Data Collection Research Methods in Applied Linguistics

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Preface

For research in applied linguistics, the successful elicitation and collection of data is a key challenge to obtaining reliable and valid results in a research project. In our review of research books available in our field, we noticed that many textbooks tend to focus on research designs, with far less attention paid to the important step of obtaining data. For example, textbooks tend to provide detailed accounts of experimental designs in second language research, but little advice on the tools used within these designs to collect data from participants. Likewise, research methods textbooks might give comprehensive overviews of field research or ethnographic research, but little guidance on how to obtain good data when in the field, whether it be via observations, interviews or field notes. Much applied linguistics research is conducted in the field, and therefore, researchers often face innumerable challenges and obstacles in collecting good data. Our book aims to provide guidance in this area by squarely focusing on the things researchers do to obtain data in their research projects.

We have also observed a tendency in research methods books to conflate data collection methods with approaches to research design, which our book aims to remedy. For example, questionnaires (a data collection method) are often discussed interchangeably with survey research (a research design), even though

some questionnaires are used for purposes other than 'to survey' and survey methods can utilize more than just questionnaires to collect their data. In some books data elicitation tasks and tests (data collection methods) are listed alongside elements of methodology such as experimental studies (a research design). While we acknowledge that certain data collection techniques often accompany certain research designs, we feel there is a need to uncouple these two dimensions of research to encourage more freedom and creativity in applied linguistics research. Because, in fact, multiple data collection research methods can be (and are) used within a variety of research designs.

One book which does not conflate research design with data collection methods is Brian Paltridge and Aek Phakiti's edited collection, *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, published by Bloomsbury Academic. This book consists of 31 chapters on various research methods, and research areas, but intentionally does not touch on data collection research methods. Paltridge and Phakiti (2015), therefore, provide a clean overview of designs, within which a multitude of data collection methods can be used by the reader. For this reason, we believe that our book acts as a suitable companion text to this volume, by adding this missing dimension to research in applied linguistics research methods. The commendable decision of these editors to not conflate data collection with research designs and topics is one of the reasons why we approached Bloomsbury to publish our textbook, as, together, these two textbooks offer a comprehensive overview of research methods in applied linguistics.

When data collection is discussed in methodology textbooks, there tends to be an overemphasis on interviews and questionnaires as the main qualitative and qualitative methods to collect data in our field. This sends a highly constrained message to novice researchers in terms of the repertoire of techniques available to them as researchers to collect their data. To expand this realm, our book explores frequently used data collection techniques, including, but not limited to: interviews, focus groups, field notes, observations, stimulated recall tasks, corpus building, and questionnaires, and tests/measures. It also introduces techniques that are widely used in other social science disciplines and are only beginning to make inroads into the mainstream of applied linguistics research, including the use of journals and focus groups.

While the methods outlined in this book will be of interest to all researchers, our target readership consists predominantly of postgraduate students of applied linguistics and language education research (including TESOL), who are being introduced to research methods for the first time. Our aim is to provide a book that will complement the traditional formats of research methods training in postgraduate settings, which are generally organized around abstract notions of design: case studies, ethnographies, surveys, experiments, action-research, or narrative inquiry. Alternatively, we present research methods in terms of the tangible actions that researchers take to collect data. This perspective should be of primary relevance to novice researchers, who are often highly concerned about obtaining usable data for their projects. Thus, we hope the book will become an essential resource for all applied linguistics researchers, and will be used as a valuable textbook for research methods courses worldwide.

Each chapter in this book focuses on one area of data collection, outlining key concepts associated with the method, discussing ways to increase the reliability and validity of data collected, as well as covering the procedures needed for good data collection. Each chapter also showcases several real examples of published research projects where the method is used to collect data. It does this to provide tangible examples to the reader so that they can better understand how these techniques are put into action by experienced researchers. In many cases, we draw on our own published studies—not because we believe they are better than others available, but because we have a more intimate understanding of the processes behind the scenes in the data collection phase of the research.

The introductory chapter provides an overview of research methods and data collection. This is intended to act as an abridged version of the content provided in most research methods book by providing an examination of common research designs such as experiments, surveys, case studies, ethnographic research, and action research. This information is then used as a platform to discuss how research designs can incorporate multiple data collection techniques, and how these techniques are not bounded by particular research methods. This chapter will lay the foundation for a focus on data collection as its own dimension of research methodology.

The next four chapters in the book focus on data collection research methods used to collect data directly from participants. Chapter 2, on data

elicitation tasks, provides an overview of the variety of tasks used by researchers to collect data on various language learning processes. Chapter 3 then explores retrospective and introspective tasks as a further way to directly monitor unseen processes of acquisition of language use and language using/learning behaviours. Key challenges explored include issues such as time between the task and data collection, the provision of suitable stimuli, external factors affecting task completion, issues surrounding talk-aloud tasks, and issues surrounding self-report measures on cognitive processes. Chapter 4 looks at validated tests and measures, and explores issues surrounding the construction of valid and reliable measures, as well as issues surrounding the adaptation and use of measures constructed by other researchers for similar research purposes. Chapter 5 looks at observations, contextualizing the data collection research method in a wide array of applied linguistics contexts. Types of observation frameworks are outlined, including time-sampling and event-sampling designs.

The next four chapters explore indirect methods to collect data from participants who self-report on the constructs being investigated. Chapter 6 provides an overview of interviews and interview types, and problematizes the way interviews are currently used in much applied linguistics research. Next, Chapter 7 outlines the use of diaries, journals and logs, differentiating the varied use of this data collection technique by drawing on robust work in the field of psychology. Following this, questionnaires are explored in Chapter 8. While this is a common topic covered in many research methods books—and one of the few data collection instruments that is given emphasis alongside research designs—it is a popular one in our field, and deserving of a chapter in itself. Chapter 9 explores issues surrounding focus groups, and outlines the major differences between interviews and focus groups in order to problematize the unreliable way they have been applied to much research in our field thus far.

The third section of the book includes two chapters that collect discourse (written and spoken) which are then subjected to various methods of data analysis in our field. Chapter 10 explores the use of documents in research, in that researchers collect these secondary sources upon which to conduct primary research. This chapter explores the use of archive documents (such as newspapers), policy documents, textbooks, online communications (such as websites, blogs, and social media comments), but also research documents

themselves in the form of systematic reviews. Issues surrounding the identification and selection of documents are discussed in terms of making informed choices to enhance the reliability and validity of data collected. Chapter 11 outlines the collection of discourse in order to build corpora for linguistic analysis, which is a huge area in applied linguistics research. This chapter mostly centres on the issues and procedures surrounding the recording of spoken discourse in real-world settings, although the collection of written discourse is also addressed. While other methods aim to collect data with a specific research question in mind, data for corpora are collected to build a resource that other researchers may draw upon in answering a range of future research questions.

The final chapter concludes our volume, and explores macro-perspectives of issues associated with good data collection. It discusses triangulating data collection, and offers advice on the realities of data collection, which is inevitably a messy process. It also explores core issues rising to prominence in our field such as a need for replication research and research transparency, which involves making available data collection instruments for researchers use in their projects.

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Heath Rose
Jim McKinley
Jessica Briggs Baffoe-Djan

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