CASE STUDY RESEARCH IN ELT AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS: TRENDS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND CHALLENGES

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This article critically examines 'case study research' in English Language Teaching (ELT) and Applied Linguistics, tracing its historical roots, theoretical bases, and methodological orientations. Employing a qualitative narrative review design, it synthesizes key perspectives and discussions from the major works in the field. The article outlines definitions, types, features, issues, trends, and applications of case studies in ELT. Findings indicate that case studies are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic, offering rich, contextualized understandings of the classroom situations and learner-teacher interactions. Current trends include a shift from single to multiple-case designs, the rise of longitudinal research, the integration of mixed methodologies, micro-analytic analyses of classroom discourse, and a growing focus on identity, agency and multilingual practices. Despite its limitations related to generalizability and subjectivity, case study research remains vital for developing theory and fostering pedagogical innovation in ELT.

Keywords: Multiple case studies, qualitative research, generalizability, particularistic, English Language Teaching

1. Introduction

The case study research has roots in psychology, sociology, and anthropology. However, case studies did not receive methodological attention until the development of qualitative research techniques. Research methods textbooks from the 1960s and 1970s primarily focused on statistical techniques and experimental design variants. A case study research is a part of qualitative research tradition in which researchers focus on a unit of study known as a bounded system (e.g., individual teachers, a classroom, or a school). Case study is a type of qualitative research, even though it can involve historical data and quantitative analysis. The primary objective of most case studies is to deepen our understanding of a phenomenon, process, individual, or group, rather than to conduct experiments and generalize findings to other groups, as is customary in larger-scale survey research. Pandey (2025a) stated that "Qualitative research in applied linguistics aims to understand and interpret language, language learning, or use in specific contexts, as well as social phenomena, within natural settings like social and school environments" (p. 87). Pandey (2025b) further views "Qualitative research in applied linguistics often aims to elucidate language, language acquisition, or usage within contextual frameworks, or to examine social phenomena as they manifest in natural environments" (p. 116). For Dornyei (2007), "cases are primarily people, researchers can also explore in-depth a programme, an institution, an organization, or a community. In fact, almost everything but a case serves as a case as long as it constitutes a single entity with clearly defined boundaries" (p. 151). Qualitative case studies, like other qualitative research methodologies, focus on meaning and understanding, utilize the researcher as the principal tool for data collection and analysis, employ an inductive investigative approach, and yield vividly descriptive outcomes. According to Merriam (2009),

> A case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system. Part of the confusion surrounding case studies is that the process of conducting a case study is conflated with both the unit of study (the case) and the product of this type of investigation. (p. 40)

If the phenomenon you want to study is not bounded, not identifiable within a specific context, it is not appropriately studied as a case study. It is a study of the particularity and complexity of a single case. Yin (2009), for instance, explains case study in terms of the overall research process, noting that "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 18). In contrast, Stake (2005) emphasizes identifying the unit of study - the case itself. Wolcott (1992) takes yet another perspective, describing it as "an end-product of field-oriented research" (p. 36), rather than a research strategy or method. According to Gay et al. (2017) case study research is

> a qualitative research approach in which researchers focus on a unit of study known as a bounded system (e.g., individual teachers, a classroom, or a school). A number of researchers have addressed the definition of a case, which is a concept that is sometimes difficult to grasp. (P. 402)

While differentiating case studies from ethnographies, Mackey and Gass (2022) state, "case studies generally aim to provide a holistic description of language learning or use within a specific population and setting" (pp. 308-309). However, case studies often offer in-depth accounts of particular students (or occasionally classes) within their learning environment, whereas ethnographies concentrate on cultural trends within groups.

Although case studies can be conducted using a variety of methods and techniques, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches, they are often categorized as belonging to the qualitative research tradition (Yin 2009). Case study is regarded as *transparadigmatic*, meaning it can be carried out within postpositivist, critical theory, and interpretivist paradigms (Van Wynsberge & Khan, 2007). Although scholars define case study in different ways, one common feature is that it involves examining a unique, bounded phenomenon within its natural setting. It represents an approach where the focus is on

exploring a specific case in depth rather than aiming for broad generalizations. Being *bounded* means that the phenomenon under investigation is clearly delimited-we have a defined sense of what falls within the case and what does not (Stake, 2005). Equally important, the case is embedded in a particular and well-defined context; without this contextual framing, a case cannot truly exist. The research methodology and resultant report may be classified as a case study if it conducts an in-depth examination of an individual, a group, an institution, or a community (Merriam, 1998; Simons, 2009; Stake, 2005).

The term "bounded" refers to the fact that the phenomena under investigation is well-defined; we are quite certain of what is and is not true (Stake, 2005). Additionally, the context in which the case is located is specific and well-defined. We don't have a case if we don't consider the circumstances. Therefore, the research that thoroughly examines one individual, one group, one organization, or one community, it can be referred to as a case study.

The primary distinguishing feature of case study research is the specification of the subject of investigation, the case. A case study is more a selection of the subject matter than a methodological option. As Stake (2005, p. 443) views, "A case study is less of a methodological choice than a choice of what is to be studied." The "what" refers to a bounded system (Smith, 1978)- a distinct entity or unit defined by clear boundaries. In other words, I can "fence in" the focus of my study. A case, therefore, might involve a single individual serving as an example of a phenomenon, or it could encompass a program, a group, an institution, a community, or even a specific policy.

The unit of analysis, rather than the subject of inquiry, defines a case study. A study examining how older individuals acquire computer skills would likely be qualitative rather than a case study, with the unit of analysis focusing on the learners' experiences, and an unspecified number of older adult learners and their computer usage experiences might be chosen for the research (Merriam, 2009). To qualify as a case study, the unit of analysis must be a specific program, a

distinct classroom of learners (a bounded system), or an individual older student chosen based on criteria such as typicality, originality, or success.

For Adelman et al. (as cited in Nunan, 1992, p. 75), it is the study of an 'instance in action'. In other words, one selects an instance from the class of objects and phenomena one is investigating (for example, 'a second language learner' or 'a science classroom') and investigates the way this instance functions in context as cited in Nunan, 1992). Case studies aim to improve our understanding of a phenomenon, process, person, or group, rather than generalizing to other populations. However, misunderstandings persist, leading some to dismiss them as subjective, ungeneralizable, practical, and unscientific.

Case studies are a unique research method that uses multiple data sources to explore specific, bounded phenomena. Researchers assume that there is something unique about the case they investigate, focusing on the particulars that make it special. They may generalize to theoretical propositions, concepts, naturalistic generalization, or the situation being studied. However, identifying boundaries may not always be straightforward, and researchers may fudge around a case, drawing artificial lines as part of their research process.

2. Theoretical and philosophical bases

2.1 Theoretical base

The theoretical base of case study research lies in its orientation toward understanding a phenomenon within its real-life context, emphasizing complexity, depth, and contextual richness. Case study research is based on the idea that phenomena cannot be fully understood outside their natural settings. It is an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon in its context when the boundaries between the two are blurred. Merriam (1998, 2009) emphasizes the educational and applied orientation of case studies. She views theory as both a guide and a product of case study research: existing frameworks can guide the research design, but the analysis of a case may also generate new theoretical insights. Merriam (2009) particularly highlights strength of the case in capturing the

interaction of variables over time, demonstrating how theory is applied in real-world conditions. Stake (1995, 2006) positions case study research more firmly within the interpretivist tradition. The idea of 'thick description' the case study research stresses the need for richly contextualized accounts. Flyvbjerg (2006) also strengthens the theoretical grounding of case study research by challenging the "five misunderstandings" about case studies. He argues that case studies are crucial for theory-building, not weak substitutes for quantitative approaches

2.2. Philosophical base

The case study research reflects its ontological and epistemological assumptions. At its core, it is rooted in constructivism and interpretivism, though it can also draw on post-positivist paradigms depending on the stance of the researcher. Ontologically, case study research assumes that reality is multiple, constructed, and context-dependent. There is no single objective truth; rather, reality is shaped by human experiences and interactions within specific contexts.

3. Methodology

This research article employed a qualitative narrative review design, drawing on a wide range of scholarly works on case study research in ELT and Applied Linguistics. The method was document-based, relying on books, journal articles, and theoretical discussions that define, critique, and expand case study methodology. A narrative review framework was adopted to provide an interpretive and integrative account of how case study research has been conceptualized, applied, and developed over time. Sources were selected based on their relevance to case study methodology, their authority within the field, and their contribution to both classical and recent trends, with particular attention to key figures such as Yin (2018), Merriam (2009), Stake (2005), Duff (2008), Nunan (1992), Dornyei (2007), and Mackey and Gass (2005). This design was particularly suitable because case study research itself values context, depth, and narrative richness, and by employing a qualitative, narrative synthesis, the review mirrored the methodological orientation of case studies while

generating insights that connected theory with practice. Thus, the study addressed the following research questions: a) What are the distinctive features of case study research in relation to ELT and Applied Linguistics? b) How do different types of case study research serve different purposes in ELT? c) What are the main steps of case study research in ELT? d) How are the recent trends in case study research useful in ELT? e) Why is the case study research important in ELT an Applied Linguistics? f) What are the issues and challenges related to case study research in ELT and Applied Linguistics?

4. Objectives of the paper

The objectives of this paper are to provide a comprehensive and critical examination of case study research in English Language Teaching (ELT) and Applied Linguistics. Specifically, the article aims to trace the historical roots and evolving definitions of case study research, clarify its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, and highlight its methodological diversity. It also seeks to analyze the different types of case studies, outline the processes involved in conducting them, and discuss their major strengths, limitations and practical applications. Furthermore, the article intends to identify recent trends in case study research in ELT and Applied Linguistics.

5. Results and discussion

This section highlights the key aspects of case study research. It outlines its characteristics discusses types and explains the steps. It also reviews trends in ELT and Applied Linguistics as well as the main issues and limitations such as generalizability, time and resources, bias, ethics, rigor, and reporting challenges.

5.1 Characteristics of case study

Case studies can be described as particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. A particularistic case study focuses on a specific phenomenon or situation, allowing researchers to understand everyday problems. A descriptive case study provides a comprehensive narrative that includes a detailed description of the research phenomenon, encompassing multiple variables and their interactions. Heuristic refers to the process by which case studies enhance the reader's understanding of a phenomenon beyond their initial knowledge. Case study research is influenced by the disciplinary orientation of the researcher, with educational researchers often utilizing disciplines like anthropology, history, psychology, or sociology for conceptual frameworks, data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Case studies, regardless of disciplinary orientation, can be categorized by their overall intent, such as descriptive nature, contribution to existing theory, or evaluation of an existing program. Thus, the key characteristics of case study research can be summarized as below:

a) Case studies can be described as particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic.
b) Case study research is employed for a variety of purposes across various disciplinary sectors, and the discipline determines the specific characteristics of the study.
c) Case studies can be classified according to their general purpose, regardless of their disciplinary orientation.

Particularistic refers to case studies that concentrate on a specific situation, event, program, or phenomena. The instance itself is important because of what it shows about the phenomena and what it may mean. This particular focus makes it an excellent design for real-world challenges, such queries, circumstances, or unusual events that occur in everyday life. Stake (2005, p. 448) expresses regret, "case study method has been too little honored as the intrinsic study of a valued particular, as it is in biography, institutional self - study, program evaluation, therapeutic practice, and many lines of work."

Descriptive refers to the fact that the outcome of a case study is a rich, "thick" description of the phenomenon being examined. The term *thick description*, borrowed from anthropology, denotes a detailed and comprehensive account of the incident or entity under investigation. Case studies typically incorporate as many variables as possible and illustrate how these interact, often across a span of time.

Case studies, therefore, may take a longitudinal form (Huber & Van de Ven, 1995). They are also described as holistic, lifelike, grounded, and exploratory. Their presentation can be imaginative, employing prose and literary techniques to express the researcher's interpretation and understanding of the case. The main characteristics of case study research can be outlined as follows:

Table 1: Characteristics of case study research in ELT and Applied Linguistics

Characteristics	Description
Particularistic	Emphasizes on a specific situation, event, program, or phenomenon to addresses real-world issues.
Descriptive	Provides a rich, *"thick"* description of the phenomenon under study. Includes detailed narratives that encompass multiple variables and their interactions over time, often longitudinal in form.
Heuristic	Provides new insights, deepens understanding, and stimulates discovery.
Disciplinary Orientation	Shaped by the researcher's field (e.g., anthropology, psychology, sociology).
Overall Intent	Aims may be descriptive, theoretical, or evaluative, regardless of discipline.

Thus, case study research is valued for its ability to focus on particular contexts, provide detailed descriptions, and generate deeper insights, making it a versatile approach across disciplines and purposes.

5.2 Types of qualitative case studies

Multiple types of qualitative case studies have been identified. They differ in focus, purpose and scope. These include historical and observational case studies, intrinsic and instrumental case studies, and multisite case studies. Each type offers distinct ways of approaching a case, depending on the research questions and the phenomenon under investigation.

5.3 Historical and observational case studies

Historical case studies aim to reconstruct the past and place the case within its historical context. They rely extensively on archival data such as official records, documents, oral histories, and artifacts to trace how past events, conditions, or policies have shaped the present. Such studies are particularly useful for examining educational reforms, institutional changes, or cultural shifts over time. "It is a study of the development of a particular organization over time. The key to historical case studies, organizational or otherwise, is the notion of investigating the phenomenon over a period of time" (Merriam, 2009, p. 47). Observational case studies, on the other hand, emphasize studying a phenomenon as it naturally unfolds in the present. "The major data gathering technique is participant observation (supplemented with formal and informal interviews and review of documents) and the focus of the study is on a particular organization (school, rehabilitation center) or some aspect of the organization" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 60).

5.4 Intrinsic and instrumental case studies

Intrinsic case studies are conducted when the researcher's primary interest lies in the case itself rather than in drawing conclusions beyond it. "The intrinsic case study is undertaken when the researcher is interested in the particular case itself - it is intrinsically interesting (Merriam, 2009, p. 47). According to Creswell (2016) "When the case itself is of interest, it is called an intrinsic case" (p. 465. The purpose is neither to grasp an abstract construct or a generalized phenomenon, nor to engage in theory building. Rather, the "study is undertaken because of an intrinsic interest in, for example, this particular child, conference, or curriculum" (Stake, 2005, p. 445). The case may be unique, unusual, or particularly meaningful, making it worthy of study for its own sake. In contrast, instrumental case studies view the case as a vehicle to understand a broader issue, concept, or theory. An instrumental case study is conducted "to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization (Stake, 2005, p. 437). The case is important not in isolation but as a means of providing insight into something larger. For instance, analyzing one teacher's

classroom practices could serve as an instrument for exploring broader pedagogical innovations or challenges in education.

5.5 Multiple case studies

Multisite, or collective, case studies involve the examination of several cases either simultaneously or sequentially. "These are commonly referred to as collective case studies; cross - case; multi-case, or multisite studies; or comparative case studies. This type of study involves collecting and analyzing data from several cases and can be distinguished from the single case study that may have subunits or subcases embedded within" (Merriam, 2009, p. 49). The figure 1 below presents the typology of case studies.

Figure 1:Types of case studies
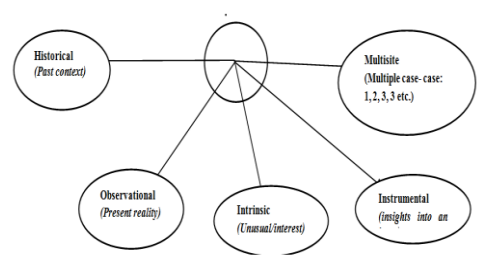
The figure illustrates the main types of qualitative case studies, showing how each varies in purpose and scope.

5.6 Steps in the process

Conducting a case study involves a systematic series of steps that guide the researcher from identifying the purpose of the inquiry to interpreting the collected data. Each step builds upon the previous one, beginning with a clear statement of purpose and the formulation of guiding research questions. The steps discussed below provide a structured yet flexible roadmap for producing rigorous and meaningful case study research. Table 2 below outlines the major steps involved in the research process in ELT and Applied Linguistics.

Table 2: Steps in the process

Trend	Description
State the Purpose	Define what the study aims to discover or solve
Develop Initial Res. Questions	Developing guiding questions
Review Literature	Examine prior studies, theories, and gaps
Case Rationale for case Selection & Sample	Justify case choice and participant
Collect Data Strategies	Choose suitable methods (interviews, observations, surveys, etc.)
Analyze & Interpret	Identify patterns, draw conclusions, link to literature

Conducting a case study involves defining a clear purpose, formulating guiding research questions, and reviewing relevant literature to establish a foundation. The researcher then justifies the case and sample selection, chooses appropriate data collection methods, and finally analyzes and interprets the data to draw meaningful conclusions.

6. Major trends in case study research in ELT and Applied Linguistics

Research in case studies within English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics has undergone substantial evolution, indicating changes in technique, emphasis, and breadth. The focus has shifted from singular, confined examples to encompass multiple-case designs, longitudinal approaches, and the incorporation of hybrid methodologies to improve validity and scope. Significant issues such as identity, agency, and emotion have become increasingly prominent these days. These developments characterize case study research as a dynamic and flexible tradition

that persistently elucidates the intricacies of language teaching in evolving circumstances.

6.1 From single to multiple-case designs

Historically, case study research in applied linguistics often focused on a single bounded case-a learner, a teacher, or a classroom. While these single cases provide rich description, recent years have seen a strong move toward collective or multiple-case studies, where two or more cases are investigated in parallel. Yin (2018) emphasizes that studying multiple cases enables analytic generalization, allowing researchers to identify patterns and contrasts across contexts rather than being confined to one setting. Merriam (2009) also argues that multiple cases add robustness by demonstrating whether findings recur across different contexts. In ELT, Duff (2008) illustrates how cross-classroom case studies shed light on interaction patterns, assessment practices, or feedback strategies that are not unique to a single classroom but part of broader pedagogical tendencies.

6.2 Longitudinal orientation

Another defining trend is the growing use of longitudinal case studies to capture how learning, teaching, and professional identities develop over time. Stake (2005) suggests that case study is particularly valuable when it documents change and process. In applied linguistics, longitudinal case studies have become prominent in exploring teacher identity (Tsui, 2007), learner autonomy (Benson, 2011), and motivational dynamics (Dornyei, 2007).

6.3 Methodological integration and mixed methods

While case studies are primarily qualitative, there is an increasing trend to integrate quantitative tools in order to strengthen claims and triangulate findings. Yin (2018) and Creswell (2018) both point out that case studies can be conducted within mixed-methods frameworks, where qualitative insights are complemented by survey data, test scores, or frequency counts.

6.4 Micro-analytic focus on classroom interaction

A particularly strong trend in applied linguistics is the micro-analytic investigation of classroom interaction within case studies. Using Conversation Analysis (CA) and discourse analysis, scholars focus on episodes of turn-taking, repair, scaffolding, and feedback that illustrate how learning opportunities are constructed. Duff (2008) emphasizes that micro-analytic case studies are not merely descriptive but explanatory, showing how interactional practices connect to learning and participation. This trend is important in ELT because it provides teachers and researchers with fine-grained evidence of how pedagogy unfolds moment by moment.

6.5 Digital and online learning contexts

More recently, Reinhardt (2019) highlights how case studies of social media and digital platforms illustrate new literacies and participation frameworks. In ELT, such studies often focus on online peer feedback, collaborative writing in Google Docs, or the use of mobile applications for vocabulary learning. This trend reflects the adaptability of case study methodology to new contexts, showing how learners and teachers construct meaning in digital environments.

6.6 Identity, agency and emotion

A major substantive trend in case study research is the exploration of teacher and learner identity, agency, and affective factors. Norton's (2000) influential work established identity as central to language learning, while Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) demonstrated how learners exercise agency in sociocultural contexts. More recent case studies (Barkhuizen, 2016) continue this trajectory, showing how professional identity, agency, and emotions like anxiety or motivation shape classroom participation. In ELT, this trend is particularly important for understanding why learners engage (or disengage) and how teachers negotiate policy, curriculum, and classroom realities. Case studies focusing on identity and emotion highlight the human dimensions of teaching and learning, offering insights that broader surveys often miss.

6.7 Multilingualism and translanguaging practices

The multilingual turn in applied linguistics (Garcia & Li Wei, 2014) has pushed case study researchers to document how learners and

teachers draw on multiple languages in the classroom. This trend is highly relevant in multilingual contexts like South Asia, where English is taught alongside local languages. By focusing on real classroom practices, case studies reveal how policies promoting English-only approaches interact with the lived multilingual realities of learners and teachers. This reflects a broader move toward recognizing diversity and inclusivity in ELT pedagogy. Table 3 below provides an overview of the major trends in case study research in ELT and Applied linguistics.

Table 3: Major trends in case Research in ELT and Applied Linguistics

Trend	Description
Single to Multiple-Case Design	Move from one case to multiple cases for comparison and generalization
Longitudinal Orientation	Studies track change in learning identity, or motivation over time
Methodological Integration/ Mixed Methods	Combining qualitative insights with quantitative data for triangulation
Micro-Analytic Focus on Classroom Interaction	Close analysis of talk, feedback and scaffolding in classroom episodes
Digital & Online Learning	Focus on online tools, digital literacies, and mobile learning
Multilingualism & Translanguaging Practices	Documents use of multiple languages in classrooms and inclusive pedagogy

7. Why case study in ELT and Applied Linguistics research

Case study research holds a significant place in ELT and Applied Linguistics because it captures the richness and complexity of real-life contexts. It provides thick, holistic descriptions, investigates multifaceted social settings, and generates insights that can guide both practice and future inquiry. By bridging theory and application, case studies illuminate classroom processes, inform program evaluation, and support curriculum and policy development. They also engage readers through vivid narratives, enable transfer of learning across contexts, and embrace the complexity and diversity of human experience. Thus, case study research offers a credible and powerful means of understanding language teaching and learning in authentic settings.

7.1 Rich, holistic and contextual description

Case study research provides a thick, detailed, and contextual account of real-life situations. Merriam 2009) notes, "Anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon" (p. 51). Such holistic description allows readers to grasp the dynamics and subtleties of a case. Unlike quantitative approaches, case studies preserve the authentic complexity of social life, making them especially useful in applied disciplines. A case study on pragmatic dimensions can vividly capture how speech acts, politeness strategies, or discourse markers function in real classrooms. Pragmatics is highly contextual; thus, thick description allows readers to see how pragmatic competence develops in authentic interactions. Pandey (2024) elaborates on the importance of pragmatics stating, "Pragmatics offers insights into why certain linguistic patterns and structures emerge based on their use in communication, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of language" (p.62)

7.2 Investigation of complex social units

Case study research is particularly powerful for examining complex social settings with multiple variables that shape human behavior. "The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon" (Merriam, 2009, p. 50). By capturing interrelated factors within real contexts, case studies produce insights that surveys or experiments cannot fully reveal.

7.3 Generation of insights and tentative hypotheses

Another strength lies in its potential to illuminate new meanings and generate hypotheses that guide

future research. Merriam (2009) stresses, "The qualitative case study offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences. These insights can be construed as tentative hypotheses that help structure future research" (p. 51). This positions case study research as a key theory-building approach, enriching the field's knowledge base.

7.4 Applied relevance for practice and policy

Case studies are particularly valuable in applied fields like education, health, administration, and social work, where understanding processes and programs is crucial. Merriam observes: "Because of its strengths, case study is a particularly appealing design for applied fields of study such as education, social work, administration, health, and so on. An applied field's processes, problems, and programs can be examined to bring about understanding that in turn can affect and perhaps even improve practice" (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). She further adds: "Case study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy" (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). Thus, case studies bridge the gap between theory and practice, contributing directly to real-world improvement.

7.5 Vicarious learning and reader engagement

Case studies enable readers to learn vicariously through the researcher's narrative. Merriam emphasizes their capacity to engage readers by bringing phenomena to life: "A case study can 'bring to life' for readers a situation, program, or phenomenon, enabling them to vicariously experience it through the rich description provided" (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). Supporting this, Stake (2005) notes that case researchers pass along some personal meanings of events, while readers reconstruct knowledge for their own contexts (p. 455). Similarly, Eisner (1991) illustrates how: "A vivid portrait of excellent teaching … can become a prototype that can be used in the education of teachers or for the appraisal of teaching" (p. 199). This highlights the transferability of knowledge from one case to another through narrative and imagery.

7.6 Transferability through the particular

Although often criticized for lack of generalizability, case studies achieve naturalistic generalization. Erickson (1986) argues, "Since the general lies in the particular, what we learn in a particular case can be transferred to similar situations" (p. 130). Merriam (2009) aligns with this view by suggesting that it is the reader, not the researcher, who determines the applicability of findings to their own context (p. 51). This makes case study research highly reader-centered and flexible.

7.7 Acknowledgment of complexity and human difference

Finally, case study research resists oversimplification and instead embraces the complexity of human life. Shields (2003) powerfully defends this approach: "The strength of qualitative approaches is that they account for and include difference-ideologically, epistemologically, methodologically-and most importantly, humanly. They do not attempt to eliminate what cannot be discounted. They do not attempt to simplify what cannot be simplified" (p. 13). Thus, case studies honor the paradoxes and contradictions of real-world phenomena, making them a credible design for exploring applied problems.

8. Data collection techniques

Similar to other qualitative researchers, case study researchers employ the same data collection methods utilized by researchers conducting various forms of qualitative research, such as ethnographic research and narrative research. The primary feature of case studies that distinguishes them from other types of research is that they use multiple data sources (interviews, documents, observations) to explore (describe, analyse) particular bounded phenomena (Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015). The objective is to gain comprehension about the specific case being examined. A case study researcher gathers descriptive narrative and visual data to address inquiries pertaining to the processes and reasons behind the subject matter. In addition, similar to other researchers that focus on qualitative methods, case study researchers recognize the importance of triangulating their data by utilizing diverse sources of information.

9. Issues and limitations

Although case study research provides deep insights into real-life contexts, it also faces several challenges. Questions about generalizability, time and resource demands, and the risk of researcher subjectivity often limit its wider acceptance. The absence of standardized procedures, ethical concerns related to selective reporting, and persistent doubts about validity and rigor further complicate its use. In addition, lengthy and overly detailed reports may reduce their usefulness for busy policymakers and practitioners.

9.1 Problem of generalizability

One of the most common criticisms of case study research is its limited generalizability due to the focus on a single case or small number of cases. Merriam (2009) observes, "Perhaps because a case study focuses on a single unit, a single instance, the issue of generalizability looms larger here than with other types of qualitative research" (p. 51). While case studies produce rich insights, they are often context-specific. The burden of transferability is placed on readers, not the researcher (Stake, 2005, p. 455).

9.2 Time, cost, and practical constraints

Producing a high-quality case study requires significant time and resources. Merriam (2009) points out that, "Although rich, thick description and analysis of a phenomenon may be desired, a researcher may not have the time or money to devote to such an undertaking" (p. 51). Even if completed, the final product may be too lengthy or detailed for busy practitioners or policymakers to read and use.

9.3 Subjectivity and researcher bias

Because the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, case studies are highly susceptible to subjectivity. Merriam (2009) notes, "Qualitative case studies are limited, too, by the sensitivity and integrity of the investigator. The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis" (p. 52). This reliance on the researcher's skills, training, and ethical integrity can both enrich and weaken the research. As Hamel (1993) argues, case studies have been "faulted for [their] lack of representativeness … and lack of rigor … linked to the problem of bias" (p. 23).

9.4 Lack of standardized procedures and guidelines

Merriam (2009) underscores the absence of universal guidelines for conducting and reporting case studies. "Nor are there guidelines in constructing the final report. The investigator is left to rely on his or her own instincts and abilities throughout most of this research effort" (p. 52). This lack of structure makes it difficult for novice researchers, particularly since training in techniques such as observation and interviewing is not always widely available.

9.5 Ethical concerns

Ethical dilemmas are particularly acute in case study research because of the depth of description and the researcher's interpretive role. Guba and Lincoln (1981) warn of 'unusual problems of ethics'. "An unethical case writer could so select from among available data that virtually anything he wished could be illustrated" (p. 378). This highlights the danger of selective reporting and underscores the need for reflexivity and transparency.

9.6 Reliability, validity, and rigor

Questions of rigor often surface in critiques of case study research. Merriam (2009) acknowledges that case study design struggles with issues of reliability and validity due to its interpretive nature (p. 52). Hamel (1993) reinforces this, stating that case studies lack methodological rigor in "the collection, construction, and analysis of empirical materials" (p. 23).

9.7 Overwhelming detail and reporting challenges

Another limitation involves report writing. Stake (2005) identifies dilemmas researchers must resolve, such as: "How much to make the report a story; how much to compare with other cases; how much to formalize generalizations or leave such generalizing to readers; how much description of the researcher to include in the report; and whether or not and how much to protect anonymity" (p. 460). These challenges can

lead to reports that are too descriptive, too long, or too narrative-driven, reducing their usability for decision-makers.

10. Conclusion

This paper examines 'case study research' in ELT and Applied Linguistics which aims at tracing its historical development, clarifying its theoretical and philosophical bases and evaluating its methodological diversity and practical relevance. Employing a qualitative narrative review of key scholarly works, the study discussed definitions, types, processes, and emerging trends in case study methodology in ELT. The findings revealed that case studies are characterized as particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic, enabling researchers to capture the complexity of real-life classroom practices, teacher identities, learner agency, and multilingual realities. The study outlines important trends, such as a shift from single to multiple-case designs, the growing use of longitudinal perspectives, the integration of mixed methods, micro-analytic investigations of interaction, and the exploration of digital learning environments. Further, the paper deals with the limitations and issues related to case research in ELT such as the issue of generalizability, subjectivity, and the absence of standardized reporting guidelines. Despite these challenges, the study underscores the importance of case studies in bridging theory and practice, offering practical applications for curriculum design, pedagogy, teacher training, program evaluation, and policy development. The article therefore contributes to advancing theoretical understanding and practical knowledge in applied linguistics. The study recommends that future research further expand the scope of case studies by incorporating multisite and cross-context comparisons, exploring the role of technology and online platforms, and deepening investigations into affective, identity-related, and multilingual aspects of language education.

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