

GUIDE FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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**LICENCIATURA EN BILINGÜISMO CON ÉNFASIS
EN INGLÉS**

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LINGUISTICS**

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el título de Licenciado en Bilingüismo con Énfasis en
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Abstract

Research has been one of the most significant areas in education; not only does it contribute to finding solutions to educational problems emerging in teaching and learning, thereby impacting the reality of the immediate context, but also it validates the conception of problem-solving and critical thinking by triggering the development of logical thinking habits. This project deals with how to conduct qualitative research through a handbook which serves as a guide for novice researchers in the area of social sciences. This handbook emerged from the necessity to guide and enable students as a means to design their own research projects on a topic of personal interest in the field of applied linguistics. Alternatively, the handbook also seeks to provide tools that help students optimize time by increasing autonomous work and minimizing dependency on other professors or researchers. Therefore, all sections of the process of research are addressed: from the problem statement, research questions to the data collection, analysis and interpretation. In each section, the novice learner will find in this text the way to structure the section and significance of the section, the guidelines to write the section down, tips of what to avoid, tips on what to consider as well as a sample at the end of each section. We expect that this handbook will aid to a successful research project.

Resumen

La investigación ha sido una de las áreas más importantes en educación; no solo contribuye a encontrar soluciones a los problemas educativos que surgen en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje, impactando así la realidad del contexto inmediato, sino que también valida la concepción de la resolución de problemas y el pensamiento crítico al desencadenar el desarrollo de hábitos de pensamiento lógico. Este proyecto trata sobre cómo llevar a cabo una investigación cualitativa a través de un manual que sirve como guía para investigadores novatos en el área de las ciencias sociales. Este manual surgió de la necesidad de guiar y capacitar a los estudiantes como un medio para diseñar sus propios proyectos de investigación sobre un tema de interés personal en el campo de la lingüística aplicada. Alternativamente, el manual también busca proporcionar herramientas que ayuden a los estudiantes a optimizar el tiempo aumentando el trabajo autónomo y minimizando la dependencia de otros profesores o investigadores. Por lo tanto, se abordan todas las secciones del proceso de investigación: desde el planteamiento del problema, las preguntas de investigación hasta la recopilación, análisis e interpretación de datos. En cada sección, el alumno novato encontrará en este texto la forma de estructurar la sección y el significado de la sección, las pautas para escribir la sección, consejos sobre qué evitar, consejos sobre qué considerar, así como una muestra en el final de cada sección. Esperamos que este manual ayude a un proyecto de investigación exitoso.

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The problem statement

Definition and significance

The statement of the problem is the first chapter that you find in a research project. Nonetheless, it is not the first section that you develop when you initiate the process of doing research. This statement can also be regarded as the justification of your research study. Metoyer-Duran and Hernon (1994) affirm that the problem statement represents “the crystallization of the issue and the essence of what I am doing” (p. 107). This means that it is a fundamental component of a research paper, so you, as an undergraduate researcher, need to ask what and how you are enquiring about the identification of the main problem. That is why it is necessary to start with the state of the art since it provides the researcher with insights into how other studies are similar to the proposed one. Furthermore, Merriam (2009) underlines that the logic and purpose of a research study are laid out by the problem statement and it is crucial when making decisions in relation to sample selection, data collection, and data analysis.

The problem statement is also defined as a “carefully crafted essay that lays out the logic of the research study” (Merriam, 2009, p.60). Similarly, this statement or crafted essay supports and leads you through some details about a topic, what it is known, what research has been done around that topic, what are the relevant concepts and theories, etc. At the very end, the reader arrives at the particular question that you have about the phenomenon. For instance, when you are writing this statement, it is recommended to make it look as an essay; this can give a clear imagination for the reader. Hence, first you identify the problem, the possible challenges that the problem may constitute and how you want to improve on the problem.

Finally, according to The University of Southern California (2018), the statement of the problem is the concern of the research project, which leads to a condition to be improved upon, particular flaws to be disposed of, or a troubling question that is prevalent in scholarly literature, in theory, or within existing practice that points a need for meaningful understanding and deliberate investigation. This definition provides insights for understanding how this statement introduces the reader to the importance of the topic to be studied, so the reader is directed to the significance of the study and the research questions. It also places the problem into a particular context with a specific gap to improve upon.

The problem statement is the core of the research inquiry since it provides an effective overview and diagnosis of a problem which needs to be replaced, improved or disposed of. The problem of the research investigation aims at answering questions concerning a particular drawback, which people find relevant to be solved. This is a necessary step in the research writing process owing to the fact that you may have a clear understanding of the importance of the condition to be improved concerning the research interest. Additionally, Metoyer-Duran and Hernon (1994) point out this section serves as a tool for guiding researchers to avoid the replication of previous studies and provides a sense of direction to the research project.

These are elements of the statement of the problem that you should take into account:

- **The state of the art.** This element provides information about other researchers, who have investigated your study and helps you to raise interest if any particular topic you might want to do research. A key factor to develop this element is the context of the research matter encompassing the general and specific. In other

words, going nationally and then regionally including the latest projects conducted, statistical results, and laws and policies related to the issue.

- **The gap.** Identifying the gap makes the research problem meaningful since there must be a problem that has not been investigated or that needs further studies. Therefore, your contribution to the field seeks to resolve this particular gap. The knowledge void would be supported by the literature review
- **The purpose statement.** It is one of the most important statements in the study, and it has to be informative, clear and specific. In a paragraph, one sentence or more, it is conveyed the overall intent of a proposed study (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, words are used such as intent, purpose, or objective (e.g. the purpose of this study is...)
- **Set of objectives.** The research objectives refer to the actions that will be taken as a means to give an answer to the research questions. Merriam (2009) describes the research objectives as the expected achievement once the project ends; it illustrates what is to be studied and how research questions will be achieved. Therefore, well-framed research objectives serve as a guide to write the results and findings.

Research question

Definition and significance

The research question, which is part of the statement of the problem, is a key and fundamental core of a research project. In fact, you cannot write a good research project if research questions are not well-framed. Rees (as cited in Draper, 2018) claimed that the particular systematic process of data collection expands knowledge and understanding in order to objectively and accurately answer a research question. With this in mind, the data collection process cannot take place without a research question.

Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun (2018) underlined that a good research question has four main characteristics a) the question is feasible in all types of research; the study should be researchable, without being broad and should be focused on a specific population, b) the question is clear (i.e., avoiding ambiguity and being specific), c) it is significant (i.e., it is worth investigating), d) it is ethical (i.e., the research will not affect anyone physically or mentally, refraining from offending a given community in the matter of religion, ethnicity, race or political inclinations, etc.).The process whereby research questions are generated helps the researcher in making certain connections with both previous findings and existing theories (White, 2013). Therewith, you may replicate existing research in a different context in order to compare the results or avoid unnecessary repetition of previous empirical findings.

One of the main purposes of your research project is to find an answer to your research question. It is worth mentioning that the research question connects to the theoretical framework and serves as a guide to write the results and conclusions. The researcher, from time to time, can refine the questions and set the objectives by conducting a literature review (Khoo, 2005). In doing so, the question can have a certain

focus owing to the fact that it can be explored the extent to which the question has been researched into. This is also important because it determines if the question has already been answered or if the existing findings can be disproved.

The conceptual framework

Definition and Significance

The conceptual framework in an undergraduate research project is defined as “an end result of bringing together a number of related concepts” (Imenda, 2014, p.189). Such definitions of those related concepts are made by you, as a novice researcher, based on definitions proposed by other researchers and, in such a case, on the theory in which the research is supported; this can be either an existing theory or a specific theory created by you. According to Miles & Huberman (as cited in Grant & Osanloo, 2014), so as to write the conceptual framework, the writer has to bear in mind that this section of the research project is a well-ordered network of beliefs, conceptions, assumptions, and key-terms, which are interrelated, guided, and supported to the proposed research project. What is more, Camp (2001) underlined that the conceptual framework is a structure of what the researcher has learned in order to best explain the natural progression of a phenomenon to be studied. By the same token, you can be guided by this structure of related concepts as a means to widen the understanding of the problem being studied and articulate these related terms with the theory. Adom, Hussein and Joe (2018) highlight that the conceptual framework is the researcher’s knowledge of how the research problem would be best explored. Thus, it is paramount for you, as a teacher in development, to know how the research problem will be explored by considering key factors, constructs, the relationship between particular variables and the direction the research will take through the conceptual framework.

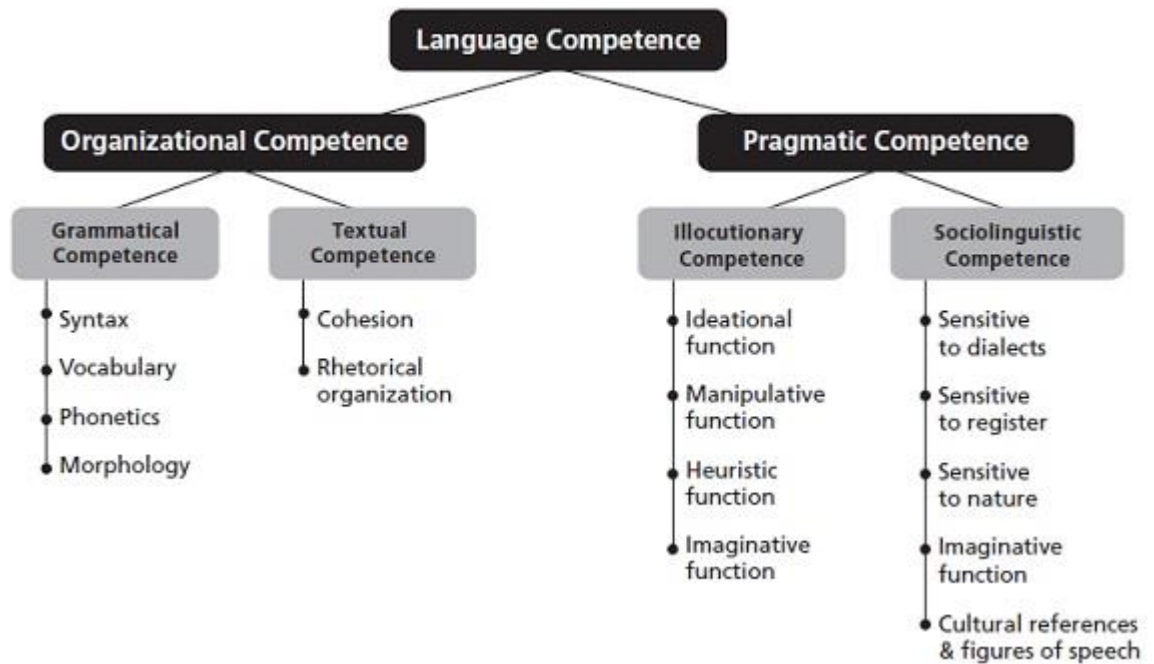
Moreover, choosing a good conceptual framework will contribute to the research process in the matter of the “identification of relevant concepts/constructs, definition of key variables, particular questions to be investigated, selection of a

research design, choice of a sample and sampling procedures, data collection strategies, data analysis techniques, and interpretation of findings” (Merriam, 2009 as cited in Schultz, 1988, p. 34). As a result, all aspects of your research study are affected by how well-structured your conceptual framework is within the theoretical framework.

Now, when thinking about the conceptual framework, it is worth noting the distinction between both concept and constructs. On the one hand, a concept is a symbol which names, labels or treats an abstraction. This is generalizable or agreed-upon by many people having concrete or material existence such as a person, a place or a thing (Dash, 2016). Each concept may be defined without a logical connection among other different concepts. On the other hand, a construct is a set of interrelated concepts created to explain a given phenomenon. For instance, language components in applied linguistics could be a construct that embraces a combination of a set of related concepts such as bilingualism and multilingualism, conversation analysis, contrastive linguistics, sign linguistics, language assessment, etc.

In order to understand the distinction between concept and construct is to think about language competence as the main construct of a research project; this construct can be comprised of a set of concepts such as organizational competence and pragmatic competence. The former includes concepts as grammatical competence and textual competence which have some sub concepts. The latter comprises two other concepts as illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competences by which other subdivisions follow. The differences have been outlined (figure 1).

Figure 1. Components of Language Competence (Bachman, 1990, p. 87)



The construct section is required to have all these concepts in order to be theoretically defined and each of these must have a transition in which one concept connects to the others.

As researchers, you have to bear in mind the importance of providing a conclusion paragraph in which both concepts and constructs stated are articulated in the research study. This means that the topic being investigated must have a logical connection with was previously defined and articulated.

The literature review

Definition and significance

The literature review in a research project makes clear the context of the research, in conjunction with details about the findings, strengths, and flaws of previous studies in the field (Mackey & Gass, 2016). Namely, it is a scholarly section underlining knowledge in regards to findings, together with theoretical and methodological contributions to an area of study, and in your case, to the field of Applied Linguistics. As for this. Cooper (1984) and Marshall and Rossman (1999) as cited by Creswell (2014) to explain that the lit review provides results and summaries of studies conducted by others which are closely related to the researcher's study or proposal. By means of these ideas, the lit review shares with the reader a point of reference for comparing and contrasting the results of a study from another as well as it serves as a framework for establishing the significance of your study.

Ridley (2008) stated that the literature can be understood as the collection of academic and peer-reviewed writing on any given subject which "provides a historical background for your research" (p.16). Therefore, it is an articulated summary and synthesis of the most important and salient aspects of the literature of your field, and the most pertinent or relevant information of your research project. What is more, it gives you insights into related research in the field and ideas of how your work may extend or address a gap you identified in your field by giving more significance to the problem.

One of the main goals of a thorough literature review is to collect enough meaningful research and theory, thereby formulating a well-structured and solid argument by which research questions can be generated (Luse, Mennecke, & Townsend 2012). Even so, not only does it provide a framework for writing the research questions

but it serves as a basis for showing the context for the research, justifying the research and giving support to the research problem; thus, enriching your knowledge about the topic being researched.

The literature review is not a systematized account of previous studies, but an organization of what researchers synthesized, thereby reflecting the point that they want to make regarding previous studies (Mckay, 2006). To illustrate this, with a thorough review of literature, you can examine, for example, research on the effectiveness of the process writing approach in EFL environments, and you found that some researchers have different conclusions with regard to the effectiveness of this approach. You could, therefore, cite studies that indicate that the writing process approach does contribute to the development of writing skills followed by a synthesis of those who indicate otherwise.

Conclusions of the chapters

Research is part of every academic curriculum and a graduation requirement for undergraduate, masters and doctoral degrees, but its importance in education plays a fundamental role for finding solutions to problems that emerge in the teaching and learning field. Research is related to the development of critical thinking and investigative spirit in students. For this, the bilingual teaching program at the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira seeks to promote and enhance all the community to do research as a means to seek and find solutions to the educational problems emerging in the field of applied linguistics and second language teaching in order to impact their immediate context and to transform their reality when it is required. As a result, this guide is intended to be a useful handbook that will guide novice researchers in the design of their research projects to work autonomously as well as for professors since they can use it as a tool to provide feedback to students and use the teaching tips proposed in the field of applied linguistics or social sciences. Considering the potential impact, this document then addresses key elements of the process of research and its stages, which can serve as a working guide for students in their first exposure to educational research minimizing time and increasing autonomous work. *A guide for conducting research in applied linguistics* represents our effort to explain how to conduct qualitative research in easy steps and clear text accessible to teachers and researchers in development. In essence, it is a practical guide that includes tips for each section, samples and teaching tips for conducting qualitative research; readers also come to understand the theoretical and significance underpinnings of this process.

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