CHAPTER SEVEN

Case Studies

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In this chapter, I describe some characteristics of case studies, discuss some methods that are commonly used in case study research, point out some issues in ethics, validity and generalizability and give an example of case study work in the applied linguistics field.

Characteristics and assumptions of case study research

In spite of the fact that case studies are often referred to as a method (e.g. Yin 2009), 'case study' is better thought of as an approach, a strategy or a multidisciplinary research tradition (Creswell 2013; Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011; Simons 2009; Van Wynsberge & Khan 2007), with a long history across many disciplines. Case studies are also often characterized as part of a qualitative research tradition; however, many methods and techniques can be used in conducting a case study, both quantitative and qualitative (Swanborn 2010; Yin 2009). Case study has been described as 'transparadigmatic', capable of being conducted within postpositivistic, critical theory and interpretivist paradigms (Van Wynsberge & Khan 2007, p. 8). Although differences abound on the precise definition of case study, a generally accepted aspect is that it is an approach in which the object of inquiry is set in a natural context, is unique (in the sense of singular) and bounded. It is also an approach in which the researcher's interest is in an in-depth investigation of the particular rather than the general. By 'bounded' we mean that the phenomenon we are investigating is delimited – we are

pretty sure we know what is and is not the case (Stake 2005), and the context in which the case is situated is also particular and delineated. Without attention to context, we do not have a case (Yin 2009). So, the research approach and the written report that results can be called a case study if it investigates one person, one group, one institution or one community in depth (Merriam 1998; Simons 2009; Stake 1995, 2005), with a goal of understanding a phenomenon or a process as exemplified by the person(s) or institution (Swanborn 2010). A multiple case study investigates several particular groups, institutions or individuals (Stake 2006).

The purpose of most case studies is to enhance our understanding of a phenomenon, process, person or group, not to experiment and generalize to other populations in the tradition of larger-scale survey research. Nevertheless, misunderstandings about case study still exist, causing some people to dismiss it as overly subjective, ungeneralizable, too practical and not sufficiently theoretical, with a bias towards verification, and in general unscientific. These myths about case study have been persuasively countered and 'corrected' (Flyvbjerg 2006, 2011). Simons (2009, pp. 164–167), among others, discusses the strengths of a case study's subjectivity, numerous kinds of generalization that are possible from case study research (cross-case, naturalistic, concept, process and situated generalization, as well as in-depth particularization that contributes to 'universal understanding') and the usefulness of case studies in generating theory and evaluating policies.

Perhaps the primary feature of case studies that distinguishes them from other types of research is that they use multiple data sources (interviews, documents, observations) to explore (describe, analyse) particular bounded phenomena. We assume that there is something unique about the case we choose to investigate and are interested in the particulars of what makes the case special, not necessarily what makes it representative of larger processes or groups of people (Simons 2009; Stake 2005). When we speak of generalization, it is to theoretical propositions (Yin 2009) or concepts (Simons 2009), to the kind of vicarious experience in readers that Stake (2005) calls naturalistic generalization or to the situation being studied (situated generalization; Simons 2009). However, by choosing to investigate a case, we presume to be able to identify what makes the case particular and bounded, and therefore what is not a case. But, identifying boundaries may not always be straightforward (Creswell 2013). Researchers often fudge here and there and draw some artificial lines around a case. This is a normal part of case study research.

Second, by choosing a case study tradition, we demonstrate an interest in in-depth portrayals of phenomena associated with particular people or sites, rather than in a broader, more superficial sampling of the phenomena we are investigating (see some examples in Yin 2012). This choice usually requires a commitment of time and a mix of data types. For instance, in applied linguistics, people who are interested in the L2 language acquisition

of just one person can conduct a longitudinal study of the language learner (see a discussion of some of these studies in Duff 2008; Van Lier 2005), and people who are interested in L2 writers (for example) can follow one or more individual writers over time as they learn how to write in particular settings for particular purposes (e.g. Berkenkotter et al. 1988; Blakeslee 1997; Casanave 1998, 2010; Leki 2007; Li 2005, 2007, 2013; Prior 1998). In education, researchers who wish to evaluate particular programs or institutions can learn from documents, observations and multiple interviews over time (Simons 2009). The point is that depth and detail over time, of the kind not available from survey research, are essential in a good case study.

A third characteristic of case studies, whatever methods are employed, is that the case study's small *n* – a person, program, institution – is clearly situated or embedded in a particular context (which may be physical, historical, temporal) (Van Wynsberge & Khan 2007). Without a thorough understanding of context, we will not be able to interpret what the particulars of the case mean.

Types of case studies

Many types of case studies can be imagined, such as descriptive case studies, explanatory case studies, cross-case syntheses and case study evaluations (Yin 2012), but I find Stake's (1995, 2005) discussion especially useful. He distinguishes between intrinsic and instrumental case studies. Intrinsic case studies hold our interest because the case itself is interesting. It can be difficult to convince dissertation committees and journal reviewers that we are doing a study solely because the case fascinates us and because we want to gain deep understanding of it for its own sake. We typically need to produce a rationale that argues why a study will benefit others or contribute to larger bodies of research. But, Stake (2005, p. 445) tells us that an intrinsic case study

> is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but instead because, in all its particularity *and* ordinariness, this case itself is of interest.

He insists that intrinsic case studies contribute to knowledge even if they do not follow typical 'rules' of scientific research.

With an instrumental case study, on the other hand, something external to the case itself holds our interest, and the case study is conducted in order to further our understanding of the external interest. The case itself may or may not be typical but is chosen 'to advance understanding of that other interest' (Stake 2005, p. 445).

Procedures in case study research

Because there is so much variability in how case study research can be conducted, I can give only the briefest of overview of procedures here. I urge readers who are attracted to the qualitative case study tradition to read more widely and to distinguish between approaches that are more traditionally scientific and *positivistic* (Yin's work; Miles & Huberman 1994; Swanborn 2010), those that are *realist* without being positivistic (Maxwell 2012) and those that lean more towards the interpretive camp (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Simons 2009). Useful examples for second language acquisition (SLA) research are described in Duff (2008), although her descriptions focus more on the outcomes of her and others' research than on the discourse-analytic procedures she used. For examples of case studies in education and educational evaluation, see Merriam (1998) and Simons (2009). Many other examples from applied linguistics and second language education exist as published articles rather than books. In this section, I consider how L2 researchers might choose a case, collect and analyse data and write up a case study report. The section concludes with some comments on researcher roles and responsibilities.

Choosing a case

As is advised for all research, case study research begins with questions and curiosities that the applied linguistics scholar has, rather than with the tradition or method. Perhaps the most pervasive mistake of novice researchers is to start with pronouncements such as: 'I plan to do a mixed-method study', or 'I will do a case study'. As attractive as one approach or the other may look, this is putting the cart before the horse.

So, start with questions, puzzles and curiosities. These will lead to an appropriate choice of approach and method, and if case study is called for, to choosing a case or cases.

For instance, when I was looking for a dissertation topic in graduate school, I was attracted to issues in academic literacy (both first and second language) but was not sure why. With some reading and thinking, mainly about myself and my struggles to read and write in graduate school, I realized that I was not interested in ESL writing as much as I was in the role that writing was playing in disciplinary socialization. I was struck that when people entered graduate school, they often did not have clear identities as particular kinds of scholars who fit within disciplinary communities or communities of practice. Then, some years into their programs, they had taken on previously unfamiliar ways of thinking, using language, writing and researching. The one activity that they seemed to be doing all the time was reading and writing. Moreover, we were all evaluated in graduate school on our writing rather than on tests. Writing

and interacting with written texts must hold the key to this miraculous transformation of identity in graduate school.

My curiosity was about the individual's experience of the role of writing in this transformation, not in general processes of the acquisition of academic literacy or in text analysis of academic writing. I wanted to know what specific people were experiencing. In those days, we did not talk about studying ourselves (doing autoethnographies, for example), so I had to find some people to follow around for a while, at least a year – long enough to begin to see some transformations. A case study approach was thus well-suited to my curiosities. I requested permission in writing from the head of the sociology department nearby and from some of his students and ended up studying a first-year doctoral cohort (cf. Prior 1998, for a comparable study of disciplinary socialization). I observed their core classes for several terms, collected samples of their writing, looked at what they were reading and conducted many interviews over time to get a sense of how individual students were changing (Casanave 1990).

But, of course, this is not the only way to choose a case, nor are individual people the only examples of what a good case might be. A researcher might have a strong instrumental purpose for doing research and want to select case study participants and sites or programs much more systematically and purposefully. An applied linguistics researcher, for example, may wish to learn how a beginning L2 learner, or an especially successful learner, strategizes learning over time. It should be noted that in case study research, comparisons are not needed; we could focus on a successful or unsuccessful learner only. Another researcher may be interested in how a particular language program functions. The researcher also needs to make decisions about a case based on many practical factors: How much time will participants have to spend with you without their feeling pressed or resentful? Where are participants and programs located – close to or far from home? Will you and the participants share a language or will one of you be using an L2? Is the particular program you are curious about one that you are affiliated with or are you an outsider? Will administrators or teachers whom you wish to learn from consider you a spy or an ally? These are just a few of the practical questions to consider in choosing a case.

The main point is to start with strong curiosities about some phenomenon associated with particular people, processes and programs, beginning with yourself.

Collecting and analysing data

Unlike some other research approaches, almost any data can be used in case study research. However, particularly in qualitative inquiry, case study data are typically collected over time, in some depth, and from a limited

number of people and settings. If the study is of one or more individuals, then interview data, recorded and transcribed (and possibly translated), will be central, as will be other sources of information from the participants (email, journals, casual conversation, documents). See Yi (2007) for a nice description of multiple data sources that she used in her study of a Korean high-school student's out-of-class composing. Interviews with key people who interact with the participant(s) may also play a part. Depending on the topic, data may also include multiple observations of classroom learning or teaching or other group settings (e.g. meetings) in which the participant is involved. Depending on circumstances, these observations may or may not be videotaped. The researcher's own reflections, in the form of research memos and write-ups of early responses to participants and their experiences, also become data (see Maxwell 2013 on research memos). In a case study, the researcher can be seen as one of the participants.

If the case study is of a program or a school rather than of one individual, the researcher needs to gain access to key people in the organization (this can be tricky). Data may consist of interviews or even a survey of people in the organization, documents of many types and a great deal of observation recorded as fieldnotes and research memos. The researcher may also collect visual data in the form of photographs or videos. The point in a case study is to come to know the case well, thoroughly and from different perspectives. Any data that contribute to this effort are included.

Analyses of many types can be used in case study research. Quantitative analyses can be done of surveys, content analyses of documents and linguistic and content analyses of interview transcripts, classroom transcripts and writing samples. Observations, interviews and documents can also be analysed by means of prose descriptions of themes and narrative analyses of stories in which themes, impressions or narrative structures of a story become the main focus.

Finally, a good analysis proceeds to and from concepts at a higher level of abstraction – a conceptual framework – that helps readers see the connections between the individual study of one person or place and others that may be similar or different. The analysis may also be used to help build or modify theoretical concepts. It is in these senses that case study findings can be generalized or at least transferred to other contexts and made use of by others (Simons 2009, p. 164).

Writing a case study report

A case study needs to be written in a detailed and accessible way, so that readers can be in some sense transported into the world(s) of the case. As I mentioned earlier, Stake (1995) calls this kind of connection

with readers 'naturalistic generalization', in the absence of the type of generalization we find in statistical studies:

> Naturalistic generalizations are conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life's affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to themselves. (Stake 1995, p. 85)

As Stake (p. 85) says, even if we cannot generalize to a larger population, 'people can learn much that is general from single cases'.

Therefore, the standard technical report style is usually not appropriate for a case study report because it will lack the kinds of details needed, even though comparable sections are usually present in a case study (e.g. an introduction, description of context and methods, examples and interpretations of data, and discussion, regardless of what headings the writer uses). The case study report includes the writer's reasons for doing the study, and his or her roles in the interaction with the participants, class or program are made clear. Descriptions abound and may include visuals – readers need to vicariously see and experience contexts, people and events. Case studies may include quite a bit of narrative – what happened in the research process and what happened in the participants' lives or in the group, program or organization being studied. There may also be photographs or drawings in the report, or in a website established by the researcher. The website can also include full transcripts and sound recordings, assuming that participants have given permission for their data to be used in this way and that their confidentiality is protected. In the report, alternative interpretations may be offered, and conclusions about a person or program tend to be tentative. In all write-ups, the case report needs to be presented with enough convincing detail, so that readers can judge for themselves whether the insights and observations of this particular object of investigation pertain to their own situations.

Some people believe that a good case report, in the naturalistic or qualitative tradition, requires better writing skills than does a technical report. Lincoln and Guba (1985) mention this, and certainly their criteria for evaluating a case study report (see below) focus primarily on qualities of writing. After all, a case report must persuade readers of its credibility. Persuasiveness will happen not only as a result of the quality of the research, but also through the writing (Ely et al. 1997). As Simons (2009, p. 153) pointed out, 'To have the impact on our readers we desire, vignettes, cameos and narratives need to be well written.' But novice scholars or L2 speakers should not despair: Most of us are not inherently good writers. We learn to write better as we practice; we get feedback from others; and if our research questions lead us to a naturalistic case study project, we will be required to write. See Chapter 9 in Simons (2009), which is devoted to techniques designed to help students with reporting and writing. See also Belcher and

Hirvela (2005), who found that some of the L2 doctoral students they worked with were obligated by their research interests to write qualitative dissertations. They succeeded admirably.

Researcher roles and responsibilities

In conducting all research, researchers need to be alert to how their investigation might possibly harm participants. Qualitative inquiry in particular often depends on close contact with and descriptions of particular people and places and thus needs to pay attention to qualities of 'honesty, justice, and respect for persons' (Soltis 1991, p. 247) and to the fundamental principle of 'doing no harm' (Simons 2009, p. 96). Case-study research that adopts qualitative methods places the researcher in an especially sensitive position: The case study is by definition an in-depth study of a particular person, group or program. As the study becomes more and more particularized, it becomes difficult to protect participants' identities and to separate private issues from those that can be written about without risk. A written agreement with case study participants (*informed consent*) that alerts them to possible risks, that assures them of anonymity, that informs them that all data are confidential and that gives them the right to withdraw from the study at any time should be made early in the research process. It is also a good idea, whenever possible, to share transcripts, descriptions and drafts with participants and to check with them regularly about whether they want any material excluded in the interest of *privacy* and *confidentiality*. It should be noted that interpretations, as opposed to descriptions and transcripts, usually remain the prerogative of the researcher, even when they are negotiated with participants.

It behooves researchers as well to consider not only the risks to their participants, but the possible benefits. Researchers who only take, and do not give something back, are deservedly looked at sceptically by those they research. For example, L2 students in a case study project might benefit by receiving special long-term attention from researchers, and if the study is done even partially in the L2, they will benefit from extra language practice. In one of my case study projects, I requested quite a bit of interview time from one of my Japanese participants, a busy professor (Casanave 1998). She benefited by being able to use me to check the English in some of her professional papers.

Researchers themselves develop complex and sometimes personal relationships with case study participants and sites and thus need to reflect constantly (e.g. in research memos) on the roles they are playing in their own study. For example, to what extent are researchers viewed as insiders or outsiders to the community they are involved in (Richards 2003)? To what extent does a close or intimate friendship influence a researcher's choices and interpretations (Taylor 2011)? Power, gender and status differences

need to be attended carefully. L2 students, young or old, may feel especially vulnerable to the requests by and interactions with an interviewer, even if the interactions take place in the students' L1. Students may not be able to express their discomfort or resistance. An open discussion of the investigators' roles and relationships in the project will wisely take place with participants and become part of the case study report as well.

Issues of validation

A standard question about the need for validation in all research asks what Maxwell (2013) has asked: How might you be wrong? Why should we believe what you have said about your case? Responses to these questions have been debated for decades, and range from traditional criteria adapted from the sciences to radical rejection in certain kinds of qualitative inquiry of any criteria that look too *realist* or too scientific. Whether qualitative researchers believe that we should retain (Maxwell 2013; Morse et al. 2002) or reject (Wolcott 1990) notions of validity as a fundamental evaluative criterion, most are committed to a criterion of rigour (however defined) that is applied during the process of research, not just to evaluate the results.

For both quantitatively and qualitatively based case studies, one way that researchers can address issues of validity is from a modernist or realist position. This traditional position claims there is a real world out there, that our job is to represent it as accurately and objectively as we can, knowing that there is no pure Truth to be known or found, and yet that there are ways to check on the accuracy of our interpretations and representations. In his discussion of threats to validity (bias and reactivity), Maxwell (2012, 2013) acknowledges that he is a realist, not a postmodernist, and as such, he uses a very common-sense definition of validity, which, as realists, we could adopt for a case study:

> […] I use validity in a fairly straightforward, commonsense way to refer to the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account. (Maxwell 2013, p. 122)

He then points out that we do not need to believe in *objective truth* to hold this common-sense view, and that most researchers are not seeking such truth. Rather, most of them want 'some grounds for distinguishing accounts that are credible from those that are not' (p. 122; see also Creswell 2013; Phillips & Burbules 2000). This view recognizes that we cannot eliminate researcher bias or the influence of researchers on participants and settings, but that we can openly acknowledge that bias in our interpretations and writing. Some or all of the items in Maxwell's validity checklist can be applied to case study research if we see ourselves as realists-modernists. The checklist includes long-term involvement in the field, detailed and

varied data, participants' feedback on our interview transcripts and interpretations (*member checking*), informal intervention by the researcher (and recognizing that our presence is always an intervention), searching actively for discrepant cases, triangulating (primarily by collecting data from multiple sources), using numbers (tables, etc.) where appropriate (*quasi-statistics* – a term coined by Howard Becker many years ago to refer to 'the use of simple numerical results that can be readily derived from the data' Maxwell 2013, p. 128) and comparing one case with others (Maxwell 2013, Chapter 6). This perspective on validity in qualitative case study projects will not usually raise eyebrows with dissertation committee members or with journal editors. It is quite widely accepted.

However, Denzin's (1997) take on the validation issue may raise both eyebrows and hackles. Given that some of the changes and flux that are being experienced in qualitative inquiry are influencing research in applied linguistics and second language education, I believe that we need to listen to arguments for viewing evaluation criteria in new ways. Denzin uses the term 'legitimation' rather than validity. From his critical post-structural perspective, he sees the 'crisis of legitimation' in qualitative inquiry (with ethnography as his example) as one in which we can no longer rely on traditional scientific claims of authority and empirical credibility in the texts we write from our research. Rather, post-structural legitimation must be seen as subjective, emotional, moral and political performances (including drama and poetry) of words and texts that draw audiences in and move them in some way (emotionally, to take action). The text or performance will be endlessly contested. The researcher's goal, in other words, is to present multiple versions of 'reality' and to deal openly with contested views.

I conclude this section by presenting the ideas of Lincoln and Guba (1985, 2002; also covered by Simons 2009), on judging the processes and products of qualitative inquiry, and case studies in particular. In their 1985 book, Lincoln and Guba recommended multiple criteria concerning trustworthiness to evaluate the research *process* for all naturalistic inquiry. These criteria concern the ways data are collected and treated. They offer the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as replacement criteria for the traditional criteria for evaluating scientific and technical projects (e.g. reliability, validity, generalizability). Like Maxwell, they assert that to know a particular case well, researchers need to spend a great deal of time getting to know the case, observing contexts and events and triangulating data by looking at the case from multiple perspectives (diverse data, methods and investigators). They also suggest that we share ideas in interim reports with peers and with participants themselves and create some kind of archive (tapes, videos, documents) against which we can check findings. Their point is that, even though we can never prove anything, we need to find ways to help make case study findings believable, applicable to readers and dependable and confirmable to the extent possible

by our system of record keeping. Because case study research, focusing as it does on a particular and bounded case such as an individual or a program, is even more susceptible to criticism by traditional researchers than other naturalistic inquiry, these techniques for legitimating the research process take on special importance.

In a later publication, Lincoln and Guba (2002) ask how to judge the *products* of naturalistic inquiry, case reports in particular, at a time when innovations and alternatives in approaches to research are proliferating. They comment on four qualities of the product (the case report itself) that can be used to evaluate it (see my comments above on the importance of writing).

First, they state that resonance criteria should be used to assess the fit between the written report and the belief system or philosophical assumptions that underlie the report. A naturalistic case study would reflect multiple realities, for instance, including reflection by the researcher on his or her role, whereas a more traditional study would seek more unified and distanced explanations and representations. Second, rhetorical criteria would be applied to the report that reflects qualities of good writing: unity, organization, simplicity and clarity, craftsmanship (elegance and creativity of the writing, involvement of the writer). Third, empowerment criteria are used to judge whether the report moves readers to undertake some action, even if it is just consciousness-raising. Finally, applicability criteria ask whether the case study can be applied to readers' own contexts. This is a way that case study research can be *generalized*.

In all three of these views of evaluation criteria, researchers no longer presume that interview transcripts or observation fieldnotes represent uncontested or unmitigated facts, truth or unbiased perspectives of participants and observation sites. All case studies result in texts, not accurate representations of reality, and all are constructed by researchers in the act of doing research and writing and must be judged in this light. As texts, they can always be contested and reinterpreted. The good news here is that we exist in an era of methodological, representational and evaluative diversity. All approaches require rigorous attention to both research procedures and to writing. The researcher's task is therefore one of knowing what is out there, making reasoned choices and explaining those choices clearly.

A sample study

In this section, I summarize one case study to exemplify some of the characteristics of a case study of one individual. The study concerns a Korean 'study abroad' (*jogi yuhak*) adolescent, 'Hoon', who was struggling with identity and academic writing in a Midwestern U.S. high school (Yi 2013). It comes from a larger study of the bilingual literacy practices of Korean

teenagers in a Midwestern city. This approach to case study, selecting a focal individual from a larger project, is quite common, particularly when the researcher has conducted a major project as part of a doctoral dissertation. The study focuses on interactions between identities and literacy practices and is framed in part with perspectives from New Literacy Studies (Gee 1992; Street 1995) and academic literacies (Lea & Street 1998; Lillis & Scott 2007, all cited in Yi 2013, p. 211).

In this spin-off case study, Yi wished to understand the interactions between Hoon's identities and his inability to write successfully in his advanced ESL class, which he was forced to repeat three times, in spite of doing well in other high school (classes that required little writing). Following good case study procedures, Yi used numerous data sources within a bounded context to document Hoon's experiences and attitudes over time (approximately two years). Yi's data included:

> observations, interviews, transcripts, field notes, Hoon's literacy activity checklists, and artifacts, such as his literacy autobiography, e-mails, online chatting with me, reading materials, writing samples, quizzes, and the work he produced for such courses as Advanced ESL, math, biology, and Japanese. (p. 213)

These multiple data sources provided Yi with invaluable insights unavailable in a shorter or more superficial study. She analysed her data by inductively immersing herself in the various sources multiple times and identifying patterns and themes. She also documented her own biases and interpretations to check how those might have influenced her findings. Finally, she reviewed her findings periodically with Hoon ('member checks'), including staying in touch with him after he returned to Korea.

Yi found that Hoon felt trapped in his ESL classes, believing that his identity was stigmatized by the ESL label. Yi also discovered that his literacy skills were poor in both Korean and English, and that he resisted devoting effort to improving. Not a success story, this study revealed Hoon's resistance and resentment at his ESL status, and thus his many missed opportunities to develop academic literacy skills even in Korean.

In long-term, in-depth case studies like this one, the researcher is always faced with more data than can possibly be used even in a dissertation, let alone in a short journal article. Yi devoted quite a bit of space to her review of literature, her framework and her discussion, so readers might be frustrated not to see more actual data excerpts, but this is a choice that all authors of journal articles must make. Nonetheless, we trust her findings for a number of reasons: how long she worked with Hoon, the varied data sources, a suitable framework from which to interpret her findings, the possibility of connecting core issues to readers and to her framework and attention to the quality of her writing.

Strengths and limitations of case study research

If researchers want to understand deeply a particular person or a site (a class, a program), with the primary goal of understanding and interpreting rather than of experimenting, hypothesis testing or generalizing to other populations, then a case study, particularly in the qualitative tradition, is an appropriate choice of approach. Moreover, the case study approach benefits by being able to accommodate many different methods, mainly qualitative but also quantitative, including detailed linguistic analyses of L2 development (Duff 2008). In applied linguistics, a case study is able to look closely at contexts, people and change over time (Van Lier 2005, p. 195). For researchers who enjoy uncovering the particulars of a person or phenomenon and spending time doing so, case studies will suit them.

On the other hand, case studies often involve more time than some researchers have and require social skills that they may not be comfortable with. Moreover, if researchers really want to say something about a population of people, rather than about an individual, then a case study may not be the best choice. The case study report itself requires good writing skills in order that rich and varied details can be presented in a convincing way. Readers need such details to be able to apply the case study findings to their own lives and settings. We can all polish our writing skills, however, so this should not deter us as researchers unless we truly hate to write. Additionally, qualitative case studies are still finding their way into the applied linguistics repertoire of valued research approaches in dissertations, journals and books. Therefore, researchers who feel they need to please gatekeepers should assess the political scene before committing to a qualitative case study project.

Speaking for myself, I find nothing quite so engaging as a case study when I am curious about an aspect of another person's life. Moreover, we look closely at ourselves in this kind of research and can include personal reflections as part of the case study report. Both self and others become characters in the stories we tell.

Resources for further reading

Duff, PA 2008, *Case Study Research in Applied Linguistics*, Routledge, New York, NY.

This readable book provides an introduction to case study research in applied linguistics. It includes many examples from well-known case studies from the 1970s and 1980s as well as more recent examples, focusing more on findings than on methods. It also features how-to chapters on doing and writing up case study research. Most of the discussion presumes that researchers will be

investigating language acquisition, but Duff also refers to research on topics such as identity and socialization.

Flyvbjerg, B 2011, 'Case study', in NK Denzin & YS Lincoln (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th edn,Sage, Thousand Oaks, pp. 301–316.

This chapter is adapted from Flyvbjerg's previous publications (e.g. Flyvbjerg 2006), all of which are important for their systematic dispelling of myths about qualitative case study research. One of his points is that context-dependent research is the only kind of research that we have in the social sciences.

Leki, I 2007, *Undergraduates in a Second Language: Challenges and Complexities of Academic Literacy Development*, Lawrence Erlbaum, New York, NY.

Leki's case studies look at how individual L2 undergraduates in a US university find their way into the literacy practices of their subject matter areas. Even for those not interested in L2 literacy, the case studies provide models of how to conduct and write up one kind of case study research.

Prior, PA 1998, *Writing/Disciplinarity: A Sociohistoric Account of Literate Activity in the Academy*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ.

Although Prior's book can be quite densely theoretical in places, his case studies of second language writers provide good models for one kind of case study research that includes analysis of L2 writers' texts and the many social and personal factors that help shape those texts. See also Casanave's (2002) collection of case studies.

Simons, H 2009, *Case Study Research in Practice*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

In addition to introducing the basics of case study approaches, this very readable book from the field of education and educational evaluation benefits from focused attention to ethics, writing and to dispelling myths about case study research. It is less 'positivist' in orientation than Yin (2009).

Stake, RE 1995, *The Art of Case Study*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Stake's work on case study is perhaps the most frequently cited in the education, sociology and applied linguistics literature. It is rather prescriptive, but those who are new to case study research will appreciate its guidelines. See also his later publication, Stake 2006, on multiple case study analysis.

Van Wynsberghe, R & Khan, S 2007, 'Redefining case study', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 80–94.

In this important article, the authors review the main issues in and critiques of case study research. They then offer a 'transparadigmatic and transdisciplinary' prototype view of case study that includes seven features: a small n, contextual detail, natural settings, boundedness, working hypotheses and lessons learned, multiple data sources and extendability of readers' understanding (p. 4).

Yin, R K 2009, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th edn, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

This often cited book gives readers in a variety of disciplines a systematic introduction, with examples, to designs and methods that can be used in case studies, particularly

of organizations. Notable is Yin's more traditionally scientific perspective, and his point that case studies do not inherently call for qualitative methods but can utilize many quantitative and computer-associated methods. Exercises are included at the end of each chapter.

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