Methods and methodologies in second language writing research

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A B S T R A C T

A considerable variety of methods have been used to understand the complex, multifaceted nature of L2 writing. Often driven by pedagogical imperatives and informed by particular views of writing, texts and writers, these methods themselves raise questions regarding what we believe writing is and about our interpretive practices. With increasing numbers of teachers and scholars turning to investigate writing in their classrooms or courses of further study, it may be helpful to be aware of what options are available for studying writing and how these relate to key methodological designs. More than this, however, it is important to be aware of what our choices imply about our understanding of what writing is and how it can be known. In this paper I set out the main approaches to studying writing for novice researchers, providing examples of key studies, and go on to situate these methods within the main theories about writing arguing that methods are not neutral options but allow us to see certain things but not others. They do not just tell us different things about writing but reveal what we believe writing to be.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, second language writing has evolved into a well-established field of inquiry characterized by defined areas of interest, distinct methods of inquiry, and networks of conferences, journals and professional organizations for the dissemination of knowledge among practitioners. Teachers have come to recognize the value of research. Once seen as a distinct scholarly activity divorced from the hard realities of the classroom, the emergence of more context-sensitive pedagogies encourages us to better understand the texts we present in our classes, the ways our students write, and how target communities use the texts that are important to them. Teachers of writing are, then, increasingly becoming researchers of writing, developing an understanding of texts and establishing a basis for reflection which in turn feeds back into, and improves, teaching.

The kind of systematic research-reflection cycle mentioned above is termed *action research* (e.g. Burns, 2013) and it has clearly done a lot to democratize research by putting it into the hands of teachers, and to professionalize teachers by giving them new skills and knowledge to bring to their classrooms. But research just as often originates in a desire to satisfy curiosity than solve problems. When talking of case studies, for example, Stake (1995), distinguishes between intrinsic and instrumental types, the former undertaken because of its interesting particularity and ordinariness, rather than of its benefits to others or contributions to a literature. It is useful, therefore, for novice researchers to see what their options are when

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selecting inquiry methods and it is equally important for them to understand what these choices imply about writing, students and learning. In this paper I want to offer some guidelines for novice researchers in second language writing research and to argue that research methods and designs are not neutral options but are motivated and allow us to see certain things but not others. First, I begin with a brief review of the key approaches to researching writing then discuss how these methods relate to wider epistemological perspectives.

2. Methods and methodologies in L2 writing research

Research generally begins by isolating something that interests or worries us and then asking questions about it. The kinds of questions we ask, however, and how we collect, analyze and interpret the data to answer them, depend on our preferences and preconceptions, the topic and the purpose we have for studying it, the context, our access to data, the time and resources we have, and the energy we are prepared to invest. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' formula to carrying out research on writing (or on anything else) but nor is there a perfect approach to every question. While research can answer questions that interest us, there is rarely only one answer or one 'truth' waiting to be revealed. In fact, almost any research design can answer any research question. But while the research approach we adopt will tell us something about the thing we are studying, it is important to be aware of the assumptions we are making when we design our research and select our tools for collecting data.

Here we need to distinguish between *methods*, or ways of collecting data (such as observations, surveys and interviews), and *methodologies*, the principles and understandings that guide and influence our choice and use of methods (like experimentation and ethnography). Methods are the front line techniques and methodologies the systematic application of them.

Methodology, therefore, concerns how research is done, how we find out about things, and how knowledge is gained. While it clarifies, explains and justifies the choice of certain methods in our research, researchers (and journals) often tend to favour some methodologies over others and regard those as uniquely legitimate or effective. In fact, the choice of methodology we adopt to study L2 writing will largely depend on what we believe writing is, the model of language we subscribe to, and how we understand learning. Methodology, then, is a general strategy or operating model for conducting research: a plan which contains a logical organization and the directions to answer a research question. It shapes how methods are used but does not determine the data required, how these data are to be collected or how they should be analyzed. Thus collecting naturally-produced student texts, a method, might be done as part of a wider ethnographical study, as part of a controlled experiment to compare groups of writers, or as data for studying learner improvement over time (methodologies).

3. Research methods

Because *method* is often used to refer to all research processes, it is helpful to clarify the differences so that teachers can see the research options available to them. First, there are four broad ways of collecting data related to writing and these are set out in Table 1 and elaborated briefly below.

3.1. Elicitation

Elicitation refers to methods for prompting self-report and performance data.

- *Questionnaires* are useful for collecting large amounts of structured, easily analysable information about text users' characteristics, beliefs or attitudes, information that is not usually available from observation of their behaviour or from their texts. Like interviews, they allow researchers to tap people's views and experiences of writing, but are more quantitative and restrictive. They have been widely used in writing research to discover the kinds of writing target communities require. Evans and Green (2007), for example, used a questionnaire to survey 5000 Hong Kong students about the difficulties they experience when studying through the medium of English, identifying problems of style, grammar and cohesion.
- *Interviews* offer more interactive and less predetermined ways of eliciting information than surveys and so allow greater flexibility and potential for elaboration. Although sometimes simply oral questionnaires, highly structured and limiting responses, interviews generally represent a very different way of understanding human experience. Semi-structured formats, which loosely follow a set of guidelines and allow extensive follow-up, or unstructured types, which observe an outline of issues but follow the direction of interviewee responses, regard knowledge as generated between people rather than as objectified and external to them. Participants are able to discuss their interpretations and perspectives, sharing what writing means to them rather than responding to preconceived categories. This flexibility and

Table 1
Major methods used in researching writing.

Elicitation:	Ways of prompting self-report and performance data
Introspection:	Ways of collecting verbal or written reports by text users
Observation:	Direct or recorded data of 'live' interactions or writing behaviour
Text samples:	Collections of naturally produced samples of writing