

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

<b>Title</b>	Research Methods in Second Language Acquisition: A Practical Guide
<b>Editors</b>	Alison Mackey and Susan M. Gass
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Second language acquisition (SLA) research is a hybrid discipline that draws on a range of other disciplines such as education, psychology, sociology, and so forth, which influence the research methodologies applied in this field. The existence of such a diverse number of disciplines leads to the presence of various approaches to SLA methodology. Mainly to address this peculiar feature of SLA research, Alison Mackey and Susan M. Gass offer their book entitled “Research Methods in Second Language Acquisition” to provide a comprehensive and comprehensible account of major and minor trends in this field. Largely due to the already mentioned reason, each chapter is authored by an adept expert in a particular sub-area in SLA research to thoroughly describe and provide insights into the particular method of his/her expertise. The book makes a valuable contribution to the design, development and conduct of research projects. As the editors themselves state, the book “is intended as a guide for students as they design research projects” (p. 1).

The book consists of an introduction and two main parts. The introductory chapter, Chapter 1, is written by the editors. Each chapter first presents some essential background and the relevant theoretical framework in the area of research. Then, it touches on studies conducted by each chapter’s author to provide a step-by-step guide to the discussed method, making the book and its chapters highly user-friendly. Finally, project ideas and resources, additional readings, as well as study questions are included to facilitate a thorough understanding of the method and to stimulate ideas for new research.

Part I of the book (“Data Types”) includes 9 chapters and examines the various common types of data studied in SLA. In Chapter 2 “How to Use Foreign and Second Language Learner Corpora” (p. 7), Sylviane Granger introduces corpus linguistics as a major contributor to frequency, variation, and co-text facets of language. She defines learner corpus as “computerized databases of written or spoken texts” (p. 7) which can vary on the basis of time of collection, scope of collection, targeted language, learner’s mother tongue, medium, and text type.

Chapter 3 “Formal Theory-Based Methodologies” (p. 30), authored by Tania Ionin, examines data collection methods used in formal, generative SLA research. In this regard, the author concentrates on grammaticality judgment tasks and interpretation tasks. She clarifies that the

application of the former is more suitable for studying morphological or syntactic phenomena, while the latter can be used to examine the link between form and meaning.

Shawn Loewen and Jenefer Philp, in Chapter 4 “Instructed Second Language Acquisition” (ISLA; p. 53), look at research methods for investigating the nature and effectiveness of instruction on second language learning. First, they cite Housen and Pierrard’s (2005) definition of ISLA as “any systematic attempt to enable or facilitate language learning by manipulating the mechanisms of learning” (p. 2). After presenting this brief definition, the authors suggest observational studies, non-interventionist quasi-experimental studies, interventionist quasi-experimental studies, and action research as different types of research in ISLA.

In Chapter 5 “How to Design and Analyze Surveys in Second Language Acquisition Research” (p. 74), Zoltan Dornyei and Kata Csizer cover the prerequisite steps in designing a survey to obtain valid and reliable data. In addition, readers are informed about how to interpret and use questionnaire data in discussing quantitative data analysis. As a final point, they include a how-to section to highlight three issues to be taken into account in reporting survey results, namely, the generalizability issue, the inclusion of technical information, and the utilization of more informative tables.

Chapter 6 “How to Carry out Case Study Research” (p. 95), by Patricia A. Duff, concerns one of the earliest methods in SLA research, that is, case study. The author characterizes it as a “potentially powerful yet quite practical form of inquiry and theory building” (p. 95). Moreover, the author accentuates that much can be learned by looking both holistically and in detail at the behavior of only a few subjects and that this is the distinguishing feature of case studies. In the following sections of the chapter, Duff defines three main approaches to case studies – positivist, interpretive, and critical. However, the major part of this chapter seeks to shed light on the practicalities of conducting case studies.

Kim McDonough and Pavel Trofimovich, in Chapter 7 on “How to Use Psycholinguistic Methodologies for Comprehension and Production” (p. 117), clarify that, from a psycholinguist’s perspective, “language comprehension and production involve a complex interaction of various processing components” (p. 117). These underlying factors of language use and learning deserve to be meticulously examined. To do so, psycholinguists have developed ingenious methods such as self-paced reading and self-paced listening tasks to examine language comprehension, as well as picture-word interference and sentence preamble tasks to study language production. The authors first describe each task, then refer to its theoretical framework, and lastly draw attention to some methodological considerations.

Chapter 8, titled “How to Research Second Language Writing” (p. 139) and authored by Charlene Polio, is devoted to the examination of second language writing. Polio identifies two major ways of classifying empirical studies in this area, namely by the focus of the study and by the research method. In discussing the second way of classifying studies, the author names eight methods. The rest of the chapter is devoted mainly to a discussion of two of these methods, namely text analysis and writing process analysis.

Keiko Koda’s chapter – Chapter 9 “How to Do Research on Second Language Reading” (p. 158) – complements the previous chapter. Koda treats reading as a multidimensional construct and argues that “no single approach can adequately address all aspects of reading” (p. 158). However, she stresses in particular the integration of the learners’ first and second language reading sub-skills and suggests how one could investigate dual-language impacts on second language reading.

The first part concludes with Debra A. Friedman’s chapter – Chapter 10, “How to Collect and Analyze Qualitative Data” (p. 180). In this chapter, she expresses that the increasing focus on language learning as a social process and a growing emphasis on the contexts of learning have been accompanied by the enthusiasm in applying qualitative methods in SLA research. She begins her chapter by offering her perspectives on the characteristics of this approach. She then continues to present theoretical and practical aspects of qualitative methods for data collection and analysis.

Part II (“Data Coding, Analysis, and Replication”), with 5 chapters, shifts the focus of the book to ways of coding and analyzing the data. Chapter 11, the opening chapter of the second part, is by

Andrea Revesz on “Coding Second Language Data Validly and Reliably” (p. 203). It describes top-down, theory- and instrument-driven coding methods. Revesz defines data coding as “organizing and classifying raw data into categories for the purpose of further analysis” (p. 203). Revesz pays special attention to the concepts of validity and reliability in relation to data coding.

“Coding Qualitative Data” is the title of Chapter 12, written by Melissa Baralt, which provides extensive discussions about the NVivo as a kind of software applied in data coding in qualitative research. While referring to the various types of data present in qualitative research, the author argues that the utilization of this software can facilitate data management, coding, and analysis. The chapter presents examples of how qualitative data in SLA research can be coded using this software.

In Chapter 13 “How to Run Statistical Analyses” (p. 245), Jenifer Larson-Hall covers the top four most frequently used statistical procedures in SLA research, namely t-tests, ANOVA, correlations, and chi-square. Larson-Hall provides useful information about each statistical procedure such as issues related to effect sizes, the appropriate way of reporting the results, and suitable graphs for each of the procedures. Another outstanding feature of this chapter are the links provided to a number of websites that can help researchers perform basic statistical tests.

Chapter 14 “How to Do a Meta-Analysis” (p. 275) by Luke Plonsky and Frederick L. Oswald looks at meta-analysis and emphasizes its potential power in adding clarity to SLA theoretical claims along with providing critical research insights. However, the authors argue that “there is no single best way to do a meta-analysis” (p. 289). The chapter also clarifies the practical aspects of meta-analysis and addresses three major problems with narrative or qualitative reviews in SLA research.

The concluding chapter of the book is Rebekha Abbuhl’s “Why, When, and How to Replicate Research” (p. 296). Abbuhl views replication as an absolute prerequisite for future research. In line with her opinion, Schmidt (2009) states that replicability is one of the cornerstones of the scientific method, because it helps prevent Type I and Type II errors. The author also explains what exact, approximate and conceptual replications are, and describes steps to be followed in conducting replications.

To conclude, Mackey and Gass’ “Research Methods in Second Language Acquisition” is an intriguing book in many respects. It is not just another book for the library, since it addresses remarkably most of the hot issues in SLA research. It is a well-written, concise and very accessible book that allows readers to develop a firm understanding of the underpinning concepts in SLA research. The discussion of methods used in SLA research within pertinent theoretical frameworks is the prominent feature of the book that leads to the continuous narrowing of the gap between theory and practice. Furthermore, the use of summary boxes, examples as well as study questions throughout the book, which increase the tangibility of each method, allows theory and practice to be presented in a highly communicative style that helps readers grasp the key methods of SLA research. Another noteworthy feature of the book are the contributions from different experts that afford readers comprehensive views about the state of the field. Moreover, the authors endeavored to avoid taking up any particular position regarding what constitutes the most ‘legitimate’ approach to SLA research. The advantage of such an approach is a rich and informed account of each area. Regarding the intended audience of the book, the editors themselves hope to see graduate students and scholars looking to keep pace with the latest research projects and methodologies in SLA as the main users of the book. The reviewers find Mackey and Gass’ valuable new book to be an excellent resource for novice researchers who wish to obtain an understanding of the principal issues that have been addressed. Moreover, the book can serve as a source of reference for those who are already members of the community of SLA researchers and as a textbook for teachers, who will find the book useful when teaching SLA courses.

In spite of all the strengths of this volume, there are a few limitations. The major theoretical development in SLA since 1994 has been the emergence of *sociocultural SLA*. Though this topic deserves a more dense discussion, it was only addressed marginally in this volume in Chapter 10. The second major theoretical development which does not figure at all in this volume is the *connectionist* view of SLA. Moreover, we were surprised to find no treatment of speaking and

listening research in this volume, which may thus not fully satisfy the expectations of readers interested in learning more about research into these two skills. However, the overall strength of this volume should not be overshadowed by the aforementioned points. Despite these limitations, the book is a much-needed and welcome addition to the literature and presents a wealth of information on SLA research.

### **References**

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