

# Circumstantial Suitability of a Case Study: Its Applications and Limitations in Linguistics

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**How to cite this paper:** Okowa, N., & Odero, O. (2024). Circumstantial Suitability of a Case Study: Its Applications and Limitations in Linguistics. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 14, 1003-1014. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2024.145052>

**Received:** July 7, 2024

**Accepted:** October 21, 2024

**Published:** October 24, 2024

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## Abstract

Case study as a form of primary research method faces a serious definitional crisis among researchers in all areas of study. This library research aims to reconcile these definitions, establish whether case study is a method, a methodology, a design, a research or an approach. This paper analyzes the circumstances under which case study could be most suitable, especially in applied linguistics. The authors focus on the limitations of case study, its strengths notwithstanding. Despite its inherent weaknesses, case study remains a very powerful methodology for language researchers and for theory development in applied linguistics and language education. Its limitations in generalizability are counterbalanced by its detailed portrayal of issues, settings, individuals, and interactions.

## Keywords

Case Study, Definitional Crisis, Generalizability, Misunderstandings, Method, Research, Circumstantial Suitability

## 1. Introduction

This paper seeks to define a case study as a form of primary research method, and attempts to delve into the definitional crisis in case study, and the ongoing argument on whether it is a method, a methodology, a design, an approach or a research in itself.

Secondly, this paper critically examines the circumstances, situations, contexts or “cases” under which a case study would be suitable in a research in Linguistics. The last part of this article discusses the limitations or weaknesses of this type of research method in the field of Linguistics, its strengths notwithstanding.

## 2. Literature Review

The case study research method originated in clinical medicine (the case history,

that is, the patient's personal history). The first case studies in the social sciences were likely conducted by Pierre Guillaume Frederic Le Play, a 19<sup>th</sup> century French sociologist and economist who studied family budgets. The method has been used in sociology, psychology, and anthropology since the early 20th century.

The best known case studies in psychology were the ones carried out by Sigmund Freud, including Anna O and Little Hans. Freud (1909a, 1909b), as quoted by MacLeod (2024), conducted very detailed investigations into the private lives of his patients in an attempt to both understand and help them overcome their illnesses.

Harrison et al. (2017) note that case study research has undergone substantial development over the last 40 years, and that such change and progress are a result of parallel influences from historical approaches to research and individual researcher's preferences, perspectives on, and interpretations of case study research.

Many conflicting and controversial definitions of case study have been proliferating from different scholars. Harrison et al (2017) have observed that since researchers who have contributed to the development of case study research come from diverse disciplines with different philosophical perspectives, there are equally a variety of definitions and approaches of the case study.

According to MacLeod (2019), case studies are in-depth investigations of a single person, group, event or community. In this category of research, data are typically gathered from a variety of sources and by using several and different methods such as observations and interviews.

A case study has been described as a report of descriptive information on data of research of an experiment, project, event or analysis. Apparently, there is a relationship between experiment and case study, yet they are different. A case study is a detailed study of a specific subject, such as a person, group, place, event, organization, or phenomenon. It is an observational research design which usually involves qualitative methods, but quantitative methods are sometimes also used. But in experimental studies, researchers introduce an intervention and study the effects; the experimental studies are randomized, meaning the subjects are grouped by chance (Institute of Work & Health, 2016). In an experimental research method, there are two specific groups or variables that are used to test a hypothesis. The dependent variable is the aspect, subject or group of an experiment that is influenced by the manipulated aspect; an outcome measured to evaluate the effectiveness of the treatment. The independent variable is the variable that is changed or manipulated in a series of experiments. Experimental research can be conducted in laboratory or field settings, just like the case study.

Rolland & Herstad (2013) define a case study as "an in-depth *study* of the particular where the researcher seeks to increase his understanding of the phenomena *studied*". This definition is pedantic. A case study is an investigation of a single bound case of a specific entity, such as how street families acquire and learn English in Nairobi city.

It is debatable whether a case study is a research method or something else.

Harrison et al. (2017) reaffirm that case study is variously referred to as a methodology and a method, a research method (Yin, 2014), an approach, research and research design, research strategy, qualitative design (Creswell, 2014) or qualitative case study (Merriam, 2009), and a form of inquiry or investigation. Often these terms are used interchangeably without definitional clarity. However, prominent case study researchers do emphasize that an overarching methodology shapes a case study design and that multiple sources of data and methods can be used.

MacLeod (2019) argues that “case study is not itself a research method, but researchers select methods of data collection and analysis that will generate material suitable for case studies”. The underlying meaning of this argument is that a case study is a research design; it is not a research method. Then what is the difference between a research design and a research method?

A research design is a roadmap, a plan to answer the research question(s) while a research method is a strategy used to implement that plan. Though different, the two are synonymous because a good research design ensures that the data collected or obtained enables the researcher to answer the research questions more effectively. Most frequently used research methods include observation/participant observation, surveys, interviews, focus groups, experiments, secondary data analysis/archival study, and mixed method combining two or more of these methods.

Rolland & Herstad (2013) observe that

...case studies have often been seen as a fruitful way of studying a phenomenon before using a more formal and rigorous approach for verifying or falsifying existing theory. Some researchers even define the case study in itself as almost of no value, and hence an inappropriate approach for doing scientific research.

This notion that a case study is not a useful or an appropriate approach or design is strongly rejected by Rolland & Herstad (2013) who focus on how case studies can make profound contributions within information systems (IS) research by selecting *critical* cases in their paper “The ‘Critical Case’ in Information Systems Research”.

Yin (1989) argues that case studies are not one specific method or methodological choice and is not the same as ethnography, and thus a case study does not need to be based on only one ethnographical inquiry like participant-observation. A case study could easily include documents analysis, participant-observation, interviews and analysis of participants’ words.

Stake (2005) concurs and views the case study as a choice of what object to be studied, rather than a choice of techniques or methods. He emphasizes the defining feature of case study research as being the object of the study (the bound system, that is, the case) adding that the case study research focuses on a particular thing and that the product of an investigation should be descriptive and heuristic

in nature. In other words, a case study should vividly describe the object of the study, and discover or reveal unique characteristics of the case under study.

Duff & Anderson (2016) contend that a case study generally constitutes a qualitative, interpretative approach to understanding the experiences, features, behaviors, and processes of a bound (a specific or defined) unit. This definition implies that a case study can be suitable for an explanatory research rather than for descriptive or exploratory research. Qualitative case study is a research methodology that helps in exploration of a phenomenon within some particular context through various data sources, and it undertakes the exploration through variety of lenses in order to reveal multiple facets of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

In a more technical definition of the case study, Yin (1989: p. 23) denotes that a case study is an empirical inquiry that:

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which
- multiple sources of evidence are used.

This definition depicts a case study—unlike more superficial and generalizing research methods—as a method intended to provide such finer details, information, and “thick description” as that of ethnography, which allows for the thorough analysis of the complex and the particularistic nature of a distinct phenomenon.

### 3. Rationale of the Study

This study was informed by the fact that case study has as many definitions as the number of scholars who have attempted to define it, causing a definitional crisis. This crisis surrounding case study remains largely unresolved. This study was an attempt to reconcile the many definitions with a view to resolving the crisis. There was need to delve deeper into the key characteristics, meanings, applications and implications of case study.

Another justification of the current article was the need to critically evaluate the strengths of case study as a research method in linguistics, and to disabuse the misconceptions about the weaknesses of case study in research.

The major challenges to case study still remain unresolved, namely generalization, validity, reliability, theory role, authority, and authenticity, dependency, and longevity of the case. Only Zaaima Talib AlBalushi in his work *Challenges of a Case Study* (2019) has attempted to offer solutions to these challenges.

### 4. Methodology

This study used library research as the main method of research. This step by step process was used to gather information from library resources on the circumstances under which case study could be most suitable. The research topic was generated from a PhD in Linguistics course work unit in methodology in Linguistics

as a term paper at Rongo University.

The third step in the library research process involved evaluation of the information gathered from the internet library in order to write this article. The assumption that a library research process is a straightforward step-by-step progression could be quite misleading. The researchers realized that the process was cyclic: the steps could be repeated as we gained more insight on the topic.

The research tool used in the search for the information was Google; to access books, journals and other online library resources. We used Google because it is considered the best and most accurate search engine due to its advanced algorithms and vast database, according to information so obtained on Top 19 Best Search Engines of 2024. [Browning \(2024\)](#) places the popularity of Google as a top search engine in the world at 92% of the search market. In the words of [Gil \(2024\)](#), “Google is fast, relevant, and has the most extensive single catalog of web pages available”.

The informational search queries in this study were as follows:

- 1) What is a case study?
- 2) What is the scope of a case study?
- 3) In what circumstances is case study most suitable in research in linguistics?
- 4) What are the strengths and weaknesses of case research in linguistics?

We evaluated all relevant sources of internet information and came up with this paper.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Types of Case Study

Apart from the definitional crisis already covered in the literature review, the research revealed that there are various types of case studies. The typology of a case study could determine the circumstantial suitability of and the purpose of a particular case research.

[Stake \(2005\)](#) identifies three general types of case studies that can be applied for different purposes:

- intrinsic case study: the researcher is interested in that particular case, and the purpose is not to understand a generic phenomenon, but simply to increase the understanding and make sense of the case being studied. It allows the curious researcher to freely learn or study issues of personal interest. The focus of this type of case study is the researcher’s interest to acquire more knowledge and understanding of the object of study.
- instrumental case study: a case specially selected for the refinement of a theory, (instrumental case study allows for researchers to try to understand the science behind an experiment or case), and
- collective case study: a number of different cases can be studied in order to compare and draw general implications from the phenomena studied. It shows a detailed and concise data on a group of individuals.

Other types of case studies existing in the current literature review include:

- explanatory case study shows the data and description of a casual investigation.
- descriptive case study compares the new gatherings to the pre-existing theory.
- exploratory case study gives more background information than usual case studies, compares results, and allows the researcher to dedicate more time into studying the information needed for their experiment or case.

These scholars seem to agree that it would be more relevant to talk about the case study in terms of an approach. In this direction, the case study could be defined as an approach to the study of the particular—often with a special focus on what is unique and what is common in a particular case, where various research methods and data collection techniques can be used. Using such a simple definition of case study might be a more useful approach in discussing the proliferation of definitions and subsequent confusion. In any case, they all seem to view case study as “a methodology, a type of design in qualitative research, an object of study and a product of the enquiry”.

Creswell et al. (2007) conclude with a definition that collates the hallmarks of the key approaches and represents the core features of a case study:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g. observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports) and reports a case description and case-based themes.

The main purpose of case studies, according to Copland (2018) is to find a real-life application of a theoretical concept or solution. Typically, case studies should be current and complex. Since case study research usually involves one specific concept, the complexity of the case chosen will determine how and whether the idea is passed across effectively.

The purpose of a scientist’s case study is to experiment between theories or come up with new theories. Scientists are able to develop a hypothesis and go into detail through their research and experimenting when processing through the case study type of their choice.

## 5.2. The Scope and Domains of Case Study Research

Although this paper was not intended to assess the strengths against limitations of Case study, it should be noted that a researcher selects a case study design because of the nature of the research problem and the questions being asked. Case study is the best plan for answering the research questions; its strengths outweigh its limitations insofar as it offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon.

Case study is a particularly appealing design for applied fields of study such as education, social work, administration, health and business whose processes, problems, and programs can be examined to bring about understanding that in turn can affect or even improve practice. Case study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy

(Reis, 2009).

According to Harrison et al (2017), a case study is consistently described as a versatile form of qualitative inquiry most suitable for a comprehensive, holistic, and an in-depth investigation of a complex issue (phenomenon, event, social situation, and organization, program, process, individual or group) in context, where the boundary between the context and the issue is unclear and contains many variables.

In a business environment, a researcher can forecast the demand for products a company is developing. In this circumstance, the company will require current/up to date information on consumer preferences to help them make the right decisions (Copland, 2018).

There are case studies that are particular to psychologists, scientists, sociologists, and linguists. Within those types of case studies, there are individual theory, organizational theory, social theory, and linguistic theory. A psychologist would use a case study to seek in-depth information about the human brain, behavior or cognitive thinking; a sociologist would go farther and look into the behavior or interactions within, between or around communities, groups, or organizations in areas like language use.

Case study would be used in applied linguistics to address a plethora of issues in language. A few examples include L1 use in language teaching and learning in pre-primary education in Kenya's new Competency-Based Curriculum; L2 transfer; interactive or collaborative language learning; task-based language learning; language learning/teaching strategies; language teacher education; language testing (for example, why the national mean score in cloze test in English paper one remains a dismal 3 out of 10 in KCSE); multilingualism and language revitalization, language change and language death. Duff (2008) asserts that case studies of individual language learners are a valuable means of illustrating issues connected with learning, using, and in some cases, losing another language.

Duff (2012) posits that case study is a very common and important approach to research in applied linguistics and many other academic and professional fields. Linguists use it in order to understand aspects of language learning or use. The focus of a case study may be the knowledge, performance, or perspectives of a single individual, such as a language learner or teacher. The "cases" are language learners, teachers, speakers, or writers, often representative of the school, family or society where particular language practices are salient and the complexities, interactions, and dynamics of the system can be examined within the fullness of the case (Duff & Anderson, 2016).

Case study has been and will continue to be used to investigate how political factors operate in multilingual and transnational contexts such as language immersion, study abroad, refugee resettlement, and language revitalization within indigenous communities, among many other contexts and circumstances. The approach can be used to investigate how young children and the elderly in their primary home communities engage one another as an indicator of language main-

tenance, language shift/change or language death (LD); issues of language learning and language acquisition; people in intercultural situations (including educational contexts) such as Luo and Luo-Abasuba in which Dholuo is causing imminent death of Olusuba.

Case study can be used in research on how the global village is negotiating the complexities of the globalized knowledge economy where certain languages/literacies or tongues, ideologies, ideas, and cultural practices are privileged over others. The case study can explain the prestigious position of English language in the world today, and why there is a move to replace it with the “dead” Latin in the business world today.

Duff & Anderson (2016) argue that “an examination of people’s experiences, development, and participation in particular communities over a longer term is much more feasible in case study than in studies with larger number of participants”. This argument either seems to diffuse the claim that case study is time consuming or tries to advance a notion that if it is time-consuming, then it is for a worthy cause.

The narratives of case study participants, such as teachers, learners, and speakers/writers describing their experiences, are becoming more common sources of data than in the past, although they also include interactional data, observational and documentary evidence. Biographies (of *Raila Odinga: An Enigma in Kenyan Politics* by Babafemi A. Badejo) and autobiographies (of *Benjamin Franklin* by Benjamin Franklin, *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela, *My Experiments with Truth* by Mahatma Gandhi, *Dreams from my Father* by Barrack Obama), personal diaries and memoirs provide sufficient information on their objects in individual case writing.

In a hypothetical study of *Audrey*, with a speech or language disorder, for example, a researcher would normally want to elicit an oral or written narrative of her history and ongoing experiences. In contemporary case study research in applied linguistics, multiple case studies (and not single cases) are the new trend in order to provide several instances of the phenomenon in question and issues of typicality and variation among cases not possible to address in a single case. Recruiting several of Audrey’s classmates and agetates to participate would likely reveal intriguing differences and similarities across the participants. Generalizability in case studies would no longer be the culprit.

A researcher can use case study of such prolific, proficient, strategic and effective writers like Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Grace Ogot who use English as second language (L2) in their writings. Again, interviewing their agetates, classmates in high school, former departmental colleagues at the university, workmates and other close associates, would yield very reliable data.

Case study research method can be used in the area of L1 language/literacy among street urchins in Koinange Street, in Nairobi, Kenya. Getting to know how street families acquire and develop oral and written skills out of classrooms can make an interesting study. Street children are competent multilinguals in our

society today. Now it is this last hypothetical case study of language use in street families that we will use to demonstrate the limitations or weaknesses of the case study research method or design in this paper.

### 5.3. Limitations of Case Study

The case study as a research approach in various fields has been heavily criticized for lack of control, lack of rigour, and problems of generalization (Galliers, 1993; Irani et al., 1999; Yin, 1989).

Willis (2014) points out that single case study analysis has been subject to a number of criticisms on related issues of methodological rigour, researcher subjectivity, and external validity, reliability and replicability of various forms of a case study.

The most oft quoted limitation of case study research is the issue of generalizability which looms larger here than with other types of qualitative research. The claim that one cannot generalize on the basis of a single case is widespread in academic literature. However, according to Flyvbjerg (2011), this claim “is a delusion”. He presents five “misconceptions” or “misunderstandings” that have systematically undermined the credibility and use of case study:

Misunderstanding No. 1	General, theoretical knowledge is more valuable than concrete case knowledge.
Misunderstanding No. 2	One cannot generalize on the basis of an individual case; therefore, the case study cannot contribute to scientific development.
Misunderstanding No. 3	The case study is most useful for generating hypotheses in the first stage of a total research process, but not testing and theory-building.
Misunderstanding No. 4	The case study contains a bias toward verification; a tendency to confirm the researcher’s preconceived notions.
Misunderstanding No. 5	It is often difficult to summarize and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of specific case studies.

The five misunderstandings represent the conventional or orthodox view of the case study. This misconception, and Willis (2014) concurs, raises issues of theory, reliability, and validity, and challenges the very status of the case study as a scientific method, design or approach.

In order to understand the first misunderstanding, we must grasp the role of cases and theory in human learning. We need to understand that case study produces the type of concrete, context-dependent knowledge in research on learning that allows people to grow from rule-based beginners to refined experts. Besides, in the study of human affairs, context-dependent knowledge rules out the possibility

of social science emulating natural science to develop epistemic theory.

This criticism of case study approach is misdirected because these limitations also exist in other research approaches.

Flyvbjerg (2006) refers to these limitations as “misunderstandings” that are devastating to case study as a scientific method. He observes that single cases, experiments and experiences of researchers like Galileo, Skinner, Pavlov, Darwin, Freud, among others, indicate that both human and natural sciences can be advanced by a single case. He also argues that formal generalizations based on large samples are overrated in their contribution to scientific progress. Therefore, findings on language use among street families in Koinange Street in Nairobi can be very similar in studies on the same family in very different and far places like Lokichogio.

Besides, there are issues of reliability and validity in the case studies. Most scholars have faulted case study for its lack of representativeness and its lack of rigour in the collection, construction, and analysis of the empirical materials that give rise to this study. Data collection by a strange researcher can be a daunting task among street urchins in Nairobi and elsewhere. Sometimes they can give you a wrong response either because they are suspicious of your real intentions or because they got interested in the goodies and inducements you might have used to cow them as case participants.

Lack of rigour is closely linked to the problem of researcher bias, usually introduced by the subjectivity of the researcher and others involved in the case.

However, much can be learned by the reader from a particular case through the researcher’s colourful narrative description (Reis, 2009). A vivid portrait of street urchins in Koinange Street can become a prototype that can be used in the comparative study of language use by other street children in Korogocho slums of Nairobi or Pand Pieri estate in Kisumu city.

Erickson (1986) argues that since the general lies in the particular, what we learn in a particular case can be transferred to similar situations and that it is the reader, not the researcher, who determines what can apply to their context. The reader will add what the researcher fails to pass along, subtract, invent, shape and reconstruct the knowledge in ways that leave the case study more likely to be personally useful (Stake, 2005).

Case study is more expensive/costly and time-consuming than the other types of qualitative inquiries. A researcher may not have the time and money to devote to such a demanding study over a long period of time with street families in a very wild ecology and weather, and animosity to a strange scholar. When time and money are available to produce a worthy case study, the product may be too lengthy, too detailed, and too involved for busy policy makers, practitioners and busy leaders of Nairobi county government to find time to study the output of the research. A case study researcher must therefore control the amount of description, analysis or summary material of the product of his investigation.

Qualitative cases are also limited by the sensitivity and integrity of the investigator, “the primary instrument of data collection and analysis”. A case study

researcher should be well trained in observation and interviewing of destitutes and vulnerable groups without fixed abode (vagabonds in town), and have guidelines in security issues and on constructing the final report so that it does not become too cumbersome for the reader. Researcher's limited abilities and instincts would mar the output of the study of the street families. Already his attitude toward the case participants would most likely be unfavourable and cynical.

This case study would not escape the usual problems of ethics and confidentiality. From the onset, the researcher would be invading the niche and exclusive domain of the street families. An unethical researcher could so select from among available data that virtually anything he wished could be illustrated. Both readers and authors of case studies must guard against biases that would affect the final product. Researcher's own subjective feeling of nausea, for example, may influence case study of the street family.

## 6. Conclusion

Case studies of individual language learners are a valuable means of illustrating issues related to language learning, language application and language loss. This is one area that gives this paper its social and contextual significance.

Furthermore, case studies provide students with scenarios in which they can begin to think about their understanding and solutions to problems encountered in real-world situations. Well-planned case studies can challenge students' critical thinking and hone their problem-solving skills in a safe and open learning environment.

Despite its inherent weaknesses, case study remains a very powerful methodology for language researchers and for theory development in applied linguistics and language education. Its limitations in generalizability are counterbalanced by its detailed portrayal of issues, settings, individuals, and interactions. The case study researcher and reader are in a good stead to understand the lives of their targets/objects of study or the focal participants, their linguistic experiences and circumstances within their unique—but possibly common-learning ecologies. Consequently, we gain new understanding of what it means to be a contemporary language learner, speaker, teacher or user in a particular circumstance. Increasingly more graduate students, researchers and scholars are using case study as a vital research tool in applied linguistics. What researchers ought to do is to develop guidelines and parameters for the case study as a pragmatic, perfect, applicable model and source of authentic primary data.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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