
Book Review

A Realist Approach for Qualitative Research

Joseph A. Maxwell. Sage Publications, Inc., 2012. (222 pages). ISBN: 9780761929239

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In a recent issue of *OnCUE Journal*, Keith Ford highlighted the need for a balance of theoretical perspectives to be represented in this journal. A new book by Dr. Joseph A. Maxwell, *A Realist Approach for Qualitative Research*, is an invaluable study for anyone who wants to explore a theoretical perspective which treads the ground between qualitative and quantitative research without being either naïve or overly complex. In this review I want to outline the components of a realist approach as propounded by Maxwell and explain its relevance for those engaged in applied linguistics research. Since Maxwell formulates his approach to social studies by referring to applied linguistics as just one of several disciplines in the field, I will also discuss Belz's research on German-American telecollaboration, one of the very few empirical works in applied linguistics framed within a realist perspective (Belz, 2002).

In my PhD research project, I interrogate the relationship between the ideological discourse of *nihonjinron* (roughly translated as the “study of Japanese uniqueness”) and EFL education in Japan. As such, I must look for ways to combine observable reality (language use in the classroom, for example) with larger realities beyond the immediate (social structures and cultural systems).

With time, I came to realize that a realist-oriented critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2010) has the greatest potential for revealing the complexity of the relationship between individuals and social institutions.

Since the 1940s, when the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan initiated the groundwork in establishing applied linguistics as a field of study, quantitative research has been dominant. A large portion of empirical work has emerged from the positivist tradition which a) prioritizes systematic regularity and direct causality and b) shows a tendency to overlook diversity in data. In the area of research on *nihonjinron* and EFL in Japan, I have noticed that several studies show the same tendency to limit the use of empirical tools to questionnaires and interviews, then generalize results to the Japanese population at large (Befu and Manabe, 1987; Gano, 1987; Rivers, 2011; Sullivan and Schatz, 2009; Yoshino, 1992). From this basis, Befu & Manabe (1987), Gano (1987) and Yoshino (1992) conclude that there is a direct causal link between *nihonjinron* and educational practices. I believe that this approach to research is problematic, because in attempting to quantify complex social processes there is a temptation to overlook data which may appear extraneous, or to over-amplify the significance of certain data. On the other hand, the most notable shortcomings of qualitative research are its emphasis on local contexts and its tendency to “use data collection and analysis methods that emphasize uniformity, such as relying on key informants and focusing on shared themes and concepts” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 64). In short, neither of these research traditions is entirely convincing. Maxwell proposes a more viable strategy which combines both methodological traditions as a form of triangulation, each approach compensating for the shortcomings of the other.

Dr. Maxwell’s book is structured in the following way. Part One outlines the realist approach to social research and provides insightful explanations of concepts such as meaning, culture, causation and diversity. Part Two defines central qualitative research approaches. It explains the design of a variegated approach to research. Here, the author addresses important research issues such as validity, reliability and evidence. Part Three provides two actual applications of critical realism in social research. In the first example, Maxwell studies kinship

systems and social organization among Plains Indians. In it, he recounts how he, as a cultural anthropologist, moved from positivism to interpretivism, to constructivism, and finally to a realist perspective. The second example is a year-long ethnographic fieldwork project in a northern Canadian Inuit community. Here, Maxwell recalls how he solidified his realist stance by deepening his views on meaning and diversity.

Maxwell positions himself within the realist tradition initiated by Bhaskar (1978, 1979, 1998) by first defining realism as an ontological perspective. More specifically, he holds that the relationship between ontology (what reality is) and epistemology (how we perceive that reality) is complex. Taking from Kant's two-world interpretation and from Husserl's phenomenology of perception, realism rejects theories which conflate epistemology and ontology. Instead, it sees both forms of knowledge as possessing *sui generis* properties. Consequently, one of the primary concerns for realist-oriented research should be to provide an account of the relationship between these two forms of knowledge.

Maxwell's particular realist perspective echoes Bhaskar's (1998) and Corson's (1997) critical brand of realism. He defines critical realism as an approach to knowledge and empirical research which combines a realist ontology and a constructivist epistemology (i.e., our understanding of reality is our own creation, composed for our own specific purposes). This effectively calls into question the notion of pure objectivity in research. Maxwell stresses that all of our knowledge is partial, incomplete and fallible. Therefore, our epistemology is essentially interpretive as opposed to straightforwardly representational. But if we only have our senses to perceive the world, and if our perceptions are essentially different from the reality we aim to describe, how are we to assert any claim to knowledge? In response, realist thinkers, including Sayer (2000), ask a further question: what is it about reality which leads us to form the kind of knowledge we have of it? Put differently, because epistemology is constructed through discourse, and ontology possesses properties that are distinct from epistemology, what is it about ontology which leads us to formulate epistemological discourse in the way we do? To me, this question is refreshing because it is a departure from post-structuralism and other forms of relativism which define social reality as entirely constituted by

discourse.

Critical realism has long been rejected by many advocates of empiricism and quantitative research on the basis that, while it criticized empiricism's take on probability and causality, it offered nothing back in return. However, in suggesting terms such as process or mechanism instead of long accepted notions like cause or rule, I believe Maxwell offers a valid alternative.

Maxwell has devoted much of his academic life to the realist approach to social inquiry. For over 25 years, he has been actively teaching, researching and writing on qualitative research design, especially the philosophy and logic of research methodology. Some of his main foci include cultural and social theory and the integration of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Maxwell's approach is of great significance to applied linguistics for two main reasons. First, since using a language is not just a cognitive but a social practice, we need to frame our accounts of language use within the larger field of social research. This is not to say that SLA research has overlooked social contexts altogether. But for the most part, this area has been given marginal attention. Of course, accounting for the social stratum influences both data collection procedures and data interpretations. As such, because the larger social sphere often resides beyond the directly observable, we need to contemplate a richer approach to interpretative research.

Second, Maxwell offers valuable insights into the notion of diversity. He takes from Wallace's (1970) views on culture and argues that the field of social research has been dominated by the replication of uniformity model, which holds that similarities between people are what bind societies together. A famous example of such approach is Benedict's (1946) *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, which describes Japanese post-war society in terms of its shared values and rituals. In contrast, by adhering to the organization of diversity approach to culture, he argues that social diversity is not only real but fundamental to social organization. Sugimoto and Mouer's (2002) study of Japanese culture and society is a good example of this approach. By emphasizing contiguity rather than similarity, Maxwell shows that solidarity is created by processes which have less to do with similarities or commonalities between individuals, but with contiguity,

or a combination of differences and complementarity between people.

Pertaining specifically to qualitative research, Maxwell's contribution is significant because it considers people's beliefs, intentions and feelings as equally real entities (in the ontological sense) as objects or processes. Furthermore, their discursive formulation can reveal valuable insights into humans' understanding of their world. The author expands on this view by stressing that people's beliefs, intentions and feelings are not inherent but socially constructed. Also, because these mental characteristics are crucial in explaining the kinds of actions individuals choose to undertake, social research should pay close attention to them. To achieve this, Maxwell points towards the analysis of verbal behavior, i.e., CDA.

Personally, I have found Dr. Maxwell's book to be one of the most engaging, insightful, informative and motivational books on the subject of qualitative research to date. Unfortunately, little is said about applied linguistics per se. However, I believe that his insights into social processes and social research can help us realize, as applied linguists, that the study of language learning involves observation and interpretation of highly complex phenomena, and most importantly, that our field must be located within the larger field of social research.

In closing, I invite readers to look for Belz (2002), one of the very few genuinely applied linguistics research adhering to a realist perspective. In her paper, she focuses on German-American telecollaboration and combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods. By distinguishing between context and setting (structure) and situated activity and self (agency), Belz employs a stratified view into social reality, which is characteristic of the realist approach. Each stratum is observed through both quantitative and qualitative means. Different forms of discourse are analyzed through different analytical tools, bridging fields such as psychology, political science, technology and applied linguistics. Most noticeably, she refrains from establishing clear causal relationships or making deterministic claims to truth. Instead, she argues that the relationship between context/setting and situated activity/self is multi-directional, and therefore no single cause can be revealed. Yet, she remains confident that her overall analysis,

being ecologically rich, can act as solid basis for a concluding discussion on pedagogical implications.

To me, a realist approach to qualitative research, such as the one advocated by Maxwell and applied by Belz, is ideal because it conceptualizes the notion of causality by first distinguishing between ontology and epistemology. Accordingly, while human interpretation of reality constitutes a real world in itself, it also interacts with ontological reality in a causal relationship. To reveal this process, it is crucial for us to enrich our interpretations of real-world phenomena while asking ourselves: what is it about reality which leads us to formulate our interpretations of it in the way we do?

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