



USE OF CASE STUDY RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL SETTING

VYUŽÍVANIE VÝSKUMNEJ METÓDY PRÍPADOVEJ ŠTÚDIE V PROSTREDÍ VZDELÁVANIA

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Abstract:

The following article depicts the case study as a method of qualitative research in educational settings, with the closer emphasis on language pedagogy. It gives the overview of the method, specifies the proper possibilities for its use and relates it to education. It highlights the advantages and also shortcomings of using this research method. It also points out the lack of use of the case study as a reliable research method on the national level in Slovak education.

Abstrakt:

Príspevok sa zaoberá výskumnou metódou prípadovej štúdie a jej využitím v kontexte jazykového vzdelávania. V prvej časti príspevok koncipuje základné definície prípadovej štúdie a jej možné využitie v cudzojazyčnom vzdelávaní. Sústreďuje sa na pozitíva tejto výskumnej metódy a poukazuje na nízku mieru využívania prípadovej štúdie v prostredí edukácie, konkrétne vo vzdelávaní cudzích jazakov na národnej úrovni.

Keywords: case study, education, research, language pedagogy

Kľúčové slová: prípadová štúdia, vzdelávanie, výskum, cudzojazyčné vzdelávanie

Introduction

A case study is designed to study uniqueness and complexity of a single case. It is one of the methods of qualitative research mostly used in social sciences. We may study a single case if it is itself very interesting or the circumstances and the setting are of great interest of the researcher. In our article we focus on a case study in educational settings and develop the idea of using case study method when teaching foreign languages.



We discuss various authors, mainly from English and American research environment. They are Michael Bassey, Robert K. Yin, Robert E. Stake, the authors of the book *Evaluating Educational Interventions*, T. Chris Riley-Tillman and Mathew K. Burns, and David Silverman, and Punch. We base our discussion of the issue mostly on English writers who conduct their researches using case study method in various fields of social sciences. In the final part of the study we would like to analyse what are the views, challenges and limitations in using case study method in education.

What is Case Study Method?

Stenhouse claims (in Bassey, 2010) that case study methods involve the collection and recording of data about a case or cases, and a preparation of a report or a presentation of the case. Sometimes, particularly in evaluation research, which is commissioned to evaluate a specific case, the case itself is regarded as of sufficient interest to merit investigation. However, case study does not preclude an interest in generalization, and many researchers seek theories that will penetrate the varying conditions of action or application founded on the comparison of case with case. Generalisation and application are matters of judgements rather than calculation, and the task of case study is to produce ordered reports of experience which invite judgement and offer evidence to which judgement can appeal.

Furthermore, Sturman (in Bassey, 2010) offers more holistic view on the definition of a nature of the case study method when he states that a case study is a generic term for the investigation of an individual, group or phenomenon. While the techniques used in the investigation may be varied, and may include both qualitative and quantitative approaches, the distinguishing feature of case study is the belief that human systems develop a characteristic wholeness or integrity and are not simply a loose collection of traits. As a consequence of this belief, case study researchers hold that to understand a case, to explain why things happen as they do, and to generalize or predict from a single example requires an in-depth investigation of the interdependencies of parts and of the patterns that emerge. His view suggests that case study method is deeply rooted in authenticity and considers real-life situations and environment. Case study method pays



detailed attention to integrity of the studied case and may offer a general view on the phenomenon.

Yin, (2009) defines case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when – the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. He follows that the case study inquiry copes with technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

Simply, if a researcher desires to investigate a real-life situation in a deeper understanding case study method is one of the most suitable methods of research. Case study method investigates both, the specific real-life situation and its context. The reason why the case study method is used in social sciences is the need to research both of the methods, which are not always possible to select or distinguish.

Another American researcher, writer, and educator, Stake, discusses the definition of the case study in his book *The Art of Case Study Research* (1995) where he explains that a case may be a child, a teacher, a programme but the teaching style of the teacher may lack boundaries and may not be called a case study. All schools within a nation may be called a case but the policies of school reforms are less likely to be called a case. He claims that a case is a complex and specific functioning thing. The case is an integrated system. The parts do not have to be working well, the purposes may be irrational, but it is a system, thus people and programs clearly are clearly prospective cases. Events and processes fit the definition less well, and studies of them are less likely to capitalize on the methods discussed in this book.

Based on Hendl (2005) case study is an opposite to statistic based research conducted in quantitative research – collection of a small number of data about as many cases as possible. A case study is based on collection of as much data as possible about one case or a small number of cases. The ground of this approach suggests that we learn about other similar cases through studying one case deeply in its complexity.



Based on American terminology (Burns, Riley-Tillman, 2009) a case study or a single case study, single case design (SCD) = an experimental design is a class of experimental methodology that has been utilized in a number of disciplines including education and psychology. It is known by a number of names: single subject, intra-subject, and also $N = 1$. According to Gerring (in Riley-Tillman, Burns, 2009) a case itself co-notates a unit observed at a single point in time or over some period of time. Each case may provide a single observation or multiple (within case) observations. A case study may be understood as the intensive study of a single case where the purpose is to shed light on a larger class of cases (population).

Based on the above discussed definitions we may agree that a case study is focussed on closer, deeper or wider researching and understanding of a single case, a situation, a subject or a phenomenon. Moreover, the study of a case in its complexity develops the possibilities to differ between the circumstances of the studied subject and the subject itself. By studying the case or several cases within one study from many and various possible angles researchers may come to variability of conclusions and interpretations. Thus, this is usually possible in a qualitative research only because it analyses various circumstances and conditions in which the subject or more subjects exist. Furthermore, the case study research puts its emphasis on understanding the case as opposed to explaining the case.

Use and Challenges of a Case Study Method

Case study method (Yin, 2010) is mostly used in social sciences, namely: *ethnography, business, history, sociology, economy, politology, education and other*. Moreover, researchers choose to conduct a case study research when they are focussed on the research of *individuals, small groups, organizations, relationships, decisions, communities*, etc. Researchers really need to have a “case” to study. Many times the case study method is misused when it is planned to analyse only an idea or an argument not a real-life situation.

Many researchers struggle how to collect the data for the case study they would like to conduct and what evidence to use to support the data collection. In research it seems



data collection represents a demanding and time consuming part of the research. Many times researchers conducting qualitative research struggle with the basic questions as *how? what?*, and *who?* In the following chapter we discuss the main six source of evidence for data as suggested by Yin in his publication *Case Study Research Designs and Methods*.

He suggests (2009) six primary sources of evidence: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, physical artefacts. As Yin states all six of them have their strengths and weaknesses as we show them in the following figure:

Documentation:

- stable, can be reviewed repeatedly,
- unobtrusive – not created as a result of a case study,
- exact contains exact names, references, and details of an event,
- broad coverage – long span of time, many events and many settings.
- retrievability - can be difficult to find
- biased selectivity – if collection is incomplete
- reporting bias – reflect bias of author (unknown)
- access – can be deliberately withheld

Archival records

- same as those for documentation
- precise and usually quantitative
- difficult to access due to privacy reasons

Interviews

- targeted – focuses directly on the case study topics
- insightful – provides perceived casual inferences and explanations
- biased due to poorly articulated questions
- response bias
- inaccuracy due to poor recall



- reflexivity – interviewee gives what interviewer wants to hear

Direct observations

- reality – cover event in real time
- contextual – covers context of “case”
- time consuming
- selectivity – broad coverage difficult without a team of observers
- reflexivity – event may proceed differently because it is being observed
- cost – hours needed by human observers

Participant observation

- the same as for direct observation
- insightful into interpersonal behaviour and motives
- bias due to participant-observer`s manipulation of events

Physical artefacts

- insightful into cultural features
- insightful into technical operations
- selectivity
- not available

Documentation may include letters, official documents, personal documents, diaries, memoranda, progress reports, and internal records, formal studies of evaluations of the same case as you are studying, news or journals articles and publications. Documentation is essential in any case study in educational settings. It gives the researcher the base for further decisions. However, it may also mislead the researcher to false objectives because the researcher may unintentionally select only some documents and it is than incomplete documentations. When doing documentation process it is important to realise that the documents we are studying were originally written for different audience with different objectives than ours. Archival records include public use files, local government records,



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organisational records, maps of places, survey data, official data about residents, survey participants, employees. When investigating the official data researchers need to be aware of the fact that not all the records they find are of the same relevance that they need to use. Researchers need to be able to select the records and use them appropriately in the study of the case. Another very widely used source of evidence for a case study is an interview. We differentiate between a survey and an interview. An interview in a case study is more of a guided conversation with the interviewee than a structured survey. Interviewer has to follow the line of his specific objectives not to be misled and biased by the information received from the interviewee. Interviews are very suitable for qualitative research in education because in education we mostly deal with people, attitudes, emotions, behaviours, relationships. Direct observation is very relevant to case study research because unless it deals with some historical phenomena it is important for a case to watch and observe the situation and circumstances directly in its natural and real life conditions. Results of direct observation may support the study of a case immensely. It may bring a new point of view and even disagreements with the documentation. It is relevant to allow more than one observer to investigate to make the observations more relevant. The fact that the case is directly observed may also change the behaviour of the subject who is observed. Participant-observation is a special kind of observation when the observer is not a passive one but plays a role in the situation, in an organisation, being a decision-maker in the settings, being a neighbour in the neighbourhood. It is mostly used in anthropology or sociology. In education we may apply this method in a role of an assistant teacher, assistant educator. Physical artefacts are a work of art, technology or an instrument a tool. They are physical form of evidence that is a part of the research and the researcher uses it to develop some kind of broader perspective.

Every research of a case study is a mixture of methods and sources of evidence. A case study is incomplete if it only provides an analysis of documents or results of a single interview. The study of a case if it intends to be relevant and reliable should be a multiple methods study. To provide any further information for researcher with relevant data the research of a case should be put in a database or a narrative. It cannot be only a simple



data collection report. We will focus on reliability and validity of a case study research in the following subchapters.

Case Study and Methods of Conduct in Language Pedagogy

As Bassey (2010) states case study research has to be conducted well so that it provides the researcher with specific data that allows him to:

- explore the significant features of the case
- create plausible interpretation of what is found
- test for the trustworthiness for this interpretations
- construct worthwhile argument or story
- relate the worthwhile argument or story to any relevant research in the literature,
- convey convincingly this argument or story to an audience
- provide an audit trail by which other researchers may validate or challenge the findings or construct alternative arguments

Bassey (2010) divides case study research into seven stages: 1. Identifying the research as an issue, problem or hypothesis, 2. Asking research questions and drawing up ethical guidelines, 3. Collecting and storing data, 4. Generating and testing analytical statements, 5. Interpreting or explaining the analytical statements, 6. Deciding on the outcome and writing the case report, 7. Finishing and publishing.

After deciding on the issue researchers should focus on collecting vitally important data and discuss them. Probably the longest and the most time consuming phase of such research is generating and testing analytical questions and interpreting them. Researchers have to make their analysis understandable and trustworthy for the audience. When conducting a case study research it is essential to focus on data collection and data analysis.

There are several basic ways how to collect and analyze data in a case study research. It seems logical to ask questions, listen attentively to the answers, observe and read official or private documents. Furthermore, researchers need to spend some time with the



individual, the case. If it is a school, researcher should spend time and observe the atmosphere of the school, if it is an individual, spend some time with him or her, and get to know them. It is vital for making up conclusions and publishing final statements about the cases. Usually asking questions and observing are conducted at the same time. Sometimes it means answering many essential questions are collecting data, discussing common everyday issues about life, learning, teaching, etc. Should the observations and the interviews be trustworthy and real life-like they have to be conducted in a friendly and stress-less atmosphere, especially, if we observe or interview individuals who are not used to communicate with unknown people (researchers). When observing pupils, probably the best way is to make their own teacher observe them and then interview her or him. Pupils are used to their own teachers and behave much more real than if they were interviewed or directly observed by an unknown person.

In terms of the most common method for many research methods, reading documents, it means collecting as much significant data and information to the researcher papers, diaries, as possible. It is important for the researcher to learn from the history of the case and all possible side influences of the case. Reading data include studying official documents, personal diaries, etc.

Is a Case Study Method Used in Research in Language pedagogy?

We focussed our recent research on the use of case study method in language pedagogy. The centre of our attention was two acknowledged journals of teaching English as a foreign language: ELT and TESOL. We also researched two Slovak periodicals focussed on education and language pedagogy. First is named Pedagogika and the other is an electronic quarterly periodical named X-lingua.

ELT and TESOL are both highly respected quarterly English publications focussed on the latest research conducted in the field of teaching English as foreign language and language pedagogy. Most of the respected academics and well known writers publish their studies and articles there. They also publish various tips and plans for teaching English, inform about teaching English around the world and publish articles from the well known researchers around the world. Since 2006 only 2 academic articles were



published where serious results of case studies in the field of teaching English were presented.

In Slovak environment in the field of ELT there were no case studies researches presented in the official journals. The quarterly Slovak periodical *Pedagogika* aims at language pedagogy rarely. Teaching English is not the top priority in the content of the journal. Second periodical, *X-lingua* aims at language pedagogy. There were found no case study researches in the journal in the period of the last two years.

Conclusion

Case study research is a very personal research. In its nature it is a descriptive method, rooted in observation and data analysis. Researchers often involve their own personal ideas and perspectives in the summary interpretations. It usually takes some longer time, long periods of observations and a lot of data collection and data analysis until a researcher is prepared to create a respectful and relevant case study research. As we focussed our attention to this issue we support the idea of its use in educational settings and language pedagogy. Should the research in the field of teaching English as a foreign language be authentic and real-life like when conducting one or two specific phenomena, it is crucial to focus on detailed analysis of the situation, environment, and personal involvement of the individual. This method is reasonable in the research of language pedagogy when integrity and wholeness of the case are needed.

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