

Comparative Roles of Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis in Qualitative Social Research

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: Content analysis and thematic analysis are important qualitative research methods used to study complex phenomena or textual data. However, some researchers may still be confused about the characteristics, purposes, procedures, and contexts of use of these two methods. So, this academic article aims to present a comparative overview of content analysis and thematic analysis, focusing on their definitions, procedures, strengths, limitations, and guidelines for selecting the method appropriate to the research objectives.

Methods: This article was developed through a comprehensive review of scholarly literature, methodological texts, and empirical studies related to content analysis and thematic analysis. Relevant concepts, theoretical foundations, analytical procedures, and applications within qualitative social science research were systematically examined and synthesized. The reviewed literature was subsequently compared across multiple dimensions, including research objectives, data management strategies, coding processes, analytical focus, interpretation, and presentation of findings.

Results: The synthesis revealed that content analysis primarily focuses on the systematic identification, classification, coding, and examination of patterns within textual data. It enables researchers to organize large volumes of information into meaningful categories and may incorporate both qualitative interpretation and quantitative descriptions, such as frequencies of words, concepts, categories, or recurring patterns. Consequently, content analysis is particularly useful for examining communication content, identifying trends, and comparing textual characteristics across different contexts or time periods. In contrast, thematic analysis emphasizes the interpretation of underlying meanings embedded within participants' narratives and experiences. Through a recursive process of familiarization, coding, theme development, review, and refinement, thematic analysis generates themes that capture the essence of participants' perspectives and social realities. The method is especially valuable for exploring attitudes, perceptions, emotions, experiences, and sociocultural contexts. Although both methods involve coding and categorization of textual data, they differ substantially in analytical depth, interpretive orientation, and expected outcomes.

Application of this study: The body of knowledge from this article can serve as a guideline for qualitative research in selecting content analysis or thematic analysis appropriate to the research questions and data characteristics.

Conclusions: Content analysis and thematic analysis are complementary qualitative methods that contribute significantly to the understanding of social phenomena. While

content analysis provides a structured approach to identifying and describing patterns in data, thematic analysis offers deeper interpretive insights into participants' meanings and lived experiences. The choice between these methods should therefore be guided by the nature of the research problem, the characteristics of the data, and the intended analytical outcomes. A clear understanding of their similarities and differences can improve methodological appropriateness and strengthen the quality and credibility of qualitative research.

Keywords: Content Analysis; Thematic Analysis; Qualitative Research; Social Sciences

Introduction

Qualitative research is perceived to be of utmost importance within the social sciences [1-4] as it offers researchers an opportunity to appreciate the intricacies associated with human behavior, social relations and culture. Addressing the linguistic minutiae of language learning and teaching or comprehending the learners' experience to optimize teaching strategies can be successfully accomplished only through applying qualitative methods [5]. Moreover, qualitative research is more flexible and adaptable. For example, King et al. [6] state that qualitative research enables a fairly relaxed and flexible approach. Also, these methods are not set in stone, as researchers can alter their strategies, including the questions they ask and how they collect and analyze information as they progress with their work, to ensure they investigate every angle of the question being studied. This flexibility is crucial, especially in EFL settings in which students' approaches to learning a language may greatly differ due to cultural and individual differences. Moreover, qualitative research provides an understanding of the basis of certain behaviours and attitudes [3] that may be lost in quantitative research. A questionnaire may show that a large number of students are unable to speak, but qualitative interviews would explain why—for instance, students may experience anxiety or lack sufficient opportunities for practice. Considering such underlying factors may enable researchers to formulate measures that are more appropriately targeted in terms of effectiveness. Qualitative research generates rich, thick data which allows the researcher to formulate suitable learning experiences, hence fostering advancement of effective teaching approaches and resources.

In order to collect qualitative data, content analysis is fairly commonly performed. Drisko and Maschi [7] argue that content analysis aligns closely with other social science methods by identifying and quantifying key words, themes, and concepts, enabling researchers to tally and analyze diverse qualitative and quantitative patterns. This benefits researchers interested in analysing language shifts, changes in perception, and shifts in content over time [8]. A systematic approach is a key feature of content analysis. Researchers develop a coding technique that organises collected data, ensuring the analysis is systematic and reliable. This is particularly useful for corpora of text such as students' essays, interviews, or recorded teaching materials. For example, if content analysis is applied to students' essays, it is possible to flag a considerable number of errors and other recurring elements, which can assist in planning curricula and lesson plans. Additionally, content analysis helps track changes that occur over time.

Another effective means, in addition to content analysis, is thematic analysis of widely used qualitative data [9-13]. This methodology emphasizes the identification, analysis and reporting of the patterns (themes) within a data set [9,14]. Thus, it creates a more complex and accurate portrayal of the data and therefore, this method is of prominence in studies conducted within the field of foreign language learning. Thematic analysis provides opportunities to search for basic themes pertaining to language learning, teaching methodologies and learners, which enrich our understanding of language learning. One of the strengths of thematic analysis is the richness of detail that it can bring to bear on the experiences and understanding of participants. In contrast to content analysis, which uses data in a numerical form, thematic analysis requires the researcher to bring out the meaning contained in the data [15]. This particular approach to research is very useful in language learning as it can enable researchers to identify factors that can affect students' learning like their attitude, feelings and motivation, which can in turn aid in the development of effective teaching methods [16].

Despite the recognised benefits of using content analysis and thematic analysis, researchers may misuse these methods if they are not well acquainted with their distinctive features and contexts of application [17]. This can

lead to deficient or superficial conclusions and reduce the trustworthiness of their research. Addressing this misunderstanding, Hsieh and Shannon [18] note that some researchers apply both content analysis and thematic analysis simultaneously, taking for granted that each method highlights certain aspects of the research and involves a different approach. Furthermore, a lack of knowledge of the content analysis procedure limits researchers' ability to identify crucial links and relationships within the data, which could provide valuable insights [8]. Additionally, there are times that data simply gets thematized, when, in fact, thematic analysis needs to be employed, where the data is first interpreted before being categorized. Perhaps, researchers too often take short cuts and do not focus on explaining and coding the themes, which are important for ensuring a thorough analytical framework. In such cases, the research questions may only be partially answered [19]. Additionally, other researchers may fail to comprehend the non-linear process that characterizes thematic analysis—that is, the movement between the data and the analytical framework. This back-and-forth movement is significant in the process of theme construction as it ensures that the theme reflects the data. Such a lack of depth results in a superficial analysis that misses important details [20].

In order to avoid these problems, the researcher should be aware of the sequences and targets set by each approach. This means knowing how to construct a coding scheme for content analysis and how to identify, define and label themes in thematic analysis. Therefore, this article contributes to the understanding of content analysis and thematic analysis through a clear framework encompassing their purpose, process, and outcomes. It will also provide a guide to help researchers choose the most appropriate methodology for their work. Within this framework, the article delineates the two approaches by providing practical advice to help researchers choose the method for their work. The article aims to enhance the utility and rigour of educational and social science research through a clearly defined comparative approach to data collection and analysis, particularly for qualitative data.

Quantification of Content & Interpretation of Meaning

Thematic analysis and content analysis are distinctive approaches qualitative research, each addressing different purposes [21]. Recognition of these purposes is important for researchers to select the relevant methodology in their investigations and utilize it appropriately.

As its name suggests, content analysis is concerned with the content, and specifically, content in the form of verbal or text data. Its goal is to examine the messages underlying various forms of media content [22]. The primary function of content analysis is the study of information with regard to the problem under consideration. It involves describing the meaning of a communication and quantifying the occurrence of various terms. Content analysis, therefore, involves investigating coded data [8]. Coded data is analysed by systematically measuring and categorizing the relationships between the concepts in the research questions and the coded values, so that conclusions can be drawn over the influence of a certain coded value on a specific concept or variable. Content analysis may be said to be an approach which allows researchers to explore the meaning of a text and its non-material aspects within a well-defined conceptual boundary.

In contrast to content analysis, themes in thematic analysis are interpreted in accordance with the research purpose, which is to aid the researcher in understanding participants' accounts and views across the data set. Thematic analysis is not simply counting the number of words or sentences in the text; rather, it is concerned with the meaning and the impact that the words and the sentences have. Thematic analysis is useful in attempting to comprehend people's views, the context surrounding those views, and the rationale for why such reasoning was provided [11]. It enables researchers to analyze the details of human experiences; thus, it is applicable in the analysis of language acquisition, teaching methods, and learner motivation [16]. Thematic analysis, by maintaining focus on the meaning and context of the data, provides extensive narration which brings out the themes and relationships encapsulated in the data set.

Steps to Conduct Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis

Every form of analysis in research is unique in its process and intended objectives. In this case, content analysis and thematic analysis differ in their processes and objectives. Each researcher should understand and develop methods to ensure their results are reliable and valid.

Content analysis is a primary form of analysis for evaluating textual data in a sequential and quantitative manner. It begins with the primary research questions and objectives that the analysis aims to achieve. As noted by Krippendorff [8], the first step is to determine the material to be analyzed, which should be relevant to the research objectives. This material can be in the form of documents, written materials, or audio transcripts from interviews. After that, the researchers construct a set of codes or categories that will be used to organize the data. This involves determining certain words, phrases or concepts necessary to accomplish the research objectives. According to Hsieh and Shannon [18], having a well-defined coding scheme is critical to the integrity of the analysis. After the coding scheme is developed, the next step would be the coding of the content. This entails ongoing scrutiny of contents, notes, and other data and marking them with codes that identify the corresponding sections. If vast data sets have to be managed and coded, computer programs such as NVivo or Atlas are available. After the coding process, data that has been coded is subject to analysis in order to detect anomalies and trends. This would include determination of frequency counts of the occurrence of each code and scrutiny of their presence within the dataset. The last stage involves explaining the findings and interpreting the observed trends to provide the answers to the posed research questions [23].

To begin, researchers should establish the research question or objective very succinctly and directly. This will ensure that the researchers focus on researching or measuring relevant aspects of the topic. Second, researchers gather data pertaining to the research question through methods such as conducting interviews, reviewing articles or looking for relevant social media posts. The data should be sorted or grouped in a coding scheme to develop content categories. These can either be derived from existing literature or constructed entirely from the data. Then, researchers should proceed to the application of this coding scheme using qualitative or content analysis, which may be manual or computer based, to sort each submission into one or more classes. After coding, the next step examines the results by counting, measuring or computing the repetitions of the codes, and searching out patterns or interrelations in the data set. Finally, they must relate their findings to the research problem, state the conclusions and provide explanations and recommendations from the study results.

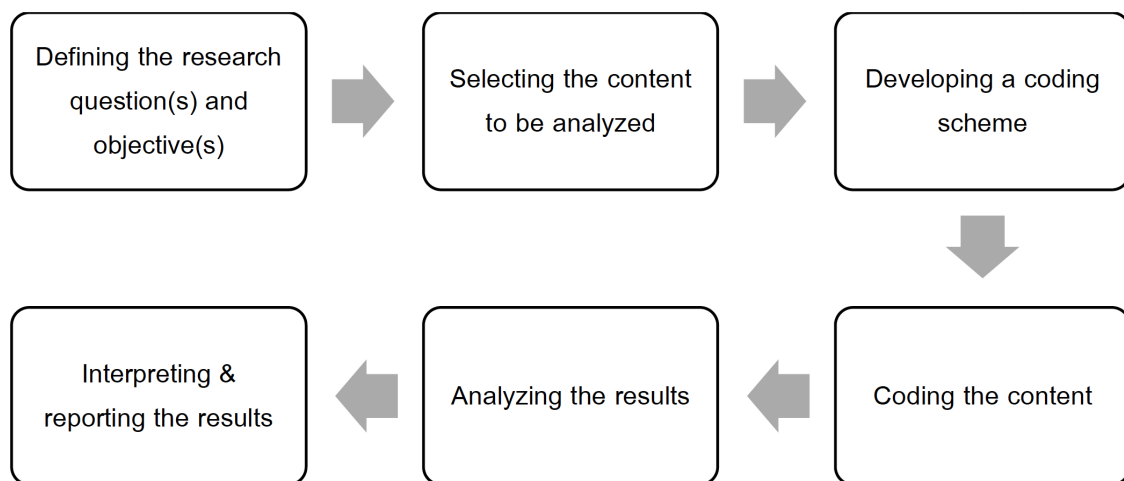


Figure 1. An Adapted Overview of Steps for Content Analysis

Source : Elo and Kyngäs [24]; Krippendorff [8]

With respect to qualitative analysis, thematic analysis refers to a method wherein themes identified from the data collected become the focal point for interpretation [25]. Braun and Clarke [19] consider there to be six key steps when carrying out thematic analysis. The first step is familiarisation with the data, involving detailed reading and understanding of the context of the materials. The next step is to construct initial codes, where one identifies elements in the data that are pertinent to the study. In step three, these codes are grouped into potential themes as researchers begin to link the codes that appear to be related to one another. The fourth step is concerned with verifying the themes through theme review. In this regard, the postulated themes are compared with the dataset to verify if they correspond. At this point, it is possible for researchers to revise and merge themes in order for them to be clear and consistent. The fifth stage involves

defining and naming each theme . Finally, in the sixth stage, as the researchers issue the thematic inquiry report, they narrate the thematic strands and provide explanation of how the data relates to each theme [20].

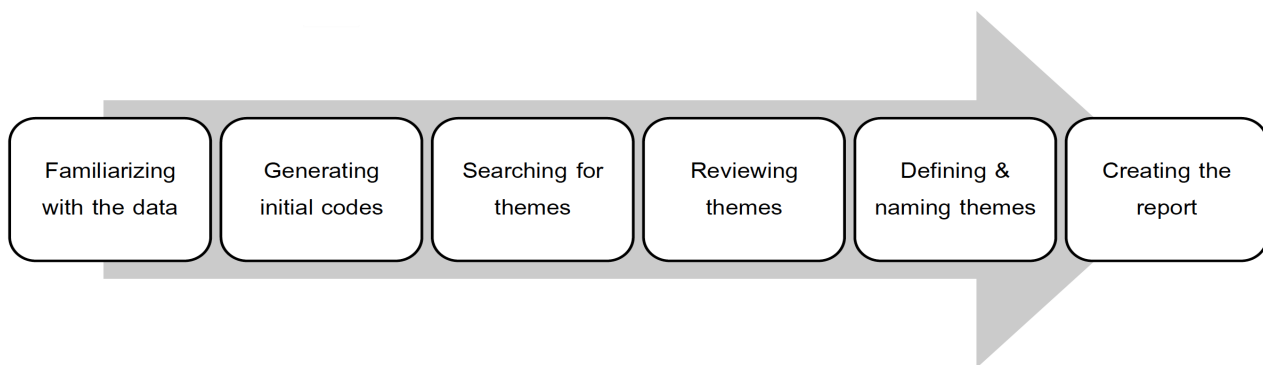


Figure 2. An Adapted Overview of Steps for Thematic Analysis

Source : Braun and Clarke [19]

Practical applications of these steps are evident in recent research. For example, Kaarakainen et al. [26] examined the phenomenon of loneliness in peer support discussion forums by performing inductive-deductive thematic analysis and content analysis of the data, and the data revealed eight salient themes, which content analysis illuminated and for which thick descriptions were constructed. Similarly, Kazu et al. [27] described the importance of curriculum literacy by employing thematic content analysis, using coding and thematic structuring. Additionally, Gibbs and Reed [28] identified distinctions between children's fictional storybooks and informative science books by employing content analysis. They constructed a code sheet from which information was extracted and then coded without regard to genre. Furthermore, coder pairs were used to compute interrater reliability, and a 90% agreement rate was reported. These examples illustrate the breadth of contexts in which content analysis and thematic analysis can be used to derive significant results.

A Comparison of Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis

Although both methods employ qualitative data analysis to derive conclusions, these two methods are different in many aspects. The following overview aims to compare the two perspectives and assist researchers in arriving at a decision of which one best suits their study's requirements.

I. Purpose and Approach

Content analysis, by definition, is a content-focused method with a specific intent and scope. The intent is to quantify the number of certain words, phrases or concepts within the content [29]. Doing so transforms the content into quantitative data that can further be subjected to a statistical analysis. This is especially helpful when analysing communication, particularly for identifying the number of times key terms are used and under which contexts [8]. It corresponds well with research objectives that seek to analyze large volumes of qualitative data through patterns and trends by giving the search an organized and replicable design. Conversely, thematic analysis refers to a method for analyzing qualitative data in which the aim is to identify, analyze and interpret patterns (themes) [30]. The aim of thematic analysis is to engage with the data at a level deeper than the surface, enabling the researcher to capture the distinct experiences and perspectives of the study participants [19]. This technique captures the essence of contextual data, emphasising the intricacies, nuances, and relationships identified in the data. It is designed for the consideration of complex problems and for advancing the understanding of social and human behaviours and their relationships.

II. Familiarization with Data and Coding

In content analysis, the initial step is to formulate the research question and select the appropriate material for analysis. At this stage, the researcher can develop a coding system or define categories in which the content will be organised. This may follow previous studies or be derived from the data itself. Coding involves disaggregating the data and reassembling it into different categories within a predetermined system of associations. This systematic and organised approach maintains the validity and reliability of the analysis [18]. For thematic analysis, similar methodologies apply, in which the analyst, after several readings of the text, constructs the data and seeks to capture additional

concepts, which are often spontaneous. Some researchers construct initial codes by analysing different features of the entire data set. Unlike content analysis, thematic analysis seeks to capture and construct meaning from data that does not have predefined categories. This simplification leads to greater appreciation of the nuances in the data [20].

III. Theme Development and Analysis Focus

In content analysis, the researchers interpret data by recognizing specific data patterns and trends, which form an overview of the content of the topic in question. This technique is most appropriate to applied research needs which involve statistically quantifiable parameters [23]. Contrary to content analysis, in thematic analysis researchers attempt to discover themes by bringing together all codes that relate to possible themes and checking if the themes are relevant to the data. It aims to uncover patterns and connections among themes. Researchers clean and shape the themes to restate the message of the data into a more coherent story.

IV. Analysis of Findings

Content analysis is a technique in which codes are assigned to content, and content is systematically coded. The analysis is simplified as frequencies are calculated, allowing for conclusions to be drawn. These conclusions are generally replicable and valid with respect to the given data. Results are often presented using graphs or summary tables that highlight the attributes and their respective strengths and weaknesses. This technique comprises the majority of the written work because it is more quantitatively oriented [31]. In contrast, qualitative data research emphasises analysis and interpretation to develop core ideas through thematic analysis. Data extracts are accompanied by analytic narratives to construct an engaging account of the research. This approach highlights the richness and multi-faceted nature of qualitative data and offers a complete and holistic understanding of the research question posed [16].

V. Strengths and Weaknesses

Content analysis enables a structured and organised examination of a large set of information. It can be quantified and analyzed statistically, and, regardless of the presence of a test case, maintains internal consistency and reliability. However, some components and associations may be too complex and therefore omitted. It focuses on a limited set of established classifications and is unlikely to capture all relevant issues. In contrast, thematic analysis advocates a more flexible and creative interpretative approach [13]. It values the complexity and richness of qualitative data and does not impose a linear emphasis on concepts associated with themes; rather, concepts are shaped within the context of the data collected. However, it is likely to be more interpretive and subjective. For this reason, thematic analysis may have less replicability than content analysis.

Table 1. Key Differences Between Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis

Dimensions	Content Analysis	Thematic Analysis
Purpose	Describing and quantifying patterns in data (words, phrases, categories) and linking them to research questions	Identifying, analyzing, and interpreting themes that capture meanings and patterns in participants' experiences
Approach to coding	Employing a pre-established codebook that is refined inductively or deductively; instances of each code are counted in the dataset	With a focus on interpretation, theme cultivation or codebook construction that is recommended as the inductive track.
Unit of analysis	Words, phrases, categories, documents, or media items	Coded data extracts grouped into broader themes
Reliability stance	Emphasizing inter-coder agreement, clear definitions, and replicability	Emphasizing reflexivity and transparency rather than mandatory inter-rater reliability
Typical outputs	Frequencies, charts, category maps, and interpretive commentary	Named themes with rich analytic narrative and supporting data extracts
Best suited for	Large or mixed-methods datasets, monitoring trends, examining manifest content	Exploring lived experiences, perceptions, and latent meanings

While sharing similarities, both content analysis and thematic analysis are based on different concepts when working with qualitative data. Content analysis, with its more positivistic approach, views data as objectively measurable and categorisable, treating it as a reality to be confined. It suggests that content, especially manifest content, exists independently of the researcher and, therefore, can and should be organised, classified, and quantified if necessary. Constructivism, by contrast, aligns with a more thematic approach. Thematic analysis seeks to define and articulate themes, recognising the importance of the researcher. It captures context, nuance, and the underlying processes of meaning-making, rather than focusing solely on counting. This means they should not be seen as interchangeable but as complementary methods to address the research questions. In practice, combining elements of both methods—such as using content analysis to map patterns before conducting an in-depth thematic analysis—can produce richer, more trustworthy findings if done transparently. Based on the distinctions, advantages, and limitations discussed above, researchers can apply the following decision-making framework to choose between content analysis and thematic analysis.

Table 2. A Decision-making Framework

Steps	Content Analysis	Thematic Analysis
1. Defining the research purpose	Mainly interested in tracking explicit patterns, such as frequency, presence/absence, manifest content	Mainly interested in exploring underlying meanings and experiences or latent content
2. Considering the data characteristics	Large datasets, multiple time points, or media corpora	In-depth interviews, journals, or open-ended responses
3. Deciding on the coding logic	A fixed codebook and inter-coder reliability	Flexible, reflexive coding with rich themes
4. Planning the outputs	Charts, counts, and category maps	Analytic narrative with illustrative quotes

That is to say, content analysis and thematic analysis are two qualitative research methods that are useful with distinct functions, areas of application and methodologies. Content analysis, for instance, is most suitable for research that seeks to process more numbers in most of its output and to establish trends among them. On the other hand, thematic research seeks patterns in the data with the aim of discerning the intricacies of the issue being studied. In light of the observations above, it follows that the differing methodologies have their own merits and as such, a researcher can select the most suitable for their study aims and objectives, thereby enhancing the quality of the data analysis process of the research.

What Researchers Should Know Before Using Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis

Before starting the processes of content and thematic analysis, researchers should be familiar with some important details, without which the methods will not be applied properly and thus not be reliable. Hence, both methods have to be comprehended in detail.

1. The researchers should know the key concepts and processes involved in content as well as thematic analysis. Content analysis is known to be a technique through which textual data is systematically coded and cataloged so as to look for commonalities and trends [8]. Conversely, thematic analysis has a wider approach in that it seeks for the meanings of relationships in qualitative data through themes [19]. If researchers understand the basic concepts and principles of these methods, they will combine their merits seamlessly.

2. Adequate preparation of data is necessary. This means selecting content that is relevant to the main objectives of the research and making sure that it is adequate and appropriate for analytical purposes [23]. The researchers should also undertake process of thorough familiarization with the the data in order to gain a deep understandings of its meanings and contexts.

3. It is also critical to consider how to ensure that the analysis will be reliable and valid. Such considerations include consistency in coding, reassessment and modification of themes on a regular basis and thorough triangulation of results [20]. The coding develops in relation to the the research focus, and researchers should be ready to revise and refine their coding multiple times.

Conclusion

In this article, content analysis and thematic analysis have been contextualised as the main approaches to qualitative research, and while this is an important distinction, this paper has much more to offer. By addressing the definitional and procedural differences between the above approaches, it provides researchers with an organised framework within which the most appropriate technique and subsequent execution of the technique can be tailored to the research problem. Knowing how to use content analysis and thematic analysis appropriately and effectively goes beyond simply offering added rigour to the methodology—it ensures that the findings are credible, that the right questions are being asked, and that the research findings can contribute to improved policy, practice, and more effective research. The article thus enhances the rigour, clarity and scope of qualitative research in the social sciences.

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