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Phenomenology as a research methodology in teaching English as a foreign language

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Abstract

Considering the fact there is no single research approach capturing the nature of multi-faceted educational phenomena, phenomenology, as a research method, can be employed in educational settings to explore the essence of a certain phenomenon from the perspective of the one who has experienced it. Advocating positioning this methodology in EFL context, the present paper initially, delineates the basic principles of the approach. Then, it illustrates how a phenomenological approach can be applied in language teaching drawing on one of the author's own case studies in the field of EFL context entitled as EFL student's perception on her academic failure. The paper concludes that an appropriate application of phenomenology to EFL issues will help language teaching practitioners to broaden their understanding of pedagogical issues through learning from the experiences of teachers and students making them to re-evaluate their presuppositions on numerous educational issues.

Keywords: EFL teaching, Phenomenology, Perception, Research Methodology, Learning

Introduction

Historically, research in education has commenced through employing quantitative or empirical approaches focusing on those areas and issues that empirically investigated (Valle et al., 1989). Even now, it has been reported that between 1991 and 2001 as many as 86% of the published research papers were quantitative while only 13% were of qualitative nature (Lazaraton, 2005). In spite of the fact that recently a broader multidisciplinary perspective has been taken in research methodology resulting in publication of some qualitative studies, quantitative research still is dominant in at least applied linguistics (Dorney, 2007).

In line with prior studies (e.g., Liu & Brown, 2015; Plonsky, 2013; Plonsky & Gass, 2011), Amini Farsani and Babaii (2020) in their study on the methodological issues in the field of applied linguistics indicated that *t*-tests (72%) and ANOV (47%) received more emphasis than other statistical tests revealing that authors mainly opted to test the differences between group means. Extending Hyland's call-for-further research by examining the cross-breeding of research orientations and academic citations, Farsani et al.

(2021) argued that paradigmatic orientations may shape rhetorical mechanisms of academic citations in keeping us abreast of research trends in the field.

In spite of the strong emphasis on these methods, there is a growing interest in employing qualitative researches. In fact, rejecting the idea that quantitative tradition is the only superior research method, proponents of a new school of thought, namely phenomenology, believed that the phenomenon should not be measured through the lens of its accepted reality; rather they focused on the participants to explore how they make sense of their everyday world (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). In fact, Husserl (1952/1980), one of the leading figure in phenomenology, criticized psychology asserting that it had gone wrong by attempting to apply methods of the natural sciences to human issues. He further stated that people are not simply reacting automatically to external stimuli, rather they respond to their own perception of what these stimuli mean to them. Husserl, consequently came to conviction that those researchers who attend only to external, physical stimuli not only miss important variables but ignore the context and thereby create a highly artificial situation (Lavery, 2003).

This methodological approach has mainly been influenced by tenets taken from the writings of Husserl and Heidegger. As a mode of qualitative inquiry, phenomenology attempts to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of participants who have experienced it. In other words, through avoiding any preconceived perception he may have of the phenomenon being studied, the researcher presents a detailed description of the phenomenon. This school of thought is usually referred to as transcendental phenomenology which can be attributed to Husserl.

Subsequently, besides focusing on participants' descriptions of the phenomenon, another school of thought in phenomenology, namely hermeneutic phenomenology, attributed to Heidegger, argued that the researcher should try to make an interpretation of the data deduced from the live experience of the participants (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

Phenomenology, as a research method, has already been employed in greater abundance in fields such as psychology, nursing, and health science (Farrell, 2020). The method, however, has not been fully exploited in the field of foreign language education. It is my conviction that taking such an approach, phenomenology, would enable EFL practitioners to delve into the complex processes of learning and teaching. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to outline the basic elements of the approach while presenting concisely excerpts of a phenomenological study (Bonyadi, 2019) already published in EFL context.

Phenomenological studies and EFL learning and teaching

Only in some cases, researchers have employed this approach to examine certain issues in EFL teaching and learning, including underachieving students and their teachers (Oreshkina & Greenberg, 2010), the student experience of other students (Sohn, 2016), students' and instructors' experiences with online education, and teachers' experiences of integrating new technologies in their teaching (Cilesiz, 2020), Iranian EFL learners' experiences of an effective English language classroom at the tertiary level (Drood et al., 2020), and maintaining students' foreign language proficiency (Namaghi et al., 2017) to cite just a few examples.

Nevertheless, phenomenology as a research approach is not usually employed by researchers compared with the other methods (Halling, 2002). This can be attributed to the underlying philosophy associated with this research method which is intimidating to some novice researchers (Sohn et al., 2017). This underlying philosophy has prevented some researchers from taking phenomenology as a research method which is so unfortunate taking into account the wide range of research questions such an approach can address in education (Farrell, 2020).

However, acknowledging that 'reality' is not directly accessible to the researcher and that it might emerge in interaction between the phenomenon and the participants (Van der Mescht, 2004), practitioners in Education can employ phenomenology as a research method. In EFL contexts, there are certain structural, normative and usually taken-for-granted assumptions about EFL teaching and learning. Through conducting phenomenological research, it is possible to challenge the assumptions by bringing to the force the live experiences and perceptions of the main agents of EFL teaching/learning endeavor, namely policy makers, teachers and students. These experiences can be subsequently incorporated into curriculum. Indeed, phenomenological research can capture the distressful lived experience of both students and teachers in a way that no questionnaire-based research can do. Figuratively speaking, phenomenological studies enables the researchers to walk in the shoes of the participants across their natural settings, campuses and classrooms (Sohn et al., 2017).

Phenomenon

A phenomenon in EFL context can be the role of a university teacher as perceived by college authorities, a new textbook introduced to the curriculum as perceived by teachers, and topic selection in writing classes as perceived by the students, just to name a few.

In conducting any phenomenological study, the EFL researchers should try to observe the main features of the approach as delineated below:

Live experience

The emphasis should be placed on eliciting the lived experience of participants through certain data collection instruments such as interviews, verbal or written reports and diaries.

Bracketing

Bracketing is putting aside the researchers' expectations lest they might influence the descriptions provided by research participants throughout the course of the study. Without bracketing, the researcher might formulate research or interview questions in a way that reflects his own preconceived assumptions on the phenomenon at hand "rather than what stands out in participants' perceptions" (Sohn et al., 2017, p. 130).

Participants

Purposeful sampling ranging from 1 to 20 is opted for in phenomenological studies; the participants are expected to have first-hand experience of the phenomenon at question. Furthermore, the participants' willingness to reflect on their perceptions through the

specified mode of data collection (interview, written report, diaries) should be ascertained by the researcher. Furthermore, the participants' willingness to reflect on their perceptions through the specified mode of data collection (interview, written report, diaries) should be ascertained by the researcher.

Rich description

An inductive approach is taken for the analysis of the collected data. Meticulous analysis of the data is required as to capture the essence of the phenomenon being researched; every specific words and phrases in the data referred to as micro aspects of discourse should be coded. Even, in some cross cultural studies, there is a need for an insider to reflect on the special literary devices employed by the participants throughout the data collection phase of the inquiry.

Then, the recurring patterns in the data referred to as the macro aspects should be sorted out and labeled as the main themes of the data. The rich descriptions of data be evidenced by securing qualities such as vividness, richness, accuracy, and elegance (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Validity

To seek for validation of the findings, the researcher might both consider the findings of the other related researches or refer to the participant(s) of the study at hand. Based on this validation, the researcher, then, would be in position to share the findings.

Although validating the findings of phenomenological studies through member checking has been disputed by some phenomenologists arguing that the participants understandably lack the needed expertise to judge research findings (Giorgi, 2007), the participants' affirmation of the emerged meaning and themes resonated with their lived experience would be of great value. In fact, based on the collective experience, participants usually suggest minor changes in researchers' interpretations of the meaning of the experience (Sohn et al., 2017).

Revisiting a phenomenological study in EFL context

Language teaching in Iran, understandably, has followed the global trend of language teaching. That is, it has gradually shifted from positivistic method bound language teaching paradigm to the recent post method paradigm (Frahady, 2007). Influenced by constructivism, language teaching focused on helping EFL learners to activate their mental resources. In fact, it "shifted from product oriented quantitative approaches to process oriented qualitative approaches" (Frahady, 2007, p. 87).

This paradigm shift in language teaching was subsequently reflected in language research methodology indicating the dynamic nature of research methods. The researchers, then, tried to investigate language learning and teaching processes from epistemological perspectives (King & Mackey, 2016).

As a further illustration of how a phenomenological approach can be applied in language teaching, I draw on one of my own case studies in the field of EFL context, namely an EFL student's perception on her academic failure.

Problem statement and research question

Failing a course at the tertiary level can be considered as one of the major problems threatening students' future academic success. It "not only leads to the waste of current expenditure and time but also generates mental-psychological, social and family problems for the university students" (Najimi et al., 2013, p. 1). However, students' failure in an academic course is usually considered as a common phenomenon in the eyes of instructors. Luckily, in recent years some scholars, (Mortenson, 2006; Najimi et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2005) have attempted to reconsider the issue trying to investigate students experience and perceptions on their academic success and failure.

Involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, all qualitative research designs aim at studying things in their natural setting "attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5). From this perspective, diary studies, as a kind of qualitative research, "can offer insights into processes that are not otherwise easily accessible or open to investigation and thus provide useful information to language teachers, learners and researchers" (Curtis & Bailey, 2009, p. 70). A diary has been defined as "a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal and then analyzed for recurring patterns or salient events" (Bailey, 1990, p. 215).

If an important part of teachers' responsibilities is to care for their students' feelings after experiencing a failure in their academic courses, then it would be quite logical to find a way into their feelings and taking them into account especially when we, as teachers, are on the verge of assigning them a Pass or Fail based on their performance. The relevant literature fortunately indicates that focusing on students' perceptions has already found its way into the field. In line with this almost new trend, the present case study addresses the following research question on a student's perception of her course failure.

What is the perception of an EFL student on failing a course and retaking it?

Research design

Involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, a phenomenological approach has been employed. The study aimed at exploring things in their natural setting "attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5). In particular, the paper has used a diary case study; this type of inquiry "can offer insights into processes that are not otherwise easily accessible or open to investigation and thus provide useful information to language teachers, learners and researchers" (Curtis & Bailey, 2009 p. 70). A diary has been defined as "a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal and then analyzed for recurring patterns or salient events" (Bailey, 1990, p. 215).

Thus, the researcher suggested that the participant, with the pseudonym Neda, initiate writing a diary in the first person recording her experiences on taking a class for the second time. Considering the fact that "the limited language proficiency will not allow [diarists] to express their thoughts confidently and fluently" (Curtis & Bailey, 2009, p. 72), Neda was asked to write the journal in her native language, Persian, so that she could

freely jot down her ideas without too much concentration on style and mechanics of her writing in a foreign language. I informed her that the diary would be studied and responded to as a classroom procedure.

However, in an effort to minimize “data contamination” (Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p. 192), it was not until the last day of the class that the researcher informed her of using the diary for research purposes and she immediately gave her verbal consent. Thus, at the end of the semester, the researcher focused on a 2592-word diary hardly dividable to any specific entries. However, to capture the emerging themes, the researcher initially tried to divide the diary into manageable entries based on discourse markers such as “first”, “second” and “today”.

Participant

An adult female EFL student, with the pseudonym, Neda, consented to participate in this diary case study. Neda had already taken her BA in English translation studies. As a master’s student enrolled in a Teaching English as a Foreign Language Master’s course in an Iranian university context, she took a Linguistics course as a requirement for the MA degree in the first semester of the 2017 academic year.

However, despite her active participation in the classroom, Neda, along with three other classmates, failed the course that semester. The researcher, as their teacher, asked the failed students to attend a private meeting to discuss the newly announced outcome of the Linguistics course. Two of the students attended the meeting and discussed their failure of the course. However, Neda refused to attend the meeting. The following semester, the same course on Linguistics was offered to the new batch of students.

On the first session of the class Neda and the two other failed students were spotted taking a seat in the class meaning that they were enrolled in the course for the second time. As Neda had already refrained from expressing her feeling on the issue, the researcher decided to focus on her as a case trying to elicit her perceptions on her failure.

Results

Essential theme 1: failure as a lasting personal emotional shock

Neda exposes her initial perception to her failure in the Linguistics course. Extract No. 2 reveals this point:

Extract No. 2 (Data 8)

So many times I was thinking of it [failing the course] I can remember how much I cried when I got my score. My mom was looking at me wondering either to laugh at me or fight with me. She told me I didn't used to pay any damn to my scores before and went on saying that I would give another try and would make it up again.

The above-mentioned diary entry is suggestive in that it actually signifies how a mundane act of announcing students’ scores becomes such a complex, emotionally loaded process. First of all, one can infer that failing a course is a lasting experience which has been signaled by the diarist through the initial phrase “so many times”. This is in sharp contrast when compared with announcing the scores by the teachers on the site which takes a few seconds.

Essential theme 2: failure as a socio-psychological shock

The second theme emerging from Neda's account of her perception on course failure is evident in the following excerpt:

Extract No. 3 (Data 8b)

I told her "Mom, score isn't so important for me at all. I feel like I'm a retarded student having a lower IQ." I started hating everything. I thought that all my classmates would make fun of me. The other thing, I started getting jealous of them!!! ... Oh, something else, when I saw my score on the site kids [classmates] started posting me messages asking me what my score was. How much I hate this. It is none of your business.

As one can envisage it was not the score itself that disturbed the diarist as evident in the sentence "Mom, score isn't so important for me at all". Rather it was the backlash from the diarist over getting a low score in the course. This backlash can be subsumed under the general term, namely socio-psychological factors. In other words, for Neda the low score on the course was associated with some negative emotional feelings such as: retardedness, being made fun of, getting jealous of and losing face. Besides such negative emotional feelings, a sense of regret was evident in the diary as indicated in the following entry.

Essential theme 3: feeling regret

Having a feeling of regret was found to be one of the major themes in the account as perceived by Neda.

Extract No. 4 (Data 11)

I wish I had dropped the course the day before, retaking a course was not a problem for me but this score gave me a sense of bad feeling

Of course, regret is considered to be a common and inherent phenomenon of human development (Landman, 1987 as cited in Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002) and is often associated with negative emotional states (Gilovich et al., 1998, as cited in Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002) that might affect one's quality of life. Considering the fact that "undoing the consequences of regrettable behaviors is not always possible" (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002), we can assume that the diarist in Extract No. 3 has started, at least verbally, to adapt to her regrettable behaviors (failing the course).

Essential theme 4: resurge of socio-psychological shock

There were traces of socio-psychological shock resurgence after Neda retook the course as required. As indicated earlier, her first entries in her diary was generally dealing with her initial reaction to her course failure. However, one could detect a second phase in the diary namely her reaction towards taking the course again. In Extract No. 5 Neda exposes her perception on the issue:

Extract No. 5 (Data 13)

On the first day of Linguistics, I was standing at the class door waiting or the Teacher. You cannot imagine. Everybody came to me asking me "Why are you here?" Then I had to say that I hadn't passed Linguistics the semester before. This initiated

a series of questions and answers. And then the same negative feeling came all over me. I should say that I did know they were all happy at the bottom of their hearts. Ok, let's move on. The first session of the class was really terrible. I didn't like to take the class at all. Looking at the text-book made me really nervous. ... That very day, the teacher started speaking to us on our failure last semester. Still, I didn't want to accept that. But, later on I realized what he was saying.

As is evident in the entry, Neda in her first session is over-concerned about her classmates' reaction to her failure and fears derision by her peers. This over concern about others' opinion has been considered not only as a feature of anxious language learners but of perfectionists as well (Tsui, 1996 as cited in Gkonou, 2013). In other words, Neda's over-concern about her classmates can be attributed to her personal anxiety as she herself in several entries had referred to this trait. Extract No. 6 is an example of the case:

Extract No. 6 (Data 16)

I'm getting so happy when I've classroom presentation as it makes one follow the issue and conduct a research on. But it makes me nervous as it is so hard to speak to the kids [classmates]. I used to say "She say". I had some problems in using simple grammatical structures. I'm very stressful. I want to control it though.

A sense of absolute pessimism was evident in this phase which surfaced through her sentence "The first session of the class was really terrible." This sense of pessimism was still associated with rejection of failure signaled by "Still, I didn't want to accept that".

Essential theme 5: sense of optimism

Unlike the absolute pessimism indicated above, a sense of optimism gradually started emerging as the researcher moved on through the entries.

Extract No. 7 (Data 18)

Last semester I didn't understand the section on Presupposition. I don't know why. This time while I was presenting the chapter I asked him [the teacher] to explain more and he did. I think this time I got it.

Extract No. 8 (Data 21)

Throughout the first few sessions I felt like humiliated and mentally retarded but at the end of the semester my nervousness got cooled. Now I'm quite sure why the teacher asked me to write down whatever I was studying. ... Without any reason, I was a little bit angry with the teacher? All in all, If I want to speak frankly, I should say that retaking this course was very beneficial to me.

Extracts No. 7 and 8 clearly demonstrate the change of diarist's mood from absolute pessimism to optimism. This also indicates that Neda's failure perception is not stable. Initial total rejection was changed into regret leading to resurgence of socio-psychological shock and then surfacing a sense of optimism and hopefulness. This suggests that EFL perceptions of their failures are not a static process but a dynamic one vulnerable to fluctuations based on few contextual factors. This is reminiscent of Dornyei's (2007) words that "diary studies are appropriate for looking at temporal variation in dynamic processes, investigating for example how people change or respond to certain stimuli" (p. 157).

As one of the main challenges of interpreting qualitative data is said to be “its potentially questionable reliability and internal validity” (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p. 306), the researcher in the present study resorted to “methods triangulation” (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p. 212). That is, after finalizing our analysis of Neda’s diary entries, we set a short oral interview with her sharing the results of the analysis. She verified the emerging themes and patterns.

Discussion and pedagogical implications

It is possible to draw an analogy between Neda’s perception on her course failure with taking an emotional journey as depicted in Fig. 1.

This graphed representation illustrates Nada’s journeys from her early perception of the phenomenon to the last one. Early on, she experienced a personal lasting emotional shock which initiated her journey. A socio-psychological shock was experience followed by a feeling of regret. The journey continued by resurgence of socio-psychological shock which later was transformed into a sense of optimism.

The findings of the study indicated the diarist, Neda, attributed her exam failure to anxiety, family problems, her health problem and lack of proper studying. Anxiety stood out as being the most widely cited attribution for exam failure. This reaffirms the findings of the study by Fry and Ghosh (1980) who claimed that Asian students assumed more personal responsibility for failure and attributed success to luck. This is also in partial agreement with the results of a study conducted by Gkonou (2013). Based on her study “socio-psychological constraints raised by diarists [in his study] included undesirable teacher-learner role relationships, negative self-evaluation, examination anxiety, deficient study skills, and obstacles to independent learning” (p. 1). However, Gobel and Mori (2007) found a significant relationship between exam scores of EFL students and the attributions of ability and task difficulty with attributions for their failures. None of these factors (ability, task difficulty) was identified in the present study.

Moreover, further scrutiny of the data entries revealed that for the diarist getting a low score on a course was associated with some negative personal/social emotional feelings such as: feelings of mental retardedness, being made fun of, jealousy and losing face.

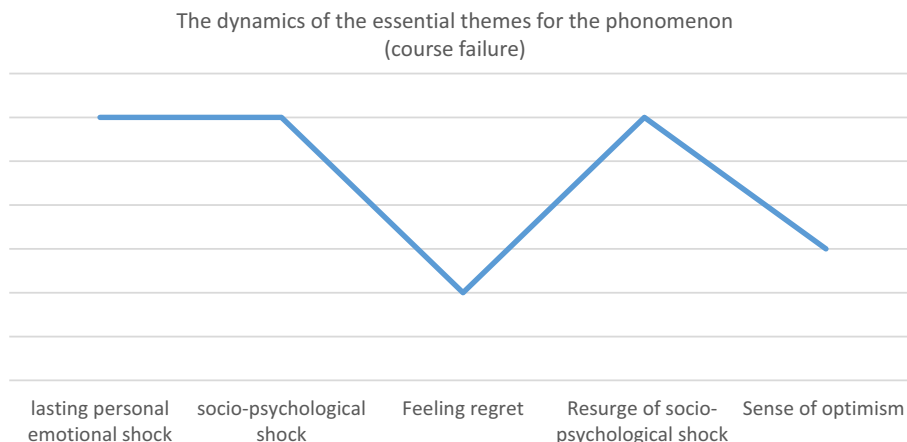


Fig. 1 The dynamics of essential themes for the phenomenon (course failure)

However, after retaking the course and attending the class for a few sessions, the diarists' negative perception of her failure was gradually changed into a kind of optimism. It was as if there was a clear pattern of failure perception. That is, an initial emotional reaction characterized by strong affective status (crying, rejecting the failure) which was later on changed into at least a neutral or in some cases positive mindset (being hopeful, accepting the failure) on course failure.

The diarist's points of view on her course failure in the present study raise some pedagogical implications to be considered by EFL teachers. Awareness of students' course failure perceptions and exercising caution on evaluating students' final course performance can be considered two practically relevant issues in classroom teaching.

Identifying the causal attributions of students' course failure is of significant importance. If we find that causal conditions for students' failure are unstable like effort, then we can expect that they are likely to change. That is, the failure might not be repeated. Students' should be informed that even stable reasons for course failure like exam anxiety can be changed provided that they cooperate on the issue. All in all, teachers' awareness of students' course failure attributions might result in students' future academic success.

EFL teachers should exercise caution while evaluating and assigning test scores on students' course performance. As was indicated in the diary, the assigned scores by the teachers might have a lasting negative influence on students' emotions and their subsequent academic performance and motivation as well. If the evaluation is carried out improperly then it would become somehow difficult to stimulate the interest of the EFL learners.

In sum, the lived experience of the participant on the course failure provided insight into the phenomenon. The emerged themes may serve as lessons to EFL teachers making them to contemplate on the possible consequences of their evaluations. On the other hand, it should be taken into account that success and failure are two inseparable aspects of any educational system. In fact, there is no guarantee that one would accomplish an academic degree without experiencing any of them. That being said, teachers should remind the students who failed a course that their negative feelings are natural and subject to change for the better in the end.

Conclusion

Social realities are different from the natural world because they depend on human action for their existence. Thus, taking this as a framework, qualitative research methods such as phenomenology can be used to investigate the lived experiences of the participants in certain social events (Riazi, 2016).

The results attained through represented case study illustrated the application of phenomenological methodology in education. As a research method, phenomenology holds great promise for exploring a variety of issues in the field of education in EFL context. It can shed light on the complex phenomena involved in language learning and teaching experiences as perceived by EFL learners and teachers. In fact, appropriate application of phenomenology to EFL issues will help language teaching practitioners to advance and broaden their understanding of numerous pedagogical issues through learning from the experiences of teachers and students. Looking at the pedagogical issues through the eyes

of those lively involved in the learning/teaching processes is expected to provide validated experience for the others (Barrow, 2017). Furthermore, exploring the participants' perception would make their voices heard by others in power, such as policy makers, school authorities and the like. This, in turn, would make them to revisit their taken-for-granted issues from educational planning to curriculum development.

Abbreviation

EFL English as a Foreign Language

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Author contributions

The author AB carried out the research. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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