

RE-HUMANISING LANGUAGE POLICY AND PLANNING RESEARCH: METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Abstract

Research on language policy and planning (LPP) of international organisations has predominantly focused on the United Nations and the European Union, while the context of ASEAN is otherwise overlooked due to a perceived lacklustre interest in analysing discourses and phenomena in the Global South. This paper firstly explicates the rationale for research on ASEAN and the Southeast Asian region and argues for a case for rethinking the supranational-LPP of ASEAN. Drawing on theoretical concepts on actors and agency in language planning, the paper discusses an innovative methodological approach in LPP research—engaging with scholars (sociolinguists) in imagining LPP possibilities of ASEAN. The paper fundamentally gives credence to the hitherto underutilised and undervalued agentic ‘voices’ of scholars as ‘people with expertise’ in LPP, in an attempt at ‘re-humanising’ LPP research in the Global South. This paper therefore brings to the forefront the critical role of (socio)linguists with expert knowledge in language planning processes and re-emphasises the agency of LPP scholars as linguistic experts in supranational LPP. While the research methodology is grounded in solid theoretical foundations, offering refreshing contributions to LPP scholarship, the data collection process proved to be challenging due mainly to a need for Covid-related adjustments, i.e., towards online interviews. The pandemic has, inadvertently, performed the role of a ‘catalyst’ which expedites a transition towards online/virtual data gathering methods. Reflecting on the researcher’s experience in data collection, this paper elucidates the advantages and challenges of conducting online interviews, as well as proposes useful strategies employed while collecting data during pandemic times.

Keywords: language policy and planning research, Global South perspectives, actors and agency, online interviews, critical reflection

Introduction

In recent years, there have been growing calls for applied linguistics research of the Global South from critical and Southern perspectives (Heugh et al., 2021; Pennycook & Makoni, 2019). This paper firstly explicates the rationale for research on ASEAN and the Southeast Asian region and argues for a case for rethinking the supranational-LPP of ASEAN. Drawing on theoretical concepts on actors and agency in language planning, the paper then discusses the innovative methodological approach in LPP research—engaging with scholars (sociolinguists) in deliberating LPP possibilities of ASEAN. This paper further argues that imagining policy possibilities is an attempt at re-humanising applied linguistics research (Weber & Horner, 2012). While the research methodology is informed by theoretical underpinnings and justified on disciplinary grounds, executing such an approach and its ensuing data collection methods

proved to be a daunting experience in the era of the Covid- 19 pandemic. In the subsequent sections, this paper essentially provides a critical reflection of the data collection method in a doctoral research and elucidates researcher's reflexivity throughout the process. Relating to researcher's experience in data collection, the struggles and strategies in conducting online interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic period are further discussed. Taken together, this paper not only intends to address the practicality issues of data collection in pandemic times, but also to provide theoretical and conceptual justifications for an underexplored methodological perspective in the field of language policy and planning (LPP).

Global South Perspectives: Positioning Southeast Asia and the Relevance of ASEAN

Lately, there has been a trend in social science and humanities research aimed at initiating and reviving discourses and intellectual discussions about the Global South and Southern perspectives (Collyer et al., 2019; Heugh & Stroud, 2018; Pennycook & Makoni, 2019;). The term 'Global South' is often used as a more palatable term as compared to 'developing', 'Third World' or 'less-developed' nations (Ruvituso, 2020). The use of the term 'Global South' indicates a symbolic paradigm shift from saturated discourses in literature on development and socio-cultural inequality to recognising the significance of geopolitical dynamics (Ruvituso, 2020). From a geopolitical standpoint, this can be traced to the politico-economic dynamics happening around the globe as we speak. Economic, political, and military strengths that coalesced in Europe and the US during the twentieth century now appear to be changing places—from north back to south and east, according to scholars such as Mahbubani (2022), and Mahbubani and Sng (2017); therefore, there is a need to shift our focus from the saturated discourses of the Global North and start gazing towards the Global South in applied linguistics research (Lee, 2021; Pennycook & Makoni, 2019).

From an ecological perspective, Southeast Asia is a sprawling geographical region with a population of more than 690 million and an estimated 1246 living languages (Eberhard et al., 2019). It is widely acknowledged that the ethnolinguistic diversity of Southeast Asia is remarkably complex and intricate (Lee et al., 2021b; Tupas & Sercombe, 2014). Colonisation, inter/intra-national migration, and cultural diffusion (Pennycook, 2002; Tollefson & Tsui, 2004) have resulted in a complex and dynamic language ecology. A plethora of national languages, together with ethnic, indigenous, minority and exogenous foreign languages are blended in a 'linguistic cauldron' of 'superdiversity' (Vertovec, 2007). While we acknowledge the need for applied linguistics research of the Global South by Global South researchers through Southern applied linguistics and decolonising theories (Collyer et al., 2019; Connell, 2018; Pennycook & Makoni, 2019), from a geopolitical perspective, the strategic positioning of Southeast Asia within the Indo-Pacific is also generating interest among scholars globally. The most important strategic competition of the 21st century between an established power and a rising one will be played out in the Indo- Pacific (Singh, 2018). All things considered, discourses about ASEAN and the Southeast Asian region are gaining traction. The significance of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the geopolitical landscape (Mahbubani, 2015) prompted Ergenç (2020) to propose using ASEAN as a means of researching in studies related to regionalism and governance of international organisations.

Context Matters in Language Policy and Planning

ASEAN was first established in 1967 as a regional bloc with five Member-States: Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. With the inclusion of Brunei, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, ASEAN today consists of ten member-states. Timor-Leste, however, remains as an observer and is yet to be accepted as an ASEAN member-state. ASEAN is one of the longest-surviving intergovernmental organisations in Asia, widely perceived as an organisation which has strived to maintain peace, harmony and stability in the region since its establishment (Severino, 2008; Chesterman, 2008). ASEAN is also an emerging regional geopolitical force and is often used as a proxy politico-economic battleground by global superpowers, namely the US and China (Singh, 2018). This makes ASEAN an interesting case study (Mahbubani, 2015). The available body of literature on ASEAN, however, is mostly on political-security, international relations, human rights, socio-cultural issues, with limited attention to language planning and education policies.

In a globalising world, the multiple layers of governance and the influence of the burgeoning economic and political might of supranational organisations, far exceed the influence of some states (Blommaert, 2007; McEntee-Atalianis, 2015). As a result, nation-based LPP models are rendered insufficient in reflecting the experiences or needs of global communities (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). ASEAN has adopted English as its sole working language (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009). This language choice is widely perceived as pragmatic, aimed at the economic integration of the inherently multilingual and multicultural member-states. This official language choice of ASEAN is a noticeable feature in a world increasingly celebrating multilingualism and unity in diversity (Lee et al., 2021a). Research on LPP in international organisations, however, has predominantly been about the United Nations (McEntee-Atalianis, 2016) and the European Union (Kruse & Ammon, 2018), while the context of ASEAN is otherwise overlooked due to a perceived lacklustre interest in analysing discourses and phenomena in the Global South (Collyer et al., 2019; Connell, 2018). We need to encourage a more inclusive applied linguistics that opens the doors to southern voices, as well as continuing more research on southern contexts, which more likely opens up a much wider range of thinking (Lin, 2013).

Lately, there has been an emerging interest in ASEAN-level LPP. However, apart from Kirkpatrick (2010, 2017) who has written extensively on the LPP of ASEAN, few (Lee et al., 2022) have scrutinised the process of ASEAN's regional LPP. Using ASEAN as a case to study supranational LPP, this research speaks to policymakers and stakeholders who frequently need to grapple with linguistic choices and challenges not only at the macro-national, meso and micro-levels, but also increasingly at a supranational-level, beyond the state (Ricento, 2000). This paper contributes to the methodological perspectives on research of ASEAN LPP. This paper also opens up the spaces for LPP research at the supranational layer of ASEAN, calling for a shift from the already saturated discourses on macro-LPP (national/state-level) as well as micro-LPP in this part of the world (Baldauf, 2006; Tupas & Sercombe, 2014).

The understanding of supranational LPP in this paper needs to be contextualised under these three conditions, i) ASEAN is not a supranational organisation like the EU, although it is an

intergovernmental organisation (Koh, 2007). ii) ASEAN member-states have full sovereignty in national-level language and education policy and planning. iii) ASEAN, to date, has not proposed any language policies/language-in-education planning, e.g., as a template of reference for member-states. Understanding supranational LPP under the said conditions is paramount for ensuring the continued protection of the sanctity of the ASEAN Charter and ASEAN Way institutional norms (Acharya, 2017), which principally regard non- interference in internal affairs as one of the main guiding principles of ASEAN (Seah, 2009).

Actors and Agency in LPP

In this section, to better understand supranational LPP, I offer alternative insights from the perspectives of social actors, i.e., scholars who are hitherto undervalued and underrepresented in language policy debates and planning discourses. I argue that their views as people with expertise approach are relevant and should be taken into consideration when reflecting upon the socio-historical and sociolinguistic context of the Southeast Asian region, as well as for rethinking regional policy possibilities. I further discuss how agency and actors in LPP provide a methodological justification in this paper. I do so by relating to ‘agency of projectivity’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), as well as being informed by the epistemological belief of co-construction of ‘new’ knowledge (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009) with key actors, in this context, ‘people with expertise’ in LPP (Zhao & Baldauf, 2012).

One of the essential components of any LPP is the agency of the actors involved in devising, interpreting, implementing and/or evaluating language policies (Baldauf, 2006). There has been a spike of interest in various aspects of agency, considering that language policies are always contextual, processual, and negotiated (Baldauf, 2006; Lee & Samuel, 2020; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021). At the supranational-level, the notion of agency is also beginning to generate interest among researchers (McEntee-Atalianis, 2016; McEntee- Atalianis & Vessey, 2021). Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001, p. 148), describe agency as “constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with the society at large.” Taking into consideration their framing of agency, I have approached this research from a social constructionist perspective in this paper, which emphasises the co- construction of knowledge among research participants, in imagining ASEAN’s linguistic future and possible policy trajectories. A major focus of social constructionism involves uncovering the ways in which social phenomena are developed, institutionalised, known, and made into traditions by humans (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Informed by social constructionism theory, qualitative research enables research participants to construct knowledge in a social environment, building on their prior sociolinguistic, socio-political and sociocultural experiences to offer insights into *how* and *why* the policy was formulated, and deliberates on imagined linguistic possibilities.

Guided by critical perspectives in applied linguistics research, one of the main research objectives is problematisation of the context, but that in itself is insufficient according to Pennycook (2001). He further cautions that critical work has often been criticised for doing little more than criticise things, for “offering nothing but a bleak and pessimistic vision of social relations” (pp. 8-9), rendering one as a ‘critic’ without providing practical and/or tangible alternatives. In cognisance of this, this research, aims to strengthen the critical approach to

applied linguistic studies, by providing participants affordances for imagination of future prospects, possibilities, and trajectories (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) or what Pennycook (2001) calls “preferred futures” and offering a “model of hope and possibility” (p. 9). Through the involvement of key actors in LPP, this paper is principally grounded in a ‘performative’ ideological shift towards ‘preferred futures’ informed by inclusive, responsible, democratic and ethical approach to LPP.

Using Zhao and Baldauf’s (2012) framework as a reference, ‘people with expertise’ can potentially exercise their agency in creative and imaginative ways: in the case of ASEAN language policy, through affordances such as engaging in an intellectual endeavour of a doctoral research, instead of via the conventional top-down, methodical, and structured nature of LPP (Ricento, 2000). The outcome of such an endeavour, I believe, not only enables ‘people with expertise’ as legitimate actors in LPP, engaging in an ‘imagined participatory policymaking’ process, but also more importantly, it empowers them to exercise what I call ‘transformative agency’ in this hitherto underexplored domain of supranational-LPP of ASEAN. This paper therefore brings to the forefront the critical role of linguists with expert knowledge in language planning processes and re-emphasises the agency of LPP scholars as linguistic experts in supranational LPP.

As mentioned earlier, (socio)linguists are classified as ‘people with expertise’ within the actors in language planning framework (Zhao, 2011; Zhao & Baldauf, 2012). These key actors were invited to exercise their ‘agency of projectivity’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) by reflecting upon the ASEAN LPP process and reimagine alternative linguistic possibilities. Projective agency involves “processes of reflection on the current situation as a response to problems that cannot be resolved through the application of existing ways of thinking and acting” (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021, p. 6), in other words, as an imaginative way of recreating the shape and trajectory of the world around us. They further add that projectivity is a future-oriented component of agency that involves a process of imagining possible future trajectories of action that are relevant to the actor’s hopes, fears, and desires for the future. Agency is not found only in the reproduction of past experiences, in fact, it may also involve a creative reconstruction of the world that gives shape and direction to it (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Borrowing from Emirbayer and Mische (1998), a focus on agency to imagine possible future trajectories in this research can thus be considered as a form of ‘agentive projectivity’.

From a critical applied linguistics perspective (Pennycook, 2001), the objective is to suggest future LPP possibilities that shift the focus from ‘what is’ to ‘what should be’. This can also be perceived as a meaningful endeavour at ‘re-humanising’ linguistics and language planning (Weber & Horner, 2012). While problematisation provides an understanding of discursive power and inequality in critical applied linguistics research, “imagination offers us the opportunity to harness this power to imagine alternative linguistic futures” (Jeffery & Halcomb-Smith, 2020, p. 5; Pennycook, 2001). This paper therefore provides a refreshing perspective aimed at giving scholars and ASEAN officials an opportunity to exercise their agency by ‘talking (future) policies into being’. Most LPP research on international organisations to date has focused on the analysis of the policy documents and media statements,

while others have analysed the discourses (conversations) during the meetings (Wodak et al., 2012; Kawashima, 2021). Since LPP has traditionally been a technicist endeavour, planned by political leaders at the highest echelons of the organisation (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997), this scholarly act of ‘talking policy into being’ is therefore a refreshing contribution to the literature, further enriching methodological perspectives in LPP research. This hitherto undervalued and underexplored methodology in LPP research is particularly useful in bringing to life the otherwise solemn process of LPP, in an attempt at rehumanising applied linguistics research, or what I call rehumanising LPP, in this context supranational ASEAN LPP. In this section, I deduce that the intellectual exercise of re-humanising LPP research also enables participants to engage in agency of projectivity (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), which would have been otherwise virtually impossible in any other research setting.

Data Collection Method: Online Interviews

While the research methodology is grounded in solid theoretical foundations, offering refreshing contributions to LPP scholarship, the data collection process proved to be challenging due mainly to a need for Covid-related adjustments, i.e., towards online interviews. Through the course of the data collection process, adaptations and adjustments have become normalised in the present ‘Volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous’ (VUCA) world because of prolonged lockdowns and physical distancing measures. I argue that current phenomena necessitate a paradigm shift, if not an evolution in data collection methods in applied linguistics research, from conducting ethnographic research, on-site observations, accessing physical archived documents, field works and in-depth on-site interviews, to virtual approaches such as recorded video clips, conducting interviews through online tools, as well as accessing images, online documents and websites. I am not saying that these data collection methods are entirely ‘new’, but the pandemic has, inadvertently, performed the role of a ‘catalyst’ which expedites a transition towards online and virtual data gathering and data analysis techniques.

The process of gathering data related to the supranational-LPP of ASEAN was also found to be challenging due to limited official documentation of ASEAN-level LPP in the public domain. In this context, the limited available (re)sources on this topic also posed a methodological challenge. Fortunately, this challenge could possibly be overcome by introducing an ‘innovative’ methodological strategy, by conducting semi-structured online interviews with actors in LPP- people with expertise- and providing them a ‘safe’ environment/platform for a co-construction of ‘new’ knowledge on the future of ASEAN LPP. Interview, in the context of my doctoral research, involved conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives, views on a particular context and policy (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The number of interviews was driven by the process of saturation when the generated data provided a sufficient “authentic insight into people’s experiences” (Miller & Glassner, 2004, p. 126). In this case, I interviewed about 22 participants, which was considered ‘sufficient’, and a surplus of participants would only lead to data saturation (Creswell, 2013). The following section explains the rationale for selection of research participants.

Research Participants and Selection Techniques

In this research, purposive sampling was used as it was considered a practical and more appropriate way than convenience sampling to achieve research goals, aided by cultural understanding of the contexts in question (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Purposive sampling was employed in this case study research to elicit diverse and relevant views from the research participants about the focus of the research. The drawback of using purposive sampling is its potential subjectivity. To reduce any potential selection biases, I adhered to the following principles:

- a) **Key informant technique:** This entailed engaging with people with specialist knowledge, i.e., scholars and linguistic experts in the field of LPP (Zhao & Baldauf, 2012) with prior knowledge about Southeast Asia. Participants were filtered based on their involvement with LPP research on ASEAN; and/or knowledge of at least one or several Southeast Asian nations. Key (socio)linguistic experts on LPP in Southeast Asia and the ASEAN context from several universities were identified. The scholars were based in Australia, Indonesia, Ireland, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and USA.
- b) **Snowball technique:** I undertook snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) based on recommendations from the selected respondents in accordance with the criteria above. About a quarter of the research participants were recruited through this sampling technique. Both local and international experts in these disciplines were engaged in order for the policy inquiry process to be well-informed in terms of its theoretical foundations (Mahboob & Tilakaratna, 2012).

Overall, participants of twelve nationalities from eight countries, situated in four different continents were recruited. Having a diverse sample from various organisations accentuated the concept of ‘circling reality’, which was defined as the necessity of obtaining a variety of perspectives in order to get a better and more stable view of ‘reality’, based on a wide spectrum of observations from an extensive base of time and space (Dervin, 1992). In this context, Individual viewpoints and experiences could be verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the attitudes, needs or behaviour of those under scrutiny might be constructed based on the contributions of a range of people. Throughout the research journey, I found it particularly helpful to tap into the expertise and experience of interview participants to provide insights into the case. The engagement of key actors with agency in LPP thus provides active voices and builds substantial discourses (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021) in supranational LPP of ASEAN.

Narrating a Researcher’s Journey of Conducting Online Interviews

During data collection, the Covid-19 pandemic struck, resulting in the interview sessions being conducted fully online via Skype, email, and Facebook Messenger. As mentioned earlier, the Covid-19 restrictions globally made it a priority to switch to online platforms. Interviews with scholars from, e.g., Australia, UK, Ireland and the US were undertaken via a virtual (online)

format, i.e., via Skype mostly (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; O'Connor & Madge, 2017). Conducting in-person interviews can be particularly difficult for researchers whose participants are geographically dispersed (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009), therefore Skype was an appropriate method of data collection for my qualitative research (Sullivan, 2012). I need to clarify that, when I started collecting data, *Zoom* was under-utilised and rarely mentioned, therefore almost all participants preferred Skype, which had been a conventional technological tool used for various purposes, including data collection and research meetings (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). One participant opted for Facebook Messenger, while another answered interview questions via email. In hindsight, it was unimaginable how the pandemic changed the dynamics of using technological tools (see Lobe et al., 2020; Lupton, 2020)! Based on my experience, although the participants and I had to grapple with time-zone differences, these were useful tools. The blessing in disguise was that the interviews could still be conducted even if some countries had started implementing lockdown measures in March 2020; for example, in the US, Malaysia and in Australia.

Another advantage of conducting interviews virtually was that I could save on commuting and accommodation expenses. In the end, interviews through online platforms were found to be a cost-saving measure (Cater, 2011). It was efficient in my case, as I had to contend with financial and time constraints. It was the right decision after all, as I was still able to virtually 'meet' scholars based in the US, UK, Ireland, Melbourne and Sydney during a global pandemic. The relative success at carrying out a research at a global scale: involving participants from both Global North and Global South on a Southern context (ASEAN and the Southeast Asian region), exemplifies the advancement of technology and more significantly, reflect the nature of globalisation in both context and scale (Papanastasiou, 2019). The interview sessions made me feel as if I had been teleported to different parts of the world within the 60 minutes of engaging conversations.

Upon reflection, there were several interesting anecdotes throughout the data collection process. As per the ethical procedures, the prospective research participants were given two weeks to respond as to whether they agreed to be part of the research. In reality, the time frame was overly-optimistic, and what happened at times was not what I had anticipated. One participant, for example, responded four months after the email request for interviews had been sent! After two to three email reminders in the span of a month, two other participants finally responded and agreed to an interview. As a rule of thumb, I would send email reminders twice and if I did not get a reply, I would proceed with other prospective respondents. However, there were surprising instances where participants only replied favourably after a lengthy period of time. The lesson I learnt was not to 'assume' one was not interested in the research project even though there was no response initially. My inference was that some participants might have read the emails much later than anticipated. Perhaps they had missed the emails or had forgotten to reply within the stipulated time frame. Nevertheless, it was a meaningful endeavour in my research journey.

My initial thought was that it would have been much harder to build rapport on virtual platforms as compared to physical meetings. It was, however, not a difficult task as I tried to relate my

research interests and my research paradigm with the participants' scholarly knowledge and personal experience in the region. I highlighted some of their articles and theories which were relevant for my research. I started off the conversation with casual topics, at times breaking the ice by sharing with them my past experience of studying in the United Kingdom as well as asking them about their experience in the region. I inferred that my 'non-physical' presence in the online interview might have made participants feel more relaxed and the meeting was more casual and informal. Communicating online was a seamless transition, as it felt as if the participants were more 'relaxed'. Nevertheless, the interview was still very informative and productive.

Having said that, I was wary of power differential in the data collection process as many of the participants were eminent professors and professor emeriti in their fields. A few of them posed questions of me during the interview session even though I was the interviewer. I supposed they were 'testing' me to get my views on the topic, or perhaps 'teaching' me as I engaged with them. One-on-one interviews can not only be potentially intimidating but also intriguing. Being an independent researcher embarking on my PhD journey, I equipped myself with the necessary 'ammunition', e.g., by reading and finding out more about their academic background, research interests, university profile and professional life. This is so that I could link my questions to their interests and experience. By doing so, I found that the interview sessions were more productive and interesting for both parties.

Since the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, some interviewees tended to veer to other topics which might be less relevant for this research. I steered them back on track by focusing on the topic and prepared interview questions, so that the data gathered would help answer the research questions. In this regard, I find that one way to get better, quicker and more direct answers is to send participants a list of the prepared interview questions beforehand via email. This measure, I have found, helps save time in data collection and also eases the subsequent data analysis process. By sharing the interview protocol with the participants, they can prepare themselves well before the interview and be familiarised with the context and the type of interview questions to be asked (Shenton, 2004).

Although internet connection was an intermittent issue, we managed to stay focused and stay online for around an hour for each session. This certainly changed my view about having to make physical contact with the participants for maximum research output. I could attest that connecting through a virtual platform was equally viable; in fact, the interview sessions went on longer than what had originally been scheduled. Throughout the process, I also probed further as I attempted to provide in-depth insights, or what Clifford Geertz (1973) regards as 'thick descriptions', which is what case studies are intended to achieve. The notion of 'thick description', allows for a thorough analysis of the complex and particularistic nature of distinct phenomena (Geertz, 1973). I also found that, in a virtual setting, the audio recording was clearer than being physically present at an interview setting. This was likely due to my close proximity to the speaker and the use of an effective audio-recording tool.

Interviewing participants was an enriching and enlightening experience for me as a researcher engaging with researchers in the field. The experience motivated me to be more passionate

about my research, as the participants constantly encouraged me with their wise words and counsel. After concluding the interviews, I used ‘otter’ software for transcription purposes. Otter is an open-source, online transcription service provider which offers captions for live speakers, and generates written transcriptions of the speeches, using artificial intelligence and machine learning. When using otter for the automatic translation, I checked the verbatim transcriptions carefully and edited accordingly. The online tool was useful, but not perfect. Overall, I estimated around 80% accuracy for generated written transcriptions. Once the transcription process was completed, the transcriptions uploaded on the otter platform were deleted and subsequently, I closed the otter account.

The entire research experience has taught me that data collection does not necessarily need to be ‘fully on-site’ but can be conducted ‘fully on-line’. This is something I have not imagined would have been possible in the pre-Covid pandemic years. While some have lamented the adverse implications, if not inconveniences, caused by pandemic-related disruptions on academic research, I prefer to view this as a blessing in disguise. My advice is simply this: embrace ‘VUCA’ as a way of life and that ‘uncertainty is the new certainty’. In a way, it is almost inevitable that the ‘new normal’, at least in these two years, entails collecting data amidst lockdowns, border closures and interruptions. My personal journey tells me that applied linguistics research can still potentially yield positive outcomes even in a period of adversity and uncertainty. Technology has to some extent, facilitated the data collection process.

Discussion and Personal Reflections

I have often wondered why Global South scholars, i.e., those from the region, are less interested in looking at the supranational-ASEAN LPP, than in investigating the macro-national context. My research journey embodies a refreshing form of critical applied linguistics from Global South perspectives (Pennycook & Makoni, 2019). I argue here that critical applied linguistics is a way of thinking and doing, a “continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire and action” (Pennycook, 2001, p. 3). Overall, the methodological experiment turned out to be a meaningful academic endeavour both for the participants as well as for me as the researcher. It is therefore, my fervent hope that a Southern scholar, such as myself, can help reinvigorate research on sociolinguistics of the South (Taylor-Leech et al., 2021), particularly on the context of ASEAN.

Reflecting on the research journey, I have found that scholars/experts have great imaginations, aimed at addressing a myriad of concerns in LPP. This is partly because LPP research is their core business and scholars are inclined to view LPP from varied perspectives and ideologies. Experts are generally motivated to problematise the context of ASEAN LPP, i.e., challenging the *status quo* which has been in place since 1960’s (Lee et al., 2022). Their argument is that the existing English-only regime is a postcolonial construct which might have worked in the postcolonial era, but the future dynamics demands us to revisit existing practices and chart future LPP trajectories in ASEAN in the form of ‘preferred futures’ (Pennycook, 2001).

While scholars have been given agentive spaces as people with expertise in this research endeavour, I have discovered that this exercise has made some participants uncomfortable as

they are shifted away from their comfort zone into an unknown territory of practical LPP at a supranational-level. I also realised that many scholars experienced a dilemma between ‘idealism’ and ‘realism’ (Lee et al., 2022). On the one hand, these participants were aware of the need to reimagine linguistic possibilities which are inclusive, equitable, ethical and more democratic than the present ‘monolingualisation’ of ASEAN LPP. On the other hand, many were also realistic about the complexities and limitations in ASEAN LP. Taken together, there were participants who were realistic and pragmatic in their views about the existing policy regime, while others were more critical and offered alternative perspectives. This tells us that, even in an imagined future, it is an unenviable task trying to (re-)construct feasible and acceptable linguistic alternative(s) for ASEAN.

Upon reflection, I am compelled to deliberate on a lingering question often asked among scholars in the field: ‘why are (socio-)linguists left out of LPP discussions, if any?’ Kennedy (2011) notes that linguists are unlike healthcare experts, where their expertise is recognised and opinion accepted, thus having a stronger impact in the policymaking process. Politicians and policymakers, also known as ‘people with power’ in actors in LP framework (Zhao & Baldauf, 2012), tend to bypass linguists in making LPP decisions. To politicians and policymakers, language is not viewed in the same light as, say, business, science, technology or health, where technical know-how from experts in these areas are highly valued in the decision-making process. I have learnt through this research that ‘people with expertise’ are rarely engaged in mainstream policymaking processes and seemingly detached from practical decision-making, particularly in the context of ASEAN supranational-LPP. The role of sociolinguists, albeit important to LPP, is unfortunately mostly confined to academia or academic discourses.

Even though scholars might not be in an ideal position to influence or make policies, this paper focuses on the potential contributions that language experts might be able to make to the process of policy construction. I further argue that their views should not be undermined as they have experience working in the field of LPP within the region; and their perspectives are mainly informed by empirical research and theoretical foundations, both of which are crucial in helping us understand the world around us. Language experts therefore should not be restricted in their ability to contribute to the process of policy formulation, particularly if deeply entrenched ideologies about language are to be subjected to careful scrutiny (Wee, 2011). Co-constructionism, in this context, values their expertise and offers them an opportunity to make their voices heard. Their voices are otherwise underrepresented and undervalued in public domains and political circles (Tollefson & Perez-Milans, 2018).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have detailed the advantages and challenges of conducting online interviews, as well as proposed useful strategies employed while collecting data during pandemic times. My personal research journey may be relevant to those currently conducting similar research and/or researchers planning to pursue research in related fields. More importantly, I have argued that critical applied linguistic research should not only challenge the *status quo* and understand the constraints and problems faced in the past and present LPP, but also offer suggestions to

address the linguistic and educational inequalities (Pennycook, 2001; see also Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The current regional and global policy dynamics require us to provide practical and realistic solutions to the complex linguistic problems we are faced with today. Moving from ‘critique to hope’ offers the opportunity to position oneself not as a ‘passive victim’ (McLaren, 2009), but as a ‘social actor’ with the agency to initiate or suggest changes for the betterment of society and its people. On that note, the paper fundamentally gives credence to the hitherto underutilised and undervalued agentic ‘voices’ of scholars as ‘people with expertise’ in LPP (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021), in an attempt at ‘re-humanising’ LPP research in the Global South. In short, ‘policy imaginings’ may be pursued as the way forward in LPP research, as policy is essentially about projecting hope and ideals of an imagined linguistic future (Liddicoat, 2013).

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