Incorporating qualitative usefulness in L2 program-level research

Peter CARTER, Etsuko KAKIMOTO,
Kaori MIURA, C. Jeff ANDERSON

Abstract

Due in part to the so-called "replication crisis", researchers are faced with demands for greater clarity and higher standards in their publications. At the same time, both oral and written accounts of their work remain constrained by limited amounts of time or page numbers. For qualitative studies, one possible solution is the "Total Quality Framework", an approach to design and analysis that focuses on both standards and replicability in areas where this has previously been challenging. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the model and its concept of "usefulness" as it applies to L2 program-level design.

Key words: Total Quality Framework; qualitative usefulness; replication

Introduction

Current university researchers face more pressure than ever before; in addition to the well-known "publish or perish" paradigm (see, for example, Grose, 2007) which means that time and effort put into nurturing students receives little reward, they have been affected by what is termed the replicability crisis. This refers to the extent to which previous results can be obtained through replication (Baker, 2016), and presenting replicable research requires a doubling of resources and time – time that few researchers possess. Furthermore, even when researchers do their utmost to ensure that their work reaches the required standard for replicability, few journals currently allow the extra space needed to show this.

Prospects for replication in L2 studies

With regard to second language studies, there is almost no incentive to focus on replicability (Porte, 2012), meaning that L2 researchers who do work on this issue need to selectively report on their efforts, one of the causes of the replication crisis in the first place (Begley & Ioannidis, 2015). The purpose of this paper is to introduce a model whereby L2 researchers might be able to raise the standards of their work while also meeting the requirements for replication. Specifically, we discuss the use of Roller and Lavrakas' "Total Quality Framework" (TQF) approach (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015), as it might be applied to program-level research, that is, inquiry into the effectiveness of the entirety of a given curriculum.

Effectiveness of the English Communication Course

Since its inception in 2008, course instructors in our program have been active in assessing the English Communication Course's practicality, explained as follows:

> ... a practical education is one that is beneficial to its participants: students benefit when they have clear and timely information about the choices they have with regard to course selection, they benefit when they take appropriate actions, and they benefit if they put themselves in a better position with regard to their future. (Carter, Kakimoto, Miura, & Anderson, 2014, p.71)

Summarizing the findings of six papers that enquired into the program's practicality in three domains: student awareness, student activities, and measurable student outcomes, or – as we put it at the time – what it is that "students know, do, and achieve while within the course" (p.72), we discussed the need to extend our work into a coherent whole, viewing the entirety of their achievements in and beyond the program.

Adoption of standards for research quality

Student achievement is strongly linked to the learners' own sense of

satisfaction with their education (Oja, 2011) and as with other research domains involving student-participants, it was important that the research treated the members of our program in an ethical manner. As we extended our work into the program's effectiveness in new directions, we therefore adopted and adhered to standards set by an American group comprised of education and psychology specialists, the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (Gullickson, 2002), which proposes benchmarks for accuracy, feasibility, propriety, and utility. Utility means that measurement research should be "informative, timely, and useful" (Gareis & Grant, 2013, p.16).

The joint committee standards are intended to apply to all forms of research involving students, and are widely adopted internationally for many such projects. They are intended to be applied to projects of any scale and design, which means that individual studies may still need to feature other safeguards or benchmarks to ensure their acceptability. This could be said to be particularly true of studies involving small sample sizes or non-normally distributed data, as these are known to limit the range of approaches available (Keppel & Wickens, 2004).

In such cases, the "utility" aspect of the Joint Committee standards may need bolstering. Program-level data from the English Communication Course will always feature a low number of participants due the maximum enrollment of only 24 students per year, in addition to which data relating to affective domains are likely to be skewed due to the instructors' focus on the program's effectiveness. In an era when qualitative studies are under greater scrutiny than ever, the ethics of accountability and replicability have come to the fore (DuBois, Strait, & Walsh, 2017). As such, if the Joint Committee's recommendations provide a general framework for the course instructors to operate within, a specifically qualitative approach is still desirable for quality purposes.

Qualitative "usefulness"

One concept recently recommended for use in stringent medical and psychological research (Gray, 2017) that may be applicable to the course's ongoing projects is that of "usefulness". Usefulness is one aspect of a

framework devised by Roller & Lavrakas (2015) for improving qualitative research design and analysis.

With specific regard to the utility of qualitative works, Roller and Lavrakas propose a model that suited the project's needs. In it, the three stages of inquiry (namely: data collection, analysis, and reporting) are undergirded by a concern for "usefulness", that is, an ability to do something with the outcomes produced at each point in the research process (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). In other words, then, at every point in the research cycle, there will be a concern for how future practitioners and researchers can benefit from the stage in question. A simplified version of Roller and Lavrakas' Total Quality Framework (TQF) is presented below in Figure 1.

Stage	Data collection	Analysis	Reporting
Key word	Credibillity	Analyzability	Transparency
Defined as	completeness and accuracy of the data	completeness and accuracy of interpretations	completeness and disclosure in final documents
Usefulness (ability to do something with the outcomes of each stage)			

Figure 1. A simplified version of Roller and Lavrakas' "Total Quality Framework"

As can be seen from the figure, usefulness is a key consideration throughout the research cycle. For Roller and Lavrakas, usefulness is the goal of the TQF. As they mention, usefulness "advances the state of knowledge by way of new insights and hypotheses, and/or enables the transferability of the research to other contexts" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 10).

Usefulness in Japanese EFL contexts

As there are many English programs present in tertiary institutions across Japan, a focus on usefulness would be helpful in that it could assist in closing the gap between Japanese students' communicative abilities and those of learners in other countries. Universities with successful programs already contribute by turning out well-prepared graduates, but their contribution would be even greater

if they shared how they achieved this. With a shrinking youth population, the need for a globally-capable workforce, and an economy that has had limited growth for a number of years, it can be said that Japan has bigger issues than replicability and the standard of educational research. However, without high standards and a focus on sharing how to achieve good results, it is difficult for any Japanese university department to offer their full potential to society.

Conclusion

It should be noted that of the nine Japanese Nobel prize winners since 2010, seven have worked or studied in English speaking countries, and in all cases the world learned of their work through the English language. While language program students are unlikely to win such prestige, quality-focused institutional research improves their learning environment and any attempts to create positive learning environments and share how to achieve that should be considered worthwhile. Roller and Lavrakas' "usefulness" is an ideal starting point as it accommodates the small sample sizes and non-normally distributed data often associated with successful programs.

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