

Review

Matsuda, Paul Kei and Tony Silva, eds. *Second Language Writing Research: Perspectives on the Process of Knowledge Construction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005. 254 pages. \$29.95 (paper).

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In 1998, Tony Silva and Paul Kei Matsuda organized the first Symposium on Second Language Writing, bringing together a prominent group of scholars to discuss key issues within this growing field. Now held every other year on the campus of Purdue University, the symposium—along with the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, the Second Language Writing Special Interest Group at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the new Second Language Writing Interest Section at TESOL—has become an important forum for the exchange of ideas, particularly in the United States. *Second Language Writing Research: Perspectives on the Process of Knowledge Construction* is the second volume by Matsuda and Silva that collects the invited talks from the biennial symposium. In this newest volume, sixteen papers—all versions of presentations delivered at the 2002 symposium—reflect on the process of doing research in second language writing. The volume is divided into four sections, which take the reader from broad theoretical issues to conceptualizations of research projects, then through the work of collecting and analyzing data, and, finally, on to the truly practical side of research and the nature of being a researcher. The roster includes some of the most prolific researchers in the field as well as some welcome newer voices.

Part I, “Research as Situated Knowledge Construction,” includes three chapters that view second language writing through a metadisciplinary lens, exploring some of the macro-level forces that shape disciplinary knowledge and knowledge-making practices. In the opening chapter, Tony Silva lays out the fundamental principles behind the various modes of what might be deemed “research,” forcing readers to confront the philosophical assumptions that underlie their own inquiry practices and scholarly values. In chapter 2, Christine Pearson Casanave explores the role of narratives in shaping understandings of the field and of individual studies. In chapter 3, Paul Kei

Matsuda illustrates the value of historical inquiry in investigating the nature of the field and its historical development. Casanave's and Matsuda's chapters speak to each other in multiple ways, each capturing the critical role that stories play in knowledge construction. Taken together, these three pieces set the stage for the remaining thirteen chapters, all first-person reflections about the research practices and paradigms of second language writing specialists.

Part II, "Conceptualizing L2 Writing Research," exposes—in various forms—the role of human interactions and exigencies in shaping research practices. The chapters' authors push the boundaries of what might be deemed "traditional research," asking readers to take more innovative approaches and to step outside the research box, even if in small ways. In chapter 4, Dwight Atkinson describes an overtly reflexive methodology of situated qualitative research, characterized by "relentless questioning" (49) of the research process in its entirety. Atkinson shares his own practices through a set of interview transcripts that reveal the rich and idiosyncratic nature of any research event, a window Atkinson uses to implore researchers to interrogate their practices while engaging in them. In chapter 5, John Flowerdew demonstrates how a multimethod approach might be used to tackle a larger research project. He shows how he addressed a related set of research questions through a series of studies, each employing different methods; such a multimethod approach allows researchers to adopt different perspectives on an issue, leading to a complex understanding of the object of inquiry. Miyuki Sasaki, in chapter 6, paints a picture of a continuously evolving research process shaped by a chain of exigencies and interpersonal interactions. Next, Robert Weissberg (chapter 7) considers what sociocultural theory offers to the study of oral and written modes of communication, and Richard Haswell (chapter 8) describes the potential benefits of prototype categorization theory for writing evaluation research. Haswell's chapter is especially illuminating because he succeeds in reorienting readers' views of evaluation through the application of an innovative approach. In chapter 9, Xiaoming Li approaches the important issue of how cultures and people are represented in research, particularly in studies in which culture is a central construct. She calls for something akin to an "open-source" approach, in which readers have access to the work that lies behind the scenes of the research report—specifically, Li asks researchers to include the full texts analyzed, the reasons behind participant selection, and the theoretical paradigms that undergird the researcher's work.

In the book's third section, "Collecting and Analyzing Data," the chapters highlight the practicalities and realities that influence decisions researchers make in data collection, coding, and analysis. Susan Parks, in chapter 10, argues for understanding qualitative research as a heuristic

used to grapple with key issues like emergent design, the representation of data, and researcher stance and the role of theory. She articulates the problems of notions such as the emic-etic (i.e., insider-outsider) distinction by illustrating how she dealt with the issues in her own work. In chapter 11, Linda Lonon Blanton comes closest to discussing the central issue of ethics in research—both in what we choose to study and what we do with our findings. After describing her own experience with an ethical quandary, Blanton asks readers to consider what to do when they find no way for their research findings to bring about positive change. In other words, she cautions researchers to be careful when “mucking around,” because they might not like what they find. Next, in chapter 12, Colleen Brice exposes the concept of inter-rater reliability as problematic in single-authored, small-scale studies, especially those that study L2 writers. She concludes her chapter by suggesting that dependability be assessed not by inter-rater reliability but by evidence that a study’s conclusions are grounded in data that can be found in research reports. In chapter 13, Ken Hyland emphasizes the ways that choices made in research questions, design, method, and analysis are embedded within the researcher’s theoretical orientation. He illustrates this principle clearly through his own research which mixes corpus-based text analysis with oral interview data. In the only collaborative piece, chapter 14, Rosa Manchón, Liz Murphy, and Julio Roca de Larios detail their decision-making processes in a study using concurrent protocols. The authors focus on issues of validity and attempts to minimize causes of invalidity, and they conclude by urging researchers to address such issues more openly in their publications. Finally, in chapter 15, Sarah Hudelson reflects on a study she conducted ten years earlier, asking the important question of how her present knowledge and beliefs would affect the way she might pursue the same study today. She shows clearly the contingent nature of research as she outlines several ways that her evolving understanding of emergent (bi)literacy has a trickle-down effect on the research questions she would now ask, the procedures she might use for collecting data, and the interpretations that she would reach in analyzing data. It is striking that many of these authors are calling for some generic changes; that is, in their insistence on increased self-reflection and fuller disclosure, they reveal the ways in which the generic constraints of the traditional research article limit our ways of representing, and therefore constructing, knowledge.

The volume ends with a “Coda,” containing one chapter by Dana Ferris. Here, Ferris discusses openly the nitty-gritty of being a researcher, in what might be described as an autobiographical account. Newer researchers are likely to find Ferris’s chapter particularly interesting because she describes

the realities of researching, writing, and publishing at a teaching-intensive university. This final chapter also articulates quite overtly the theme that runs throughout the book: research is never a neat and tidy process.

While all the chapters add important insights, two are particularly notable. Silva's opening chapter is valuable not only for its description of the landscape of research paradigms, but also for its quite explicit call for the adoption of a paradigm that blends modernism's rationality and post-modernism's relativity. Silva advocates a multimodal methodology driven by research questions rather than by a belief in the inherent superiority of one method over another. Though his call to lay to rest the "quantitative vs. qualitative" debate is not new, Silva presents a philosophical basis for doing so. Perhaps more importantly, he offers a multidisciplinary field—one that at times suffers from polarizing and fracturing beliefs about inquiry—a unifying paradigm for multiple ways of studying the diverse issues inherent in second language writing.

Also noteworthy is Blanton's chapter, in which she openly recounts a research project that left her with only the negative conclusion that the writers she studied had almost no hope of improving their literacy skills within the confines of the college classroom that was supposed to support them. At the end of her piece, Blanton stresses the obligation that researchers have to their participants—a sentiment that runs through many of the other chapters but is not addressed so overtly. Blanton brings the participants directly into the picture, reminding readers that research has implications for the lives of actual people. When those implications are negative, researchers must be prepared to grapple with any repercussions.

Reading *Second Language Writing Research* is like taking a behind-the-scenes gaze into what research is really like—the stuff that never makes the journal pages or conference papers. New researchers may find it reassuring to see that the process is inherently messy and flawed, even for experienced and well published experts. At the same time, the book is not pessimistic, and it may even serve to inspire or invigorate those just beginning to delve into the world of empirical inquiry. And while many of the authors here do highlight issues unique to ESL writing research, their insights are of value to all researchers of writing. Although this is not a "how to" guide, it might serve as a strong companion volume to a methods text such as Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior's *What Writing Does and How it Does It*. Experienced researchers are likely to find this Matsuda and Silva volume an honest and open examination of inquiry practices and, as such, a welcome addition to second language writing literature. Indeed, second language studies in general have not addressed the question of research from a metadisciplinary perspective; this volume is a valuable first endeavor.

Of course, many dimensions of knowledge construction do not make it into this book, including discussions of research dissemination: How have—and do—journals and presses enable or constrain professionals' knowledge-making practices? What role do social networks play in knowledge construction and distribution, particularly in this relatively small arena? What are the possibilities for change? These seem to be especially important questions for an interdisciplinary, international field like second language writing, though they may be beyond the scope of this volume. Still, the underdiscussed question of research ethics—addressed explicitly only by Blanton—could hold a more prominent position in this volume. I also felt the absence of chapters on, for example, collaborative research, feminist research, or the attempt to “give back” to the community or participants through participatory action research. These absences, however, simply reflect current gaps in the field's research orientations.

As the study of second language writing increases, Matsuda and Silva's newest volume provides an important platform of discussion on ways that scholars in the field come to construct knowledge. In years to come, *Second Language Writing Research: Perspectives on the Process of Knowledge Construction* will stand as one historical account of the state of the field at this burgeoning moment, and it should serve well as a starting point for continued discussion.

WORKS CITED

- Bazerman, Charles and Paul Prior, eds. *What Writing Does and How It Does It: An Introduction to Analyzing Texts and Textual Practices*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2004.