Doing Good Quality Research

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Introduction
Research has always been an important aspect of academic life; it is also increasingly being promoted as a central strategy in the development and career advancement of language teaching professionals. For the purposes of this article I will not distinguish between these two groups; rather, my aim is to outline a number of criteria for good quality research which I believe are of relevance to anyone doing research in English language teaching. I will now discuss several criteria in turn.

1. Purposeful
Good research has a clear purpose — i.e. it is clear why the study was conducted. We can break this criterion down into three elements. Firstly, clarity of purpose is demonstrated through well thought-out research questions. According to Punch (1998), effective research questions will be clear, specific, answerable, and focus on matters that are worth studying. Secondly, a clear purpose stems from the researcher's ability to problematize the context under study. Problematizing the context means identifying in the classroom, school, system or other educational setting where the research is taking place, an issue that needs to be studied. Third, the purpose of a study can also be defined through an analysis of relevant background literature that creates an argument. A literature review which fails to create an argument lacks a purpose — it may represent a thorough analysis of what others have written, but does not fulfil its purpose unless it demonstrates why the study needs to be conducted.

2. Methodologically Appropriate
I have done several projects into what English language teachers think research is. One issue to emerge from this work (e.g. Borg, 2009) is that good research is often associated with quantitative methods involving statistics. This is of course a misconception, and there is no automatic correlation between the particular research methods used and the quality of the research. What is fundamental, though, is that research methods are chosen appropriately. This means that they are suitable for addressing the study's research questions. It is the researcher's responsibility not only to choose which methods to use in collecting data but to justify those choices — to explain why they were made. As part of this rationale we also need to show an awareness of the limitations of the choices we make (every method has limitations). Good research, then, will be based on appropriately chosen and justified research methods.
3. Technically Competent
Good research design is important; executing this design skilfully is critical. I have, for example, read many excellent research proposals which argue very convincingly for the use of semi-structured interviews. In many cases, though, the quality of actual interviews which were later conducted has been poor, often as a result of the researcher’s lack of interviewing skills. Similarly, writing a theoretical argument for the use of questionnaires is easier than designing an effective questionnaire and administering it successfully. Without technical competence — the ability to translate a research plan into action — research cannot be of good quality. This extends to the analysis of data too — if data are not analyzed appropriately, the quality of the research will be questionable. It is essential, then, that researchers have not only theoretical knowledge about research methods but also the skills to implement these methods in collecting and analyzing data. Technically competent data collection and analysis enhance the reliability and validity of a study.

4. Makes a Contribution
Good quality research makes a contribution of some kind. This contribution can take many forms. It can be a contribution to a previously studied issue (e.g. providing new insights or extending existing findings, often in a specific context). The contribution may also stem from a focus on an innovative issue — one previously unstudied (e.g. in the late 1990s, research on teachers’ beliefs and practices in teaching grammar emerged as an innovative research focus). It can be a contribution to how a particular issue can be studied (i.e. a methodological contribution). Research can also aim to make a theoretical contribution — to provide insights into broader explanatory frameworks for phenomena. ‘What contribution does this research make?’ is a question we should be able to answer about our work. If we cannot find an answer then it is less likely that those reading or listening to our work are going to see much value in it. Research which confirms what we already know about an issue is not necessarily less valuable, because confirmatory research is important. However, in some areas certain findings are very well-established and simply confirming these again may not be seen as particularly valuable. For example, there has been much research in recent years which shows that teachers’ theoretical statements about ideal teaching do not always reflect what they do in the classroom. Or there have been many studies which show that teachers’ beliefs influence their practices. Research which simply confirmed these kinds of findings might not be rated very highly in terms of its contribution; particularly if a researcher’s goal is to publish an article in a top research journal, the quality of the contribution the research makes can be the difference between the article being accepted and rejected. A key purpose of the literature review is allowing the researcher to identify where the scope for a contribution in relation to a particular topic is. Research can also make a practical contribution — i.e. it can have clear implications for action to be taken by policy makers, teacher educators, teachers or learners. The impact on practice of educational research is increasingly seen as an important dimension of its value.

5. Ethical
Good quality research is ethical — it cares for those participating in the research and ensures
that they are respected and that there are no negative consequences for them as a result of the research. Obtaining informed consent from participants is also a key aspect of ethical research. Of course, while in theory ethical principles are very clearly defined, in practice researchers will often face tricky decisions about what to do and which raise ethical questions. For example, telling participants what a study is about may sometimes influence their behaviour and invalidate the findings. In such a case researchers will need to consider how much to reveal in advance about the study (e.g. they may opt to give participants a general description of the study rather than spelling out the detail). Or in some studies it may be difficult to find participants, but without participants there can be no study. In such cases researchers may feel that they need to try to persuade people to participate more forcefully (and pressurizing people in this way may not be ethical). Ethical issues arise even when we are researching our own classrooms. We need to think about our learners, and, for example, to ensure that the research has no negative effects on any of them. Most research associations have codes of ethical practice (see, for example, http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/guidelines/ethical.pdf for that of the British Educational Research Association).

6. Critical
Criticality is a quality that permeates all elements of good quality research. It is shown in the way the focus for the research is defined — i.e. in the quality of the literature review and in the way that the researcher avoids unjustified assumptions about the issues under study. Criticality is demonstrated through the appropriate choice of research methods, with an awareness of the limitations of the methods chosen and not just their strengths. The presentation and discussion of findings also present many opportunities for researchers to demonstrate their criticality; for example, a critical stance is seen when researchers ensure that all claims are supported by evidence and demonstrate an ability to consider alternative interpretations (not only the most obvious ones) of findings. Researchers who monitor their own biases and reflect on how these might influence their work are also being critical. One final example of criticality relates to the researcher’s use of terminology. For example, I regularly see research proposals where a term like ‘teacher-centred’ is introduced and used with the assumption that everyone accepts the negative connotations of this term. A critical stance here would introduce the term, show an awareness of the connotations it has, and define what it means for the researcher. Criticality is a fundamental quality of good quality research. In its absence, researchers may simply engage in an exercise of finding evidence to confirm conclusions they have already reached; this is the antithesis of what research is meant to involve.

7. Coherent
The final criterion for good quality research I will discuss here is coherence. A study may be well-designed and competently executed. The researcher may have adopted a critical stance throughout. Ultimately, though, research is assessed on the basis of how it is reported. This can be orally or in writing but in either case if the report lacks coherence the audience will not develop a good impression of the work. In one sense, then, the quality of research is defined by the skill with which it is communicated. It is important, therefore, for researchers to
dedicate suitable time to preparing to communicate their work. In the case of an oral presentation, for example, I always advise my research students to ensure their focus is clear and specific, that the amount of information they present is not overwhelming for the audience, and that the logic of the talk (i.e. the links between different points) is obvious. For written reports, the same guidance applies; if readers can discern the structure of the report and see a logic to this structure, then they are (as long as other issues of quality discussed above have been addressed) more likely to develop a positive impression of the work. Coherence also refers to the consistency of a piece of research — e.g. the data that are presented should relate to the questions that the researcher wants to answer; the key issues covered in the discussion section of the report should relate to points previously highlighted in the findings. Consistency of this kind enhances the overall coherence of a research report.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, then, I believe that we can enhance the quality of our research (and better evaluate the research of others) by asking ourselves this series of questions:

- Is the purpose of the research clear?
- Have research methods been appropriately chosen and justified?
- Have data been collected and analyzed in a technically competent manner?
- Does the work make some kind of contribution to knowledge, with potential implications for practice?
- Is the research ethical?
- Does the researcher adopt a critical stance?
- Is the research reported in a manner that is coherent?

These and other criteria for assessing the quality of research have been discussed in the research methods literature (e.g. Alton-Lee, 1998; Borg, 2004; Davis, 1992; Denscombe, 2002; Pawson, et al., 2003; Seale, 1999) and readers interested in this topic may also want to consult these sources.

**References**


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