

GROUNDING THEORY METHODOLOGY IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING RESEARCH

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Abstract: This paper discusses the use of grounded theory as a methodological approach to second language learning (SLL) research. It recommends that grounded theory methodology, which is introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), be employed in SLL research to produce up to date substantive theories of second language learning which are currently very scant. Important elements that constitute grounded theory methodology are presented. The advantage of using grounded theory methodology is also discussed, in particular its outcome in enriching SLL literature by producing grounded theories which fit empirical situations. The paper concludes with a brief look at useful resources to gain in-depth understanding of this methodology.

Keywords: Grounded Theory, Second Language Learning, Second Language Acquisition, English Language Teaching, Research Methodology, Theories, Practice.

INTRODUCTION

The grounded theory methodology is widely applied across disciplines such as health sciences (eg. Oturu, 2011; Thulesius, 2009), education (eg. Barnett, 2012; Stillman, 2011) and business studies (eg. Loy, 2011; Johnston, 2009). However, the use of grounded theory methodology in second language learning (SLL) research is still at its infancy. A review of literature on second language learning reveals that previous research in the field is mostly concerned with the deductive approach of testing existing theories (eg. Rashid 2011; Rahman, Nabilah and Rashid, 2011; Rashid, Vethamani and Rahman, 2010). Consequently, there are very limited theories produced to explain the current practises in language learning.

The problem of limited current theories in the field of second language learning perhaps can be solved by using grounded theory approach. This is because grounded theory methodology aims for theory generation instead of theory testing. Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasized that grounded theory methodology is intended to 'improve the social scientists' capacity for generating theory that will be relevant to their research' (p.vii), and are understandable not only to sociologist but also to layman. More importantly, the grounded theories produced are able to provide 'relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications' (p.1). Based on these perspectives, it is discernible that the use of grounded theory methodology will not only enrich literature on SLL but also produce theories that are understandable to teachers and learners and thus enable them to make sense of the theories and

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link them to practice. In addition to that, the theories produced may also be useful in shaping the national policy relevant to second language learning and teaching. There are three objectives of this paper, which are; (1) to establish the need for grounded theory methodology in SLL research, (2) to highlight the important elements in grounded theory methodology and (3) to present useful resources to gain an in-depth understanding of grounded theory methodology.

AN OVERVIEW OF GROUNDED THEORY

Grounded theory methodology was first introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Since then, it has evolved and has been 'remodelled' by others to meet their research needs and objectives (Glaser, 2004). This has raised some reactions from Glaser who believes that grounded theory should not be remodelled and those who are interested to employ grounded theory as a methodological approach to research need to follow the original principles of grounded theory 'package' (Glaser, 2002; Glaser, 1998) as he believes that it will lead to the true emergence of the theory grounded in the data (Glaser, 2012; Glaser, 1998).

At the same time, Glaser has been criticized by others as having positivist perspectives of grounded theory even though he himself never declares that he espoused positivism as his epistemology (see Age, 2011). Perhaps, this is mainly due to the fact that Glaser aims for generalization besides rejecting the association of grounded theory with symbolic interactionism and constructivism which both fall under the interpretivist paradigm (see Glaser, 2002).

The dispute between the key players in grounded theory remains at the philosophical underpinnings of the methodology and to some extent in the coding process between Glaser and Strauss (see Glaser, 1998 and Corbin and Strauss, 2007 for comparison). Despite the dispute that has led to three different versions of grounded theory which are: Classic grounded theory associated with Glaser, Straussian grounded theory associated with Strauss and Corbin, and Constructivist grounded theory associated with Charmaz, all the key players share the same notion that grounded theory is a powerful research methodology as it produces theories which are meaningful not only to sociologists but also laymen besides being able to provide 'relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967 : p. 1).

ESTABLISHING THE NEED FOR GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH IN SLL

The need for grounded theory methodology in SLL research can be best established by highlighting the scarcity of previous SLL research that employs this methodology. A search in *Scopus Database* and *Google Scholar* using the key words 'Grounded theory AND language learning' produced no relevant result. A search in *Grounded*

Theory Review Journal for research articles published in the year 2004 up to the year 2016 also produced no relevant result. However, a change in key words to 'Grounded Theory AND Teachers' enabled me to find some research articles in which the authors claim to use the grounded theory approach. However, a critical look at all the research articles reveal that only a handful of them wholly employed grounded theory principles, strategies and techniques with the main aim of developing a grounded theory. Among the research articles are *Forces Steering Iranian Language Teachers' Work* by Namaghi (2006), *Adventuring: A Grounded Theory Discovered through the Analysis of Science Teaching and Learning* by Maloney (2005), *Substantive-level Theory of Highly Regarded Secondary Biology Teachers' Science Teaching Orientations* by Friedrichsen and Dana (2005), *Social Studies Teachers' Conceptions of Discussion: A Grounded Theory Study* by Larson (1997), *A Social-psychological Grounded Theory of Teacher Stress and Burnout* by Blasé (1982), and *A Grounded Theory Study of Beginning Teachers' Role Personalization through Reference Group Relations* by Gehrke (1981).

Among the grounded theory research highlighted above, only one was carried out in the context of second language learning and teaching which is that carried out by Namaghi (2006). This reflects the dearth of grounded theory research in the literature of SLL learning and to address this gap, SLL researchers need to be encouraged to employ grounded theory methodology in their research. We argue that the scarcity of grounded theories in the area of SLL is a severe problem as it could affect the effectiveness of teaching and learning process especially when teachers need to link theories to practice. In the section that follows, we discuss the advantages of using grounded theory methodology in further detail.

THE ADVANTAGE OF USING GROUNDED THEORY IN SLL RESEARCH

A long-standing goal for many teacher preparation programs is to link theory to practice (Barkesdale-Ladd & Rose, 1997). To train teachers to link theories to practice is not easy especially if the theory is generated 'by logical deduction from a priori assumptions' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: p. 3). We argue that a change of focus to grounded theory may offer solution to this problem. This is because grounded theory methodology produces theories which 'fit the situation being researched, and work when put into use' (ibid). Glaser and Strauss (1967) further explain that by 'fit' they mean that the categories are 'readily applicable to and indicated by the data under study' and by 'work' they mean that the theories are 'meaningfully relevant to and be able to explain the behaviour under study' (p. 3). In other words, the theories can be easily understood and applied as they are grounded in the data. For instance, a grounded theory generated based on the data obtained from classroom research will be easily understood and applied by learners, teachers and other people who have experiences of being in the classroom.

Below is an example of grounded theory of macro-structures that steer language teachers' work put forth by Namaghi (2006) and as we argue before, any language teacher can easily make sense of the theory (*bold in original*):

Forces steering teachers' work is the core theoretical category, which pulled together three other categories. These categories are indicative of macro-structures, which are beyond teachers' control. First, **mandated curriculum** controls the input. That is instead of using his professional knowledge to select a textbook, which best serves his students' needs; teachers are obliged to teach the centrally mandated curriculum. The second category, **mandated national testing scheme**, controls the output. Instead of using his knowledge of language testing to develop tests, which have a positive backwash on teaching and learning, he should follow a fixed and centrally mandated testing scheme. Third, **make the grade pressure** controls the process of teaching and learning. Culturally, scoring well is much more important than learning well. In the face of these macro-structures and as a coping strategy, teachers consciously choose to follow an **instrumental approach**. Being a pure implementer of externally imposed initiatives and schemes, teachers worry that their practice is being deprofessionalised. More specifically, by responding to cultural constraints, they don't use their own professional knowledge and experience. Lack of use leads to atrophy. Thus, although promoting teachers to the top of career ladder, instrumental teaching leads to **deprofessionalisation**.

(Namaghi, 2006)

A slightly different way of presenting grounded theory is discernible from Maloney (2005) who puts forth the theory of adventuring based on her research involving Science teachers as shown below:

Any person who actively seeks out physical or mental challenge in new ways, proceeds to overcome those challenges in ways that are not conventional, and then applies the new knowledge to another task is adventuring. The purpose of adventuring is not to produce an end product (although certain actions may have an endpoint such as laboratory experiments). Adventuring behaviours have a deeper objective than just to get somewhere, do something, or make a mark on an actual or metaphorical mountain-top. The point is the journey, the challenges that arise during the process, and the knowledge that, even for an expert in the field, something new is to be learned each day from each event. Each new learning impacts others, and the results or consequences of the present may appear at a later time.

(Maloney, 2005)

Based on the examples of grounded theory presented above, it is discernible that grounded theories can be easily understood by the sociologist and layman (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and this includes policy makers and teachers thus enabling them to link the theories to practice in their attempts to optimize the effectiveness of language teaching.

In the section that follows, we briefly highlight the eight important elements in grounded theory methodology with the hope that it will stir the interest of SLL researchers to employ the methodology in their research.

ELEMENTS IN GROUNDED THEORY METHODOLOGY

Literature reviewed (see Birks and Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) reveals that there are eight fundamental elements within grounded theory research which are:

1. Initial coding and categorization of data – Initial coding is the first step of data analysis involving identification of important words/group of words in the data before they are labelled accordingly. The related codes will then be categorized.
2. Concurrent data generation/collection and analysis – this requires researchers to generate/collect some data from an initially purposive sample. Initial data gathered will be coded before more data is collected / generated.
3. Memo writing – Memos are the written records of a researcher's thinking during the research process and memo writing helps the researcher to become more analytical and reflective.
4. Theoretical sampling – Theoretical sampling is required when the researcher needs to get more information to saturate categories under development. Samples are identified based on their ability to give information-rich sources of data to meet the researcher's analytical needs.
5. Constant comparative analysis –this is the process in which the researcher constantly compares incident to incident, incident to codes, codes to codes, codes to categories, and categories to categories until a grounded theory is fully integrated.
6. Theoretical sensitivity – The first level of theoretical sensitivity is personal as it reflects the researchers' insights into both themselves and the area of research whilst the second level reflects their "intellectual history, the type of theory that they have read, absorbed and now use in their everyday thought" (Birks and Mills, 2011: 11).
7. Intermediate coding – this is to relink data after it has been fractured during the initial coding. Two ways in which the researcher employs intermediate coding are: (1) "develop fully individual categories by

connecting sub-categories, and fully developing the range of properties and their dimensions”; and (2) link all the emerged categories (Birks and Mills, 2011:12).

8. Theoretical saturation - Saturation is said to occur when no new theoretical insights arise and no new properties of categories emerge.

Some other researchers who do not associate their studies with grounded theory approach also employ the elements highlighted above (e.g. Rashid, Rahman & Rahman, 2016; Yunus, Mohamad, Waelateh, 2016; Rashid, 2016). As acknowledged by many novice researchers, one of the main reasons they choose to employ grounded theory methodology is because this methodological approach offers clear steps and guidance in doing the research (Glaser, 1998). Useful resources that can help novice SLL researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of grounded theory methodology are presented in the next section.

USEFUL RESOURCES ABOUT GROUNDED THEORY

Recommendation of useful resources that can be used to gain an in-depth understanding of grounded theory methodology made in this section is based on the first author’s personal experiences of attempting to employ classic grounded theory in his PhD studies. Since many researchers have remodelled the grounded theory, we suggest that novice researchers start by reading *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* written by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This is important to avoid confusion and misconception as many researchers choose to ‘adapt and adopt’ this methodology and often violate the principles of grounded theory (Glaser, 1998). It is admitted by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) that reading this book clears one’s misconception of grounded theory.

Another useful book to read is *Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussion* by Glaser (1998). In this book, Glaser tackles the various issues raised by other researchers such as the rhetorical wrestle of philosophical underpinnings of grounded theory, and the function of literature review in grounded theory. In addition to that, Glaser also provides a practical guide to doing grounded theory in this book. It is also necessary to read *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory* by Glaser (1978) to gain insights on how to monitor theoretical sensitivity in the attempt of developing the theory.

Besides the three books, *The Grounded Theory Review* which is an open access journal published by the Grounded Theory Institute is also useful for novice researchers to take a look at the examples of grounded theories as well as discussion of current issues surrounding this methodology. Besides that, there is much valuable information about grounded theory on the Grounded Theory Institute website which can be accessed at <http://www.groundedtheory.com/>.

CONCLUSION

The scarcity of grounded theories in the literature of second language learning makes it difficult for teachers and policy makers to link theories to practice thus they are unable to optimize the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. Hence, more SLL research that employs grounded theory methodology needs to be carried out so that substantive theories which are based on the current empirical situation can be produced and thus shape the teaching practices and national policies towards the improved efficiency of second language teaching and learning.

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