Introduction

Of the wide range of qualitative methodologies available to applied linguists today, few are as misunderstood as Glaser and Strauss’s (1967/1999) concept of grounded theory. Myths and misconceptions abound, from that of framing the grounded theory methodology (GTM) as privileging informant data over the scholarly literature, to the notion that GTM represents ‘a whole lot of effort for very little gain’ (Silva, 2005, p. 4). Scholars in applied linguistics have mistakenly equated GTM with other forms of qualitative inquiry, such as ethnography (Harklau, 2005; Nunan, 1992) or action research (Burns, 1999). GTM is frequently misrepresented at scholarly conferences; many classroom practitioners and graduate students present descriptive thematic analyses that are claimed to have been derived from a use of GTM, but they have little evidence to demonstrate that they have followed any of the methodology’s primary practices.

The result of this methodological malpractice has been that GTM has been both deeply misunderstood and unfairly maligned by scholars and gatekeepers within the applied linguistics scholarly community. In this chapter, I will dispel the myths and offer a vigorous defense by answering the following questions: What is grounded theory? Why do we need it? How is it done? How can it contribute to the development of applied linguistics research? In addition, the defining origins, current methodological developments, and core methodological procedures will be explained. GTM will be compared with other qualitative research methods to further highlight its purposes, and ways that grounded theory research can be presented to complement the academic discourse structures and scholarly concerns of the applied linguistics community will be provided. Near the conclusion, a forecast of the future of GTM in applied linguistics research will be considered.

What is ‘grounded theory’?

The origins of grounded theory lie with sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. Their groundbreaking book, *Awareness of Dying* (Glaser & Strauss, 1965/2007), laid bare the social processes and symbolic interactions that take place in hospitals around terminally ill patients. At the time it was published, there was curiosity as to how Glaser and Strauss (neither of whom had
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medical training and who had only recently started to teach sociology in the Nursing Department at the University of California, San Francisco) could have written such a penetrating and prescient work. In response, they wrote *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies in Qualitative Research* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/1999), which explained the methodology that they had developed while researching for *Awareness*, and to write against what they saw as the obsession that sociologists and others in applied research fields had with big data, the top-down imposition of ‘great man’ theories on fieldwork, and with the privileged position given to quantitative research methods.

For Glaser and Strauss, ‘grounded’ means that findings should be rooted in first-hand evidence – the problems, actions, symbols and aspirations of the people being studied – and ‘theory’ refers to an explanatory model that ‘fits empirical situations . . . [one that] should be understandable to sociologists and laymen alike. Most important it works – provides us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications’ (1967/1999), which are constantly refined by the inclusion of new data.

Glaser and Strauss were often unclear in their book as to when grounded theory referred to the end product and when it referred to the methodology. This is why today theorists (Bryant, 2017; Hadley, 2017a) often distinguish between the methodology as GTM, and to the end product as a grounded theory. This should be kept in mind when reading other works on GTM, where terminological confusion still exists. More important, however, is to understand that the methodology of grounded theory is one that is exploratory, open-ended, and emergent. GTM was never designed as a means of verifying or validating existing theory. Using GTM to investigate, for example, whether language learners have operated within Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, would be an inappropriate use of the methodology. Exploring the problems faced by language learners and the strategies they take in trying to learn a language, and then either developing a new perspective on language learning strategies or connecting the findings to further expand existing research, would be more in line with the way that GTM was originally intended to be used.

After the publication of *Discovery*, interest in GTM intensified, but many found Glaser and Strauss’s methodological suggestions difficult to discern. Glaser left academia to make a living through his private Grounded Theory Institute, while Strauss stayed in academia for the remainder of his career. Epistemological differences came to the fore. The ensuing publications revealed Glaser had a rigid positivist epistemology but a flexible approach to GTM; Strauss however had a pragmatically flexible epistemology but a highly structured methodology. This resulted in a period of heated discourse between those who followed Glaser’s approach and those devoted to Strauss’s style. Despite this decade-long debate, which arguably generated more heat than light, interest in GTM continued to grow, whereby the end of the 20th century it had become the most widely used qualitative methodology in the applied social sciences outside of applied linguistics (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). By the first decade of the 21st century, the community of grounded theory methodologists had come to recognize several versions of GTM: Constructivist (Charmaz, 2014), Glaserian (Gibson & Hartman, 2014), Straussian (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), Postmodernist (Clarke, 2005), and Critical Realist (Bryant, 2017; Hadley, 2017a). The main differences between these versions relate more to the epistemological and ontological beliefs of the theorist than to methodological procedures. Comparable to the way one can discern similar features among members of a family, the types of GTM available today also have more in common than what is different (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Chief among these shared features are:

- A focus on exploration over that of verifying pre-existing research findings
- Simultaneous data collection and analysis. Each piece of data (i.e. a written observation log of an event, interpretation of a statistical analysis, interview transcript of an interview

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or online chat, etc.), is coded, and reflected upon through memos and notes, before searching out the next data set.

- Multiple levels of coding generated from field data and scholarly sources, which serve to fracture data into manageable sets
- Reflexively interpretive analysis, starting with empirical description and moving progressively towards higher levels of theorization

Essentially, one enters a particular social arena in a spirit of intellectual humility, and stays open to all possibilities as one asks questions. The theorist breaks down and then classifies the answers. Grounded theorists constantly and critically assess their developing ideas to both clarify and define the limits of what eventually becomes a plausible explanation (theory) of what is happening in the field.

GTM is designed to help a researcher manage the pace of collecting data so they can reflect more deeply upon its possible meanings. The question of course is how one actually goes about doing this. To those ends, I shift now to the specifics of GTM.

GTM

GTM consists of three distinct stages: open exploration, focused investigation, and theory construction (Figure 22.1) Each stage has its own set of procedures.

Open exploration begins when the theorist, who in the context of applied linguistics is likely to be a language teacher, encounters something in class that makes them stop and ask, ‘What’s going on here?’ However, before starting research, theorists first should reflect upon what they think they already know about their curious incident. Usually this entails writing an essay or imaginary interview with oneself, to externalize one’s preconceptions and existing scholarly knowledge, and then to put this aside so as to be open to the potential of new insights and perspectives coming from the research participants. The theorist is expected to be well read in their discipline, so at this stage, the theorist should not seek out any new scholarly literature. The goal is to construct new insights and discoveries rather than validating preexisting knowledge.

The theorist then enters the field, makes observations, and conducts interviews with anyone in the social arena willing to speak. This is what is called open sampling. After each interview
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or other data collection event, the data are fractured using open coding, which is composed of pithy, descriptive restatements of issues taking place in the data. Open codes are usually written as gerunds to focus on the words of informants at face value, and their observable actions. This is to help the analyst to focus upon what is going on from the perspective of the informants, and to avoid the early imposition of their own ungrounded hypotheses. Open codes are created from the data. Prepackaged codes from other studies are never used in GTM. New codes are created when new issues are encountered. The writing of memos and notes continue throughout this process.

After five to ten data collection events, regular patterns begin to emerge, and a number of similar codes may have also been created. The theorist stops collecting new data for the moment and begins to group together the codes that share some perceived similarity. These are then given interpretive labels that explain this affinity. These labels are called focused codes. The theorist may generate many of these codes, but they will need to focus upon ten to 15 of the focused codes that, due to their engagement with the data and informants in the field, they feel are most representative of the salient issues.

Open and focused codes are, in and of themselves, not the grounded theory. Codes become the building blocks for constructing a grounded theory. GTM helps researchers to generate codes so that a grounded theory can be constructed. The result, after going through focused investigation and theory construction, is not collection of themes, but instead, a study of social actions, strategies, trajectories, and the processes that people either employ or experience when interacting within specific social arenas such as classrooms, schools, academic societies, or social media platform communities.

Focused investigation now begins. The theorist engages in theoretical sampling, which means that they search for people, places, and scholarly literature that can provide more information about the focused codes. The sampling is for understanding the codes, and is not simply looking for more people to explore issues, as during open exploration. As the theorist begins searching for scholarly literature that speaks to the focused codes, it is often the case that they find what they are looking for outside their scholarly field. This is a major reason why grounded theories are often interdisciplinary in nature. However, the scholarly literature is not used to validate the researcher’s developing theory; it is afforded the same status as other research informants. Parts of the literature that relate to the focused codes are noted, and the theorist expands on these by writing theoretical memos. Theorists may also access archival data or access statistical studies relating to the social arena, and to add these to the focused codes. GTM can contain various forms of data.

The patterns of behavior will now seem to become quite clear, and at this point, grounded theorists will need to engage in what is called constant comparison (Glaser, 1992). This involves not only searching for other events, data, and patterns of human behavior that fit with the focused codes, but also for cases where predicted patterns of human interaction do not take place. This helps to tighten the specificity and applicability of developing theoretical ideas, and better defines the edges of developing concepts.

In time, theorists will notice that they are expending much more energy than before to find new, but arguably less important, pieces of data. This is a condition that Glaser and Strauss called theoretical saturation. A grounded theorist’s ‘job is not to provide a perfect description of an area, but to develop a theory that accounts for much of the relevant behavior’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/1999, p. 30). Theorists now begin grouping focused codes under higher, more abstractly stated labels known as conceptual categories. These categories are important pillars of theory construction, and take the form of evocative metaphors, such as firewalling, bunker busting, resource leeching, and the like (Hadley, 2015).
During theory construction, researchers engage in theoretical coding, which involves returning to the field to find out the conditions, connections, and relationships that connect and are shared between the conceptual categories. The writing of memos, interviewing, further literature study, and observations will continue until the theorist is satisfied that the interrelated network connecting the categories forms a fair and truthful representation of the human interactions taking place in the arena being studied. It is here that the theorist’s positivist, constructivist, post-modern, or critical realist perspective will come to the fore as they further craft the theoretical explanation.

Near the end of theory construction, the theorist will identify a core category, phenomenon, or ongoing process that ties together the conceptual categories. These also tend to be expressed imaginatively, such as professional disarticulation (Hadley, 2015), survival: reconciling multiple realities (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), or status passage (Glaser & Strauss, 1971/2010). One could view the core category as the title of a book, with the conceptual categories as the chapters, and lower-order focused codes as the sections of these chapters, which lead down to the empirical data upon which the theory is based.

A good grounded theory has pragmatic applications for people operating in a specific social arena. It fits the data that were gathered from the informants, and injects significance into what at first glance might appear as social chaos. In the final analysis, however, it must be emphasized that a grounded theory is just that – a theory: Grounded theories are ‘not proven; they are only suggested. The theory is an integrated set of hypotheses, not findings’ (Glaser, 1978, p. 134). The potential strength of a grounded theory is in its development out of what happened in the field and not as the verification of what ‘should be’ as envisaged by armchair academics far removed from the social environment.

Comparing GTM with other qualitative research methodologies

Much of what sustains the pursuit for knowledge in GTM has a long tradition in Western inquiry. From Herodotus, who interviewed eyewitnesses to learn their perspectives on social events, to Aristotle and his penchant for grouping and classification, to Socrates with his method of constantly comparing concepts, ideas, and critically assessing what can and cannot be said with certainty on the subject – these elements can be found in GTM, as they are to varying degrees found in other methods of qualitative research. I believe this is one of the underlying reasons why some have wondered whether ‘grounded theory’ serves as a catchall term for any form of qualitative research. In this section, I will untangle these jumbled assumptions by comparing and contrasting GTM to other qualitative methodologies more commonly used in applied linguistics research: case studies, action research, ethnography, and phenomenology. It should be noted at the outset that these will be discussed heuristically, as today many qualitative researchers attempt eclectic methodological mixes, from phenomenological case studies to ethnographic action research (Sumison, 2002; Tacchi, Slater, & Hearn, 2003). Such is the nature of qualitative data analysis (QDA), which when informed, is limited only by the creativity of the researcher. What follows here, however, is a treatment of the archetypal forms of each methodological tradition, to better distinguish the nature of GTM.

Case studies (see also Duff, this volume)

According to Hamel, Dufour, and Fortin (1993), the term case study was derived from the psychological and medical term case history, and its origins for sociology came through the Chicago school of social inquiry and early anthropology. Case studies focus upon a small
group of individuals purposefully chosen by the researcher, either because of their uniqueness or because of some sense of commonality with other groups (thus laying the groundwork for the potential generalization of findings). Case studies are in-depth investigations of a bonded system, which in the group is a self-contained entity with discernible social boundaries (Denscombe, 2003). This is perhaps why case study research features prominently in applied linguistics. Language teachers spend many hours of their day in the ‘bonded systems’ of their classes and educational institutions. It is an ideal place from which to conduct research, since they are already embedded as participant observers.

Yin (1981) notes that case study research can accommodate both qualitative and quantitative methods. Usually, however, the case study relies upon participant observation, interviewing, a study of written records, or an analysis of archival material (Stake, 1995). The researcher tries to blend into the settings to provide a naturalist account of the phenomenon under study. Case studies are marked by considerable descriptive detail of a person, program, or event. Common themes in the data are usually identified and then elucidated for meaning. Case studies are best for describing a certain event or explaining aspects of a complex social phenomena (Kohn, 1997). They are limited in scope, and most feel they should be used to expand upon or validate an existing theory (Creswell, 1998).

**Action research (see also Banegas & Consoli, this volume)**

The term *action research* was first coined by psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946), who posited action research as a pragmatic, iterative process aimed at making a positive difference in the lives of others. In applied linguistics research today, action research is arguably the most widely used qualitative research methodology, mainly because it takes ‘research’ out of the hands of expert outsiders and places it within the control of the informed practitioners who are experiencing problems in their work environment (Burns, 2005; Edge, 2001; Hadley, 2003). There are no required methods for doing action research, making it a remarkably elastic research tradition. Some researchers use statistical surveys, while others opt for participant observation or coded interview transcripts (Davis, 2006).

Common to all forms of action research is a cycle aimed at solving problems and/or promoting positive change. The goal is often to improve work-related venues, such as a class or a small language department (Ellis & Kiely, 2000, p. 89; Winter, 2002, p. 143). Action research practitioners are cautious about making sweeping generalizations about their findings, though most hope that readers working in similar conditions will receive insight from their work and apply the findings to their own particular situations.

**Ethnography (see also Li Wei, this volume)**

Ethnography originated from the work of anthropologists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While in the beginning, as Denscombe (2003) notes, the study of exotic aboriginal groups amounted to little more than voyeurism under the thin veil of academic curiosity, ethnography eventually grew into the respected tradition that it is today. In applied linguistics research, ethnographies rose in stature during the mass exodus of English language teaching (ELT) professionals in the 1970s and 1980s, when these language teachers sought to make sense of their new cultural homes (Holliday, 1996; Watson-Gegeo, 1998).

Today the range of what is called ‘ethnography’ has expanded, but the primary methods used in all continue to be *noninvasive observation*, a study of *cultural artifacts*, and *unstructured interviews* that are recorded later as *field notes*. The researcher typically spends six months to
a year ‘in the field.’ During this time, vast amounts of empirical data about every conceivable aspect of the target culture are collected, catalogued and thematically coded (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1990). This large storehouse of qualitative data is reconstructed into a written account marked by ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 8). What this means is that the depiction of life in the specific social group rich in detail and often emotive. After reading a good ethnographic study, one should feel as if one has spent quality time within the studied community, and that one has gained significant insights into joys, tribulations, and rites of passage within the group.

A key element of the ethnographic research process is the inclusion of the researcher. Readers learn as much about the social background, beliefs, and worldview of the researcher as they do about the target culture. Often researchers explain why they chose their particular cultural group, how they collected the data, and what efforts they took not to disrupt the study by their presence within the group (Denscombe, 2003). Ultimately, what the reader receives from ethnography is a cultural portrait (Creswell, 1998) that seeks to foster greater insight and toleration among peoples of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is the attempt to ‘understand people’s perceptions, perspectives and understandings of a particular situation’ (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 153). The subjective meaning of human experiences becomes the primary focus of study. While less prominent than action research, case studies, or ethnography, it is still a respected form of qualitative inquiry in applied linguistics. Although starting as a European philosophy, a methodological version of phenomenology from the United States, inspired by Alfred Schutz (1967/1972), has had the greatest influence on applied linguistics research. This form of phenomenology focuses on what people do and feel. Social phenomena are interpreted from numerous perspectives; the notion of multiple realities is a given. Even the most mundane of experiences are of interest to the phenomenologist, since they may point to deep social constructs that shape the way people perceive their world.

Phenomenological researchers first reflect upon their worldview and potential biases, and seek to ‘bracket’ these off as they enter the field. Assuming the role of an uninformed outsider, they conduct long, unstructured, and intensive interviews with informants. They encourage informants to give emotional narratives that help to immerse the phenomenologist in their world. Phenomenologists seek a subjective sense of deep insight coming from finally beginning to see the world uncritically through the eyes of the informants. Interviews are often transcribed to identify key words, concepts, and themes.

The phenomenologist then becomes a bridge between the informants and the outside world, and creates a rich narrative account aimed at ushering readers into the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of others. Description, not theorizing, is key to phenomenology. If readers feel they have truly experienced a deep, almost mystical sense of insight from the phenomenologist’s account, then the research has reached its conclusion. Any theory designed to further explain the phenomena would be superfluous.

**A Juxtaposition to GTM**

As can be seen in Table 22.1, the methodology of grounded theory has multiple overlaps with the qualitative traditions discussed thus far. Part of the reason is because the rise of GTM to such prominence in qualitative research has resulted in many of its methods being incorporated within other methodologies. Few realize that it was really only until the work of Glaser and Strauss (1965/2007) that methods such as coding or memoing were clearly delineated and
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set out as stages of a systematic methodology. Even so, the methods used may have similar names, but different goals. For example, the use of coding is a relatively new addition to action research, but the manner in which coding is used in action research differs from GTM, in that action research codes specifically for problematic themes and concepts (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Coding in GTM is not predetermined, but instead is an interplay between the researcher and the data that begins descriptively, and through successive stages, becomes increasingly abstract to construct a theory.

The point here is that while other qualitative research methodologies either share or have borrowed practices that can be found in GTM, they are distinct in terms of what they create as their end product. Other qualitative methodologies tend towards thick description – a study of the life world of research participants, of solving a problem and/or verifying existing theory. GTM seeks to develop an explanatory theory that speaks to people in specific social arenas. It creates theories about social interactions, problems, or social phenomena. These theories are intended to be credible, useful, and to provide people with a new vocabulary for describing their situation. In turn the theories seek to aid researchers in anticipating negative developments so they can work towards more beneficial outcomes.

**Communicating grounded theory**

The depth of analysis and amount of material gained from doing GTM usually provides enough material for a book, several papers, and scores of conference talks. The presentation of material depends, then, upon the scope of the venue. Only a book is capable of communicating a grounded theory in its fullness. A paper or edited book chapter is appropriate for one of the major theoretical processes. The conference talk, which typically allows for only 20 to 30 minutes, allows only for one of the lower level concepts. However, even in the case of the more constrained opportunities for dissemination, it is still vital that one briefly presents the core category or phenomenon before drilling down to the aspect of the theory one wishes to highlight.

Structuring the reports of a grounded theory entails a reorganization of the data so that they match the coherent order normally seen in scholarly works for applied linguistics. The context within which the theory is located will comprise the beginning, together with an introduction of the core category. This will be followed by a review of the pertinent literature, statistical studies, or other published material, that was found during the time of focused coding. Because GTM is so widely misunderstood in applied linguistics, after the literature review, how the data were collected and coded, and how memos and notes were maintained, can be briefly explained. Any challenges or limitations encountered in the field should also be mentioned. From here, the desired aspects of the grounded theory can be reported.

Equally important to following proper scholarly discourse structures is the need to conform to discourse patterns and styles as they pertain to applied linguistics. While there are a few examples of grounded theories in applied linguistics (Hadley, 2015; Senior, 2006), most of what is available comes from other disciplines. I believe that the suspicion of some scholars in our field regarding grounded theory studies stems from a case of learning GTM through one discourse style, and failing to write in a style often expected by scholars within the applied linguistics community.

Recently, some scholars have offered helpful suggestions on how to go forward in this area. In Durrant’s (2017) corpus-based study of lexical bundles within academic writing practices across a range of scientific and applied social science disciplines, he found that for a piece of scholarly research in applied linguistics to be more easily received and disseminated, it should utilize abstract constructs as a point of departure. It highlights the role of free agents
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(i.e. teachers, students, etc.) interacting within complex, often chaotic social environments. Applied linguistics research is more readily accepted if it has synthesized multiple viewpoints and highlights the centrality of a particular issue within an established scholarly context. The emphasis tends towards empirical evaluation, but the research must avoid sweeping statements of a generalized universal nature in favor of positioning the research as limited and more interpretive in its findings. Finally, research should be combined with existing concepts to develop new relationships and fresh insights. Findings such as these are supported by other corpus-based studies of what gets accepted at international applied linguistics conferences (e.g. Simon-Maeda, 2016), and the grounded theory should be crafted in a way as to address these issues. In doing so, the theory can then make a helpful contribution to the field.

Towards the future of GTM

What does the future hold for GTM? I believe the work will continue to find ways of analyzing text that will help theorists to become even more aware of their biases. Such developments can help theorists to sidestep their biases and thereby enhance participants’ voices during open exploration. Research tools such as personal construct repertory grids, for example, show great potential for allowing informants ways of carrying on an internal conversation with themselves, and expressing their beliefs in ways that can be analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively (Hadley, 2017b). In addition, even though computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) has keyword searches of textual material, these pale in comparison to what corpus linguists can do in the analysis of text. I believe that, beyond deeper studies into the sociological aspects of second language learning and education, one of the greatest areas of potential for GTM lies in corpus linguistics – but with regard to methodological concerns, and in developing new grounded theories of language and discourse.

For the long-term future of the methodology, certainly we will see different emphases as time goes on, due to the ongoing epistemological shifts that take place periodically in the crafting of qualitative research methodologies (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). This means that there will be seasons where more focus on evidence-based theories will be seen, followed by shifts towards more interpretive and constructivist theories, then to be followed by pragmatic interest in critical theories.

Conclusion

In broad brushstrokes, this chapter has sought to explain the origins, practices, purposes, and future potential of GTM for qualitative research in applied linguistics.

Too long has applied linguistics relied upon other applied disciplines such as psychology, education, and sociology as the feeders of insight. I believe that it is time for us to find our voice as a community and to give back as much as we have received. Applied linguists, as scholars and teacher-researchers, are typically multilingual, multicultural, and embedded within venues around the world. We have access to people and places that are the envy of scholars in other fields. GTM can help by making fresh and sometimes provocative contributions that can challenge the status quo.

So long as the goal is to explore social interactions, processes, problems, and social phenomenon affecting people in specific circumstances, GTM offers researchers an even, systematic, and iterative set of procedures. This chapter has sought to clarify the grounded theory methodology and to demystify its practices. It is hoped that, with greater understanding and openness to what has often been a misunderstood methodology in applied linguistics research, more
researchers will begin to embark on an adventure of exploration, and to construct grounded theories that will contribute to the lives of researchers, educators, students, and beyond.

References


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