors that appeared in their sound files in the following face-to-face sessions after pointing out the errors most of them made and providing them with correct sounds for those errors.

All the participants had to receive instruction in regular face-to-face sessions and then practised given tasks at an appointed time after the classes. Dörnyei (2001a) claims that "making the teaching materials relevant for the learners" (p.29) is one strategy classroom teachers can use to generate students' initial motivation. He suggested that teachers can discover the topics students want to learn and build them into the curriculum as far as possible (Dörnyei, 2001b). Following his suggestion, I provided a number of topics to the participants and had them select their favourite topics at the first session of the course. Then I created course materials **which were based on** the learners' topic selection.

Some French learning websites **were also chosen** to be teaching content of the course and presented to learners in the classroom. The use of these authentic materials **was intended to** make French 'real' to the participants and therefore enhance their language–related values and attitudes (Dörnyei, 2001b).

The semester constituted cycles of three-week practice on three tasks. The task practice procedures and task content **were posted** on the class website in order that learners could follow the design of the study and complete the tasks appropriately. Additionally, they **were invited to** post questions or share information on the classroom bulletin board, where I provided course-related information for those students who were absent from the classes or who learned slowly during the classes to catch up with the course outside the classroom.