
Designing case study research

The importance of a thorough literature review

We turn now to another important element in STANDARD FORM reporting that we discussed previously: the LITERATURE REVIEW.

Any research study typically stands on the shoulders of studies that preceded it. In order to acknowledge that debt to previous studies and show where the new study fits into the field, the study often begins with a literature review. This not only summarizes what related studies have been done in the past and what they have shown, but, as importantly, it discusses what *hasn't* been

done and what *hasn't* been shown. A good literature review provides both the context and the justification for the new study. It shows why there is a need for the study about to be reported.

In a longer report, such as an MA thesis, the literature review forms an entire chapter and is a crucial introduction to the reported study. Even in shorter reports, such as journal articles, it needs to be clear and comprehensive. In any case, carrying out a thorough review of the literature is an important part of designing your research project because:

- 1 you don't want to re-invent an existing wheel that is already in the literature;
- 2 you want to learn from any mistakes that were made in the previous research so you do not repeat them; and
- 3 you want your research to fit with and add to the research that has preceded it.

Consider the following short literature review from a research article (adapted from Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle 1978: 335). The article, for which this is the abstract, also focuses on a central theme of this chapter—the similarities and differences between first and second language acquisition.

Various researchers have recently stressed the similarities between first and second language acquisition (Corder 1974; Hansen-Bede 1975; Holley and King 1971; McNamara 1973), pointing out that errors typical of first language acquisition, such as overgeneralization, also occur in second language acquisition (Ravem 1974; Richards 1974), and that interference is of limited importance (Buteau 1970; Wardhaugh 1974). These conclusions disagree with the traditional view based on contrastive analysis, concerning the prevalence of interference errors. (Fries 1957; Lado 1957; Stockwell, Bowen and Martin 1965). One possible explanation for the disagreement is that interference errors may be more typical of those who have gone through second language training, whereas those who learn a second language in an unstructured, 'picking-it-up' situation may use strategies more similar to those of the first language learner.

A good literature review provides you with a sound basis for your research and will help convince the reader that your findings are valid and interesting. Some questions, then, to get you started:

- 1 How does one set up a literature review and create the *categories* for the review?
- 2 How does one decide what *issues* to examine within the categories?
- 3 How does one go about finding relevant *research* on these issues?