

# 英语教学中的 学术研究与写作

Academic Research and Writing Practice  
in English Language Teaching

■ 王林海 董洪学 著

 复旦大学出版社

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# Preface

In recent years, there have been many changes in the English language teaching circles in the higher educational institutions of China. One trend of these changes is that there is increasingly intense competition between universities as to the quality and quantity of academic works produced by their teachers. The notion that a teacher should also be an academic researcher is becoming more and more popular, particularly at universities. Whether it is right or wrong, this is a fact. Many colleges and universities no longer expect their foreign language teachers merely to be good at teaching their subjects to their students, they also want their teachers to do enough research work and have enough academic publication of their works as well. However, currently in China, not many foreign language teachers have enough knowledge about how to do academic research and how to write academic papers. Another important trend existing in the English language teaching field in China is that almost all the college English teachers are trying some new teaching approaches as a kind of innovation of their traditional teaching methods. The need to find out the effects of teachers' innovative teaching methods on their students' performance is appealing and even pressing our language teachers to learn some practical classroom research techniques. This book is intended to be an introduction to language teaching research and academic writing. The authors of this book first introduced briefly and systematically the research methods and traditions, and then exemplified with their own writings and research works how to apply the research methods to teaching practice, which may serve as some help for non-researchers to develop skills to practice academic research in their working place by themselves, to read and evaluate research reports of others with critical and analytical eyes, and to write academic works or papers based on their research work in the teaching surroundings.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Teaching Research and Research Methods

### Key Information of the Chapter

This chapter offers a broad overview of a range of research methods which are applicable to EFL practitioners. It aims at telling readers what they should do or learn to do research, and particularly focuses on the research which students and teachers may wish to conduct for their writing of academic papers and dissertations.

### Aims of the Chapter

- To educate readers to a competent level of theoretical and critical understanding of some key research methods;
- To enable language teachers and learners to seek out relevant links between research and research methods and classroom practice.

### Contents of the Chapter

- An introduction to research methods and traditions
- Principles of qualitative and quantitative research
- Observational and non-observational techniques in data collecting
- Action research
- Important aspects in conducting research work
- The experimental research method
- Ethnographic research
- Introspective methods in academic research
- Case study research
- Classroom observation and research
- Elicitation techniques for research
- Triangulation research
- Data analysis and interpretation
- Directions for the actual research

## 1.1 Research Traditions and Methods in Applied Linguistics

In the language teaching field, research, according to David Nunan (1992), is a process of inquiry, which consists of developing questions, problems or hypotheses, collecting relevant data and evidence, and analyzing or interpreting the data and evidence. Research, in tradition, has been put into two categories: *quantitative research* and *qualitative research*. Quantitative research is noticeable, objective and outcome-oriented, uses controlled measurement, can often be generalized and assumes the existence of externally independent “realities”. Qualitative research, comparatively, is contextual, subjective and process-oriented, uses naturalistic and uncontrolled observation from the “insider” perspective, assumes that all knowledge is relative, and that studies on a subject should be holistic and not much generalized.

### 1.1.1 Quantitative Approaches to Research

A quantitative approach is a scientific approach to enquiry which aims at objectivity. Research hypotheses are formed, which are most often based on former evidence and subjected to controlled testing and statistical measurement procedures. Usually researchers of this approach work within a number of variables which are specifically identified as part of the research procedure. The establishment of internal and external validity seems of essential importance in such research. The most salient advantage of quantitative approaches lies in the clarity and rigor of the procedures employed in the research. Another advantage of quantitative approaches to research is that because an experimental approach offers clear definitions and controls of variables, studies can be replicated and comparisons can be made across different studies and sites.

#### Examples of Quantitative Research

In the classroom interaction study, for example, a researcher could conduct an analysis of classroom turn-taking behaviour. Sato (1982) used videotapes and observations to examine her learners' turn-taking behaviour. Data analysis is a fascinating area in the classroom language research of teachers' talk and students' talk. Taking a transcript of some classroom interaction, you can calculate the number of turns taken by each participant. First, you need to define a “turn”. Will any utterance be counted as a single turn and whether it is one or several words? How will interrupted turns be coded? How will discourse maintenance moves be coded? For example, “um”, “yeah”, *etc.*, are spoken while the other speaker is still talking, likely trying to show that the listener is paying attention.

When you have completed the turn distribution tally, you can analyze by using a specific linguistic unit of analysis—the word. How many words does each participant utter during this segment of interaction?

Examples of quantitative research can also be found in discourse analysis, which refers to a number of procedures for examining spoken or written chunks of language. In classroom research, it usually involves analyzing spoken language. It can also include qualitative interpretations, but from a quantitative perspective, it would include coding and quantifying units of analysis, *e. g.*, utterances. Repair interactions are used as the data base.

### 1.1.2 Qualitative Approaches to Research

Qualitative approaches to research are from emic (inside) perspective as opposed to an etic (outside) perspective. The appearance of qualitative approaches was due to the inability of quantitative approaches to take into account how human situations, experiences and behaviours construct realities which are subjective. Thus, while quantitative research explores the world from an etic perspective, the qualitative approaches study the research context from the emic perspective.

The principal methodological tools used in qualitative research are observation, description and data collection. The emphasis is on “rich” data collection. Extensive explanations and details are provided on the contexts and participants in the research, which are often called “thick” descriptions.

Qualitative research does not set out to follow a predetermined research procedure. The data are used to develop insights and implications which may then become the basis for further research or which may work to shape or shift the research questions. As the data are usually extensive and detailed, qualitative studies usually involve a small number of research contexts or subjects. For example, you can observe the learners from participants’ perspectives on classroom discourse by asking questions like “How would you describe the atmosphere in a class? Would you describe the learners as being particularly receptive or defensive?” In such an observation task, you could speak to the teacher and the learners to get their emic interpretation of a transcript, or devise a list of questions that you would like to ask each participant. This could have a linguistic focus or a sociological focus, or a combination of the two.

### 1.1.3 Comparisons between Quantitative and Qualitative Research

The figure below provides a comparison of quantitative and qualitative research approaches.



Quantitative Research	Qualitative Research
values objectivity through the discovery of facts or truths	encompasses socially subjective and relative interpretations of phenomena
tests pre-established hypotheses through the collection and measurement of data	draws on data to develop and refine hypotheses
establishes cause-and-effect relationships	interprets human behaviours from participants' perspectives
intervenes in the research context and controls variables	explores naturalistic and cultural settings without controlling variables
reduces data to measurable quantities by statistical means	gathers "rich" data and interprets them through "thick" description and analysis
ensures reliability through the consistency and replicability of methods	ensures validity through multiple data sources
generalizes beyond the research population	does not seek to generalize beyond the research context
focuses on research outcomes that confirm or disconfirm hypotheses	focuses on the processes as well as the outcomes of research

**Figure 1 A Comparison between Quantitative and Qualitative Research ( Burns, 1999)**

Some writers have argued that qualitative and quantitative approaches are incompatible in essence. Their argument is that these two approaches rest on fundamentally different views of the status of knowledge and truth and the nature of social behaviour. Recently, however, more and more researchers are taking another view on the relationships between qualitative and quantitative approaches. They view the two approaches as complementary and believe that each approach can supplement and complement the other. It is suggested to view research pragmatically and to employ methods which address the issues of concern in the most effective way possible. For example, if a teacher does not wish to generalize the results of a classroom study beyond the classroom in question, he or she may collect data solely through participants' observations and diary accounts. On the other hand, for a research which aims at revealing general patterns across a large population, the quantitative methods would normally be employed to obtain as precise an idea as possible of the distribution of certain kinds of behaviour. In this case, it is also necessary to obtain more in-depth information from individuals via interviews or observations, which serve as a supplement to the quantitative data.

Burns(1999) argues that neither of these two broad approaches should be seen as superior to the other because they each take a different view of the nature of knowledge and have different goals and functions. What a researcher should bear in mind is that their

selection of the methods and procedures should be based on different kinds of purposes for undertaking the research.

### 1.1.4 Other Categories of Research

Some researchers argue that the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research is too single. They argue that in practice, qualitative research and quantitative research are indistinguishable in many facets. They have put forward some other research methods, such as the primary research and the secondary research provided by Brown (1988).

The primary research and the secondary research are mainly concerned with quantitative research. The primary research collects data from primary sources, such as a group of language learners, while the secondary research gains information chiefly from secondary sources, such as reviewing others' findings from books and journals. Primary research can be further divided into case studies and statistical studies (see Figure 2). Case studies focus on a single person or a certain number of individuals, studying certain aspects of their language learning process or outcomes over a period of time. Statistical research utilizes one or more statistical analyzing methods to study the language learning phenomenon. It sees its subjects as a cross section of possible behaviours at a certain time. In Brown's model, statistical research can also be subdivided into survey studies and experimental studies. Survey studies investigate people's attitudes, opinions, characteristics and so on by using some forms of questionnaires. Experimental studies try to control the conditions under which the subjects' behaviour is observed. For example, in one type of experimental study, a teacher wants to study the effects of gender on his/her students' understanding and mastering the English grammar — "subjunctive mood". His/her research might involve trying to teach some sentences of unreal conditions to both the boy students and girl students, testing them and then separating their scores into two groups according to gender, and finally studying and interpreting the results as well as the differences and similarities of the mistakes they have made.

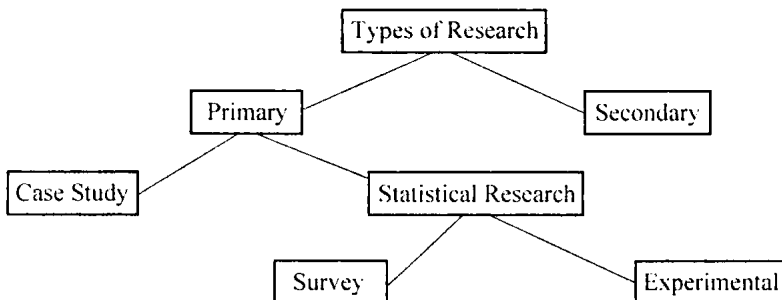


Figure 2 Adapted Types of Research (Brown, 1988)

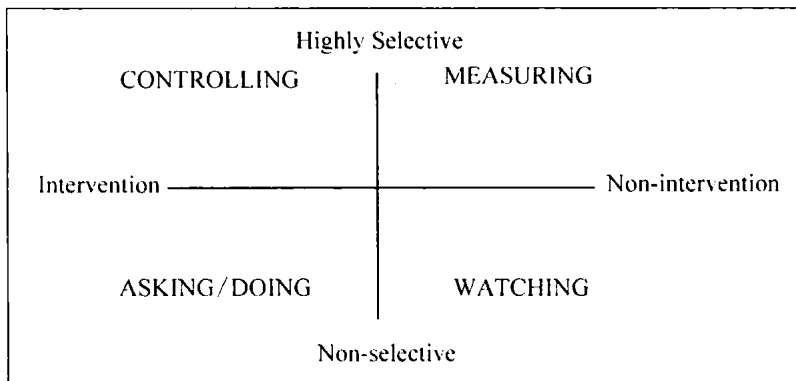
Chaudron (1988) has identified four research traditions: the psychometric tradition, interaction analysis, discourse analysis and ethnography methods. Psychometric method conducts investigations by using different methods and experiments. Interaction analysis of the classroom research uses various observation systems, tools and plans to study how the teacher-controlled interaction can influence the learners' behaviour. Discourse analysis studies classroom discourse from the linguistic perspective by analyzing classroom transcripts which are usually categorized speech words. Ethnography research tries to obtain data by means of naturalistic and uncontrolled observation techniques and provide insights into classrooms from cultural perspectives.

Grotjahn (1987) argues that the qualitative-quantitative distinction is too simple and that, in actual research studies, it is necessary to take into consideration the method of data collection. In quantitative data gathering, researchers traditionally use tests, questionnaires, *etc.* as techniques, while in qualitative data gathering, observation, interviews, journals, focus groups and other tools are often employed; questionnaires can be utilized to collect both quantitative and qualitative data (Nunan, 1992; Wajnryb, 1992; Lynch, 1996; Richards, 1996; Burns, 1999; Hopkins, 2002). However, none of these researchers has definitely claimed that techniques traditionally used to collect quantitative data cannot be employed in the gathering of qualitative data or vice versa.

In addition to the method of gathering data, Grotjahn also attaches importance to the type of data yielded by the investigation and the way of data analysis. The three variables, he thinks, particularly important in actual research studies. The analysis of research traditions provided by Grotjahn is insightful, based on which, he provides us with two "pure" research paradigms. The first one is *exploratory-interpretive* paradigm, which results in qualitative data by using a non-experimental method, and conducts an interpretive analysis of the data. The second is an *analytical-nomological* paradigm, in which, data are collected through an experiment, and yields quantitative data through statistical analysis. In addition to the two "pure" forms, there are six "mixed" paradigms which mix and match Grotjahn's three variables in different ways. For example, there is an "experimental-qualitative-interpretive" paradigm which utilizes an experiment but yields qualitative data, and the data are analyzed interpretively. The other five different research paradigms resulting from combining these variables are the "experimental-qualitative-statistical", the "exploratory-qualitative-statistical", the "exploratory-quantitative-interpretive" and the "experimental-quantitative-interpretive".

There is another important model developed by Van Lier (1988) for characterizing applied linguistic research. Van Lier claims that language research can be analyzed in terms of two parameters: an *interventionist parameter* and a *selectivity parameter*. Research is put into the type of the interventionist parameter according to the extent to which the researcher

intervenes in the environment. A formal experiment which takes place under laboratory conditions would be placed at one end of the interventionist parameter, while a naturalistic study of a classroom in action would be placed at the other end of the interventionist parameter. The selectivity parameter categorizes research according to the degree to which the researcher, before the investigation, specifies the phenomena to be studied. A formal experiment, in which the researcher pre-decides the focus variables, would be placed at one end of the parameter, while an ethnographic “portrait” of a classroom in action would occur at the other end of the parameter. Intersection of these two parameters creates four “semantic spaces”: a “controlling” space, a “measuring” space, an “asking/doing” space and a “watching” space as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** Parameter Model Developed by Van Lier (1988)

The controlling space has the features of a high degree of intervention and a high degree of control, and contains studies in which the experimenters focus their attention on a limited number of variables and attempt to control these variables in some way. For example, in an investigation into the effect of cultural knowledge on reading comprehension, the researcher may set up an experiment in which subjects from different cultural backgrounds read texts in which the content is derived from their own and other cultures. In such an experiment, the focus is on a single variable, cultural background, which is controlled through the reading tasks assigned to the subjects. The measuring space includes those research methods involving a high degree of selection but a low degree of control. For example, the researcher may be interested in the effect of a teachers’ questions on students’ responses. Armed with a certain number of teachers’ questions, the researcher observes a series of classes, documenting the types of questions asked and the length and complexity of the responses. Here the researcher is highly selective in what he or she chooses to look at or look for, but does not attempt to control the behaviour of either the teacher or the students. The asking or doing space encloses studies in which there is a high degree of intervention but

a low degree of control, while in the watching space, there is a low degree of both intervention and selectivity.

According to the different procedures researchers might employ, research, traditionally, can also be distinguished between *deductive research* and *inductive research*. The inductive research aims at finding general principles, theories, or truths from the study and analyzing of single instances, while deductive research begins with a hypothesis or theory and then searches for evidence to support or refute them.

A form of research which is becoming increasingly popular in language education is action research. Some experts, like Kemmis & Mc Taggart (1988), maintain that action research typically contains three important elements: being carried out by practitioners, such as classroom teachers rather than some outsiders; being carried out together with others; aiming at solving problems in a specific situation. There are also researchers, such as Nunan (1992), who argue that it is not necessary that action research should involve collaborative work. They believe that the study of a particular class, a group of students, or even a single learner can be seen as action research if the study is done by a practitioner trying to answer some questions, involves the collection and analysis of data, investigates and finds ways to solve pressing problems in his or her working context. In Figure 4, you can see the steps involved in action research suggested by Nunan (1992).

Step 1: Initiation	A teacher comes to me with a problem: his current group of students do not seem interested or motivated. What should be done?
Step 2: Preliminary Investigation	We spend some time collecting baseline data through observing and recording classroom interaction.
Step 3: Hypothesis	After reviewing the initial data, we form the hypothesis that the students are unmotivated because the contents of the classroom teaching is not addressing the needs and interests of the students.
Step 4: Intervention	The teacher devises a number of strategies for encouraging the students to relate the contents of the lessons to their own backgrounds and interests. These include increasing the number of referential over displaying questions.
Step 5: Evaluation	After several weeks, the class is recorded again. There is much greater involvement of the students, and the complexity of their language and student-led interactions is enhanced.
Step 6: Dissemination	The teacher runs a workshop for colleagues and presents a paper at a language conference.
Step 7: Follow-up	The teacher investigates alternative methods of motivating students.

Figure 4 Stages in Action Research (Nunan, 1992)

It can be said that the core of the action research is professional self-improvement through focused collaboration. Teachers are allowed to be both more deliberate and more responsible in their efforts to change educational practice. As Grundy (1999) has pointed out, action research aims to challenge traditional educational practice and research in a number of key ways:

- Action research challenges the separation of research from action.
- Action research challenges the separation of the researcher and the researched, emphasizing the reform of educational practices over the whole school as a community, and thus offering the potential to break down the ideology of individualism in education.
- Action research challenges assumptions about the control of knowledge.
- Action research challenges assumptions about the nature of educational reform.

### 1.1.5 Two of the Most Important Aspects in Conducting Research Work

Two elements extremely important for any successful research work are the reliability and validity of a research, which are traditionally subdivided into internal and external reliability and validity. Reliability refers to the consistency and replicable nature of the research. Internal reliability refers to the consistency of data collection, analysis and interpretation. External reliability refers to the extent to which independent researchers can repeat a study and achieve results similar to those obtained in the previous study. Validity refers to the extent of how much the research has actually investigated what the researchers intend to investigate. Internal validity refers to the interpretability of a piece of research, while external validity refers to the extent to which the results can be generalized from samples to populations. If all the variables under investigation are controlled, the research is more likely to be internally valid, but if the study is carried out in context, this will likely increase the external validity but weaken the internal validity.

Nunan (1992) has summarized the features of reliability and validity by asking some questions in the following Figure 5.

Type	Key Questions
Internal Reliability	Would an independent researcher, on reanalyzing the data, come to the same conclusion?
External Reliability	Would an independent researcher, on replicating the study, come to the same conclusion?
Internal Validity	Is the research design such that we can confidently claim that the outcomes are a result of the experimental treatment?
External Validity	Is the research design such that we can generalize beyond the subjects under investigation to a wider population?

**Figure 5 Questions to Establish the Reliability and Validity of a Research Study**

In addition to internal and external validity, there is the construct validity worth attending to. A construct is a psychological quality, such as motivation and intelligence, which can not be observed directly. Therefore, it is of great importance that researchers define the constructs clearly enough to make them accessible to outside observers.

In a word, researchers should constantly be careful to guard against some potential and actual threats to the reliability and validity of their research work. The two sample studies below are shown to illustrate the threats to validity posed by poor research designers (Nunan, 1992).

### *Example 1*

#### **Internal Validity under Threat**

In an investigation of three different methods of teaching grammatical structure, three teachers in three different schools are each trained in one of the methods and apply it to their classes. One teacher has three mixed ability classes, another has four mixed ability classes, and the third has two similar groups of fast track learners. At the end of the term, each group is administered a test devised by their teacher. Group achievements for each group are computed and compared.

#### **Critique**

In this investigation, the results are not interpretable. It is impossible to say whether the results are due to the method, the proficiency of the students, the skill of the teacher, or the ease of the test.

### *Example 2*

#### **External Validity under Threat**

(Adapted from Wiersma, 1986) A study investigates the effect of length of visual exposure on the ability to memorize and recall nonsense words. Subjects are ten postgraduate students who are undertaking a Master of Arts program in psychology. There are five different lengths of exposure, so five groups of two volunteers each receive different length of exposure. A volunteer participates in the study by being exposed to 20 nonsense words individually. After each exposure, the volunteer is asked to recall the nonsense words.

**Critique**

Suppose that the performance scores generally increased length of exposure, the question remains: to which populations and conditions can the results be generalized? Can they be generalized to primary and secondary students learning meaningful material? Can they be generalized to young adults working on meaningful tasks in a highly structured situation? The answer to both questions is no. The results may not even be generalizable to the graduate student population, since the participants were volunteers.

**Sample Studies of Threats to Internal and External Validity (Nunan, 1992)**

## 1.2 Experimental Research Method

If the researcher mainly utilizes an experiment as the method to gather, analyze and interpret data, his or her research will belong to this type. The experiments in the language education context are done mainly for the exploration and study of the relationships between variables. Variables are the things or factors which do not remain constant. In the case of language education program studies, a variable may be an individual's motivation, language proficiency and so on. For example, if a teacher or someone else as a language researcher wants to explore and find out the link between the changing of teaching method and the students' test scores, there will be at least two variables in the research—the teaching method and the test scores. The variable, such as the teaching method, that is expected in the research to influence the other variable, like the students' scores, is called the independent variable, and the variable being affected, such as the test score, is called the dependent variable.

There are many ways a researcher can employ to gain evidence. For instance, you could investigate a group of English language learners by means of questionnaires or interviews to know their attitudes towards your teaching methods; you can ask another teacher to observe your class and make records. However, unlike the method of standard testing, these data-gathering methods may be considered too subjective by your colleagues. They believe in test scores rather than subjective impressions. To convince your colleagues of the effectiveness of your new teaching method, you need to use some experimental techniques, such as a standardized term test to provide evidence. To ensure the rigorousness of your experiment, you need to reduce the possibility that there might be a casual relationship between the independent variable (your teaching method) and the dependent variable (the test scores of your students) because it is very likely that some other factors



rather than your teaching method that play a role in the achievement changes of your students. For example, you might have chosen a group of fast track learners whose English proficiency is comparatively high as the subjects of your experiment. To guard against such threats or attacks, some experts suggest that you should select learners at random and arrange them to study in two comparing groups, a control group and an experimental group; and you should also test their English proficiency before the experiment to make sure that their English is of the same level. In the experimental group, you can use your innovative teaching approach, while in the control group you can use your traditional teaching method. In this case, it can very well be assumed that other variables which might have affected the results exist in equal quantities in both the control and the experimental groups. Thus you will likely be more powerful to argue that it is your teaching method that makes a difference. According to the procedures you employ to carry out the research, experimental research can be put into three categories: the true experiment, the quasi-experiment and the pre-experiment. If you have randomly assigned your subjects to both the experimental group and the control group, and administered a pre-placement test and a post-treatment test to both groups, it can be reasonably argued that you have formally carried out a “true” experiment. If you have both pre-test and post-test as well as experimental and control groups, but no random assignment of subjects, your research design can only be called quasi-experiment. A pre-experiment may have pre- and post-treatment tests but lacks a control group to make a comparison.

To collect statistical data in the experiment research, it is sometimes necessary to measure the variables on some scales. Variables can also be categorized as nominal scale, ordinal scale, interval scale and ratio scale according to the type of scale on which they are measured. A nominal scale measures mutually exclusive variables. Ordinal scales measure the variables which have ranking features like first, second, and so on, but in which the actual scores are not given. Interval scales provide information about the ranking of the scores as well as the distance between the scores, which are most typically used test score data in the research of applied linguistics. Ratio scales are employed to measure absolute values, which rarely appear as something interesting and useful to researchers in the field of applied linguistics. In the actual practice, it is most often not realistic to make an experiment involving the whole population of your target students. It is, therefore, only feasible to test a sample of the population. As a result, we need to use some statistical inference techniques and procedures to ensure the possibility of using samples to represent the whole population. For data analysis, some skills, like the chi-square tables, are useful in the conduction of experimental research.