

Good research questions

Hossein Nassaji

University of Victoria, Canada

Language Teaching Research

2019, Vol. 23(3) 283–286

© The Author(s) 2019

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1362168819845322

journals.sagepub.com/home/ltr



An important decision that a researcher should always make is whether the study is worth doing. Second language research is a vast area with many questions. However, not all questions are good questions. Therefore, it is essential to know what good research questions are and what they involve. A research question is not any question we ask. Instead, it is a clear, specific, and goal-oriented query related to a problem that needs to be addressed. It is the soundness and appropriateness of the research question that determine the quality of the research. One characteristic of good research questions is that they are empirically testable. That is, they are stated in ways that can be observed and measured. Such features increase the likelihood of accurately gathering and evaluating relevant data regarding the issue under investigation. Of course, although a research question may be testable, there are other reasons why a research question cannot be answered, including practical restrictions. Thus, a good research question is also one that is feasible given the time constraints, the facilities required, and the expertise of the researcher. A good research question is also interesting, not only to the researcher but also to others in the field. The latter necessitates that the researcher knows what is currently going on in the field and where the field is moving. There are other features of good research questions. Good questions are also theoretically, pedagogically, or empirically motivated and hence worthy of research. A research question is theoretically worthy of investigation to the same extent that it contributes to the development, refinement, or testing a theory, hypothesis, or key constructs in the field. Its investigation would fill a gap in the research literature and add to the current understanding of the phenomenon. Questions are pedagogically motivated if they are driven by a desire to address issues of practical importance to language teaching. Thus, their investigation helps improve teaching practice. Given all these, it is crucial to pay special attention to developing effective research questions before embarking on any studies.

The research questions examined in the five studies reported in this issue of *Language Teaching Research* meet all or most of the criteria mentioned above. The first study by Jung et al. investigated an important issue related to learners' perception of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) in second language (L2) classrooms. The study

Corresponding author:

Hossein Nassaji, University of Victoria, Canada.

Email: nassaji@uvic.ca

addressed the following two questions: (1) how learners perceive the facilitative effects of SCMC for both L2 learning and the development of intercultural communication competence (ICC), and (2) how such perceptions are affected by the various features of interaction during online discussions. The data were collected from 55 learners from three countries (Korea, Japan, and Taiwan) who had participated in joint online discussions as part of a course on intercultural communication. The results showed positive attitudes from the learners towards such technology-mediated communication. As for factors, while learners' attention to cultural and language issues turned out to be the most significant predictors of students' perception towards L2 learning, attention to culture was the only significant predictor of ICC development.

Having its theoretical underpinning in task-based language teaching, the research by Van de Guchte et al. investigated two theoretically and pedagogically important questions: (1) whether focusing on either language or content during pre-task planning involving peer modeling observation had any differential effects on learners' subsequent task performance, and also (2) whether there was any 'trade-off between attempted (accurate) use of the target structure and complexity'. The questions were motivated by previous research findings that guided planning can have positive effects on learners' task performance and that conditions with a focus on form versus a focus on meaning may lead to differential effects on the accuracy and complexity of task performance. It was hypothesized that a language focus would lead to increased accuracy of the target structure while a content focus might lead to greater complexity. The participants were 48 learners of German divided into two groups each exposed to a different planning condition: video observation with a focus on form and video observation with a focus on content. Results confirmed the differential effects of the two planning conditions, with the language-focused condition leading to more accurate use of the target structure, and the content-focused condition leading to more complex sentences (i.e. a greater number of subordinate and coordinate clauses). A trade-off was also found between accuracy and complexity. For example, those students in the focus on language condition who attempted more correct use of the target structure produced fewer subordinate clauses in their performance whereas those in the content condition produced a larger amount of subordination. This finding was taken to support the Trade-off Theory (Skehan, 1996, 1998) which holds that learners have limited attentional resources, which should be shared between complexity and accuracy during task performance. Altogether, the findings provide evidence that different types of pre-task planning may contribute differently in terms of complexity and accuracy to students' subsequent task performance.

Miranda et al.'s study examines whether and how teacher education programs prepare teachers to teach English to language learners with disabilities effectively. Adopting a utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008), the research investigated the efficacy of the teacher preparation programs in a special education department in a university in the USA. Three questions were addressed: (1) what knowledge and skills are required to teach English learners with disabilities, (2) whether the knowledge and skills deemed as required are included in the programs, and (3) what level of competence the teacher candidates report to have and what additional preparations are needed. The first question was addressed through a literature review, which led to the development of a framework for data collection and evaluation. The data were then collected using a document review,

a survey of teacher candidates' knowledge and perspectives, a faculty questionnaire, and a faculty focus group. The results indicated significant deficiencies in both content and instruction needed to prepare the teacher candidates to teach the students. The gaps were mainly apparent concerning the knowledge of second language acquisition and understanding of assessment procedures and practices. The findings also led to a number of ideas expressed by the faculty on how to address such deficiencies, including the need for faculty preparation, administrative support, and assisting teacher candidates in developing the necessary knowledge and skills needed to serve their students. Overall an important issue to emerge from this study is the challenges that teacher preparation programs face in meeting the needs of their students. This issue is essential and has significant implications for how best to design and deliver programs that can adequately serve students with special needs.

Li and Somlak's study examined the effect of articulatory gestures on improving L2 pronunciation. It was an experimental classroom-based study and addressed the question as to what extent audio-visual aids with articulatory gestures help students improve their accuracy of four English speech sounds considered to be difficult for them (i.e. /θ/–/s/ and /ð/–/z/). Two classes of L2 English learners with Mandarin as their first language (L1) participated in the study, each being exposed to one of the two versions of a recording that involved the target sounds: an audio version and an audio-visual version with articulatory gestures. Based on the role shown in previous research for articulatory gestures in learning L2 speech sounds, it was hypothesized that L2 speech training with the aid of articulatory gestures could facilitate L2 learners' production of the target sounds. The results of a pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest showed improvement for the audio-visual aid but not for the audio only on the first posttest. The finding was taken to confirm the assumption that exposure to audio-visual aids involving articulatory gestures assists the development of L2 pronunciation.

Finally, Gkonou and Miller's research addressed the issue of student anxiety. The study was driven by an interest in understanding what language teachers do in order to address their learners' language anxiety in the classroom. The study was part of a larger research project on language anxiety and the strategies L2 learners use to regulate their emotion. The data reported in this article come from in-depth interviews with eight teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) who work with these students. Three research questions were posed: (1) how language teachers identified their students as anxious learners, (2) how they viewed themselves as appropriately responding to those students, and (3) what emotional mitigating strategies they believed they practiced in their classrooms. The study used positioning theory as a theoretical framework to explore and interpret the data. Position was taken to refer to the ways in which someone positions himself or herself towards something or is positioned by others. How positions are understood, represented, or interpreted in interaction were considered to shape what people do or feel in response to selves or others. The results showed that most teachers viewed themselves as aware, caring, and responsive in addressing their students' anxiety and emotional needs. Their responses also revealed that teachers made constant efforts to intervene and used a number of strategies to alleviate their students' negative emotions. These efforts along with the teachers' working conditions including heavy workload was seen as leading to what the researchers called 'emotional labor' as teachers also tried to

subdue their own negative emotions while caring for the emotion of their students. Given these, they argue, language teacher education needs to acknowledge the emotional dimension of teaching practices and also promote awareness and the importance of psychological well-being in the classroom. Altogether this study provided significant insight into our understanding of the affective and emotional aspects of classroom teaching and the efforts that could lead to alleviate their adverse effects.

Altogether, the articles included in this issue of *Language Teaching Research* make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the various dimensions and processes involved in language teaching and learning. They are well designed, and each examines questions that are both theoretically and pedagogically significant. In second language acquisition (SLA) research, many of the questions studied may be theoretically driven, that is, they may be posed to examine claims about how an L2 is acquired. While theoretically motivated questions might have pedagogical relevance, it may be argued that not all pedagogical questions may have theoretical significance. While this might be true to some degree, in many cases well defined pedagogical questions can also have significant theoretical relevance. That is, they may lead to findings that can inform theories that can explain effective instructional practices. All the studies reported in this issue, including those which seem to address highly pedagogical questions, such as Jung et al.'s study of learners' perception of computer-mediated communication, Miranda et al.'s research on teacher education, or Gkonou and Miller's study of teachers' engagement with anxious learners, can be taken to have significant theoretical import. That is, they can, individually and collectively, contribute to a body of knowledge or framework that can be used to understand the processes and principles involved in effective language teaching.

References

- Patton, M.Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation*. 4th edition. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 17, 38–62.
- Skehan, P. (1998). *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.