

Full Length Research Paper

SLA research in postmethod era: Neglects, misunderstandings and alternatives

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Accepted 6 January, 2009

Much of the recent literature in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has a primary reliance on experimental design and quantitative analysis. Since SLA is so complex and multidimensional, it is difficult to study in an unnatural experimental design. In such a setting, some of the variables that affect the very nature of language learning may be missed within experimental design. Furthermore, the complexity of SLA often makes it difficult to formulate the appropriate questions or to identify the relevant variables. At the same time, the profession is becoming more socially responsive and more politically involved and the fact that language pedagogy is context sensitive has been well documented. These new developments are in contrast with some concepts such as objectivity, generalization and idealization that we have in our research orientation. The purpose of this paper is to show that research orientation in SLA does not match with the new developments that we have had in the profession, and to shed more light on the core assumptions underlying qualitative research, proposing it as a more relevant way of conducting research in SLA. Of course, the intention is not to deny the application of quantitative research in SLA totally.

Key words: Qualitative research, quantitative analysis, SLA, SLA research.

INTRODUCTION

Quantitative paradigm is still dominant in doing research in Second Language Research (SLA). In fact, "SLA researchers have generally accepted the use of the research techniques and philosophy dominant in the social sciences, particularly psychology" (Davis, 1995), and as Haverkamp and Young (2007) put it, until recently, there was little incentive for psychologists to consider alternatives to the positivist and post positivist views of science that have dominated the 20th century", and many of them "find it difficult to think outside the taken-for-granted character of positivist assumptions".

Moreover, in SLA research, "influenced by the Chomskyan tradition, the majority of (western) researchers viewed language as residing within the individual, language learning an activity that relied exclusively on individual psychological factors" [sic] (Yihong et al., 2001), and many scholars in SLA still believe that "in order to gain understanding of the phenomena of SLA, there really is no alternative to rational inquiry itself" (Gregg et al.,

1997), and they suggest the use of methods of investigation used in other scientific disciplines for an objective understanding of the phenomena of SLA (Gregg et al., 1997).

However, the "seemingly entrenched views on the nature of knowledge are changing... This change is most visible in the hardest of the sciences, physics" (May, 1994). To make this point we quote from May (1994):

Quantum theory implies that, at the most elemental level, the universe is an invisible whole. At the quantum level, the observing instrument and the observed object are thought to be in mutual and irreducible interaction. In this Contemporary quantum understanding of the universe, theorists describe perception and action as inseparable. This scientific revolution in views on objectivity and subjectivity has been apparent in the social sciences and humanities for some time.

In fact, "once the principle of scientific objectivity was brought into question, the issue of scientific subjectivity and the reflexive nature of knowledge construction became topics of broader intellectual interest" Furthermore, as Farhady (1995) puts it, "Positivism was less success-

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ful in its application to the study of human behavior. The reason was that human behavior is too complex to be accounted for by observation alone" and it has become clear that "the intangible quality of human behavior makes human sciences drastically different from the natural sciences".

Moreover, in the realm of SLA, one can easily notice that the profession is becoming more socially responsive and more politically involved. Most of the published papers before 90s and during 80s just talked about the linguistic or cognitive aspects of language teaching. However, now, there are many papers dealing with "postmethod pedagogy" with its three parameters: "pedagogy of particularity, practicality, and possibility" (Kumaravadivelu, 2001), "method as a colonial Construct" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), "Critical pedagogy in L2 learning and teaching" (Canagarajah, 2005), "EIL pedagogy" (Mckay, 2003), and linguistics imperialism etc, all of which defy objectivity, generalization and idealization. So, one can see a kind of mismatch between the research orientation and other developments in SLA.

However, according to Magnum (1997) quoted in Yihong et al. (2001) "in the field of SLA, qualitative research is currently challenging quantitative research as the only accepted form of research scholarship", and there are signs that SLA profession is moving, albeit painfully slowly, towards adopting more qualitative methodologies. As Yihong et al. (2001) reported in their review of 992 articles published from 1985 to 1997 in four famous applied linguistics journals, namely Applied Linguistics (AL), TESOL Quarterly (TQ), The Modern Language Journal (MLJ), and International Review of Applied Linguistics (IRAL):

There was quite a large gap between quantitative and qualitative studies in the second half of the 80s, with the latter low in percentage. When entering the 90s, the gap became noticeably smaller, and from the mid 90s, the percentage of qualitative studies has been approaching that of quantitative studies. The shift toward qualitative methods is especially evident with TQ.

In spite of the fact that qualitative methodologies have been accepted as a sound kind of inquiry in other disciplines and in SLA, the mainstream research in SLA is still quantitative. To understand this fact, one can just count the number of qualitatively oriented published papers in the mainstream SLA. Furthermore, it seems that there is a kind of resistance towards an alternative methodology by some of the scholars in the field.

The purpose of this article is to shed more light on the paradoxical situation in SLA, regarding the accepted assumptions and new developments in the field, and its research orientation, and to highlight the flaws of doing quantitative research in SLA, calling for developing concepts and theories that can take into account the complexity and multidimensionality of SLA. Furthermore, it explains the core assumptions and purposes of qualita-

tive research, proposing it as a more relevant way of doing research in SLA.

Quantitative research and the concept of method

The concept of method has a long history in language teaching. However, the limitations of this concept have been recognized. According to Stern (1983) quoted in Pennycook (1989) "there is a fundamental weakness in the concept of method". Kumaravadivelu (2003) refers to the concept of method as a "colonial construct" and as a "construct of marginality", and believes that "a rickety pedagogic pedestal constructed on the shifting sands of the concept of method having stood solidly for such a long time is a reflection more of its magic than of its merit. Also, according to Pennycook (1989) the concept of method "in conceptualization of teaching has diminished rather than enhanced our understanding of language teaching".

The important point here is that the concept of method is in line with the basic concepts of quantitative paradigm, and the philosophy behind it, which is positivism. That is, one can prescribe some principles of language teaching and learning in a book and send it to all parts of the world, because there are objective facts that can be generalized.

However, strange as it may seem, while the concept of method has been questioned and problematized, and nobody wants to be considered as a proponent of method era, some of the concepts such as generalization, objectivity, and one-size-fits-all perspective towards the findings of SLA research are still popular.

Where is the problem?

If we just review the titles of the recent papers published in applied linguistics and SLA, as one of its founding member, it becomes clear that the profession is becoming more socially responsive and more politically involved. To make this point we quote from some prominent scholars in applied linguistics. According to Kumaravadivelu (2001):

The profession is faced with an imperative need to construct a postmethod Pedagogy... Visualizing a three-dimensional system consisting of the parameters of particularity, practicality, and possibility, I argue that a postmethod pedagogy must (a) facilitate the advancement of a content-sensitive language education based on a true understanding of local linguistic, socio-cultural, and political particularities; (b) rapture the reified role relationship between theorists and practitioners by enabling teachers to construct their own theory of practice; and (c) tap the sociopolitical consciousness that participants bring with them in order to aid their quest for identity formation and social transformation.

Elsewhere, Kumaravadivelu (2001) says, "all pedagogy, like all politics, is local. To ignore local exigencies is to ignore lived experiences", and "language pedagogy, to be relevant, must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu". In the light of the above discussion, it is reasonable to claim that generalization of the findings and having a one-size-fits-all perspective towards the findings of SLA research is a wrong assumption.

Another related issue is that "language lessons are basically social events, which are co-constructed by the individuals participating in them" (Block, 1996), and not basically about cognitive factors. Prabu (1992) and Allwright (1989) quoted in Block (1996) deal with classroom as a social context and not just a peda-

gological Context:

A classroom is thus an arena of human interaction – not the pedagogic, interactions desired or elicited as part of teaching strategy (when may or may not occur as expected) but the more elemental, inevitable interactions which occur simply because human beings, with all their complexity, are involved.

If we are ever going to make significant progress towards reaching any sort of principle on practical understanding of how learners get whatever they get from language lesson then we are going to have to think much more in terms of socio-psychology of the language classroom.

Furthermore, according to Kumaravadivelu (2001) "language teachers can ill afford to ignore the socio-cultural reality that influences identity formation in the classroom, nor can they afford to separate the linguistic needs of learners from their social needs". The above discussion defies the assumption that "SLA is basically about cognitive factors" (Block, 1996).

In addition to the aforementioned misunderstandings of adopting quantitative orientation towards research in SLA, there are many other problems with quantitative methodologies and its philosophical foundations. According to May (1994) in quantitative research "the internal processes whereby the mainstream scientist arrived at knowledge are ignored and only the external processes are considered to be important. In other words, "the important intellectual work is finished long before the first datum is collected and begin again only when the numbers, having been crunched and printed out". However, "intuition and creativity are acknowledged increasingly as important, if not essential, ingredients for scientific discovery".

Furthermore, although "the role of researcher is defined as a case of "detachment an impartiality and objective portrayal" (Kiani et al., 2008) in quantitative research, even those who are proponents of this paradigm confess the role of common sense in research. As Hatch and Lazarson (1991) put it when they are explaining the factors that affect correlation:

Let's review the factors that can influence the value of r ... After all the warning, the most important thing is to use common sense. It is possible to have a very high correlation coefficient--high but meaningless-- or a very low correlation that still can be important.

Another problem with adopting quantitative research in SLA is the fact that, given the complexity and multidimensionality of SLA, it is difficult to study in an unnatural experimental setting. In such a setting, some of the variables that influence the very nature of language learning and teaching may be missed or eliminated within the experimental design. Furthermore, complexity and elusiveness of SLA often make it difficult to formulate the appropriate questions or to identify the relevant variables.

Randomization can also be questioned, since it is the process of de-individualization, that is, the uniqueness of each person is ignored. There are also some problems with questionnaires. As Halliday (2002) sums it up:

There are well known problems with questionnaires – how the mode of question influences the mood of response, how far people tell the truth, how far they understand the question anyway, how far the social impact of a questionnaire will influence perception.

Expectations from research

A corollary to the above argument is that we have some

expectations from research in this era. In fact, while applied linguistics is becoming more socially responsive and more politically involved, research in applied linguistics must also be more politically self-reflective, and more socially responsive. Furthermore, it should be practice oriented, and when it comes to epistemology and methodology it should be plural, since applied linguistics is interdisciplinary.

However, in spite of the developments that we have had in SLA and applied linguistics, research in applied linguistics is still during 50s, positivistic, and talking about, objectivity, generalization, and looking at research from statistical perspective. Furthermore, some of scholars in SLA still suggest the use of methods of investigation in other scientific disciplines (Gregg et al., 1997), and they have forgotten that "doing what is done in the so-called scientific communities does not make applied linguistics more scientific (Block, 1996).

Part of the reason for this lack of congruence originates from the fact that applied linguistics is still during infancy, compared to other disciplines such as sociology, psychology etc, so the scholars in applied linguistics have tried to extend the findings and concepts of other disciplines to applied linguistics. However, in so doing, they have committed a mistake. Since the ideas and concepts that we have in language teaching and learning have been extended from social sciences, so we talk about complexity and multidimensionality of human learning, socio-political factors that affect it, linguistics imperialism and critical pedagogy etc. However, the concepts that we have in research in applied linguistics and SLA have been extended from physical sciences. In other words, when it comes to teaching the language, most SLA scholars subscribe to constructivism and its underpinning assumption about human learning. Surprisingly, however, in conducting research in SLA, most of the scholars in the field advocate the positivist or an empiricist view toward human learning and research enterprise in the field as it is the case in natural sciences. To some extent, this is tantamount to saying that in our research orientation we have thought that human beings and objects are the same, so although the subject of study is different in social and physical sciences, we can use the same procedure for both. This lack of congruence and confusion has resulted in conducting many pieces of research with little use to the practitioners or the discourse community.

Research and discourse community

It seems that many of the research papers written in SLA have not been concerned with the application and the use of their findings sufficiently. However, logically speaking, we do research to solve a problem and to do something for the benefit of our discourse community, especially in applied sciences. Therefore, the end is more important than the means. However, "SLA researchers have often been concerned with methodological rigor"

(Ortega, 2005). In other words, they have been too pre-occupied by the means, and they have forgotten that when we are doing research, there is an end to be served.

However, according to Ortega (2005) "as it is customary to explain our methodological and epistemological choice clearly..., we should explicitly address the value choice embedded in any given piece of research", and "the value of research is to be judged by its social utility". Therefore, it seems logical to forget about idealization as a target of conducting research in the field. SLA researcher should have a comprehensive perspective to the phenomenon under study, and take into account the cognitive, contextual, social, as well as many other variables that affect language learning. This kind of perspective will result in a more realistic understanding of the SLA phenomenon. It does not mean that whatever is found is general to other contexts; however, the researcher should explicitly discuss the findings, and let the reader judge about the extent of generalization of the findings to their own context.

What's the alternative?

While the shortcomings of the current research-orientation in applied linguistics and SLA have been recognized, it seems logical to develop concepts and theories that can take into account the complexity and multidimensionality of SLA.

The next section tries to shed more light on the core assumptions underlying qualitative research, proposing it as a more relevant way of doing research in applied linguistics and SLA. Before that, it is worth noting that mixing methods across qualitative and quantitative paradigms at the philosophical level is problematic. These two paradigms have different perspectives toward reality, truth, and the world. Therefore, mixing the two paradigms is just at the level of techniques. According to Leininger (1997) "quantitative and qualitative paradigms have different philosophic premises, purposes, and epistemic roots that must be understood, respected, and maintained for credible and sound research outcomes", so "one can not mix research methods across qualitative and quantitative paradigms, but one can mix methods within each paradigm. In fact "the idea that more is better and blend the methods tend to prevail without full awareness of the purposes and potential outcomes of each paradigm its methods and uses".

Core assumptions underlying qualitative research

Qualitative research is "an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of methods such as interview, case studies, ethnographic research and discourse analysis, to name just a few examples" (Muijs, 2004). These methods "have their earliest roots in the work of anthropologists and sociologists as they attempted to understand culture of the

others" (Morrow, 2007). "The philosophical foundations supporting the qualitative research methodologies are a number of holistic and humanistic perspectives like phenomenology, interpretive perspective, symbolic interactionism, etc" (Kiani, et al., 2008). Also, "it is often argued that a major binding feature of qualitative research is its opposition to positivism, the philosophical basis for quantitative research" (Holliday, 2002).

"Qualitative research is emic and idiographic as opposed to etic and nomothetic" (Morrow, 2007). That is, qualitative research is an attempt to look at the world through the eyes of the participants. Doing qualitative research is accepting a philosophy that the mental life of the people and their subjective experience make sense, and they are valid to be investigated. In quantitative research, the assumption is that the knowledge about group is more important than the knowledge about individual; however, qualitative research believes that knowledge about an individual is as important as knowledge about a group.

According to Kiani et al. (2008), there is a belief in qualitative research that "it is impossible to separate the outside world from the individual's idea and perspectives", and "multiple realities exist and our view of reality is determined through individual lenses or biases". In addition, "reality is not out there, but it resides in the mind of the individual".

In addition, qualitative research has a holistic perspective towards the phenomenon under investigation, and believes that "human experience is so complex that it can not be studied by reductionism" (Kiani et al., 2008). According to Watson and Gegeo (1992) quoted in Davis (1995) qualitative researcher must take into account "all relevant and theoretically salient micro and macro contextual influences that stand in a systematic relationship to the behavior or events one is attempting to explain".

Moreover, according to Davis (1995) qualitative studies assume a "cyclical process involving collecting data, conducting data analysis through which hypotheses are formed, testing hypotheses through further, more focused data collection, and so until redundancy is achieved". In addition, the design of qualitative research is not predetermined, but it "is emerging". Lincoln and Guba (1985) quoted in Davis (1995) suggest that qualitative design:

Must be emergent rather than preordained: because meaning is determined by context to such a great extent; because the existence of multiple realities constrains the development of a design based on only one (the investigator's) construction; because what will be learned at a site is always dependent on the interaction between investigator and context, and the interaction is also not fully predictable; and because the nature of mutual shading can not be known until they are witnessed.

The number of the participants in qualitative research is limited. According to Morrow (2007) "Data sources

in qualitative studies are quite different from the familiar survey or experiment and are typically gathered from a more limited sample that is purposefully, rather than randomly, sampled". Regarding the size of the sample in qualitative research Patton (2002) quoted in Morrow (2007) argued:

There are no roles for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know; the purpose of the inquiry; what is at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility; and what can be done with available time and resources.

"Standards of trustworthiness or rigor in qualitative research has been established from within the qualitative genre rather than imposing such terms as validity, reliability, and generalization from the quantitative tradition" (Morrow, 2007). According to Leininger (1994):

Qualitative researchers should not rely on the use of quantitative criteria such as validity and reliability to explain or justify their findings. Such dependence reflects a lack of knowledge of the different purposes, goals, and philosophical assumptions of the two paradigms. Because the paradigms are so radically different, a misuse of criteria of each paradigm poses critical problems and greatly curtails the development of credible and valid outcomes.

Therefore, they use a new set of terms. Lincoln and Guba (1985) quoted in Edge and Richards (1998) suggest the following alternatives:

Underlying concept	Rationalist criterion	Naturalistic criterion
Truth value	Internal validity	Credibility
Applicability	External validity	Transferability
Consistency	Reliability	Dependability
Neutrality	Objectivity	Confirmability

Purpose in qualitative research

"The fundamental purpose, or goal, of qualitative inquiry is often described as understanding lived experience within its socio-historical context" (Haverkamp and Young, 2007), or according to Seliger and Shohamy (1989) "the ultimate goal of second language behavior is to discover phenomena such as patterns of second language behavior not previously described and to understand those phenomena from the perspective of participants in the activity. In contrast to the common belief that "qualitative research is the primary example of hypothesis-generating research" (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989), and quantitative research is especially suited for the "testing of hypotheses" (Muijs, 2004), Haverkamp and Young (2007) believe that for qualitative researchers "the distinction between the basic and applied research is rejected in favor of viewing the construction of knowledge, for either theory and practice, as having multiple entry points into the circle of direct experience and theo-

rizing about the experience". Therefore, the range of purposes in conducting qualitative research according to them "can be described as falling under one of three categories, several of which are already familiar to quantitative researchers: theory or construct-oriented research, practice or evaluation-oriented research, and action or change-oriented research".

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to show that while there is evidence that language pedagogy is context sensitive, and the profession is becoming more socially responsive and more politically involved, looking at research just from a cognitive perspective, and having a one-size-fits-all perspective towards the research findings can be problematic. Research in SLA should develop concepts and theories that can take into account the complexity and multidimensionality of SLA phenomena.

Now, the dilemma in SLA is that the orientations in teaching the language and research on language learning are not the same. In teaching, most scholars advocate constructivism. So, the prominent perspective is that language learning is context sensitive, multi-dimensional, complex etc. However, in SLA research, the empiricist perspective is dominant. Hence, most of the researchers are searching for universal and general rules. Scholars in the field should try to bridge this gap.

It is hoped that the present work makes the SLA researchers aware of the current mismatch between the research orientation in SLA with the new developments that we have had in the profession on the one hand and, on the other, makes them aware of the shortcomings of this orientation, as well as catalyzing their curiosity and desire to reflect upon their work, and trying to know more about qualitative research and practice it as a more relevant way of doing research in SLA.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the anonymous reviewers of this paper for their helpful comments.

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