Disciplinary dialogues

Comparative research, research syntheses, and adopting instruments in second language writing

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Applying the concept of replication to research in the social sciences or humanities raises an enormous number of complications, as Porte and Richards rightly acknowledge in their review. Languages, literacies, cultures, learning, and education are each multifaceted phenomenon. Second language (L2) writing may be one of most extreme circumstances in which to expect variability—rather than consistent or identical results—across different contexts and populations, related to each of these phenomena, as well as interactions among them. As I read Porte and Richards’ arguments and examples I sense their ideas lead (a) less toward wholesale advocacy of replication as a singular research design and (b) more toward “partial replication” as one research strategy within broader approaches to comparative research and research synthesis as well as the adoption of previously developed research instruments.

Comparative research—across cultures, countries, languages, and educational settings—is needed to understand fundamental commonalities and differences in how L2 writing is taught, learned, and assessed internationally (Cumming, 2003). Comparative research is a well established approach to inquiry into educational policies, seeking to identify, analyze, and explain differences rather than expecting uniformity across societal contexts (Bascia, Cumming, Datnow, Leithwood, & Livingstone, 2005). Comparative analyses across societies and time periods are likewise integral to fields such as ethnography, history, or political science in order to synthesize findings, hypotheses, and theories in ways that avoid extreme cultural relativism. My most recent research project adopted comparative principles to investigate literacy learning and teaching among adolescents across three culturally diverse cities, languages, and educational settings—with collaborators in Toronto, Amsterdam, and Geneva—involving common research instruments, designs, and analyses in order to illuminate similar trends and differences rather than simply expecting to replicate similar findings (Cumming, 2012).

Principled, systematic syntheses of research findings are also needed to evaluate and make sense of the vast quantity of research findings that accumulate about particular issues in language learning, as Norris and Ortega (2006) have usefully demonstrated. In Leki, Cumming, and Silva’s (2008) research synthesis, we concurred with Porte and Richards’ impression that the proliferation of studies of responses to errors in L2 writing has produced results that defy the formulation of common principles—given the great array of different research designs and foci, variety in methods of analyses and of teachers’ or peers’ responses, as well as differences in purposes, populations, and contexts of teaching and learning. Certain contextual complexities might be clarified if researchers were to adopt common instruments and research designs, as Porte and Richards propose, or to organize large-scale comparative analyses. Nonetheless, research syntheses such as Hyland and Hyland (2006) would still be necessary to make sense of common issues arising from new replication studies, which themselves would probably reveal even more complex variables than are now recognized.

I have found the idea of partial replication valuable primarily for two purposes: (1) apprenticeship of novice researchers and (2) use of previously developed research instruments. I have encouraged master’s students to design...
thesis studies following the logic of replication studies outlined by Polio and Gass (1997), ideas that surely will be updated in Porte’s forthcoming book. In addition to the research contributing to current knowledge, this sort of apprenticeship is akin to Pound’s (1934) urging aspiring poets to learn to write poetry by translating recognized past masters or the copying from recognized masterpieces that painters commonly do in museums. Only one student of mine has taken up this challenge rigorously, however: Maxfield (2002) tried to replicate, with adult Chinese immigrants she was teaching in a settlement program in Toronto, Kobayashi and Rinnert’s (1992) study of young adults learning English at a university in Japan. In trying to implement the instruments and procedures from the original study, Maxfield quickly found that the many adaptations she had to make because of cultural, linguistic, and educational differences forced her research into more of a conceptual than even a partial replication. More frequently in my experience, M.A. students decide to adopt instruments, tasks, procedures, or research questions from published studies to address issues of interest to them, as in Wang (2003), rather than to attempt a full replication study. In natural contexts of teaching and learning, the prospects of replicating prior research strictly may seem unfeasible or improbable. However, there is every reason for researchers, novice and experienced alike, to adopt instruments and procedures that have been developed previously, assuming they are relevant to the current research purposes and participants, rather than to spend months themselves piloting, field testing, and then validating wholly new instruments or procedures.

In the one research study I have done that we called a partial replication, Cumming, Kim, and Eouanzou (2007) administered to ESL students in an intensive English program in Canada a questionnaire that Zimmerman and Bandura (1994) had developed to evaluate the composing processes and self-efficacy of American (L1 English) college students. Our empirical results came out more neatly than had those in the original study, showing that the English learners had well differentiated senses of their own composing processes (i.e., distinguishing between planning and drafting their texts; editing, revising and using sources for these texts; regulating their concentration and motivation while writing; and writing to meet readers’ expectations). Moreover, the students’ senses of self-efficacy for regulating these writing processes proved to be a wholly separate factor from their degree of proficiency in English. This finding added evidence to the notion that writing skill and language proficiency are relatively distinct abilities. Even with this simple questionnaire, however, and research that intruded little into the complexities of classroom teaching or learning, we had to modify the wording of a few items to accommodate the English comprehension of our research participants as well as use scores from institutional TOEFL tests as a dependent variable rather than SAT scores and grades from courses, as Zimmerman and Bandura had done. Replicating prior research on phenomena as complex as L2 writing has, therefore, to be recognized as necessarily constrained by contextual factors, even when adopting simple, established research instruments. Moreover, the results of replications require further interpretation through principled research syntheses as well as verification across contexts through comparative analyses. Those are the implications to which I see Porte and Richards’ intriguing arguments eventually leading.

References


Science Research Writing. 1.2 Grammar and Writing Skills

This section deals with four language areas which are important in the Introduction: TENSE PAIRS, SIGNALLING LANGUAGE, PASSIVE/Aktive USE, PARAGRAPHING.

1.2.1 Tense pairs

Present Simple/Present Continuous

In order to use tenses correctly in the Introduction, you first need to look at the difference between the way the Present Simple tense and the Present Continuous tense are used.

Institutions Doing Comparative Research and Areas of Focus.

ICS provides knowledge in the culture(s), history, politics, and language relevant to one geographic area of the world or region concentration.

Centre for Comparative Construction Research (CCCR) currently occupies a niche position by specializing in research on performance and productivity issues of the global construction industry, and other matters relating to comparative construction, such as project management effectiveness, building quality, building refurbishment and retrofit, bidding theory, green building design, environmental impact and infrastructure procurement and finance. Comparative research methods have long been used in cross-cultural studies to identify, analyse and explain similarities and differences across societies. Whatever the methods used, research that crosses national boundaries increasingly takes account of socio-cultural settings. Problems arise in managing and funding cross-national projects, in gaining access to comparable datasets and in achieving agreement over conceptual and functional equivalence and research parameters. Attempts to find solutions to these problems involve negotiation and compromise and a sound knowledge of different nation.

Students writing in a second language are also faced with social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition. L1 models of writing instruction and research on composing processes have been the theoretical basis for using the process approach in L2 writing pedagogy. However, language proficiency and competence underlies the ability to write in the L2 in a fundamental way.

A brief survey of the nature of L2 writing and L1 models of the writing process illustrates why it is difficult to apply L1 research to a model for second language writing. Further, certain social and cognitive factors related to second language acquisition show that strategies involved in the language learning process also affect L2 writing. Cumming is most noted for his work on second language writing research. He adopted the Goal Theory from educational psychology to study second language writing development.

His main claim was that goals can emerge in three different ways: dilemma, intention and outcome. He also claimed that goals play an important in the development of second language writing.[4]. In his paper entitled Learning to write in a second language: Two decades of research, he identified three main areas of research on second language writing: 1. Textual features