

## **Reflection on Conducting Qualitative Research: Principal Issues and Practical Solutions in Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

Every year, a large number of senior university students in Indonesia will/ have experience in conducting qualitative research. Some of them choose qualitative research because they understand that their questions only can be answered through qualitative research. While the rest of them only see that qualitative research is may be simpler than quantitative research because no need to calculate the numbers and do statistical trial. Unfortunately, many of these students who start their new role as novice researchers don't have sufficient knowledge on some issues before doing this research. This paper aims to provide clear and practical elaboration of some principles in qualitative research which are frequently absent and become the common malpractices by novice researchers. Some practical solutions are discussed as well. In the end, conducting ideal qualitative research in Indonesia is not only the responsibility of expert researchers but also stakeholders, lecturers, and students.

**Keywords:** auto ethnography, ethics, evaluation, Indonesia research, qualitative research

### **Abstrak**

Setiap tahun, sejumlah besar mahasiswa senior di Indonesia akan/memiliki pengalaman dalam melakukan penelitian kualitatif. Beberapa dari mereka memilih penelitian kualitatif karena mereka memahami bahwa pertanyaan mereka hanya dapat dijawab melalui penelitian kualitatif. Sedangkan sisanya hanya melihat bahwa penelitian kualitatif mungkin lebih sederhana daripada penelitian kuantitatif karena tidak perlu menghitung angka dan melakukan uji statistik. Sayangnya, banyak dari mahasiswa yang memulai peran barunya sebagai peneliti pemula ini tidak memiliki pengetahuan yang cukup tentang beberapa masalah sebelum melakukan penelitian ini. Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk memberikan penjabaran yang jelas dan praktis dari beberapa prinsip dalam penelitian kualitatif yang seringkali tidak ada dan menjadi malpraktek yang umum dilakukan oleh para peneliti pemula. Beberapa solusi praktis juga dibahas. Pada akhirnya, melakukan penelitian kualitatif yang ideal di Indonesia tidak hanya menjadi tanggung jawab peneliti ahli tetapi juga pemangku kepentingan, dosen, dan mahasiswa.

**Kata Kunci:** auto etnografi, etika, evaluasi, penelitian Indonesia, penelitian kualitatif

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## **INTRODUCTION**

There is more than one way in conducting qualitative research. How researcher carry out the qualitative research depends upon a range of factor including their beliefs about the nature of social world and what can be known about it, the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired, the purpose(s) and goal of the research, the characteristics of research participant, and the position as well as the environment of the r1 esearcher themselves. Qualitative research somehow is flexible and can be creative (Hlady-Rispal, Fayolle et al. 2021). This research also can be done through different design such as narrative inquiry, case study, phenomenology, ethnography, longitudinal, comparative, etc. However, this value of qualitative research also brings some principal and practical issues.

Conducting research involves mixed feelings. On the one side, it is indeed stressful. When the researchers' cognition reaches certain degree of stress and exploited, as a result, it may produce emotional exhaustion and procrastination. Emotional exhaustion is a feeling overwhelmed and depleted of energy and emotion (Maslach, Schaufeli et al. 2001). Meanwhile, here, procrastination means the preference to delay something recently hard to do but is needed to obtain a particular objective, although being aware of negative result (Fuertes, Jose et al. 2019). On the other side, there is a spark of joy in discovering or understanding something new even though the findings in our research are not something extraordinary but it still contributes to expand the field of knowledge (Ramig 2002). The research demands the researchers' patience, intelligent, rigor, thoroughness, fidelity, etc. In some stages of research, the researchers may feel that they want to quit the research because of numerous reasons such as the inadequate funds to continue the research, the approval hasn't granted by the ethics committee, the loss of transcribed data, etc.

Writing a full research reports or journal articles is one of the graduation requirements for most universities in Indonesia. As the consequence, several challenges and misconceptions on conducting qualitative research are not only faced by the students in bachelor level and master level (Lathif, Nurkamto et al. 2021), but also in doctoral level (Affandi, Ali et al. 2021) as well. To the best of my knowledge, there are many studies (Bitchener, Basturkmen et al. 2011; McCloskey 2011; Agricola, Prins et al. 2018; Daniel 2018; Fuertes, Jose et al. 2019) which discuss the problems of conducting research done by senior students; any bachelor, master, and/or doctorate students who are in their last year of their study. However, it seems that there are some missing issues which rarely discussed.

Based on the problems above, my paper's objectives focus on four issues: First, discussing the absent issue which rarely discussed in Indonesia i.e., ethics. Second, promoting auto ethnography as an alternative approach in qualitative research. Third, provide guidance in self-evaluating qualitative research. Fourth, providing practical solutions for these issues. Therefore, I divide the discussion into three sections: ethics and ethics committee, introspective method, and evaluating qualitative research.

The qualitative study is all about try engrossed in one's life. Some qualitative researchers clearly stated the identity of their participant while others keep the participants of the study anonymous. When collecting, analyzing, and presenting the data, the qualitative researcher inevitably deals with ethical behavior. It mainly deals with ethical issue related to the participants of the study. The ethical considerations in qualitative research are especially important as qualitative researcher negotiate entry to the field site of the research; involve participants in the study; gather personal, emotional data that reveal the details of life; and ask participants to give considerable time to the projects (Creswell 2007).

Qualitative researcher needs to make sure that the study will not provide any harm for the participant. Because qualitative research requires in-depth analysis of the participant, well awareness of the potential problems form the study must be anticipated. The ethical limit should be gain

attention in qualitative study (Ritchie 2003). It is resulted in the importance of predicting any possible harm for the participant caused by the study and if can, advice for minimizing the harm can be drawn before conducting the study.

The privacy and anonymity of the research participant must also put in priority. Researchers are not allowed to violate the participant's rights just for the sake of the research. Respecting participant's privacy is unlikely decreasing the value of the research. Avoiding researcher's personal judgments also evince the respect for the participants. In analyzing the data, the researcher should not include any personal judgments on a personal level (Flick 2009). Fair and objective data analysis must be the essence in presenting the qualitative research.

Indeed, the discussion of ethics are inseparable to ethics committee or Ethics Board. Unfortunately, during our experience as a student and a lecturer, we haven't found any Ethics committee in many universities across Indonesia. This committee is a group of ethics-expert lecturers that gives permissions to the students or the lecturers-researchers before they go to collect the data from living beings; humans, animals, and/or plants (Iphofen and Tolich 2018). They prevent researchers to do any harms or unethical acts to the research subjects/ objects (Bryman 2012). Ethical Committee and research supervisors are different, although both of parties are lecturers but they have different role. Research supervisors are the lecturers who assigned to guide senior students to complete their research. The senior students, even the PhD candidates, are not allowed to conduct independent research without any supervision. By the aim to gain the research permission, the senior students and their supervisors work together to prepare the students' examination to face Ethics committee. In short, the position of ethics committee is vital but many stakeholders may haven't considered the establishment of Ethics committee in their institutions. The regulations which hold by Ethics committee in each institution may varies due to the different needs and expectations (Yin 2018).

We have tried to browse online on google scholar and visit some of qualified ELT journals indexed as *Sinta 1* in Indonesia (e.g., SIELE Journal, ELTEJ, IJELTAL, VELES, etc.) by using some keywords such as *ethic, ethical committee, ELT Indonesia ethics committee* and *ELT Indonesia ethics boards* and found some articles and theses which contain one or some of these keywords. However, it seems that we hardly found any explicit statement or explanation about how they can obtain the approvals to do their research or who gave them those approvals. We put our concern on ethics committee or research ethics because many of the research (candidate) participants stated that they reluctant to continue or join the research because they haven't seen any benefits of it. Even more, some of them were afraid that they have been used for the benefits of the researchers only. In my academic experience as a bachelor and a master student, my research supervisors always ask me to mention the benefits of the research for myself (as a researcher and a student), for the field of knowledge, and the participants. However, for once again, I am not sure that all of the benefits I have written in my research (Rohmah 2006; Halim and Rohmah 2020; Rizqan and Rohmah 2020; Rohmah

and Rizqan 2021; Hadiani, Rohmah et al. 2022; Rohmah 2022) are adequate for the participants. There is a possibility that the benefits we earned are not equal to the benefits they received. Unsurprisingly, recruiting participants is not an easy task; unless the participants are our students. In other words, if the power or the status of participants is equal or higher than the researchers, they possibly ask for equal benefits because they have spent their time to participate in the research. Meanwhile, if the power or the status of participants is lower than the researchers, they may not ask equal benefit for them. These participants consider that they perform their duty as good students who should help their teachers.

Conducting research needs a serious decision and commitment. There is a story from our friend who earned master in TESOL from Monash University, Australia. She told us that taking a thesis course is only recommended for master students who have planned to take PhD. In the other words, most of the master students are not recommended to do research. She noted that the ethics committee has different requirements for literature research and field research. In particular, Bryman (2012) explains that a field research demands some specific regulations such as feasible risk, ethics and approval, and data security. First, the researchers should ensure that the research is low risk for humans. For example, the research participants may reject the interview if the meeting point, a location where the researchers and the participants do agree to meet, are too far or unsafe for the participants. Second, the process of data collection can't be conducted in holidays and weekend. The holidays and weekends are quality time for personal or family. Any violation to this issue will make the participants feel uncomfortable. Third, the researchers should ensure the data security. After the research is done, the verbatim data should be destroyed.

Commonly, any research involves humans will be examined thoroughly by the ethics committee and it takes longer time than research that doesn't involve humans as the subjects. All of these complexities are impossible to be done if the researchers don't have a solid commitment.

The progress of research in university can't be postponed although ethics committee is absent and all of their research can't be accused as unethical research either. We believe that those stakeholders, senior students, and supervisors never have any intention to conduct unethical research because they are academia who can maintain their integrity. Due to this incomplete circumstance, we propose two suggestions which can be implemented. Firstly, the stake holders should provide a training which aim to teach the supervisors about ethics. Second, teach the ethics to the students on how to maintain their integrity as academia. Secondly, conduct focus group discussion during supervising session so the students can share their preparation and experiences with their peers. In sum, the lecturers play double roles, as the supervisors and as the ethics consultants.

## **METHOD**

In qualitative research, the researcher and the research participant have their own subjectivity. Therefore, it needs to be compromised. The need of compromising their understanding and

interpretation leads to necessity of researcher's deep understanding in conducting qualitative research. To examine the research participant deeply, introspective method can be used in qualitative study. Introspective method is "the process of observing and reflecting on one's thought feelings, motives, reasoning processes, and mental states with a view to determining the ways in which these processes and states determine our behavior" (Nunan 1992). The process of observing and reflecting cognitive and mental processes is a common area of qualitative research. Hereby the introspective method is seen as suitable for qualitative research.

However, introspection seems to be unreliable because the researcher has no way of controlling whether subjects are in fact able to accurately describe their mental states. To answer this, "deliberate and immediate observation of inner processes" must be conducted (Wundt as cited in Feest, 2012). The stimulus is used as the prompt of participants' experience. Therefore, it is the stimulus that "introspectively observed", not the mysterious inner experience of the participants (Feest 2012). The qualitative researcher then must draw their version of what truly meant by the participant. This way, what the research wants to capture can be presented fairly. To be more precise, there are some other ways in using introspective method.

#### ***Five Types of Introspective Method***

Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) exposed five types of introspective method as follows. First, *Researcher Introspection* is where the researcher is the only subject and the introspector who produce introspections of his or her own research. On the one hand, this type may be the most practical and convenient method for the novice researchers because they don't need to recruit other persons as their participants. On the other hand, this type is a bit tricky because the researcher may involve too many personal and emotional introspections. Second, *Guided Introspection*: the researcher doesn't introspect but acts as the guide meanwhile participants as the introspectors. Two notable differences between the first and the second type of introspections are quite clear i.e., the focus/ subject of the research and the way of interpreting data. Third, *Interactive Introspection* is where the researcher and participants share equal portions. Even more, the researcher and the participants' status is quite similar (Xue and Desmet 2019). The participants act as the co-researchers, they form a collaborative and mutually emphatic introspective group. Fourth, *Syncretic Forms of Introspection* is where the researcher put his/ her own introspections as part of the data. It means that the introspection data are compiled of the researcher and the participants; they combine as if they are as an individual. It should be noted that *Interactive Introspection* and *Syncretic Forms of Introspection* are looks alike. The main difference is that *Interactive Introspection* involves interaction between the participants and the researcher during the introspection process. Meanwhile, in *Syncretic Forms of Introspection*, the researcher's introspections are added after the participants' introspections are collected. The participants don't know the researcher's introspections. It can be said that the researcher's introspections are used for enrich the data. Fifth, *Reflexivity within Research* is where the researcher

uses his/her introspections to enable contrasting comparison. This introspection is used not used as data, but it is used as a tool to analyze the consistency of data from the observation in the field work.

### ***Auto ethnography***

Auto ethnography is a qualitative method which the researcher acts as the participant of his/her own research. This method allows the researcher to write his/her own experiences and reflect on and understand the lived experiences and enact a transformative role in his/her sociocultural milieu (Sardabi, Mansouri et al. 2020). This method aims to produce new knowledge that enhances our in-depth understanding of a chosen subject. The subject should be personally meaningful as well as socially, culturally, and academically significant (Lee 2020). In short, this method is the accurate illustration of researcher introspection.

The use of this method becomes quite popular, especially in Asia context, during the COVID19 pandemic. A number of researchers (Su 2019; Lee 2020; Liu 2020; Peters, Wang et al. 2020) proved that they can maintain the spirit of inquiry and manage their integrity as academia simultaneously. Based on their studies and other literature, I find some key points related to the strengths of this method. First, no need research permission because this method investigates the researcher him/herself. Second, it can be conducted any time. Third, the first-hand experience is a privilege, the detail of events only can be seen by the participant-researcher. Fourth, one of the popular topics during this pandemic i.e., emotions or feelings only can be investigated comprehensively through auto ethnography because any feelings involved are only understood by the participant-researcher. Fifth, auto ethnography is by nature a form of narrative writing with a critical lens (Sardabi, Mansouri et al. 2020).

The use of auto ethnography is not commonly used in Indonesia until recently. From the literature, Wahyudi's work (2016) is one of the earliest empirical research that used auto ethnography. This method is hard to received, or even rejected, by senior language scholars and lecturers in Indonesia because of several considerations. First, many qualitative research done by students are no more than describing events or perceptions. As the qualitative researchers, they cannot provide in-depth findings and discussions. Second, many lecturers are not highly active researchers who continuously conduct research to obtain expertise or at least engage with the research new issues. Noted, autoethnography, as a research method, is relatively new. A number of scholars (Ellis 1999; Bullough and Pinegar 2001; Anderson 2006; Wall 2006; Butz and Besio 2009) have proposed their notions in defining and evaluating this method since decades ago. Third, last, trustworthiness of data is rather inadequate. Conducting an autoethnography doesn't mean that we, as a researcher and a participant, can avoid the ethics. It should be noted that the ethics in any research is inevitable. In this case, the researcher has the privileged opportunity to disclose various personal and sensitive stories (e.g. childhood sexual violence) to be discussed in the public sphere (Poerwandari 2021).

## **HASIL DAN DISKUSI**

Many or even most novice researchers seem to feel less confidence in evaluating their research. We have selected some general guided questions adapted from Creswell (2007) which help researcher to review what they have written: 1) Does the author assemble events about a notable issue related to the subject's life? 2) Does the author develop a chronology that links different stages or aspect of an event? 3) Does the author elaborate a persuasive event in a literary way? 4) Does the author apply procedures of data analysis such suggested by research experts? 5) Does the author convey the overall essence of the experience of the subjects? 6) Is there a describable identification of the 'case' 7) Is the author reflexive of self-disclosing about his or her position in the research? Indeed, this self-evaluation is really recommended to novice and expert researchers because their integrity as academia can be assured by answering these questions. These seven questions are not in order, so it can be started from any number.

Another experts, Ary, Jacobs et al. (2014), also provide similar questions: 1) is the research question explicitly mentioned? 2) does the study answer the research question and recommend further questions for inquiry? 3) is there any evidence that the author maintained ethical standards?? 4) are the descriptive data apart from the interpretation? 5) is the study reported in a way that is accessible to others? Unlike Creswell (2007), the questions constructed by Ary, Jacobs et al. (2014) are arranged in order. These questions seem easier to be used.

It is recommended to conduct FGD by giving Creswell (2007) and Ary, Jacobs et al. (2014) guided questions for the researchers and their peers (i.e. senior students) during their supervision sessions. For undergraduate students, the supervisors may lead and set the limit of the discussion in order to keep the focus. Meanwhile, for master and doctorate students, they are expected to be more independent even though the supervisors may give a little hint to keep the interactive flow of the discussion.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper concludes that, as academia, we still have a long way to go in conducting ideal qualitative research. Many universities in Indonesia have their own considerations in supporting the development of curriculum, ethics, and policies for qualitative research. This paper wants to acknowledge the progress that we have been made so far and contribute to the guide novice researchers in their studies. Furthermore, I believe that mastering principal qualitative research is not only to prove the quality of our ability but also to spark the joy and spirit of research which lead us to continue doing research in the future.

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