Introduction

Case study research has played an important role in applied linguistics for many decades, but it is now enjoying increasing prominence for a variety of reasons. One set of reasons is related to its accessibility, its clarity, its potential impact on readers, and its role in knowledge mobilization and communication with wide audiences. By analyzing and presenting one or a small number of very concrete instances of a phenomenon, within a relevant theoretical framework and research design, researchers can make visible some of the complex dimensions of people’s language-related and social engagements in events that resonate with others. Another set of reasons for its burgeoning role and visibility in publications is that although case studies are not uncommon in research in psychology and other fields traditionally considered more positivist in orientation, the “social turn,” and a greater emphasis on sociocultural dimensions of language learning and use (Duff, 2019), such as learner subjectivity and the “self” in applied linguistics (e.g., Kramsch, 2009; McNamara, 2018), and a focus on identity, ideologies, narrative, and voice, among other dimensions of human experience, have rendered case study a highly appropriate approach to research in applied linguistics. In other words, less attention overall is being paid to learners’ linguistic systems (either at one time or over time) and, instead, more attention is paid to their lives and other systems and processes at work in their past, present, and future engagements with language.

In this chapter, I discuss the core features of case study, provide recent examples from a number of applied linguistic domains, and then discuss several important issues, such as generalizability. Although I have written about case study research in applied linguistics in a number of other publications (e.g., Duff & Anderson, 2016; Duff, 2008, 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2019) and have drawn on insights from other case study methodologists (e.g., Merriam, 1998, 2009; Simon, 2009; Stake, 1995, 2006; Yin, 2018), here I provide a recent update on this topic that I hope extends that previous work. Since my own research is primarily concerned with language learning and multilingual socialization across the lifespan, this chapter discusses case study as a method, an approach, or a strategy for examining language learners (speakers, writers, performers) embedded within typically transnational social contexts. Much of my own recent case study research and research supervision concerns heritage-language and Chinese-L2 learning, Generation 1.5 and study-abroad (English-L2) experiences, and
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English-L2 academic discourse socialization (ADS) at secondary schools and universities (undergraduate and graduate).

In a recent article (Duff, 2019), I identified an important role for case study in transdisciplinary, multiscale research (see also Douglas Fir Group, 2016) in our field: case study can provide a common, central focus for researchers that can be approached from multiple theoretical and methodological points of reference. King and Mackey (2016) make a similar point, encouraging what they call the layering of multiple perspectives in an individual study, which is different than the concepts of triangulation or mixed-method research where the research is integrated within the same theoretical and methodological framework as a rule. But even the traditional case study conducted most often by a single researcher with just one or a few research subjects still has much value for our field if conducted with rigour, reflexivity, and with relevance to contemporary issues in our field as well as in society.

What is case study research? What is a case? What phenomena does the case represent or embody?

Case study research in our field is typically a form of qualitative, interpretivist research. A “case” may be an individual, a family, a program, a nation, or another structure or entity, and these entities can also be nested within each other. That is, the researcher may be interested in the phenomenon of multilingual development by a child or several siblings within a family in a larger community context with its own history and ideologies. Or the research may seek to compare several children from different homes in the same community or across communities. The latter design is usually referred to as a multiple-case study. Unlike ethnography (see Wei, this volume), case study does not necessarily aim to study groups or cultures over an extended period of time through participant observation and other approaches derived from anthropology. However, ethnographic studies are themselves, typically, case studies of one group (culture) and often of focal participants within that sociocultural constellation, as they participate in cultural activities of the community.

Case study offers strong heuristic properties as well as analytic possibilities for illustrating a phenomenon in very vivid, detailed, and highly contextualized ways from different perspectives. It can offer evidence to support new models or theories, or to refute existing ones. It can provide an analysis of a phenomenon that cannot easily be reduced to static or singular variables (traditionally, in certain kinds of quantitative research, called independent variables). Beyond its empirical or theoretical significance, case study also has an important pedagogical function in educational contexts to teach principles of applied linguistics or to create “stories” of learners or contexts that may help the public understand issues more poignantly than reports based on other kinds of research might. For example, describing the social and linguistic backgrounds, histories, challenges, and accomplishments of a set of asylum seekers or refugees or other transnational migrants can be very powerful, creating empathy and understanding among readers, whether university students, colleagues, or members of the public. Indeed, case study is widely used in problem- or case-based teaching and learning across a number of disciplines and professions as well as in journalism for that very reason.

As various methodologists (including me) have written, both within applied linguistics and in other quite disparate fields, the essence of case study is that it examines, in depth, a small number of singular, “bounded” entities in situ. Although a program, policy, curriculum, intervention, or school could each constitute a case if examined holistically, this chapter deals primarily with human cases – language learners – whose lives are impacted by and indeed are located within those larger entities or (social) structures but whose own characteristics (behaviours, dispositions,
histories, experiences, social networks, communities) are of central concern (DFG, 2016). The principles remain the same regardless of the nature of the case. Attention should be paid to context, to case selection and demographics, to the characteristics or particularities of the individual(s), and to a specific phenomenon (e.g., a construct) or cluster of phenomena of theoretical and sometimes practical (pedagogical, policy) interest that the case exemplifies. Such phenomena or constructs of primary interest might be learner agency, identity, communities of practice, social networks, or transnational and multilingual trajectories, or a combination of these elements (see examples in Duff, 2014, 2015; Duff et al., 2013; Duff & Doherty, 2015). The phenomenon or phenomena might be more linguistic or discursive: for example, the development of stance-taking (e.g., use of epistemic stance-markers, such as “I argue that,” “the data clearly demonstrate that,” “I’m not really sure”) or voice in oral or written academic discourse; the development of formulaic utterances or collocations of a particular type (“It is beyond the scope of this study,” “What’s up?”); or processes of translanguaging among multilingual speakers (combining languages or elements of language in artful ways). These elements become units of analysis representing larger processes (e.g., of epistemic or affective stance-taking), and the individuals in the study are, in a sense, the locus (or nexus) for observable behaviours, perceptions, and interactions.

Shifting foci in case studies of language teaching, learning, and use

In the past, case studies in SLA tended to be clustered into two primary categories (although there were many others as well): (1) linguistic aspects of L2 development (e.g., negation, relative clause and question formation, morphological development) in working-class immigrants (sometimes children, but more often adults) with limited English L2 skills, or other European L2s; and (2) university students learning English as an L2, in the United States for example, engaging in the development of L2 reading, writing, listening or speaking skills, vocabulary, pronunciation, or particular grammatical forms. (Other areas of focus in early SLA are reviewed in Duff, 2008). Issues related to such social-psychological constructs as attitudes, aptitude, and motivation to learn or use an L2 tended to be explored in larger quantitative studies using survey questionnaires, an orientation that is currently changing in favour of more situated, dynamic approaches, looking at learners’ “selves”; thus, the use of cases is finding its way into that line of research as well, sometimes in combination with larger-scale surveys.

In addition, case study research in applied linguistics increasingly focuses not on the distinct categories of L1 vs. L2 (although “L2” is used as a shorthand descriptor in this chapter) and of deviation from L2 norms, but rather on the multilingual literacies and multimodal practices learners engage in as they negotiate the languages and other semiotic resources in their highly distributed (transnational, translocal) lives and repertoires (see, e.g., Lam, 2009a, 2009b). Further, intersectionalities in social categories and subjectivities (see Duff, 2019) figure in case study research to a greater extent, such as being a racialized (African American) woman studying Portuguese in Brazil (Anya, 2017). In fact, categories of all types commonly used (e.g. Generation 1.5, native speaker, non-native speaker) are interrogated in much current work because of the problems with essentializing groups according to static norms and labels that may not represent individuals within those groups well (or at all) or that individuals simply do not identify with. This observation is very much in keeping with the spirit of case study with its focus on particularities and local ecologies, rather than generalities.

Fortunately, the purview of case studies has expanded considerably in intervening decades (see overviews in Duff, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2019) to address a much wider range of issues and intercultural and multilingual “contact zones” (Pratt, 1991) in applied linguistics.
Thus, a larger proportion of studies conducted by scholars in applied linguistics now examine the populations and contexts described next, among others. Due to the growing number of case studies related to each theme, just a small number of examples of each are shown.

- Multilingual development/use and identities in transnational families, students, and returnees (e.g., Anderson, 2019; King, 2013; Kanno, 2003)
- L2 writing or speech or multimodal performance in academic disciplines and professions (e.g., Casanave, 2002, 2015; Kibler & Hardigree, 2017)
- Academic discourse socialization (e.g., Kobayashi, 2016; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015; and other case studies reviewed by Kobayashi, Zappa-Hollman, & Duff, 2017).
- Study abroad and SLA (especially European L2s) (Anya, 2017; Kinginger, 2008; for other study-abroad case studies, see Duff, 2018)
- Learning of non-European L2s, such as East Asian languages (e.g., Duff et al., 2013)
- Heritage-language learning by children, adolescents and young adults, and cross generationally within families (Li & Duff, 2014; Jing-Schmidt, Chen, & Zhang, 2016)
- Indigenous language learning and/or revitalization (e.g., McIvor, 2012)
- Autoethnographic studies of researchers’ own learning experiences (Duff et al., 2013, see also Starfield, this volume)
- Digitally mediated L2 learning and use (Lam, 2004, 2009b; Ma, 2017)

Research design decisions in case study

**Single-case vs. multiple-case studies**

A single, very interesting or intriguing case can often provide a sufficiently rich account of the phenomenon of central interest, particularly if ample relevant information (data) exists from which to derive a well-textured analysis and interpretation. In earlier publications (e.g., Duff, 2008, 2014, 2015), I provided examples of such cases: highly motivated polyglots, for example, and also people who may struggle with learning or using another language for most of their lives, despite having high levels of motivation and opportunity. Data in case studies often come from just one or (more typically) a combination of data generation processes, such as tests, questionnaires, interviews, observed performance, retrospective or introspective accounts captured through logs or journals, or artefacts that have been produced, such as Microsoft PowerPoint presentations, essays, transcribed conversations, policy or media documents, or images. Sometimes a “single” case might actually involve a pair of interlocutors (e.g., in conversations displaying creative translanguaging), a small group (e.g., working on a project together as a social unit), or an event. There should, however, be a sampling or selection strategy underlying the choice of a single case (even if it was just based on serendipity or convenience). Explaining this strategy helps readers interpret the findings. I outline (Duff, 2008, and elsewhere) several sampling/selection options, ranging from representative or typical case selection to extreme or critical case selection, with many more categories to choose from. Naturally with one case, the reader will want to know how and why it is that this case, and not another or others, is being examined. Explanation of the strategy underlying the selection will help readers draw inferences from the researcher’s interpretations.

Alternatively, there may be occasion and good reason to include multiple cases, often from two to six. On one hand, including multiple cases may yield remarkable variation among participants, possibly, and selection might be based on seeking maximum diversity among
the group of cases. On the other hand, the selection strategy might seek greater homogeneity in some respects: for example, seeking participants who are all female students from the same ethnolinguistic background enrolled in a particular study-abroad program at a Canadian university. Nevertheless, recruiting along these lines should be done with the realization that such apparent homogeneity might also give rise to tremendous differences in learning experiences or outcomes as well. This more ostensibly homogeneous sampling (e.g., all-Japanese; all-Mexican, all-Korean, all-Chinese multilingual students whose L2 English was developing in content-based English medium university courses or programs) has been successfully used by me and many doctoral students I have worked with, particularly in studies of academic discourse socialization within co-national, study-abroad cohorts.

Notwithstanding such similarities among cases, marked differences emerged in our collective research studies among individual experiences of academic discourse socialization even within similar courses or programs, or from one course or university context to the next, or one participant to the next, as well as over time. In each study, there was an excellent rationale for selecting students from similar backgrounds, which was documented by the researchers. Such findings then beg the question: What factors or interactions among factors seem to account for the different scenarios or developmental trajectories, and particularly those that demonstrate stark contrasts? Not all multiple-case studies seek to include students from similar backgrounds and may instead wish to select participants likely to reveal very different sorts of accounts or finding; and yet, similarities might emerge across diverse students. Regardless, explicating decisions about who is included and who is not, what kinds of data are being used and why, and how the selection (or recruitment or participant volunteering process) might have influenced the composition of the participants and the results that are reported. In connection with this point, it is very useful to have researchers reflect on their own *positionality* with respect to the study (see McKinley, this volume), the site, participants, and interpretive process and how they might have been perceived by participants in relation to their role as researchers (but also perhaps, a fellow graduate student, someone of the same gender and with similar interests or ethnicity, a kind of “insider” to the community, a teacher, and so on). Considerations of researcher positionality are commonly referred to as *researcher reflexivity* and are very important in most research but are particularly important in case studies and ethnographies – the latter, where the person may be a participant observer spending a great deal of time in the research site for the purposes of the study (and perhaps because that is also their normal site of work or study or their primary community).

**Longitudinal vs. non-longitudinal (short-duration) research**

Case study research is not prescriptive about the duration of a study. It depends in large part on the research questions being explored. Questions that relate to L2 or identity development or to evolution in abilities, perceptions, behaviours, or performance are likely to attempt to conduct longitudinal research in such a way as to capture change over time. Of course, histories and aspirations can be captured through introspective or retrospective narrative accounts as well; that is, they are longitudinal in the sense of being concerned with “the long view” of a person’s life, or intergenerational language transmission, migration, or language shift, for example, but not necessarily in terms of the researcher’s own involvement in the study. As noted earlier, research occurs along various timescales and can represent scalar events in many different ways. In applied linguistics case study research, *longitudinal* often means for the duration of a course or an academic year, or the important transition from one context, such as high school, to another, such as college or a workplace. In anthropology, in contrast, *longitudinal* might mean at minimum a complete year (reflecting agrarian cycles and rituals originally)
or many years, to represent cycles and seasons of cultural life and rites of passage in the community being studied. There are many benefits to conducting longitudinal research in L2 learning contexts, some of which are described in Harklau (2008) and Duff (2008, 2018), as well as challenges. The latter are associated with logistical difficulties maintaining the involvement of research participants across time and space (especially those who are very mobile), participant attrition, study costs, publication pressures especially for emerging scholars, and so on.

Data generation and analysis

As noted earlier, data in case studies may come from a number of sources, all of which the researcher usually has a role in eliciting. This is why some researchers (see Talmy, 2010; Talmy & Richards, 2011) prefer the term data generation to data collection. That distinction reminds us that data such as responses to questions in interviews are themselves discursive artefacts resulting from interactions between researcher and researched. The latter typically do not enjoy the same institutional role, status, or entitlements in their interactions as the researcher, and the researcher, conversely, is the primary designer of the research (e.g., questions, prompts, placement of audio or video recording devices, selection of themes or excerpts to feature) and principal beneficiary of the study. McGregor and Fernandez (2019) provide an interesting analysis of this dynamic in their own study-abroad case study interview research. In addition, when data are produced under such social conditions (elicited or solicited), face-saving moves by both parties (researchers and research participants) may influence the revelations, accounts, or data samples that are generated.

The kinds of data that are sought (or produced) naturally reflect the research questions as well as what is considered conventional in the area of study. Commonly, attempts are made to bear various kinds of data (by means of triangulation) with the understanding that these data from different sources might not yield consistent or convergent findings, but rather, might provide multiple perspectives or insights, including conflicting or contradictory ones. The challenge for the researcher is to explain why such discordances might exist.

Analysis in case study often begins even as data are being generated in interviews or other observed interactions and even when seemingly mechanical procedures such as transcription are taking place (Duff, 2008). The researcher is already noting (often in a research journal) themes or ideas that might prove important or merit further investigation. Often with studies involving large amounts of data, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo) is used to manage, sort, tag, code, and synchronize or cross-reference data (see Selvi, this volume); for example, audio (sound) files or video clips can be linked to transcripts of the same and to interviews about these interactions, as well as to researchers’ or participants’ comments on what transpired or the materials they may be discussing (e.g., writing samples). Whether processing data with the assistance of such digital tools or not, it is important to find ways to efficiently manage, sort, retrieve, and code data, depending again on the type of focus.

Many handbooks provide advice on how to tag, code (at different stages of analysis), and generate themes for thematic analysis in case studies, as well as ways of representing findings visually through graphs, conceptual maps, matrices, tables, etc. (e.g., Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). Chapters by Baralt (2012) and Friedman (2012) provide “how-to” discussions of coding and analysis in applied linguistics (L2 learning) research (see chapters in Duff, 2008, as well), and an easily accessible article by Braun and Clark (2006) provides a very practical account of thematic analysis from psychology. Grounded theory data analysis procedures sometimes used in case study research are explained and illustrated by Hadley (this volume).

Some of the software designed for qualitative research is also designed to help with capturing relationships among different types of data and codes. Although case study researchers
typically describe their analytic strategy as recursive or iterative, inductive, thematic, and so on, it is extremely helpful to provide enough detail and examples for readers about the nature of the process. What kind of coding was done? What are examples of first-order or second-order codes? How did these codes map onto the selected themes? Did the themes pre-exist, based on prior research, for example, or were they unexpected and new? A common shortcoming in qualitative research is that detailed explanations about data analysis and chains of reasoning are missing, as are accounts about the total corpus of data, the reasons (as discussed earlier) for selecting particular cases or certain examples or incidents from the data and not others.

**Reporting on findings and generalizability**

One of the most interesting aspects of case study in applied linguistics (and other fields) is getting to know more about the lives of others. The participants may be fascinating individuals in and of themselves. But generally, case studies are designed not just to introduce readers to participants, but to advance knowledge of a more theoretical and more general nature. How do the cases help us understand the complex factors affecting linguistic behaviours, processes of learning or demonstrated performance, beliefs, identities, and so on? How might these be theorized? How do these insights relate to existing accounts of the same: do they refute, corroborate, amplify, or complicate them? In reporting findings, it is therefore important to return to the research literature that motivated the study from the outset and then make those connections explicit again in the discussion of findings.

While there should be no illusion in qualitative, interpretive case study research that the researcher is completely objective or neutral (disinterested), the onus is on the researcher to demonstrate a measured, well warranted approach to drawing inferences or conclusions. Were negative examples, outliers, or exceptions to general findings reported? This interpretive process, too, may call for explicit reflection on the part of the case study researcher (and possibly participants as well) about how decisions that were made at any stage in the process might have affected the reported findings.

In reporting on case studies, researchers must be careful about how they move from the particularities of the case study to more general, higher-order, or more abstract insights. This involves questions of generalization or generalizability. The potential for generalizability is often categorically dismissed with case study. Yet there are a number of researchers who view other possibilities, with generalization to theory, models, or analytic concepts, for example, rather than to populations. A researcher might assert that a case study produced new understandings about the challenges or processes of language revitalization in a particular community – not that all communities would be affected by the same set of challenges. However, there are other scholars who suggest that, depending on the nature and type of case selection, certain types of generalization may be well justified and even desirable (e.g., Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 2018). They posit that is a serious misconception about case study research that it is only exploratory and not explanatory and that it cannot lead to wider understandings (see discussion of this theme in Chalhoub-Daville, Chapelle, & Duff, 2006; Duff, 2006, 2008; Ercikan & Roth, 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2011). Case study researchers should therefore be well informed about these debates and about how to frame the discussion of their findings appropriately.

**Writing up case study research**

Case study findings can be reported using different rhetorical genres: expository text, narratives, visual depictions (figures, tables, conceptual or semantic maps, images), and other
forms of representation. Standard expository text might present individual cases one by one with a cross-case analysis discussion afterward; or, there might be a brief introduction to each case to begin and a greater emphasis on the themes in relation to the cases. Narrative approaches might involve autoethnography, autobiography, oral history, short story, poetry, and drama. Some of these approaches (e.g., autobiography based on oral histories) have been part of the rich history of case study since its inception by the so-called Chicago School (e.g., Lewis, 1961) more than half a century ago. (Kouritzen, 1999, in our field, used this autobiographical narrative approach to report on her multiple-case study of heritage-language maintenance and loss in Canada.) Also in a narrative vein, Barkhuizen (2016) recently advocated for short story accounts in case studies, which he exemplified in a longitudinal case study of one teacher’s identity negotiations.

Criteria for assessing case studies

Criteria for assessing case studies take into account how well the study was conducted and how cogently it has been presented in written form to maximize the many affordances of using cases. Tracy (2010) proposed the following “eight key markers of quality” (p. 837) in qualitative research such as case study which could be considered assessment criteria: “(a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence” (p. 837).

Authors should aim to provide a relevant and current theoretical framework in case study reports and explain the “gap” that the study is filling and/or the original contributions or insights that the case study has generated (by noting other relevant literature and lacunae in that body of work and also new perspectives gained from the current study). Then, within the given space limitations (e.g., a 4,000- vs 8,000-word article vs a 200-page dissertation or book), the study’s design and implementation should be described, including the case selection strategy, the nature of the research questions and phenomena being explored, and especially details pertaining to analysis and interpretation. This is sometimes called the “chain of reasoning”. Providing enough evidence to support claims or “themes” and an explanation of representativeness of cases, incidents, etc., all give the reader more confidence in the credibility of the analysis and findings and, therefore, the likelihood of being able to “transfer” those insights to other contexts; this process is sometimes referred to as transferability or, in Tracy’s list, resonance. Disclosures about attention to research ethics and researcher positionality are also expected. Being a skilled writer has many advantages in qualitative research such as case studies because the author can bring the “story” to life in a compelling, coherent manner.

Conclusion

A single chapter cannot do justice to the growing number and types of case studies being conducted and written about in applied linguistics across the wide range of sub-disciplines, theories, contexts, and populations of interest to our field. In this chapter, I have attempted to highlight some key characteristics of case study research in relation to additional-language or multilingual learners. Some of these features are shared by other research approaches discussed in other chapters. It is clear from reviews of recent publications in the top journals in applied linguistics that case studies in our field now enjoy legitimacy and recognition for their important role in knowledge creation and mobilization in 21st century research across the academic spectrum, a status that was often contested in earlier work.
References


