Literature Review in Research Writing: Some Practical and Theoretical Perspectives

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What is Literature?
Literature can be understood from different perspectives: a collection of creative works of a people, written and sometimes spoken; a story, fiction, drama or poetry of high artistic value; any written, informative text – example the leaflets inside the packages of drugs or other products we buy; and lastly, a body of existing works and researches – publications, books, journal articles, and conference papers – on a particular subject. Our interest today is on the last perspective of literature (a body of existing research on a particular subject). Let us now define and explain literature review, with this perspective in mind.

What is Literature Review?
The literature review is a critical examination of previous research works or studies related to a research topic. It is meant to provide background information on the research question (the main intention/ objective of the research), and to identify what others have said and/or discovered about the research question (Nunan, 2008), In the course of carrying out a literature review, one may come across a study which answers the very question one is proposing to investigate. This is part of the reason many supervisors and mentors insist their students/ mentees engage in the literature review after choosing a research topic. If one discovers that what one intends to investigate has already been investigated by another researcher, one may not continue with the topic, rather one can retouch the topic (fine-tune the problem to include an area where there are still gaps in knowledge (questions yet to answered) on the subject. If some previous researcher studied the IMT Enugu Financial Challenges as it obtained between the years 2000 to 2020, for example, you can decide to study the IMT Enugu Financial Challenges as obtained from 2020 to 2025, as the case may be. Or if the previous study centred on the IMT Management, you can focus on the IMT students, or a particular department, as opposed to a previous study that studied another department.

Generally, writing the literature review helps the researcher to understand the following:
1. the opinions of scholars on the subject of the research (conceptual review);
2. the range of theories that scholars on the subject have used to analyse their primary data (theoretical review);
3. the studies that have been carried out (including their methodologies and findings) on the subject of study (empirical review);

4. the important gaps in knowledge not covered by previous researches; and
5. the necessity to cover these gaps in knowledge as established by scholars and stakeholders in the field (such scholars/ stakeholders should be cited accordingly).

Okeugo (2023) corroborates the above. For Okeugo, an effective literature review should:
- flesh out the introduction's brief description of the background of the study.
- critically assess important research trends or areas of interest relevant to the study.
- identify potential gaps in knowledge.
- establish a need for current and/ or future research projects. (p. 318)

Also, the effective literature review helps the researcher to discover "how other scholars connect their specific research topics to larger issues, questions or practices in the field" (Okeugo, 2023, p. 317).

In the opinion of Ezeh (2011), the ultimate goal of the literature review is "to bring the reader up to date with current literature on a topic and forms the basis for another goal, such as future research that may be needed in the area" (49). The literature review helps to establish the potential gaps in knowledge which the Background of Study (in Chapter One) usually must have briefly exposed.

Where to Get the Materials for Literature Review
- the libraries; the internets; book stores; the archives; personal collections

Materials/ Sources of Information for Literature Review
- journal articles,
- research projects for the award of degrees
- textbooks – reports of field works
- conference papers

The internet – world wide web – today is the easiest and quickest means of getting the required materials for literature, because most libraries, journals or authors of repute all have their websites and products online. There are almost a limitless number of high-impact factor articles in high-impact factor journals, as indexed by Scopus or SCImago (Thomson Reuters), etc., on any subject available online, though some of the journals do not publish Open Access. They may require the reader to subscribe and pay before accessing the articles. But then, there are other free research platforms, such as Google Scholar, Research-Gate, Academia Letters, etc. where the researcher can access, free of charge, research works, journal article, conference papers, books, even some of those ones that you cannot access without paying in the publishing journals' website. Yes, because most researchers are registered on the platform and often freely upload their publications on their own pages. Thus, the internet becomes a fertile ground for getting the materials for literature review. Asking specific questions help to provide better results.

Remember: The internet is also filled with learners' opinions, unreliable and even false positions on a topic. Be careful to look at the material and the source of the material critically before taking its content.

Leveraging the AI programmes

Using AI ethically for your literature review or research makes it possible for you to have easy access to all the knowledge, existing, on a particular topic, or subject. It is just like using your computer to answer your questions. Asking the right questions is also important here. Every significant research that has been done over the centuries has been reported online, so AI makes it possible for you to check out these, as quickly as possible, as much as you can go, and ethically too.

With AI tools, such as Chat GTP, Gemini, etc., one can easily prepare an annotated bibliography – a list of relevant studies relating to the research question or issue, ranging from advertised abstracts, brief research reports, to books.

Skills Needed for Literature Review:

Information seeking skills: The researcher needs the ability to scan through a large volume of written material, whether manual or computerized, to identify a set of useful articles and books.

Critical appraisal skills: The ability to apply the principles of analysis to identify unbiased and valid studies is also key.

Paraphrasing skills: Excessive verbatim quotations, using the exact words of the authors of works you are examining, usually renders the literature lengthy, unnecessarily boring and irrelevant in actual fact. The researcher should be able to summarize a previous study using mainly their own words.

Words/ expressions that can be used while citing authorities or reviewing the studies: explore, analyse, examine, uncover, reveal, report; or contend, proffer, maintain, state, say, propound, corroborate, differ, etc. Example: In their study, Anidi and Kadiri (2018) explore the concepts of semantics. … They contend that …They employed the experimental method. Their findings include… Remember you can report in the past or the present tense, but be consistent, generally, whichever tense you choose.

Citations and references: Give credit to the authors whom you have used or borrowed their ideas and information. Use quotation marks when you copy the direct words of the author. For all in-text documentation, choose the style adopted in your area of study or department. Lack of appropriate citations lead to plagiarism theft of intellectual property.

How to Organise the Literature Review

Scholars such as Ezeh (2011) and Okeugo (2023) among others agree that literature review should be organised in sub-themes following the major sub-themes, which are usually categorized as:
- Conceptual Framework

- Theoretical Framework
- Empirical Studies
- Summary

Note that conceptual and theoretical frameworks are similar in meaning and function, but there is a thin difference between the two concepts, as discussed below. It should be noted that theoretical framework encapsulates conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework: It is a concise description of the major concepts or variables operating within the area of the problem, which other scholars have examined before. Ezeh (2011) describes it as a set of coherent ideas or concepts designed to support and show the network of relationship of the key areas of a study. It is not enough to only define the variables; you can compare and contrast viewpoints; or you can analyse the usefulness or relevance or not too relevance of the viewpoints in the present society.

Theoretical Framework: The theory is the guiding lens through which one's research can be seen and appreciated. It is a model showing how a theory or set of theories within the discipline relate to the particular research being carried out. Here, the researcher is expected to identify the theory, the propounder of the theory, date, tenets, relevance to the current study and benefits.

Empirical Studies: This explores the existing studies in the field in relation to the one being carried out. The researcher/ reviewer should read each study critically, and then summarise/ paraphrase, accordingly. The following aspects of each study should be noted – the author(s), date, and title of the study, methods of data collection, findings/ results, and recommendations. After these, the reviewer is expected to examine the areas of similarities and differences between the previous and current studies. At this stage, it is easy to identify the gaps in knowledge and the need for research in this area. The reviewer, however, does not make the case that the proposed research is going to plug all the gaps or meet the need in this area (Nunan, 2008).

Summary of Literature Review: It is usually necessary for the researcher/ reviewer to summarize the key points of the literature review, after all the conceptual, theoretical and the empirical reviews are completed. The summary should show briefly and in a logical manner how the subthemes – the conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature – as reviewed contribute in clarifying the problem of the study. Emphasis must be given to the gap(s) in knowledge seen in the empirical studies which underscores the importance of further research, such as the present one, on the subject. The literature review remains inconclusive without this sub-section – the summary.

Concluding Thoughts:
William Durant said, "Fifty year ago, I knew everything; now, I know nothing. Education is a progressive discovery of one's ignorance".

For Alvin Toffler, "The illiterates of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn". Remember the 'sin' of Galileo, Galileo was unjustly incarcerated, jailed for life, for committing what was assumed a heresy. "He said the earth is roundish/ spherical", as against the known, even Biblical, assertion that the earth is flat. Researches eventually proved Galileo right. Anyway, after many years/ centuries, Pope John Paul II eventually apologized on behalf of the Church for that error of judgement that led to the imprisonment and eventual death of Galileo in prison. One must keep learning, unlearning, and relearning. The moment you stop these, then you are prepared to die.

Look at me, I have been very skeptical of this idea of artificial intelligence (AI); I was scared of Apps like Chat GPT, Gemini, etc. I saw them as hackers, and the users as people reaping where they did not sow, something like plagiarism, stealing other people's (authors) intellectual output without due reference to them/ authors. Now, I am beginning to see that there are ethical ways of using the Apps. In fact, to remain current, updated and smart (not clumsy, obsolete and ignorant), to be able to accomplish a number of tasks quickly in this present fast-paced world where one is faced with a lot of responsibilities, one may leverage the AI Apps/ programs. It may be compared with using the computer and the smart phone. You can appreciate how much the phone/ computer helps us today to accomplish a number of works, almost simultaneously. In 30 minutes or less, for example, you have gone to bank to make transactions; gone to buy a product, food stuff, electronics, etc.; gone to class to give a message to your students; gone to your child's school or residence to check on them; attended a meeting, maybe in Abuja or the US, all online, without moving a leg, car, or aircraft.

Francis Bacon said that "Reading maketh a full man [person]; conference a ready man [person]; and writing an exact man [person]". Bacon again says that: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested". This means that some books are to be read only in part, others to be read but not curiously and some few to be read wholly with diligence and attention. We should put all these in focus while reading and reviewing the whole lot of literature on a particular subject.

Thanks for Listening.

References

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