CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Developing a Research Project

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This chapter concludes the first part of the volume by presenting an overview of key research processes as discussed in a number of the preceding chapters. Published research is used to exemplify each research process. The chapter then discusses the characteristics of a good research project, after which it outlines strategies for developing a successful research proposal. It then provides suggestions on how to choose and focus a research topic as well as how to refine a research question. Details to include in a research proposal are discussed as well as the specific areas that a research proposal needs to address. Questions to guide the design of a research proposal are also provided. The chapter concludes by providing criteria by which research projects are often judged.

Common research stages

This chapter first presents research processes that are common to most applied linguistics research. The research processes that are presented are applicable to quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods research. Figure 15.1 presents the stages typically involved in developing a research project. While the figure suggests a sequential model of research stages, in actual practice, these stages are often *iterative* and *cyclical* as one stage is likely to inform or influence other previous or later stages. Three published studies (Kääntä et al. 2013; Moskovsky et al. 2013; Song 2012) are used to illustrate each of these research processes.

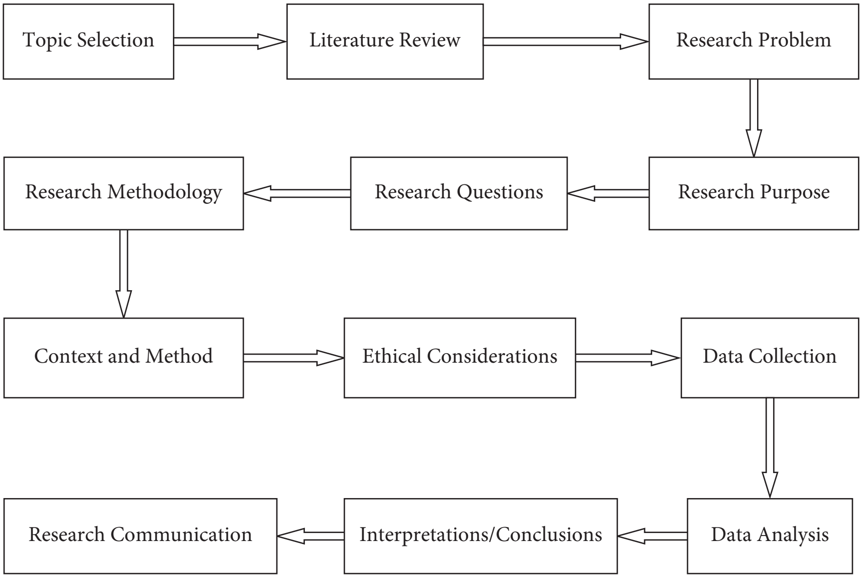

FIGURE 15.1 *Common research stages*

Researchers usually begin by choosing a topic that they would like to know more about. Topics can arise from a researcher's personal experience, or from a researcher's knowledge of existing theories or published research. The topic, however, often needs to be narrowed down, so that it is focused and its study is manageable within a given time frame. A topic can, for example, be refined from a review of the research literature on the particular topic. It is important, however, to distinguish a research topic from a research title. A topic is related to the construct or aspect of interest. A title, on the other hand, should give some indication of the topic(s) to be examined, the context in which the study will be carried out and/or the research methods to be employed. It is important to note that since a title cannot be very long (ideally fifteen to twenty words), it needs to be chosen with great care, so that it provides useful information about the study. The following are examples of research titles:

- Learning English through social interaction: The case of Big Brother 2006, Finland (Kääntä et al. 2013).

This title indicates the topic and context of the study. However, it does not tell us that the study adopted a conversation analytic framework to examine interactions among selected Big Brother (BB) contestants. This is something that could be usefully added to the title.

- The effects of teachers' motivational strategies on learners' motivation: A controlled investigation of second language acquisition (Moskovsky et al. 2013).

This study was a quasi-experimental study which examined the influence of motivational strategies by Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers on Saudi learners' learning motivation. The title does not suggest the research method but the word 'effects' implies that the study is somewhat experimental. Additionally, it does not tell us the specific context of the study. The use of the word 'controlled' implies that all aspects of the study were regulated whereas, in fact, the study used only a quasi-experimental design which did not employ random assignment, so it is not, in its fullest sense, controlled (see Gass this volume).

- Imagined communities and language socialization practices in transnational space: A case study of two Korean "study abroad" families in the United States (Song 2012).

The topics are presented clearly in this title (imagined communities (ICs) and [home] language socialization practices). It tells us the context and participants in the study (Korean families in the United States). The title also clearly suggests that this study was a case study. However, when we examine the actual study, we find that it was longitudinal and took about one year of data collection. It may have been helpful to have something about this feature of the study in its title.

Literature review

Doing a literature review is like conducting *library research*. What is involved in a literature review is, however, more than just finding relevant studies on a particular topic. We also need to consider theories relevant to the study as well as the history of research in that area. Understanding existing theories helps us set the direction of our research (e.g. this may determine whether it should employ quantitative or qualitative methods). It also helps us locate relevant studies. Identifying and locating previous research is essential for a successful research project. Studies can be identified and retrieved through databases, internet searches, academic journals and books. A review of the relevant literature involves defining the constructs or aspects under investigation and discussing how previous studies were conducted (e.g. aims, research questions, context and participants, research instruments, data analysis, findings, conclusions and implications).

Ary et al. (2006) identify seven benefits of doing a good literature review. First, it helps researchers see the frontiers of the particular research area, so the proposed study can go beyond these. Second, it helps put the original research questions in perspective. Third, it helps in limiting research questions and leads to a better definition of the concept(s) or construct(s) of interest. Fourth, it provides insights into the reasons for contradictory findings in previous studies. Fifth, it shows the research methodologies that were used in previous studies and may help researchers decide what methods will be useful, unpromising or can be improved upon in the proposed study. Sixth, it helps avoid unintentional replication of previous studies. Finally, it places the researcher in a better position to interpret the significance of research findings in light of the current status of the research area.

There are various structures a review of the literature might take depending on the research area and methodology to be adopted. For example, researchers may choose to write up their literature review using a *historical perspective approach* (theoretical developments, followed by research from the past to the present, leading to a statement of a research gap), a *contrastive approach* (comparing and contrasting competing perspectives/theories about a topic, leading to the rationale for the study) or an *aspect-by-aspect approach* (description and discussion of the various research aspects under investigation, which can then be integrated in the proposed study). See Evans, Gruba and Zobel (2011), Paltridge and Starfield (2007) and Punch (2007).

- Moskovsky et al.'s (2013) literature review illustrates the *historical perspective approach*. First, it discusses periods of L2 motivation research, adopting Dörnyei's (2001) definition of motivational strategies as '"the motivational influences that are consciously exerted to achieve some systematic and enduring positive effect"' (Moskovsky et al. 2013, p. 28). Relevant studies are mentioned as follows: 'The only three studies that we are aware of which have actually attempted to empirically test the effectiveness of motivational strategies are Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) in Hungary, Cheng and Dörnyei (2007) in Taiwan, and Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) in South Korea' (Moskovsky et al. 2013, pp. 36–37).

- Kääntä et al.'s (2013) review of the literature is an example of the *aspect-by-aspect approach*. It addresses English use and people's attitudes towards English in Finland. It then discusses recent development in conversation analytic approaches to second language (CA-SLA) research which take the view that language learning is socially 'co-constructed and jointly accomplished by interactants in situated, social interaction' (p. 97). Finally, it focuses on the case of BB, which is a reality TV show in which contestants are isolated from the outside world. The researchers then discuss previous research into BB.

- The literature in Song (2012) is structured in terms of the background and rationale for the study. It does not follow the literature review structure described above. The article starts off with a discussion of Asian families undertaking 'transnational migration to English speaking countries for their school-age children who could earn overseas education credentials and learn English through their experience' (p. 507). Song's literature examines research on study abroad families' transnational practices as a unique phenomenon and focuses on the topic of 'these families' future "imagined" membership of a particular community that they wish to enter upon return' (p. 508).

Research problem

After a comprehensive review of the literature, the research problem(s) or focus needs to be identified. A research problem may be suggested by previous researchers when they outline the limitations of their study and provide implications for further research or by carrying out an independent synthesis of previous research findings. A research problem may be seen as a research *gap* or *void* (what has not been addressed or explored thoroughly). There may be several gaps that can be addressed, but only one or two may be focused on due to time and budget constraints. The research gap may be identified in the relevant parts of the literature review or at the end of it.

- Kääntä et al. (2013) review the literature, dealing with each area of research separately: learning and use of English in Finland, a conversational analytic approach to language learning as situated practice, and research on the BB TV programs. They identify research problems or gaps in the literature in each particular area as it is discussed. For example, they point out that in the context of Finland, where a close relationship between English and Finnish among young Finns exists, the BB show 'provides a special environment for examining multivalent and hybrid aspects of contemporary forms of communication' (p. 341). In the review of the CA-SLA framework, they state that 'most research in CA-SLA has so far focused on examining language learning in situations specifically designed for learning, such as classroom interaction, classroom dyads, and internship practices … or in such institutional situation of second language use as business phone calls …' (p. 342). They then state that 'The present study aligns itself with this emergent research interest in CA-SLA, focusing on language learning in non-pedagogical settings in three ways …' (p. 343). In relation to research on BB, they point out that 'To date, this research has mainly focused on the relationship between the audience(s) and the show … and on housemates' experiences of participating in the show … Only a few have examined the housemates' interaction in the house' (p. 343).
- Moskovsky et al. (2013) identify a gap in the literature at the end of their literature review by pointing out that 'Hence, to the best of our knowledge, there has not so far been a controlled (i.e., experimental

and/or longitudinal) study that has addressed the issue of the effect of the implementation of motivational strategies in the language classroom' (pp. 38–39).

- In her article, Song (2012) discusses educational inequality and how parents' own trajectories (e.g. attendance at a prestigious high school) influence their children's learning goals and language learning practice. Song finally argues that 'transnational families' language learning practices should be considered not only from their involvement in the current, local community aspect, but also from their relationship to educational policies and practices of a prospective community that exists in their future and beyond national borders.' (p. 508)

Research purpose

In published articles, researchers typically present their research purpose or aim at the beginning of their paper. For example:

- Kääntä et al. (2013) aim to investigate 'how interactants can create language learning opportunities for themselves and others in and through social interaction'. (p. 340)
- Moskovsky et al. (2013) aim to 'assess the effects of motivational strategies used by Saudi EFL teachers (*N* = 14) on Saudi EFL learners' (N = 296) self-reported learning motivation' (p. 34).
- Song (2012) aims to 'explain the relationship between these families' future membership and current language learning practices' (p. 508).

Research questions

Research questions are asked to help researchers consider the most appropriate research methodology and design for their study. Some research questions require quantitative research designs (e.g. involving survey or experimental methods), whereas others suggest qualitative designs (e.g. using a case study or discourse analysis). Research questions should be congruent with the research problem or gap to be addressed. They should not be too broad or too specific. They should be capable of being answered given the method and techniques that are adopted to collect and analyse the data.

- Kääntä et al. (2013) do not explicitly describe their research questions but instead explore three research issues: the nature of 'extended repair sequence in meaning interaction' (pp. 345–347), 'a confirmation request as a way of entering a conversation' (pp. 347–349 and 'humor and mockery in group membership construction and maintenance' (pp. 349–354).

- Moskovsky et al. (2013) do not explicitly state their research questions, but, on the basis of the content of their result section, their two research questions are related to 'differential changes in learners' motivation over time as a function of treatment' (pp. 51–53) and 'group differences in learners' motivation at T2 [Time 2] due to treatment (and independent of preexisting group differences)' (pp. 53–56).
- Song (2012) asks two exploratory research questions: 'what are the mothers' ICs and how are these ICs related to their past and present membership and experiences?' and 'how do these ICs influence their view of their children's language learning goals and socialization practices? (p. 508).

Research methodology

A review of the literature can inform researchers of the research methods used by previous researchers as they may have investigated the same general topic. Through the review, we can gain a sense of what kinds of research methods or techniques are suitable for our own study. The choice of research methodology will lead to particular aspects of the research design: the procedures to follow, the data analysis involved, and the measures taken to ensure its validity and reliability. In terms of methodologies:

- Kääntä et al. (2013) employed the CA-SLA methodology to examine social interaction in the BB program. It can also be argued that this was also a case study as it focused on one contestant (i.e. Kaki) in particular.
- Moskovsky et al. (2013) adopted 'a quasi-experimental study with a pre-post intervention plus control design' (p. 38).
- Song (2012) utilized an ethnographic framework to examine two transnational Korean family cases in the United States.

Context and method

Context is related to the research setting or site where the study will be conducted. The research method of a particular study could be described as the operationalization of the research methodology that has been adopted. In a published research report, the methodology section typically describes this in detail (e.g. the choice of research setting and participants, the research instruments or techniques used, the data collection procedures (including any treatments or interventions), along with how the issues of reliability, validity/trustworthiness and ethics are to be addressed and how the data analysis was conducted in order to properly answer the research question).

- Kääntä et al. (2013) do not have an explicit section on the research method that they adopted. However, they provide detailed information about the empirical data being used for the study (e.g. 'The data analysed in this study come from the second BB season in Finland that started September 28, 2006 and draw from an average of 14 hours of recording live BB every day from a special BB 24/7 cable channel for two non-consecutive weeks' (p. 344)). They also describe how they selected the extracts to be analysed.
- Moskovsky et al. (2013) follow the traditional structure for the description of an experimental research method in which details on the following aspects are provided: participants, design and matching procedure, instruments (including a mention of a pilot study), intervention schedule and data collection.
- Song (2012) discusses her research method using the heading 'current study'. She presents information about the participants and the context of the study. She also adds that the study was 'part of an ethnographic investigation of Korean study abroad families and their children's language socialization practice in the US over one year between 2004-2006' (p. 511).

Ethical considerations

As discussed throughout this volume, ethical considerations are important in the conduct of research (see De Costa this volume). Participants should agree to participate in a study and be aware of any consequences of the study on them. Many journals nowadays ask authors to confirm that appropriate ethical procedures were followed as a requirement for submitting an article to the journal, so, while this may not be outlined in the published paper, this does not necessarily mean that these procedures were not followed.

- Kääntä et al. (2013) do not, for example, discuss the issues of ethics in their study as their data drew on publically available data. It could be argued that ethical clearance and consent from research subjects are not needed for this kind of data. It is not known, however, whether Kaki (and others) signed a consent form, or not, for their data to be used in the study.

- Moskovsky et al. (2013) discuss a number of ethical issues relevant to their study such as how potential participants were informed of the details of the study.
- Song (2012) does not explicitly mention ethical considerations in his paper. However, it is reasonable to assume that ethical clearance from the researcher's academic institution was given prior to the study and that all research participants consented to the study.

Data collection

The success of research depends on a successful data-collection stage. Appropriate data to serve the purpose of the research need to be identified. Then, tools appropriate to the type of research being conducting need to be developed. In quantitative research, research instruments or techniques might include a variety of tests (achievement, language proficiency, aptitude tests), questionnaires, structured observation schemes and think-aloud protocols. In qualitative research, research instruments or techniques may include fieldnotes, observations, diaries and journals, photographic records, interviews, written responses, student information, teacher records, teaching materials and information drawn from archival sources. The successful collection of data requires careful planning and needs to be reported on in subsequent papers derived from the study. For example, Kääntä et al. (2013) describe how their data were collected (pp. 344–345), Moskovsky et al. (2013) describe how they collected the data for the study (pp. 38–44) and Song (2012) provides a section which describes how the data were collected (pp. 511–512).

Data analysis

After the data have been collected, they are used to answer the research questions. Hence, the data need to be systematically analysed. The preparation of the data for analysis may include sorting the data into types, assigning identity codes to participants, inputting the data into a computer program, transcribing (or translating) the data, coding and reducing the data, carrying out reliability or credibility analysis and conducting further analysis of the data to address or answer the research questions. In quantitative research, data analysis can be done using various statistical procedures (e.g. correlational analysis, *t*-test, analysis of variance, etc, see Phakiti this volume). In qualitative research, the data analysis, for example, could be done through thematic analysis, content analysis, frequency counts, narrative inquiry (see Holliday this volume) or discourse analysis (see Paltridge & Wang this volume). In a mixed methods design, a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses can be carried out (see Ivankova & Greer this volume). Here are some examples:

- Kääntä et al. (2013) use extracts (employing conversation analysis conventions) to illustrate and interpret their data.
- Moskovsky et al. (2013) mainly perform statistical analysis including descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis, reliability analysis, and between-subject, mixed-model and repeated-measure analyses of variance (ANOVAs).
- Song (2012) discusses the inductive process of his data analysis which moves from the micro to the macro level (p. 512). She uses several excerpts to illustrate the data and then interprets the data that is relevant to the research issue under investigation.

Interpretations and conclusions

On the basis of the data analysis that has been conducted, researchers can begin to outline their research findings. The data and data analysis need to support any claims researchers wish to make. It is important to avoid claiming something that the data sets do not justify. A discussion of research findings (see the Discussion or Results and Discussion section of the report) needs to make reference to the theories and previous research that were considered in the review of the literature. For example:

- Kääntä et al. (2013) present their findings using several extracts from video clips (with English translations) and interpret meanings and make inferences beyond the recorded interactions. In the Conclusion section, they summarize the key findings (p. 354), stating how their study illustrated the impact of English on young Finns' language use. They also connected the study to the previous literature.
- Moskovsky et al. (2013) present their research findings using several tables which contain statistical test outputs and interpret them in terms of statistical significance and effect sizes. They summarize the main findings and discuss the contributions of their study to the field. They conclude by noting the limitations of their research and the implications that had on their findings and for the direction of future research.
- Song (2012) uses several interview excerpts to illustrate each of the two family's cases, followed by an interpretation and an identification of other emerging issues. Commentary on previous

literature is integrated into the discussion. There is also an implications section which draws on cases of children who have had transnational experiences and their language practices and which stresses the importance of this issue in language learning and teaching.

Research communication

It is important to share research findings with other people so as to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field. The communication of research can be done through presentations at conferences and seminars or in writing in the form of a dissertation, thesis, research report or journal article. It is important to understand the conventions of each channel of research communication and its audience. For example, the structure of a dissertation or thesis (e.g. Paltridge & Starfield 2007) can be different from that of a journal article (e.g. Chapelle & Duff 2003).

Essential features of a good research project

There are several important aspects that need to be considered when developing a research project. Therefore, it is important for any one researcher or research team to understand the desirable aspects of a research project.

Apart from a good understanding of the criteria by which to judge the quality of a study (e.g. adopted theoretical framework, validity/ trustworthiness, ethics and research methods), the following three aspects need to be considered when developing a research project: *originality*, *worthiness* and *feasibility*. First, originality in the context of a research study means that it does not aim to find out something people in the field already know. Originality can be considered in terms of a new topic or aspect of research that has never been done before or has not been done as comprehensively as what is proposed. Originality can also be considered in terms of a new research context (e.g. new setting and participants) or new or revised research instruments or techniques (or a mixture of them). Finally, the discovery of knowledge or the development of fresh insights can also be considered original.

Second, the project needs to be *worth doing*. It is important to consider the value and relevance of the project because there are many things that might be done but are not worth doing. The worthiness of a research project can be determined by its likely yields and outcomes and the potential of the research to address the gap of knowledge in the existing research field. It will be considered worthwhile if it solves a particular outstanding research problem or resolves a prevalent misunderstanding, or finds new ways of doing some part of the research. Clearly, it must be of relevance and interest to people in the research field. The topic of the research should be of interest to a wide audience, such as the international readership of a journal. Connected to this is the question of whether the completed project is likely to lead to some kind of publication, such as a journal article or a book, so that the research is able to contribute to the development of the discipline in which it is located.

Third, a good research project needs to be *feasible* and *manageable* within the time frame available for it, with the resources that are available for it, and by the researcher(s) who will be carrying out the study. A project that may take three to four years, as with a doctoral project in the United Kingdom or Australia, will be much too ambitious if there is only a year available to carry out and complete it. We need to consider the financial resources required for the project, such as air fares and accommodation costs that, without which, the project may not be able to proceed. It is also important to consider whether the people who wish to carry out the project have the theoretical background and methodological skills that the proposed study requires. So, for example, if the study is a conversation-analysis project, the people carrying out the study need to know how to analyse conversational data from this perspective. Or, if the study requires some kind of statistical treatment, the researcher needs to be able to conduct statistical analysis. It is important to be realistic in this regard, and not, for example, live in the hope that someone will provide help when the time comes to the data analysis phase of the project.

It is important to stress that while appearing original and worthwhile, a project that aims to examine several complex aspects in one study using a variety of research instruments and techniques (e.g. tests, questionnaires, individual interviews, focus group interviews, observations, diaries and documents and data bases) may be unfeasible or unmanageable. Unless there is a team of several experienced researchers, each research aspect under study is likely to be investigated only superficially and the amount of data to analyse may be daunting, which will most likely result in a poor analysis being done. A good research project does not need to address everything one needs to know in a single study. Rather, it should thoroughly investigate a small number of aspects of a phenomenon. Even as part of a research degree, a thesis or dissertation is only a piece of research that prepares students to learn about research methods and methodologies and to do a manageable and meaningful research project. The acknowledgment of the limitations of the study, thus, is important because not only do they allow researchers to understand the validity and trustworthiness of the study, but they also allow the development of future research directions on the topic.

Developing a research proposal

There are a number of important steps to go through in developing a research proposal. We often tell students to start by drawing up a shortlist of topics and, from these, to choose one of them for investigation. It is often a good idea at this point to talk to someone who has had experience in carrying out research (e.g. a colleague, a professor or potential research supervisor) to get their advice on which of the topics, in their view, is the best one to proceed with. A general question needs to be formulated which can then be further focused. This stage of the process often causes new researchers the most trouble, so it is worth spending as much time as necessary to get the question right. In short, the question needs to be both *worth asking* and *capable of being answered*. There are many questions that are worth asking but which cannot, in any practical sense, be answered and there are questions that are capable of being answered but which are not necessarily worth doing. The study, thus, needs to strike a balance between the value of the research question and its answerability using the proposed methodology and within the researcher's ability to carry it out.

Once the research question has been decided on, researchers need to think about what data needs to be collected to answer the research question, where and how it might be collected, and how the data might be analysed. From this point, an initial research plan can be drawn up. At the same time, researchers need to read widely on the topic to determine whether they are on the right track. That is, they need to get an idea of what previous research has been done on the topic and to see how this research was carried out. After this has been successfully done, a detailed research proposal can be written. This proposal should include definitions of the key constructs mentioned in the proposal (such as 'negotiation of meaning' or 'willingness to communicate') that would enable someone reading the proposal (and in turn your completed research) to understand what exactly is meant when these terms are used. Also the ethical implications of the research need to be considered in terms of what permissions will be needed to carry out your research, and what guarantees of anonymity will be given to the people involved in the research project.

The structure of a research proposal

Table 15.1 shows the typical structure of a research proposal and the purpose of each of the sections of the proposal. Not every academic department will follow the same set of headings, of course, or ask researchers to cover each of these areas, so it is important to find out exactly what is needed in the particular context.

Table 15.1 The typical structure of a research proposal (adapted from Paltridge 1997)

Section	Purpose
Title	To summarize what the research will be about
Summary of the Proposed Study	To provide an overview of the whole research proposal (e.g. what the research aims to do, research methods adopted and key significant contributions of the proposed study). This section is similar to an abstract of a research article but does not have findings. Although it appears at the beginning, this section is often the last to be written.
Definitions of Terms	To provide the meaning of the key terms that readers will encounter in the relevant background literature or that are used in the research question/s
Background and Literature Review	To demonstrate the relationship between the proposed study and what has already been done in the particular area; that is, to indicate the research framework and the 'gap' or 'void' that the proposed study will address
Implications of the literature review	To consolidate a synthesis of the literature that eventually informs the focus of the proposed study in terms of a theoretical or methodological gap or research problem, leading to a specific study aim or research question (below)
Research Questions and/or Hypotheses	To provide an explicit statement of what the study will investigate, i.e. the questions the study will answer or the hypotheses it will test
Research Methodology	To provide an overview of the research approach that will be employed in the study, data that will be collected, how it will be analysed, etc. This section is similar to a 'Research Method' section in a research article, but the future tense is normally used instead of the past simple tense when it is about the proposed study.
Ethical Considerations	To provide a statement as to how participants will be advised of the overall nature of the study, and how informed consent will be obtained from them
Anticipated Problems and Limitations	To show awareness of the limitations of the study, what problems may be met in carrying it out and how they will be dealt with
Significance of the Proposed Study	To say why the study is worth carrying out. This can be discussed in terms of theoretical, methodological, pedagogical and/or policy-informed implications.
Resources and Budget Required	To say what resources the research will require and what costs may be anticipated in carrying out the study
Proposed Timetable	To give a working plan for carrying out, and completing, the study

(*continued*)

Section	Purpose
References	To provide detailed references and bibliographic support for the proposal
Appendices	To provide examples of materials, research instruments or data elicitation techniques that might be used, or adapted, in the study

Details to include in a research proposal

The expected length of the proposal will also vary from academic department to department, from degree to degree and across universities. Generally, though, it will be expected to provide a clearly focused research question or hypothesis that is both worth asking and capable of being answered. Precise definitions of the key terms in the research question/s or hypothesis should be included that will allow them to be clearly identified throughout the study. An awareness of key research which has already been carried out in the particular area should also be demonstrated. This includes a summary of what conclusions were reached in this previous research, by whom and when and whether these conclusions are in agreement or conflict with each other. An awareness of the main issues or controversies which surround the problem under investigation and the significant gaps in previous research in the particular area should also be shown. A description of how this previous research is relevant to the proposed study will also be expected.

It is also important that an appropriate research approach for the particular question or problem has been selected, and that a well-defined list of procedures that will be followed in the carrying out of the research has been included. The method of data collection and its analysis should be described. The proposal should also include, if appropriate, a description of any particular theoretical framework to be drawn on for the study and the reason/s for its use in the study. The proposal should indicate how the sample population (or data) will be selected for the study and the reason for this selection. It is also useful to plan for a pilot study in which the research instruments you will use are trialled and evaluated and an analysis of the trial data carried out.

The proposal should describe why the study is significant; that is, why the research question or hypothesis is worth investigating. Ethical issues, if there are any, need to be discussed. This will include a discussion of the question of whether informed consent needs to be obtained, and if so, how this will be done. It is also helpful to include a proposed timetable for the research as this will give an indication as to how realistic the proposal actually is. A budget statement is also important as this will give an indication of how realistic the proposal is in terms of financial requirements and whether the research might need to be adapted in the light of these.

Owing to the space limitations, we cannot include examples of a research proposal in this chapter. However, there are several examples of research proposals that can be found in the following online resource:

- http://www.bcps.org/offices/lis/researchcourse/develop_writing.html#planning, viewed 21 September 2014.

This website describes the steps involved in developing a research proposal (e.g. planning, writing drafts and evaluating them). It provides several examples of research proposals including examples from the fields of education and linguistics. It also offers practical advice in writing a thesis or a dissertation.

Criteria for judging a research study

The issues involved in judging and evaluating the quality of an empirical study are highly complex. Judging and evaluating a study involves an interaction between examiners' or reviewers' characteristics (e.g. areas of research, expertise, standing in the field), a researcher(s)'s written report and the context in which both the examiners/reviewers and the study interact. In most cases, an evaluation of an empirical study can be subjective, despite the use of criteria having been provided to judge it. For example, two examiners reading the same thesis or dissertation independently and using the same criteria may or may not agree with each other in terms of the thesis or dissertation quality. Bourke and Holbrook (2013) examined what thesis examiners look for in a thesis or dissertation.

Criteria for judging a thesis or dissertation

It is not straightforward to present a set of universal criteria for judging a thesis or a dissertation given that each educational institution will have its own developed standards. It nevertheless is useful and relevant, especially for research students to have a sense of how a thesis or a dissertation may be judged, so that they can be prepared to work towards the desired outcome. One can argue that writing a thesis or a dissertation without knowing how it will be assessed is an extremely difficult task to accomplish. Different educational institutes have their own criteria to grade a thesis or a dissertation. In this section, we introduce some key criteria that students should be aware of when they work on a thesis or dissertation (see e.g. Bourke & Holbrook 2013; Evans, Gruba & Zobel, 2011; Johnston 1997; Mullins & Kiley 2002).

Research problem and literature review

The thesis or dissertation effectively identifies, analyses and syntheses an issue, problem or research topic through reference to an up-to-date selection of research material. It establishes its significance in the field by using a suitable theoretical or conceptual framework and by considering relevant and significant previous research. The review of associated theories and previous research is accurate and critical. Key terminology is used precisely and consistently. The gap or need for the study is clearly identified from the existing research. The research questions and/or hypotheses to be investigated are important and relevant to the research issue or problem and connected closely to the review of literature.

Research methodology

The thesis or dissertation appropriately and adequately describes the methodology adopted, including the procedures used for the data gathering, ethical considerations and data analysis. It elaborates the rationale for the choice of the methodology for the research and, where appropriate, provides a connection between this methodology and the research methodology(ies) adopted in previous research on the topic. Overall, it demonstrates the researcher(s)'s strong command of the research methodology, including an understanding, recognition or awareness of both the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology that influence the validity or trustworthiness of the thesis.

Research procedures

The thesis or dissertation describes sufficiently the overall research procedures, including detailed descriptions and explanations of the research setting, the participants (if any), the ethical considerations, the research instruments, the data elicitation techniques, the specific stages of the data analysis and what care has been taken to ensure the data analysis is systematic and credible.

Findings and interpretation

The thesis or dissertation clearly and sufficiently presents and explains basic information on the findings in relation to the research aims, questions or hypothesis that are presented in the thesis. The presentation of the findings meets the expected conventions of the particular research design (e.g. experimental, survey, case study, narrative inquiry research). It takes an evidence-based approach to making inferences as well as offers a critical interpretation and discussion of the findings. The thesis does not attempt to overgeneralize its findings. It links the present findings to the relevant literature presented earlier (e.g. examining similarities or differences in research findings, new understanding or evidence).

Conclusion and implications

The originality and substantial level of the contribution of the thesis or dissertation may be considered in the conclusion section. In the conclusion chapter, the thesis clearly summarizes the key research findings, notes potential research limitations that affect the conclusions and recommends implications of the study for existing and future research. Implications can be discussed in regard to theoretical, methodological and/or pedagogical implications.

Writing quality

The thesis or dissertation is well-written, well-organized and coherent. It is free from grammatical or typological errors. It meets technical standards relevant to the field of research, including appropriate presentations of tables and figures, and accurate use of the reference style (e.g. APA Referencing Style).

Criteria for judging a journal manuscript

Academic journals also provide reviewers with criteria for assessing the quality of a submission. For the journal *TESOL Quarterly* (Mahboob & Paltridge 2014), these are:

- Does the manuscript contain new and significant information to justify publication?
- Is the problem significant and concisely stated?
- Are methodological and/or theoretical matters comprehensively described?
- Are the interpretations and conclusions justified by the results?
- Is adequate reference made to other work in the field?
- Does the manuscript appeal to the general interests of the *TESOL Quarterly* readership?
- Does the manuscript strengthen the relationship between theory and practice?

It is important, then, to consider the criteria by which a project will be judged when planning for as well as when carrying out the research, so that it meets particular quality expectations when it is completed.

Resources for further reading

Bell, J 2010, *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers in Education and Social Science*, 5th edn, Open University Press, Buckingham.

This is a practical book providing advice on how to develop a research project. Chapter 2 discusses planning a research project, selecting a topic, focusing the study and presenting a project outline.

Bourke, S & Holbrook AP 2013, 'Examining PhD and research masters theses', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 407–416.

This article analyses examiners' evaluation criteria such as literature review, methodology, contribution and presentation when they evaluate PhD and masters theses or dissertations.

Casanave, C 2014, *Before the Dissertation: A Textual Mentor for Doctoral Students at Early Stages of a Research Project*, Michigan University Press, Ann Arbor, MI.

This book presents critical, yet significant issues that students should consider before they start writing a dissertation or thesis (e.g. things to consider before deciding to pursue a doctoral degree, several types of writing that shapes a research project).

Chapelle, CA & Duff, PA 2003, 'Some guidelines for conducting quantitative and qualitative research in TESOL', *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 157–178.

This article provides guidelines for good research writing practice for both qualitative and quantitative research, particularly for a journal article.

Creswell, JW 2014, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th edn, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

This book presents approaches to designing qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods research. In this edition, Creswell includes the mixed methods approach. This book is useful for both developing a research proposal and writing up a research report.

Elphinstone, L & Schweitzer, R 1998, *How to Get a Research Degree: A Survival Guide*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards.

The first chapter of this book ('Getting Started') is especially relevant to writing a research proposal. Section headings in this chapter include 'What is a thesis?', 'Distinction between a Master's and a Doctoral degree', 'Choosing a thesis topic', 'Defining your thesis topic', 'Methodology and research design', 'The research proposal', 'Criteria for assessing a research proposal' and 'Checklist of questions to be asked about a research proposal'.

Evans, D, Gruba, P & Zobel, J 2011, *How to Write a Better Thesis*, 3rd edn, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

This book introduces the nature of theses. It covers various issues involved in thesis writing (e.g. thesis structure, academic writing and content).

Griffee, DT 2012, *An Introduction to Second Language Research Methods: Design and Data*, TESL-EJ Publications, Berkeley, CA.

There are three parts to this e-book which is free to download from the TESL-EJ website: getting started, design and data. Chapter 2 presents in detail a typical structure of a research paper. It provides clear explanations of each section of a research report (e.g. title, introduction, literature review and research methods).

McIntosh, K & Ginther A (2014), 'Writing research reports', in AJ Kunnan (ed.), *The Companion to Language Assessment*, John Wiley & Sons, London.

While targeting at language assessment research, this chapter is useful to know more about what is involved in writing a research report. It provides tips and strategies for successful research reports.

Paltridge, B & Starfield, S 2007, *Thesis and Dissertation Writing in a Second Language: A Handbook for Supervisors*, Routledge, London.

This book provides a comprehensive treatment of and resources for thesis and dissertation writing. This book is useful for both research supervisors and students.

Punch, K 2007, *Developing Effective Research Proposals*, 2nd edn, Sage, London.

This book is a very good guide for writing research proposals. Chapter 8 contains sample quantitative and qualitative research proposals.

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Johnston, S 1997, 'Examining the examiners: An analysis of examiners' reports on doctoral thesis', *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 333–347.

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Mullins, G & Kiley, M 2002, '"It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize": How experienced examiners assess research theses', *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 369–386.

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