Research Methods in Language Policy and Planning

A Practical Guide

Edited by Francis M. Hult and David Cassels Johnson

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Research Methods in Language
Policy and Planning
The science of language encompasses a truly interdisciplinary field of research, with a wide range of focuses, approaches, and objectives. While linguistics has its own traditional approaches, a variety of other intellectual disciplines have contributed methodological perspectives that enrich the field as a whole. As a result, linguistics now draws on state-of-the-art work from such fields as psychology, computer science, biology, neuroscience and cognitive science, sociology, music, philosophy, and anthropology.

The interdisciplinary nature of the field presents both challenges and opportunities to students who must understand a variety of evolving research skills and methods. The *Guides to Research Methods in Language and Linguistics* addresses these skills in a systematic way for advanced students and beginning researchers in language science. The books in this series focus especially on the relationships between theory, methods and data- the understanding of which is fundamental to the successful completion of research projects and the advancement of knowledge.

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In my book, *An Introduction to Language Policy: Theory and Method* (Ricento 2006b), I wrote “language policy and planning (LPP), as an interdisciplinary field, requires an understanding and use of multiple methods in exploring important questions about language status, language identity, language use, and other topics that fall within the purview of research” (Ricento 2006a, 129). I also agreed with James Paul Gee (1999, 5), who noted “any method always goes with a theory. Method and theory cannot be separated, despite the fact that methods are often taught as if they could stand alone.” Furthermore, as LPP tends to focus on practical, “real world” issues that involve language, researchers approach their work with *strategic* goals in mind; for example, a goal of research might be to explain how high-stakes exams in US public schools are de facto language policies, and often lead to disproportionately negative outcomes for language minority students (Menken 2008). Researchers who choose to investigate this topic already have strong views, often influenced by their own experience, on matters such as the nature and purpose of schooling, theories of language acquisition and learning, ethical concerns about fairness and validity in assessment practices, and so on, that will influence the questions they ask and the particular research methods they employ to answer those questions. In short, researchers in LPP usually have strategic goals in mind when they formulate research questions, goals that are strongly influenced by their particular beliefs and (often unstated) theories on a range of phenomena. It follows that the methodological tools that a researcher uses will be strongly influenced – if not determined – by his or her theories on the “objects” that are to be investigated, to be scrutinized for particular “properties” and relationships that the researcher believes, a priori, are worthy of investigation because they believe these are the properties that matter most, because their theories and beliefs lead them to believe so. Furthermore, regardless of the research methods we select from our toolkit, in the end, all social science research is *always* interpretive: despite our best intentions and efforts to achieve “objectivity,” or “neutrality,” or “validity” through our carefully selected research methods, as social scientists we are always *interpreters* of complex phenomena that are beyond our ability to understand and characterize in any definitive way.

These observations are in no way meant to diminish the importance or usefulness of research in LPP. Rather, they point to the essential fact that good research, from the inception of hypothesis generation, to the gathering and analysis of data, to the discussion of the findings and implications for policy and future research, is
value-laden, and this is a good and necessary thing. Social science research that is worthwhile can never be a sterile exercise in gathering facts and reporting observations conducted in a social vacuum; the best research in LPP is overtly mindful of why we ask the questions we ask, in whose interest we conduct research, and how individuals and society will benefit from our research.

The object(s) of our research arise from the social contexts – including belief systems – in which we are socialized and educated, and especially through the epistemological lenses acquired through our particular disciplinary training, subject to ongoing questioning and revision. Because LPP is an interdisciplinary field, researchers must become knowledgeable in subject areas outside their disciplinary specialization(s), a daunting task given the difficulties of gaining such knowledge and incorporating it in research questions and methods in non-ad hoc ways. Given the inherent challenge to understanding complex social phenomena that involve language, society, and policymaking and evaluation, the task of characterizing what we study and why we study it leads to perpetual debate and controversy. It is not surprising that much effort is spent on defining what, exactly, the field of LPP is, and what it is not. John Petrovic (2015) suggests that a productive way to think about “language policy” is not as a singular construct but as “language” and “policy,” each considered as a separate construct. This is because, according to Petrovic, different readings of “language” inform the shape that “policy” takes, while policy usually constructs language in particular ways. The implication from this formulation is that our theory of language precedes and informs our research questions that involve investigating policies on language in society. But, as Petrovic notes, if policy implies a theory of politics, then we cannot proceed very far in research unless we acknowledge “where we are coming from,” politically. This means, for example, that we cannot simply declare ourselves to be “liberals” without considering what sort of liberalism we embrace and what that could mean for our analysis of a particular policy or policy approach in particular contexts or social domains. Petrovic’s deconstruction of “language policy” is but one example to illustrate the challenges that obtain in the ongoing quest to develop a robust, coherent, and empirically informed field of intellectual inquiry under the heading “language policy and planning.” In response to these challenges, a number of scholars (François Grin, Peter Ives, Stephen May, Yael Peled, John Petrovic, and myself, among others) are endeavoring to generate conversations and collaborations across disciplinary boundaries in an effort to develop better theoretical and explanatory models amenable to empirical validation or refutation.¹

To summarize, there are no truly “naive” research questions in the social sciences; rather, the questions we ask and the methods we choose to investigate those questions are the products of deeply held beliefs on a broad range of phenomena, informed by theoretical constructs that claim to explain how and why things are “in the world,” and, in the case of LPP, how the world might be improved by applying the knowledge gained through empirical research. David C. Johnson (2013, 95) notes that “While the field of language policy is theoretically rich, empirical data collection on language policy creation, interpretation, appropriation, and instantiation has, historically, not matched the theoretical and conceptual robustness. In part, this is a natural result of the inchoate nature of the field.” I would add that our empirical research findings will certainly lead to better theorizing and conceptualizing, and that will require not only the appropriate use of a variety of social science
research methods described in this volume, but, of equal importance, greater aware-
ness and infusion of appropriate theories and conceptual frames from diverse disci-
plines, including political theory, political science, economics, social theory, and
related policy sciences.

This volume is a very useful addition to the developing, if “inchoate,” field of lan-
guage policy and planning; but it seems to me that what is now required is an
updated and expanded volume on theory2 that would include coverage on the afore-
mentioned disciplines in order to provide greater balance and coherence to a field
that, historically, has paid more attention to sociolinguistics and ethnography than it
has to politics, economics, or sociology.

Thomas Ricento
Calgary, Canada
September 2014

Notes

1 Examples of disciplinary boundary crossing can be found in a recent thematic issue of the
journal Language Policy, ‘Language Policy and Political Theory’ (Ricento, Peled, and Ives
2014), and in Ricento 2015.

2 Ricento 2006b covers some of this territory, but more extensive treatment in a number of
subject areas is warranted.

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Ricento, T., Peled, Y., and Ives, P., eds. 2014. Language policy and political theory. Language 
Policy 13(4). (Thematic issue.)
Applied linguistics is an intellectual space – a transdiscipline – where theories and methods from multiple fields intersect around language issues (Halliday 2001). Language policy, as Spolsky has pointed out, is a “paradigmatic example of applied linguistics in that it must draw on a range of academic fields to develop practical plans to modify language practices and beliefs” as well as to investigate policy processes empirically (Spolsky 2005, 31). Theories and methods are not merely imported from this range of academic fields, but refined and strategically combined in order to conduct research that is problem-centered, or issue-focused (Hult 2010a). Specialists in language policy and planning (LPP) have drawn upon a broad constellation of research methods that have roots in diverse disciplines such as anthropology, law, linguistics, political science, social psychology, and sociology (of language), among others, in order to conduct inquiry on problems or issues related to policy formation, interpretation, implementation, resistance, and evaluation.

Beginning in the 1960s, early language planning was primarily something that a handful of scholars did, and only later became an object of study (Spolsky 2005). These early scholars were called upon to develop strategies and frameworks for language-planning initiatives and produced many of the theoretical frameworks that we use today, very notably the distinction between status planning (focused on the functions of language) and corpus planning (focused on the forms of language), and, later, acquisition planning (focused on language learning) (see review in Hornberger 2006).

The 1980s and 1990s saw a growing group of critical scholars who explicitly engaged with language planning as a hegemonic mechanism potentially imbued with dominant and marginalizing discourses (e.g. Ruiz 1984; Tollefson 1991). Tollefson,
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for example, proposed the historical-structural approach, which focuses on the historical and sociopolitical processes that lead to the development of language policies. Around the same time, sociolinguistic researchers who utilized ethnography began to take an interest in LPP. Hornberger’s (1988) ethnographic investigation of language planning and bilingual education in Peru is one of the first to examine how language planning impacted language use in schools and communities.

Since the 1990s, and especially beginning in the 2000s, there has been a rapidly increasing number of researchers who utilize ethnographic and discourse-analytic methods to examine LPP processes “on the ground,” so to speak, with a focus on how policy texts and discourses relate to language practices in schools and communities (e.g. Davis 1994; Freeman 1998; King 2001). While this line of LPP research is prominent, as evidenced by recent edited volumes (e.g. McCarty 2011; Menken and García 2010), many other scholars have applied a broad spectrum of research methods from their respective fields to LPP studies, including economics (Grin 2003), political science (May 2001), and law (Leibowitz 1984; de Varennes 1996), among many others.

Over the last half-century of inquiry, then, research methods have been taken beyond their disciplinary foundations and honed specifically for LPP investigations. Thus, the field of LPP is maturing as scholars are paying more and more attention to diverse and critical ways of approaching LPP issues and, concomitantly, to research rigor (Johnson 2013; Menken and García 2010; Ricento 2006). As such, we believe the time is right for a volume that consolidates research approaches to LPP.

Our initial motivation for developing this book emerged from two distinct experiences: (1) during our dissertation fieldwork we felt a need for a resource like this book, and (2) our supervision of students leads us to believe that they, as well, would benefit from a book that helps them design and conduct language policy studies. Although students take qualitative and quantitative research methods courses during MA and PhD coursework, their application to studies of LPP is often left unexamined. It would, of course, be difficult for any college or department to offer advanced research methods courses in every domain in which students might do thesis or dissertation work. Indeed, part of the process of conducting independent work is to build on a general foundation of research methods to develop the details of a specific study. To this end, students in the early stages of developing a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation embark on substantial reading of methodological literature, in addition to other relevant topical and theoretical sources, to begin framing their own original studies.

In guiding our students, we have found it easy to recommend texts that address core principles and social theory related to language policy (e.g. Cooper 1989; Kaplan and Baldauf 1997; Ricento 2006; Shohmay 2006; Spolsky 2004, 2009); however, suggesting foundational texts on research design in language policy is much more challenging. There are many excellent methods texts in general areas such as discourse analysis, ethnography, and sociolinguistics, and empirical studies of language policy abound in journals and edited volumes. Going from general research methods to designing one’s own language policy study, though, can be a long conceptual leap for novice researchers – this book is intended as a springboard.

As Nancy Hornberger (2013; this volume) points out, in contrast to theoretically or disciplinary-driven research where methods follow more directly, researchers
engaging with problem-centered or issue-focused inquiry must rely on “methodological rich points.” These are points of reflection at all stages of the research process where one considers whether or not one has access to the most appropriate method(s) in relation to one’s research question(s). Such reflection requires a critical awareness of what methods are available, the kinds of research questions for which they are epistemologically appropriate, and the sorts of data and analysis they facilitate. Without such a methodological overview, there is a risk that a novice researcher will design a study using only the methods to which they were exposed in methods courses, forcing them to fit research questions for which the methods are less than ideal or, perhaps worse, altering the research questions to fit the methods instead of the issue or problem in need of investigation. Alternatively, students must invest considerable time and energy on their own to gain the scope of methodological perspective needed to select appropriate methods and extrapolate their potential applications to LPP issues.

Accordingly, we have designed the present volume as an attempt to offer readers a bird’s eye view of a range of research methods as they can be applied to LPP. Inspired by our own students’ needs, we have kept the novice reader in mind at all phases of developing the book. In selecting topics, we have considered both the fundamentals of approaching LPP as a domain of inquiry and specific methods for designing and implementing a study. All chapters, written by leading language policy researchers known for their attention to methodological rigor, are intended as entry points for readers with little or no familiarity with the topics. As such, the contributions in this volume are not meant to be comprehensive in their coverage, but rather to provide the reader with an overview of key methods and methodologies to consider thereby helping the reader make informed methodological decisions as they conceptualize LPP studies and continue to read more deeply about specific methods.

The first section includes five chapters that address fundamental considerations when embarking on a language policy study. These include issues that arise during the conceptualization and implementation stages of inquiry such as the deliberate critical thinking process of selecting research methods as well as reflexive issues related to researcher positionality and ethics when investigating sociopolitical issues around language policy. The first three chapters, thus, offer guidance on how to develop a language policy study and then how to carry it out in a responsible manner. The section also includes chapters that address, respectively, two fields of scholarship that have an especially salient connection to politics and policy: political theory and law. While these are by no means the only scholarly perspectives from which to approach language policy, political theory and law are two fields that place politics and policy as the focus of inquiry (and they are also fields in which politicians and legislators often have training), making them useful to understand, whether one chooses to embrace a political or legal orientation or to follow one of the many other traditions of inquiry.

The second section, in turn, comprises thirteen chapters, focusing on different methods for language policy investigation from a diverse range of epistemological and disciplinary traditions. The chapters in this section are written as basic how-to guides for planning and implementing studies. Each is organized with the same structure to facilitate comparison, helping readers easily determine what each method offers and how different methods might complement each other. As readers
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will quickly notice, many of these methods can work together, and we have tried to illuminate these connections with cross-references throughout. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction that situates the method intellectually and explains its relevance to language policy. Next, the development of research questions is considered with special attention to the kinds of questions that align with the method. Methods for data collection and analysis are then discussed, emphasizing the practice of conducting research. Each chapter concludes with a brief case study that illustrates how the method has been applied in an LPP study along with a short list of sources for further reading about the method.

The final section of the volume is an appendix that offers advice about public engagement with language policy initiatives and debates. Language policy researchers often wish to make a positive social impact in addition to, or as part of, their inquiry. As scholars, we receive training in research but seldom in the professional skills needed for successful engagement with public policy. With this in mind, the four appendix contributors offer advice based on their own experience with engagement in sectors that are of special interest to LPP researchers: communities and schools, political debate, government, and media. Each contribution offers hands-on tips for how to get involved and how to interact productively with policy stakeholders.

As language policy continues to diversify as a field, its strength going forward lies in the methodological rigor of well-conceptualized and systematically conducted studies. It is in this way that the field will make its most meaningful social contributions through research that can inform the creation and sound implementation of equitable language policies. In all, it is our hope that the present volume will contribute to the rigor of the field by offering a practical methodological toolkit for students who are new to language policy and a reference for established LPP researchers.

References


**Further Reading**


Part I  Fundamental Considerations
2 Selecting Appropriate Research Methods in LPP Research: Methodological Rich Points

Nancy H. Hornberger

Introduction

LPP issues arise every day and everywhere. In the media and in day-to-day human encounters, concerns recurrently surface around literacy levels in the workplace; plain language in advertising and government; linguistic diversity and multilingual education in schools; English-only policies at school, city, state, and national levels; English as a global language; and Indigenous and immigrant groups’ rights to use and teach their own languages and to maintain or revitalize them. Innovative (and failed) attempts to solve problems, enable equal access, and/or recognize minority rights through language policy are regularly launched and, more often than not, aborted too soon. Answers to the essential LPP question remain tantalizingly diverse and unpredictable:

Why do individuals opt to use (or cease to use) particular languages and varieties for specified functions in different domains, and how do those choices influence – and how are they influenced by – institutional language policy decision-making (local to national and supranational? (Ricento 2000, 208)

All of this LPP researchers seek to study and illuminate. And they do so from widely interdisciplinary bases and in all social domains.

How then do LPP researchers select appropriate research methods to study these questions? Drawing from a data collection toolkit that includes survey questionnaire, census and demographic data, linguistic corpora, interviews, policy documents, participant observation and participatory action; and an analytical toolkit embracing
statistical, experimental, ethnographic, linguistic, and discourse-analytic approaches and their many variations, there appears to be a dizzying array of choices confronting the would-be LPP researcher. The choices may appear all the more perplexing when we consider that our research methods and approaches are linked to the questions we are asking or the problem we are addressing.

The second half of this book takes up the particularities of specific methodological approaches and conceptual terrains; here, I attempt to raise more general methodological considerations to guide our selection of methods, drawing attention to what I have called methodological rich points, or those times when researchers learn that their assumptions about the way research works and the conceptual tools they have for doing research are inadequate to understand the worlds they are researching. Methodological rich points make salient the pressures and tensions between the practice of research and the changing scientific and social world in which researchers work. (Hornberger 2013, 101)

While my experience and examples draw mostly from ethnographic work in educational LPP, I believe the rich points they illustrate point to similar concerns for all LPP research. We begin with a brief look back at the evolution of LPP research and then take up methodological rich points organized under the heuristic for sociolinguistic analysis first offered by Fishman (1971, 219), adapted here as: who researches whom and what in LPP, where, how, and why?

**LPP as an Evolving Theoretical and Methodological Terrain**

Ricento (2000) traces the evolution of LPP research since World War II in three phases with their respective sociopolitical, epistemological, strategic (and I will add methodological) concerns: an era of decolonization and state formation in the 1950s–1960s, when LPP research was conducted under a mainly structuralist paradigm and oriented toward problem-solving; widespread failure of modernization in the 1970s–1980s, accompanied by the rise of critical research paradigms, including critical LPP research focusing on inequalities of access to education and socio-economic mobility; and beginning in the 1990s, the emergence of a new world order characterized by massive population migrations, the re-emergence of local ethnic identities, and the globalization of capitalism, along with the flowering of postmodern research paradigms and attention to linguistic human rights in LPP.

There is a methodological parallel to this trajectory, with LPP research methods moving generally over time from large-scale national census, demographic survey, and self-report language use/language attitude questionnaires directed toward informing language policy to solve problems at national or regional levels; to incorporation of economic, legal, and political analyses directed toward reforming structures of unequal access; to more ethnographic on-the-ground methods directed toward illuminating the complexities of enacting language policy in local
contexts. However, it is not the case that earlier methods have been discarded along the way; rather, the LPP field has embraced a steadily expanding methodological toolkit.

Joshua Fishman stands as a giant in the early period of cross-national comparative projects, international conferences with published proceedings, and the launch of LPP publications; but his genius also always lay in his profound commitment to linguistic human rights and what he affectionately called the “little languages” of the world, a commitment born of his own heritage as a Yiddish speaker and activist. The still vital *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* and the Contributions to the Sociology of Language book series (both of which Fishman founded) are emblematic of the field, with their encyclopedic documentation of multilingual national contexts and the fate of language policies therein; and methodologies in the early years favoring large-scale census, survey, and questionnaire studies. Fishman was also one of LPP’s “Big Four” (J. Rubin, personal communication, October 6, 1988), along with Jyotirminda Das Gupta, Joan Rubin, and Björn Jernudd, who undertook the 1969–1972 Ford Foundation-funded International Research Project on Language Planning Processes in Israel, India, Indonesia, and Sweden, respectively (Fishman, Ferguson, and Das Gupta 1968) and went on to provide leadership for the field for several decades, right up to the present. Also launched relatively early was the journal *Language Problems and Language Planning*, in 1977, whose title makes clear the problem-solving orientation in LPP research at the time—an orientation that is still with us, although the problems and their solutions are understood in arguably more nuanced and complex terms (see Lo Bianco, this volume). By the 1980s and 1990s, with the failure of the modernization development paradigm and the rise of critical research perspectives in the social sciences, there was a general sense that the LPP field was theoretically and methodologically adrift (Cooper 1989; Ricento 2000; Schiffman 1996; Tollefson 1991), but no real alternative emerged until the turn of the millennium.

The year 2000 saw the launch of three new LPP journals edited by well-known LPP researchers: *Language Policy*, edited first by Bernard Spolsky and then by Kendall King and Elana Shohamy; *Current Issues in Language Planning*, edited by Robert Kaplan and Richard Baldauf; and the *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, edited by Thomas Ricento and Terry Wiley. These journals infused new intellectual energy into the field with increased theoretical attention to critical, postmodern, complexity, and globalization perspectives and increased methodological contributions from ethnographic and discourse-analytic approaches. Considerations of language ecology, language ideology, and language identity in relation to LPP offered new conceptual arenas in which to bring these theoretical and methodological insights to bear. Reflecting these developments, the present volume embraces a wide spectrum of methodological approaches emergent over the multi-decade trajectory of LPP research, from census/demographic and language attitude survey methods to legal, economic, historical-structural, ideological, and political analyses, to classroom ethnography, corpus linguistics, media analysis, and intertextual analysis. Given a field whose scholarly concerns and methodologies today are so varied, how then does a researcher know or select which methodological approach and which methods to use?
Methodological Rich Points

One way to think about that question is to frame it in terms of the paradigmatic heuristic for sociolinguistic analysis first offered by Fishman (1971, 219), and adapted here as: who researches whom and what in LPP, where, how, and why?

In what follows, I take up some methodological rich points that arise in relation to this heuristic, and which can, I think, serve to guide LPP researchers in our ongoing selection and revisiting of research methods.

Who researches whom in LPP?

At the most basic level, LPP researchers focus attention on language users – individuals and groups, teachers and students, community members and policymakers, among others. LPP is after all, as Cooper once wisely observed, centrally concerned with “deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes” (Cooper 1989, 45). Participants are central to LPP, and methodological rich points around our collaborations with and representations of our research participants are unavoidable.

In essence, the considerations for LPP researchers here revolve around respecting and being with research participants as fellow human beings while also “studying” them. Educational ethnographer Page writes that increasing recognition of limits to “the qualitative claim that researchers [can] document and explain, fully and accurately, another’s life-world as it is” (Page 2000, 5) presents both a political challenge as to whose representations are the ones put forward and an aesthetic challenge as to how knowledge is represented in texts.

The slogan “research on, for, and with subjects,” put forward by Cameron and colleagues (1992), captures some of the tensions around collaborating with and representing aspects of our research participants’ lives and language use. After first discussing issues of power and of positivist, relativist, and realist paradigms of research, the authors introduce what could be considered a continuum from an ethics-based approach (research on subjects), which seeks to balance the needs of a discipline in pursuit of knowledge with the interests of the people on whom the research is conducted but in which subjects have no real role in setting the agenda; to an advocacy-based approach (research on and for subjects), which despite its commitment to participants nevertheless still tends toward a positivist notion that there is one true account; and finally to an empowerment-oriented approach (research on, for, and with subjects), which uses interactive, dialogic methods and seeks to take into account the subjects’ research agenda, involve them in feedback and sharing of knowledge, consider representation and control in the reporting of findings, and take seriously the policymaking implications of the research.

Paying more attention to collaboration and representation in LPP research may take a number of forms – it may be about working with multiple members of a research team including members of the community being researched; it may also be about researcher-researched relationships; and may range from consultative to fully