

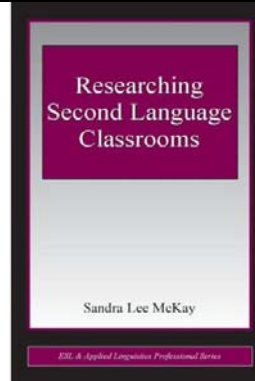


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***Researching Second Language Classrooms***

by Sandra Lee McKay (2006)  
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***Reviewed by Karim Sadeghi***



**Overview**

Like most of the other volumes in ESL and Applied Linguistics Professional Series (edited by Eli Hinkel), *Researching Second Language Classrooms* has been authored to offer professional assistance to practicing teachers, novice researchers, and graduate or post-graduate students. The book starts with a clarification of types of classroom research and closes with guidelines on how to make research findings public. Each chapter defines the pertinent research terms, highlights relevant examples of published research, and provides ideas for exploration. All chapters include a succinct summary of the major issues, and references are made to journal articles or books where more information may be found. The book ends with a thorough reference list and boasts of extensive author and subject indices. The following illuminates further what each chapter includes, with an emphasis on the most salient features and comments on the content and the texture.

**Description and Evaluation**

The book begins with a preface penned in a vivid language where parts of a letter written by an Oxford University professor to his ten-year-old daughter are cited in an attempt to answer her questions about facts in the world not easily digestible for a child. The main body of the book, however, begins with *Classroom Research* as chapter 1. The chapter aims to introduce major types of classroom-based research, the characteristics of acceptable research questions and designs, and the relevant ethical issues. Benefits and threats of doing research for teachers are discussed early in the chapter. In various sections throughout this chapter, and likewise in the others, useful consciousness-raising activities are introduced under the heading of 'Exploring the Ideas' where an interaction is forced between the reader and the author. The focus of the first chapter is on the problem of defining and categorizing research in terms of paradigms (basic versus applied), traditions (qualitative versus quantitative) and methods (including action research, surveys and others). The author clarifies their distinctions and clarifies how they are relevant to SLA or TESOL research. The differences between qualitative and quantitative traditions are discussed in terms of the amount of control (or intervention) and structure involved as well as issues

concerning internal and external validity/reliability in quantitative research and credibility, transferability, and dependability in qualitative research.

The brief review of research methods (which acts as an overview for chapter 2) begins with the more controlled ones (survey research, for example) and moves toward the less structured qualitative-oriented ones (such as case-studies). The chapter continues with the steps in specifying a research question and the ways to develop a research design. A very important aspect of all types of research, namely, ethical considerations, appear to the end of the chapter. Entitled "Ethical Research," the section clarifies the meaning of ethics and offers suggestions on how L2 researchers working with human subjects should address such issues as getting informed consent and gaining access. A very positive feature of the book is that it provides the reader, from time to time, with example research reports published in journals on applied linguistics. By so doing, the book offers numerous benefits for novice researchers, including familiarizing them with the names of the most famous outlets for publishing research such as *TESOL Quarterly*, *ELT Journal*, *System*, *Applied Linguistics* and the like, and providing them with examples of studies applying particular research methods and designs.

Chapter 2, "Researching Teachers and Learners," is intended to introduce the research methods commonly used in researching the attitudes and behavior of the two integral components of a language classroom, i.e., teachers and students. Action research is dealt with first since, the author argues, "it is a method that ... is directly concerned with promoting more effective L2 teaching and learning" (p. 29). Survey research is introduced next where two main data collection tools, i.e., surveys (usually in the form of written questionnaires) and interviews are discussed in sufficient detail. Guidelines for designing surveys precede an example of a questionnaire used in a recent study. Calculating inter-item consistency has been recommended as a check on the instrument's reliability (p. 42); it should, however, be noted that such internal consistency estimates may not truly indicate reliability, which refers to the consistency of observations over time (author, 2007). Likewise, it has been claimed that "attitude scales on a questionnaires are also treated as interval scales" (p. 43) without justifying how and why such a change of scale is possible, since as Brown (1988) asserts, while data on interval scale may be converted to an ordinal scale, the opposite is not possible.

As regards interviews, their types and purposes are clarified first, followed by recommendations on how to conduct them. Verbal reports and diary studies, two forms of introspective research used for investigating the candidates' thought processes, are discussed next. Having sorted out the distinction between retrospective and introspective research, the writer explicates the procedures to be used in conducting such studies and gives hints on analyzing relevant data. Diary research is likewise defined then, its merits and demerits are illuminated, and guidelines are offered on how to conduct such studies. Case studies and ethnographies are discussed last as two frequently cited examples of qualitative research. The steps to be followed and cautions to be taken in conducting such research are enumerated and examples of research applying these methods are critiqued. After almost any method discussed, the author refers the reader to research studies applying the relevant method and asks a series of questions, ranging from the research question to design-related questions to pedagogical implication, leaving the reader for him/herself to find relevant answers,

and possibly compare them with a friend's. In the case of case studies, however, the author has given his own answers to the questions he asks, providing the reader a reference point for judging the acceptability of his/her responses. The inclusion of more activities of such a nature could have been a great asset for novice researchers.

Readers are introduced to the methods of research used for investigating oral or written discourse in chapter 3: *Researching Classroom Discourse*. Interaction analysis and discourse analysis are nominated as two research methods used for studying oral discourse, and text analysis is referred to as an avenue for analyzing written texts. Discussion on interaction analysis starts with defining the term and moves on with a detailed look at the features of generic and limited coding systems commonly used in such research. Conversation analysis and ethnography of communication are introduced as two techniques for doing discourse analysis. The procedures for conducting discourse analysis follows next, with two examples of recent studies preceding a short introduction to critical discourse analysis. It would have been more desirable had the writer clarified the distinctions between discourse analysis as a field and discourse analysis as a research method, especially because for most readers the first meaning of the term is the only one they are familiar with (Johnstone, 2002). A similar argument may also be made for text analysis as a field as apposed to it as a research method.

With regard to written discourse, analyses of student and teacher texts are separately treated, followed with examples and procedures for doing syntactic, text, and contrastive rhetoric analyses. Text analysis of teachers' texts is discussed in terms of teacher feedback and teacher designed classroom materials. Corpus-based research is introduced next as a text analysis method for investigating and assessing one of the most important ingredients of any learning-teaching encounter, i.e., teaching materials or textbooks. The types and benefits of corpus-based research are discussed and examples of how such research is used in concordancing are offered, followed by a few very useful Web site addresses for some free corpora. A brief look at non-corpus-based research on L2 teaching materials and a short review of critical text analysis research call a halt to the chapter. Having provided hints on how an analyst makes use of a the vast array of resources available for him/her including context and co-text (Brown & Yule, 1983) to arrive at how listeners or readers make sense of what is communicated (and what *is not* communicated) could have added to the number of handy devices in the practically-minded researcher's toolbox.

The characteristics of effective research reports, academic papers and MA theses are reviewed in the final chapter of the book, "Writing Research Reports." The chapter starts with guidelines on writing good theses and journal articles, and the importance of consulting sample theses completed in an institution is noted. The structure and components of research reports are discussed next in considerable detail. Guidelines on what to include in the *Introduction* of reports are offered, followed by very useful recommendation on what to include and what not to in the *Abstract*, how to word the *Title*, and *Style*-related suggestions. *Literature review* is discussed next with helpful material on its organization, purpose, and citation options. The most important part of any research report, i.e., *Methodology*, comes next, where important issues concerning the choice of participants, materials (data collection tools), procedures and the ways of analyzing data are explained in a lucid language. Instructions on how to analyze and organize the data in the form of tables appear under *Findings and Discussion*. As

the final section of any research report, *Conclusion* is suggested to include a summary of major findings, a call for further research, a statement of the limitations and a note on pedagogical implications. What seems to be missing in this so-nicely worked-out plan are notes on Acknowledgements, Table of Contents (for theses), References, Footnotes or Endnotes, and Appendices.

### **Summary**

*Researching Second Language Classrooms* promises to be an easy-to-use guide for interested L2 researchers. The diversity of research examples referred to in the book coupled with the vast array of L2 research methods introduced make it a welcome supplement to other textbooks on EFL research. It would make an ideal text on research methods courses in TESOL and Applied Linguistics for both undergraduates and post-graduates.

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