

Double-tracking in Qualitative Research: Confronting and Theorizing Data Collection Challenges in Literacy and Language Education in New Times

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the experience of three researchers' projects located within the field of literacy and language education, all adopting some aspects of qualitative research paradigm, caught in the crosswinds of Covid-19 restrictions during the data collection phase. Particularly, the research objective of the projects is focused on the way language and literacy education intersect in the lived literacy experience of research participants who are in primary school, pre-university, and university levels. Although different in their research questions and objectives, these three research projects share the same expectations with regards to eliciting talk through qualitative interviewing from research participants who are assumed to navigate the world of language learning and literacy practice. These research participants are expected to share a part of their lived literacy experience. This is made more complex when these research projects are positioned in multilingual and multicultural contexts. This is because potential complexities emerging from translation, cross-linguistic choices, and cross-cultural messages may confound the data collection process. Where previously, these complexities could be mitigated through the use of exchanged gestures and the understanding of facial expression or body language, with traditional methods like face-to-face interviewing now becoming unsustainable, new questions of how digital platforms can be equally trustworthy, are raised. Central to this query is whether or how a research participant's conveying of lived human experience can be fully captured when done through the digital medium. Following this, two main issues pertaining to the re-shaping of practical fieldwork (i.e., confronting problems) and research paradigm (i.e., theorizing ideas) respectively will be explored. Using the concept of double-tracking to engage with changes in theory and practice, the paper offers both practical and theoretical guides for how qualitative data can be collected with trustworthiness, at a time when physical, face-to-face communication is no longer feasible. Particularly, the practical guide for confronting fieldwork challenges lies in implementing in a systematic way, a documenting of what worked or did not work from the decisions that were taken. Known as analytical memo-ing, this form of audit trail allows the researcher to step outside of the context in order to reconsider the decisions. While this is not new as qualitative researchers are expected to keep this form of journaling as a part of the analytical process, the recommendation here is for the researcher to pay particular attention to what may not have worked. From here, the theorization of that which did not work should be then carried out so that the practical decision will find its place within not just a method-based choice but a methodologically-grounded point. This form of double-tracking will steer the research back to the origin of qualitative research work which was founded not upon context-free, value-free circumstances, but upon context-bound and value-laden human experience.

Keywords: literacy education, language education, double-track, trustworthiness, digital