

## Navigating Complex Communication Dynamics in Qualitative Research

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**Abstract :** This study examines the dynamics of communication among researchers and participants who have various levels of hearing, use multiple languages, have various disabilities, and who come from different social strata. This qualitative methodological study focuses on the strategies employed in an ethnographic research study examining the communication choices of six sets of parents who have Deaf-Disabled children. The participating families varied in their communication strategies and preferences including the use of American Sign Language (ASL), visual-gestural communication, multiple spoken languages, and pidgin forms of each of these. The research team consisted of two undergraduate students proficient in ASL and a Deaf principal investigator (PI) who uses ASL and speech as his main modes of communication. A third Hard-of-Hearing undergraduate student fluent in ASL served as an objective facilitator of the data analysis. The team created reflexive journals by audio recording, free writing, and responding to team-generated prompts. They discussed interactions between the members of the research team, their evolving relationships, and various social and linguistic power differentials. The researchers reflected on communication during data collection, their experiences with one another, and their experiences with the participating families. Reflexive journals totaled over 150 pages. The outside research assistant reviewed the journals and developed follow up open-ended questions and prods to further enrich the data. The PI and outside research assistant used NVivo qualitative research software to conduct open inductive coding of the data. They chunked the data individually into broad categories through multiple readings and recognized recurring concepts. They compared their categories, discussed them, and decided which they would develop. The researchers continued to read, reduce, and define the categories until they were able to develop themes from the data. The research team found that the various communication backgrounds and skills present greatly influenced the dynamics between the members of the research team and with the participants of the study. Specifically, the following themes emerged: (1) students as communication facilitators and interpreters as barriers to natural interaction, (2) varied language use simultaneously complicated and enriched data collection, and (3) ASL proficiency and professional position resulted in a social hierarchy among researchers and participants. In the discussion, the researchers reflected on their backgrounds and internal biases of analyzing the data found and how social norms or expectations affected the perceptions of the researchers in writing their journals. Through this study, the research team found that communication and language skills require significant consideration when working with multiple and complex communication modes. The researchers had to continually assess and adjust their data collection methods to meet the communication needs of the team members and participants. In doing so, the researchers aimed to create an accessible research setting that yielded rich data but learned that this often required compromises from one or more of the research constituents.

**Keywords :** American Sign Language, complex communication, deaf-disabled, methodology

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