1 Planning a survey project

Research in the language teaching professions is done by many different types of people and comes in many forms. Figure 1.1 is my attempt to show where survey research fits into all of these forms of research. Notice that the figure shows two basic categories of research: **secondary research** (that is, studies based on secondary sources such as other researchers' books and articles), including library research and literature reviews; and **primary research** (that is, studies based on primary, or original, data sources, such as classroom observations of real students, or their test scores, or their responses to a questionnaire), including qualitative, survey, and statistical research. Further subdividing primary research, *qualitative research* can be thought of in terms of the many research traditions encompassed by the term "qualitative" (holistic ethnography, ethnography of communication, discourse analysis, phenomenology, etc. – for more on this topic, see Lazaraton, 1995) or in terms of many different qualitative data-gathering techniques (diaries, field notes, case studies, etc.). Continuing the subdivisions, *survey research* (the topic of this book) includes interviews and questionnaires, and *statistical research* includes descriptive studies, exploratory research, quasi-experimental studies, and experimental research.
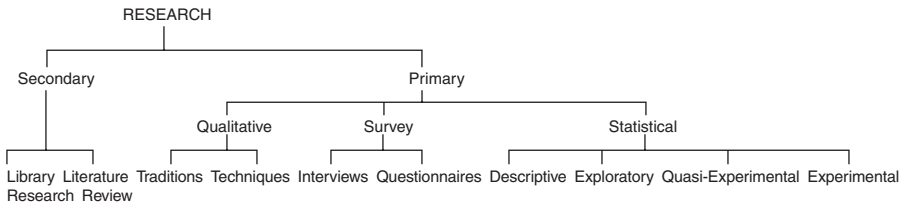

Figure 1.1 Broad categories of research.

Much has been written about these various types of research and the ways they are interrelated, so I will not elaborate on all of them here. However, even without elaboration, Figure 1.1 illustrates four important characteristics of **survey research:** (1) It is primary research and therefore data-based; (2) it is based on interviews and questionnaires; (3) it is distinct from qualitative research and statistical research (for instance, see any of the numerous books cited in the References on *survey research*

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methods); and (4) it is somehow sandwiched between qualitative and statistical research in that survey research can draw on both qualitative and statistical techniques, and conversely in that qualitative and statistical research studies sometimes include survey techniques. In practice, this last point means that survey research can take four forms in terms of how the results are analyzed: purely statistical, statistical with some qualitative, qualitative with some statistics, and purely qualitative. Given all the distinctions shown in Figure 1.1 and discussed here, any general definition of **research** will obviously need to be very broad, perhaps something like the following: Research is any systematic and principled inquiry (for many other definitions of research, see Brown, 1992c).

The purpose of this book is to focus on and explore the issues involved in one type of survey research methodology: language surveys. **Language surveys** are any survey research studies that gather data on the characteristics and views of informants about the nature of language or language learning through the use of oral interviews or written questionnaires. In this book, *data* will be defined as all of the information, quantitative or qualitative, that results from a survey. (Note that in American English, the plural term *data* is often used in the singular, as in *the data is ready for processing*. In this book, I will use **data** only for the plural noun, as in *the data are ready for processing;* the singular **data point** will also be used in lieu of *datum*. In deciding whether to use the plural or singular usage, no correct answer exists; you will simply have to follow your personal preference. However, you should probably decide on using *data* one way or the other, as I have here, and use it consistently.)

Available tools for gathering information

Before deciding on a language survey as the appropriate research methodology for gathering information in a particular situation, you should consider all of the available tools so you are sure that you have chosen the most appropriate and efficient instruments available. Many tools are available for gathering information about language or language learning, as shown in Table 1.1. Notice that I have organized the available research tools into four categories useful for gathering non-survey information (existing information, tests, observations, and meetings) and two categories useful for gathering survey information (interviews and questionnaires).

Non-survey information

EXISTING INFORMATION

You should always consider existing information before wasting energy developing brand-new information-gathering tools. Existing information

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TABLE 1.1. TOOLS FOR GATHERING INFORMATION

Type of information	Type of tool	Research tools
Non-survey	Existing information	Records analysis
		Systems analysis
		Literature review
		Letter writing
	Tests	Proficiency
		Aptitude
		Placement
		Diagnostic
		Progress
		Achievement
	Observations	Case studies
		Diary studies
		Behavior observation
		Interactional analysis
		Inventory
	Meetings	Advisory
		Interest group
		Review
		Delphi technique
Survey	Interviews	Individual
		Group
		Telephone
	Questionnaires	Self-administered
		Group-administered

may include *existing records* of any kind. For instance, in a language program, databases of student records may exist (in computer format or in paper files) that would be worth analyzing. Such records might include biodata information about the students that would eliminate the need to do a survey, or at least the need to do a survey of biodata information. *Systems analysis* of existing records is similar but is conducted more broadly – for instance, across years or among different language programs. A *literature review* may also prove useful for finding out whether other language professionals have been concerned about gathering information similar to what you are interested in. Perhaps, answers to your questions already exist, and even if they do not, such a literature review may provide useful ideas for developing your own survey instruments. In addition, a literature review may lead you to identifying individuals or institutions that have interests similar to yours. Then, *letter writing* (or variations such as phoning, faxing, or e-mailing) may prove useful for gathering information that already exists in other programs. As mentioned above, you should

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definitely consider existing information first, in order to avoid the problem of reinventing a wheel that already exists.

TESTS

Tests may also prove useful for gathering information in a language teaching setting. Language *proficiency tests* are particularly useful for gathering information about the general skill or knowledge levels of language students. *Aptitude tests* provide information about each student's general ability or aptitude to learn languages. *Placement tests* are useful for gathering information about the level of study that would be most appropriate for students. *Diagnostic tests* are useful for gathering information about the specific strengths and weaknesses of individual students with regard to a clearly identified body of language knowledge or set of language skills. *Progress tests* are similar to diagnostic tests, except that progress tests are administered while the course is still in progress to determine how much (of the material or skills being taught) the students have learned. Finally, *achievement tests* can provide information about the amount that has been learned in a particular language course or program with regard to a clearly identified body of language knowledge or set of language skills. All in all, tests can provide fairly efficient ways of gathering large-scale information on students' abilities, knowledge, or skills. The different types of tests I listed above are distinct from each other in that they are designed to gather information for a variety of purposes (for more information on the different types of tests, see Brown, 1995, 1996).

OBSERVATIONS

Observations involve direct on-the-spot examination of language use, learning, or training. *Case studies* usually involve carefully observing a single individual or a few individuals over a relatively long period of time. *Diary studies* include any procedures wherein an individual or group of people keep a journal or diary on a regular basis about a particular issue or set of issues. The diaries are then analyzed systematically. *Behavior observation* includes any investigation in which language production or language learning behaviors are examined, systematically recorded, and analyzed. *Interactional analysis* would be used as the label if such behavior observations focused on interpersonal language interactions. *Inventories* are simple counts, as in a count of lexical tokens, or number of each part of speech in a given corpus of language. In a language teaching setting, an inventory could include a count of the number of students per teacher, chairs per classroom, parking spots per student, number of books in the library, and so forth. Observations, regardless of the type used, are often appropriate for providing direct information about language, language learning, or language learning situations.

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MEETINGS

In language teaching settings, meetings are generally structured so that the participants can accomplish certain tasks. However, the process of trying to accomplish a task may provide unforeseen information about the people or issues involved. *Advisory meetings* should be set up to inform the participants about new conditions, or policies that may have occurred in a particular institution. *Interest group meetings* are most effective at airing differences that may have arisen. There may be differences in views between individuals or between interest groups within a program. The point is that groups should convene and argue the relative merits of their different ideas. *Review meetings* should draw participants into the process of sifting through and analyzing the information gathered with other procedures. All types of meetings provide opportunities to gather data with relative efficiency, particularly about the interactions of the participants. One other meeting-related technique deserves mention here because it can be used to avoid meetings. The *delphi technique* is "a communications process which permits a group to achieve consensus in the solution of a complex problem without face-to-face interaction or confrontation" (Uhl, 1990, p. 81; for more on this topic, see this source).

Survey data

INTERVIEWS

Interviews are procedures used for gathering oral data in particular categories (if the interview is well planned and structured in advance), but also for gathering data that was not anticipated at the outset. Interviews can be conducted with individuals, in groups, or by telephone.

Individual interviews are interviews with respondents on a one-to-one basis. Such personal interviews allow for gathering data privately. As a result, you can establish a certain level of confidentiality and trust, which, if handled correctly, is more likely to lead to the "true" views of the respondents than, say, group interviews. However, such interviews also have a drawback, which is that they are very time-consuming. As a result, individual interviews are best used for exploring which questions, views, or issues are worthy of later follow-up study through structured questionnaires, which are much easier to administer.

Group interviews might at first seem to be procedures that could circumvent the time-consuming nature of individual interviews. Unfortunately, any information obtained in a group interview is not confidential. For personal, political, psychological, or even emotional reasons, the opinions expressed when participants are together may be quite different from the views they would express if they were interviewed individually.

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This difference between individual and group interviews can sometimes prove useful. By comparing the opinions of people when they have been interviewed in a group interview with what they say individually, you can actually study the disparities.

Telephone interviews offer a kind of compromise in the sense that they are confidential, but somewhat less time-consuming because the interviewer need not spend time traveling to the respondents. However, telephone interviews also have several drawbacks. For instance, in a telephone interview, some data are lost because the interviewer cannot observe the facial expressions, gestures, and surroundings of the respondents. A telephone survey also eliminates the possibility of showing respondents any kind of realia. In addition, at least in the United States, people have become very wary of telephone sales promotions and surveys, and therefore, may instantly shut down communication or be hesitant to cooperate.

QUESTIONNAIRES

Interviews can clearly be used to gain insights into the questions, topics, views, and opinions that may be of interest in a particular language setting. However, if those issues are worth pursuing on a broader scale (in terms of the number of people you survey), questionnaires may prove easier to develop and more efficient to use.

Questionnaires are any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing out their answers or selecting from among existing answers. Questionnaires are particularly efficient for gathering data on a large-scale basis. For example, whereas interviews might be used effectively with a few of the participants in a language program, a survey would be more effective for obtaining the views of all the participants.

When you think of a questionnaire, you probably think of the self-administered type. A **self-administered questionnaire** is most often mailed out and filled in by the respondents whenever and wherever they like (that is, it is self-administered), and then returned by mail. Questionnaires of this type have three inherent problems: (1) they often get a low return rate; (2) they must be completely self-contained and self-explanatory, because on-the-spot clarification is not possible; and (3) you do not know the conditions under which the questionnaire was filled out.

A **group-administered questionnaire,** which is administered to groups of individuals all at one time and place, may solve all three of the problems listed in the previous paragraph. For instance, if you want to survey the students in a particular language school, you could go to each of the classrooms and ask the teachers to spend the 15 or 20 minutes necessary for all the students to fill out the questionnaire together. In such a

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situation, you will have solved problem (1) because the students will be a captive audience, who will generally feel obliged to fill out the questionnaire. Thus the return rate will be high. In fact, you can make it even higher by tracking down any students who were absent on the day of the questionnaire administration and having them fill out the questionnaire on the spot. You will also have solved problem (2) because you can be present to explain any ambiguities or confusions that arise. And you will have solved problem (3) because you will know exactly what the conditions were when the students filled out the questionnaires.

When the respondents are other than students – for example, the parents of students – you may need to call a meeting that will attract them for some other reason (for instance, parent–teacher conferences, an all-school talent night that involves every student, or some other meeting that is likely to attract all or most of the parents). Once they have been attracted to the meeting, you will once again have a captive audience to respond to your questionnaire. Note, however, that you will definitely want them to fill out the questionnaire (with your profuse thanks) on the spot. If they are allowed to take the questionnaires home, all of the problems discussed above will once again be present.

Clearly, the group administration strategy offers a relatively efficient way of administering questionnaires. However, if the geographic distribution of the respondents is wide, or the number is very large, the self-administered approach may make more sense.

The steps in a survey project

You should never view a survey in isolation. Instead, you should consider any survey, whether an interview, a questionnaire, or both, as a part of a larger survey project. Such a survey project requires careful and complete planning before you administer the survey interviews or questionnaires. You must decide a number of issues: (1) how the survey fits into the bigger picture of the field as a whole or into a particular language program, (2) what the purpose of the project is, (3) what formats and types of questions you will use in the survey, (4) whom you will sample in the survey, (5) how you will administer the survey so as to obtain the maximum amount of quality data, (6) how you will analyze the data you get, and (7) how you will report the resulting data, and to whom. And, as I pointed out at the beginning of this paragraph, you must make all these decisions before you actually conduct the research so you do not waste all your efforts because of oversights and blunders caused by unforeseen circumstances. In short, in setting up a survey research project, you must become clairvoyant – at least with regard to the potential pitfalls of your specific project.

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Stacey and Moyer (1982) suggest the following ten steps for the con-
struction of surveys:

1. Specifying survey objectives and research questions
2. Reviewing the literature
3. Defining abstract concepts
4. Selecting question formats
5. Selecting the statistical analysis
6. Writing the survey questions
7. Ordering the questions in the survey
8. Adjusting the physical appearance of the survey
9. Preparing the cover letter and instructions
10. Validating the survey

These ten steps are fine if all you are concerned about is producing a sur-
vey instrument. However, this book will take the point of view that a lan-
guage survey instrument is part of a larger survey project, which involves
the following steps:

1. Planning a survey project
2. Designing a survey instrument
3. Gathering and compiling survey data
4. Analyzing survey data statistically
5. Analyzing survey data qualitatively
6. Reporting survey results

As you will see in the chapters that follow, these steps, though fewer in
number than those suggested by Stacey and Moyer (1982), are broader. In
other words, these six steps form categories that include all of the ten steps
listed by those authors, but also much more. These steps correspond to the
titles of this chapter and the other five chapters in this book, so the steps
clearly form the basis for the book's organization. By way of previewing
the rest of the book, I will briefly describe each of these steps in turn.

1. Planning a survey project

During the planning stage of a survey research project, you should rec-
ognize that survey interviews and questionnaires are only two of the tools
available. As discussed in the previous section, tools other than surveys
may prove more appropriate for gathering certain types of data. Thus,
before investing a great deal of energy in a survey project, you should
consider potential alternatives to survey interviews and questionnaires,
such as existing information, tests, observations, and meetings. Your goal
should be to find the most appropriate tools for gathering data – the tools
that will best serve the purposes of your particular project.

If it turns out that survey interviews or questionnaires are the most ap-
propriate tools for your project (or for part of a larger project), the next

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part of the planning process is to delineate the goals of the language survey. Such surveys are often used to perform needs analysis and program evaluation (for a classic needs analysis from Europe, see Richterich & Chancerel, 1980, or more recently, the Japanese language learning needs analysis reported by Iwai, Kondo, Lim, Ray, Shimizu, & Brown, 1999), but surveys can also be used to conduct other types of research (for an example from Australia, see Willing, 1988, or the questionnaire in Appendix I). To delineate the survey project goals, you may need to think over and define all key concepts that are important to the project.

The last part of the planning stage is to formulate tentative survey research questions. Of course, the research questions may change, but at least if they are put into writing they can serve as a tentative starting point for the project. Even if the survey is for curriculum development rather than for research, research questions should probably be used so they can serve as a starting point and working basis for whatever investigations will follow.

I will cover all of these issues that make up the planning stage in a survey project in much more detail later in this chapter.

2. Designing a survey instrument

Designing a survey instrument, whether an interview or a questionnaire, involves thinking about a number of different issues. To begin with, consider the questions themselves. Language teaching professionals may find themselves wanting to address a wide variety of different types of questions. Generally speaking, these questions fall into one or the other of the following categories: behaviors, opinions, feelings, knowledge, and sensory; or problems, priorities, abilities, attitudes, and solutions. You must also consider the different functions that can be served by the questions in a survey. Will the survey include biodata, opinion questions, self-ratings, judgmental ratings, or Q-sort?[1] Equally fundamental decisions must be made with regard to question formats. Will the questions be closed-response (questions that can be answered by selecting from among options), or open-response (questions that require the respondent to produce a spoken or written answer), or some combination of the two?

The actual creation of the questions in a survey instrument involves thinking about the form of the questions, the meaning of the questions, and the reactions of the respondents. However, even with good questions in hand, a number of steps must still be followed before the survey

1 For those who are not familiar with the Q-sort, it is a procedure for rank-ordering items in a survey, often done in a face-to-face interview with separate cards for each of a number of items that the interviewee is asked to sort in order, from the items they most agree with to those they most disagree with, or the items they most like to those they most dislike. For much more on this topic, see McKeown & Thomas (1988).

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instrument is ready to use: (1) The order of presentation of the questions must be considered, (2) the formatting of the instrument must be made maximally effective, (3) the clarity of the directions should be checked, and (4) the whole product should be carefully edited.

Chapter 2 covers all of these survey design issues in much more depth.

3. Gathering and compiling survey data

Gathering any kind of survey data involves deciding which people to administer the instrument to. This procedure, called *sampling,* is generally designed so that a relatively small number of people can be taken to represent a larger population. For instance, 1,000 people might be sampled from the population of the United States in order to study the current political views of the entire population.

Once decisions have been made about the sampling, you might want to consider the different survey tools that are available. Would an interview survey be more appropriate than a questionnaire survey? If so, what kind? Individual interviews? Group interviews? Or a telephone survey? And if a questionnaire would be better, which type? – Self-administered, or group-administered? Or should some combination of these tools be used sequentially?

If an interview is being administered, the interviewers should all follow certain basic guidelines. Thus you will have to develop very clear directions for the interviewers. In addition, training sessions for interviewers may be necessary, to make sure that the interviewers all understand the procedures and that they all conduct the interviews in a similar way.

If a questionnaire is being administered, the biggest problem with self-administered questionnaires is return rate. People fail to return a mailed questionnaire for many reasons. Fortunately, a number of strategies can help increase such return rates. Even if the questionnaire is to be administered to a large group in a single sitting, steps should be taken to maximize the efficiency of the administration.

Having successfully gathered the survey data, you next need to compile the data into some form that will be relatively easy to store, access, sort, and analyze. This process of compiling survey data may involve a range of activities, from data coding for the numerical answers to closed-response questions to transcribing the answers to open-response questions.

Chapter 3 covers all of the issues involved in gathering and compiling survey data in much more depth.

4. Analyzing a survey statistically

Once you have coded the closed-response answers numerically, you may want to analyze the resulting data statistically to look for patterns in the answers that are interesting or illuminating.

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