

# An Investigation on Case Studies in the Field of Linguistics Since 2000

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**Abstract**—This is an empirical study investigating on case studies in the field of linguistics. From eight core foreign periodicals, 29 articles titled with “case study” were found and studied on. It is discovered that case studies are not evenly distributed in these periodicals and in different years. Besides, though all of the articles are within the range of linguistics, they direct at varied orientations. After looking into the data sources and designs and clarifying the diversified types of data sources as well as analysis methods, some “unqualified case studies” with single data source were discovered.

**Index Terms**—eight core foreign periodicals, case study, data source, research design

## I. INTRODUCTION

Case study is widely been used in all walks of the society, especially in business contexts and the discipline of law. It seems that case study is so kind that it fits every types of studies. However, in the field of linguistics, case study is a very typical qualitative method which distinguishes itself from other qualitative methods like ethnography and narrative study. However, this article aims not to make a distinction between case study and other approaches, or offer a clear definition to it. In this article, eight core foreign periodicals in the field of linguistics since 2000 were selected as corpus of data: *Applied Linguistics*, *English for Special Purposes*, *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, *Language Teaching*, *Language Teaching Research*, *System*, *TESOL Quarterly* and *The Modern Language Journal*. The literature review part is to introduce the previous studies on case study both home and abroad. The next part shows how many case studies there are, how they distribute in different years and in these periodicals, and what these case studies concern. In the final part, measuring the data sources, design as well as analysis methods, the article will appraise the quality of these studies. Since there are not many researchers studying on the development situation of case study, this article is expected to be a guidance for those who are interested in case study research method.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

[1] offered very brief introductions on the origin of case study: case study could be traced back to the Law School of Harvard in 1870, which was recognized as a method of leading students to think about the principles and principles of law. Then its application field gradually extended to medical science, psychology, sociology, political science, pedagogy and applied linguistics, etc. Researchers from different fields have different focuses when they carry out case studies.

Though there are not enough evidence showing how case study comes from, a great many of scholars have tried to define it. Both in [2] and [3], there is the view that case study is one of the typical qualitative methods. [2] is a report on a survey of applied linguistics articles published in five major Chinese journals between 2000 and 2010, with the conclusion that the qualitative researches of applied linguistics in China could be classified into eight types: case study, discourse analysis, introspective methods (including diary studies), corpus studies, interactional studies (including conversational analysis), narrative research (including in-depth interview studies), action research and ethnographies.

The clarifications in [3] between quantitative and qualitative methods also hold similar foundations with [2], which is shown in Figure 1.

And foreign scholars have paid their efforts to define case study. According to [4], case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. However, this view is hard to be agreed on for the reason that lots of studies are done on contemporary issues and events. Neither are the exact implications of “phenomenon” and “context” nor the differences between “phenomenon” and “context” explained. [5] concludes three important characteristics of case study: firstly, there’s great emphasis on a certain point in case study, so there’s no need to study on all details; secondly, the study to the certain point should be carried out under a bounded context; thirdly, the certain point is not at all isolated but it is a part of a bounded system. Again, just like what is stated by [4], this

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summary is far from clearness. The exact meaning of “context” is ignored and it’s hard to tell the differences between “bounded” and “unbounded” after reading it.

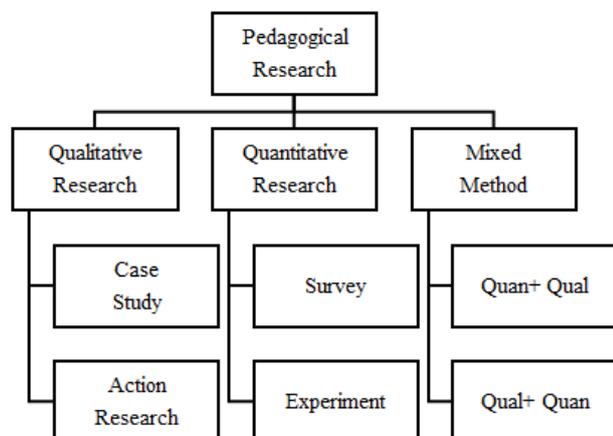


Figure 1. Classification of pedagogical research (Wen & Han, 2011)

[6] argues that case studies in research may be mistaken for the case method used in teaching. It is defined that the case study is an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units. A unit connotes a spatially bounded phenomenon. From this definition, we could only get to know that case study is filled with descriptions so that it can be “intensive”. However, this definition may lead us to misunderstandings. Case study is not the representative (as he says, “a single unit”) of a group (“a larger class of [similar] units”). As a qualitative method, the value of a case study lies in its peculiarity and irreplaceability. As [7] argues, more discoveries have arisen from intense observation than from statistics applied to large groups. This does not mean that the case study is always appropriate as a research method, or that large random samples are without value. The choice of method should clearly depend on the research problem under study and its circumstances. In other words, the value of a case study just lies in intense description. Generalization should not become the only standard to judge the value of a study. It all depends on the concrete research purposes and problems.

According to [8], case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information. This point is made briefer in [9]: case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e., a setting, a context). That is to say, case study can be a study on a single case or many cases. It is also noteworthy that a case study should contain multiple sources of data. In fact, this point is also illustrated in [5]. A “case” can refer to a learner of foreign language or a teacher of foreign language; it can refer to a class or a school; it can refer to a decision, such

as language policies, the arrangement of a foreign language course, teaching method and a foreign language discipline; it can also be the traits of a person, like his/her learning strategy of vocabulary or his/her motivations.

As it can be seen from these citations, Chinese scholars have paid their effort to bring about the knowledge about case study to learners, but none of them own their views. They attain the meanings of “case” from foreign scholars just as we do from theirs. In addition, there are still no explanations to neither “background” nor “bounded system”. Further investigations are called for to solve the puzzle.

Other scholars turn their eyes to the characteristics of case study. [10] concludes three main elements of the case study: description, issue and interpretation. It is stated that the real business of a case study is particularization, not generalization. However, this statement is so general that it can also be used to describe other qualitative methods, like ethnography or life history. Actually, in [11], case study is described as “a potentially catch-all category”.

This article aims not to give a clear and distinct definition to case study, but it attempts to reveal how it has developed under the context of social science since 2000 in foreign academia. Common characteristics which distinguish case study from other qualitative methods are expected.

### III. TREND

The article found out a total of 29 studies on case study with the entries of “case study”, “case studies” and “case analysis”. During the period between 2000 and 2017, *English for Specific Purposes* published 9 case studies, which takes up the most percentage. *The Modern Language Journal* published 7, which is the same with *TESOL Quarterly*. 2 case studies could be found in *System* as well as in *Applied Linguistics*, 1 in *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* and *Language Teaching Research* separately. There are none in *Language Teaching*. The percentage for each journal as well as publication year are listed in the following tables.

The high percentages of case studies published in *The Modern Language Journal* and *TESOL Quarterly*, just fit the explanations given in [11] on the preferences of these journals. It is concluded that *The Modern Language Journal* seems to favor discourse-based paper, while *TESOL Quarterly* focuses specifically on case studies, conversation analysis and critical ethnography.

As we look into these numbers, we can find that the qualified case studies, which could be published in core foreign periodicals are less than expected. Meanwhile, the quantities of case studies published for each year are not evenly distributed. The year 2000 and 2005 both witnessed the peak of case studies, with 5 articles for each were published separately in *Applied Linguistics*, *Language Teaching Research*, *International Journal of*

Applied Linguistics, System and TESOL Quarterly. After 2005, the quantities of case study published in these journals basically stay on average. However, there is a

three- year- time blank period, from 2013 to 2015. This trend is shown in Fig. 2.

TABLE I. THE QUANTITY AND PUBLICATION YEAR OF CASE STUDIES IN 8 CORE FOREIGN PERIODICALS (2000-2017)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	total
<i>Applied Linguistics</i>	1										1								2
<i>English for Specific Purpose</i>		1		1	1	3	1	1	1										9
<i>International Journal of Applied Linguistics</i>						1													1
<i>Language Teaching</i>																			0
<i>Language Teaching Research</i>	1																		1
<i>The Modern Language Journal System</i>	1	1				1			1	0	1	1	1						7
<i>TESOL Quarterly</i>	1				1		1	0					1				1		7
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>29</b>

TABLE II. THE QUANTITY AND PERCENTAGE OF CASE STUDIES IN 8 CORE FOREIGN PERIODICALS (2000-2017)

Core Foreign Periodicals	Quantity	Percentage (%)
<i>Applied Linguistics</i>	2	6.90%
<i>English for Specific Purposes</i>	9	31.02%
<i>International Journal of Applied Linguistics</i>	1	3.45%
<i>Language Teaching</i>	0	0%
<i>Language Teaching Research</i>	1	3.45%
<i>The Modern Language Journal</i>	7	24.14%
<i>System</i>	2	6.90%
<i>TESOL Quarterly</i>	7	24.14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100%</b>



Figure 2. The trend of case studies published in eight core foreign periodicals (2000-2017)

With an in-depth study on the themes, content as well as participants of these case studies, it is discovered that the case studies focus on different orientations. Among 29 articles, 3 of them are concerned about second language acquisition. [12] examined the second stage of

natural second language attrition in the first language environment as observed in a Japanese male returnee child. In [13], a longitudinal case study was conducted, aiming to explore the dynamic pattern in development of accuracy and complexity in the acquisition of Finnish. [14] compared three culturally distinct groups of undergraduates, who were interacting with course content to achieve academically in order to see which culture-related factor had its influence on second language learning.

3 articles are aimed at course evaluation. [15] presented a case study in a specialized business context involving senior German bankers, which reflected that effective need assessment of learners, syllabus design and materials preparation were beneficial in ESP courses. [16] tested the effect of courses implemented under the Nebraska foreign language framework, and then compared the results with traditional classes. [17]

reported on a 5-year study of a technology- enhanced educational reform initiative at a university in eastern China.

Then, the majority, 17 case studies pay their attention on language teaching and learning, among which 9 articles concern teaching issues while the rest of 8 care about the learning of students. If we make a further clarification, among the 9 articles concerned with teaching, 7 set out to develop teaching performances and improve teaching effects, while the other 2 shift their focus on teachers groups. Coincidentally, all of these 2 articles come from *TESOL Quarterly*. [18] explored the perspective of two long-time English language teachers, the connections between their transnational life experiences and their development of intercultural competence. And [19] reported on the transformation of professional identities of novice ESOL teachers in China. Among the 8 articles studying on students' learning, half of them focus on students' writing process, 2 concentrate on speaking part and 2 would like to see the whole

process of student learning. There is one different from the other. It shifted its eyes on a special community—the LGBT group ( “L” for lesbian, “G” for gay, “B” for bisexual and “T” for transgender). [20] tried to find out the learning needs of these students and considered how educators could best meet the LGBT students' needs.

There are still 6 articles left to discuss, among which 3 are under business contexts. Whether these 3 “case studies” are real case studies, the article will discuss in the followings. One article falls in the area of interpersonal communication and phonology, which also concerns a special community, the aphasia patients. [21] presented an analysis of the means and processes through which an aphasic speaker with severe limitations in spontaneous speech productions was able to make a self-initiated, substantial contribution in interaction with a non-aphasic interlocutor. The last 2 articles made a research on how the social cultures and environments affected language learning. The above data is shown in Table III.

TABLE III. DIFFERENT ORIENTATIONS OF THE 29 ARTICLES (2000-2017)

Orientations Quantity & Percentage	Second Language Acquisition	Course Evaluation	Language Teaching & Learning	Interpersonal Communication & Phonology	Social Effects on Language Learning	Business Contexts
	3 (10.34%)	3 (10.34%)	17 (58.62%)	1 (3.46%)	2 (6.90%)	3 (10.34%)

#### IV. DATA AND DESIGN

This part makes a comparison among the 29 articles concerning types and sources of data.

Among the 29 articles, 5 articles collected data from questionnaires and surveys, 17 from related documentations, 12 from participant observation, 15 from interviews, 2 from narratives and story-telling and 2 from self-reflection. This is shown in Table IV.

TABLE IV. DATA SOURCES FOR THE 29 ARTICLES

Source	Questionnaire and survey	Related documentations	Participant observation	Interview	Narratives and story-telling	Self-reflection
Quantity	5	17	12	15	2	2

As it is shown in Table IV, it can be assumed that there's a high percentage of articles, which collected data from multiple sources. It is noteworthy that there are articles which collected data not only from participant interviews, but also from interviews received by the relevant. In [22], a yearlong ethnographic case study of two study abroad South Korean families' language socialization practices, was conducted. The author acted as a family tutor and paid high attention to the two five-year-old Korean children. She observed and conducted interviews with the two children and finally obtained 135 audio recordings and 35 video recordings. However, in order to understand the familial contexts and explore how their parents enacted language ideologies, she also conducted interviews with the parents and the data were used as a member check as one of the major data sources. To illustrate how institutions and individuals could support immigrants' language learning

and settlement, [23] concentrated on a couple, who were Chinese immigrants in Canada. In addition to regular tape-recorded interviews with the couple, the author also had informal and formal interviews with people who were influential in their life. In these cases, interviews with children (the focus) and parents, interviews with the couple and related persons were both conducted. The article sees them as one way of data collection but two sources of data since interviews with different sides represent different perspectives. The significance of multiple data sources just lies in the provision of different perspectives, which helps a case study go in depth. Eventually, among the 29 articles, 5 articles collected their data from two sources, and 13 articles built up their data corpus from three or more sources, which shows the fact that 18 articles collected data from multiple resources and the rest of 11 articles had only one way to get data. Among the 5 articles with two data

sources, 3 took the combination of participant observation and interviews [16], [18], [24], 1 favored survey combined with documents [25], and 1 preferred to combine interviews with documents [26]. Among the 13 articles with three or more data sources, 5 combined observation, interviews with documents or surveys [19], [27], [30]; 3 had observation and interviews and documents, surveys or self-reflection as abundant data sources [17], [31], [32]; 1 incorporated free conversations with survey and narratives [12]; 1 integrated survey with discussion reports and student diaries [33]; 1 collected data from classroom discourse, self-reflection and documents [34]; and the rest, as it was mentioned above, 1 observed and conducted interviews with participants as well as relevant persons [22]-[23].

Among the remaining 11 articles, which adopted only one way to collect data, 5 were themed on language teaching and learning [20], [35], [38]. In these articles, researchers simply relied on one data source (writing samples, reports, dialogue journals or interviews to the same object). For example, targeted at exploring the role of contrastive rhetoric in writing pedagogy in the context of a monolingual class, [35] had a design of pre-test and pro-test (both pre-test and pro-test belong to procedures of experiment, which is known to be a typical quantitative research method). In pre-test, the group of students, were asked to write a timed essay within 45 minutes. Then in the pro-test, which happened 6 days later, students were acquired to finish a home writing assignment. During the analysis process, there was a comparison between these writing samples and a discourse analysis focusing on textual features was conducted. Since there are no other data sources, this study is more like a discourse analysis rather than case study. Besides, only one perspective was provided, it is far from a qualified, in-depth case study. Actually, researchers who collect multiple data sources come up with the issue of “triangulation”. [19] aimed to explore the transformation of professional identities of novice ESOL (English to speakers of other languages) teachers. In this design, interview data were primary while journal protocols and observation provided supplementary data for explaining the changes in participants’ professional identities and were used to triangulate and further validate or inspect the interview data. Similarly, with the lack of different perspective to look into, and lack of triangulations, all of the 11 articles of single data source are hard to be called real case studies.

In the stage of data analysis, the 29 articles adopted different methods for analyzing. Collaborated with the data from interviews and documentation collection, 6 articles chose conversational analysis, 7 adopted discourse analysis and 5 worked on thematic (content) analysis. [39] explained this method in detail. The frequencies of the various details represent the themes. Seeing through the written and transcribed materials, he found out some themes according to the frequency with which they occur. [19] emphasized the importance of

reading and rereading. Only in this way could a piece of data be illustrated, a unit of meaning be shown or implied. Then the themes after coding need further exploration to discover the relationships between them. Finally, a careful reorganization of the tentative categorization is required. And the rest of the 9 articles, especially those collected their data relying on one source, just made simple comparisons under certain standards.

## V. CONCLUSION

Case study is not at all an easy term to define, especially in social science. However, in the field of linguistics, case study is a typical qualitative research method which holds an equal status as ethnography and narratives. With the nature of in-depth descriptions, case study features multiple data resources. The current study is a retrospect on the development of case study in linguistics since 2000. Based on eight core foreign periodicals, it is discovered that there are only 29 journals during 8 years which claimed themselves to be “case study”, not as many as expected. Most of them focus on language teaching and learning. Though 18 studies collected data from multiple sources, there are still 11 studies relying on single data source. In this sense, though they have detailed descriptions of a case or cases, they don’t meet the requirements of obtaining data from different ways and showing various perspectives of an event. The theoretical part of this article needs strengthening and more in-depth explorations are needed. However, to quote Casanave, “novice scholars, no matter what their mother tongues, also need to understand that one of the purposes is to add their own voices to authoritative conversations in a field, and thus help change the field and its practices”, in this sense, this article is of significance.

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