The Role and Function of Literature Review in Educational Research Studies: A Pragmatic Perspective

By

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Introduction

The literature review is a crucial element of educational research studies, serving as a bridge between existing knowledge and the research being undertaken. A comprehensive and well-executed literature review is not merely a descriptive summary of previous works, but rather a critical examination that establishes the context, significance, and originality of your research. It requires a deep engagement with existing scholarship to demonstrate a deep understanding of the field and to effectively position your own research within this landscape.

From a pragmatic perspective, its role extends beyond merely summarising previous work; it is instrumental in shaping the research problem, guiding methodological choices, and ultimately influencing the interpretation and application of research findings (Creswell, 2009). This article examines the multifaceted role and function of the literature review in educational research, highlighting its pragmatic implications for advancing knowledge and informing educational practice.

Establishing the Research Territory

A literature review is not simply a perfunctory task or a descriptive summary of prior works, but rather a strategic and analytical process that establishes the foundation and justifies the need for the research being undertaken. A comprehensive literature review not only demonstrates a researcher's command of the field but also illuminates the path for their own investigation (Galvan & Galvan, 2017).

Therefore, a primary function of the literature review is to establish the research territory by situating the study within a broader intellectual context. This involves identifying the key issues, debates, and theoretical frameworks relevant to the research topic. By engaging with existing scholarship, researchers demonstrate their understanding of the field and highlight the significance of their own work (Riazi, 2014). Similar to a "road map," the literature review guides the reader through the terrain of existing research, illuminating the paths taken by previous scholars and revealing areas ripe for further exploration. This process involves not simply listing previous works, but critically assessing their strengths, weaknesses, and relevance to the current study.

Thus, the main function of the literature review is to *situate your research within the existing body of knowledge* (Ridley, 2012). This involves identifying the key concepts, theories, and methods that are relevant to your research topic and demonstrating an understanding of how these elements have been explored in previous studies. By analysing and synthesising this prior work, researchers can articulate the current state of knowledge, identify areas of agreement or disagreement, and pinpoint gaps, inconsistencies, or limitations that their own research seeks to address (Hart, 2018). This process of positioning your research within the existing literature is essential for establishing the context and significance of your study, as well as for demonstrating its originality and potential contribution to the field (Machi & McEvoy, 2016).

A high-quality literature review is not merely descriptive but critically engaging. Researchers must go beyond summarising findings to critically evaluate the quality and relevance of prior studies (Fink, 2019). This involves carefully considering the theoretical frameworks employed, scrutinising the methodologies used, and assessing the validity and reliability of the findings.

Identifying potential biases, limitations, or conflicting results in previous studies can help researchers strengthen their own research design and ensure the robustness of their findings (Okoli, 2015). For example, a literature review might reveal that previous studies on a particular topic have relied on small, homogeneous samples, potentially limiting the generalizability of their findings. Recognising this limitation, researchers can design their own study to include a larger, more diverse sample, thus enhancing the validity and generalizability of their results.

Moreover, a well-structured literature review guides the reader through the landscape of existing knowledge, leading to a clear articulation of the research gap or problem that the study aims to address. Many sources offer helpful strategies for organising the literature review, including a thematic approach, where studies are grouped around key concepts, theories, or research questions (Webster & Watson, 2002). This thematic organisation enables researchers to draw meaningful connections between studies, highlight areas of consensus or debate, and provide a coherent narrative that leads to the rationale for their own research.

In a study on the effectiveness of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), Golonka et al. (2014) conducted a comprehensive literature review to establish the research territory. By examining over 350 studies, they identified key areas where technology has been applied in language learning, such as vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and speaking skills. This

review not only demonstrated the breadth of existing research but also highlighted the need for more rigorous studies in certain areas.

Justifying the Research Undertaking

The literature review plays a crucial role in justifying the research undertaking by demonstrating the need for the study and its potential contribution to the field. This is achieved by identifying gaps, inconsistencies, or unanswered questions in the existing literature (Creswell, 2009). By highlighting these limitations, researchers establish the rationale for their own investigation and its potential to advance knowledge and understanding. For instance, if a study aims to explore the effectiveness of a new pedagogical approach, the literature review would need to demonstrate the limitations of existing approaches and the need for alternative strategies (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2006; Marczyk, DeMatteo, & Festinger, 2005).

As an example from language learning/teaching research, Gkonou et al. (2017) used their literature review to justify a study on language anxiety in the classroom. By synthesising previous research, they identified a gap in understanding how language anxiety interacts with other individual differences in learners. This justification helped to establish the significance of their research and its potential contribution to the field.

Shaping the Research Problem and Questions

Beyond demonstrating a command of the field, the literature review has a vital role in shaping the direction of your research. By critically evaluating previous studies, researchers can identify areas where further investigation is needed, refine their research questions, and develop testable hypotheses.

In other words, engaging with the literature is essential for refining the research problem and formulating focused research questions (Dörnyei, 2007). By critically evaluating previous studies, researchers gain insights into the

complexities of the topic, identify potential variables, and refine their research focus. This iterative process of reviewing and refining helps ensure that the research questions are clear, researchable, and contribute to the ongoing scholarly dialogue in the field. For example, a researcher initially interested in "technology use in education" might, through the literature review, narrow their focus to "the impact of virtual reality on student engagement in language learning," leading to more specific and impactful research questions.

In their investigation of corrective feedback in second-language writing, Bitchener and Storch (2016) used the literature review to refine their research questions. By critically examining previous studies, they identified conflicting findings regarding the effectiveness of different types of feedback, which led them to formulate more nuanced research questions about the contextual factors influencing feedback efficacy.

Informing Methodological Choices

The literature review serves a pragmatic function by informing methodological choices (Plomp & Nieveen, 2013). The literature review helps to illuminate the methodological landscape of your research area by showcasing the strengths and weaknesses of different research designs and analytical approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For instance, a review might reveal that a particular research method, while widely used, has inherent limitations that your study seeks to overcome by employing a more robust or innovative approach. This careful analysis of prior research methods provides a strong justification for the methodological choices made in your own study (Jesson et al., 2011).

More specifically, by examining the design and methods employed in previous studies, researchers can identify best practices, potential pitfalls, and alternative approaches relevant to their research questions. For instance, a researcher exploring a phenomenon from a qualitative perspective might

decide, based on the literature, to use grounded theory, while another, investigating the effectiveness of an intervention, might opt for a randomised controlled trial. The choice of appropriate methods is thus guided by a thorough understanding of the methodological landscape as presented in the literature (Fink, 2019; Galvan & Galvan, 2017).

As an example, the literature review conducted by Plonsky and Oswald (2014) on effect sizes in second-language research had significant implications for methodological choices in the field. By analysing the reporting practices and interpretations of effect sizes in previous studies, they were able to propose guidelines for more robust statistical analyses in future research.

Framing the Interpretation and Discussion of Findings

The literature review continues to be crucial even after data collection and analysis. It provides a framework for interpreting the study's findings, placing them in dialogue with existing knowledge (Creswell, 2009). Researchers compare and contrast their results with those of previous studies, drawing connections, highlighting discrepancies, and exploring potential explanations for similarities or differences. This comparative analysis strengthens the validity of the findings and contributes to the cumulative nature of scientific knowledge (Jesson et al., 2011; Oliver, 2012; Pautasso, 2013).

In a study on the role of motivation in language learning, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) used their literature review to frame the interpretation of their findings. By situating their results within the context of existing motivational theories and empirical studies, they were able to highlight how their research both confirmed and extended the current understanding of language learning motivation.

A Pragmatic Perspective on Literature Review

A pragmatic perspective on the literature review emphasizes its practical utility in guiding research and advancing knowledge in the field of education. It is not merely a perfunctory academic exercise, but an active and iterative process that shapes all stages of the research journey. By embracing a pragmatic lens, researchers can harness the power of the literature review to produce impactful and relevant research that contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical application in educational contexts (Plomp & Nieveen, 2013).

Besides, this pragmatic approach to literature review in educational research recognises the multifaceted role this crucial element plays in the research process. Far from being a mere academic exercise, the literature review serves as a dynamic tool that shapes, guides, and strengthens research at every stage. It establishes the research territory, justifies the study's undertaking, refines research questions, informs methodological choices, and provides a framework for interpreting findings.

In the context of educational research, particularly in fields like language teaching and learning, this pragmatic approach enables researchers to navigate the complex landscape of existing knowledge effectively. By critically engaging with prior studies, synthesising diverse perspectives, and identifying gaps and opportunities, researchers can produce more relevant, rigorous, and impactful work. The literature review, when approached pragmatically, becomes a bridge between past insights and future discoveries, facilitating the cumulative advancement of knowledge in education. As demonstrated through various examples, this approach not only enhances the quality of individual studies but also contributes to the overall coherence and progress of the field. Moving forward, researchers in education should continue to embrace this pragmatic perspective, viewing the literature

review not as a burden, but as a powerful tool for driving meaningful research and ultimately improving educational practices.

Steps in Writing a Literature Review

1-***Identify Key Words***: Start by identifying keywords relevant to your research question to efficiently search databases like ERIC, EBSCO, ProQuest, and Google Scholar (American Psychological Association, 2010).

2-***Prioritise Sources***: Prioritize journal articles, followed by books. Ensure you are accessing reputable sources. Websites, while potentially helpful, require careful evaluation of their credibility (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2006).

3-***Abstract Studies***: As you gather articles, write a brief abstract of each one. Abstracts summarise the article's main elements: the research problem, questions, data collection, analysis methods, and key findings (Cohen et al., 2028). Referencing each article using a consistent style, such as APA, is crucial from the outset (Marczyk, DeMatteo, & Festinger, 2005).

4-***Design a Literature Map***: As you read and abstract your articles, create a visual representation of the research landscape. A literature map helps you organise the studies into categories and demonstrates how your study will contribute to existing knowledge (Cohen et al., 2018).

5-***Draft Summaries***: After identifying the most relevant articles and organising them through a literature map, begin drafting comprehensive summaries of each study. These summaries will form the basis of your literature review.

6-***Structure Your Literature Review***:

Quantitative Studies: The literature review should include sections discussing the literature on major independent variables, major dependent variables, and studies linking both (Creswell, 2009).

Qualitative Studies: The literature review might be integrated into the introduction to provide a rationale for the research problem.

Mixed Methods Studies: Adapt your approach based on the type of design and emphasis on qualitative or quantitative aspects.

Key Considerations When Writing a Literature Review

- **Purpose of the Literature**: The way you use literature differs depending on your research approach:

Qualitative: Literature substantiates the research problem but does not limit participant perspectives. It is often included more at the end of the study than at the beginning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Quantitative: Literature substantiates the problem and suggests potential research questions or hypotheses. It typically warrants a separate section (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Mixed Methods: The use of literature depends on the type of mixed methods design and the emphasis placed on each approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

- **Critical Engagement**: Critically evaluate each source, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments presented. Do not simply summarise, but actively engage with the material (Hart, 2018).

- **Synthesis and Coherence**: Synthesise findings from multiple studies to identify common themes, contradictions, and gaps. Organise your literature review to provide a coherent and logical flow of ideas (Fink, 2019; Galvan & Galvan, 2017).

- **Transparency and Accuracy**: Ensure that all information is accurate and presented transparently (Okoli, 2015). Clearly state your rationale for including or excluding studies, and avoid plagiarism by accurately citing all sources using a consistent style guide, such as APA (Jesson et al., 2011; Oliver, 2012; Pautasso, 2013).

- **Contribution to Knowledge**: Clearly articulate how your research addresses gaps, extends existing theories, or offers new perspectives within the field (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016; Webster & Watson, 2002).

By following these guidelines, you can produce a comprehensive and well-structured literature review that effectively contributes to your research study.

Conclusion

Literature review, as illustrated in this article, is not merely a preliminary step in educational research but a cornerstone that underpins the entire research endeavour. From a pragmatic perspective, its role is multifaceted and indispensable, extending far beyond the descriptive summary of previous works. It serves as a strategic and analytical process that establishes the research territory, justifies the research undertaking, shapes the research problem and questions, informs methodological choices, and frames the interpretation and discussion of findings.

A well-executed literature review is instrumental in shaping the research problem by critically evaluating existing studies, identifying gaps, and refining research questions. It provides a roadmap through the landscape of existing knowledge, guiding researchers to areas ripe for further exploration. By critically assessing the strengths and weaknesses of prior studies, researchers can design more robust methodologies and ensure the validity and reliability of their findings.

Moreover, the literature review plays a crucial role in justifying the research undertaking. By highlighting limitations, inconsistencies, or unanswered questions in the existing literature, researchers can establish the rationale for their own investigation and its potential to advance knowledge and understanding. This justification is essential for demonstrating the significance and originality of the research, thereby enhancing its potential contribution to the field.

The pragmatic utility of the literature review is further underscored by its role in informing methodological choices. By examining the design and methods employed in previous studies, researchers can identify best practices, potential pitfalls, and alternative approaches relevant to their research questions. This

thorough understanding of the methodological landscape provides a strong justification for the methodological choices made in the study.

Even after data collection and analysis, the literature review continues to be crucial. It provides a framework for interpreting the study's findings, placing them in dialogue with existing knowledge. This comparative analysis strengthens the validity of the findings and contributes to the cumulative nature of scientific knowledge.

In essence, a pragmatic perspective on the literature review emphasises its practical utility in guiding research and advancing knowledge in the field of education. It is not merely a perfunctory academic exercise but an active and iterative process that shapes all stages of the research journey. By embracing a pragmatic lens, researchers can harness the power of the literature review to produce impactful and relevant research that contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical application in educational contexts.

In conclusion, the literature review is a dynamic and essential component of educational research studies. Its role and function are not static but evolve throughout the research process, from establishing the research territory to framing the interpretation of findings. By critically engaging with existing scholarship, researchers can ensure that their work is grounded in a deep understanding of the field, thereby enhancing its relevance, rigour, and potential impact on educational practice and policy.

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