

# **MDDE 701: Advanced Research Methods**

## **Assignment 2**

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

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Note. The data used in this paper was once examined for other research questions. However, it is the first time to analyze them from the perspective of monologue/dialogue. Though the total data size was huge, the data is limited only to a single class case for this particular assignment. The author teaches language course and lecture course but the data used for the assignment is from a language course that includes online activities at a distance, for which the students' consent for analysis had been obtained, and the data size is easily managed.

## Research questions (Creswell, 2007, pp.107-113)

### Description of phenomenon/phenomena of interest

The observations reported in a few research papers (for example, Dougiamas & Taylor, 2003; Wu, 2006) as well as those by the author of this paper that, especially at the initial stage of implementing online discussion forums, the students' postings tend to be monologic; that is, each thread tends to end by single posting of an individual without having dialogic interactive exchange to the initial posting.

### Declaration of the selected first tradition of inquiry

#### a. Purpose statement

The purpose of the study is to examine if the phenomenon above stated is empirically supported.

#### b. Central question

The central question of the study is to see if or not the students' discussion forums tend to be monologic especially at the initial implementation phase of the discussion activity.

#### c. Sub-question

How we can define monologic vs. dialogic discussions?

How students perceive these differences?

How these are actually observed in the online discussion forums?

## Description of the setting

The data was collected during the 2008 spring semester from three classes of an undergraduate English course named "Practical English II," which is to initiate academic English who may be going to study in English speaking countries in the future. This course is primarily designed for sophomore students of ages mainly of 19 and 20. The English level of the students in this study is considered to be distributed in-between lower-intermediate to higher-intermediate (that was examined and proved in other study

for other purposes). A difficulty is that even though they spent years in learning English in junior high and high school, in general, they were not given much, or as they reported (to the survey questionnaire) almost never, opportunity to write English or express their ideas in English up to now.

The university, which is public, ranks within 50 among 750 universities in Japan and is generally regarded as a “good school” in the country. The school culture is generally serious and mature.

### Course design

The course was provided in the blending mode of face-to-face and online instructions and the research questions for the MDDE 701 course assignment regards the online and distance portion of it. For all the students in the study, the blended learning and the usage of LMS that supported the online portions was the first experience (that was examined and confirmed by the survey).

In 2008 spring was set up five discussion topics that were coherent to the chapter topic in the assigned course textbook and that were chosen by vote among three choices at the end of each chapter as a wrap-up activity. The discussion forums were announced to be grade bearing assignments; however, exact grading policy was not noticed (for a comparative purpose of other study that was held concurrently).

The topics treated in this class group over 15 weeks were:

Chapter 1: If you were a marketing manager, how would you increase the appeal of a car repair shop to women? How would you increase the appeal of a supermarket to men?

Chapter 2: Imagine that your company wants to advertise at a baseball stadium. You can choose to have a painted sign on the back fence or an electronic ad that will appear only on television. Which type of ad would you suggest? Why?

Chapter 3: One trend described in the lecture is that people feel busier because they have to juggle many responsibilities. Is this true for you?

Chapter 4: The lecture describes Americans as busy when they do leisure

activities. In your opinion, what are some of the positive effects of this and what are some of the negative effects?

Chapter 5: Which do you think is more important to consider when choosing your food, nutritional needs or pleasure? Why?

As the text was made being situated in the US University, in the actual forums, the context of the US was changed to Japan when necessary and appropriate.

Prior to the five discussion forums, the students were given an opportunity to “practice” the forum functionality by setting up a separate forum space to introduce each other. Also, from the third forum, an additional direction was made to urge them to “make comments” to others’ postings besides their core opinion postings to the given topic.

Though more colloquial, the chapter lessons covered learning set expressions regarding discussion strategies including “Enter the Discussion” (such as “I’d like to add my two cents.”), “Contribute to the Discussion” (such as, “In my opinion”), “Interrupt and Ask for Clarification” (such as “Could you explain that?”), “Asking for More Information” (such as “How does that work?”), and “Agreeing and Disagreeing” (such as “I see your point, but”) with the course textbook over the course period.

Besides the online discussions, the students were given opportunity to write blogs in the same online space on the LMS; this was given as an optional activity for self-study. Another particularity is that throughout the course period, the students used pseudonyms (this point was the real focus of another study as an intervention); therefore, the students did not show their real identities in the online writing space in this study. Also, throughout the course period, two student moderators, each time different pairs, were assigned to look after each topic forum though, as it will be reported below, these did not work as intended actually.

### Methods chosen

To explore the research questions above, two kinds of approaches in qualitative research tradition – namely, grounded theory and case study were chosen in this study. The data was collected from two different sources, 1) interview transcripts and 2) online discussion postings, in order to balance the interpretation.

Both are in the category of text-based data collected from the same sample group therefore, it is said to be a case study. And the analysis method relied on is that of grounded theory (especially the systematic analysis procedure described by Strauss and Corbin 1990 book). However, when thinking of its focus on the online discourse, it may also be in the sub-category of ethnography that treat online text data, as we find in the new terminologies such as “online ethnography” (Lichtman, 2006), “netnography” (Kozinets, 2002), and “webnography” (Puri, 2006), especially in this particular study because the author who executed the analysis played the instructor role (“practitioner-participant”) of the course also as if an ethnographer in the online space.

### Data collection and analysis 1: Interview

#### a. Samples

Fifteen students (7 male and 8 female students), five of each belonging to the same class, volunteered to be interviewees to the interview call by the author-instructor. The sampling process is said to be “simple random” type (Neuman, 2006, p.227) because there was no incentive for being volunteered for the extrinsic motivation such as the extra course grade however, the interviewees were asked to participate within the set framework of each class in target.

#### b. Analysis procedure

The interview was held on the final meeting day in 2008 spring semester (lasting 15 weekly face-to-face meetings). The interview took the semi-structure format (due to the contextual constraints) consisting of eight prepared non-leading short questions regarding the blended learning course experiences.

The author played the interviewer role and each interview last short of ten minutes at the maximum. The data analyzed below is one of the eight questions that are:

Q.3 How did you feel about the discussion assignments on Moodle in the Practical English II course?

that includes information directly relevant to the discussion forum activities.

Figure 1 below gives a view of the analysis procedure on Atlas.ti software (Atlas.ti, 2008)

– the usage of software was chosen as it allows systematic analysis and its resonance to the grounded theory procedure (that we learned in MDDE 602) and that the present paper relies on.

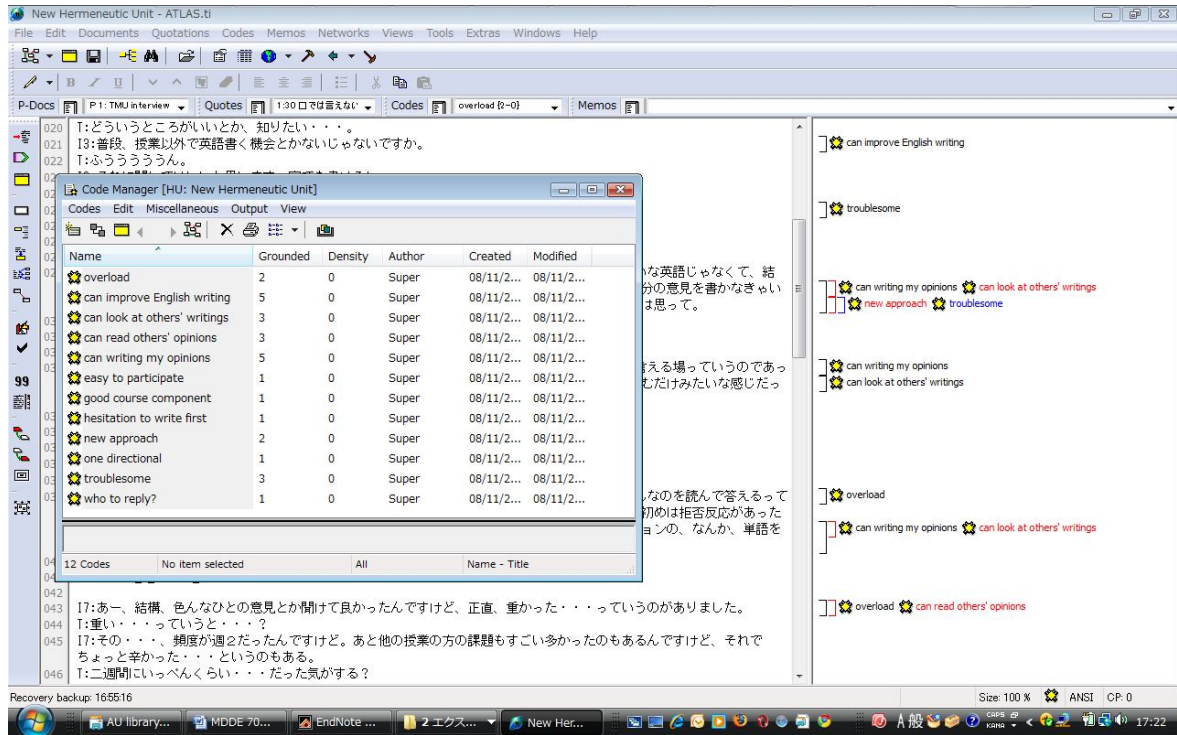


Figure 1. A view on Atlas.ti for interview script analysis.

## c. Results

Table 1 below summarizes the results of interview transcript analysis with the basic understanding of open and axial coding following the book by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Table 1  
Categories, codes, and frequencies

Categories	Category frequency	Codes	Code frequency	
Perspective sharing	8	Can read others' opinions	3	
		Can write my opinions	5	
English empowerment	8	Can look at others' writings	3	
		Can improve English writing	5	
Course management	5	Negative	Overloaded	2
			Troublesome	3

	4	Positive	Easy to participate	1
			New approach	2
			Good course component	1
Discussion management	3		Who to reply?	1
			One directional	1
			Hesitate to write first	1

The responses to Q.3 by the 15 interviewees were given tentative codes in terms of similarities in the core concepts and then further grouped into categories at the higher level of similarities.

A particularity of the coding process is the decision of distinguishing between reading/writing *English postings* and reading/writing *opinions* of others or the interviewee him/herself: under the given context, the notion about linguistics development (that is, being able to read and write English better) and the notion about cognitive development (that is, being able to have deeper understanding of the subject matter) were considered to refer to different levels or aspects of the discussion activities under this particular case.

Overall, the analysis tells that even though the opinions are divided almost evenly between positive (supported by four students) and negative (supported by five students) about the implementation of online discussions, the majority acknowledges the merits of them (supported by eight students) for the reasons of fostering linguistic and/or cognitive development.

When it comes to the phenomenon of postings tending to be monologic, only one student referred directly to this notion, when she said that “自分の書く英語力が上がったと思うけど、なんか、みんなが自分の意見を単発で言ってるだけなんで、ちょっとつまんなかったっていうか。もっとなんか、このひとがこう言ってるから、自分はこう思うとか、言うのがあったら、もっと面白かったなって思いました。(I think my English writing ability has improved but everybody just post their own opinions singly and I felt a little board. I mean if we had more things such like, because this person said this way, I think this way kind of thing, I think it would become more interesting.)” (Literal translation by the author). This observation is considered to refer to the student’s perception that sufficient level of *bidirectional* interaction was not made in the forum.

Though more indirectly, a student’s mentioning his uncertainty about “who to reply” in the discussions can be considered to be the extension of the idea that he saw trouble in making decisions how to make more dialogic comments on others’ writings. As it will be

reported below, because of this hesitation or not, none of the students in this study used the reply functions to make comments to others though they were instructed and should have known fully its functionality.

### Data collection and analysis 2: Forum discussions

#### a. Samples

Due to limit in space and time as well as to keep consistency, one class conference (called 606) to which the interviewee who mentioned about her perception about the monologic development of the forum postings belonged, was chosen for this analysis.

The initial intake of this class was 22 (including two students who had never showed up in the classroom) however those who participated in the online discussion activities were somewhat less than 12 or 10 students, though it was given as assignments, than the initial intake as the results below will report.

#### b. Analysis procedure

All the five discussion forums of the given class were first printed out and the following points were examined: 1) to have an overview of the forum development, the number of students' postings to each discussion topic was first counted, 2) the number of postings that follow any replies from other students (dialogic) and those who do not (monologic) was next counted, and 3) smaller signs at textual and visual levels that are understood to show the trace of intending to construct more dialogic relation between the postings were further looked for.

#### c. Results

Table 2 below summarizes the number of postings in each discussion session and the number of students participated in each discussion session.

Table 2  
Descriptive analysis of the dialogue postings

Session	Total number of postings	Number of students participated
1	11	11



2	12	12
3	12	11
4	8	8
5	10	10

Though only half of the students out of possible 22 participated in the required part of the online activities, this relative low attendance rate should be understood with their attendance to the optional blog writing activity – this is out of the focus of the present study but it was unexpected that even though blog writings were optional, the students showed high level of enthusiasm to and preference for this option that were not required part of the course.

The reason why from session 3 to 4, the total number of postings decreased with certain level of recovery in session 5 is not ev. This could often happen for a separate reason from the course management itself such as there were consecutive paper dues in other courses (as the students in this study belonged to the same department).

It is found that all the students made only one time of posting per each session, except one student who made two postings for Session 3: as it was noted above, this session was particular in that the instructor made an extra direction to urge them to make comments on others' postings; therefore, it is possible that this student reacted this way in response to the instructor's direction. However, this reaction was not followed by other students and the trend of one posting per one student per one discussion session unfortunately continued to the end. From these, at the surface level, it looks that the majority of the postings ended monologic; however a closer analysis revealed interesting findings.

Table 3 below summarized the results of the third step of the analysis that is to look for smaller signs at textual and visual levels that would be to show their efforts to construct more dialogic relation between their own postings and others.

Table 3  
Reference patterns in the discussion forums

Session	Direct references		Indirect references					
	To nickname	To idea	Invitation	Care to others	Opening greetings	Closing greetings	Exclamation	Emoticon
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)
1	0	4	5	2	1	1	5	0

2	1	0	2	0	5	2	5	0
3	2	4	4	1	5	1	5	2
4	2	0	2	0	0	1	1	0
5	2	0	4	2	1	1	4	1

In the table, categorization was made between *direct reference* and *indirect reference*. Direct references are those expressions that a) directly referred to other students' nicknames to link their ideas (for example, "I have the same opinion as [nickname]'s") and others and b) directly referred to the ideas mentioned in other students' postings to link theirs and others (for example, the idea of "female assistant" in a student's posting was taken with agreement, being restated as "women assistant"). Indirect references are those c) that tried to invite the opinions of others (for example, "Tell me your opinion" and "How about you??") d) that showed some sort of caring to others' existence (for example, "you know" and "for us"), e) that started their postings by some sort of greetings (for example, "Hello Hello Hello"), f) that ended their postings by some sort of greetings (for example, "Thank you!!!"), g) that included more frequent usage of exclamation marks (for example, putting double exclamation mark "!!" at the end of all sentences in one posting) than usual, and h) that included emoticons.

An important point to be reminded is that in the category of direct reference of ideas that scored four times each in Session 1 and 3, in reality, the similar or the same expression of "female assistant" and "this idea" were simply repeated. In this sense, these were considered to be the signs of uptaking ideas from other postings into their own sentences, however with the limitation to the linguistic ability to what extent they handled paraphrasing in their own writings.

All these analyses showed that even if at the first look, all the postings looked more monologic with no direct comments by replying, these can be the evidence how the students tried to resort to other communicative devices such as greetings and punctuations, those within their manageability and surety, as if to try to be friendly and to maintain good social atmosphere for the discussions as possible. In this sense, we might say that the higher level of direct/indirect references relate to the expression of cognitive presence whereas those of lower level might be more related to their social presence (Garrison et al., 2000). If so, among the reference categories found in this study, we may think that higher amount of paraphrasing type of reference may be the sign of acquiring higher order thinking in case of non-native speaker writers.

Based on these observations, the postings were given further re-calculation to categorize

them into four groups of 1) no references at all, 2) those with direct reference, 3) those with indirect reference, and 4) those with either of direct or indirect reference. The results are summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4  
Monologue vs. dialogue postings

Session	Monologic with no reference	Dialogic with direct reference	Dialogic with indirect reference	Dialogic with either direct or indirect reference
1	4	5	7	7
2	5	1	7	7
3	1	8	8	11
4	4	2	3	4
5	2	3	7	8

This further shows that at the discussion session 3 when the instructor urged them to be more interactive, the students may have reacted by resorting to any means possible to refer to each other as the number of dialogic postings had suddenly increased as they are marked in red. However, the efforts did not seem to be taken over to the following two sessions of 4 and 5, as the distribution of postings with direct or indirect devices somewhat go back to the state of session 1 and 2 afterwards. This may suggest the necessity of continuous encouragement/reinforcement to make dialogic interaction, not one-off direction, which may hopefully lead to the higher level of direct references in their writings.

#### Comparative study of the two approaches

##### a. Validity of the results

The interview analysis found only one student among 15 who mentioned explicitly the idea about the monologic development of the discussion forum postings. And the discussion forum transcript analysis of one class as a case study to which the student was the member, revealed that at the surface level, her observation coincides with how the forum appeared over the course period. However, a closer examination of the discussion scripts also revealed that even if the nearly half of the postings in one session may look monologic – just stating his/her opinions without any references to others' work or other classmates, they actually may have tried to show caring to others' ideas and

writings in their own ways possible.

In this sense, the analysis results of the two different sources to examine the same phenomenon of monologue vs. dialogue discussions are not considered to be inconsistent in this study – rather, it may give us some clue why the discussion looks monologic at the surface level, even for the perception of the author–instructor. Also it may explain why the majority of the students perceived them rather as meaningful occasions to know others' ideas and improve their English without feeling much of alienation in the online space as the author-instructor had suspected and even worried.

In sum, the usage of two different sources with different angles within qualitative methods is considered to raise the validity of the observations and interpretations of the present study. However, this is with the caution that these are only said within the specific case that was examined and the conclusion withdrawn from these two methods do not assure any generalizability to other cases themselves.

#### b. Weaknesses of the methods

The weakness of interview method is its reliance on the subjective perceptions of the interviewees. However hard we try to be royal to their enunciation, the interview method has to be understood as how things are looked by a specific interviewee if not relatively large sample such as 20 to 30 (Creswell, 2007, p.66) are examined to the level of sample saturation.

An obvious weakness of the interview method in this study is that its primary focus was not to look for the students' perception about the online discussion forum development. In a sense, the most general form of un-leading question of “How did you feel about the discussion assignments on Moodle in the Practical English II course?” was appropriate to withdraw the most general perceptions about the discussion forums. However, it is possible that different structure of the interview questions more focusing on the research question of this paper would bring more findings about the topic.

Another weakness of the interview method in this study is the relational effects between the interviewer and the interviewees. Even if the students were emphasized that the interview did not have any influence on their course work evaluation, having the course instructor to play the role of interviewer, would let them avoid mentioning, consciously or unconsciously, negative notions about the discussion forums in general.

The general weakness of content analysis method is its not having an established analysis method that claims higher validity in the field (Wever, 2005). In this study, the unit of code was decided rather intuitively by the author, however, careful examination is necessary if it's for claiming higher validity. Also, ideally, it is hoped to apply co-rater to balance the results to raise its accuracy of analysis.

As for the discussion analysis in this study, one of the obvious weaknesses is the limited sample size due to the time constraints for this assignment. It is more appropriate to cover all the forums of three classes as in the 15 interviews belong to – in such a way, the results would claim higher validity with possibly more insights for the further study.

Also, the discussion analysis may have limitation due to the linguistic manageability of the students in this study. Even though it admitted clues for them to give feedbacks each other in their own ways, higher manageability of the language would possibly bring different results.

#### c. Strengths of the methods

Strength of the interview method is its ability to elucidate the unknown phenomenon by its reliance of subjective perceptions of the interviewees. In this particular study, the multiple view points of other students actually provided a more balanced view on the understanding of the discussion forums – that is, different from rather pessimistic view of the author-instructor about her unsuccessful forum development, more students admitted more advantages from the activities, possibly because they realized dialogic conversation in their own ways at their perception level than the author herself. In this sense, the female student who shared the similar view to the author-instructor might have possibly higher English writing ability than other participants in the forum.

Strength of the discussion analysis was its force to give detailed examination to reveal clues and mechanism that may not be apparent at the surface level of reading – the finding of this study, even with small sample size, was frankly unexpected to the author-instructor and it helps to have more ideas how the transcript analysis, especially of those written by non-native writers of English who are at the developmental stage, should ideally be held so as to gain more insights from the text data.

#### Summary of findings

The purpose of the study was to verify the belief about the online discussion forums that are said to tend to be monologic, especially at its initial stage of implementation. The two analysis approaches of interview transcripts and online discussion forums as a case study relied on grounded theory confirmed the phenomenon of monologic tendency of the forums both as a student's perception and as an event. These give answer to the two sub-questions of "How students perceive these differences?" and "How these are actually observed in the online discussion forums?"

As for the first sub-question, "How we can define monologic vs. dialogic discussions?," the results of the study rather demanded the need of re-definition of the distinction between monologic and dialogic discussions, especially when it concerns with writings by non-native speaker writers. The study suggests that physical appearance of no comments by reply functions would lead to sort of misconception to the interpretation of the discussion development. However, the study did not supply enough information to provide more suitable definitions of these two concepts at this stage.

To conclude, much finer research is felt to be necessary regarding the research questions of dialogic vs. monologic forum discussions. Also, the need of resorting to more than two research methods or perspectives to obtain a balanced understanding of the phenomenon is felt to be necessary in qualitative methodology so as in quantitative methodology.

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