Reflexive Thematic Analysis in Military Research:
Insights from a Thai Military Academy

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Abstract

This article examined the application of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) within the context of a military academy, focusing specifically on the Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy (NKRAFA) in Thailand. Military academies offer a distinctive research environment characterized by rigid hierarchies, cultural traditions, and power dynamics that influence both participant responses and the research process. The researcher's positionality, including prior affiliations and perceived authority, significantly influences participant responses, necessitating a reflexive approach to data interpretation. Semi-structured interviews were employed in this study to demonstrate Braun and Clarke's six-phase RTA in the analysis of the motivational dynamics of Thai air cadets learning English as a second language (L2). Themes related to motivational challenges, adaptability, and institutional influences on language learning were revealed through the analysis, all of which were shaped by individual dispositions and hierarchical pressures. The flexibility of RTA and its emphasis on researcher reflexivity are essential for navigating the ethical and practical complexities of this hierarchical setting, enabling a nuanced interpretation of cadets' experiences. This paper emphasizes the value of RTA in highly structured environments, where reflexive engagement with data and attention to researcher positionality enriches analysis. The study calls for further research applying RTA in various military institutions to explore how structural variations influence participants' experiences. Additionally, cross-cultural studies utilizing RTA in international military contexts could offer insights into the intersection of cultural diversity and military hierarchy, contributing to the development of more inclusive and adaptive training programs in military education.

Keywords: Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), Military Academy Research, Air Cadet Motivation, Language Learning, Hierarchical Dynamics

Introduction

Military academies, with their stringent hierarchy, deeply rooted traditions, and unique cultural dynamics, offer a distinctive and complex research setting. These institutions operate on principles of rank, discipline, and loyalty, shaping communication styles and relationships. Researchers entering this environment—especially those with prior affiliations or unique characteristics—inevitably encounter dynamics shaped by both their own identities and the academy's rigid structures. In such a setting, the researcher's positionality, including background, affiliations, and perceived authority, becomes integral to participants' openness and data authenticity (Berger, 2015).

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In the context of the Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy (NKRAFA), these dynamics could be remarkably observed. Social and professional ranks define daily life, shaping cadets' perceptions of authority, trust, and confidentiality. Individual variables such as gender and professional role of an instructor in military education context could be found resulting certain degree of complexity in engaging with students i.e. air cadets as in present scenario. This dual role underscored the need for reflexivity in understanding how hierarchical and cultural norms shape participants' responses. Air cadets' assumptions about the instructor's role and potential policy influence highlighted the impact of these norms on research interactions.

As Hall (1990) and England (1994) have inserted, identity and positionality are not merely background factors but active elements shaping the research process itself. Hall's notion that "there's no enunciation without positionality" captures the necessity of navigating these influences consciously. Positionality, therefore, became a tool to foster openness, while requiring careful handling to address power imbalances and spectrum of anxiety in participants. The dual role of insider and outsider presented challenges, underscoring the importance of reflexivity, transparency, and ethical responsibility in such a context. This study examines the methodological implications of these dynamics through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to better understand how positionality shapes research in military academies.

Over the past decade, military research has drawn on a range of methods to address the complexity of studying military organizations, personnel, and cultural dynamics. Qualitative methods such as ethnography, in-depth interviews, and participant observation allow researchers to capture the nuanced experiences and interactions within military contexts. Ethnographic studies have been particularly valuable for understanding military culture and identity by observing individuals in their natural settings. Likewise, case studies and thematic analyses have gained traction in examining military behavior and structure outside traditional institutions (Soeters et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2020).

Quantitative methods like survey research and multilevel analysis have been instrumental in exploring large-scale organizational behavior, such as morale, discipline, and operational effectiveness across ranks. Computational modelling and experimental methods also enrich military studies by enabling simulations and the analysis of large datasets related to conflict dynamics and military operations (Soeters et al., 2014). While these approaches offer valuable structural insights, they often lack the depth required to unpack culturally embedded, hierarchically influenced experiences central to military life.

In response, recent trends in military research have increasingly integrated both qualitative and quantitative methods (Williams et al., 2020) to capture individual and organizational perspectives. This blending enhances the scope of military research, particularly in exploring the intersections of cultural values, hierarchical structures, and behavior within the armed forces. As could be observed through an extensive review of traditional qualitative studies, a certain degree of necessity to expand research horizons into reflexive engagement and uncover how these factors could shape lived experience should be recognised and fulfilled.

Review of related literature on Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

Developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) provides an interpretative framework ideally suited to these complexities (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014; Byrne, 2022). RTA transcends rigid coding frameworks, emphasizing researcher reflexivity and situating the researcher as a co-creator of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019). It enables the identification of both semantic (explicit) and latent (underlying) themes, inviting researchers to reflect deeply on their positionality and its impact on data interpretation (Braun et al., 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2020).

In 2024, Braun and Clarke introduced the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG), designed to address common gaps in RTA application and promote methodological coherence, reflexive openness, and transparency in qualitative reporting. These guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2024) further underscore RTA's commitment to interpretive depth and are especially valuable in complex contexts. In military contexts, where cultural and hierarchical dynamics strongly influence participant perspectives and research interactions, RTA's reflexive nature enables a more nuanced understanding of themes emerging from this distinct environment.

Despite its strengths, RTA is often misapplied even in settings where its interpretive power could be maximally beneficial. Braun and Clarke (2024) have identified several recurring issues, including *Misalignment with RTA's Theoretical Foundations*: Many studies mistakenly treat thematic analysis as a single method rather than a flexible family of approaches. In military research, this can result in data interpretation that overlooks the theoretical underpinnings unique to RTA, reducing themes to superficial summaries rather than deeper insights. *Lack of Reflexivity and Methodological Coherence*: RTA demands transparency in how researchers' perspectives influence theme development. In many studies, insufficient reflexivity leads to methodological incoherence, where themes are identified without clearly articulating the researcher's positional influence. This can skew findings by ignoring the impact of rank, affiliation, and identity on participant openness. *Confusion Between Themes and Topics*: Themes in RTA should encapsulate a coherent story or deeper meaning rather than surface-level topics. This is particularly important in military research, where capturing layered meanings around hierarchy, identity, and culture is essential. *Over-Reliance on Positivist Quality Standards*: Using reporting checklists like COREQ with RTA can introduce "methodological incoherence." In military research, where power dynamics complicate data gathering, rigid adherence to these standards can constrain RTA's interpretive strengths. To enhance military research using RTA, Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG) provide a coherent, reflexive framework specifically tailored for interpretive research demands (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

Research Methodology with Application of RTA in Military Milieu

This section demonstrates the application of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) in analysing the data from the recent study entitled, *Examining Motivational Dynamics of Thai Air Cadets and Their Adaptability to Learn L2 between Year One and Year Two* (Sommeechai, 2024). Using semi-structured interviews as the primary method to collect data and following the RTARG (Braun & Clarke, 2024), the six-phase process of RTA (Braun et al., 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2014, 2019, 2020; Byrne, 2022) helped facilitate the identification of themes related to cadets' motivation, adaptability, and experiences in language learning within the structured setting of a military academy. The six-phase process is demonstrated as follows:

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data

The process began with familiarisation, achieved through active listening to each interview in its entirety before transcription. This phase could be operationalised to achieve beyond surface understanding, requiring immersion in the cadets' verbal expressions and non-verbal cues. For instance, one cadet expressed frustration about the academy's rigorous schedule, mentioning a wish for fewer ceremonies and more time focused solely on core studies. During this recount, he hesitated and looked away—a gesture that, upon further listening, hinted at an internal conflict. He seemed cautious, perhaps due to concerns about potential repercussions of openly criticizing academy policies.

By refraining from taking notes during this initial playback, subtle details in tone and expression could be mentally catalogued and later incorporated the observations into reflexive notes and analytical insights. These small yet significant elements provided a broader context, particularly in understanding how power and formality within the academy may have shaped cadets' disclosures.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Data were coded using NVivo, where 'nodes'—often serving as initial codes—helped organize the content relevant to the research questions. For example, the "decent background" code highlighted cadets with prior English exposure and was considered a factor in their motivation levels. Given RTA's flexibility, the codes evolved, with some being refined or eliminated based on their relevance to the central themes.

Phase 3: Generating Themes

In this phase, codes with shared meanings were grouped to form broader themes. For example, "Motivational Dynamics" emerged as a primary theme by integrating codes like "Self-Motivation," where cadets expressed a desire for improvement, and "Institutional Challenges," which included complaints about limited English practice opportunities. The data revealed how motivation fluctuated based on the cadets' year in the academy and their exposure to English outside of structured lessons.

Another significant theme, "Dispositional Factors," arose from codes capturing internal factors like the cadets' persistence and self-perception as English learners. For instance, a first-year air cadet shared his habit of practicing English vocabulary through online sources, which stemmed from his personal drive to succeed despite institutional constraints that prevented them from accessing the internet.

Phase 4: Reviewing Potential Themes

The review phase involved refining themes to ensure they accurately represented patterns within the dataset. Braun and Clarke's (2020) guiding questions helped ensure each theme had a clear organizing concept. For example, the initial theme "Socio-Relational Factors" was initially focused on peer influence but was expanded to include "Family Support" after recognizing that cadets often drew motivation from family connections. This refinement added depth to the understanding of how relational support networks influenced cadets' attitudes toward English learning.

To demonstrate, figure 1 below shows the finalised thematic map after reviewing multiple nodes in NVivo.
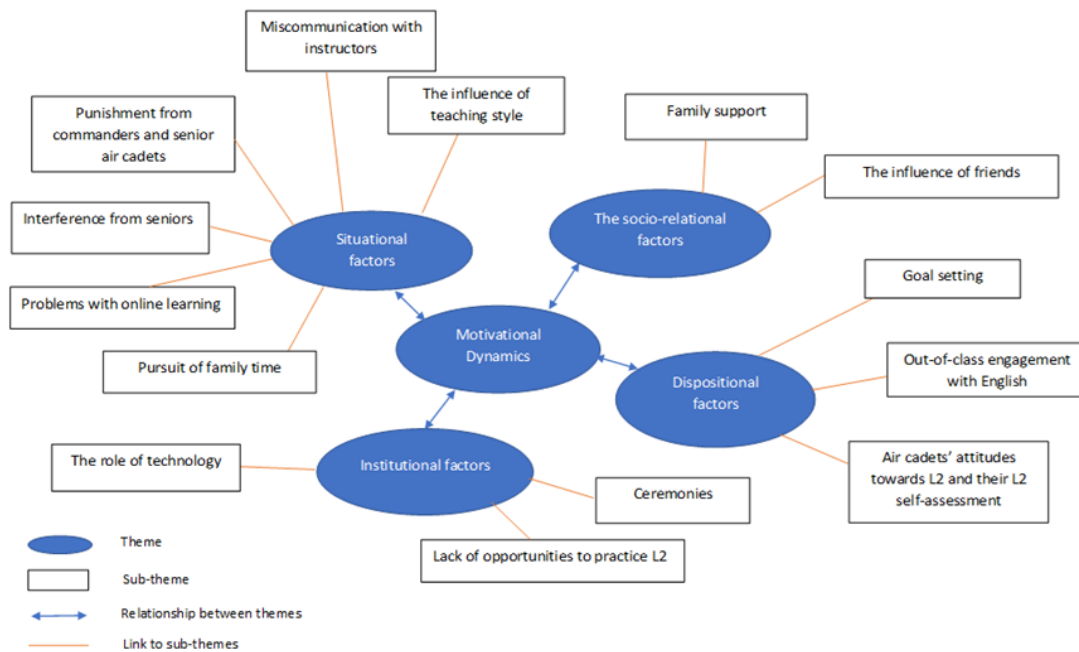

Fig. 1 Thematic map demonstrating five themes

Figure 1: Finalised thematic map demonstrating five themes

The five themes were developed from the initial seven themes after refining the data which is presented in figure 2 below.
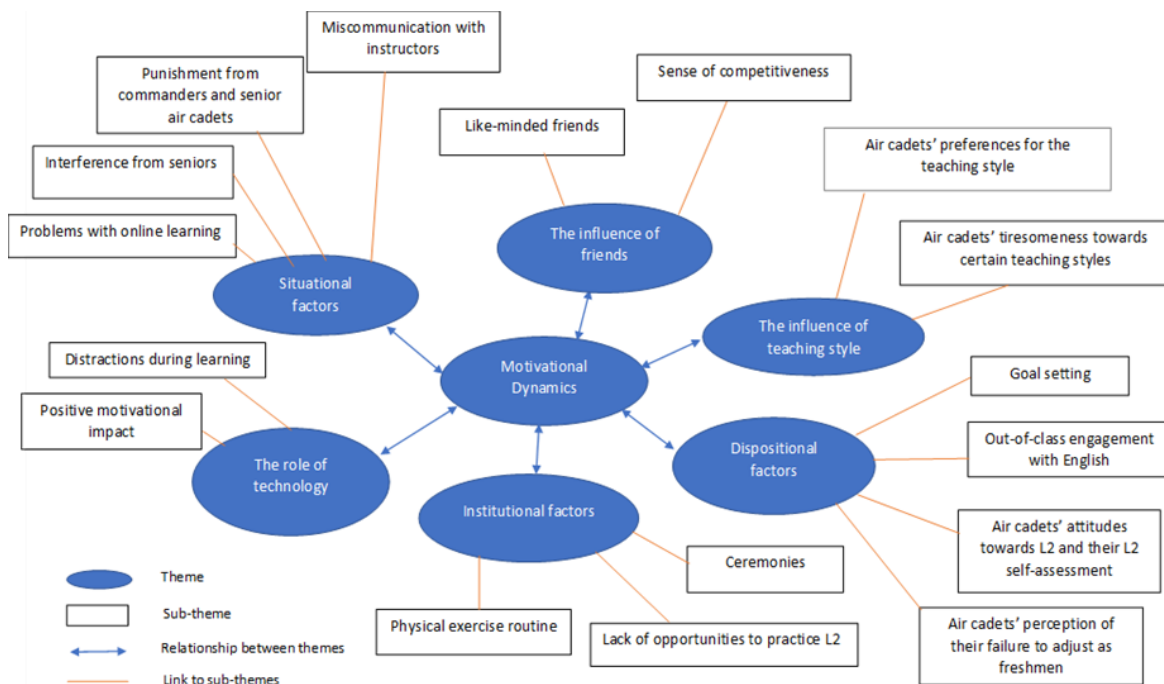

Fig. 2 Thematic map demonstrating seven themes

Figure 2: The initial thematic map demonstrating seven themes

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

This phase focused on ensuring each theme had a clear, representative title and defined boundaries. The theme "Socio-Relational Factors" was selected over "Influence of Friends" to encompass broader support systems including both peer and family influence.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

In producing the report, the themes were logically structured to offer a cohesive narrative of the motivational dynamics among cadets. For example, I began with "Dispositional Factors" to lay a foundation of the cadets' personal motivations, followed by "Socio-Relational Factors" to explore the impact of family and friends. Themes related to external influences, such as "Institutional Factors" and "Situational Factors," were introduced subsequently to provide a comprehensive view of the cadets' experiences. This thematic order helped illuminate the layered motivations of Thai air cadets, underscoring the complex interplay of internal disposition and external pressures in their adaptability to L2 learning.

By situating each theme within both the personal and institutional context of the academy, this phase allowed for a rich, layered analysis, demonstrating how RTA's recursive and reflective approach is well-suited to exploring complex, hierarchical settings like military academies.

Findings on Application of RTA in Military Milieu

RTARG alignment

Each phase of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) could be observed to align with the RTARG (Braun & Clarke, 2024) by emphasising methodological coherence, reflexivity, and conceptual alignment. During the familiarisation phase, the data derived have been actively engaged and analysed adhering to RTARG's emphasis on unfiltered immersion to capture authentic and nuance insights. During initial coding, NVivo nodes were used to allow codes to evolve, resonating with RTARG's recommendation against rigid, positivist language and supporting an interpretive, flexible approach. The process of generating themes emphasised shared meanings rather than surfaced-level topics, in line with RTARG's guidance to prioritise depth and interpretive connections. The iterative review of themes throughout the dataset aligned with RTARG's emphasis on recursive analysis to maintain coherence and refine meanings. In defining and naming themes, RTARG's guidelines were strictly followed with emphasis on capturing the story within each theme, and mitigation of oversimplified topic-based labels. The final report structure integrated theoretical context, as RTARG suggests, creating an analytic narrative with logical dynamic. Throughout the process, reflexive engagement emphasised how researcher's attribute shaped data interpretation, aligning with RTARG's emphasis on transparency and the researcher's situated role in the analysis.

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity could be considered imperative to RTA, particularly in hierarchical contexts such as military academies. The position of instructor teaching at NKRAFA could be observed to equip the researcher with an insider status here. However, this dual role as both an insider and outsider

influenced participant responses, as some cadets could possibly perceive the researcher as a potential authority figure whose influence on policy still remained. This perception sometimes led to guarded responses, requiring efforts to reassure participants about confidentiality and the study's academic purpose.

Gender dynamics further contributed to the reflexive process. As a woman in a male-dominated academy, my gender influenced the types of responses cadets shared, with come feeling more comfortable discussing emotional aspects of their learning experiences. This positional complexity, shaped by the researcher's gender, prior affiliations, and the broader institutional hierarchy, underscores the need for continuous reflexivity in RTA to ensure that interpretations remain faithful to participants' experiences rather than coloured by preconceptions.

By embedding reflexivity throughout the RTA process, the analysis sought to capture the cadets' motivations and experiences authentically, while acknowledging the inherent power dynamics that might shape the data collection and interpretation in a military context.

Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Based on data analysis and findings of this present study the following aspects could be taken into consideration as potential challenges for future research on RTA in military context.

Power Dynamics in Military Research

Research within a military academy necessitates navigating pronounced power dynamics characteristic of hierarchical settings. In a military institution, rank could be found dictating nearly every interaction, establishing layers of authority and deference uncommon in typical research environments. As a result, the way in which cadets perceive authority figures could be found influenced by organisational hierarchy, including researchers, who may unintentionally be perceived as part of the institution's authoritative structure. This power dynamic could impact both the candour of participants and the type of information they felt comfortable sharing, posing challenges for researchers aiming to gather genuine, unfiltered responses.

For instance, some cadets may perceive the researcher as an extension of the academy's administration, potentially tailoring their responses to avoid repercussions or to align with institutional expectations. In this present study, certain participants expressed hesitancy when discussing policies or practices they found restrictive. Certain reflection on a broader challenge in military research could be observed here with significant emphasis on maintaining that participants feel safe enough to express criticism and vulnerabilities without fear of judgment or punishment.

However, when approached reflexivity, these dynamics could provide unique insights. By openly acknowledging my dual position as a researcher, officer and instructor. The openness in position acknowledgement was operationalised aiming at fostering trust, demonstrating that the research environment was independent of the academy's hierarchical structure. RTA has potentially been considered beneficial in this context, as it encourages researchers to reflect on how their positionality influences data collection and interpretation. In military settings, where power imbalances could

remarkably find pronounced, RTA would possibly be considered a potential conceptual framework to operationalise these dynamics to become an analytical tool rather than a hindrance, highlighting how institutional hierarchy influencing participants' response formation.

Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations

The military context demands heightened sensitivity to confidentiality and data handling, given the personal and institutional nature of the information collected. Military academies operate under strict codes of conduct and confidentiality, where even minor breaches can have serious implications for participants. Therefore, ethical standards and meticulous design for applying RTA's flexible and interpretative approach should be maintained, particularly in protecting personal data and safeguarding participants' identities.

Based on the direct research experience throughout this present study, major challenge concerning maintaining confidentiality has been observed in a context where cadets often expressed concerns that their responses might unintentionally be disclosed to their superiors. To address these concerns, a rigorous measure of data anonymity was employed and it had been made clear to the participants that no identifiable information would be linked to any findings. Additionally, pseudonyms were used, and specific details leading to identification of individuals were excluded from the reported data. Informed consent procedures were comprehensive, detailing how data would be handled, stored, and shared while emphasising the confidentiality of their responses.

Conclusion

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is underscored as a sophisticated and flexible approach, particularly suited for investigating complex hierarchical environments such as military academies. The rigid structures and deeply embedded cultural dynamics of military institutions present unique challenges for researchers. However, RTA's emphasis on reflexivity and its iterative, interpretive methodology enables researchers to navigate these challenges effectively, generating insights that go beyond superficial observations. This approach allows themes related to power dynamics, institutional influences, and participants' nuanced motivations to emerge, fostering a deeper understanding of how hierarchy and cultural influence both individual and collective experiences in military settings.

Due to its adaptability, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) proves to be a valuable tool for researchers examining military and other highly structured environments, such as law enforcement or corporate institutions. This approach supports a comprehensive exploration of both individual perspectives and systemic influences, which are often deeply interconnected in such settings. Researchers are encouraged to adopt RTA when investigating contexts where positionality and power dynamics significantly shape participant interactions and data authenticity. By embedding reflexive practices into their analyses, researchers can enhance the depth of their findings while addressing the ethical complexities inherent to these environments.

Further research could build upon this study by applying Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) across various military institutions to compare how distinct organisational structures and cultural norms shape themes such as motivation, adaptability, and interpersonal dynamics. Comparative studies across branches of the armed forces could uncover variations in cadet experiences unique to each institutional culture, thereby providing a broader perspective on military training and education. Additionally, large-scale research to explore RTA in multinational or cross-cultural military contexts should be conducted to expand insights into interaction between such variables as cultural diversity and hierarchical structures; therefore, valuable guidance for inclusive and adaptive military training programmes could be further developed at global stage.

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