



Review of Research Methods in Second Language Acquisition: A Practical Guide

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***Research Methods in Second Language Acquisition: A Practical Guide*, Alison Mackey, Susan M. Gass (Eds.). Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford (2011). 336 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4443-3427-2 (pbk.)**

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The study of second language acquisition (SLA), as a relatively young field (Ellis, 2005; Gass & Selinker, 2008) dealing with how second, third, and even fourth language speakers learn language after they have learned their native languages has become one of the central fields of language teaching and learning. This situation leading to rapid and continuous developments within the field of SLA has created a growing interest in researching many issues such as how language learners develop grammatical as well as pragmatic competencies, how they learn to speak and read these languages in transactions of everyday life, both in natural settings (by living in the country where the language is spoken) and in instructional settings (classrooms or individual tutoring), and how they change as they acquire their second languages.

Within these areas of interests, every single research concern calls for a different methodology or a combination of them to be able to achieve valid and reliable interpretations which are likely to contribute to both the theory and practice of SLA. In this context, having knowledge and understanding of research methods used in SLA studies carries great importance. Thus, this is the issue that the book *Research Methods in Second Language Acquisition*, edited by Alison Mackey and Susan M. Gass, tries to address: It presents a number of SLA topics through the lens of research methods to provide a comprehensive examination of *how to best approach and research a specific area of second language acquisition*.

The book starts with an opening chapter where the editors, Mackey and Gass, inform readers about the content and structure of the book. In this introductory chapter, they emphasize why they linked SLA and research methods. Following the introductory chapter, the book has 14 more chapters written by 18 distinguished

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researchers. The chapters are collected under two main parts; *data types* (from chapters 2 to 10), and *data coding, analysis, and replication* (from chapters 11 to 15).

The first part, which is devoted to data types, includes representative types of a wide range of data that is commonly studied in SLA, including learner corpora, formal theory-based methodologies, instructed second language acquisition, design and analysis of survey research, case study research, psycholinguistic methodologies, second language writing and reading research methodologies, and collection and analysis of qualitative data. Twelve prominent authors teaching at universally recognized universities discuss these issues in detail.

In Chapter 2 titled “*how to use foreign and second language corpora*”, Sylviane Granger presents a brief background to how learner corpus research originated; describes the terms corpora, corpus; and provides the objective of analyzing corpora (learner language) within SLA research. Granger successfully draws attention to the open-ended type of data produced by learners who use L2 for authentic communication purposes (Ellis, 1994: 669-673). Then, to make it clearer, she classifies it as natural language use data and clinical data and points at the tendency among SLA researchers to rely on clinical data since natural language use is difficult to gather due to the limited use of second especially foreign languages in authentic settings. For this reason, corpus researchers are said to resort to open-ended clinical data such as written compositions, oral interviews, or introspection data (see Brown and Rodgers, 2002; Taylor, 2005; Mackey and Gass, 2005; Dörnyei, 2007; Nunan and Bailey, 2009). In this chapter, alongside the types of learner corpus data, learner corpus typology, and stages of learner corpus research are also examined. The chapter is closed with pedagogical implications to improve tools and materials as well as to contribute to lexicography, courseware, and language assessment.

Chapter 3 written by Tania Ionin on “*formal theory-based methodologies*” is directed to data collection methods in formal, generative SLA research. Although the author emphasizes that SLA studies examine second language learners’ natural production, the scope is narrowed down to experimental methodologies relying on elicited production, grammaticality judgment tasks, and interpretation tasks. For this reason, the chapter goes on with a sub-section devoted to the design of judgment and interpretation tasks. From this perspective, this chapter is an important contribution to SLA research since it is very rare to find research methodology resources dealing with judgment and interpretation tasks.

From the next chapter on, till the end of the first part, the book introduces a variety of methodologies. With a focus on classroom research, chapter 4 informs readers on instructed second language acquisition upon which controversial points of views have arisen. The other chapters in this first part (chapters 5-10) deal with methodologies pertaining to survey, case study, psycholinguistic, second language writing and reading research, and collection and analysis of qualitative data.

In Chapter 4, by focusing on general L2 classroom instruction, Shawn Loewen and Jenefer Philp deal with “*instructed SLA*”. Resting upon Housen & Pierrard (2005),

they define it as “any systematic attempt to enable or facilitate language learning by manipulating the mechanisms of learning and/or the conditions under which these occur” (p.2). Arguing that instructed SLA is not a method in and of itself, the authors emphasize that it encompasses many different methodologies to answer specific questions related to the effects of second language instruction. Then, by emphasizing the limitations of early instructed SLA studies as being product-oriented rather than process-oriented, Loewen and Philp present observational, non-interventionist quasi experimental, interventionist quasi-experimental, and action research studies as practical and particular ways for the inclusion of systematic and careful documentation of classroom interaction and instruction. Similar to the previous chapter, this one also follows a step by step approach upon conducting research through these methods.

As stated by Ellis (2011) many applied researchers investigate learners and teachers within classroom contexts as this type of research has high ecological validity, applied and theoretical value; thus is more likely to be heeded by practitioners. However, as Kramsch (2000) emphasizes SLA is not language-specific; that is many of the questions it seeks ignore classroom vs. non-classroom distinction in that the internally driven development of a second language does not change with context. In other words, as put forth by Housen and Pierrard (2005), both instructed and uninstructed learners would proceed through the same stages and sequences of acquisition, suggesting that instructional intervention is not capable of overriding certain, natural mechanisms, and universal dispositions operative in SLA. Bearing these in mind, focusing on instruction may stand as a limitation to SLA research. The next chapter addresses one of the topics which almost every research methodology resource covers (see Brown and Rodgers, 2002; Taylor, 2005; Mackey and Gass, 2005; Best and Kahn, 2006; Dörnyei, 2007; Nunan and Bailey, 2009). “*Design and analysis of surveys*” written by Dörnyei and Csizér, describes how to carry out survey research in SLA studies. Therefore, the chapter, mainly and very neatly, presents the means to design survey research; sample, collect, and analyze survey data; and report survey results.

In the next chapter, “*case study methodology*”, Patricia Duff provides a description of this particular methodology and its historical evolvement in SLA studies as one of the most common forms of qualitative and mixed-method research. After this brief information, the procedures for carrying out case study research are given. As acquisition, comprehension, and production of a language involves neurological and psychological processes, many issues related to the subdivisions of psycholinguistics such as lexicon, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics have been studied for decades. Being very well-informed about the role of psycholinguistics in SLA research, the editors devote chapter 7 to the “*use of psycholinguistic methodologies in SLA research*”. In this chapter, Kim McDonough and Pavel Trofimovich explore how to research comprehension and production issues in language learning and use. To make it more concrete, they provide detailed descriptions and methodological considerations for researching comprehension

through self-paced reading and listening tasks, and production through picture-word inference task, and sentence preamble tasks. In this sense, this chapter is distinctive since it seems to be the first in research methodology literature dealing with psycholinguistic issues.

After providing a detailed account of the three very common research methodologies used in SLA research, the book makes a smooth transition into two more chapters presenting the methodologies used to research writing and reading skills. The first of these, chapter 8, on “*how to research second language writing*” by Charlene Polio, classifies studies into eight categories by the research method they employ: *survey, interview, meta-analysis, classroom observation, ethnography, content analysis, text analysis, and process analysis*. However, it focuses on the last two methods since they are thought to be more specific to second language writing, and briefly mentions the others (pp. 141-143). After presenting the aims and details of these two methods, at the end of the chapter, the author nicely brings text and process analysis together via a sample research question aiming to find out whether students who are taught to modify their writing process are successful and produce better-quality texts.

The other chapter written by Keiko Koda on “*how to do research on second language reading*” explains how first and second language linguistic knowledge jointly constrain second language reading development; clarifies what constitutes evidence for such dual-language constraints; and more significantly demonstrates how such evidence can be obtained in empirical studies. Then, it goes on with how to formulate hypothesis, and test it empirically, and how to construct and interpret data. Since information coming from empirical studies is expected to feed classroom instruction, the chapter devotes a subsection to pedagogical implications. Thus, it presents a very detailed account of research on L2 reading development. When the already available research methodology resources are considered, this chapter and the previous one seem to first appear in this book which can be seen as one of its contributions to the SLA field.

In this first part devoted to data types, the last chapter written by Debra Friedman addresses “*how to collect and analyze qualitative data*”. Similar to some other resources upon qualitative data collection and analysis (see Brown and Rodgers, 2002; Mackey and Gass, 2005; Best and Kahn, 2006; Dörnyei, 2007), the chapter begins with a brief introduction to qualitative research and its characteristics. It goes on with major qualitative research traditions such as ethnography and conversation analysis. Following these, the chapter provides a step by step approach towards designing and conducting a qualitative study by presenting purpose, sampling, data collection, data analysis, and evaluation considerations.

Part II which is devoted to *data coding, analysis, and replication* includes five chapters again addressing noteworthy issues. The first of these, chapter 11 deals with “*coding second language data validly and reliably*”. The author, Andrea Revesz, starts by discussing validity, reliability, and threats to both as the central themes of the

chapter. Mainly putting emphasis on top-down in other words, theory and instrument-driven coding methods, the chapter then goes on with the steps in data coding, and strategies to increase validity and reliability. In relation to the steps, some issues such as selection, preparation, transcription, and data coding are briefly discussed. So as to inform readers about the strategies to increase validity and reliability, the author explains standard steps involved in researcher-imposed coding which is mainly employed for data that is qualitative in form, but quantitative in analysis. For this type of coding, selection and development of a coding scheme, coder selection and training, and coder reliability are presented. Revesz also devotes a short closing on reporting the coding procedures. Including all these basic, but very critical components, the chapter offers guidance for valid and reliable data coding.

The next chapter authored by Melissa Baralt develops around a relatively rare topic of research methodology resources, and informs the readers about “*coding qualitative data*” with a focus on use of NVivo which the author calls to be the most frequent software in SLA research. Before going into the details, a distinction is made between coding in quantitative and qualitative data. Then, with an emphasis on data management and organization, the benefits of computer-assisted data analysis software are put forth. The way to code qualitative data including the steps such as keeping a coding journal, open coding, and the way it differs in traditional pen and paper coding and electronic coding in NVivo are also explained. These are followed by how to develop themes, how to establish relationships between the emerging themes and patterns, and how to interpret the findings. To further illustrate the way it works, the author exemplifies qualitative coding with NVivo through sample studies.

As it is the case with some other research methodology resources (see Taylor, 2005; Best and Kahn, 2006; Dörnyei, 2007), in chapter 13, Jennifer Larson-Hall discusses “*how to run statistical analyses*” through t-Tests, one-way ANOVA, correlations, and chi-square as very basic and frequent inferential statistical tests used in SLA research reports. For each of these, the same order of presentation structure is followed by first giving very brief information about the test type, then providing the ways to conduct the test and to report the test results. Readers are also informed upon how to interpret the effect size of the test, and how to best represent the graphical data for that particular type of test.

The last two chapters, by bringing a new dimension and richness to the already available research methodology resources, reveal important issues upon meta-analysis and replication research. While discussing “*how to do a meta-analysis*” in chapter 14, Luke Plonsky and Frederick L. Oswald initially provide some key consideration upon what meta-analysis is and why SLA researchers may need do meta-analysis. Then, they explain the steps involved in meta-analysis. The very detailed account of these steps includes defining the research domain, conducting the literature review as well as filtering it, coding process, calculating effect size, choosing an appropriate meta-analysis model, and interpreting the results. Keeping the fact that meta-analytic approach is recent and rare, they close the chapter by expressing their suggestions and hopes for the future of meta-analysis.

Similar to the previous one, the last chapter authored by Rbekha Abduhl and devoted to *“why, when, and how to replicate research”* covers a very unique perspective which has not been addressed by any other research methodology book before. Following a brief introduction upon the significance and types of replications, steps of doing a replication study are presented. The steps include choosing the study to replicate, deciding on the replication type, formulating the research question, interpreting, and writing up the results. Bearing the scarcity of resources on replication research, this chapter provides its readers with unique insights.

As can be interpreted from the review, there are some points to be mentioned upon the strengths of the book. First of all, it is seen to be a useful resource especially for graduate and postgraduate students who are at the beginning of their careers as researchers, and who need to benefit from the work that have been undertaken in SLA which they may have less familiarity. However, it can also be used as a reference resource by experienced researchers and teacher educators.

As a very well-designed and established resource of SLA and research methods, it has much strength such as the authors, presentation of the content, organization of the book, and contributions to the field. First and foremost, as the editors mention in the introductory chapter, all chapters are written by experienced and prominent authors in that particular area, such as learner corpus research by Sylviane Granger, case studies by Patricia Duff, and survey studies by Zoltán Dörnyei and Kata Csizér. In that sense, with the contributions of twenty acknowledged specialists, this book provides a variety of perspectives.

Regarding the presentation of content, each chapter starts with a brief background to the research area since putting a research method into practice is not free from its theory. One of the attractive features of the book is that almost every chapter provides project ideas and resources, lists of additional readings, and study questions which may help the audience go beyond what is presented. This particular feature of the book may also promote a better understanding of the content as readers work through it. Moreover, the step by step guidelines provided in each chapter for preparing the audience on how to handle a specific language acquisition issue in a research methodology or a combination of methodologies reflect the authors' extensive hands-on experiences and knowledge with the specific area of interest.

Furthermore, reader-friendliness, information-richness, and reader-accessibilities of the book are some other qualities to be mentioned. The authors' very simple and neat styles as well as their expertise in presenting every single step and detail to undertake SLA research within an appropriate methodology enable us to positively answer these issues. The authors' use of extensive summary statements also creates a book that has something of value for researchers who are interested in SLA studies. Beside these, almost every chapter has the same structure which makes it easier to follow. Together with these, the fact that the authors constantly refer to other resources for further reading makes this book an information-rich resource. As for the

organization, the book includes and also ends with an index that lists words in alphabetical order and provides the page numbers on which they are introduced.

One more attractive feature of this book is that it offers an accessible account of major issues related to SLA and more importantly the best way to approach them when it comes to conduct a research. To accomplish this, sample study boxes may be of great help for inspiring young researchers to employ the appropriate methodology in relation to second language acquisition studies. Being informed by sample studies employing the specific methodology presented in each chapter, the book can be said to have a practical approach to the methodologies it covers.

In conclusion, both because of the strengths mentioned above and contributions to bridge research methods and SLA, *Research Methods in Second Language Acquisition* has a lot to offer to its readers.

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