



LSLP Micro-Paper 77: Critical Literature Review

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Defining the Term

Research is a very important fixture of becoming a teacher, one that has become essential in our professional development. However, the question of whether research means just collecting data in the field is one worth revisiting. Sometimes what teachers may need is to look at the existing research and develop deeper inquiries to find answers to existing questions. It is in moments like these when it is useful to treat the literature not as the basis to support a study and our data collection, but as the study and the data themselves.

One of these approaches to the literature is the critical literature review. One conducts a critical literature review where one relies on the existing literature to develop an argument to answer a research question. Although the research process already includes the literature review as a necessary part, the idea of a *critical* literature review has a similar departure point but a very different purpose. While a traditional literature review or even a state-of-the-art review provides a description of trends and missing issues in any given field, a critical literature review uses the literature to develop said topic.

A critical literature review is also different from a meta-analysis, although it shares with it the notion that both approaches to the literature intend to address a research question and treat the literature as data. However, a critical literature review tends to pay more attention to the findings of the studies whereas the meta-analysis focuses more on the methodology.

In terms of writing a critical literature review, the style looks very similar to that of an empirical (fieldwork-based) research report (e.g. research paper, thesis, etc.). There is a statement of the problem and a research question. One can have a conceptual framework to guide the problem and the analysis. There is a description of the methodology, in this case related to selection of readings and the analysis or organization of the literature. The “findings” would present the main points of one’s argument, all supported by the research literature, and there would be implications and even suggestions for future research.

A critical literature review is a good way to have a deeper understanding of how to use the existing body of research to find solutions to our current educational issues beyond the traditional fieldwork.

Connecting it to LSLP

We have begun to explore critical literature reviews as an alternative in our school literacies research (#Team21inP20). We already have some projects underway to characterize the field of [literacies in second languages](#) at a regional and global scale.

Critical literature reviews, in this case, are very helpful as they help us recognize the work of regional counterparts while proposing ways for other researchers to learn from the frameworks we are creating. We also find this kind of research to be a useful entry point for novice researchers who may not have sufficient access to school sites to make a valuable contribution to the field.

Expanding Second Language Research

One of the major issues that the COVID-19 crisis surfaced was, in fact, the over-reliance on empirical fieldwork. This should provide a moment of reflexivity, not to stop doing it, but to consider alternatives to it and thus prevent saturation of fieldwork.

Critical literature reviews can be a very helpful resource for beginning and advanced researchers. For beginners, it is an opportunity to hone their skills in data analysis and the careful reading of the literature. For advanced researchers, it affords a moment of reflection and a way to demonstrate the power of the existing research to tackle educational issues and make the research more accessible to practitioners and the research community at large.

References

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