Book Review

Research Methods for Language Teaching: Inquiry, Process and Synthesis, Netta Avineri Macmillan Education Palgrave, 2017. 235 pp. £19.99, ISBN: 978−1−137−56342−2.

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Introduction

Since the early 1990's an increasing number of books on research methodology in the social sciences and education have been written, yet only a few of them directed towards applied linguistics (to include: TESL, TEFL, Second or Foreign Language Classrooms). This absence of attention is due in part to the complexity and breadth of the discipline, not to mention that it entails putting forth the theory, practice, plus extensive experience in doing research, teaching graduate classes, supervising theses, reading many journal articles, presenting at conferences and teacher training. The problem is probably made worse when the textbook writer is a busy teacher at whatever level. Yet, writing a book on doing research in applied linguistics is a praiseworthy undertaking since research in itself brings about new knowledge.

Netta Avineri's new book on methods for language teaching, therefore, deserves a big welcome, especially when it combines its twelve chapters into four main sections. In attempting to be as comprehensive as possible by providing both theory and practice, and including from such topics as the philosophy of research, definitions of 'research,' the importance of research questions and a literature review, research ethics, data collection (using questionnaires, interviews, case studies, pre− and post−tests, and later transcribing data) and data analysis (interpretive and experimental analyzes), to making implications based on the data—all emphasizing in−service teachers as researchers. An ordinary research methodology book in the social sciences, education and our fields (Applied Linguistics/TESL or TEFL/ Second or Foreign Language Classrooms) is usually 300 to 400 pages long. But this book is small in the total number of pages (only 235 pages) so Avineri must be concise in her approach. She does this by including only the crucial topics, keeping her explanations short and straight−to−the−point, using informal language, including a few examples and some illustrations, and recommending books/journal articles/websites in the chapters and suggested readings (at the end of each chapter).

Description of parts & critique

Avineri's 5−page introduction comes right after series editor Andy Curtis's Introduction. After talking about her own background (to me, sometimes not so relevant here and we are reminded of Dörnyei's (2007) and Duff's (2008), which can be more engaging), she explicitly states her objective: "to provide [mainly pre− and in−service language teachers] with a range of approaches and tools for thinking deeply about conducting research in classrooms in which you teach, student teach, observe and develop curricula…[to] encourage you to become part of a community of practice focused on inquiry, equipping

you with relevant terminology and options for your own teaching and research" (emphasis found in the original, p. 2). The book stems from her "strong belief in an inquiry−based approach to teaching language" (p. 2, emphasis added). She then rightly defines 'research' using simple terms: "Research is a way of saying that we don't know yet—which then involves a disposition of humility to explore and discover what is happening in the world around us" (p. 3). In addition, she states that the four main areas that she will focus on are domains that language teachers are often interested in: classroom management issues, methodological concerns, linguistic matters and sociolinguistic topics (unfortunately, leaving out topics like materials evaluation and design). Finally, she quite correctly claims that the book has several 'unique features' (p. 4): "It will motivate the reader to join 'a practitioner−researcher community of practice" (p. 4), especially to be more reflective, critical towards one's teaching; It has, as the core objective, the inquiry nature (while research methods coming later); It also incorporates technologies and multiple modalities both as research topics and as research tools; Reflections and activities are also included; and, the book is practical through its hands−on nature; and, it "provide hands−on approaches to realistically conducting research while teaching, considering issues like time management and process" (p. 4). Unfortunately, I do not believe I have seen much of this last feature in the book.

     Section 1: Inquiry, "Foundational research concepts, literature review, research questions, research design and research ethics" (p. 5) begins with Chapter 1: *How to ACE the research process* (Notice that Avineri's 'ACE' is also an acronym for 'applicable,' 'collaborative,' and 'empowering'). The very first chapter in this book presents the research process, divided into 11 steps, worldviews which determine research method selections, various research approaches (a wonderful concise overview), false dichotomies (i.e. quantitative vs. qualitative),

time management and the writing process. Then, the author takes about five full pages to describe the book's overview, when she herself has already done it in the introductory part of each chapter and when the series editor Andy Curtis has already done it quite succinctly.

In Chapter 2: *The noun and the verb of the literature review,* Avineri provides good information on how to do a literature review which includes its definition, the seven source types for literature, and the process (i.e. understanding, organizing, critiquing, synthesizing, reporting and becoming). She stresses several times in the book that the literature review process is iterative (i.e. "ongoing process with multiple steps," p. 213). Then, she talks about how to select a topic, search for information, find useful resources (she mentions effective tools like Google Scholar), read sources critically and organize the information (e.g. by using a Venn diagram—although she does not give a real example!), synthesize all the information and writing the literature review. Here, it would be beneficial too if she would explain what dialoguing is.

Chapter 3: *Research questions and research design: Concretizing inquiry,* begins by repeating the 11 steps in the research process (as setting research questions and designing research are Steps 3 and 4), taking the opportunity to introduce more key terms, e.g. 'empirical,' 'operationalized,' 'positionality' and 'personal narratives.' Then, it addresses the two types of research and research questions (inductive vs. deductive—and, this dichotomy will recur throughout the remaining chapters), and the three types of inquiry (naturalistic vs. psychometric vs. mixed methods). Here, research questions are nicely defined as "lesson objectives in that they provide the focus for our inquiry" (p. 48).

Chapter 4: *Research ethics: Reasons, roles, responsibilities and relationships,* is to me, an interesting chapter since it talks about ethical considerations, something that teachers, graduate students and novice

researchers are occasionally ignorant of. Avineri focuses on two key words here, honesty and good communication, "[It] is important that there be mechanisms in place so that these boundaries can be negotiated upfront and in an ongoing way so that they remain transparent to everyone engaged in the research" (p. 65). Unfortunately, here and in the other parts, I do not think I have found her mention about plagiarism at all, which is to me, a very important topic. In any case, the subjects, the author stresses, also need to be informed of how and where (etc.) their information would be displayed. She advises teachers to strike a good balance between their role as a teacher and as a researcher and to create a plan to handle these ethnical issues, "be critical reflective throughout the research process" (p. 71) and be culturally aware. Here, she emphasizes the importance of doing (classroom) action research to be in contact with other teachers, "being part of a community of practice as you engage in inquiry" (p. 66). Ironically, it appears that the author wants to emphasize doing (classroom) action research although she does not really spell it out clearly.

Section 2: Data Collection: Naturalistic (for qualitative data) and psychometric (for quantitative data) approaches. In the following four chapters (pp. 77 to 147), we see Avineri's expertise: collecting qualitative data from questionnaires and interviews to other methods (focus groups, reflections, case studies, ethnography and visual data) and transcribing data—occasionally at the expense of quantitative data (pp. 148 to 157). Here, she wisely emphasizes triangulation, i.e. the use of multiple methods to gain the real data and to "[answer] a particular research question" (p. 120).

In Chapter 5, *Making questionnaires work for you,* Avineri describes the questionnaire regarding its definition, uses (pros and cons, or, to her, 'affordances'). Interestingly, although she devotes one whole chapter to questionnaires, she puts this question at the beginning:

"Do you believe questionnaire data when you hear about it in the media?" (p. 77)—probably because she wants us to think more. She emphasizes several times in this and other chapters that any method that one chooses would entail pros and cons. She judiciously tells questionnaire designers to have sympathy on the respondents, be clear and don't have too many questions, and, order the questions well (e.g. moving from easy to harder questions). Interestingly too, she advises us to put the respondents' demographics section last. I like her formatting tips (p. 84) and wish she would provide more examples of using them here, as well. Other issues discussed include the pros and cons: of maintaining the anonymity of respondents, uses of dichotomous questions, ranking questions, multiple options questions, open−ended questions, problems and solutions, and research validity (unfortunately, minimally discussed). Also, she mentions a few online tools to design questionnaires: Google Docs, SurveyMonkey, Zoomerang and SurveyGizmo.

Chapter 6: *Interviews, Focus Groups and Reflections* concerns three methods (from the chapter title) regarding the definition, uses, types and caveats. To be more specific, the interview, the first method, can be divided into three types: Structured, semi−structured and open−ended/person−centered. Other topics here include the importance of listening, the interview location and electronic tools. Second, regarding the focus groups method, Avineri talks about being an effective focus group facilitator, use of production tasks, discourse completion task (DCT), role plays and picture description tasks. Finally, reflections, or more precisely, structured reflections, include: teacher journals and diaries, as well as students' stimulated recall methods and think−aloud procedures. Again, Avineri rightfully cautions us against our authority as the teacher that may influence the students' responses.

Similar to the two preceding chapters, Chapter 7, *Case Studies, Ethnography and Visual Data,* describes what case studies are and their

functions. Prior to this, she states what her definition of culture is and briefly discusses classrooms as cultures. For ethnography, Avineri offers a definition explaining a number of related concepts: familiar vs. strange; emic vs. etic; ethnocentrism vs. cultural relativism; positionality (again); autoethnography (an example is needed for this "method that is becoming increasingly popular within applied linguistics" (p. 127).); participant−observation; keeping field notes (note−taking vs. note−making) and collecting artifacts. Here, it would be wonderful if she could explain ethnography by giving examples of language classes, rather than talking about the Japanese culture of taking shoes off before entering the house. Moreover, concerning visual data, Avineri mentions mapping, taking photographs, continuously monitoring one's student(s) (I'd put this method under ethnography!), audio/video−recording of one's students' doing activities, and student−created visuals (e.g. using VIVID), plus (free) online tools to create 'movies,' based on the classroom to share with conference participants. Again, Avineri wisely reminds the reader about ethics, e.g. to be transparent to the research subjects about the research dissemination.

In Chapter 8: *Transcription: Process and Product,* the author talks about what transcribing is, its uses and how to do it. She includes a short excerpt from her own transcription of a Yiddish lesson with good step−by−step explanations. Finally, she talks about how students can also learn about their own language proficiency by transcribing their talk. This chapter, like the other chapters on qualitative or inductive research, is well written.

Chapter 9: *Approaches to Collection of Quantitative Data,* and Chapter 11, are sadly the only two sections that are devoted to quantitative methods. The key words here seem to be experimental design, numeric, measurable, observable, more controlled in nature, deductive research question, confirm/disconfirm, descriptive/inferential

statistics, and cross−sectional/longitudinal. Avineri gives a few examples of research questions for quantitative analysis. She discusses in some detail: the eight types of quantitative research, three types of variables, four levels of measurement, reliability vs. validity (and its three types) vs. replicability, sampling, experimental research details (with treatment groups vs. non−treatment groups, the intervention, pre−test vs. post−test), parametric data vs. non−parametric data, ethical considerations and use of corpora. To be more user−friendly, the author could give more concrete examples for each of the types of quantitative research, the measurement levels, and parametric data vs. non−parametric data. Also, she could write more for one of the most exciting quantitative trends now—the use of corpora. Finally, it would be wonderful if the examples to be added were focused on language teaching and learning.

Section 3: Data Analysis: "guidance on both interpretive and statistical approaches to data analysis" (p. 5), begins with Chapter 10: *Interpretive Analysis of Qualitative Data,* which describes: the importance of interpretation, steps for an interpretive analysis and caveats (including ethical considerations and positionality), and three main data analysis methods. In discussing the three data analysis methods, Avineri addresses coding (which brings about the emerging theme and later the argument), content analysis and discourse analysis. While the first method, along with memoing, is discussed in great detail, the latter two sometimes appear to be lacking in depth and examples. Finally, she offers three examples to show the interrelationships among coding, content analysis and discourse analysis (in the appendices) but they do not seem to be clear at all.

Chapter 11, *Approaches to Analysis of Quantitative Data,* is a short chapter (only 7 pages), where the author focuses on: quantitative data concepts already mentioned in Chapter 9, stages to analyze quantitative data, three basic ways to summarize quantitative results,

two types of statistics (descriptive vs. inferential), null hypothesis vs. alternative hypothesis, and selecting sophisticated software to match the existing data. To me, the author could have said much more and included some relevant examples, as well.

The final section 4, aptly titled, *Bringing It All Together,* Avineri discusses, "approaches to building an argument, considering implications and becoming integrated into relevant communities of practice" (p. 5). Chapter 12, *Arguments, Implications and Communities of Practice,* attempts to bring everything together. Here the author discusses how to build a convincing argument from the two types of data collected (if possible) in order to answer the research question(s). It also deals with inductive−deductive relationships, pedagogical implications, sharing the findings through journal articles and conference presentations (unfortunately, there can be more on writing journal articles and making presentations), and, probably the author's ultimate goal, fostering a community of practice in order to, "continue engaging in research and staying motivated to share your findings with others" (p. 200).

Merits

In addition to the advantages mentioned in my introduction, Avineri's book has a number of strengths. First, the book starts with the macro picture (i.e. "the philosophical nature of inquiry," pp. 11−13) and proceeds to the smaller issues (i.e. experimental vs. naturalistic approaches and various research methods and their concerns), making it easy for readers to follow. Second, it emphasizes ACE, especially collaboration among language teachers, resulting in them being part of the 'community of practice.' Since Avineri knows that language teachers generally do not have much time and may not know much about how to conduct research, she wants them to see the value of

doing research (especially classroom action research), to constantly reflect on their teaching and to collaborate in order to empower one another. Third, similar to most research textbooks, especially those on qualitative research, the topic of ethical issues is prominent, and here it appears in many chapters throughout the book. In fact, what the author calls "positionality" (or to her, the fact that teachers are aware of their own perspective) is being self−critical, part of reflective teaching, and also the issue of ethics in research which she continuously brings up. Fourth, the book contains some practical information on designing and analyzing qualitative data, e.g. to first find the emerging patterns and later build a strong argument based on them. Also, it explains how to read a journal article well. And, finally, the references section contains a lot of updated materials, and they can be both on AL/TEFL and social sciences/education/other fields (although one could wish for more AL/TEFL works like Nunan and Bailey, 2009). I think this is to compensate for the missing information in the book due to its smallness. Also, many of the book's suggestions are new and wonderful electronic materials or websites.

Limitations

Avineri's methods book also has some limitations which I will center around three major points. First, the book occasionally does not have enough examples or case studies. The author seems to be describing or explaining the issue without any concrete examples which would make the reader understand more quickly. Also, the examples can be made more relevant, i.e. more concerned with language teaching. Second, due to the smallness of the book and several repetitions (e.g. in her introduction), the book suffers from being incomplete. This forces the reader to resort to other more comprehensive materials, e.g. Nunan and Bailey (2009), Dörnyei (2007), McDonough and McDonough (1997),

Burns (2010), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Creswell (2014), Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), and Phakiti (2014). Third, it would be ideal if the two short chapters on quantitative research were expanded, with relevant examples from the author's experience. Also, there can be more on classroom action research, content analysis and discourse analysis (and critical discourse analysis), as well as writing a journal article based on the research and making conference presentations. Here, a list of major journals in applied linguistics and teaching English as a second/foreign language, and their companion websites would greatly complement the volume. One important topic that I think she should mention and elaborate on is plagiarism. Moreover, there are a few minor flaws: Occasional lack of clarity (e.g. the terms "dialoguing", "observer agreement", "dependability", "confirmability", "credibility" and "transferability"); some not so useful activities (e.g. Activity 6.3); inconsistency of British and American spellings in several parts (e.g. p. 179); and, some mistakes: "thirteen components" of the questionnaire (p. 86) (instead of "fourteen"); "Dewey, 1993" (p. 112) (instead of "1933"); and, the already−mentioned grammatical slip: "Review all of the categories and ascertain whether some categories can be merged or if some need to them be sub−categorized" (p. 175).

Final words

Despite some limitations, Avineri's 2017 research methods book deserves commendation. It is a good book on doing research for language teachers and graduate students as it covers most of the important topics, delineates the main steps of doing research (as well as the novice's pitfalls), introduces a lot of updated and relevant materials (both conventional and electronic), written in easy−to−grasp language, and follows a constant pattern throughout the volume. Although it may not be a tour de force (at least for this first edition), it is a book that should be read by graduate students, thesis supervisors, educators and teachers interested in doing research.

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