

Guidelines for doing research

This chapter will ...

- present a set of guidelines for planning, carrying out and evaluating research projects.

9.1 Introduction: The research cycle

The research process is best understood as a cycle of six actions. These include identifying concerns and forming questions, choosing the most appropriate research approach for addressing the questions, gathering the data, analysing them, reflecting on the findings and deciding what to do based on what was found, and disseminating or in some way sharing what was learned with others. The process is cyclic in that each step leads to the next, with the findings from one project generating new concerns and questions for further investigation. The six steps, illustrated in Figure 9.1, are explained in greater detail below.

9.2 Identify concerns and develop research questions

The first step in the research process entails identifying particular concerns or issues arising from one's professional life as an applied linguist. For example, one's focus might centre on concerns with the larger social discourses that give shape to the institutions and activities comprising one's social or professional community. Alternatively, one's concerns may be with

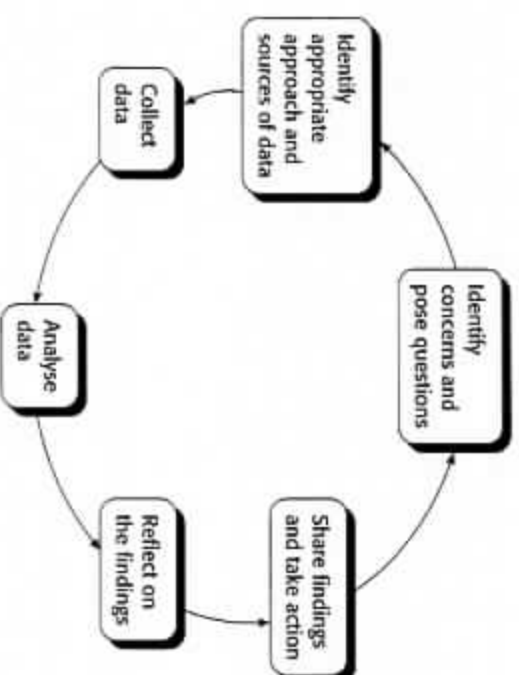


Figure 9.1 Research cycle

improving conditions for language learning in one's teaching context or with coming to a deeper understanding of an individual or group of individuals from a particular community with which the researcher is associated.

Once concerns have been generated, they can be prioritised according to their importance or significance to the researcher, and from this ranked list a specific topic for investigation can be identified. Once the researcher has decided on his or her specific focus, the next step is to generate a list of questions about it. For example, an interest in the more macro beliefs about a particular ethnic group embodied in a particular group's social institutions can lead to the following questions: What official documents produced by the social institution refer to or in some way deal with the ethnic group in question? What themes or topics related to the group characterise the documents? A concern with improving language pedagogy can lead to further questions, such as: What interaction patterns are typical of this learning context? What roles does the teacher play in constructing them, and what role do the students play? What kinds of linguistic actions are students becoming appropriated into via their participation in these patterns? And so on.

Once a set of questions on which to focus has been chosen, the researcher needs to consider whether they are reasonable in light of any constraints he or she may have in terms of time, and availability of resources. It may be, for example, that the question asked is both significant and of great interest to the researcher, but he or she lacks the resources needed to address it adequately. A final decision to be made before beginning to collect data is the intended outcome. That is, the researcher needs to

consider what he or she plans to do with the findings. Perhaps, the goal is to present the findings at a peer-reviewed conference specifically for feedback on the study, with the ultimate aim of publishing a report of the study in a refereed journal and thereby contribute to professional discussions on that particular topic. Alternatively, one may wish to use the findings to help to justify changes to a particular instructional or organisational programme. Whatever the objectives, they will help to guide the implementation of the study, so it is important that they are clear to the researcher before commencing the study.

9.3 Identify research approach and sources of data

Once the research questions have been articulated, the next step is to formulate a plan for gathering data to help to answer them. This entails identifying the approach that the researcher considers to be the most appropriate, given the questions asked. Six of the more commonly used approaches to the study of language, culture and learning from a sociocultural perspective were presented in Chapter 8. The approach one chooses is, of course, very much tied to the questions one is asking. For example, if the concern is uncovering rhetorical patterns typical of a particular collection of oral or written texts, then a discourse analytic approach would be appropriate. If the concern is not only with uncovering points at which the use and interpretation of particular linguistic cues by participants in an interaction differ, but also with the effects the differences have on the subsequent unfolding of the communicative event, then an interactional sociolinguistic approach would be appropriate. It is also necessary at this point to identify the participants and setting of the study. These decisions are also based on the research questions in that they will lead the researcher in choosing a particular context and identifying members of that context. Once the setting and participants have been identified, the researcher must determine the particular sources of data.

It should be noted that while there are several possible sources of data, the sources one chooses are determined in part by the research approach taken. An ethnography of communication, for example, will require data from multiple sources, including, for example, videotapes of the communicative event of interest, field notes from long-term observations of the event, and collections of documents that are important to the accomplishment of the event. On the other hand, a micro-analysis of one communicative event may require less data from multiple sources collected over a period of time, and more finely tuned transcriptions of the event itself in order to capture the moment-to-moment movement of actions in the interaction. Some possible sources of data are discussed below.

9.3.1 Interviews and questionnaires

Interviews are conversations conducted with participants. They are usually audio- or video-recorded then transcribed for analysis. Interviews are typically of three types: *structured*, *semi-structured* and *open*. The purpose of *structured interviews* is to obtain specific kinds of information on a particular topic. The interview questions are compiled prior to the interview, leaving little opportunity for the interviewee to address other topics. This type of interview is helpful when one has a set of specific questions in mind and is interested in seeking answers to only those questions. The purpose of *semi-structured interviews* is also to get answers to specific questions and so here, too, the interviewer comes to the interview with a set of pre-formulated questions. However, unlike structured interviews, here the interviewee is afforded opportunities to elaborate upon his or her answers.

Open interviews are even less structured. Here the interviewer is free to direct the discussion as he or she wishes, expanding on some issues, raising others for discussion and so on. The interviewee also has more freedom to raise additional topics for discussion and in other ways move the conversation in various directions. An advantage to both semi-structured and open interviews is that one may end up with unanticipated perspectives on the research topic. They are particularly useful if one is interested in obtaining others' ideas on a general topic, or in uncovering others' understandings of particular concepts or terms. A disadvantage is that the interview data may be difficult to code and analyse, especially if each interviewee addresses a different aspect of the topic or decides to move the conversation towards different topics altogether.

Questionnaires are similar to interviews except that they ask for written responses from the participants. Like interviews, they can be structured, semi-structured or open. Structured and semi-structured questionnaires solicit specific kinds of information to be given in short answers or by choosing one response from several options. Questionnaires that are more open-ended ask participants to use their own words to provide opinions or information on a particular topic.

9.3.2 Think aloud protocols

This method of data collection involves asking individuals to verbalise their thoughts while engaged in a particular activity. The purpose of this method is to glean from individuals' comments the cognitive processes and strategies they are using to accomplish the task. This is a useful source of data if, for example, one is interested in gaining an understanding of an individual's perceptions of his or her involvement in a task. Think alouds are usually audio- or video-recorded, and later transcribed for analysis.

A variation of the think aloud protocols involves asking individuals to provide comments on their participation after the fact. This is often used when taking an interactional sociolinguistics approach, where participants are brought in to observe their taped participation in an event and asked to stop the tape wherever they thought their linguistic actions were being misunderstood by the other participants, or where they might have misunderstood those actions of their interlocutors. The researcher then begins his or her analysis of contextualisation cue difference at those points.

9.3.3 (Participant) observations and field notes

Observations require the researcher to be present for an extended period of time in the communicative event or context being studied. For example, if the researcher is interested in the activities that are of significance to a classroom community of language learners, he or she can choose to spend time in the classroom observing the activities. If, during the observations, the researcher decides to participate in the context, he or she is considered to be a *participant-observer*. One can decide to participate fully in the events, for example, acting either as an aide to the teacher in the classroom context or as the teacher. An advantage to full participation is that the presence of the researcher is likely to raise few concerns or questions among the other participants in that context. A major disadvantage is the difficulty one faces in trying to observe and collect data and at the same time be a fully involved participant. A more reasonable position may be to participate as an interested observer. In this case, the other participants are aware of the purpose of the researcher's presence but he or she does not have to be involved fully in all activities.

Written accounts, or *field notes*, are usually kept on these observations. These notes can be more or less structured, depending on the questions that have been asked. For example, prior to observing the classroom the researcher can make a list of behaviours in which he or she is particularly interested. While observing, the researcher can then use the list to note whether and how often the behaviours occur and the contexts of their occurrences. Alternatively, interest may be in documenting the myriad ways students participate in their classroom interactions, regardless of whether they conform to a particular list. In this case, the field notes become detailed descriptions of the different behaviours observed.

9.3.4 Video-recordings

Video-recordings of communicative events and activities are able to capture actions as they occur in real time. They allow the researcher to study the connection between (a) linguistic actions and spatial organisation,

(b) linguistic actions and body movements, including gestures, posture and facial movements and (c) communicative stability and change across time in ways that cannot be performed by any other means of data collection. Decisions about where to place recording devices, how many devices to use, and how often to record are important to the quality of the data collected. For example, placing one camcorder in the corner of a fairly small room may not permit all of the activity to be captured. Likewise, the single camcorder may not capture all the sounds of the classroom. For example, voices of individuals sitting in the far corner of the room may not be detected. Thus, it is important for the researcher to know the setting well enough to be able to set up devices in ways that will allow him or her to record all the sights and sounds particular to the context.

9.3.5 Personal reflection journals

Personal journals are documents produced by the researcher in which he or she records his or her feelings and reflections. They usually contain two parts. In the first, the researcher records detailed descriptions of incidents, readings, observations or other events considered significant to the research context. In the second, the researcher records personal feelings, opinions and reactions to the incidents, readings, observations and events. Journal recording is typically done according to some schedule – for example, at the end of each week of data collection. While journals are often written, they can also be kept as audio- or video-recordings. In addition to providing the researcher with additional documentation of events and activities taking place in the research context, the journals can help to make apparent whether and how the researcher might have influenced the collection and analysis of data.

9.3.6 Archives and other documents

Archives are collections of official documents that provide a historical record of a context. They can include written reports, records, tapes, newsletters, memoranda, physical artifacts and other materials that are typically stored in libraries, offices and other sites designated as official repositories. Such data can provide different viewpoints on a topic, and thus aid in comparative analyses across contexts. In addition, other documents and physical artifacts – some of which may not have official status but may be pertinent to a particular research setting – may be useful to identify and collect.

9.4 Collect data

Once the participants and sources of data have been identified, the next decision concerns the time period during which data will be collected. *When* one decides to collect data depends on one's research questions. If, for example, the researcher is interested in perceptions of newly arrived adult immigrants in a language programme of their language needs, then, clearly, the data need to be collected when the individuals first enter the programme. Likewise, if the researcher is interested in documenting his or her own development as an apprentice in a particular programme, or another individual's development as captured in personal reflections, then data should be collected over an extended period of time in order to produce enough data to be able to document any changes that occur.

One last point needs to be considered before the process of data collection can begin. No matter what questions are asked, what research approach is taken or what sources of data are used, the process of collecting data must be systematic. That is to say, decisions about the process of data collection should be clearly articulated, and methodical. If, for example, it is decided to ask adult language learners to generate a list of their perceived needs, all participants of the group should be involved. If, however, the researcher decides to ask just a few learners, he or she must be able to state the criteria used in selecting the individual respondents. For example, it may be decided to seek responses from females only, or from individuals with a particular first language. Likewise, if the researcher decides to videotape instances of a particular communicative event, the criteria for deciding when and how often to tape must be stated clearly, and the specific methods used to tape followed as systematically as possible for all recordings. Otherwise, as pointed out in Chapter 7, one runs the risk of collecting data that support one's own version of reality, whether or not it adequately reflects the reality of those whose contexts of experiences are the focus of study.

9.5 Analyse the data

Analysis of the data is the fourth step in the research process. This entails coding, or transforming the data into another form. How one codes depends on the kind of data collected and the larger research questions. For example, coding can involve identifying specific linguistic features of a set of verbal data and transforming them into numerical values, as with corpus-based analyses of texts. Alternatively, if one is working from transcriptions of videotaped interactions, and the concern is with patterns of interaction, the researcher may begin the analysis by coding utterances according to their functions as speech acts (e.g. coding the utterance 'what

did you say?' as a request for information) or according to the illocutionary force as determined by the role they play in the interaction (e.g. coding the utterance 'what did you say?' as a statement of disapproval). In other cases of interaction, the focus might be on finding specific communicative event boundaries, and coding the cues used by participants to open and close them.

Often, the researcher will need to construct his or her own coding framework, although it is useful to draw on and, where possible, incorporate coding schemes that others have used. Whatever coding framework the researcher decides to use, it is important to define it clearly and to use it consistently across similar sources of data. Once the data are coded, the next step involves searching across datasets for regularities or patterns of occurrence, and grouping and organising the regularities into larger segments for subsequent qualitative and/or quantitative interpretation. In terms of analysis across large datasets, the larger segments can function as a framework with which to make systematic comparisons with subsequent segments and to identify and interpret individual actions within them. As Kasermann (1991) has noted, such a framework is useful in allowing for systematic identification and comparison of both conventional and non-conventional behaviour, at least as it pertains to a particular body of data.

A last step involves arranging the findings so that they fairly and accurately represent the data. Hymes's (1980) SPEAKING model, relevant to an ethnography of communication approach and discussed in more detail in Chapter 8, provides a useful framework for representing and comparing findings from investigations of particular communicative events. Qualitative data can also be represented by transcriptions, diagrams, flow charts, and pictures, in addition to written descriptions. In the case of quantitative analyses, findings can be represented as numbers and displayed in the form of tables, charts and graphs.

A chart such as the one provided as Figure 9.2 can help researchers conceptualise and organise their methods for collecting and analysing data.

Questions What do I want to know?	Data collection How will I get data to find answers?			Data analysis How will I examine data?
	Participants/ context	Source	When	
1. What are learners' perceived language needs?	15 newly arrived adult language learners	Individual interviews	1st class of language course	Thematic coding; frequency counts

Figure 9.2 Matrix for organising methods for data collection and analysis

9.6 Reflect on the findings

Once the data have been sufficiently analysed and the findings presented, the next step involves reflecting on the findings in relation to the questions originally asked and, where appropriate, identifying steps for using the findings to meet one's intended outcomes. Some questions to guide reflections on the findings include: What did you find? Of the findings, which ones did you anticipate and which ones were unexpected? Were your questions answered adequately or were there obstacles that prevented you from completing the project? Could the project have been done differently? How so? What new knowledge or understanding can you take from your study? What might your next steps be?

9.7 Share findings and take action where appropriate

The final step in the research process entails sharing what has been learned with others and, where appropriate, taking action. No matter what was found, there will be something worthwhile to report from which others can learn. Ways to share the new knowledge or understandings include more structured activities such as formal presentations of the findings to one's colleagues at a meeting arranged by a local, state, regional, national or international professional organisation. The researcher can also decide to submit a report for publication consideration to a professional journal or newsletter. Less formal means for sharing can include presenting the findings to others as part of a discussion group that takes place in real time, face-to-face interaction, or as part of an electronic chat room run by one's professional community. One can also decide to post the report to an electronic bulletin board or to one's own personal web page.

How and with whom the researcher shares information and findings from the project depends in part on the consequences he or she anticipates the project to engender, and the degree of support he or she believes is needed to help to ensure their realisation. In addition to enhanced understandings of a particular context, possible outcomes from engaging in research can include enhanced communication and collaboration between the researcher and his or her colleagues in a particular programme or organisation, or between the researcher and his or her students; enhanced self-awareness of one's professional role as an applied linguist; and increased awareness of one's larger social context and the role the researcher can play in facilitating change. Figure 9.3 lays out in detail the questions to be considered when planning, conducting and evaluating any kind of research project.

- A. Introduction to problem**
- Is the stated problem clear and researchable?*
- Is the rationale for the problem clearly presented?
 - Has related background information been provided to support the need for this study?
 - Is the research problem situated in a relevant theoretical framework?
 - Are the research questions stated clearly?
 - Is it clear what the study will contribute to existing understandings?
- Is there a thorough review of literature?*
- Are cited references relevant to the problem and up-to-date?
 - Are the majority of sources primary?
 - Are the results of cited studies compared and contrasted rather than summarised?
 - Does the review make clear the relevance of the problem?
- B. Methods**
- Did selection procedures identify participants and contexts appropriate to the problem?*
- Are characteristics of participants and site described?
 - Are reasons given for participant and site selection?
 - Are selection and identification of participants ethical (e.g. informed, voluntary, confidential or anonymous)?
- Are methods appropriate and adequate?*
- Are sources of data adequately described and appropriate for answering the research questions?
 - Are the methods for data collection appropriate for answering the research questions?
 - Is it clear how, when, and by whom the data will be collected?
 - Is there a theoretical rationale given for the particular methodology?
 - Is it consistent with the theoretical framework of the research?
 - Are procedures for analysis, including descriptions of coding procedures, fully described?
 - Are they appropriate for the kinds of data that are collected?
- C. Findings**
- Are results appropriate and clearly presented?*
- Are the data reported clearly?
 - Are the connections between the questions asked and the findings clear?
 - Is enough evidence presented to support claims?
 - Are all cases arising from the analysis fully accounted for?
- D. Discussion**
- Do the results of the data analysis support the conclusions?*
- Are explanations for the findings reasonable, appropriate and adequate?
 - Does the argument made stay within the limitations of what the data allow?
 - Are results grounded in the theoretical framework that motivated the research?
 - Are findings compared to those of previous studies?
 - Are conclusions supported by results?
 - Have possible limitations of the study been discussed?
 - Is the contribution to the field clearly stated, and appropriate?
- Are there recommendations for future action?*
- Are recommendations for future research given?
 - Are the recommendations adequate and appropriate?

Figure 9.3 Guidelines for planning, conducting and evaluating research projects

9.8 Summary

Research is an essential component of the professional lives of applied linguists. In addition to being informed consumers of research, it is to our collective benefit as a field that we become skilled in conducting our own investigations. We must be able to ask relevant questions, choose appropriate methods for collecting and analysing data, be rigorous in the process, and be willing to reflect on the findings, making changes to our practices where appropriate, and share what we have learned with others.

In addition to enhancing our understandings of our worlds, engaging in research can help us to develop the skills we need to articulate more clearly concerns that are of significance to our particular circumstances, interests and needs as scholars and teachers of language and culture, their epistemological foundations, and both the theoretical and empirical questions these concerns give rise to. At the same time, the process affords us opportunities to move past what we already know and towards the development of new perspectives and different lenses for interpreting and understanding familiar surroundings.

Further reading

- Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds) (2000) *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd edn). Newbury Park, CA: Sage. This collection of essays provides a guide to conducting research using qualitative methods. The volume is divided into six sections: locating the field; major paradigms and perspectives; strategies of inquiry; methods of collecting and analysing empirical materials; the art of interpretation, evaluation and presentation; and the future of qualitative research.
- Cabrinn, J. and Holstein, J. (eds) (2001) *Handbook of interview research: Context and method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. The contributions to this book examine interviews as a means of collecting research data. The various chapters offer discussions on the conceptual, methodological and practical issues surrounding the use of interviews as an instrument for gathering data.
- Johnstone, B. (2000) *Qualitative methods in sociolinguistics*. New York: Oxford University Press. This book provides a detailed discussion on the use of qualitative methods in research on language and society. It includes discussion of topics such as general theoretical and practical questions about research, and the principles of selecting, collecting, and analysing language use.
- Lofland, J. and Lofland, L.H. (1995) *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (3rd edn). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co. This is a comprehensive and practical guide to the collection and analysis of qualitative data. In their discussions, the authors include a wealth of illustrative examples. It is considered an exemplar of research methods texts.

Miles, M. and Huberman, A.M. (1994) *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. The authors have created a practical sourcebook for researchers on how to design, and use qualitative data analysis methods. They describe several ways to display qualitative data including, for example, matrices and networks in addition to narrative text and provide practical suggestions for their adaptation and use.

Contexts of research

This chapter will ...

- describe a framework for conceptualising research contexts;
- offer suggestions for research projects for each dimension of the framework.

10.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters, we have laid out some of the more significant assumptions about language, culture and learning embodied in a sociocultural perspective on human action, and we have reviewed how the concepts have informed teaching practices. In terms of research, we have discussed several issues related to the 'doing' of good research, discussed some of the more typical approaches that are currently being used by applied linguists to study language, culture and learning, and offered a set of guidelines for planning, conducting and evaluating research.

In this chapter we look at how we might identify topics and questions that are appropriate for empirical investigations. The discussion is framed around a conceptual map that arranges social activity into four dimensions. I discuss the characteristics and scope of each dimension, and for each I include suggestions for research projects. The suggestions are presented using the model of the research process described in Chapter 9. They are included as examples of how readers might plan and conduct studies of relevance to their professional contexts.

10.2 Contexts of research

As I have tried to make clear in this text, the general aim of research on language, culture and learning from a sociocultural perspective is on understanding our worlds, our varied identities and roles as social actors, and the varied consequences arising from our long-term involvement in our worlds. Since our communicative lives are complex and layered, understanding them involves unfolding or teasing apart the many layers of meanings. We need to understand not just how we act as individuals in any particular moment, but how, as individuals, we construct and are constructed in particular communicative activities. We also need to understand how these activities inform and are informed by the larger social institutions to which they are linked, and the larger beliefs, values and attitudes within which the institution are nested.

Figure 10.1, which is an adaptation of a map proposed by Layder (1993) for doing social research, presents a conceptualisation of the many layers involved in research on language and culture from a sociocultural perspective. As can be seen, the framework is composed of four overlapping dimensions: social structure, institutional contexts, communicative activities, including language socialisation practices, and the individual. Each of the four dimensions represents particular constellations of empirical characteristics that are typical of different levels of social activity.

Such a map is useful in that it 'ties] together the interpersonal world of everyday life with the more impersonal world of social institutions' (Layder, 1993: 206). That is, it makes apparent the interconnectedness of the more situated aspects of life to the more macro issues of social institutions, beliefs and ideologies. While the scope of the dimensions differs, the analysis we engage in for each is similar in that on each level we seek to describe what is going on and interpret the meanings of the activity from the perspective of those whose worlds we are investigating. We also seek to explain the activity by connecting what we have learned on one level to how the activity is constructed on other levels. This means, then, that uncovering the meanings of individual behaviour requires us to locate it in its larger contexts of action. Likewise, understanding social beliefs and attitudes entails connecting them to their instantiations in real-world contexts, in our language games.

Limiting our focus to only one level will constrain what we can see, and how we come to understand it. For example, suppose we look only at changes that occur in individual behaviour in classrooms and find that, over a period of time, the behaviours in question change only slightly. If we stay at this level, we may, perhaps wrongly, attribute the lack of change



Figure 10.1 Contexts of research

to the individuals themselves, claiming individual inability or disinterest in making the changes. If we include an analysis of the classroom activities in which the individuals were involved, however, we may find that the opportunities for participation in the activities, at least for some individuals, were limited. This lack of opportunities may help to explain, in part, the lack of change in individual behaviour. And so on. The point is that without attempting to understand our findings in light of social activity on other levels, our understandings will remain incomplete.

Quote 10.1 Derek Layder on the interconnectedness of micro and macro elements

... [M]acro phenomena make no sense unless they are related to the social activities of individuals who reproduce them over time. Conversely, micro phenomena cannot be fully understood by exclusive reference to their 'internal dynamics', so to speak, they have to be seen to be conditioned by circumstances inherited from the past. In other words, micro phenomena have to be understood in relation to the influence of the institutions that provide their wider social context. In this respect, macro and micro phenomena are inextricably bound together through the medium of social activity...

Layder (1993: 102–3)

A final point on our research concerns the kind of understanding of social activity we hope to achieve through our research endeavours. Remember, from a sociocultural perspective, that full understanding cannot be based on what something appears to be, no matter how detailed our analysis. Rather, it requires us to follow its development over time. This point was made about documenting language learning in Chapter 8, but in fact it holds for all social activity. If our aim is to understand social action, we must come to see it fully, in 'the cultural, institutional, and *historical* situations in which this action occurs' (Wertsch et al., 1995: 11; emphasis added). Thus, as Vygotsky (1978: 64–5) noted, 'the historical study of behavior is not an auxiliary aspect of theoretical study, but rather forms its very base'.

This means, then, that in addition to gaining a sense of what something *is*, we need to undertake a historical examination of *how it came to be*. This requires longitudinal investigations, that is, studies of activity – from the micro to macro levels – over time. From such analyses, we can discern the conventional or typical instantiations of the activity and the wider socio-historical and political forces that have given shape to these instantiations. We can also discern how individuals gain or are afforded access to the activities, how it is that individuals attempt to use the resources towards their own ends, and how, through their evolving participation, they develop their particular strategies.

10.2.1 Sociocultural structures

This dimension is generally concerned with the large-scale, society-wide worldviews that are embodied within and both inform and are informed

by the institutional contexts of a community, their communicative practices and the individuals situated within them (Layder, 1993). These worldviews encompass beliefs, values and attitudes towards social phenomena such as group identities (e.g. social class, gender and ethnicity) and intergroup relations. They also include understandings of social constructs such as personhood and freedom, and social issues such as linguistic rights and language policies, education and public policy, racism and discrimination.

A primary concern of research in this dimension is with explicating the worldviews embodied in particular public and other official documents, and documenting the linguistic and discursive means by which they are oriented to, distributed, and maintained, by those whose documents they are. The general aim of such research is to raise our awareness of how language is used to create particular viewpoints and particular representations of the world, and of how these views can persuade us to act in particular ways. In so doing, those engaging in such research hope to clear a pathway to social change. Sources of data can come from a range of genres, such as official written records and other public documents, news discourse, documentaries, and advertising. In addition, they can come from a range of fields such as medicine, law, public policy, education, labour markets and so on.

This macro dimension of sociocultural structure has been of particular interest to applied linguists. Two directions are evident in recent literature. In one, the concern is with bringing to the field's attention significant issues specific to language, such as linguistic rights, language policies, and language education. Tove Skutnabh-Kangas (1999, 2001), Robert Phillipson (1992, 2000), James Tollefson (1991, 2002) and Alastair Pennycook (1994, 1998), for example, are well known for their writings on these issues. In general, these writings provide insightful and even provocative viewpoints on ways the field might address these important language-related issues. However, they should not be confused with empirical investigations. That is, by and large, their concern is not with explicating the contextually situated meanings of these issues for particular individuals or groups. Rather, it is with framing the issues within larger social theories in order to better understand their complexities. If particular examples from the 'real world' are used, it is often to illustrate theoretical claims, not to make a case about particular 'real world' meanings.

A second direction recent literature has taken is towards the examination of context-specific ways language is used in official texts to create particular visions of social phenomena like gender and class, and social issues such as discrimination, democracy and so on. Here one finds the work of, to name a few of the more well-known writers, Norman Fairclough (1995a, 1995b, 2000), Teun van Dijk (1993a, 1993b), Roger Fowler (1991) and Ruth Wodak (1997; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). The work

undertaken by this second group is more aptly termed empirical in that their focus is on the interrogation of texts collected from specific institutional contexts.

While the goals of this research are in keeping with this dimension, some of the earlier studies have been criticized, and rightly so, for their lack of systematicity and rigour in explicating the criteria for choosing samples of texts to examine and in locating their interpretations of the meanings in the specific contexts of use, as realised by those whose texts they are (cf. Collins, 1997; Widdowson, 2000). As noted in Chapter 8 in relation to the analysis of data, if the methods are not clearly stated and systematically utilised, it raises the question as to whether the text samples are chosen to fit with the researcher's own viewpoint rather than to illustrate the particular worldviews embodied in the settings from which the samples are drawn. This point is not meant to steer one away from doing such broad-based research; it is only to call attention to the need for rigorous and systematically employed methods no matter what the scope of the investigation is.

I have included here, in Example 10.1, an illustration of the kinds of studies currently being done in applied linguistics concerned with the dimension of sociocultural structure. It is useful in that it illustrates both the weaknesses and strengths of current discourse analyses concerned with macro social issues. It is weak in that it lacks any explanation of criteria for choosing the texts and of methods for their analysis and thus raises questions about the legitimacy of the findings. At the same time, it illustrates the potential value such studies have for understanding the wider social, political and economic ideologies embodied in more micro contexts and social relations.

Example 10.1 Sociocultural structures

Lin, A.M. (1997) Analyzing the 'language problem' discourses in Hong Kong: How official, academic, and media discourses construct and perpetuate dominant models of language, learning and education. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 28: 427–40.

Purpose: The purpose of Lin's analysis is to examine how the 'language problem' has been formulated in official public discourses in Hong Kong.

Data sources: Lin cites the following as sources for her data: government education policy document and reports, academic articles and reports, and public media such as 'influential newspapers' (p. 427). No other information is given on means for assuring that excerpts taken for analysis were representative of the larger corpus.

Data analysis: No specific means for analysing the collected data were given in the report, but it is summarised that a broad-based discourse analytic approach was taken.

Findings: According to Lin, the official documents she examined perpetuate particular conceptualisations of the notions of language, learning and education, including the following:

- The goal of education is to produce a labour force for businesses.
- Schools need to focus on development of learner proficiency in English and Chinese as a means to satisfy economic, political and other demands.
- Language learning goals should be defined by job-market needs.
- Teachers and students are considered 'sub-standard workers and learners' (p. 427).

According to Lin, these conceptualisations 'impose a labor-production model of education, denigrate the value of the child's mother tongue, impose a one-sided cognitive model of language and language learning, assume an ahistorical, non-sociocultural, computer-model of the social actor (e.g. the child, the learner)' (p. 438).

Conclusions: Current discourses are perilous to language learners as they cannot help in the development of effective educational programmes and practices. Official discourses must change to reflect views of language, learning and education that can lead to the development of educational programmes that meet learners' sociocultural needs and 'equip them with the necessary resources to survive and succeed in, as well as to contribute to, our society' (p. 439).

Suggestions for research projects

To recap, research on macro sociocultural structures involves the systematic collection and analysis of contextually situated oral and written texts for the purposes of uncovering the particular ideological assumptions embodied in their linguistic and discursive arrangements. Questions that can guide projects undertaken in this domain include the following: What can guide projects undertaken in this domain include the following: What social, cultural and ideological perspectives about the notions of language and culture are contained in a particular set of classroom texts for English language learners? What are the official language policies embodied in the standard practices of an educational or business organisation? How are these informed by beliefs about language and language users in the larger social context? What political ideologies about race and ethnicity are found in a particular professional organisation and how do they influence

the kinds of practices found in that organisation? How do teachers construct learners' identities in their stories about their experiences in their classrooms? How do these constructions reflect the cultural and political ideologies of their educational institutions?

Research project 10.1

Perspectives on the English-speaking culture(s) found in textbooks used in EFL classrooms

Identify concerns and pose questions

As we know, the resources and tools we use in our classrooms shape our learners' development in significant ways. Understanding what may be possible for their development in terms of, at the very least, social and cultural understandings requires in part that we understand the social and cultural meanings embodied in the tools and materials we make available to them. Thus, we are led to ask: What are the typical images and themes on culture that are found in one type of instructional tool common to EFL classrooms, textbooks.

Identify appropriate approach and sources of data

A discourse analysis would be the most appropriate approach for this study. Choose texts that are available for use in your classes. Make sure you are able to articulate the criteria you used to make your selections. Since examining every page would make the task unmanageable, choose specific sections from each text to examine. You may choose to look at every other chapter or a certain percentage of chapters from each text.

Collect data

Create a provisional analytic framework to use on which to note and classify the thematic content within each selection. Figure 10.2 is an example of one that can be used, or you can construct one that addresses your particular concerns.

Analyse data

Examine each selection, noting and classifying the content. Once you have examined each selection, look across datasets for recurring themes or concepts, or categories. Quantify the number of units that fit within each (as, for example, percentages) and choose the best, most representative examples for each theme, concept or category. You might construct a diagram to represent the semantic and other relations comprising a theme or

Representations	
Words and phrases	Visual representations: Where appropriate, note demographics of individuals (e.g. socioeconomic status, gender, race, age), scene and location (e.g. geographical location, urban, rural) and so on.
Topical content Personal life Family life The community Sports Health and welfare Travel Education The workplace Current events Religion Arts, humanities Political systems Science Environment Other	

Figure 10.2 Analytic framework for analysis of EFL texts

category. Construct a set of statements about the data that you feel best represent what you found.

Reflect on the findings

What did you find out about the social and cultural content contained in the textbooks? Which findings did you anticipate? Which were most surprising? What might account for these meanings? How relevant are these meanings for your students? How might you add to or in some way change the tools and resources that students will use in the classroom?

Share findings and take action

It is likely that your findings will be of interest to those who teach similar courses. Thus, it would be worth while to share a summary of your findings with your colleagues, either as part of a faculty meeting, or as a posting to an electronic bulletin board for EFL teachers. In addition, you might send your review to a journal for publication consideration.

Research project 10.2

The representation of teenagers in the news

Identify concerns and pose questions

As we know, our social identities are constructed in part by the larger beliefs, practices and ideologies found in the wider social contexts in which we live. Through the various forms of media such as newspapers, television programmes, and magazines individuals are portrayed in certain ways, and these portrayals give shape to our understandings of individuals as social beings. The questions here then are: How are American (or other cultural group) teenagers portrayed in the media? More specifically: How do stories appearing in newspapers portray the lives and activities of teenagers?

Identify appropriate approach and sources of data

The most appropriate approach is discourse analysis. Choose the newspapers from which data will be collected. If you are interested in more local portrayals, then choose newspapers that are community-based. If the concern is with more global portrayals, then choose newspapers with a larger scope, i.e. that are geared to a regional or national market. Whatever choices are made, be sure you can articulate the rationale behind them. Specify the time period over which data collection will occur making sure that you will collect enough data to allow patterns to emerge (e.g. once a day vs once a week).

Collect data

Create a provisional analytic framework to use on which to note and classify the content of the news stories. Figure 10.3 is an example of one that can be used, or you can construct one that addresses your particular concerns.

Analyse data

Total the number of stories found from each newspaper for each collection period. Examine each selection, noting and classifying the content. Once you have examined each selection, look across datasets for recurring themes or concepts, or categories. Quantify the number of units that fit within each and choose the most representative examples for each theme, concept or category. Construct a set of statements about the data that you feel best represent what you found.

Reflect and reconsider

What topics were most frequently dealt with in the news stories? How were youths portrayed in these stories: e.g. Productive contributors to the community? Troublemakers? Sympathetic characters? Difficult to control? Cateb-rated? Did news stories vary by gender, race, or age? That is, were some groups represented in particular kinds of stories more than others? What

Topics	Demographics (e.g. age, SES*, race gender, ethnicity)	Tone of coverage (i.e. words used to create positive vs negative spin)
Educational issues Sports, Lifestyle Crime (perpetrators/victims) Accidents Social health problems (e.g. drinking, smoking, drugs, eating disorders, teen suicide) Race relations Employment, workplace Community activities Other		

* Socioeconomic Status

Types of story

Illustrative (linking particular story to broader social context)

Event (relating account of a specific event with no link to some broader issue or concern)

Figure 10.3 Framework for analysis of news stories

can you conclude about the portrayal of teenagers in news stories? How might these images shape the everyday lives of teenagers in your community?

Share findings and take action

If you work for or are familiar with a youth community organisation, you might want to share your findings with them. Together you can discuss whether the representation of teenagers works to their advantage or disadvantage and together develop ways to enhance their public portrayals.

10.2.2 Institutional contexts

This dimension has to do with the institutional contexts constituting our social communities. These contexts are shaped by specific goals that are drawn from the larger worldviews in which they are nested. These goals, in turn, give shape to particular kinds of communicative activities and particular kinds of social roles and relationships in those contexts. Families, schools, churches, civic organisations, places of work, professional groups, friendship circles, neighbourhood and other social and special-interest clubs and associations are some of the more significant social institutions in which we hold memberships.

The general concern of research in this dimension is with explicating the communicative practices and activities that characterise particular

institutional contexts, including the communicative resources and patterns of participation by which the social roles and role relationships within these activities are produced and regulated. That is, it seeks to make visible the socially constituted nature of the institution, the communicative activities comprising the institution, including their relationships to each other, and the communicative means by which individuals are appropriated into or assume particular social roles and role relationships as part of their involvement in these contexts.

The general approach to such studies is ethnographic. Sources of data typically include notes from long-term participant observations, audio- and video-recordings, interviews with participants whose contexts they are, and collections of official documents. Combining the use of the ethnography of communication framework with discourse and conversation analytic techniques to analyse the data allows us to see how more micro-social actions are connected to larger patterns of use, and how these patterns are embedded within and, on another level, help to constitute particular communicative meanings, beliefs and ideologies.

A sampling of research concerned with the institutional context was presented in Chapter 4. Remember the concern here was with documenting learners' communicative worlds outside the classroom with the aim of using them to transform the contexts of the learners' schools. As with research on the more macro issues, doing 'good' research here involves rigorous and systematic use of data collection and analysis methods. Because of the broad range, amount and type of data typically collected for these kinds of studies, it is sometimes easy for researchers to 'get lost' in their data. That is, they may lose sight of concrete communication in the sense of actual communities of persons. Forms of formalization, the abstract possibilities of systems, hopped-for keys to mankind as a whole, seem to overthrow the dogged work of making sense of real communities and real lives' (Hymes, 1974: 7). To ensure that the sense being made is reflective of those whose worlds are being studied, it is especially important for researchers to make clear how data were gathered, including the specific sources used, and how reflective of the entire corpus of data are the examples used in the research report.

I have included a short overview of a study of an elementary school programme, (Example 10.2) as an example of the kinds of studies currently being done in applied linguistics concerned with the dimension of institutional context. Like the earlier example, it has both strengths and weaknesses. While it explains more clearly its sources and means of collecting data, it does not make clear how the data were analysed, how the different sources of data were analysed in relation to each other, and how reflective the samples are of the whole body of data. It is useful, however, in demonstrating the links between the members' social actions and the shapes that the communicative worlds in their schooling community take.

Example 10.2 Institutional contexts

Toohy, K. (2000) *Learning English at school: Identity, social relations and classroom practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Purpose: The multipurpose of Toohy's study is to uncover: (a) the specific communicative practices by which a group of language-minority children engage with their teachers and each other over the course of their primary schooling, from kindergarten to grade 2; (b) how these practices distribute and regulate the kinds of social identities and roles the children are socialised into; and (c) the consequences in terms of opportunities for learning afforded by these practices.

Participants: With the help of the kindergarten teacher, Toohy identified six language-minority children attending primary school in a large suburban school district in Canada to follow over the duration of the study. The children represented three different language groups, and for each group, one male and one female child were chosen.

Data sources: Toohy used a variety of sources typical of a broad-based ethnography from which to collect data over a three-year period. For example, she and her research assistants kept field notes while participant-observers in the setting. They also audio- and video-recorded regularly scheduled sessions, and interviewed the teachers, and parents of the children several times over the duration of the project.

Data analysis: Little explicit mention is made of the analytic techniques used, but it is surmised that a discourse analysis of the transcribed recordings, interview data and field notes was the primary approach.

Findings: The general finding arising from this longitudinal, ethnographic study is this: the children's opportunities for learning were enhanced in situations where they were given the chance to take on desirable and powerful positions in the situations, when they had access to their peers' expertise, and when they were allowed to play, and use English, with their peers. Influencing the availability of these opportunities were seating arrangements (e.g. where children were made to sit for certain activities, and who their seat neighbours were), and the kinds of participation structures afforded by the instructional practices (e.g. teacher-whole group, small group work, individual seat work, and so on).

Conclusion: The kinds of learning opportunities afforded to language-minority children shape their success as learners. Improving language-minority children's learning opportunities involves minimally making teachers aware of how schooling practices shape, in fundamental and consequential ways, these learners' possibilities for success.

Suggestions for research projects

As noted above, the general concern of research in this dimension is with explicating the communicative practices and activities, including participant roles and role relationships, embodied in particular social institutions. Questions to guide research projects in this domain include the following: What communicative practices and activities comprise a particular institution? What beliefs and assumptions about language and culture are embodied in them? Whose interests do these serve? How compatible are the activities within institutions and how do they compare across institutions?

Research project 10.3**Students' funds of knowledge****Identity concerns and pose questions**

As we know, students come to school with rich reservoirs of cultural and linguistic knowledge developed in the context of their families upon which teachers can build to create a more meaningful learning environment in the classroom. To uncover some of the knowledge and skills your students already possess, you can conduct a funds of knowledge project, based on the work done by Luis Moll and his associates and described in Chapter 4. A question that can guide your research is: What funds of knowledge and resources do students bring with them from their home contexts?

Identify appropriate approach and sources of data

One approach appropriate for this study is discourse analysis. A primary means for collecting data can be through interviews and questionnaires with your students and their families. In addition to being primary sources of data, students can also be involved as co-investigators and asked to conduct interviews or complete questionnaires with their family members. They can also be asked to create portfolios in which they include written, visual, graphic, audio, video and other kinds of materials that they feel best represent their home communities.

Collect data

Together with the students develop an interview protocol or questionnaire they can use with their family members. Develop a time line for conducting the interviews and completing the questionnaires. Since the findings are to be used to transform your classroom environment, it is advisable to conduct the study early in the school year. Provide students with guidelines for creating home portfolios along with a deadline for completing them.

Analyse data

Together with students, read the transcribed interviews and completed questionnaires, noting recurring themes and topical patterns. Follow the same procedure for the portfolios. Summarise and arrange the findings from the interviews, questionnaires and student portfolios into particular funds of knowledge.

Reflect on the findings

What funds of knowledge do students bring with them to school? How similar or different are they across students? How do they compare with the school's funds of knowledge as represented in the curricular and instructional practices and policies? What do they tell you about the needs, interests, and abilities of your students? How do they compare with the funds of knowledge you bring from your home context? How might they be incorporated into your classroom learning community?

Share findings and take action

Together with the students, design means for sharing what you have learned with the larger school community. You might also create a web site and invite other school communities to do similar kinds of project. Also consider presenting your findings to a professional group of teachers. What you have learned may help them to decide to make changes to their own classroom communities.

Research Project 10.4**Family literacy practices in multilingual environments****Identify concern and pose questions**

While we know that many families arriving to our communities come with many languages, often within the same family, we know far less about how families with multiple languages manage their communicative experiences, and more particularly their literacy practices. Thus, the question guiding this project is: What are the literacy practices of one multilingual family?

Identify appropriate approach and sources of data

The approach to take here is broadly ethnographic, including methods typical of an ethnography of communication to capture the range and scope of literacy practices, and discourse analytic methods for analysis of written documents that include transcripts of taped conversations and interviews with participants, and the materials they use in their literacy practices (e.g. books, newspapers, lists, letters, etc.). Given the range of

data to be collected, it is most feasible to begin with one family. The findings here can lead to new questions for exploration with additional multilingual families.

Collect data

Collecting data involves long-term participation with the group of participants. It can include regular conversations with the family to discuss literacy practices and their perceptions of them; observations of the individual family members as they go about their daily lives to uncover the ways that literacy practices enter into and are used by the individuals to construct their worlds; and collection of materials that are important to the group in terms of what they read and what they write.

Analyse data

Transcribe the videotapes and identify the common features of the literacy practices. Use Hymes's SPEAKING model as a beginning framework. Describe the patterned uses of print, the codes of language they involve, and interpret the conventional meanings in light of how they are used by the family. In addition, analyse your field notes and participant interviews for recurring themes and use them to help explain the literacy activities in light of the larger social and cultural contexts.

Reflect on the findings

What literacy practices are most commonly engaged in by this family? Do they vary by language? What do the practices mean to the family? Do the meanings vary by family role (e.g. parent vs child)? How important are they to maintaining their identities as multilinguals? How closely are they supported by the larger social community?

Share findings and take action

Your findings will have much to offer teachers and administrators in K-12 schools and adult education programmes, and both local and state policy makers. You might consider offering workshops on your findings for these groups. You might also see if there is interest among families in your community who have similar multilingual backgrounds in organising and participating in literacy-based clubs.

10.2.3 Communicative activities

This third dimension is concerned with the identification and characterisation of the communicative activities sustaining, and sustained by, a particular institutional context. In addition to everyday activities by which institutional members of particular communities live their lives, attention

is also given to those practices by which novice members or newcomers are apprenticed into the institution's activities and the specific means by which they are assessed or evaluated as bona fide members. Communicative activities include oral and written events as well as those accomplished with electronic means, such as e-mailing and electronic bulletin board postings.

The aim of research in this dimension is to identify, describe, interpret and ultimately explain the locally situated meanings of the communicative actions by which individuals jointly produce their encounters. The focus here is not on individuals within their activities, but on the particular activities that shape and are shaped by individual involvement.

Several approaches can be used to accomplish the goals of this dimension. Ethnographies of communication are typically used to uncover the conventional linguistic patterns of participation and communicative plans shared by group members and by which they accomplish their activities. If the activity is accomplished through face-to-face interaction, conversation analysis is sometimes combined with the more general ethnographic analyses to uncover the particular interactional features oriented to by the participants to produce order in the conversation. Studies like that by Jacoby and Gonzales (1991) and Capps and Ochs (1995), noted in Chapter 2, are good examples of how to combine ethnography of communication methods with more detailed analyses of conversation.

Studies can also take an interactional sociolinguistic approach to examine points of *mis*-communication to uncover differences in meanings attributed to particular cues. Examples of such studies were presented in Chapters 2 and 8. Finally, discourse analysis can be used to uncover particular linguistic cues used to index larger contextual meanings. Examples of studies taking a discourse analytic approach were presented in Chapter 8.

Similar to the studies undertaken in the other two dimensions, in addition to audio- and video-recordings of the encounters, data sources include field notes taken from participant-observations, and interviews with the participants themselves. The sampling of studies of communicative activities cited in Chapter 1, the language socialisation practices reviewed in Chapter 3, and the review of communicative activities particular to classrooms reviewed in Chapter 5, are examples of the kinds of studies typical of this dimension. In addition, I have included a short overview of a study (Example 10.3) which examines one particular activity, testing routines, as instantiated in the classroom practices of three different teachers. It is notable that in her report, the author provides details on her sources of data, and the methods she used to gather and analyse them. As pointed out earlier, such information helps the reader to make sense of and evaluate how well the findings represent the larger corpus of collected data.

Example 10.3 Communicative activities

Poole, D. (1994) Routine testing practices and the linguistic construction of knowledge. *Cognition and Instruction*, 12 (2): 125–50.

Purpose: The purpose of Poole's study is to examine how routine classroom testing events are linguistically encoded, and within these events how curricular knowledge is encoded.

Data source: The data were gathered over a four-month period from the classrooms of three teachers each from a different junior high school, all located in an urban area of southern California. They included field notes taken during observations of 50 class hours, audio- and video-recordings of 39 of these class hours, informal discussions with the teachers, and more structured interviews at the end of the data collection period. Data selected for analysis included the following identified activities: two pre-test reviews, six post-test reviews, and the written tests which constituted the focus of the reviews.

Data analysis: Poole used modified conversation analytic techniques to transcribe the recordings of the pre- and post-test reviews, and used an ethnography of communication approach to identify, describe and interpret the meanings of the recurring patterns in the conversations, including speech acts and speech act sequencing.

Findings: One of the findings that emerged from Poole's analysis revealed that the curricular content in these sessions was encoded primarily through IRE sequences 'that take the form of "test-questions" or incomplete sentence frames' (p. 130). The questions themselves were largely display or known-answer questions such as 'Where was the Whiskey Rebellion?' and 'What did the immigration act of 1924 do?' Moreover, the questions asked in the pre- and post-test reviews reflected the kinds of questions found on the written tests. For example, the question above asked by the teacher about the immigration act appeared in this exact form on the written test. Student responses, both in the reviews and on the test, were primarily limited to short noun-phrases.

Conclusion: The kinds of questions asked in the pre- and post-test reviews, and again on the written tests, as well as the student responses such questions led to, constituted knowledge as 'objectifiable, seemingly value-free form of knowledge presentation' (p. 145). Poole argues that long-term engagement of the learners in such events socialises them into a limited, constraining understanding of knowledge as discrete, isolatable display of facts. She calls for alternative forms of assessment in which 'school-valued knowledge can be assessed in a more complex form' (p. 144).

Suggestions for research projects

As noted above, this dimension is concerned with identifying, characterising and explaining the meanings of the particular communicative tools and resources used by individuals to produce their communicative activities. Also of concern are the means by which newcomers or novices are socialised into full, competent participation. The focus here is not so much on individuals within their activities, but on the particular activities that shape and are shaped by individual engagement. Research projects seek answers to such questions as: What are the communicative means and plans constitutive of a communicative activity determined to be significant to the lived experiences of the members of a particular institutional context? What social identities and role relationships are made available to the participants in the activity? How are newcomers and other novices oriented to and appropriated into legitimate participation? Where does long-term use of the activity's mediated means lead the participants in terms of what they learn and how they learn it?

Research project 10.5

Social activity in a retirement community

Identify concern and pose questions

Communicative activities are important means by which individuals and groups enact and construct their everyday worlds. While there has been much recent work on activities of youths and schooling communities, far fewer studies have been done on adults, and in particular, on adults living in retirement communities. Those interested in this population might be interested in conducting a project that examines this group more closely. One question to guide the project is: What is one communicative activity that is important to creating and maintaining social affiliation in a retirement community?

Identify appropriate approach and sources of data

Ethnography of communication would be an appropriate approach. The choice of a particular community depends on your professional and practical interests. The choice of particular activity should be determined after you have spent time with the community.

Collect data

This study requires long-term involvement in the community as an observer or participant-observer. In addition to making multiple video-recordings of the activity of interest, keep field notes of your own observations and experiences, interview the participants for their reflections and observations, and collect all related materials, artifacts, documents and written records.

Analyse data

Transcribe the videotapes and identify the features important to the accomplishment of the activity. Construct a framework of the conventional or typical sequence of communicative actions as they unfold in the activity. Describe the patterned uses of language and interpret their conventional meanings in light of how they are used by the participants to take action.

The SPEAKING framework would be useful here in describing the activity. In addition, analyse your field notes and participant interviews for recurring themes and use them to help to explain the activity in light of the larger social and cultural contexts it helps to (re)create in the community.

Reflect on the findings

What did you find about the particular communicative activity? How is it typically enacted? What functions does it play in the larger community? Whose interests does it seem to serve? How do participants feel about it? What new knowledge or understanding about this community can you take from your study? What might your next steps be?

Share findings and take action

Depending on your professional role, you can decide to share your findings with those who work in or aspire to work in retirement communities. You can also present your findings to a professional organisation concerned with ageing and language use. More informally, you can post your findings to a professional electronic bulletin board.

Research project 10.6

Classroom discourse and language learning

Identify concern and pose questions

As discussed in Chapter 5, the discourse of classrooms is consequential to learners' development in that it helps to shape both the processes and products of learning. If you are concerned with improving classroom conditions for foreign language learning, one place to begin is by examining the discourse of these classrooms. A basic question to guide this project is: what are the intellectual and practical activities that teachers and students construct in and through their discourse in a foreign language classroom?

Identify appropriate approach and sources of data

Ethnography of communication would be an appropriate approach to uncovering the communicative activities comprising the discourse of a classroom community. The level and grade of the foreign language classroom will depend on your own professional interests.

Collect data

To get a sense of the conventional practices constituted in the classroom discourse requires long-term involvement in the community. How often you visit the classroom depends on how long the course runs. If, for example, it runs for an entire academic year, you might decide to collect data once a week. If it is much shorter, say an 8-week course, you should probably plan on collecting data a few times a week. In addition to audio- and video-recording the classroom activities, keep field notes, collect related materials and artifacts, and plan to interview the teacher and students for their perceptions.

Analyse data

The first step of the analysis involves transcribing the recordings. The second involves coding the discourse into its constituent activities. You might consider involving the teacher in constructing the official coding scheme. On the transcripts, ask her to indicate what was happening, i.e. the purpose(s) directing the interaction, and label the various activities embedded in the talk accordingly. She might use labels such as 'transitioning', 'disciplining a student' and 'drilling subject/verb agreement'. She can also be asked to indicate points in the talk where these activities began and ended, and where she was unsure of what was going on. Hymes's SPEAKING model would be helpful as a descriptive framework. Another step involves constructing a framework of the conventional or typical sequence of utterances as it unfolded in a particular activity. In addition, analyse your field notes and participant interviews for recurring themes and use them to help explain the significance of the activities to the classroom community.

Reflect on the findings

What kinds of activities are typical of the discourse of this foreign language community? Were any a surprise to you? To the teacher? What kinds of communicative activities and understandings of language are students being socialised into?

Share findings and take action

Together with the teacher, you might consider how to change or enhance the classroom discourse so that it provides more opportunities for student involvement and for their using language that is communicatively rich. You might also co-present your findings at a meeting of foreign language educators.

10.2.4 Individual experiences

The final dimension focuses on the 'intersection of biographical experience and social involvements' (Layder, 1993: 9). That is, the concern is with individuals' experiences within their communicative worlds. This focus differs from a concern with communicative activities, described above, in that it gives attention to 'the way individuals respond to, and are affected by, their social involvements as against a focus on the *nature* of the social involvements themselves' (ibid.: p. 74; emphasis in the original).

Such a focus includes concerns with how individuals use the cues available to them in their communicative encounters to both index and construct their everyday worlds. It focuses, in particular, on the ways individuals index and construct their social identities and roles and those of others in light of the kinds of identities and roles into which they have been ascribed or socialised. In addition, attention is given to the ways that individuals use language in the construction of concepts such as motivation, voice, affiliation, agency and competence. Remember, as with social identities and roles, these constructs are considered to be fundamentally social, developed within and thus contingent on individuals' particular experiences in their social worlds.

Like studies of communicative activities, studies here can take different approaches. Sources of data typically include field notes from participant-observations of individuals' biographical experiences, and interviews and conversations with the individuals, in addition to audio- and video-recordings of their experiences. The conventions of language use uncovered by ethnographies of communication can allow closer inspection of how individuals orient to their conventionality. The study by Hall (1993c) mentioned in Chapter 1, for example, provides a microscopic look at how one individual manipulated in creative ways a particular convention associated with the activity of gossiping – an activity that had much social significance to the individual's social community – to raise her status as a participant in the activity.

Both interactional sociolinguistics and discourse analytic approaches also permit a focus on individual use of language. Shea's (1994) study of a non-native English speaker's experiences with two different academic advisers, discussed earlier in Chapter 2, is an example of a study that used IS to reveal how an individual's competence in accomplishing a goal was constructed in part by his interlocutor's willingness to participate in the encounter. Rampton's (1995) study, also discussed in Chapter 2, takes a discourse analytic approach to the study of how individuals communicatively experience their social worlds. Remember, his study was concerned with the varied ways that adolescents living in multi-ethnic communities used the linguistic resources available in their communities to stake out

their positionings in particular interactions and create particular social identities. Chapter 2 discussed some additional studies concerned with language use at the level of the individual. Finally, microgenetic methods are particularly useful for investigating change on the level of the individual. An extended example of such a study by Kim and Hall (2002) was presented in Chapter 8.

I have included a short overview of a study by Betsy Rymes, in Example 10.4, on the linguistic cues used by a group of students to construct themselves as particular kinds of individuals in stories they tell about their experiences of dropping out of school. Similar to Poole, Rymes provides needed detail on the sources of the narratives, and the means by which she collected and analysed them. While the analysis remains at the interpretive level, it is useful nonetheless in demonstrating how linguistic resources are used to index agency in even the most mundane of narratives.

Suggestions for research projects

To recap, the concern of this dimension is with individuals' experiences within their communicative worlds and, in particular, with how they use the cues available to them to both index and construct their everyday worlds, and their social identities and roles and those of others in light of the kinds of identities and roles into which they have been ascribed or socialised. In addition, attention is given to the ways that individuals use language in the construction of socially mediated concepts such as motivation, voice, affiliation, accommodation, agency and competence. Questions that studies in this dimension seek to answer include: How are the communicative resources of a practice used by participants to index their individual, social and cultural identities? How do individuals position themselves linguistically and otherwise in terms of the kinds of identities and role relationships made available to them in their communicative practices? Which voices seem more privileged or engender more authority, and which social identities are being made relevant? How are these identities reshaped by individuals as they make their way in their activities and with what communicative means? How do the participants appropriate the resources of others for their own purposes? What are the different means by which individuals accommodate to, resist, or actively oppose their involvement in particular communicative activities? What are the social, cognitive, linguistic and other consequences arising from an individual's long-term participation in particular communicative activities? What do individuals believe about their roles as participants and how, if at all, do these beliefs shape what they do?

Example 10.4 Individual experiences

Rymes, B. (2001) *Conversational borderlands: Language and identity in an alternative urban high school*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Purpose: One of the purposes of Betsy Rymes' study of a short-lived charter school in California is to describe the linguistic resources used by a group of students from the school to tell their stories of 'dropping out' of traditional public schools. She looks in particular at how they construct themselves as moral agents in these stories.

Data source: Her analysis is based on 12 video-recorded narratives told by eight Latino students between the ages of 15 and 18, four of whom are men and four of whom are women.

Data analysis: Rymes combines ethnographic data with a discourse analytical approach to describe and interpret the meanings of the particular resources used by the students in their stories.

Findings: Rymes found that these students render their leave-taking from traditional schools as reasonable and honourable responses to the difficult situations in which they found themselves through the use of several grammatical cues. One cue for doing so involved the use of progressive aspect to signal the durative nature of troublesome, or unmanageable actions in these situations. In describing the atmosphere of the school from which she eventually dropped out, for example, one student stated, 'if they want you bad *they'll be waiting for you*' (p. 43; emphasis in the original). Another student marked an enduring antagonistic relationship with a teacher as her reason for dropping out, stating, '*and he was looking for me* that's why I couldn't go there anymore 'cause I knew if I would go there I would get in trouble.' (p. 44; emphasis in the original).

Another grammatical cue used by these students to evoke an ongoing antagonistic atmosphere was through the use of the non-referential or existential 'it' and 'there' as in 'it's rough' and 'there's a lotta gangs' (p. 45) to describe their situations. According to Rymes, these forms 'convey a general presence, an atmospheric surround within which "the problem starts"' (p. 50). In these same narratives, the students use particular means to construct their involvement in the events leading up to their dropping out in such a way as to engender the sympathy of their interlocutors. They often use the pronouns 'they', 'everybody' and 'everyone' as agents and position themselves as involuntary objects of these agents' actions as in the following: '*cause they got me* from the back boom boom boom', '*everybody rushed me*', and '*everybody was socking me hitting me*' (pp. 54–5; emphasis in the original).

Conclusion: Rymes concludes that the study of the use of particular grammatical cues in individual narratives can reveal the intricate ways that individuals position themselves in their worlds.

Research project 10.7

Perceptions of identity and agency in narratives of bilingual speakers

Identity concerns and pose questions

The ways in which we use language in our communicative activities depend in part on our notions of identity and agency, that is, who we perceive ourselves to be, how we think others see us and how we would like others to perceive us. Understanding the everyday worlds of bilingual speakers requires in part our coming to understand their own understandings of themselves as language users. The question guiding this project is: How do a group of adult bilingual speakers perceive themselves as language users, and how do they construct their identities in the stories they tell about themselves?

Identify appropriate approach and sources of data

Narrative analysis would be an appropriate approach. The sources depend on the group you are interested in. If you are a teacher, you might want to gather narratives from a group of students. If your interest is the workplace, consider gathering narratives from bilingual individuals who hold positions in your field. The number of narratives collected depends on the context in which you are conducting your study and the kinds of claims you hope to make.

Collect data

Ask participants to provide written personal narratives. You can provide prompts such as 'How did you learn your two languages?' or 'How important are they to you?' rather than simply asking them to 'Write about yourself'. In a class situation, you might first read and discuss narratives written by other bilingual speakers, such as *Hunger for Memory* by Richard Rodriguez to get them thinking about the issues of identity and language.

Analyse data

First, decide on the features you wish to examine. They can include, for example, themes and topics, and use of pronouns and other linguistic markers to index in-group vs out-group identities, or to create themselves as characters in plots of their stories. You can also examine words they use to describe and thus construct themselves and others as certain kinds of individuals in relation to particular contexts or events and the particular languages they speak. You might choose to quantify the number of units that fit within each feature. Next, identify, describe and interpret the meanings of the patterned uses of the features. Construct a set of statements about the data that you feel best represent what you found.

Reflect on the findings

How do these individuals perceive themselves as language users? What identities are relevant to them? How do they position themselves in relation to others in their worlds? To the social contexts they consider significant? How do their perceptions compare across the group?

Share findings and take action

There are several electronic websites devoted to bilingualism where you can post your findings. If your participants were also your students, you might discuss the implications of the findings with them.

Research project 10.8

A bilingual child's use of language in play activities

Identify concern and pose questions

While there is much evidence on the linguistic features of child bilingual development, less is known about their communicative development in specific contexts of language use. In order to understand more fully the directions the language development of children who are raised as simultaneous bilinguals can take, these contexts need closer examination. Thus, a question to guide this research project is: How does a child being raised bilingually use her two languages to constitute her involvement in play?

Identify appropriate approach and sources of data

A microethnographic analysis of play events is an appropriate approach. Because of the detailed focus on language use, the number of participants can be small. In this case, one focal child and her involvement in play events with her adult caregivers can be used. If each caregiver interacts with the child in one of the two languages (e.g. mother interacts in English, the father in German), the dataset should include an equal number of play events for each language.

Collect data

Set up a video-recorder in the room where the child plays and record the play events as they take place. Decide on a time period for collecting the data. You should have enough data to be able to justify claims about the typicality of the child's language use in her play events.

Analyse data

After first transcribing the recordings, code each utterance according to language code (i.e. German or English). Utterances containing morphological or lexical items from both languages should be coded as mixed. Also code

each utterance for its communicative intent (e.g. agreeing, confirming, directing, requesting). Quantify codings for each event, and search across datasets for regularities or patterns in terms of language code use and function and choose examples from the data that best illustrate the patterns found. Construct a set of statements about the data that you feel best represent them.

Reflect on the findings

What languages did the child use in her interactions with the adult caregivers? How closely did her code use correspond to the language used by each interlocutor? What functions typify her utterances? Do they vary by code use? By interlocutor? By play event? How might you characterise the child's involvement with each interlocutor? What conclusions can you draw about the child's communicative development in the two languages?

Share findings and take action

Consider writing up your report of the study and submitting to a journal concerned with bilingualism and child development.

10.3 Summary

The ideas presented in this chapter are meant to help newcomers to the field and others who are not familiar with a sociocultural perspective to get some idea of the range of possibilities for exploration. The framework highlighting the multiple dimensions of research contexts not only helps us to conceptualise the multiple layers of our social worlds, it also provides a guide for identifying possible topics and questions for undertaking research. While the possibilities are unlimited, the focus of any investigation depends on one's particular circumstances, interests and needs.

Without a doubt, conducting research on language, culture and learning from a sociocultural perspective is both labour and time intensive, and thus, requires a fairly strong commitment to engaging in 'the dogged work of making sense of real communities and real lives' (Hymes, 1974: 7). Such work is typically not for those who are looking for quick studies, with simple answers. Rather, it is for those who enjoy exploring, who are not discouraged by what can sometimes seem to be unruly ways of living, and who are willing to persevere despite the bumps and obstacles they are likely to encounter in their journeys. Chapter 11, the last chapter, contains lists of relevant journals, professional organisations and websites where readers can find additional materials, resources and tools to aid them in their explorations.

Section

IV

Resources for teaching and researching language and culture