Book Reviews

Doing second language research


Reviewed by Anne Burns

This publication is part of the reader-friendly Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers Series. The authors set out to demystify research and to provide an accessible introduction for teachers and particularly for student-teachers enrolled in graduate programs. They explain that what sets their book apart from similar publications is that they aim not only to outline research in second and foreign language teaching and learning, as well as the research methods for carrying it out, but also to put readers inside the research process.

The book is divided into two major parts, qualitative and quantitative research, prefaced by an introduction that gives an overview of the nature of research and completed by a conclusion that considers the way research types can be combined in course evaluation. The qualitative chapters (2–4) look at Case studies: developmental research; Introspection: verbal protocols; and Classroom research: interaction analysis. Descriptive statistics: survey analysis; Correlational research: language learning/teaching attitudes; and Quasi-experimental research: vocabulary learning techniques are included in the quantitative section. The organisation framework the authors have adopted for each chapter is:

1. Introducing the research type.
2. Experiencing the research type.
3. Compiling the data generated by the research type.
4. Analysing the data generated by the research type.
5. Designing the research type.
6. Interpreting the research type.
7. Commenting on the significance of the research type.
8. Reflecting on the research experience.

Chapters 2 and 8 also have sections on reporting the research results (p xiii).

As a framework for the various outlines and discussions this works extremely well. The authors adopt an inclusive, clear and reader-aware style.

They explain concepts in an accessible manner to readers, appreciating that they may be new to research, and lead them supportively through the numerous exercises, techniques and reflections on the processes. Unlike many other writers, the authors also provide comprehensive feedback through in-text commentary, appendices and answer keys to the tasks so that readers can check out and compare their insights and responses. Several of the strategies they employ to do this – for example providing responses to their own evaluation questionnaire on the book (Chapter 8) – are innovative and provide interesting insights into ways of collecting data. These aspects will undoubtedly be highly valued by both new and ‘old’ researchers, and are a bonus to teacher educators using the book for graduate courses. They are also the hallmark of skilled teaching and research and reflect the authors’ extensive experience on both counts.

Brown and Rodgers state that their goals for this book are threefold:

1. To familiarise readers with the basic types of research design used in second language studies.

2. To provide a feel for what research activities are like in second language studies by engaging the reader in several roles within a variety of mini-studies.

3. To offer an introduction to some of the classic research studies into second language learning and teaching by engaging readers in thinking about and discussing these studies, as well as participating as subjects in adapted versions of some of these studies (pp xi–xii).

Do they succeed in addressing these goals? Well, yes and no.

The outstanding strength of the book is the lengths to which the authors go to provide experiential opportunities for reader learning. Even without a context for discussion, a reader seriously undertaking the exercises for his or her own professional development would gain considerable knowledge of methodological options for conducting research and the nature of the decisions that researchers must take.

However, the question for me as I read the book was whether these opportunities were broad enough. While the authors discuss questions of research traditions, contextual factors and definitions in Chapter 1, novice researchers would not, in my view, come away with any clearer idea about the fundamentally different philosophies and epistemologies that underpin these two major approaches to research. From my own experience of doing research and teaching on research methods courses, I would say this understanding is essential to developing relevant methodologies. Additionally,
while the authors distinguish between qualitative and quantitative approaches, the perspectives and examples drawn on retain a strong experimental flavour and many of the studies they present are ‘well trodden’. Recent ‘classic’ qualitative studies that have drawn on sociolinguistic and ethnographic approaches (eg Canagarajah 1993; Peirce 1995; Toohey 1998) are not mentioned (the term ethnography is included neither in the glossary nor the index), while action research, an approach increasingly seen as attractive and feasible to many student-teachers and teacher-researchers, is covered in 11 lines with no references to recent publications in the second and foreign language field (eg Wallace 1998; Burns 1999; Edge 2001).

As a focused introduction to the research world of recognised second language acquisition studies, this book succeeds admirably. However, those seeking a more comprehensive coverage of the range of possibilities for carrying out research in this field will need to look elsewhere.

REFERENCES