

## Book review

# Understanding, evaluating, and conducting second language writing research

**Polio, C., & Friedman, D. A. (2017). *Understanding, evaluating, and conducting second language writing research*. New York, NY: Routledge | 311 pages - ISBN: 9781138814684**

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In the quest to develop communicative skills in either a native language or a foreign language, many – if not most – people who learn a language will at one point be confronted with the challenges that are inherent in learning how to write in that language. The importance of writing is highlighted by many scholars and has been a focal area in recent publications (e.g., MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2017; Manchón & Matsuda, 2016). In his discussion of writing, Hyland (2016) states that "[w]riting is central to our personal experience and social identities, and we are often evaluated by our control of it. The various purposes of writing, its myriad contexts of use and the diverse backgrounds and needs of those wishing to learn it, all push the study of writing into wider frameworks of analysis and understanding" (p. xii).

With their book *Understanding, Evaluating, and Conducting Second Language Writing Research*, Charlene Polio and Debra Friedman introduce and discuss the rich and exciting research in the burgeoning field of second language (L2) writing. By focusing on "what is researched and especially how it is researched" (Polio & Friedman, 2017, p. 11), the authors aim to provide novice and experienced researchers with a comprehensive and contextualised understanding of the approaches and methods used in past, current and future L2 writing research.



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The book consists of 12 chapters, which Polio and Friedman have grouped into four sections: *Introduction* (Chapter 1), *Approaches* (Chapters 2-5), *Methods* (Chapters 6-11) and *Conclusion* (Chapter 12). In Section 1, *Introduction*, Polio and Friedman set the tone for their academic narrative, by discussing important concepts and highlighting the inherently rich and interdisciplinary nature of L2 writing research. This is followed by Section 2, *Approaches*, which covers - in four separate chapters - four main approaches to L2 writing research. In Section 3, *Methods*, readers are introduced to six distinct methods (and variations on those methods) that are commonly used for data collection and data analysis in L2 writing research. In Section 4, *Conclusion*, Polio and Friedman conclude their narrative, by discussing future directions in L2 writing research and by honing in on emerging methods and more general issues that they consider important drivers of future L2 writing research.

### **Section 1: Introduction**

In Section 1, the introductory chapter (*Introduction*, pp. 1-11) provides an initial general glance at L2 writing research. Without claiming to provide exhaustive coverage of the theoretical and practical 'nuts and bolts' of L2 writing research, Polio and Friedman discuss some important recurring themes in L2 writing research (e.g., the quantitative-qualitative dichotomy). In addition, they highlight the openness of the field of L2 writing to a variety of research paradigms, approaches and methods. They also emphasise that this openness is a driving force behind the development of much L2 writing research. In the remainder of the introduction, Polio and Friedman set the tone for their hands-on approach and compare two carefully selected studies on peer review. In their discussion of the two studies - one quantitative and one qualitative - they analyse the studies in terms of research methodological features such as research perspective, study design, results and limitations.

### **Section 2: Approaches**

In Section 2 (*Approaches*, pp. 13-98), the authors discuss - in four separate chapters - four widely used research approaches to investigating L2 writing. In the first chapter in this section, *Experimental Research* (pp. 15-32), basic research concepts as they apply to L2 writing research are discussed. After a short introduction to experimental research, the authors get to grips with issues involved in conducting experimental research. Examples of topics discussed are the operationalisation of dependent and independent variables, reliability, validity, practicality and reductionism. In line with their hands-on approach in the introduction, the authors highlight selected topics using a focal study of experimental research, which they discuss in detail. In addition, they end the chapter in a way that is typical of all the chapters in the book: they provide ample suggestions for further reading in the form of a structured and manageable end-of-chapter reference list.

In the second chapter, *Causal-Comparative and Correlational Research* (pp. 33-46), the authors highlight similarities and differences between causal-comparative and correlational research on the one hand and other types of research on the other hand. With their focus still largely on quantitative research, the authors discuss topics such as sampling and the use/interpretation of statistics. Once again, the discussion is presented by means of a focal study.

In the third chapter in this section, *Ethnography and Case Study* (pp. 47-72), the focus moves from quantitative approaches to qualitative approaches in L2 writing research. After introductory overviews of both ethnographic research and case study research, crucial issues for ensuring the quality of qualitative research (e.g., ethics, observer's paradox, triangulation, contextualisation, transparency and generalizability) are presented and discussed. The chapter ends with a discussion of a focal study, which highlights ethnographic research.

In the fifth chapter, *Mixed Methods Research* (pp. 73-98), the authors provide an interesting and topical end to the first section of the book in that they discuss a research paradigm that has grown in importance in the last decade: mixed methods research (MMR). Having discussed quantitative and qualitative research in the previous chapters, the authors focus on highlighting the value of combining quantitative and qualitative research and results to achieve (meaningful) integration, which is considered a definitional concept in MMR. In this chapter too, the authors provide a hands-on discussion of an MMR study into L2 writing.

### Section 3: Methods

In Section 3 (*Methods*, pp. 99-251), the authors move away from research approaches and turn their attention to a discussion of research methods, which spans six chapters. In the first chapter in this section, *Learner Text Analysis* (pp. 101-122), the authors discuss in more detail the following items: the goals for analysing learners' texts, a taxonomy of ways to analyse learners' texts, issues related to using various text-analysis measures and techniques and a how-to guide to setting up one's own study using text data. In the book's tradition, this chapter is concluded with a hands-on discussion of a focal study and a structured end-of-chapter reference list.

In the second chapter in this section, *Target Text Analysis* (pp. 123-147), the authors keep the focus on text analysis but now with a focus on target texts. After discussing the varied purposes for analysing target texts, the authors highlight different types of target-text analyses using a largely dichotomous approach to text analysis in the form of move analyses and corpus analyses. Once again, the authors elaborate on issues that are involved in analysing target texts (e.g., determining representative texts, coding and reporting, research bias towards academic and English texts).

In the third chapter in this section, *Retrospective and Introspective Methods* (pp. 148-175), the authors hone in on the options available to researchers to investigate cognitive aspects of writing processes. After discussing the types of and variations on

retrospective and introspective data collection, the authors shed light on pertinent issues related to retrospective and introspective methods by discussing three discrete topics: reactivity, veridicality and data coding/presentation. Using two comprehensive books that discuss retrospective and introspective methods, the authors provide a summary of the steps in these methods. The information provided is once again put to practical use in the discussion of a focal study.

In the fourth chapter in this section, *Interviews* (pp. 176-200), Polio and Friedman (2017) discuss one of the "most widely used qualitative data collection methods in L2 writing research" (p. 176) and highlight the strengths of interviewing. In subsequent paragraphs, they focus on the various types of interviews (e.g., semi-structured, discourse-based, focus group) and on issues involved in interview-based research (e.g., subjectivity, credibility, interview data interpretation). They close the chapter with a discussion of how to design a study using interviews.

In the fifth chapter in this section, *Thematic Analysis* (pp. 201-225), the authors turn their attention to the discovery and interpretation of patterns (i.e., themes) in qualitative analyses. In this chapter, they provide a summary of different theories. Subsequently, they discuss various approaches to thematic analysis, which include discussions of, for example, types and cycles of coding interview data, and grounded theory. In addition, they elaborate on challenging issues in qualitative coding. Such challenges include reliability, data reduction and credibility. Having discussed these issues, the reader is introduced to doing thematic analysis. The chapter is concluded with a practical example of a study that involved thematic coding and a discussion of noteworthy research methodological features of the focal study.

The sixth and final chapter of this section, *Qualitative Discourse Analysis* (pp. 226-251), concludes the section on methods. In this chapter, the authors take a closer look at qualitative discourse analysis (DA). The many examples that the authors provide illustrate myriad uses of qualitative DA. In addition, the authors provide a discussion of approaches to qualitative DA, ranging from conversation analysis, systemic functional linguistics, multimodal analysis to narrative analysis. The discussion of issues involved in DA focuses on transcription and the subjectivity of data interpretation. In line with technological developments in the area of DA, the authors briefly discuss computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), the use of which is on the increase in qualitative data analysis.

#### **Section 4: Conclusion**

In Section 4, *Conclusion*, Polio and Friedman conclude their discussion of L2 writing research in the chapter *Emerging Methods and Current Issues* (pp. 255-273). Their conclusion focuses on a discussion of emerging and promising lines of investigation in L2 writing research. In line with their focus in the book, both quantitative, cognitively orientated research methods (e.g., eye-tracking, keystroke logging) and qualitative, socially orientated research methods (e.g., reflective narratives, auto-

ethnography, critical discourse analysis, computer-mediated discourse analysis) are included in this discussion. Another line of investigation whose importance Polio and Friedman emphasise consists of research syntheses. The authors conclude this 'forward-looking' chapter by looking at features that occupy key roles in reporting (future) L2 writing research (e.g., replication, documentation of the research process, reflexivity and credibility in qualitative research).

### **Balance and Contextualisation**

Among the many strengths of the book, there are two, which, I believe, set the book apart from other (contemporary) publications on L2 writing research: (1) the authors' balanced, accessible, hands-on approach to discussing L2 writing research and (2) the authors' contextualised approach to presenting L2 writing research. These strengths are obviously correlated but for the purposes of this review, I will discuss them separately.

Because of the book's intended readership (i.e., novice and experienced researchers), it is clear that the authors had to make a series of rational decisions about what to include and what *not* to include in their narrative. In this respect, they have decided to balance (1) theoretical insights into L2 writing research with (more) practical insights, (2) quantitative approaches to L2 writing research with qualitative approaches and (3) approaches and methods used in past and current L2 writing research with approaches and methods that appear promising in future L2 writing research. Such a series of balancing acts is no easy feat.

However, Polio and Friedman have been able to produce a well-balanced book that is coherent for a wide readership and that provides a theory-based, hands-on approach to L2 writing research. Because of the contents-related decisions (i.e., balancing acts) made by the authors, critical readers may occasionally be left wondering *why* the authors decided to (not) include and/or to (not) elaborate on specific topics. One such example is the seeming imbalance in discussions of quantitative and qualitative research traditions. In their discussion of approaches to L2 writing research, Polio and Friedman discuss both quantitative and qualitative approaches. However, there does appear to be a slight imbalance in that quantitative approaches seem to be discussed at greater length than qualitative approaches. The authors by no means neglect qualitative approaches and do include them in their discussion of L2 writing research. However, they admit - albeit somewhat indirectly - that there appears to be a tendency in much L2 writing research to use more quantitative approaches.

In addition to attempting to strike a balance between quantitative and qualitative research traditions but also move beyond the traditional quantitative-qualitative divide, Polio and Friedman introduce and objectively discuss what is now often referred to by many as the third research approach, tradition or paradigm: mixed methods research (MMR, see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This is undoubtedly an

important development that they address in Chapter 5 of the book, where they discuss MMR in general and MMR on L2 writing. With the general increase in MMR studies that are published, Polio and Friedman's decision to include a discussion of MMR is extremely valuable to researchers who will be reading MMR and/or who intend to carry out MMR on L2 writing themselves. In light of all the balancing acts, the authors have managed to produce a book that appeals to a wide readership and that does justice to the richness of L2 writing research at our disposal and the developments it has undergone.

The mixed readership (i.e., novice and experienced researchers) that Polio and Friedman had in mind when writing their book has also led to an approach to L2 writing research that uses skilful contextualisation as its main 'route to market'. A clear example in this respect is the wide array of (focal) studies that the authors use to contextualise important features of high-quality research. Examples of such features are validity, reductionism, mixed methods research and data analysis. Not only do the studies that are provided and discussed make the authors' discussion of L2 writing research more palpable (i.e., real) by means of the motto 'seeing is believing', the studies also provide creative input for interested readers who wish to explore the complex - often interdisciplinary - literatures behind the studies.

A second example of contextualisation is the way in which Polio and Friedman tell the story of L2 writing research by focusing on past, present and future research. Research does not take place in a vacuum and is shaped by past and present developments, which pave the way for promising avenues of investigation in the future. This developmental context is crucial for both consumers and practitioners of research to understand how research, including their own research, fits into the bigger picture. Polio and Friedman are extremely adept at highlighting developmental links and this is extremely clear in the Conclusion, where they discuss emerging methods and current issues that they believe have the potential "to move the field of L2 writing research forward" (Polio & Friedman, 2017, p. 255).

In light of the strengths above, some readers may find that specific discussions of research and research methodology lack depth. To those readers I would say that they should keep in mind the authors' overall goal, which is to provide a uniquely balanced approach to L2 writing research. *Understanding, Evaluating, and Conducting Second Language Writing Research* has not been designed as a comprehensive, all-inclusive overview of L2 writing research. As is the case with many forms of research, the authors/researchers have had to adopt a reductionist approach. However, in aiming for clarity, they have ensured that their reductionist approach is functional to the story being told. This means that key research features are discussed and are linked in such a way that readers are able to map L2 writing research without unnecessary distractions.

## Conclusion

L2 writing research has come a long way and has witnessed and been part of interesting developments since its inception. These research developments have made the L2 writing research relevant in the context of past, present and future developments in society. Polio and Friedman document the research developments in an extremely reader-friendly way. By providing a wealth of resources for both novice and experienced researchers, Polio and Friedman are able to tell a captivating story about L2 writing research that enables readers to understand and evaluate the intricacies of L2 writing research and the potential of the field. Polio and Friedman's book will undoubtedly inspire consumers and practitioners of research to think of ways to conduct creative L2 writing studies and, in so doing, to move L2 writing research forward in innovative ways.

## References

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