Conducting Research in Applied Sign Linguistics

‘[We] are interested in how researchers can work best with Deaf people, Deaf schools, Deaf children and families, and other professionals who work in the area of deafness...[There are] important considerations when embarking on studies that involve Deaf people and their sign languages. This is not just a philosophical question anymore; increasingly research funding agencies are expecting ethical compliance, good quality dissemination, and knowledge exchange, as well as evidence of how research is actually making an impact on the everyday lives of the participants and on wider society. We argue that sign language research that is with rather than on Deaf people will both be superior in scientific terms and will achieve more societal impact’. (Singleton et al., 2015, p. 8; emphasis in original)

In this final content chapter, we discuss the various steps involved in carrying out a research project in applied sign linguistics, focusing on the considerations needed in terms of research design and participant recruitment as well as analysis. Although the approaches utilised in applied sign linguistics research are the same as applied linguistics research in general, we highlight specific issues for consideration when investigating sign language in action. For more guidance on research methods in complementary fields of sign linguistics, Deaf Studies and interpreting studies, we recommend readers refer to books such as Hale and Napier (2013); Orfanidou, Woll and Morgan (2015); Pfau, Steinbach and Woll (2012) and Young and Temple (2014) – see Further Readings at the end of the chapter for more details.

The first part of the chapter (Section 7.1) provides a clear step-by-step approach to conducting practical, sign language-based research. We then give an overview of various research topics in applied sign linguistics with examples from existing research and conclude with suggestions for research project ideas.
...to be deaf is to stand at multiple intersections of language, culture, disability, society, politics, ethics and the body. Consequently, research incursions into this complexity have to deal with the consequences of such issues as the contested nature of identity, bilingual and bimodal effects, definitionally unstable populations, relationship between epistemology and language, alternative and multiple ontologies or ways of being, socially constructed hierarchies of sameness and difference, not to mention the influence of who exactly is doing the looking and telling. (Young & Temple, 2014, p. 2)

7.1 Steps to conducting research

For applied linguists, Candlin and Crichton (2011) suggest a 5-perspective model of interdiscursivity with multiple possible entry points for research and analysis: the text perspective, the participant perspective, the social and institutional perspective, the social action perspective and the analyst’s perspective. When we apply these lenses to the study of applied sign linguistics, we can consider the following:

1. **Text perspective:** exploration of signed languages as discursive texts within signing communities and ‘across boundaries’ to wider non-deaf communities; what is the status of sign language texts, how they are produced, understood and valued and how they are shared
2. **Participant perspective:** discussion of perspectives of deaf and non-deaf signers, native and non-native sign language users and other stakeholders who engage with deaf sign language users in everyday life either through professional practice or social circumstances (such as teachers, parents or service providers); how the use of sign language has an impact on identity and how that identity is conveyed
3. **Social and institutional perspective:** analysis of the interdependent nature of social institutions, communities of practice and sign language in use (e.g. deaf clubs, deaf sporting events) and societal institutions that affect sign language policy, planning and practice (e.g., deaf schools); the power ascribed to the use of sign language in society
4. **Social action perspective:** examination of signing communities and smaller sub-groups within signing communities; the actions carried out by signing individuals to which those individuals attach meaning (e.g., lobbying for the legal recognition of sign languages); intentions behind those actions
5. **Analyst’s perspective:** presenting the ‘voice’ of the analysts, based on their expertise, their position as deaf or hearing researchers in signing