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Agency in Language Policy and Planning: A Systematic Literature Review

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Post-modern research has shifted attention in language policy and planning from central decision-making to lower-scale agency. However, there is a paucity of studies assessing the nature and quality of papers about agency in language policy and planning ecology. Considering Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis, this study examines how language policy scholars approached the agentive roles of local arbiters. All research papers published about agency in language policy and planning across three databases in the last five years were considered for this review. The results indicate that the conceptualization, design, and execution of agency-oriented research are not yet woven into a fully-fledged theoretical fabric.

Keywords: systematic review, agency, language policy, ecology, microplanning

Introduction

Agency is a multidimensional construct with the individual as the core element of action. In language policy and planning (LPP) "agency has been defined as the intention or the capability of an individual to act, initiate, self-regulate, or make differences or changes to their situation" (Liddicoat & Leech, 2021, p. 1). In the area of language policy, there is an agreement that a focus on agency marks a shift in LPP towards more micro-level planning efforts (Baldauf, 2006; Canagarajah, 2005b; Liddicoat, 2018).

Classical LPP continued to market policy as the structure at the macro level and overlooked the power of individuals at the micro-levels. Nevertheless, Liddicoat and Leech (2014) argued that central policies "do not address local issues and needs for particular languages or, in most cases, the pedagogical practices and adjustments that need to be made to implement a macro-level policy" (p. 238).

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At the functional level, the goal of language policy is twofold: first, to respond to the growing need of societies for modern linguistic functions to express new social behaviors; second, to inject unfamiliar words into languages to ensure their survival. For some, this can be achieved in two separate ways: innovation or adaptation. Haugen (1966) explains that "adaptation is clearly the simpler since it requires only that an already existent model in another language be adjusted to the structures of one's own" (p. 18).

This explanation has struck a resonant chord among ecology approach researchers. For Pennycook (2004), "A core argument of language ecology is that language diversity is part of human diversity, and, like biological diversity, this is inherently good" (p.225). In other words, in an ecology system, languages borrow words from each other to survive. Besides, micro mechanisms (Mühlhäusler, 2000) play an agentive role in promoting or constraining educational policies.

This systematic review aims to present an updated overview of research about the agentive role of local actors at multiple levels of institutional authority in language policy and planning.

Defining Agency

Many studies have considered the development of language policies in local contexts (Canagarajah, 2005a; Corson, 1998; Menken & García, 2010) but did not take agency as the endpoint. The present study examines agency in the ecology of language policy of creation, interpretation, and appropriation. Defining agency, as opposed to the structure, can provide only an ontologically flattened view into the object of investigative scrutiny. The following definitions offer comprehensive explanations from both top-down and bottom-up approaches to LPP.

Some definitions of agency consider the macro-social context the overarching power that shapes individuals' actions. For example, Ahearn (2001) has argued that agency refers to the "socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112). Later, scholarship improved the definition to note that "agency is interdependent, that is, it mediates and is mediated by the sociocultural context" (Van Lier, 2008, p. 172).

The shift in the conceptualization of agency signals the advent of critical theory where notions of individual choice, the exercise of agency, and tension between individual and central powers become popular (Foucault, 1991; Tollefson, 1981). Recently, different fields of study have been investing in human agency, giving ample attention to the ability of individuals to act. "In sociology, [human agency] has been defined as the ability of individuals to influence their contexts rather than merely react to them" (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021, p. 1). Nevertheless, it remains unclear how stakeholders approach agency today at a higher level. Amid democratic discourse celebrating human rights, individual freedoms, and participatory governmentality (Foucault, 2019), macroscopic policies rely heavily on individuals' acceptance or resistance.

Background

In times of crisis, public policies undergo intense pressures that result in questionable decisions. During the Covid 19 pandemic, many educational polities leveraged strategies to accommodate the change and ensure educational continuity. The decision-making process questioned the 'onion metaphor' proposed by Ricento and Hornberger (1996) who argued "that these components—variously referred to in the language planning literature as language planning agents, levels, and processes— are layers that together compose the LPP whole (the "onion") and that permeate and interact with each other in a variety of ways and to varying degrees" (p. 402).

In this context, language policy is an ecology consisting of policy creation, interpretation, and appropriation. The ecology proposed in this study introduces a multilayered nature of LPP. It calls for a consideration of policy as a binary system where structure and the agentive roles of local actors are in complementarity. In agreement with this assertion, the scholarship has addressed the need to stir the metaphorical onion by examining agency at each independent layer of LPP processes (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2018; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Liddicoat, 2018).

An interesting point to make here is Noss's classification (1971) of language policy. Karam (2011) explained "that Noss distinguished three types of language policy: Official language policy, educational language policy, and unofficial general language policy" (p. 112). Educational language policy, or language in education policy, concentrates not only on the teaching of languages but also on the given status of a particular language in schools. At this level, policies are either official documents or unofficial practices by school stakeholders. For Fishman (1974), educational language policy "[…] concerns what languages will be used as the media of instruction and as subjects of study at the various levels of public and private education" (p. 112). Educational language policy promotes multilingualism and approaches languages as resources. However, some accuse it of being double-edged. It denigrates indigenous languages, but in other contexts, it encourages efforts to preserve minority languages. Johnson (2013) adds "Educational language policies have historically been used to eradicate, subjugate and marginalize minority and indigenous languages and their users […] They have also been used to develop, maintain and promote minority and indigenous languages […]" (p. 54).

The main purpose of the systematic review is to develop an understanding of the role of agency at multiple levels of language policy and planning in the literature. At the creation level, we examine studies about policymaking and the presence or absence of implementational spaces in policy texts. At the interpretation level, the paucity of research about the agentive role of meso-level arbiters requires investigating how different policy agents mediate between ideological and implementational spaces (Hornberger, 2005). At the implementation level, we focus on research that provides in situ lens on educators' agency, more particularly, research that foreshadows teachers' creative ways of appropriating or resisting central policies (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2018).

Method

A systematic review of the agency in language policy and planning was conducted to identify how LPP scholars approached the role of agency. The systematic review was informed by the reporting checklist of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Liberati et al., 2009). To identify papers for the systematic review, we conducted a comprehensive literature search. The endpoint was to review the most updated literature about agency in LPP. For that purpose, we reviewed all the papers published between May 2017 and May 2022. To increase search reliability, we covered three search databases: Scopus, Google scholar, and Web of Science. The choice of the search databases is justified by the social sciences citation index. Other search databases despite being popular were excluded for containing non-peer-reviewed articles.

To document the analysis method and inclusion criteria we developed a protocol. In Scopus and Web of Science, the search was limited to open-access articles, published in the last five years in peer-reviewed journals. We searched for articles containing "agency in Language Policy and Planning" in their titles, abstracts, or keywords. We also used "microplanning: and "agen* in language policy and planning" as a keyword for searching all articles that might include "agent"," agentic" or "agentive". After the prior screening of 474 articles on search databases, 48 articles were exported as MS excel spreadsheets with citation information (author's name, document title, year of publication, etc.), abstract, and keywords. The study carried full-text screening of 48 papers.

Articles that did not investigate agency in language policy and planning were excluded. Two papers were discarded as they tackled agency in domains other than educational language policy. We included all papers that explicitly examined the agentive role of different actors in language policy and planning. More specifically, we selected papers with clear study parameters, focus, controversial gaps, and findings. while some other search sources offered fundamental references the reviewer included only 30 articles that exclusively or partially discuss agency in language policy. The selected articles were classified in a Google spreadsheet. The management of the resources was based on the bibliographic details from search databases (citation information, title, abstract, etc.) and we added two columns. The first column to make review decisions where 1= include, 0= exclude. The second column includes PRISMA checklist essentials.

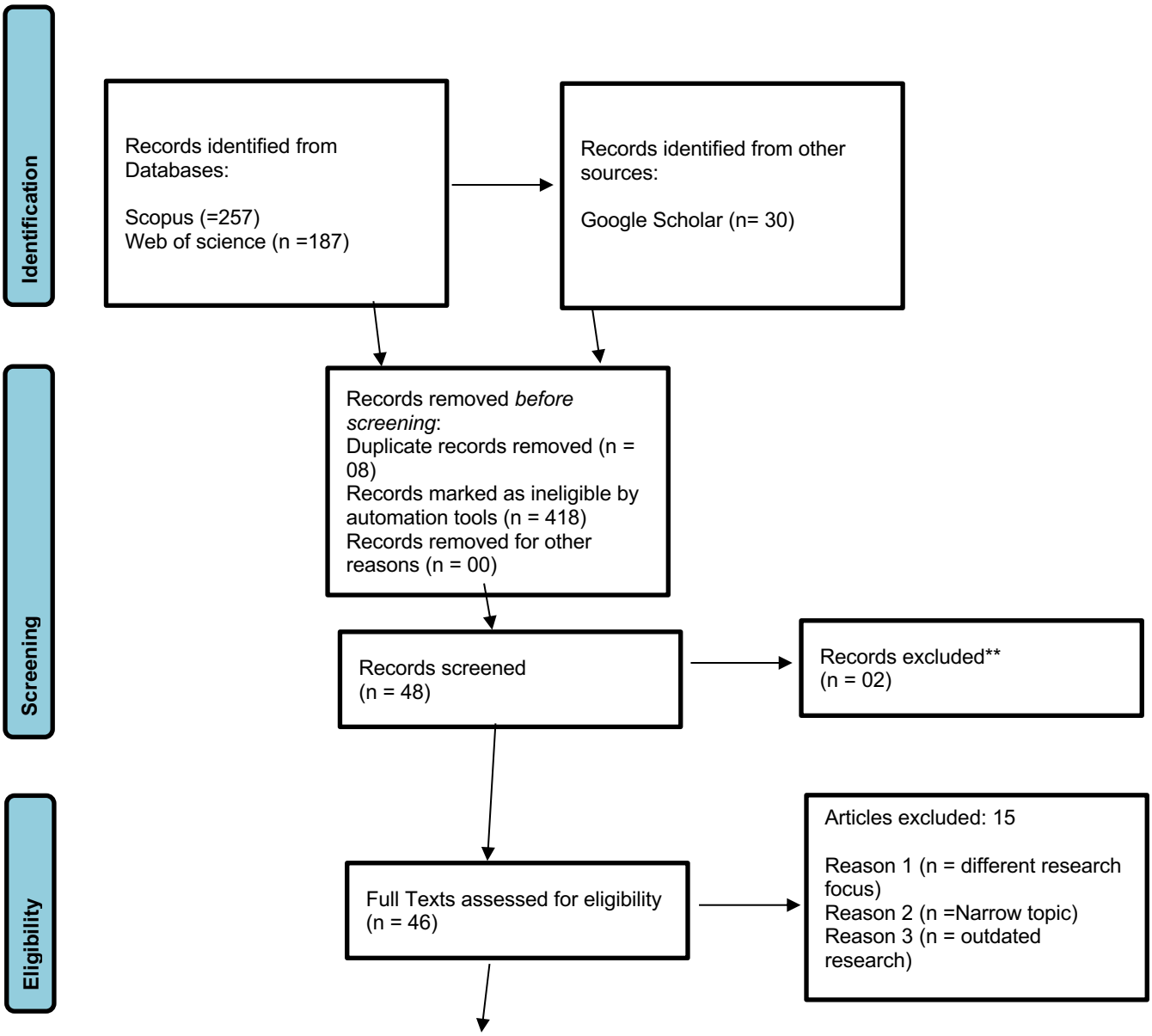
To minimize the risk of bias, we designed a table that involves study parameters, focus, gap, and study limitations. Because the PRISMA checklist was developed in the medical field, not all items are adequate for language policy and planning analysis. We, therefore, pilot-tested 21 randomly selected articles using the PRISMA checklist and then modified the items for purposes of this study. The data was carefully extracted from the remaining 46 papers using risk bias table variables: study parameters, focus, gap, and findings.

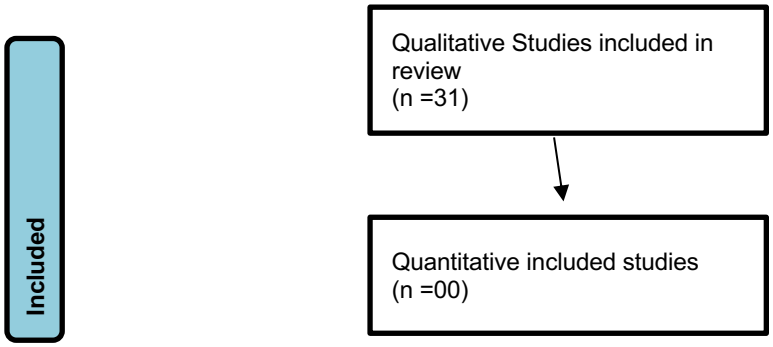
Results

The current study reviewed 27 articles and four book chapters from three major search databases. Figure 1 summarizes the study selection process and results. The primary search for literature in the databases and some search engines resulted in 474 records, 426 were excluded as they investigated agency in other social sciences. The full texts of the remaining 46 papers were screened and 15 articles/book chapters were excluded because they either had a different research focus or because they relied on outdated data. The final screening resulted in 27 articles and four book chapters from indexed and peer-reviewed journals.

Figure 1

The PRISMA Flow Diagram





The results of publications are crosschecked in Scopus and Web of Science for increasing the external validity of the search. The results show that agency is getting growing attention in language policy and planning. For example, the journal of Current Issues in Language Policy and Planning has published 76.19 % of articles about agency in language policy starting in the year 2019 while it was less than 5 % before 2016. The number of publications about the same issue varies in other journals. Besides, journals with high H-index published between two and eight articles in the last twenty years.

We would like at this point to strike a cautionary note. Most journals with high h-index did not publish more than 3 articles about agency in LPP since 2001. For instance, TESOL Quarterly, which has the highest h-index, the International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, and the Journal of Language and Education have only 4.65% of all published articles address agency in LPP during the last two decades.

Figure 2

Flow Chart of the Study Selection Process

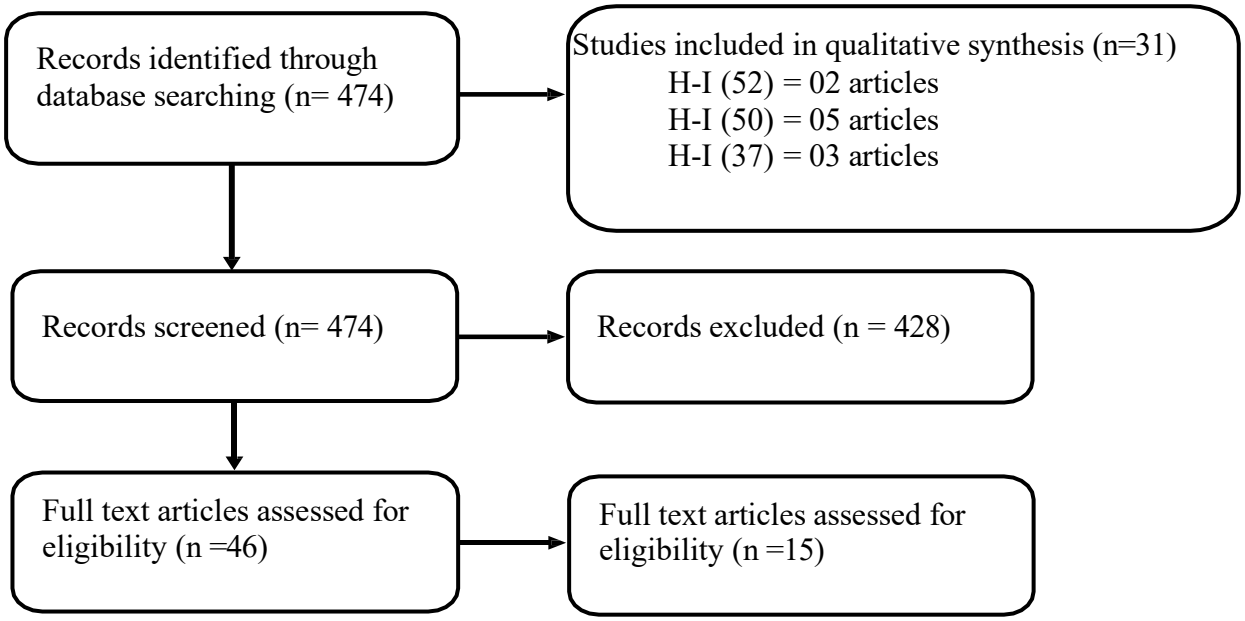


Table 1

Journal Publications about Agency in Language Policy and Planning from 2001 to 2021 from Scopus and Web of Science*

Journal Names	H-index	2001-2012	2013-2015	2016-2018	2019-2021	Total
Current Issues in Language Planning	27	1 (4.76%)	1 (4.76%)	3 (14.29%)	16 (76.19%)	21 (100%)
Language Policy	37	3	2	2	1	08
Language Problems and Language Planning	22	2	1	2	-	05
Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development	50	-	-	1	2	3
Language and Education	50	-	-	-	2	2
International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism	52	-	-	1	1	2
TESOL Quarterly	101	2	-	-	-	2

*For statistical reasons we included conference papers

Table 2 reports an assessment of the included references based on the PRISMA checklist. The checklist examined the papers' titles, study parameters, focus, gap, findings, and limitations. This is followed by a summary of the findings.

Study Parameters

The results indicate that 55.8% of the reviewed articles used the term agency in their titles. The remaining articles used other terms such as microplanning, bottom-up policy, and policy from below. The terms agent or agentive were not included in any papers' titles.

The papers examined the process of policymaking in language policy and planning. A major concern in most reviewed articles was the imbalance of power between structure and agency. "This means that the micro-level has often not been seen as a level at which language policies are created" (Liddicoat, 2018, p. 2). For many years, language policy has been seen as a product of the macroscopic structure. Respectively, the agentive role of local actors was marginalized in policy discourse. For example, "Much school English language policy in Asia has historically been dominated by top-down policy making by central government education agencies, with teachers in schools seen only as implementers" (Baldauf, 2006, p. 155).

Table 2

Assessment of the Included Articles/Book Chapters for Systematic Review

Year	2001-2012	2013-2015	2016-2018	2019-2021	Total
N. of included papers/book chapters	8	09	08	09	31 (100%)
Title					
Agency	03	04	4	5	16
Agentive	00	-	-	-	-
Agent	00	-	-	-	-
Micro/below	01	02	01	-	04
Others	03	02	03	03	11
Study parameters					
Objectives	02	03	04	04	13
Study design	03	03	03	05	14
Not clear	03	01	00	00	04
Focus					
Term definition	04	02	01	02	09
Critique top-down policies	04	03	03	02	12
Theorizing bottom-up policies	00	03	03	04	10
Gap	-	07	05	07	21
Findings	-	-	03	07	10
Limitations	01	05	05	04	15

Some papers investigate the relationship between LPP processes and power imbalances. "One way to describe this relationship is based on foregrounding the multi-layeredness of language policy processes" (Badwan, 2021, p. 2). A clear understanding of the connections between agency and structure is said to be bound to multilevel analysis. Unlike critical language policy that undermines the influence of micro-level processes, recent research has shown that local policy-making is gaining ground especially when "a lack of policy at the government level means that community members need to become agents of language planning to provide for the language needs they have identified for their communities in the absence of macro-level policy" (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014, p. 241).

The results also indicate that LPP scholarship is promoting "an approach to the study of agency that explicitly acknowledges the influence of historical and structural conditions upon agentive processes, whether these involve discourses and actions by people in power, and people with expertise, influence or interest" (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019, p. 5). The reviewed literature suggests a combination of multi-leveled analysis of agency and discourse to produce a comprehensive framework for future studies.

As stated in the study parameters, most reviewed articles about agency in language policy and planning had two major foci:

- first, to study the links between agency and structure (Ahearn, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 2015; Liddicoat, 2018);
- second, to develop a multi-levelled approach to researching language policy and planning (Badwan, 2021; Baldauf, 2006; Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019).

Research Gaps

Modern LPP reinstates the need to put distinctively new stamps in the history of the field. One major concern shared by the reviewed papers is the unexplained biases in studies about structure over agency in classical LPP. "Such studies have tended to focus on the development of structure, which inevitably involves agency, but have not focused on agency as central and have therefore continued the view of policy as a structure that has characterized much research on macro-level policy" (Liddicoat, 2018, p. 3).

The review of the literature also shows that few polities around the world have specific guidelines to help interpret policies into pedagogical practices. Modern language policy needs to consider the opportunities that language-in-education research can offer, especially "policies that refer explicitly to pedagogy in the form of requirements for the adoption of a specific method or approach in the classroom" (Liddicoat, 2014, p. 119). Besides, Johnson (2010) states that "a strong characteristic of this ideological space is the empowerment of bilingual teachers to take ownership of language policy processes and appropriate language policy in a way that benefits bilingual learners" (p.61). In this regard, we advocate that within top-down polities, research must focus on the implementation of policies with particular attention on language-in-education

so as to explore how teachers create or eliminate implementational spaces for macroscopic policies.

Findings

Liddicoat (2014,2018) and Baldauf (2006) are two seminal figures leading discussion in the reviewed papers about agency in language policy and planning. Major research in the field cites the work of the two authors. With regard to agency and structure, as Emirbayer and Mische (1998) asserted, "the constituent components [of structure and agency] cannot be examined separately" (p.1003). In that respect, the multilayerdness offers unique opportunities to examine agency and structure at the level of creation and at the levels of interpretation and appropriation.

For Baldauf (2006), within the growing tensions between critical language policies that believe in the inherent powers of policies (Tollefson, 1991) and other approaches that advocate the human agency (Canagarajah, 2005a), "micro language planning seems to be a useful concept for solving language problems in a range of areas including business, education and for families and communities more generally" (p.166). However, some research has warned that agency approached as micro-level policymaking can have counter-productive repercussions (Badwan, 2021). Some expressed caveats are the fear from reproducing social inequalities, increasing inconsistencies, and reinstating uncertainties.

With all the caveats expressed above, 80% of the reviewed articles advocate a combined approach of agency and structure while researching language policy and planning. The literature also emphasizes the need for a multi-leveled analysis as the single level analysis will only provide a flattened view into the object of investigative scrutiny.

Discussion of Empirical Data

Agency and Structure

Agency and structure constitute two sides of language policy and planning, and "despite their distinct and emergent properties, structure and agency are related to each other in complex ways, and are certainly not two opposite ends in the spectrum of social life" (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019, p. 4). However, this systematic review indicated that in the absence of explicit educational language policies, local actors initiate microplanning projects to accommodate change.

The locally planned activities constitute the unplanned language policy. Unlike critical theory that believes in inherent power of policies we also believe in the power of policy actors, especially educators. Our argument echoes that of Johnson and Ricento (2013), who observe that "a balance between structure and agency—between critical conceptualizations that focus on the power of language policy and ethnographic and other qualitative work that focuses on the power of language policy agents—is precisely what the field needs" (p. 13). Making connections between layers of educational language policy is a recent quest in the field.

Multilayered Agency

The multilayered nature of LPP makes the study of language in education a complex research based on a web of social events. "All of the papers emphasize a multi-layered analysis of language policy and look at how macro-level forces impact the decisions of teachers" (Johnson, 2018, p. 3). The 'onion metaphor' (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996) suggests a comprehensive examination of LPP where the macro/micro layers are approached equally. The classical single-layered studies contributed partially to understanding policy issues. Conversely, a multiple scale study, promises to offer an etic picture of the complexities inherent in language policy and planning.

Agency Models

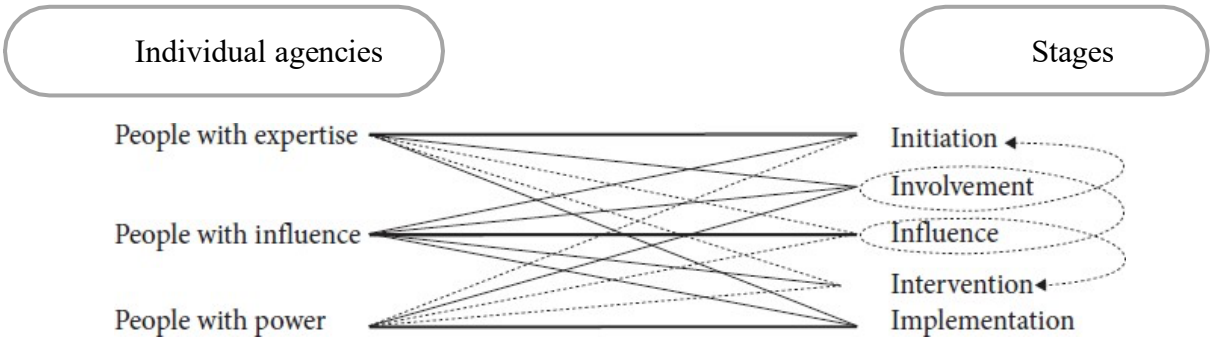
Considering that language policy and planning is multi-leveled, many agents/actors are also involved. To conceptualize a model for the agency in LPP, Shouhui, & Baldauf (2012) argued that classical LPP focused on policy creation while "the question of the people ('by whom' and 'to whom') involved in the planning process — i.e. 'Who are the actors?' and "What are their roles?'— remains largely unaddressed'" (p. 1). In the context of educational language policy, we need to consider policy arbiters at all levels. The challenge resides in explicating who the actors are and what their roles are.

Spolsky (2009) asserted that "We have few studies on this, unfortunately, and so are forced to speak about an undefined 'they' who constitute 'government" (p. 184). The model suggested by Shouhui and Baldauf (2012) denotes three groups of agentive arbiters: people with expertise, people with influence, and people with power. The groups' influence is documented at multiple levels 'stages' and thereafter the model's name 'Actor-Stage model' (Shouhui & Baldauf Jr, 2012).

Actors may participate in every stage but with disproportionate power. 'This individual LPP agency impact can be seen to occur in five 'I's': Initiation, Involvement, Influence, Intervention, and Implementation-and-evaluation' (Shouhui & Baldauf Jr, 2012, p. 7). Language planning is leveraged to initiate planning efforts for language problems (Haugen, 1966). The involvement of different stakeholders takes different aspects be it direct or indirect, explicit, or implicit. The conscious involvement of policy arbiters is prior to the subconscious influence that some policy actors may exert. Other actors may intervene to mediate planning solutions at the meso-level before leveraging the suggested resolutions for implementation. Figure 3 illustrates discourse orders between the actors and the stages.

Figure 3

Actor State Model of Influence for LLP Actors across the Five Language Planning Stages (Shouhui & Baldauf, 2012, p. 10)



Nevertheless, Shouhui & Baldauf's (2012) model did not account for the multi-leveled nature of LPP. It offered a macro-level conceptualization of agency. 'We suggest the following three groups of individuals as having agency at the macro level in a productive capacity, at least in the Chinese LPP situation which we examine in this paper (Shouhui & Baldauf Jr, 2012, p. 6). To fill the gap, McEntee-Atalianis (2016) reused the model to develop a network of influence involved in the UN language policy. 'The model constructed represents what might be interpreted as a democratic interpretation of actor influence, *i.e.,* that all actors/collectives in the network are equally crucial to the success of LPP (p. 213). Therefore, all layers of LPP are examined in the new model suggested by Baldauf and Shouhui (2012). However, how actors at lower scales interact within the stages is not clear.

Our systematic review indicated the existence of inconsistencies among LPP scholarship in terms of multi-leveled agency. The variety of disciplines, epistemologies, and ontological views might explain the source of the problem. However, Johnson & Johnson (2015) offered a theoretical model to solve the problem. They modify prior definitions of policy agents, "We expand on this [the multilayered nature of LPP] and define a language policy arbiter as any language policy actor (potentially: teachers, administrators, policymakers) who wields a disproportionate amount of power in how a policy gets created, interpreted, or appropriated, relative to other individuals in the same level or context" (p. 5). The definition provides a comprehensive understanding of agency across multiple language policy and planning processes. The model moves away from the inchoate tensions between power at the macro level (Tollefson, 1991) and agency at the micro level (Menken & García, 2010) into a new territory where despite their contradictions, structure, and agency are viewed in complementarity.

Conclusion

The systematic review shows that the growing popularity of agency in language policy and planning signals a shift in the field. First, the ethnographic studies (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007) enabled to stir the 'onion' in different directions and gave rise to the multi-layered conceptualization of LPP. Most postmodern research examines LPP issues from multiple scales.

Second, the role of policy actors at all levels is drawing more attention. Agency is examined as an independent construct that interacts with not within the structure.

The transformations in theories and approaches, although recurrent and sometimes overlapping, maintain core principles of LPP where 'Language planning refers to deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others concerning the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes' (Cooper, 1989, p. 45). The existing literature asserts that the efforts, the influence, and the results of planning are not a one-way sequence but an interactive process between agency and structure. Future research could be grounded on more than single-layered studies or tensions between policy arbiters and structure. Further works need to question the possibility of a grand theory of agency that congregates research from different spaces, structures and approaches in LPP.

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