

Second Language Research, Methodology and Design

Author:	Alison Mackey & Susan M. Gass (2005)		
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Second Language Research is not a pioneer in the field of giving guidelines to conduct research on second language learning and teaching. But, this kind of book is rare enough to deserve a special mention, especially because of the pedagogical effort made by the authors to explain to the budding researcher, in understandable language, what research is and how it should be done (and not done). James Dean Brown did this for me years ago, and for this I am eternally grateful to him.

"[I]n its most basic and simplest form, research is a way of finding out answers to questions" (p. 1) declare the authors at the beginning of the first chapter. This may sound like a truism, but the very simplicity of the definition describes exactly what a language teacher does daily: finds her/himself confronted with problems, interrogations, widening horizons and opening doors, crumbling certainties. What s/he will or will not do about it is another matter. It is the researcher's task to explore these thoughts and, sometimes find solutions, or at least explanations. This can be done with a large range of methods which are explained in this book.

Chapter 1 is an *introduction to research* that defines some key concepts such as quantitative and qualitative research, how to pose a research question (hypotheses), conduct the research and write a report. It ends with the idea that replicability is a criterion of validity for any research.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the ethical issues related to *data gathering* involving humans, especially consent and protocol preparation.

Chapter 3 gives guidelines on methodological tools for the *collection of data*: the importance of pilot testing to uncover unforeseen problems and flaws before the main research is carried out, the variety of collection measures and the choices that must be made according to the research questions (interaction, grammar, pragmatics), the study of language models, of interactions, of cognitive processes, the use of questionnaires and

surveys, etc. Abundant examples of possible tasks to carry out the research are given. The chapter ends with references to existing databases containing data that has already been collected, transcribed and analysed.

Chapter 4 deals with the concepts necessary for understanding how to design a study in second language research. In a research project, it is important to identify, include and control *variables* (independent, dependent, etc.). Then the internal and external *validity* has to be assessed, paying particular attention to the participants (language learning experience, proficiency, maturation, etc.). Testing, sampling, representativeness and generalisability are also presented here. Finally, the authors discuss *reliability*.

Chapter 5 is devoted to *quantitative studies* and Chapter 6 to *qualitative research*. The latter is more convincing than the former in that it covers this field more broadly than the former.

Classroom research, which is what most teachers do, day after day, even unconsciously, is discussed in Chapter 7: the contexts, purposes and types of classroom observation, data collection techniques, introspective methods, practical considerations and finally action research.

Chapter 8 is more technical in that it deals with *coding* the data gathered during study and observation with the attendant question of reliability.

After coding comes *analysis* which is the subject of Chapter 9. The main points of descriptive and inferential statistics are explained.

The main body of the book ends appropriately, in Chapter 10, on *concluding and reporting research*.

At the end of the book, we find more than eighty pages of appendixes: various official models of documents such as consent forms, discourse transcription conventions, a glossary of terms used in research, bibliography, an author index and a subject index

Why did Alison Mackey and Susan M. Gass wait so long to write this book? It would have become my Bible when I started doing research in foreign language learning and teaching. No doubt students in the field and young colleagues, starting out, will feel that here is what they have always wanted to know about the subject, at least until they develop their own analyses. The book has been written with just those novice researchers in mind, with questions for better understanding and further research at the end of each chapter. It is a course book for the future didactician.

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