

Research article: Trends of Research Methods in Applied Linguistics: The Case of Research Articles Published between 1986 and 2015

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Abstract

As regards the definitions and viewpoints toward the field of Applied Linguistics, one might conclude that diversity of definitions mean diversity of research trends and methodologies of research. Pica (2005) believes that such an implication is natural. Research on different issues of the field has expanded over the years and this expansion has attracted a good deal of attention among researchers. Additionally, Applied Linguistics as an interdisciplinary field of study is associated with different disciplines. This multi-disciplinary nature creates a context for the use of different research methods. The appearance of new methods and even the old ones were not considered comprehensively in the current research methodology books (Duff, 2002). Though research methodology has been the subject of many books and research papers, Duff (2002) believes that no textbook has ever provided a comprehensive list of qualitative and quantitative research methods. In addition, the emergence of mixed-methods, action research, and content analysis research approaches have further complicated the matter. It can also be added that no comprehensive report has ever specified to the actual practice of research methods in Applied Linguistics. Therefore, the second aim of this study is to categorize the existing research methods used in Applied Linguistics research articles (RAs). This study aims at investigating trends of research methods in Applied Linguistics research articles in recent three decades (1986 to 2015). To do so, a corpus of 7525 articles published in 10 applied linguistics journals were collected and analyzed by the current writers and four Ph.D. students. In this study, the focus was on the journals and published RAs since (1) they are widely accessible through personal or university library subscription (2) they are academically rigor papers peer-reviewed

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by referees (3) they cover a range of topics currently practiced in the field and (4) they reflect the research interest of wide range of researchers.

The final journals selected for analysis were 10 journals of Modern Language Journal, Language Learning, System, Foreign Language Annals, Applied Linguistics, Studies in Second Language Acquisition, TESOL Quarterly, Language Testing, Applied Psycholinguistics, and Language Teaching Journal. The list was in common with the top-most Applied Linguistics journals by Egbert (2007) and Phakiti (2014). The selected papers picked up from ten journals discussed above. Review articles, comments, and RAs written in languages other than English such as French and German were excluded from the analysis. To have a manageable analysis, the research methods were divided into two broad categories: empirical and non-empirical. Empirical methods included quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research and non-empirical included theory and implication, pedagogical operation, and personal views and perspectives. Results of the analysis indicated that the empirical studies (83.23%) were dominant over the years. It was also shown that non-empirical studies accounted for 40.73% of the papers published in 1986-1995. However, during 1996 to 2005 quantitative research was the dominant method (64.23%). In the recent decade (2006-2015), qualitative research has received much attention and increased to be used in 41.75% of the papers. Review of Applied Linguistics RAs shows that outstanding tendencies and changes in research methods were observed over that past thirty years. At first (during 1986-1995), researchers tended to use non-empirical studies for investigating research problems in Applied Linguistics. They tried to present pedagogical issues, theoretical discussions, and personal views in designs other than empirical ones which established on stronger and more acceptable theoretical bases. However, this trend subjected to remarkable changes and, along with awareness rise in research methodology among researchers, empirical studies dominated the field. The dominance of quantitative methods continued in the following decade (1996-2005). During these years, about 64.23% of RAs conducted according to the quantitative designs which showed an outstanding increase in their applications among researchers. As a matter of fact, researchers assumed that quantitative methods more closely examine language learning and teaching problems. In this regard, non-experimental studies were remarkably attracted researchers' attention. In the recent decade of analysis, qualitative methods were found to be dominant in Applied Linguistic studies. These methods accounted for 41.75% of all the RAs published between 2006 and 2015, indicating a significant increase in their use. Quantitative studies, on the contrary, from 64.23% during 1996-2005 decreased to 40.21% during 2006-2015. The abundance of mixed-methods studies in this decade was also observed to be remarkable. This popularity and extension is in line with the emergence of social variables in language studies and paradigm shift towards more critical and constructivist viewpoints. It is discussed that researchers and instructors pay special attention to these trends of research methods and take merits, demerits, and popularity of these methods into account.

Keywords: Applied Linguistics, Empirical Methods, Non-Empirical Methods, Quantitative Research, Qualitative Research, Mixed-Methods Research