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Introduction to Applied Linguistics Research
Third Year Classes

Lecture 3

Sources of Research Questions

Research is the process whereby questions are raised and answers are sought by carefully gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data. In some cases, answers are hypothesized, predictions made, and data collected to support or discredit hypothesized answers.

The Research Question is the beginning of the research process and the focus of both the consumer and researcher. Any given **research question** asks, explicitly or implicitly, either *what* or *why*. The following are examples of how these two questions typically manifest themselves:

“What” questions:

What phenomena are of importance?

In what context do these phenomena occur?

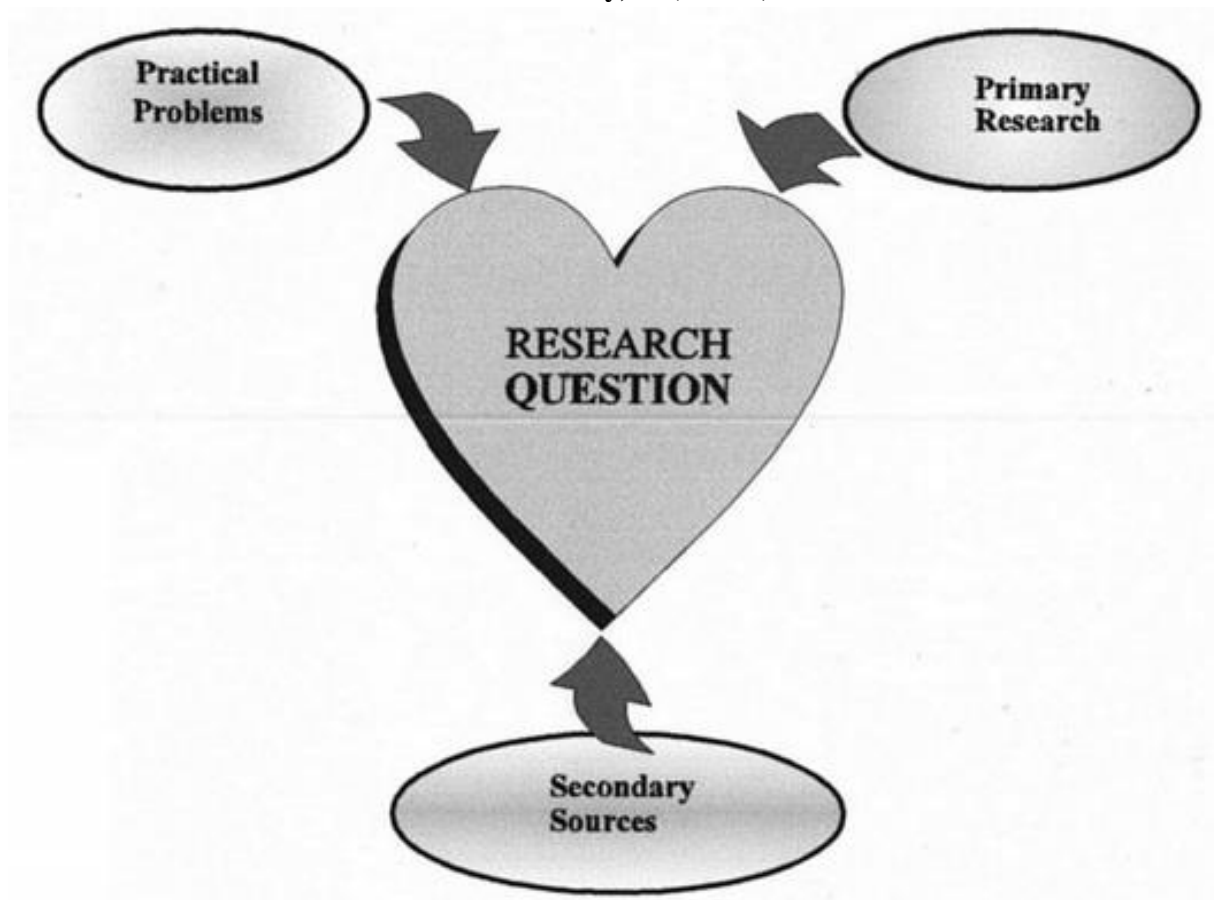
What important relationships exist between phenomena?

“Why” questions (Causation):

Why do these phenomena occur?

Why do people differ on certain traits?

FIG. 1.1. Sources for research questions
Fred L. Perry, Jr.(2005:9)



Identifying Important Questions

The motivating force behind research is the inherent curiosity of human beings to solve problems. We see phenomena around us, and we begin to ask questions: What is something made of? How did it get here? How does one phenomenon relate to another? Does one phenomenon cause another one to exist, decrease, or increase?

1. One of the most common sources is from observing *practical problems* (Fig. 1) in the language classroom. Every day, teachers, students and administrators are confronted with issues that require informed answers.

For example, Ferris (1995) noted that

teachers believe that feedback on student compositions is important based on the fact that they spend a lot of time providing feedback to help their students. This led her to question whether such feedback actually helps students improve their writing. Was this an important question? I would think so because teachers who spend long time when correcting homework need to know whether all the time they are taking to give written feedback really makes an impact.

2. The second place where important research questions are often identified is *secondary sources*.

Textbooks and theoretical papers presented at conferences are examples. These sources are referred to as *secondary* because they summarize other people's research rather than provide firsthand reports by the original researchers. Authors of such literature typically raise questions that need to be addressed. For this reason, they are fruitful places for finding current research questions being asked by the applied linguistics community.

For example Carrier's (1999) article is not a firsthand research but it is an argument for the need to research the roles that status (social position) between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) plays in listening comprehension. Carrier concluded by raising several questions for future research: What differences are there between reactions of NS and NNS listeners due to status? Are these differences due to culture? There are many articles like Carrier's that end with a list of questions for further research.

3. The third resource for identifying important questions is the *primary research*. In fact this is one of the most rewarding locations for discovering current questions being asked by the applied linguistics community. The better versed we are in the research literature, the more aware we become of the missing pieces in our framework of knowledge.

Many issues in primary research might lead us to raise important questions from previous research. For instance, sampling, the type of material used in a treatment, the method for administering a treatment, and the way in which the data were analyzed are often places where gaps might be found. Future research is needed to help complete the bigger picture before our own questions can be answered.

4. the next best place to look for research questions is in the Discussion/Conclusion section of a study, usually identified by the terms *limitations and recommendations for further research*. For example, Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, and Balasubramanian (2002), for example, noted in their Discussion section two limitations in their study on the effects of non-native accents used in assessments for measuring listening proficiency. One limitation was in the design of their study, in which they made the assumption that the lectures they used were equal in difficulty. The second limitation was the possibility that the accents they used in the study were not representative of accents used by the majority of university instructors.

Research questions immediately arise from these limitations. Based on the **first limitation**, this question emerges: **Would similar findings occur if the difficulty of the assessments for the lectures were not equally difficult?** From the **second limitation**, we might ask: **What set of accents best represents the non-native accents of instructors in English universities?** Based on these, the next step would be to find whether there were any answers to these questions

Scope of Research

Aside from personal interest , research questions need to be able to generate new information or confirm old information in new ways . To do this , a review of the literature on the research topic must be done .

Eg: Imagine you are interested in second language proficiency but instead of looking at students' use of grammatical structures , you want to investigate how well they can perform basic **speech acts** . Obviously this is not a topic that one would select without some acquaintance with **speech act theory** . You also would not select the topic if you thought that it had already been sufficiently addressed . The first thing to do is undertake a review of previous speech act research to learn exactly what has been done in this area with second language learners .

Library or net searches begin by looking at **key words** and **key authors** . Key words and key authors for speech acts might include terms such as **directive , assertive , commissive** or such authors as **Austin , Searl , Gumperz** . Think for a moment how broad a key word like **speech act** might be in such search .However , it is not as broad as **linguistics** (the number of articles and books generated by a search with this key word would be very large and very broad .

A search using **bilingual** as a key word would generate a huge number of items . But the question is how to narrow the scope of the search and at the same time find all the relevant entries .

Hopefully , this question illuminates one of the first problems regarding the definition of research questions – the questions are stated too broadly . To say we want to know more about how well second language learners carry out speech acts is a little like saying we want to know how well learners use language .

Precisely:

Which speech act do we want to investigate ?

What type of second language learners –beginners , intermediate advanced – are we talking about ?

Are the learners adult Korean immigrants in Los Angeles or Japanese high school students in Kyoto ?

In what kinds of situations speech events should be investigated ?

Is the research meant to support test development ?materials development ? Theory development ?

We were narrowing the scope via key words . Now we can narrow further via key sentences .

Using these questions as a guide , we can redefine the research question by narrowing the scope . For example , the scope could be narrowed from :

Investigate how well second language learners perform speech acts .

To

Investigate Korean ESL students' ability to recognize complaint behavior appropriate in an academic university setting .

Here **performance** has been narrowed from total performance to recognition (one portion of the total performance skill) **Second Language Learners** has been narrowed to **Korean ESL students** .

And **speech acts** has been narrowed to one speech act subcategory **complaints** .

The events in which the subcategory might occur have been narrowed to those relevant to the **university setting** .

Of course , there are many other ways in which the question might be narrowed .

A review of previous research will help us to define the scope of research in another way . But , even a fairly narrow question may need to be more carefully defined .

For example , many teachers are concerned with student motivation . Motivation like bilingualism , is a very broad concept . Previous researchers have dealt with this problem by subcategorizing the concept into types of motivation (eg: **intrinsic motivation , extrinsic motivation , instrumental motivation or integrative motivation**)

In narrowing or subcategorising the concept , **Operational Definitions** must be given to show the scope of the subcategory

