

***Case Study Research in Applied Linguistics***

Patricia A. Duff. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum. 2008. Pp. ix + 233.

*Case Study Research in Applied Linguistics* offers a detailed foray into all aspects of the role of the case study: the text defines terms related to this type of research, provides historical background on the method, and explains the process of performing and reporting case studies. Such a comprehensive introduction addresses a gap in the literature. Many research methods texts provide overviews of different kinds of quantitative and qualitative research often utilized in the field of applied linguistics, including correlational research, introspective research, and in-class observations (e.g., Brown & Rogers, 2002; Dörnyei, 2007). Few, however, focus exclusively on case study research, lacking examination of the often painstaking process case studies entail. While the book's scope is broad, Duff's purposes are clear and concise from the outset: 1) to delineate the methodological foundations of case study research, 2) to present and examine seminal case studies in the area of second language (L2) development and teaching, and 3) to demystify the process of case study research from conception to publication. As these goals suggest, the book intends to offer the necessary information and sound advice to budding researchers in applied linguistics on both the graduate and undergraduate level.

While the book is not explicitly organized into two separate parts, there is a clear distinction between the first and second parts of the text, with the first section providing a background of case study research, and the second section providing a more practical introduction to case study research. Chapters 1 through 3 address theoretical questions related to case study research, including its origins in the social sciences, the kinds of case study research published by applied linguists, and the advantages and disadvantages of using this type of qualitative research in the field. The author also compares the features and merits of case study research to other approaches with qualitative or quantitative perspectives. Chapters 4 through 6 focus on conducting case study research, providing practical "how to" information on designing, analyzing, and reporting on case study research.

Chapter 1 begins with the author outlining the reasons for undertaking the writing of the book. After a brief paragraph of explanation, the chapter delves into the author's history as a case study researcher, recounting her first study of an L2 English speaker's developing language skills. Duff notes that this research had a narrow focus, examining discrete stages of the subject's linguistic development with little attention to sociocultural or political factors affecting L2 acquisition. In addition to revisiting the process involved in collecting, interpreting, and reporting data for her first case study, the author considers the ways in which alternative approaches might have changed the content and conclusions drawn from the research. From such a personal beginning, the reader senses that this book acts as a self-reflection on the author's evolution as a researcher as well as a manual for understanding and conducting this type of research.

The lengthy second chapter gives background information on the case study as a research method – its features and purposes, its theoretical underpinnings, its historical origins, and the controversies surrounding its practice. In explaining the history of the case study in the social sciences, the author relies on a certain amount of prior knowledge of the continuum between positivism and relativism. Despite her attempt to define these terms, the author ends up glossing over them as she seeks to provide a comprehensive introduction of the case studies. When

considering the advantages and drawbacks of case study research at the end of chapter 2, the author remains a stalwart defendant, perhaps even a personal advocate, of this approach. She carefully and convincingly dismantles arguments that characterize the case study as subjective, idiosyncratic, and theoretically unmotivated, while pointing out the ability of the case study to triangulate data, generate new hypotheses, and examine atypical cases. While she anticipates and often dismisses arguments against the case study throughout the text, her eclectic approach to outlining what good research entails exhibits how thoroughly she understands the strengths and weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms.

Chapter 3 illustrates many of the points presented in chapter 2 through concrete examples of case studies. In this chapter, the author gives the reader a guided tour of seminal or otherwise important case studies in applied linguistics. She begins the chapter by presenting charts outlining the evolution of case study research. She groups research from the 1970s and 1980s together to highlight the focus on the discrete stages of L2 development in those decades. This chart is juxtaposed with another showing the research focus of more recent case studies, including influences on L2 development such as context, identity construction, gender, culture, and political issues. These charts provide a side-by-side analysis, tracing the positivist roots of case study research and focus on formal aspects of language to the more multi-dimensional, post-structural approaches used more often today. The chapter begins with a description of some of the research included in Hatch's (1983) edited volume, which contains many of the earliest case studies exploring L2 development. The author also mentions studies examining the order of first language development in children which were highly influential in subsequent L2 research, such as Brown (1973). As this section progresses to more recent case study research, the paradigm shift from concentrating on formal language structures to exploring the roles of culture, identity, and discourse communities in L2 development becomes apparent. Case studies on L2 pragmatic development (Li, 2000), the role of gender in L2 learning (Norton, 2000), and language socialization (Blum-Kulka, 1997) are presented as illustrative examples of more recent case study research.

The second half of the text, chapters 4 through 6, tackles the daunting task of demystifying every aspect of conducting case study research. Under the overarching heading of "How to Conduct Case Studies," each of the three chapters explores specific components of the successful case study. Although the author herself notes that case study research does not progress linearly, these chapters attempt to provide a sort of roadmap for the reader, beginning with the establishment of research objectives in chapter 4, and concluding in chapter 6 with tips on effectively writing a report. This section of the book is a testament to the author's broad knowledge of research methods in the field, as it seems particularly oriented to helping nascent researchers discover what designs and analyses will best suit specific research questions when conducting case studies.

The fourth chapter, the longest in this section, commences by providing a useful graphic representation of the case study research process from conception to written report. The author highlights the iterative nature of case study research through the use of arrows denoting reciprocal movement throughout the stages. This visual overview informs the second half of the book, with chapter 4 providing a narrative explanation of the conceptual and design stages of research. Attention is paid to abstract issues such as defining and operationalizing constructs, formulating

strong research questions (which will define the nature of the case study as, for instance, exploratory, descriptive, or confirmatory), and deciding the most effective way to sample data. Equal weight is given to practical issues such as leaving an audit trail (so that others may evaluate posed arguments), accessing research sites, and employing practices to protect participant anonymity. The author points to the significance of methodological rigor, stressing that detailed research journals be kept. She also argues for the importance of the triangulation of data through, for example, analyzing material from different theoretical viewpoints, collecting several versions of a piece of text, or interpreting data using several methods.

The author also pinpoints the importance of being sensitive to the effect of the researcher's own presence at the data collection site, and adhering to high ethical standards. Researchers are advised to be open to reassessing and revising research questions as data are transcribed and evaluated. The thoroughness with which the author treats every aspect of case study research is extraordinarily useful for student researchers, particularly those who wish to conduct case study research themselves. For those who prefer to scan rather than read the detailed text, the graphic organizer opening this chapter presents a fairly concise illustration of the elements and procedures indicative of solid case study research. The arrows linking aspects of the research design, data analysis, and written report highlight the notion that case study is not, and indeed should not be, conducted in a strictly linear fashion.

Chapter 5 moves from research design and data collection to data interpretation and issues of generalizability. The author explores the different ways in which case study data are analyzed, pointing out that the types of transcription notation and data analyses utilized will depend on the research design, the researcher's philosophical stance, and the study's intended audience. The author then proceeds to outline in detail the different types of transcriptions used by L2 researchers. There is also a section dedicated to coding processes, including a brief description of computer software currently available to aid researchers in sorting and coding data. The text acknowledges the advantages and disadvantages of revisiting data with participants after they have been collected and analyzed (e.g., performing member checks). Chapter 5 also highlights the importance of providing evidence for reliability and varying types of validity depending on the tradition in which the researcher is operating. To do so, the author interweaves examples of her own experiences with transcribing, coding, and interpreting data with the more abstract discussion on these processes. This allows the reader to see exactly how a researcher may choose to handle case study data.

The final chapter gives useful advice on writing the case study report, a practical concern often missing from books exploring research methods. The author first mentions the importance of considering the intended audience, which will affect the kind of voice the case study writer might wish to adopt. The author also gives a brief overview of the types of journals that might interest case study researchers. She also provides several outlines detailing ways in which one could organize the case study report. The chapter concludes by turning to stylistic matters of voice and visual representation of data, both necessary for publishing a strong text. The final paragraphs send an inspirational call to active researchers, encouraging them to embrace and establish new approaches to conducting case study research.

This text is essential reading for students of applied linguistics interested in embarking on case study research. Likewise, any budding applied linguist conducting research, whether the research design is more quantitative or qualitative in nature, can benefit from reading this book that explicates well the many issues surrounding an important research method in the field. The attention Duff pays to mixed-method design in chapter 4 and her repeated emphasis on the importance of data triangulation demonstrates that the author recognizes the contributions quantitative research methods can make in building a strong case study. What is more, this monograph does not push a certain school of research with assertions that one-size-fits-all. As a result, the reader gets a sense of the rich possibilities open to case study researchers – from single to multiple cases, different types of coding and transcribing, and the many ways in which language and context can be analyzed. Overall, the author's characterization of this type of research contains descriptions and explanations as comprehensive as those in a solid case study.

The complex descriptions, while scholarly, are equally accessible to those with a limited background in this type of research. This is an important feature of the text, considering its target to reach undergraduate and graduate students who have only recently come to the field. Certainly, a reader unfamiliar with terms designating philosophical stances to empirical research (such as positivist and poststructuralist) may have difficulty following the sections that utilize these sorts of terms. Nevertheless, the real-life examples of case study research given throughout the text help to illustrate how different schools of thought have influenced the case study as it has developed over time. Regardless of their focus, all of the chapters contain clear examples like these taken from actual data in order to support claims made about case study research. These examples may help a reader less familiar with the theoretical underpinnings of applied linguistics research locate and understand the nexus of theory and case study research. However, at times, the reader unfamiliar with at least some of the case studies mentioned may feel overwhelmed by the breadth of studies cited in the book.

While the text's title suggests that the author will examine case studies from applied linguistics in general, the focus is centered on studies of L2 development. Other subfields of applied linguistics utilizing case study research, such as discourse analysis, are notably absent from her examples. When designing a case study, the discourse analyst may approach the process quite differently from the steps outlined in the second half of the book. For example, a discourse analyst trained in conversation analysis methodology might collect data with absolutely no research question in mind. A student who has read this book may conclude that such a radical bottom-up approach is an aberration from sound research practice. Though the author acknowledges the importance of iterative research, she does not signal that some applied linguists follow a practice that strays from the graphic organizer presented in chapter 4, and that they perform such research on firm theoretical ground. Instead, these types of examples are notably absent from the book. With the growing influence of this type of inquiry in applied linguistics, often conducted as case study research, it may have been prudent to devote more time to addressing the ways in which some research deviates from the case study model provided in the text.

Given that the author achieves the three goals she outlines in chapter 1, the text provides a solid foundation for those seeking a comprehensive – yet fairly easily understood – introduction to a method that has contributed so much to applied linguistics. By providing a clear blueprint for those willing to embrace the challenge of conducting case study research, this monograph may also

encourage new researchers to try their hand at the seemingly intimidating task of undertaking case study research. As the author points out, the traditional privileging of the quantitative paradigm had effectively relegated this useful method to the margins, and this book is thus long overdue. Now that researchers work in an age where mixed methods research is melding together paradigms that were once considered to be in absolute opposition, the time for *Case Study Research in Applied Linguistics* has come.

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