

# Surveys in Language Teaching & Research: A Personal & Professional Journey

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## Introduction

Surveys are ubiquitous in all facets of life: we hear survey results in news reports, we find them at the end of almost every event, and they always seem to find their way into our inboxes.

Surveys can also be useful tools in language teaching and research.

For my BLC project, I developed and piloted a survey instrument to understand how different schools understand the role of digital technology and second/foreign language within education today. I will discuss here: I) the role of surveys in my dissertation research project; II) an overview of surveys in general; III) major lessons learned in selecting this methodological tool as a part of language-related research; and IV) reflections on the use of surveys in applied linguistics.

## I. Background: Research Project

My dissertation research project sets out to examine how second/foreign languages and digital technologies fit into and ultimately construct understandings of “global education” in schools today. My overarching researching question is:

*How do understandings of global education manifest in the relationship between*

- 1) perceptions/uses of second/foreign language and*
- 2) perceptions/uses of digital technology*

*within global schools and across different school groups?*

To answer this research question, I decided on a two-pronged methodological approach. First, I would do a case study of one school that, through observations and multiple rounds of in-depth interviews, fleshed out these understandings and uses in great detail.

I also wanted to be able to compare this focal school to a larger context—to understand how other schools were thinking through these two components and how the focal school compared to these larger trends. Second, then, I added a survey component to my research design: an online survey that would go out to schools around the country and that would help construct the larger portrait I was targeting.

## II. Survey basics

With the research questions and project design that drove the survey development in mind, I turn now to some very fundamental components of surveys. I draw primarily on Dörnyei's 2003 book *Questionnaires in second language research: Construction, administration, and processing*; you can find a detailed annotation of this resource in the **Handout** as well.

**What are surveys?** Surveys or questionnaires are "any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing out their answers or selecting from among existing answers" (Brown, 2001, p. 6; cited in Dörnyei, p. 6).

**What do surveys produce?** Surveys produce three kinds of data. First, there is factual information, such as demographics and other pieces of background information. Next is behavioral information, where respondents report on their actions and habits. Lastly, surveys produce attitude information, such as their preferences, values, and beliefs (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 6).

**What are the advantages and disadvantages of surveys?** Dörnyei cites a series of advantages and disadvantages in employing surveys in language-related research. Looking first to advantages, surveys can be *efficient*, in terms of researcher time, effort, and resources, when compared to interview and observation-based methods. Additionally, (well-constructed) surveys can be easily analyzed with different software packages; this can render them efficient in terms of analysis when compared to other methods, such as discourse analysis (Dörnyei, p. 7-9). In other words, surveys can be optimal tools in language-related research.

Alongside these advantages, however, Dörnyei also highlights several disadvantages to working with surveys. For example, surveys often produce simple and potentially superficial answers. Without the chance to follow up with respondents, as is possible with interviews or observations, the data collected risk remaining at this level (p. 10-12). In addition, survey work must account for unmotivated respondents, which can bias the outcomes and overgeneralizability of the findings. Related to the bias that stems from unmotivated respondents is the unreliability inherent in self-reporting; individuals are notoriously inaccurate when reporting on their own thoughts as well as actions. As there are not always ways to triangulate survey responses, researchers are often left to take respondent answers as is (Dörnyei, p. 10-14). Please see Dörnyei's text for more on advantages and disadvantages.

## III. Surveys: Lessons Learned

With a common understanding of what surveys are, what they do, and what advantages/disadvantages are often associated with them, I turn now to discussing the lessons I learned in developing a survey for my dissertation research project that nuance

these basics. These lessons are organized into four major themes: Timing, Survey Development, Survey Distribution, and Survey Participation.

**Timing/Time.** The biggest lesson I learned in creating surveys was that of time. As cited above, surveys are often considered to be efficient in terms of researcher time. That does not mean that time is irrelevant, however. A good survey is a well-crafted survey, and anything that's well-crafted takes time.

That time falls into a lot of different stages that are important to take into account when considering survey work or in mapping out a survey. These stages include:

- Institutional Review Board Approval
- Drafting
- Piloting
- Editing
- Distribution
- Analysis

In my survey journey, these stages have taken over a year to complete, as evidenced in the Figure 1:

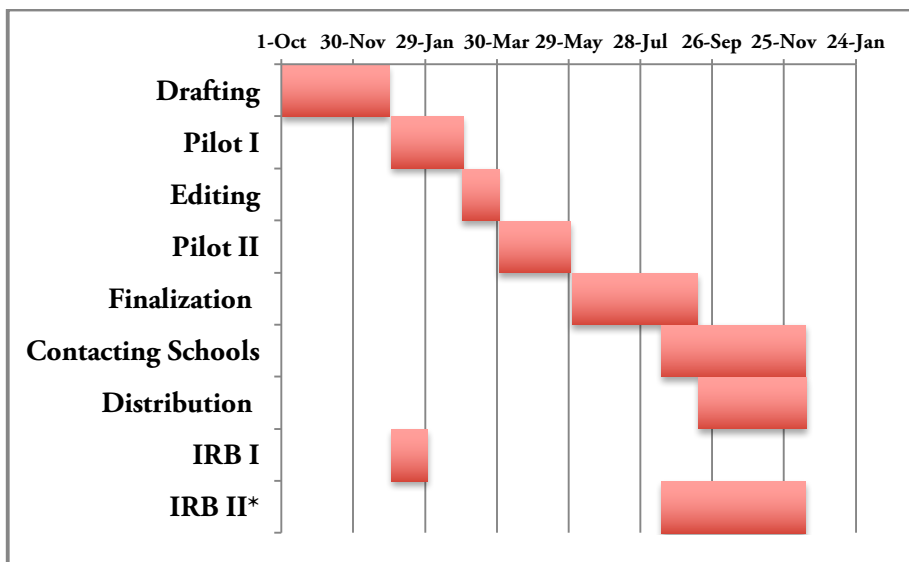


Figure 1. Timeline for Dissertation (IRB approved) Survey.

\* IRB approval for this project came in two stages: first, the overall project was approved by the IRB in January 2015. Then, each individual school/organization who agreed to participate in the study was added after piloting and finalizing the survey.

**Survey Development.** As is evidenced by Figure 1, a significant portion of the time needed for surveys falls into development: survey drafting, piloting, and editing. While it is admittedly very easy to throw a survey together, it is much more time consuming to

develop a survey that will produce data that are usable and that help answer the research questions. I will discuss several components to survey development here:

*Aligning Survey Questions with Research Questions.* A big risk in survey development is including questions that are not directly tied to the research questions driving the survey. To avoid this, it is helpful to map out how each survey item aligns with a particular research question. Survey items that don't directly address research questions can then be removed or altered. Figure 2 is an excerpt from my work that illustrates a way to graphically lay out this alignment.

Survey Item	Research Question (s) It Helps Me Answer	Question Type
Q2: On a scale from 1-5, how important is language learning in education today?	2a, c, d	Likert scale
Q3: Please explain your answer to Q2.	2a, c, d	Open-ended
Q4: What languages, if any, should students in the U.S. learn today?	2a, c, d	Open-ended

Figure 2. A graphic example of how to align survey items with research questions.

*Honing Survey Wording.* Another important piece related to survey development is the importance of how survey questions are asked or worded. Questions that are too complicated or that are leading will produce biased or unusable data.

For example, the following question appeared in the pilot of my survey: “What languages are most important for students to learn today?” In reviewing the answers to that pilot survey and in reviewing the survey with colleagues, it became clear that this question had several issues:

- 1) “What languages” was not specific enough to ensure accurate responses. First language? Second? Foreign?
- 2) “students” was also not specific enough. Which students?
- 3) The question itself assumed that learning a language was important, which biased the respondent and the data.

I revised the question to address these issues; revisions are in bold: “What **second or foreign languages, if any**, are most important for **students in the U.S.** to learn today?”

*Audience.* Related to being intentional about survey wording, it is important to consider your audience in developing the survey—both in terms of the questions asked and in terms of the survey as a whole. Looking first at questions asked, different populations have different backgrounds and different needs; a student will need different directions and scaffolding around questions than an adult will, for example. Thinking through these specific needs and incorporating them into your survey questions is important.

For example, in my pilot, I used the same language— “Please explain your answer”— for adults and students when asking them to explain their answers to Likert questions. While adults answered this question with several sentences, students did not; they produced a few words or a simple “idk [I don’t know].” Thinking in a more nuanced way about this student audience, I decided to mirror what a student might receive on a classroom assignment: “Why? Please explain your answer with a few words or sentences below.” This was a successful reframe for my student audience as I received more elaborate answers in subsequent responses.

In addition to thinking about audience in terms of individual survey questions, it is important to think about audience in terms of the survey as a whole. In particular, it is important to remember the high risk of survey fatigue. The longer a survey is the more likely it is that individuals will get fatigued and provide you with less-useful data. Prioritizing the questions that you most want answered as well as varying the types of questions you ask can be helpful here.

*Pilot. And Re-Pilot!* For the most part, the above lessons all came from piloting the survey. For me, this was where I was able to see what wasn’t working in my survey and what I needed to fix. The importance of piloting the survey instrument with populations that are similar to those that will be targeted in the official distribution cannot be underestimated.

**Survey Distribution.** With a fine-tuned survey in hand, official distribution is on deck. There are many choices in terms of how to distribute a survey. I chose an online distribution given the fact that I wanted to access non-local schools as well as a large sample. Online surveys have several advantages: responses are easy to compile and analyze as they are already in a digital, easy-to-manipulate form. Moreover, many online survey platforms have analysis tools embedded in them, which can facilitate analysis. Please see the **Handout** for a summary of the different online survey platforms that I considered.

That said, pen/paper surveys are still an option. While there may be more work associated with getting the data into an analyzable form, it is certainly easier to get people to take a survey when you are physically there to distribute and collect the instrument. Please see the **Handout** for resources that discuss both online and pen/paper survey distribution methods.

## **Survey Participation**

When planning a survey, it is also very important to think through getting people to take the survey itself. While not limited to surveys, a significant issue in survey work is the difficulty in getting respondents. People are very busy, and it can take longer than expected to find participants; I found that response rates can range from one fourth to one third of individuals contacted. The time and work associated with this component are vitally important to consider when looking at the project timeline.

#### **IV. Reflections on Survey Use in Language-Related Research**

With these overarching lessons in mind, I turn now to a reflection on the use of surveys in language-related research: in my dissertation research project as well as in general.

##### **My Project**

As mentioned above, I chose to include a survey component to my dissertation research project in order to help construct a larger sense of how schools around the country understood second/foreign languages as well as digital technologies; this larger portrait was intended to provide a comparison to my focal school.

Near the end of my survey journey, I believe that this instrument will have accomplished that task. While the portrait I will be able to paint will be smaller than I had anticipated and while the timeline was extended, the survey instrument will have succeeded in providing me with a portrait, enabling me to contextualize my focal school within a larger frame.

##### **Language-Related Research**

Having developed a survey for my dissertation research project, I have some final thoughts on the use of surveys in language-related research, which primarily take the form of my own assessment of surveys' advantages and disadvantages.

While the choice to use surveys in language-related research depends on an analysis of these advantages and disadvantages in relation to a particular project, the first question to consider, even before looking to advantages/disadvantages, is whether or not your research questions lend themselves to surveys and the kinds of data that they produce.

Once it's clear that surveys would be an appropriate tool, I would offer this assessment of surveys' advantages and disadvantages. In terms of advantages, I do see surveys as efficient in several ways. First, compared to interviews and more ethnographic methodological profiles, surveys can be very efficient in terms of resources. It is possible to collect a large amount of data from many individuals without spending much money.

Second, I agree that surveys are efficient in terms of time—but I would qualify that as *relatively efficient*. When compared to interviews and case studies, surveys allow a researcher to create a wide-scoped portrait of a phenomenon more rapidly.

That said, and as mentioned above, a good survey does take a significant amount of time to construct and distribute. This could be a disadvantage depending the individual timeline in question.

I would also concur that a disadvantage of survey work is the superficial answers received; as a researcher well-versed in interviews and used to the chance to dig deeper, I found the inability to follow up with participants to be limiting. Survey data does risk remaining

superficial, providing only a portion of the whole picture. This disadvantage can be worked around by adding in additional data collection methods to the project design that help elaborate on a phenomenon.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of my survey journey, I believe that surveys can be powerful instruments in the applied linguist's methodological battery. However, they need to be chosen carefully and constructed with great care as well as attention to detail.

## **References**

Dörnyei, Z. (2003). *Questionnaires in second language research: Construction, administration, and processing*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.