



## LITERATURE REVIEW IN CONTEXT: SUBSTANCES AND PROCEDURES

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### **Abstract:**

The study examines the concept of literature review in research framework. The main objective is to gather various and explicit scholars' views on how to review, manage and structure literature review as a vital component of research proposal. Therefore, content analysis as qualitative technique is employed to achieve the objective of the paper. The paper discusses the concept of research, social scientific research, and identifies number of social scientific research norms (universalism, organized skepticism, disinterestedness, communalism and honest). Again, the paper identifies goals and various sources of literature review including primary and secondary sources, its types, and common challenges and finally, basic substances/sub-heading, which every literature review should include. Consequently, the findings reveals that five basic sub-headings including introduction, conceptual framework, theoretical framework (if needed), review of empirical studies and summary and uniqueness of the study should be included in the chapter (Review of Related Literature).

**Keywords:** research; literature review; sources of data; primary sources; secondary sources substances; procedures

### **1. Introduction**

Generally, the focus of undergraduate and postgraduate programs at the University level is on the basic of exclusive preparation on writing a research project, theses and dissertation; and training the students on how to write well. However, the emphasis is

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highly on research, which is a system and rigorous process of asking and answering questions about the man and nature. Hence, it is quite important to define the term 'research'. The composition or the word 'research' consists of two syllables, "re" and "search" The prefix "re" is used with the meaning "again" or "again and again", and the verb "search" means to explore or examine in order to discover. Join the two nouns together then we generate the meaning of systematic investigations regarding a particular phenomenon with the aim of finding its effect, influence, impact or causes (Moten, 2009:1). In essence, researches conducted within the framework of education as a field of study, are called social scientific research. Therefore, the subsequent paragraphs provide a clear dichotomy between social scientific and social research.

## **2. Social Science Research, Social Research and Methods: A Dichotomy In-Between**

Social science research is central in a "reality-based community." It relies on people carefully studying experiences, events, and facts in social reality. Again, social research helps us answer questions and may change how we look at the world as well. It relies on the process and evidence of science as such, and it can differ from casual observation, common sense reasoning, and other ways to evaluate evidence, including pure logical-rational reasoning (mathematical or philosophical proof) or legal-judicial procedure. Some people call social sciences "soft sciences". This is not because the fields lack rigor but because their subject matter-human social life is highly fluid, formidable to observe, and difficult to measure precisely (Neuman, 2012:141).

Social research refers to type of research conducted by social scientists following a systematic plan and research methodologies that are classified into quantitative and qualitative dimensions/designs. The former deal with social phenomena through quantifiable evidence, and often rely on statistical analysis of many cases to create valid and reliable general claims, such researches are directly related to quantity. While the later designs emphasize understanding of social phenomena, through direct observation, communication with participants, analysis of texts, and may stress contextual subjective accuracy over generality. Such types of researches are directly related to quality (Marshall and Rossman, 2006:3).

Moreover, social research is a type of research that exists everywhere, which affects our daily activities and that of our neighbours, friends, co-workers and family. To expatiate, research generally, is quite salient to conduct as it helps to understand social life and arrive at possibly effective and appropriate decisions regarding a problem. In addition, social science research provides relevant, efficient and valuable information and enlarges our horizon of knowledge; however, despite its value, it is not 100 percent perfect or error free. Social scientists employ a range of methods in order to

analyse a vast breadth of social phenomena: from [census](#) survey data derived from millions of individuals, to the in-depth analysis of a single agent's social experiences; from monitoring what is happening on contemporary streets, to the investigation of ancient historical documents. Methods rooted in classical [sociology](#) and [statistics](#) have formed the basis for research in other disciplines, such as [political science](#), [media studies](#), [program evaluation](#) and [market research](#) (Neuman, 2012:143).

As stated, methods may be classified as quantitative or qualitative; most methods contain elements of both. For example, qualitative data analysis often involves a structured approach to coding the raw data into systematic information, and quantifying intercoder reliability. Thus, there is often a more complex relationship between "qualitative" and "quantitative" approaches than would be suggested by drawing a simple distinction between them (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011:322)

## 2. Norms of Scientific Community

There are five scientific research norms identified by Neuman (2012), which every research student is expected to adhere to them. These include the following:

- **Universalism:** It is a norm in scientific research that emphasizes that every research must be judged only based on scientific merit. In other words, no research should attain merit considering the status a person who owns it. For instance, a Professor, Emeritus; or the locality where the research was conducted, for example, Harvard University, United States.
- **Organized scepticism:** It a norm in scientific community that researches must be subjected to criticism, challenges and intensive scrutiny, in order to proof its worthiness. The motive is not to attack the individual researcher, rather than to ensure that methods used and evidences provided are right.
- **Disinterestedness:** Scientists must be impartial, neutral and be prepared to accept any findings that contradict their beliefs provided they possess quality.
- **Communalism:** It is a norm that stresses that knowledge, new findings obtain from new researches must be shared with other people through publications, conferences or seminars.
- **Honesty:** Generally, this is a universal norm, but it is highly recommended in scientific research. Scientists are expected to demonstrate honesty, and dishonesty is socially and culturally prohibited.

### 3. Literature Review in Context: Definitions and Relevance

Literature review section is mostly recognized as the second chapter out the five chapters, which made up a research project in an educational context. However, is not necessary that literature review section most emerge as chapter two; rather, every institution of learning or departments have their own nomenclature on which they adhere to it. Conducting a literature review is the most vital if not concerned to be the first step in scientific research. It is one component of research proposals, projects, theses and dissertations, which deals with the examination of accumulated knowledge or researches conducted in a particular area of interest, because it is ethical and likewise important to find out what others have learned and contributed on a phenomenon before you start addressing the issue. For instance, researchers normally develop interest on a particular phenomenon, coin a topic and then dwell into specific question that guides the study. Hence, they encounter two salient issues. To reiterate, supposing the topic under investigation is 'drug abuse'. There is need for the researcher to narrow it into a specific statement. For example, influence drug abuse on students' academic performance. Consequently, the researcher first needs to ask if there are any past studies relevant to this phenomenon (reviewing the scholarly literature on the effects/influence of drug abuse on students' academic performance). Ideally, structuring a phenomenon into a specific research statement overlaps nicely with reviewing the literature. Second, the researcher needs to be ethical throughout the research process (Neuman, 2011:124).

Literature review simply refers to the collection of current knowledge including substantive findings, methodological contributions to a particular topic of interest. To reiterate, literature review is defined as "*a story about your journey: your journey through scholarship in your particular field*". Literature reviews are categorised as secondary sources, which is strongly advised to encompass academic oriented literature found in recommended books, academic Journal articles (in form of *pdf* format). Most importantly, a literature review should focus only on the relevant academic scholarship. That is why is it is called 'review of related literature', consisting of up-to-date material (publications/materials of the present year and five years downward) (Brown, 2013).

In nutshell, preparing a literature review consists the following:

- Searching for reliable, accurate and up-to-date material on the topic or subject
- Reading and summarising the key points from this literature
- Synthesising these key ideas, theories and concepts into a summary of what is known
- Discussing and evaluating these ideas, theories and concepts
- Identifying particular areas of debate or controversy

- Preparing the ground for the application of these ideas to new research

#### 4. Goals of a Literature Review

Many social and scientific researchers affirm that literature review differ in terms of scope and depth. However, any review regardless of its nature, it intends to accomplish the following four goals as identified by Neuman (2011):

- To demonstrate a familiarity with a body of knowledge and establish credibility: A review gives a reader an impression that the researcher knows the area very well; and exhausted all relevant concepts and theories related to the phenomenon under study.
- To show the path of prior research and how a current project is linked to it: A review spells out the direction of current research; and how it emerges out of the related body of knowledge; and its relevance by making connection to the prior studies.
- To integrate and summarize what is known in an area: A review synthesizes different results, point out agreements, disagreements and gaps need to be filled.
- To learn from others and stimulate new ideas: A review reveals what has been found so that it can benefit others. In addition, a good review discloses techniques, research design and procedures that are worthy replicating.

#### 5. Sources of Literature Review: Primary and Secondary Sources

**Primary Source:** This refers to manufactured object, article, autobiography, a diary, a recording. In addition, it is called original source of information on a particular topic. However, primary source differs in a specialized field of knowledge. For instance, a person with direct knowledge of a particular situation is defined as 'primary source' in journalism. More so, primary sources are original sources that do not cite or comment; they are source upon which secondary sources are built on (Buckler and Walliman, 2008:101).

**Secondary sources:** A source is considered a 'secondary' when a document records or discusses information that was initially presented somewhere. Secondary sources include synthesis, review, evaluation and interpretation of the original information. Both the terms *Primary* and *secondary* are been used interchangeably, the distinction can be made depending on the context or subject. For instance, when a historical document discusses old documents, provides a synopsis and come up with novel historical conclusion, then it is now termed, as 'primary source because of the novel and innovative conclusion; but it is a 'secondary source of scholarship that exists in the old

documents. Moreover, a source can be both primary and secondary, for example, a researcher conducted a survey with an intention to explore on different volumes of a journal counting the occurrence of articles on a certain phenomenon or topic. In this case, the total consulted that might be 100, is the secondary source; whereas, the frequency found by the researcher, for example, 2000 is now emerged to be the 'primary source', (original). To reiterate, a source can be considered as secondary or primary in a particular context, and tend to appear differently in another context. To support this assertion, if a given piece of writing discusses the content of a previous original scholarship, and later the original document gets missing, then now the available one is regarded as 'primary source'. However, if the original one happens to be found in the later time, it so now considered as ' the primary source'. Hence, the both sources are related and can be used interchangeably, depending on the context (Buckler and Walliman, 2008:101).

## 6. Types of Literature Reviews

Neuman (2012) identifies the following types of literature review:

**Context review:** The researcher/author connects a particular study to a larger body of knowledge in a review, which normally appears at the beginning of a research report. In addition, this type of review initially introduces a study through connecting it within large framework of knowledge and indicates how it continues developing.

**Historical review:** This review is special in nature in which the author traces an event or issue over period, explaining how concepts, theory and research method development over a given time. Moreover, this type of review can be fused with methodological and theoretical review.

**Integrative review:** In this type of review, the author discusses and summarizes the current nature of knowledge on the topic of interest. It also aims at pointing out areas of agreements and disagreements.

**Methodological review:** In this type of review, the author compares and evaluates the relative methodological strength of various studies and show different methodologies report different results. For instance, samples, measures and research designs might differ within various researches; hence, it is good for the researcher to indicate reasons if possible for the uniqueness.

**Self-study review:** It is a review, in which an author demonstrates mastery and acquaintances with the area of study.

**Theoretical review:** It is a type of review, which involves presenting numerous concepts or theories related to one topic, and then compare them based on logical consistency, assumptions and scope of explanation.

## 7. Procedures for Review of Related Literature

Literature review is a systematic process that encompasses robust and unique styles and procedures, which research students need to follow in order to gather important and related scholarship. The following are the pertinent questions, which a research student needs to focus on while searching for literature as proposed by Knopf (2006):

1. What questions have the existing publications addressed and what issues have been neglected?
2. What are the main arguments and conclusions of existing research?
3. What are the points of convergence and divergence and what are the bases of the divergence?
4. What theories and/or policies has the literature addressed and what alternative theories and/or policies have not been examined?
5. How authentic/valid are the conclusions that have been reached?
6. What have we learned to date?
7. What are the most important problems and gaps that require additional research?
8. What methodology (ies) have been adopted and are there alternative methodology?

Considering the above questions help the researcher to arrive at the following as identified by Cresswel, (2009:25):

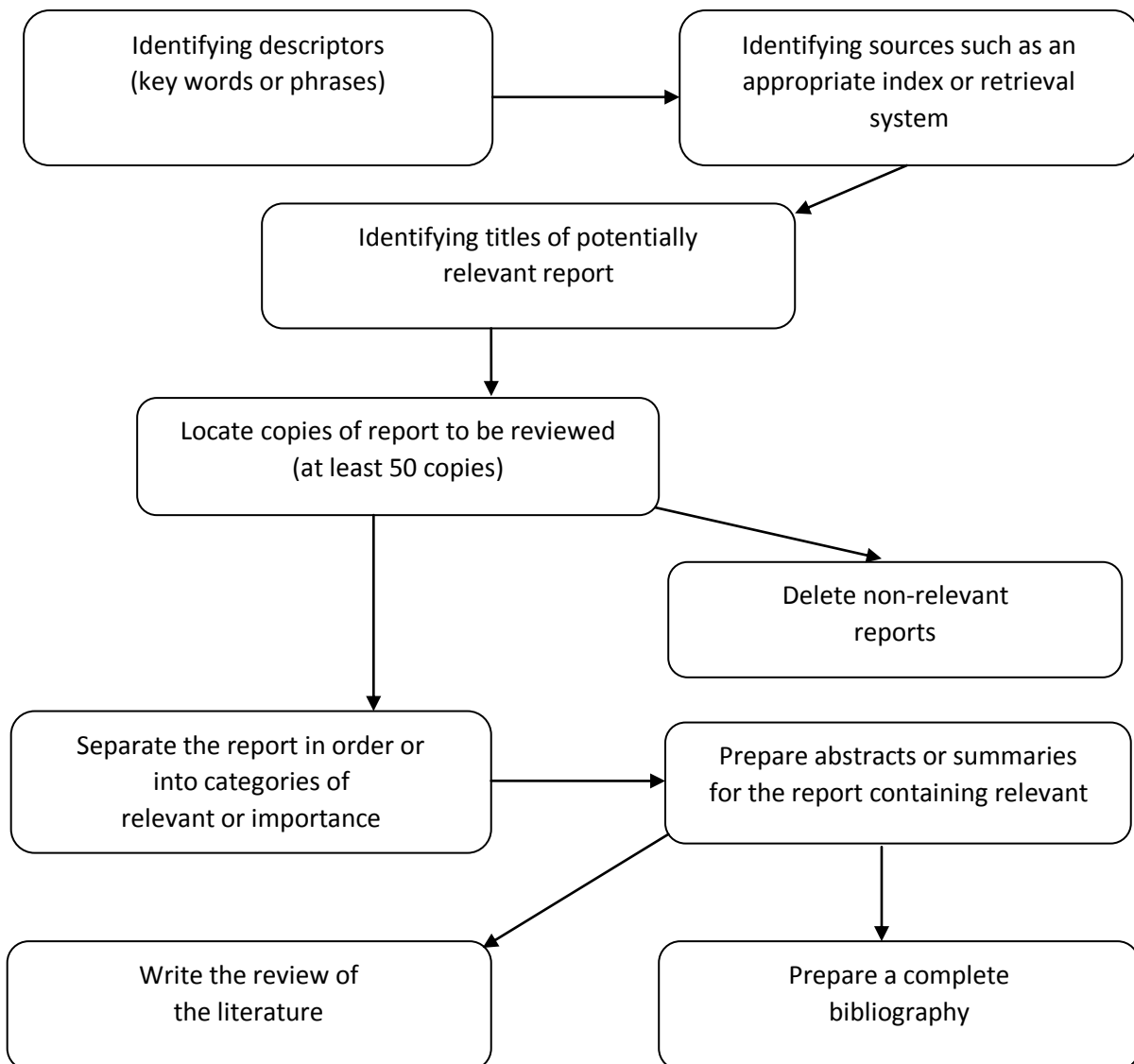
1. Delimiting the research problem;
2. Seeking new lines of arguments;
3. Avoiding fruitless approaches;
4. Gaining methodological insights;
5. Identifying recommendations for further research; and,
6. Seeking support for grounded theory.

Consequently, the student researcher will be able to produce research work that is original, with has the following characteristics as discussed by Hart (1998:27):

1. Doing empirically based work that has not been done before;
2. Using already known ideas, practices or approaches but with a new interpretation;
3. Bringing new evidence to bear on an old issue or problem;
4. Creating a new synthesis that has not been done before;
5. Applying something done in another country to one's own country;
6. Applying a technique usually associated with one area to another;
7. Being cross disciplinary by using different methodologies;
8. Looking at areas that people in the discipline have not looked at before, and,

9. Adding to knowledge in a way that has not been done before

**Figure 1.1:** Flow chart of activities in the review of the literature



Source: William Wiersma (1995:29)

## 8. Literature Review: Expected Substances

Reviewing, selecting and structuring contents of literature in a research project are skills that signify one's tradition, experiences, or worldview. It is widely known that different institutions and field of study adhere to various acceptable styles or format in structuring their literature review. However, there are four basic substances, which every literature is expected to address, regardless of the field of study. The substances/sub headings are:



## **2.1 Introduction**

### **2.2 Conceptual Framework (e.g. different views related to the variables)**

#### **2.2.1. Categories/classification/types of the concepts (as an example)**

#### **2.2.2. Effects of the concept (e.g. effects of motivation on students' performance)**

#### **2.2.3. Learners' characteristics on the concept (as an example)**

### **2.3. Theoretical framework (if needed)**

#### **2.3.1 Theory X**

#### **2.3.2 Theory Y**

#### **2.3.3 Theory Z**

### **2.4. Review of empirical studies (current sources)**

### **2.5 Summary and uniqueness of the study**

Based on the above structure, let us consider some research topics in order to know what is exactly needed under each substance/sub-heading of literature review. For example, the topic of interest is 'language learning strategies', and the focal point is to investigate the most frequent learning language learning strategies among 100 level undergraduate students' of Umaru Musa Yar'adua University, Katsina state. Therefore, the literature review section would look like:

## **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses previous related studies in education and psychological aspects related to language learning and motivation. It also delineates on the contribution of demographic influence on learning strategies, models of learning strategies, cognitive engagement and factors that affect students' cognitive engagement. Studies related to language learning strategies emerged over the past three decades. It was the time when Rubin and Stem (1975) brought the idea of successful language learners. Concurrently, there are several models developed by scholars to help students to acquire language skills. These include Chamot and Kupper (1989), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford, (1990), Grenfell and Harris, (1999).

## **2.2 Learning Strategies and Styles: Similarities and Differences**

### **2.2.1 Learning Strategies: Terms and Classification**

### **2.2.2 Learning Strategies and Learner's Characteristics**

### **2.2.3 Instructional Language Learning Strategy Models**

## **2.3 Theoretical Framework (if needed)**

## **2.4 Review of Empirical studies (current studies)**

## **2.5 Summary and Uniqueness of the study**

## **9. Common Challenges in Review of Literature: Remedies and Way Forward**

There are bunch of challenges and mistakes, which so many reviewers commit while searching and writing literature review. Some can be easily detected and tend to be common among researchers. However, the challenges can be summarized into two major bedevilled issues. First, copious and plenty sources; and second, scarcity of literature. Students should know that, it is more salient to encounter a problem of plenteous data than to have scarcity of literature on a particular topic. Both are

challenges, because in the case of too many data, students tend to mishandle sources; whereas the paucity of data will make supervisor to change the approved topic to the supervisee.

According to Knopf (2006:130), a student research can turn the challenge of paucity of data to an advantage, which will depict his/her commitment to carry out the research as well as the uniqueness of the study. He added that the challenge of numerous sources can be resolved by considering the following steps:

- Focus on the leading authorities: Author and studies that are frequently cited in relevant journals articles, books and other sources should be strictly consulted.
- Focus on recent studies from high prestige or high-visibility sources: Authors should only consult recent documents that are published in recognized and high prestige Journals, academic faculties, university press and high ranked universities.
- Focus on the studies that are most relevant and helpful for your question of interest: Articles or research materials that have less impact should not be consulted

## 10. Conclusion

Many researchers consider literature as the major vital part in writing a research work. Hence, they emphasize that students researchers should be equipped with the basic and necessary skills on how to produce substantive literature review. More so, there are so many challenges, which students experience while engaging in searching for relevant literature materials, such as paucity of data and having copious data on the area of interest. These can be regarded as advantages; however, it depends on the context. Most importantly, there are ranges of questions that a researcher needs to enable him/her to access reliable and relevant materials in the process of conducting a research. Most importantly, every literature review should encompass major substances/sub-headings including, introduction, conceptual framework, theoretical framework (if needed) and final summary and uniqueness of the study.

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