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Conference Reports

Quantitative and qualitative methods for Research in EAP

Reflections of a teacher attending the BALEAP ResTES event 'Methodologies for Researching EAP Contexts, Practices and Pedagogies', June 2011

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Self-introduction

I am a lecturer in the English Philology Department of Lviv National Ivan Franko University in Ukraine. I teach Bachelor and Master students who major in TEFL. I am currently teaching an experimental Academic Writing course to a group of English Philology students and doing research in the sphere of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), with a specific focus on Academic Writing.

In June 2011, as a member of the IATEFL Research SIG (ReSIG), I applied for and was awarded the first ever ReSIG scholarship for event participation – to attend the 'Methodologies for Researching EAP Contexts, Practices and Pedagogies' one-day mini-conference at Leicester University, UK. The 24 June mini-conference was dedicated to practices and pedagogies of research in EAP and was organized by the Research and Publications Sub-Committee of the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP). an association with which ReSIG has been developing friendly ties.

I wanted to attend the event for two reasons: firstly, to ascertain that I have been using reliable methods in my research; secondly, to learn what other researchers have been doing and how they do it. I was extremely happy to gain financial support from the IATEFL ReSIG because it would have been impossible for me to attend the event without it.

About the organizers of the event

BALEAP was founded in 1972 and since that time has supported the professional development of English language teachers working with international students in higher educational institutions in the UK and beyond. The Association promotes research through biennial conferences and one-day meetings. The BALEAP Research Training Event Series (ResTES) creates opportunities for practitioners and

researchers to share their experience of different aspects of the process of research at mini-conferences (ResTES events) of the type I attended.

Overview of the mini-conference

The conference programme was divided into two blocks: key-note presentations and researchers' / practitioners' 'work-in-progress' reports.

The key-note speakers were Dr Diana Ridley (Sheffield Hallam University) and Kyla Steenhardt (Associate Director of Higher Education at Opinion Panel, which is an independent research business set up to represent the views of students and young people). Dr Ridley compared qualitative and quantitative research methods, presented different data collection methods and criteria, described general approaches to sampling, offered a short panorama of interview types and techniques and suggested a successful way of presenting outcomes of qualitative analysis. Kyla Steenhardt's presentation dealt with defining quantitative research, and the issues which can be successfully explored by means of a quantitative approach.

A number of the 'work-in-progress' reports involved, from my point of view, unexpected research approaches, for example collecting data by means of listening to students' personal stories, or making notes on students' recollections of what they had been thinking about at a particular moment in the past. Zulfiqar Qureshi (University of Central Lancashire) delivered a presentation dedicated to stimulated recall interviews as a means for exploring students' attitudes to the course, while Houda Olabi (University of Birmingham) reported on an analysis of the efficacy and relevance of EAP courses to Arab students. Both presenters provided short surveys of their research-in-progress.

Innovative tendencies in research were also demonstrated by Helen Bowstead (University of Plymouth), who explored the use of narratives in educational research and Julia Molinari (University of Nottingham) who reflected on the process, methods and validity of piloting an EAP test.

How has attending the conference affected my own research?

My own research deals with developing techniques for minimizing the influence of Ukrainian/Russian academic style in students' academic papers in English, and I have mostly obtained data by analyzing students' papers, observing students' performance and taking notes. I have also administered some questionnaires to get quantitative results. Throughout four semesters I observed that the students, in spite of successfully identifying the proper style peculiarities, have problems with writing in academic style. Their vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraph structure, and so on, are affected by the Ukrainian/Russian style of reporting research outcomes.

Obviously, qualitative and quantitative approaches can be constituents of any research work. Supposedly, applying both methods can guarantee a relatively valid outcome, or at least ‘triangulation’. That is why the input sessions dedicated to these broad research approaches were especially interesting to me as a practicing teacher and researcher. I personally used to have more trust in figures. However, Dr Diana Ridley vividly demonstrated the utmost importance of interviewing students and providing citations from the interviews in research reports. The fact that, according to Dr Ridley, a small amount of students can be engaged in the qualitative research process seemed appropriate in my situation too, as the group I usually teach and observe consists of 10 to 18 students. Contrary to the general opinion that the more participants, the more trustworthy are the results, Dr Ridley asserted that even observing 4 people closely can be enough. Overall, according to Dr Ridley, if a researcher aims to analyse a multi-layered and complex reality, going deep into knowledge which is personally experienced can offer the possibility of an in-depth investigation of the subject in question. Thus, qualitative analysis can’t be ignored. This was the major contributor to change in my thinking as a result of the workshop.

And so, after the conference I explicitly planned a next stage for my research – collecting ‘in-depth’ information. I am intending to interview the students to learn about their strengths and weaknesses, reasons for success or failure, and so on. I will involve several participants and record the interviews in order to analyse and quote what the students said in my research report.

Much as I tend to like substantiating my research analyses with figures, in my current research I have had problems with collecting quantitative data. Kyla Steenhardt, in her Quantitative Methodologies masterclass, showed how to structure research by identifying the stages of the project, and conducting ‘conjoint analysis’ by breaking the problem into constituent parts. This information is likely to be helpful for researchers like me, those who want to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches in their studies. However, quantitative analysis implies gathering answers from a large number of respondents, according to Kyla Steenhardt, often – these days – by administering online questionnaires. Such research can be hampered by the reluctance of potential respondents to answer. Shall I consider motivating online respondents or make do with the respondents at hand? As quantitative data collected from a small number of participants can hardly be convincing, at this stage I decided to postpone quantitative analysis. In the long-term, however, I will continue to gather quantitative data by means of questionnaires, so that in several years I will have obtained sufficient data to analyse. According to Kyla Steenhardt, qualitative research cannot be generalized, while quantitative research is statistically valid. Consequently, despite the lengthy period of time I will need for collecting sufficient quantitative data, the outcomes of my research will be more valid if I do combine quantitative with qualitative research methods..

Conclusion

The BALEAP ResRES event 'Methodologies for Researching EAP Contexts, Practices and Pedagogies' was a unique opportunity for me to familiarize myself with the context and research techniques applied in UK universities. Now, as a result of attending the event with ReSIG sponsorship, while conducting my own research I shall consider implementing various approaches to attain a fuller picture of the phenomenon I am investigating.