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***Methods of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts***  
**Edited by James Flood, Diane Lapp, James R. Squire, & Julie M. Jenson (2005)**  
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### **Overview**

*Methods of research on teaching the English language arts* comprises selected chapters on methodology from the second edition of the *Handbook of research on teaching the English language arts* (2003). The eleven articles of the book, all penned by specialists in the field, aim to help researchers in the area of English language and literacy to gain a better understanding of the diverse array of existing and new research methods in a hope to conduct more effective research. What follows is a short account of the material appearing in each chapter with a highlight on the strengths and/or suggestions for improvement wherever relevant.

### **Description and Evaluation**

The first chapter of the book is supposed to act as an introduction on the general topic of the book and to help teachers to ‘become more intelligent consumers of ... educational research’ (p. 3), hence its title: *Understanding research on teaching the English language arts: An introduction for teachers*. The authors, Stotsky and Mall, set out to define academic research first and discuss two modes of academic inquiry (i.e., conceptual and empirical). They establish that qualitative and quantitative research methods as categories of empirical enquiry are compatible and can both be used for research on teaching language arts to connect theory to practice.

A problem with the chapter is, however, that the phrase ‘English language arts’, being the focus of the chapter and the book, has not been defined clearly here, and almost nowhere else in the book, and of which only a few examples appear about the end of chapter 1. Such a fault, and some other similar points to be mentioned later, probably originate partly from the fact that the book being reviewed is a collection of articles from another volume, i.e., the *Handbook*. Furthermore, the chapter has mainly been written with US teachers and educational system in mind (as the use of K-12 on page 2 shows), a context which could be widened to make it useful and applicable for teachers across the world.

Written by Anne DiPardo, chapter 2 is a technical account of *Teacher professionalism and the rise of ‘multiple literacies’*: *How to describe our specialized knowledge?* The chapter is a philosophical discussion of the notion of specialized knowledge and whether education can be regarded as a profession or not. The author defines literacy in terms of its inter-

disciplinary meaning which covers issues such as ecology, society and politics. Although the meaning of professionalism and literacies is clarified, the relationship between the title of the article and that of the book seems less resolved by the time the chapter finishes except for deciphering that *literacy* should mean something close to *language arts*. If the chapter is intended for (non-native) teachers, the complex language coupled with abstract concepts will make the task of digesting a bit difficult. Discussing English arts in L1 context only may also convey the notion of inapplicability of ideas and methods discussed in the book to English in an L2 context. It would have helped the reader more had the author clarified what NCTE and IRA stood for (p. 3), although they are familiar to professionals.

Like the ones reviewed above, chapter 3 is only indirectly related to the focus of the book which is ‘methods of research’; nevertheless, it focuses on a very important aspect of research, i.e., that of the design. Assuming researchers, university lecturers, high school researchers and particularly postgraduate research students as their target audience, Calfee and Chambliss elaborate on *The design of empirical research* in this chapter. They begin by introducing a research strategy in which the researcher should move from answer to question. The authors then elucidate the principles of research design by tackling the issues of construct validity, confounding and variability. The discussion continues with how to build a factorial design in qualitative research and concludes with the way data should be analyzed and interpreted. Similar to many other places in the book, the word *Handbook* (as in p. 44) seems to be a remnant of the parent-book of which the new book is an offspring, and a more careful editing would have taken care of such inconsistencies. It is not clear what the writers mean by ‘Chapter NN’ on page 51.

It will not be an exaggeration to claim that the book should really have started with chapter 4 as it is in this paper that authors have started talking about ‘methods of research’ which is, strangely enough, not yet on ‘teaching English arts’ but on ‘literacy development’. Penned by Tierney and Sheehy, this chapter is devoted to *What longitudinal studies say about literacy development/What literacy development says about longitudinal studies*. The longitudinal method is introduced as an avenue of enquiry in reading and writing development mainly in early childhood and pre-school period, with a comprehensive literature review of the studies applying this method. Almost the whole chapter is devoted to the first question of the title, and the focus is on the ‘development’ of reading and writing rather than their ‘teaching’. It seems that the original version of the paper was written around 2000 since there are no references after that year. There is problem with giving references, for example, on page 83, where the phrase ‘Over the past 20 years’ exists, but references such as Butler (1979) date back as far as 27 years. The same is true for references on page 88 and also it is not clear what a PPVT is on page 109.

*Case studies: Placing literacy phenomena within their actual context* is the title of chapter 5 in which the authors Birnbaum, Emig and Fisher introduce the qualitative method of case study as a research tool for looking into literacy problems. After defining case study and placing it in the broader context of qualitative research, the writers survey the history of case study research and bring examples of the application of this method in research on literacy including research on listening, invented spelling, writing and reading, but there is no mention of any case studies done on speaking. The focus of the chapter, however, is on ‘literacy research’ rather than on ‘teaching English language arts’. There is also a reference on page 128 (Strang, ...) which does not appear in the reference list. It would certainly be better to clarify what EGG was on page 131.

In chapter 6, Green, Dixon and Zaharlick introduce a research method much to do with ethnography. *Ethnography as a logic of inquiry* is an excellent account of this field of enquiry. The paper sets out to clarify what ethnography is, tracing its historical developments and proposes it as a method for studying culture. The rest of the chapter is devoted to technical and philosophical discussions on the characteristics of ethnographic research as well as issues to be considered in such research. While the chapter will be very useful for scholars wishing to obtain theoretical knowledge on the topic, the relevance of the chapter and its application in 'teaching English language arts' has not been made clear. 'In a decade' on page 145 should be revised. The reference under tables on pages 174 and 178 which end with 'in press' means that the relevant paper has not been published yet, but the references show that it has gone into press in 2001. If it is a different paper, that needs to be clarified too.

The focus of chapter 7 is teacher research. Burton and Seidl provide a case for teaching practitioners to get involved in research, as no other researcher is so close to the teaching context as teachers themselves are. In *Teacher researcher projects: From the elementary school teacher's perspective*, the nature of teacher research is made clear, the need for this kind of research is eloquently justified, and the tools and the processes involved in this research method are elaborated. There is, however, very little reference to how teacher research can be applied to 'teaching English language arts'.

In line with the discussion in chapter 7, *Teacher inquiry into literacy, social justice, and power* reviews examples of research carried out by teachers in different settings with a focus on how power and social justice issues are embedded into literacy classes. After discussing the meaning of teacher research in chapter 8, Fecho and Allen concentrate on relationships between students and teachers in literacy classrooms in an attempt to identify how the subjects such as literacy, language, power, culture, educational equity, identity, communities within the school and the intersection of communities and schools are affecting one another. The chapter is a good survey of research done in above areas, rather than a practical guide to indicate how language arts teachers can really apply the method in their own classes.

The use of *Synthesis research in language arts instruction* is discussed in chapter 9. Clarifying the benefits of reviews of literature or research summaries termed 'synthesis research' here, Smith and Klein explain the need and the procedure to conduct such meta-analyses, show what such research reviews are good for and finally produce an extensive list of criteria to judge the quality of synthesis research. There is also an elaborate appendix at the end of the chapter giving examples of synthesis documents in the areas of reading, writing, integration of language arts, teacher effectiveness, curriculum and the like. The chapter is very helpful in writing the literature review sections of all types of research, in addition to standing out as a research method by itself. Minor changes will be desirable where the chapter refers to the *Handbook* as in page 246.

Basing their argument on the idea that 'research reports do not have to be boring to read, or ... to write' (p. 273), Alverman and Hruby propose a diversion from accepted norms for reporting research in chapter 10: *Fictive representation: An alternative method for reporting research*. Having justified the use of such a writing style, they define fictive representation, clarify its difference with 'fictional' representation and bring examples of their own work, showing how they have turned their standard writing into fictive one and the reactions produced by some readers. The problems with such a form of report are that it is applicable to only qualitative research, not all reporters may be able to render their writing into an effective

fictive form, and the readers may be tempted to think that they are reading a piece of literature rather than the findings of a research activity. While the method has been presented to be used for teaching language arts at school, the only example discussed is about graduate education in a university context.

The final contributor to the book does a fine job of summarizing the history of models on language learning and teaching in *Contemporary methodological issues and future directions in research on the teaching of English*. Wittrock traces the development of research design and techniques from different fields into education. The chapter then summarizes all the other chapters in this volume, making it much more like an introduction to the book rather than a conclusion. This argument is supported by the author's referring to his own paper as a 'prologue' on page 317. The phrase 'This chapter makes' is suited to replace 'The chapters in this section of the *Handbook* make' on page 301. The same suggestion should also be applied in two other places in the paragraph before the last on page 305. The book concludes with extensive author and subject indices.

### Summary

Put together, the content of the book presents very beneficial information in terms current and alternative research methods, most of which applicable not only to teaching language arts but also to other areas of education in general. The book's being taken from a *Handbook* will, however, imply that more care could have been taken in rearranging the chapters and editing for some inaccuracies. Applying the suggestions given above and those in the appendix will hopefully lead to a higher reader satisfaction in a new edition.

### Appendix

Having removed the following typos and having checked the book for the mistakes in grammar and punctuation would undoubtedly have resulted in a more professional work. What comes below is a list of the most obvious mistakes that will bother an attentive reader.

- On page 10, in the second line of the third paragraph, the article 'the' is missing in the phrase "on one hand".
- In the last paragraph on page 11, using a colon instead of a semi-colon seems more appropriate.
- In some case, there is a mixture of British and American writing styles (such as chapter 1, pages 3 and 13 where different styles have been used with 'help').
- The last sentence of the first paragraph on page 79 seems to be dependent and incomplete in meaning.
- On page 88, in the first sentence of the third paragraph, the phrase 'in these 2 years' seems redundant.
- On page 106, there is a mistake in adding: 'Seventy six children (46 boys and 37 girls)'.
- On page 89, the fourth paragraph, line 2, a comma will be needed instead of the semi-colon. The same is true on page 101, the fourth line of the last paragraph.
- In section c of home data on page 108, 'mothers reading two, researcher provided books, to their children' commas should be dropped.
- On the same page, in section d of school data, 'are' has to be dropped to make the item parallel with the others.
- There is a spelling mistake with the word 'orthographic' on page 110.
- After 'teachers' apostrophe is redundant on p. 148, line 5.
- A full stop is missing after Sullivan's in the quoted text on p. 162.

- The word 'and' is redundant on page 165 before Green and Harker (1982), and one line earlier, a comma is needed after 'ties'.
- On page 182, 's' is redundant in 'argues' in the ninth line from the bottom of the fourth paragraph.
- The same is true for 'members' on the next page, the penultimate line of the paragraph below the heading.
- The article 'a' is redundant in the penultimate line of the paragraph under the heading on page 201.
- The date written as '4/5' on the same page has to be changed to '2/5'.
- There is a need for 's' at the end of 'reduce' in line 5 of page 206.
- On the next page, the last line, 'a new' should be written as a single word.
- On page 219, the third line from the bottom, 's' seems not to be needed after 'contain'. After 'use' the letter 'd' should be added on the third line on page 224.
- The word 'by' should be inserted after 'generated' in the penultimate line of the second paragraph on page 236.
- The comma is not needed after 'Denzin, 1997)' on page 274. The same is true in the second line of page 301.
- Under the heading 'Early contributors to educational research' on page 302, instead of 'a most' in line 3, the word 'an' seems more appropriate.
- 'Than' has been misspelled as 'then' in line 7 of the second paragraph on page 304.
- In the same place, the title of the book by Thorndike and Lorge should be modified to '*The Teacher's Word Book*' to match the one cited in the references.
- In 'Dipardo', the letter 'p' should be capitalised on page 310.

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