

EPISTEMOLOGICAL TRENDS IN ENGLISH EDUCATION RESEARCH: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE THESES

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Abstract

Research in English Language Education has developed over the past decades along with the rapid growth of English Language Teaching and Learning due to technological innovation and globalization. One of the essential elements of a research is its methodology. Research methodology represents the epistemological aspects, the nature of the research, and the objects being explored in it. Hence, a study focusing on the use of research methods is worth discussing further. In an attempt to discover the trends in English Language Education research, particularly in its epistemological aspect, this study reviews 150 research consisting of undergraduate and postgraduate theses in the three-year period of 2019 to 2021. Using content analysis, this study found the trends through the highest frequency identified in the data collection and the findings were also interpreted and added with meanings. By investigating a series of current research on English Language Education theses, the results are expected to contribute to the knowledge of English Language Education research for students, teachers, and academicians.

Keywords: English as Foreign Language, English Language Education, English Language Teaching, Epistemology, Research Methodology, Research Trends

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INTRODUCTION

Research is a process to observe, analyze and conclude an important problematic object. It must have a strong theoretical and practical basis in order to provide useful values for human life. Meanwhile, research methodologies are approaches to assist researchers and policy makers in obtaining accurate and trustworthy results for educated judgments. English language education has a wide domain of research, such as the area of English Language Education Planning and Evaluation and English Language Learning Teaching and Assessing which come from different research paradigms. In practice, this research

methodology is certainly related to the philosophy of science.

The study of science philosophy has three basic pillars of research, there are ontology, epistemology, and axiology. These three elements are benchmarks in building *The Body of Knowledge* and have an essential role in conducting the research. The philosophical foundations are prerequisites before researchers explain the relationship between research methodology and philosophy of science. This present study focuses on the epistemological trend in English Language Education research.

According to Saifullah (2013) the concept of epistemology can be studied from the application

of the scientific method explicitly. Moreover, he added that the procedures that include various thought actions, work patterns, technical methods, and procedures for obtaining new knowledge or developing existing knowledge are the meaning of the scientific method in methodological application. The use of the epistemological realm in this research is urgently needed because it relates to the ability of researchers and the scientific community in certain fields of science to map research so that it can provide greater benefits for further research.

In an attempt to map the research in the English Language Education field, there have been some previous studies on this matter (Alharbi, 2019; Bailey & Corrales, 2020; and Lopez, et. al, 2021). These studies investigated the trends on research regarding English Language Teaching and Learning with various focuses and approaches.

Alharbi examined postgraduate and doctorate research in Teaching English of Foreign Language field in Saudi Arabian context to identify the trends as a guidance for future research and as a means for improvement. The findings revealed that the highest trend covered the topic of Teaching Methodology, followed by Evaluation and Technology Use. The highest trends in the use of research methodologies were Quasi-Experimental and Descriptive studies, respectively. The highest trends in the use of research instruments were Tests and Questionnaires. While this study covered the local context of Saudi Arabian, and there has not been sufficient studies on Indonesian context regarding the English Language Education research mapping; therefore, this present study aimed to conduct similar research on Indonesian context including undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctorate research.

Meanwhile, another study reviews the types of research approach used in theses research (Bailey & Corrales, 2020). They explored the methodology, design, and techniques for data collection of a series of theses research. The findings revealed that almost half of the master's thesis did not state the type of methodology and research design being used (54%), (44%); in addition, 77% of the theses conducted a

Qualitative studies, and only one Experimental study. Case Study and Action Research were also the dominant trends, while Ethnography and Phenomenology were the least preferable. Bailey & Corrales stated that they did not include any interpretation on the findings; however, this present study attempted to draw an interpretation on the data found.

These findings are essential in giving this present study a glimpse of possible trends in English Language Education studies which can be used as a reference in analyzing the findings in present study. Both studies applied meta-analysis which leaned more to the quantitative studies, while this research applied content analysis to try to elaborate more on the findings.

Meanwhile, López et al. investigated the current trends of English Language Teaching Master's Program (2021). By using mixed-methods, they examined the master theses of five Master's programs in Colombia. The study managed to identify the most frequently used research methods, techniques, and instruments in a large collection of master theses. The study revealed that mixed methods were the most popular method due to their practicality in combining techniques and instruments to obtain richer data. Meanwhile, the less frequent methods were ethnography, survey, and descriptive research due to the feasibility of research duration and amount of population. While this study specifies on the trends in English Language Teaching in the curriculum, this present study has wider coverage.

Exploring the research trends in the realm of English Language Education may provide insight on the prospects in future research by reflecting on current practice (Widodo, Picard, Macalister, & Lin, 2018). Hence, this study is expected to contribute in giving understanding on what has been done in the past three years, so that future research may be directed more effectively. As suggested by Brown, one main reason to explore the research trends is to look at "where it has been, where it is currently, and where it tends to be in the future" (in Chaiyasook & Jaroongkhongdach, 2014).

In the context of Indonesia, according to Zein et. al, the common issue was the lack of clarity

in describing the research methodology including in informing the research approach and detailed data collection procedures. Hence, more research needs to be conducted regarding the use of research methodology among English Language Education students and researchers. Thus, the research objectives are: What are the epistemological trends in Undergraduate and Postgraduate theses at Indonesian universities in the field of English Language Education? And To what extent do the epistemological trends contribute to the development of English Language Education in Indonesia?

METHODS

To explore the epistemological trends in English Language Education research by identifying the research methods, this study used content analysis as the research design. Under the research methods, there are four categories: (1) Types of research methods (2) Data and data sources (3) Types of research instruments, and (4) Types of analytical methods. According to Krippendorff, approach in content analysis is the extrapolation of trends which means it estimates or concludes something under the assumption the existing trend will remain applicable (2004). Furthermore, he also argues that scholars have made efforts to determine the future direction of their research fields; hence, revealing the patterns and trends leads to insightful content analyses. The sampling consisted of 150 undergraduate and postgraduate theses in a time range of 2019 to 2021. The theses were selected under the criteria of English Language Education study program and the publication year. The distribution are as follows: in 2019, 35 Undergraduate and 15 Master theses; in 2020, 29 Undergraduate and 21 Master theses; and in 2021, 38 Undergraduate and 12 Master theses. The data were selected randomly based on the availability of access to their theses documents in accordance with the time range criteria.

The data were collected by accessing and downloading the theses from the respective university’s repositories. The instruments used in this study to process the data were *AntConc*

software and Microsoft Excel. The research procedure was converting the Word file to .txt format compatible with the analysis software. Then, the data were processed by the software to identify the highest frequencies of each category. The findings were presented in forms of charts using Microsoft Excel, and the findings were discussed further. The analysis was conducted in a descriptive way to identify and explore the current research trends in English Language Education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of data collected from Undergraduate and Postgraduate theses and their descriptions. Data analysis in exploring the representative data and to capture the overall trends is often presented in a tabular or diagrammatic form (McDonough & McDonough, 1997). There are four categories covered in this section i.e., types of research methods, types of data and data sources, types of research instruments, and types of analytical methods.

Types of Research Methods

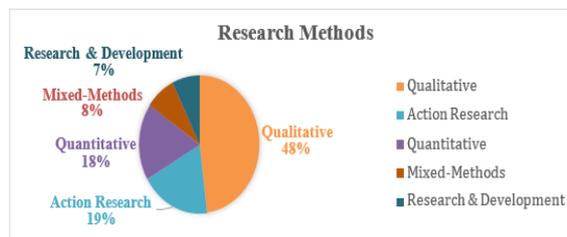


Figure 1. Distribution of Research Method

Table 1. Distribution of Research Methods

Research Method	f	%
Qualitative	72	48
Action Research	28	19
Quantitative	27	18
Mixed-Methods	12	8
Research & Development	11	7
Total	150	100

Table 1 shows the first category of epistemological trends in undergraduate and postgraduate theses in Indonesian context; i.e., the types of Research Methods. This study classifies the research methods into 5 types: Qualitative, Quantitative, Mixed-Methods, Action Research,

and Research and Development. Firstly, the findings indicate that the Qualitative research method is the most commonly used among the total of 150 research reaching 48%, or almost half of the whole data. Qualitative research design focuses on exploring a case as a phenomenon in a specific context (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Similarly, Creswell defines Qualitative research as a means to develop a detailed comprehension on a problem by interpreting the meanings of the research findings (2012). Some of the examples of found in this study are *Teachers' Difficulties in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at SMK Muhammadiyah 3 Makassar: A Descriptive Qualitative Research* (Susiyanti, 2019) and *the Implementation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Class in Islamic Banking Study Program: A Descriptive Qualitative Analysis* (Fransiska, 2020). Both explicitly state their research designs on the title to highlight the nature of the research.

Secondly, Action Research is on the second position by 19% with 28 research titles. This shows that this research design is still commonly used in this field mainly because it highlights on the dynamic nature of teachers and students which remain an interesting topic to discuss. Some of the examples are *Enhancing the Tenth Grade Students' Writing Skills of Descriptive Text by Using Instagram-based Writing Exercises* (Khariroh, 2020) and *Increasing Students Interest in Learning English through Cooperative Blended Learning Strategy* (Auliyah, 2020). The titles indicate the classroom action research due to their purposes in improving students' performance by giving certain treatments. Therefore, Action Research is still relatable and beneficial for English Language Education field as the trends in teaching practice keeps growing and developing.

Thirdly, Quantitative research design reached 18% with 27 research titles. There is no significant difference between the use of quantitative and action research designs; hence, it can be inferred both designs are equally important. Quantitative research is able to explain a relationship among variables and aims to prove a hypothesis. The problems raised in quantitative research should be measurable by numeric data

(Cresswell, 2012). Some examples of this research design are *The Effectiveness of Teachers Strategies: Instagram in Improving the Second Grader's Writing Recount Text* (Maulidia, 2021) and *the Effectiveness of Experiential Learning Toward Learners' Vocabulary Mastery* (Rochman, 2021). The keywords of this research design is to measure the effect among variables, particularly on the positive or negative effects. Therefore, the aims are to test the hypothesis through measurable data.

Lastly, Mixed-methods and Research and Development are both the least used by 8% (12 titles) and 7% (11 titles), respectively. This is presumably due to their complexity and research duration compared to the other research methods. Some examples of mixed-method research are *Students' Perception and Motivation toward English E-Learning during Covid-19 Pandemic* (Mulyani, 2020) and *Teacher-Student Rapport and Students' Speaking Performance in ELT* (Satriani, 2020). These Master Theses explore the problems through two approaches; quantitative covering the students' test scores to measure learning performance combined with qualitative covering the participants' perceptions through interviews to obtain more comprehensive findings. The examples of Research and Development design are *Developing English Syllabus Speaking Course: A Developmental Study at Yayasan Pendidikan Islam Ibuku An-Nisaa* (Mandasari, 2020) and *Designing ICT Competences-Integrated Syllabuses of Teaching-Related Courses for English Education Program* (Yamin, 2021). Research and Development design is a systematic process that involves the development and refinement of certain educational programs and materials through a series of evaluations (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2014). Hence, the theses aim to develop and design certain aspects in English Language Education including curriculum or syllabus, learning materials, or learning models.

Research Data

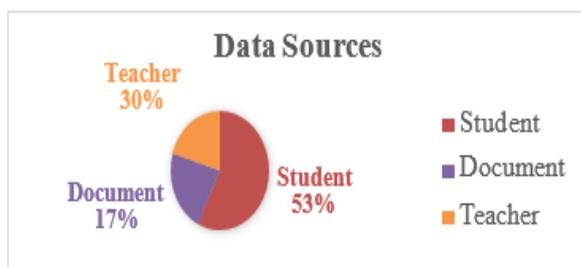


Figure 2. Distribution of Data Sources

Table 2. Distribution of Research Data

Data Source	Research Data	f	%
Student	Learning Activities	52	26
	Skill/Performance	28	14
	Perception	20	10
	Motivation	7	3
Teacher	Teaching Activities	25	13
	Perception	19	10
	Strategies	14	7
Document	Test Score	18	9
	Textbook	9	4
	Material	7	3
	Curriculum	3	1
Total		202	100

Table 2 denotes various types of undergraduate and postgraduate theses during the last three years, 2019 to 2021. The results indicate that more than half (53%) of the theses used student as the research data sources. This covers the research data of learning activities of students (26%), student performances (14%), perception (10%), and motivation (3%). The next data source is teachers reaching 30% of overall data sources. The data resulted from this data source include teaching activities (13%), perception (10%) and strategies (7%). The last, it is followed by documents by 17%, including Test Scores (9%), Textbook (4%), Learning Materials (3%), and Curriculum (1%).

While Thumvichit mentioned that learning and teaching are the main focus that got considerable attention from program developers (2020), most researchers in this study prioritize learners as the source of data and learning activities as the most frequent research data over teaching. Eventually, it is understood that a number of studies related to epistemological trends in English language education employ students as the main data and data sources, whilst the use of other

research data, especially in teachers' perspectives which still have potentials to be explored.

Instruments

Table 3. Distribution of Instruments

Instruments	f	%
Interview	87	31
Questionnaire	60	21
Observation	57	20
Test	42	15
Documents	24	9
Researcher	11	4
Total	281	100

Based on the table, it shows that the most used instrument is interview by 31%, covering both open-ended and closed-ended interviews. Interviewing is a commonly used method of collecting information from people. According to Monette et al. (1986: 156), 'an interview involves an interviewer reading questions to respondents and recording their answers' (in Kumar, 2011). Open-ended questions have possibilities to encourage cooperation and help establish meanings from respondents, while close-ended interviews are more fixed in nature allowing them to choose from two or more alternatives.

The second is questionnaire by 21%. Questionnaire is a beneficial instrument in conducting survey or collecting data without the presence of the researcher, and often being comparatively straightforward to analysis (Wilson and McLean, 1994 in Cohen & Morrison, 2007). With only a slight difference, the third is observation by 20%. Observation is a purposeful way of looking closely at an interaction as it takes place. This is common in the context of Education since it covers Classroom observations.

The fourth one is Test contributing by 15% and mostly consists of pre-test and post-test. A pre-test assesses participants in an experiment before they receive a treatment, while a post-test assesses participants after a treatment, for instance assessing students' attitudes at the end of the semester after receiving certain treatment. This is mostly used to seek for improvements on learners and to see whether the treatment has an effect on the research subject.

The fifth one is documentation by 9%. Document analysis is a procedure for reviewing or evaluating document materials. Documents contain text and/or images recorded without a researcher's intervention. It is often combined with other qualitative research methods as a means of triangulation—'the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon' (Denzin, 1970, p. 291 in Bowen, 2009). In this case, some researchers used documents such as journals, essays, lesson plans, or syllabus to support their research.

The last one is Researcher (only 4%) in which the researchers made what is called a *Human Instrument*. In this case, the objects being investigated are processed by the researchers. The example is in the Research and Development method where the researchers undergo the process of designing a product; hence, they are the ones who function as the tool to carry out the research.

Analytical Method

Table 4. Distribution of Analytical Method

Analytical Method	f	%
Descriptive Qualitative	71	44
Content analysis	45	28
Decriptive and inferential statistics	26	16
Correlational analysis	8	5
Cross-sectional analysis	5	3
Discourse analysis	4	2
Narrative Inquiry	3	1
Grounded Theory	1	1
Total	162	100

Table 4 shows that Descriptive Qualitative dominates the chart by 44% as the technique of data analysis, followed by Content Analysis by 28%. This is due to the highest trend of research methods in this study, which is the Qualitative research design. This represents Case Studies which are adopted by a significant numbers of the thesis collection. Contributing to the qualitative research design, there are also some other analytical methods covered in this study including Discourse Analysis, Narrative Inquiry, and Grounded Theory although the percentages are not significant. These are some of the practical examples of how researchers explore the data and mostly are in forms of textual analysis. Discourse

Analysis covers textual interpretation in relation to its social context and practice (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002); narrative inquiry allows researchers to identify a theory within a participant's narrative while keeping the participant stories intact, and grounded theory focuses on the analytical procedures is to reveal relationships between concepts and themes across interviews through constant analysis (Lal, Suto, & Ungar, 2012).

Furthermore, in discussing about the technique of data analysis in qualitative research, most theses used Miles and Huberman's data analysis covering data reduction, data coding, data display, data analysis, and conclusion drawing. These stages are the most frequently used in conducting qualitative research on English Language Education.

Representing the Quantitative research design, the analytical methods identified in this study are descriptive and inferential statistics analysis contributing by 16%, followed by Correlational and Cross-sectional Analysis (5%; 3%). Referring to the characteristics of quantitative research, the technique of analysis focuses on revealing trends, comparing groups, or relating variables using statistical analysis (Cresswell, 2012). The resulted findings are then perceived objectively without bias as opposed to qualitative analysis which is prone to subjectiveness of the authors. The total of 162 is because of the presence of Mixed-methods covering both descriptive Qualitative and Quantitative analyses.

The main objective of inquiry in English Language Education is examine teaching and learning practices critically in order to make improvements in the field. Referring to this notion, the potential research in English Language Education needs to be highlighted, particularly on how to research the areas and what methods to be used (Iskandar, 2012). Therefore, this study attempted to explore the epistemological trends in English Language Education research to reveal what types of research are commonly used among students in writing theses.

The findings have shown the highest and lowest frequencies of elements of research method by investigating 150 research conducted by Undergraduate and Postgraduate students in

Indonesia. The epistemological aspects of these series of research theses indicate that most students prefer to adopt Empiricism or Interpretivism rather than Positivism. According to McKay, quantitative, which belongs to Positivism, has an assumption that the reality is single; while qualitative believes that reality is multiple (2008). Therefore, in terms of its epistemology, qualitative serves more functions and meanings to the research, especially regarding the unique nature of human relationships, between teachers and students; among students; between students and materials, and so on.

Some findings in this study are contrasted with another study conducted by Chaiyasook & Jaroongkhongdach in which they found that the most common research method was Quantitative, and the most common analytic method was Descriptive and Inferential Statistics, while in this study, the dominant research design is Qualitative. It is also contrasted with the research conducted by López et al. identifying that the highest trend is Mixed-methods. These differences can be caused by some factors, including the difference of regional context.

On contrary, this study supports the findings of Dooley's research in which he examined the journal literature for trends and discovered that Qualitative research has been established in research on language education and teaching, specifically English (2020). Similarly, Bailey and Corrales revealed that 77% of the theses collected on ELT used Qualitative research design (2020). Quantitative research design may not be as popular as Qualitative research because of its characteristics which highlight more on the numeric data; while English Language Education deals more with the dynamic nature of humans, i.e., teachers and students, which need interpretative data to get more thorough understandings.

Moreover, based on the findings of this study of 150 undergraduate theses and postgraduate theses in 2019-2021, it can be concluded that the trend is student-oriented actions. This includes learning activities, employing learning strategies, and designing a learning portfolio. The trend of the research covers writing, reading, speaking, and listening learning strategies. As for making a

learning portfolio, the undergraduate and postgraduate researchers we found only focused on written and spoken forms of texts.

In terms of data source, the results are in line with Chaiyasook & Jaroongkhongdach in which they revealed that students were the majority of data sources (2014). This shows that the English Language Education realm still focuses on the students compared to teachers and other elements. It also supports the statement proposed by Iskandar; the purpose of research in ELT is to investigate relationships between teaching and learning processes their outcomes in students including how they perceive the interactions, the underlying reasons for such interactions, and what effects the interactions have on the quality of language learning (2012).

In line with the advancement of 21st century skills and the promotion of learner-centered teaching approach, it can be predicted that in the future practice, students will remain the main data source of the research on English Language Education. Moreover, this study also has similar findings with Zein et al. in which they found that most research only used a single type or data source such as interviews and questionnaires (2020). The number of research applying more complex data sources is still little. Hence, improvements regarding this matter are expected for future research.

CONCLUSION

This small-scale investigation has covered 150 undergraduate and postgraduate research theses in Indonesian context published in a time range of 2019 to 2021. In reviewing the theses, there are four main categories set as the focus of this study including types of research methods, research data, research instruments, and analytical methods. The findings are presented in forms of tables with percentages of each element in the categories. As the overall trend, Qualitative still dominates as the most commonly used research method in the field of English Language Education. This finding is in line with the nature of Education and Teaching as it deals more with the complexity of human beings and their roles as

students, teachers, stakeholders, policymakers, or members of community in general. Subsequently, qualitative has the highest frequency. The data source is dominated by students as one of the essential elements of education. Interviews are the most commonly used instruments as they can cover a wide range of data for interpretation. The dominant data analysis technique is descriptive qualitative as the highest research trend in this study (as much as 44%).

As a suggestion, a bigger scale of investigation is needed to successfully discover the trends in English Language Education research in Indonesian context. More concentrated objects of study are also encouraged to ensure that the findings represent their regional context as Indonesia is a diverse country and the local context has its own distinctive characteristics. In addition, this study only focuses on the epistemological aspect; therefore, research on a wider range including the ontological and axiological aspects may be needed.

In the development of English Language Teaching, the issues covered are teaching, learning, and assessing (Iskandar, 2012). However, based on the findings, the issue of assessment is still lacking; hence, using appropriate research methods, further research may explore on this matter. By revealing the trends in research, it is expected that it will give insights to researchers in the English Language Education field by knowing which types of research are still understudied, in this case, it is recommended to conduct more Research and Development studies due to their benefits and significance.

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