3 Researcher Positionality

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Introduction

Language policy and planning (LPP) as a field of studies emerging in the 1950s and 1960s has largely been "problem-oriented" and responded to the needs of the newly established states; many of them had just gained independence from their former colonial powers (Spolsky 2008, 137). The early LPP researchers were technical in their orientations, seeing their task as one of planning, standardizing, regulating, containing, or managing linguistic diversity for the national development agendas of building national cohesion (e.g. planning for spreading a standardized national language) and modern economic development (e.g. planning for producing a workforce with the required kinds of linguistic proficiencies for the economy). LPP researchers saw their work consisting of status planning, corpus planning (Kloss 1969), and acquisition planning/language education planning (Cooper 1989). The technical orientations of these early approaches have been critiqued in the historical-structural approach to LPP (Tollefson 1991), which seeks to unmask the ideologies behind language policies. Current developments in LPP further focus on the agency of local social actors in the policy implementational spaces (Hornberger and Johnson 2007; Hult 2010; Johnson 2010). Each of these theoretical developments carries with it different methodological and epistemological stances.

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As new researchers being apprenticed into the LPP field, students are usually confronted with a diversity of approaches and epistemological stances and need a roadmap to make sense of this diversity. In this chapter, I shall first discuss researcher positionality with reference to three kinds of knowledge-constitutive interest. These will be illustrated with LPP studies in the case of Hong Kong. Then I shall outline some suggestions about how a researcher can think about issues of researcher positionality when they are planning their research study.

Knowledge-Constitutive Interests, Disciplines of Inquiry, and Researcher Positionality

Before embarking on the question of researcher positionality, I would like to invite you to first ask yourself the following important questions:

- Why (do you do) research? What kinds of interest motivate you?
- What kind of knowledge will you produce?
- What is the possible impact of your research (or the knowledge that you will produce), and for whom?
- Is there any value-free or interest-free research? Why/Why not?

How one answers the above questions will in a large part reflect one's (implicit) interest in doing research. The critical theorist Jurgen Habermas (1979, 1987) differentiates between three primary kinds of human interest that drive research and generate knowledge. He calls these *knowledge-constitutive* interests because they provide the categories and criteria (or ontological and epistemological assumptions) to formulate answers to questions like: What counts as knowledge? How can knowledge claims be warranted? How is the researcher positioned in relation to the researched? Researchers who are trained in their own discipline's methodological tradition can be unaware of the presuppositions of their discipline's methodology without having gone through a critical reflection process or being exposed to alternative paradigms and their assumptions.

Having a reflexive understanding of the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying one's research tradition helps reveal where one stands in relation to other research traditions and why one chooses such a position in a research project. To achieve such self-understanding, we can draw on the analytical resources offered by Habermas (1979, 1987) in his critical project of reflecting on the relationship between knowledge and human interests.

Habermas proposes that there are three different kinds of human interest that underlie the processes of research and shape/constitute the kind of knowledge produced in three different kinds of research traditions or paradigms (Table 3.1). He uses three different sets of words to describe these three different kinds of knowledge-constitutive human interest – technical (work), practical (communicative), and critical (emancipatory) – and argues that these three different kinds of (implicit) interest are intimately related to three different fundamental aspects of human social existence – *work*, *language*, and *power*. These are explained below.

Table 3.1 Human interest, knowledge, and research paradigms.*

Types of human interest	*Kinds of knowledge*	*Research paradigm*
Technical (work)	Instrumental / Descriptive (cause-effect regularities)	Positivist e.g. natural sciences, experimental psychology, cognitive science
Practical (communicative)	Practical / Descriptive (sociocultural understanding)	Interpretive e.g. ethnography of communication, interactive sociolinguistics, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, discourse analysis
Critical (emancipatory)	Emancipatory / Reflexive / Transformative (self-knowledge, transformed consciousness/ practice, ideological critique)	Critical e.g. critical ethnography, critical sociolinguistics, critical literacies, critical pedagogy

*Summary based on Habermas, 1979, 1987. Adapted from MacIsaac 1996.

The technical (work) interest

This deep-seated interest is related to the human need to find the most effective tools to solve problems arising from daily necessities. From tightly controlled experiments, laws can be inferred that predict and control the physical environment in order for one to survive and build a safe and materially comfortable life. This technical interest shapes modes of inquiry and knowledge production in the empirical-analytic sciences, which aim at producing generalizable, universal laws.

The practical (communicative) interest

The practical interest arises from a fundamental aspect of human social existence: the human capacity to use language to communicate and make meaning, both to self and others. The unique human capacity to make meaning and communicate meaning through linguistic symbols marks humans' cultural break with nature – a human child is born simultaneously into a physical world and a cultural world that is saturated with cultural meanings and social norms into which the child is socialized. The key to understanding these sociohistorical meanings, norms, values, beliefs, dispositions – or ways of being in the world – lies in the practical interest in understanding how humans make meaning and achieve intersubjectivity (i.e. understanding each other's meanings) through semiotic (i.e. meaning-making) resources such as those provided by language. The human practical interest thus drives inquiry into social interaction or communicative action in order to achieve understanding of *how* (different sociocultural groups of) people are doing *what* they are doing and also *why* (but answering "why" in terms of human meanings, reasons, and not in terms of physical causation). The historical-hermeneutic tradition of inquiry (e.g. the interpretive cultural sciences, ethnography of communication, interactional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, and discourse analysis) is related to this practical interest.

The critical (emancipatory) interest

In making the different knowledge-constitutive interests explicit, a researcher can engage in a kind of critical methodological reflection that aims to bring to consciousness the different kinds of ideological assumptions and power relationships underlying their discipline's research paradigm. Such reflection exemplifies the third knowledge-constitutive interest – the critical or emancipatory interest in overcoming dogmatism, compulsion, and domination. The critical interest thus places emphasis on *self-knowledge* or self-reflection. This involves interest in the way one's history has shaped one's worldviews, values, and beliefs, which are often taken for granted as "common sense." Insights gained through critical self-reflection are emancipatory in the sense that researchers can be aware of the sources of their current values, taken-for-granted worldviews, or ways of being, which position them (with their tacit consent) in established societal or institutional hierarchies.

Disciplines of Inquiry and Researcher Positionality

The three kinds of knowledge-constitutive interests correspond to three different kinds of disciplines of inquiry known as research paradigms: the positivist research paradigm, the interpretive research paradigm, and the critical research paradigm. A research paradigm is a set of beliefs, theories, empirical methodologies, and communication practices shared by a community of researchers that provides the standards and norms for inquiry within that paradigm. Below I discuss each paradigm and how it positions the researcher in relation to the researched.

The positivist research paradigm

The technical interest underlies the positivist (or physicalist) research paradigm, which sees social phenomena as no different from physical phenomena – i.e. analyzable into objectified, constituent entities (known as "variables"), which act on one another with law-like regularity. The purpose of inquiry is to discover and identify these law-like causal relationships between variables with experimental methods (with matched experimental and control groups) or by induction from statistical analyses (e.g. correlational analysis, regression analysis, path analysis). These laws, once discovered, can be used to predict future social occurrences irrespective of sociocultural or historical contexts. The technical interest thus aims at increasing human control over nature via natural scientific research, and over society via social scientific research. The positivist paradigm asserts that the only valid knowledge is that which allows positive verification of empirical data through the experimental method (or by inference through inferential statistical analyses). The positivist research paradigm positions the researcher as the *subject* of knowing external to the researched – i.e. the object to be studied.

The interpretive research paradigm

The practical interest to understand underlies the interpretive research paradigm (also known as the symbolic or hermeneutic paradigm), which has developed in part from questions that cannot be answered by the positivist paradigm. In human practices of ascribing understanding, there is an enormous variety of considerations that can enter, and there is a dependence on context impossible to subsume under general rules. While positivist approaches focus on establishing cause-and-effect relationships between different variables, the interpretive approaches focus on understanding the purpose and meaning of social actors and social actions. Social interaction/social practice is co-constructed by social actors actively engaged in the interpretation and negotiation of meaning, and drawing on their (partially) shared cultural and linguistic (or symbolic) resources. These symbolic, communicative resources include the sociocultural norms, expectations, and meanings associated with the use of different semiotic (i.e. meaning-making) resources (e.g. registers, styles, varieties of language or other meaning-making systems such as gestures and visuals). The practical interest underlying the interpretive approaches aims to produce knowledge that enriches our understanding of how people are doing what they are doing, and why, from the perspectives of the participants, i.e. the meanings they give to their actions. The researcher aims at uncovering and describing those meanings and methods of arriving at mutual understanding through interpretive analysis, drawing on the same set of sociocultural interpretive resources shared by the researcher and the researched (i.e. member-analysis). The researcher usually positions him- or herself as a participant-observer in relation to the researched. While the researcher does not objectify the researched as an entity as in the positivist paradigm, the researched is still often positioned as the object of description and analysis without the agency of talking back to the researcher, although this is often practiced as a continuum with the line between interpretive and critical approaches increasingly blurred.

The critical research paradigm

Unlike the positivist and interpretive paradigms, which share a common feature of having as their purpose the development of a descriptive theory of the social world, the critical research paradigm asks the researcher to address the important questions of "How will your research findings affect those studied?" and "In what ways will your research findings be used?" The purpose of research is not just one of describing the world, but also changing the world (Popkewitz 1984). From the critical perspective, a researcher needs to think about "what it means to do empirical research in an unjust world" (Lather 1986, 256). The critical (or emancipatory) interest thus drives research that can lead to the empowerment of the subordinated groups in society through demystifying educational institutions, practices, and policies that produce and reproduce the domination of certain groups in society (Soltis 1984). In the critical research paradigm, both the researcher and the researched are subjects of knowing and enter into a dialogue on equal footings. In the situation where the researcher is also the researched (e.g. when conducting a critical self-reflection) the researcher enters into a dialogue with him- or herself.

An Example: The Case of Hong Kong

In this section I shall outline the background of Hong Kong and draw on three studies conducted there to illustrate the three different kinds of methodological orientations and researcher positionality outlined above.

In the early 1980s, Britain, preparing for its retreat from Hong Kong, began introducing some democratizing elements into its political system and expanding a largely English-medium higher education system, from a formerly elitist two-university system to eight publicly funded universities. Given the long-term English-medium higher education policy in most of the universities in Hong Kong, a symbolic market formed in which literacy in English became a key to socio-economic advancement (Lin and Man 2011). These forces have significantly shaped the socio-economic contexts of language-in-education policies and practices in Hong Kong. On July 1, 1997, the sovereignty of Hong Kong was formally handed over by Britain to China as a Special Administrative Region (SAR). The status of the English language in Hong Kong has remained as important, if not more, as in the pre-1997 years, and there are recurrent public discussions on "declining English standards."

Public official discourse has emphasized that code-mixing and switching constitute the main cause for "declining language standards" and that those students who do not reach the threshold level of English proficiency should not be allowed to study in the English medium. Thus, in September 1998 the postcolonial Hong Kong government issued "mandatory" guidelines for the medium of instruction (MOI) for secondary schools and streamed all publicly funded secondary schools into English-medium schools (114 schools) and Chinese-medium schools (over 300 schools). Schools not classified as English-medium schools were asked to switch their teaching medium from English to "Chinese" (taken to mean Standard Modern Chinese as the written MOI and Cantonese as the oral MOI) starting from their Secondary 1 classes in September 1998; schools can, however, decide on their own MOI for Senior Secondary classes (i.e. after Secondary 3 onwards).

Study One. Measuring the effect of the medium of instruction (MOI) streaming policy on the academic scores and psychosocial indicators of English medium instruction (EMI) and Chinese medium instruction (CMI) students

To evaluate the 1998 linguistic streaming policy, the government commissioned a study (Tsang et al. 2002) of the effect of the streaming policy on different academic and psychosocial indicators of the EMI and CMI students respectively, using a sample of two cohorts of students from 100 secondary schools, in which students were regularly administered academic tests and questionnaires on self-image and language attitudes.

The study's statistical findings speak to the pros and cons of EMI and CMI respectively: CMI produces better achievement in science and social studies, while EMI produces better achievement in English. However, if EMI students are assessed with bilingual exams, their lag behind the CMI students in science and social studies is reduced. The results in general support the rationale behind the government's 1998 MOI streaming policy: that mother-tongue education produces better content learning results than EMI. However, the content learning benefits were not able to counter the negative labeling and self-fulfilling prophecy effect on the self-image of CMI students, as it was also found that CMI students reported very negative attitudes toward learning English (e.g. showing phobia, and lack of interest and confidence) and negative self-image (e.g. reporting that they would want to switch to an EMI school if given a chance).

In this study, the positivist research paradigm was used and the researchers adopted an external outsider position as subjects of knowing examining the effects of MOI on the academic results and self-reported attitudes and self-image of students. Inferential statistical analyses were used to yield comparison findings, based on which knowledge claims about the respective effects of EMI and CMI on students' scores in different subjects and self-image were made. The main focus is on measuring the effect size of the independent variable of MOI (i.e. EMI or CMI) on two major sets of dependent variables: (1) students' test scores in academic subjects; (2) students' responses to questionnaire items intended to measure their self-image and attitudes toward learning English. These results are presented as abstract probabilistic regularities and intended as objective scientific findings: e.g. CMI education produces better results in academic subjects than EMI education; EMI education produces better results in English; CMI education produces a negative self-image among students. In this paradigm there is no place or position from which to consider the agency and the transformative potential of social actors located in the reified categories of CMI and EMI variables, and the possibilities of local social agents (e.g. students, teachers) in transforming these deterministic laws.

Study Two. Ethnography of a class changing from CMI to EMI

The second example is seen in Lee's (2002) ethnographic study in a CMI secondary school (where she worked as a teacher), which started to convert some formerly CMI classes into a total English immersion mode starting in Secondary 4 (grade 10) in September 2001. Through interviews with the students and their content teachers and through observations of their lessons, Lee concluded that many of the students were struggling with total English immersion due to their limited English proficiency. In Lee's words:

> It is a cruel fact that the students do not have a good foundation of English. From the interviews with the subject teachers, it is found that teachers' expectations are not well matched with students' expectations (and abilities). Teachers expect that those who are in S.4 class should be highly motivated. They should learn with self-initiations. However, with limited abilities (both English and academic), the students just cannot meet the requirements set by their teachers. Such a mismatch only leads to more frustration – both teachers and students are frustrated.
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> The new school policy can have a "Labelling Effect" of its own. All the school members expect that the students in S.4D are "the elites of the elites" – it is a tradition in my school that those who have better academic results choose the Science Stream classes. In order to reach that expectation, students are working under a great pressure – from teachers, other students and their families. The whole process is a painful experience.
>
> As expressed by the students themselves, they become quieter during the lessons due to two main reasons. First, they pay more attention in class as the subject content is delivered in English. They will miss some important points if they do not concentrate. Second, students do not have the courage to say anything or respond in English. They are afraid of making mistakes and being teased by others…
>
> More involvement and attentiveness in class does not necessarily mean more participation. From the interviews, the students themselves can point out this problem. I have to admit that we are already teaching a group of kids who lack self-confidence and self-assurance. With the new school policy, cumulative failures (in tests and examinations), and pressure … from the people around them, their remaining self-esteem seems to be almost destroyed. (Lee 2002, 67–68; cited in Lin and Man 2009, 98)

In this study, the researcher worked within the interpretive research paradigm and sought to describe the actions of the school participants (teachers, students) and the meanings given to these actions from their own perspectives (i.e. the ethnographic emic perspective). The school participants were described as being trapped in the institutional arrangements – the school's policy of selecting one best class to immerse them in EMI. The teachers' actions (e.g. having high expectations of the students in this class) and the students' actions (e.g. becoming quiet for fear of making mistakes and being teased by others) were described with sympathy. However, the school participants remained positioned as objects of descriptive analysis by the researcher rather than also as subjects of knowing themselves. The knowledge produced largely reflects the voice of the researcher.

Study Three. Both an interpretive and critical ethnographic study in an "international division" of a former CMI secondary school

In 2010 the Hong Kong government released the fine-tuning of the MOI policy as a response to strong societal pressure to destabilize the boundary between EMI and CMI secondary schools. Now, all secondary schools can opt to teach in English for up to 25% of the curriculum time or up to two subjects in the junior secondary curriculum, and many former CMI schools are becoming “EMI schools.” Some schools are also starting an EMI “international division” targeting ethnic minority students. This provides the context of the third study outlined below.

In this collaborative critical ethnography (Perez-Milans and Soto, 2014), a university researcher (Dr. M) and a school teacher-researcher (Mr. C) engaged in a dialogue about the critical pedagogy curriculum that Mr. C was trying out with ethnic minority students in the “International Section” of a secondary school in Hong Kong. In this study, Dr. M conducted regular classroom observations, lesson audiotaping, and analysis of lesson discourse in Mr. C’s classroom. For instance, Dr. M provided an analysis in fine interactional detail of how a student, Zareef, ambiguously positioned himself between his classmates and his teacher. While not showing interest in the vocabulary-learning task, Zareef is, however, simultaneously expressing some concern with Mr. C’s difficulties in getting students to participate in the activity (for the detailed lesson transcript analysis, see Perez-Milans and Sotos, 2014). If just the descriptive lesson analysis is done, then it should be no different from research work conducted in the interpretive research paradigm with the researcher positioned as the subject of knowing and the researched positioned as the object of analysis/description. However, Dr. M and Mr. C carried on a dialogue (both in recorded conversations and in written email exchanges) in which both had a chance to express their critical reflections on what was transpiring in the study. This dialogue was provided in the knowledge they co-produced (Perez-Milans and Sotos, 2014) based on the study. Reflecting on this collaborative research, Dr. M. and Mr. C. wrote the following:

> we also conceptualize this chapter as a discursive process of dialogue and self-reflection which has enabled us to engage in further conversation regarding (1) what we have learnt from this research collaboration, and (2) to what extent this experience could go beyond grand academic narratives which only advance our professional careers and lead to some impact on other people’s lives. (Perez-Milans and Soto, 2014, 230)

Mr. C, the teacher-researcher, was not positioned merely as the researched but also as an equal partner with Dr. M in this collaborative research study. Reflecting on this research process, Mr. C wrote the following:

> Understanding another’s subjectivity is always challenging, maybe even more so as the multi-lingual and multi-cultural nature of an environment intensifies. In my classes, students employ a wide range, of registers, cultural references, and other linguistic repertoires that may not be intelligible to the teacher or other participants or observers. So if we are to enter into critical dialogue with students, to make and re-make reality, then how do we read their meaning-making practices in order to situate our learning? As a teacher, how do I recognize the “transformative tensions” that emerge? How do I separate them from classroom acts that don’t offer possibility for critical reflection or change? Answering these questions is crucial if we are to “open up access to genres, especially those controlled by mainstream groups” (Martin, 1999: 124) and move students from disengagement with academics to proficiency in creating the types of texts necessary for school success. Overcoming this internal struggle requires attention to everyday classroom and social life. Both Dr. M and I make an appeal to others to listen more carefully … So instead of merely hearing classroom disturbances in the previous classroom interaction, we reposition

> student behavior as part of a negotiated collusion in a space fraught with tensions. (Perez-Milans and Soto 2014, 224–254)

In this reflection, written as part of the dialogue between Mr. C and Dr. M, we see how Dr. M and Mr. C positioned each other as subjects of knowing and research partners in the collaborative study. In the knowledge thus produced, we see multi-voicedness and multiple perspectives and how these were interwoven into the heteroglossic (Bakhtin 1981) piece of knowledge about how local school participants crafted a space for empowerment of minority students even under a language policy which did not favor these students.

On the Necessity of Becoming a Reflexive "Tweener"

In the above review of the different kinds of interest underlying different research paradigms and different kinds of researcher positionality under these paradigms, I might seem to be privileging the critical paradigm. However, the critical paradigm can have its limitations too. For instance, in influencing public language and education policies, positivist studies still usually figure more prominently than critical studies. However, this is not deterministic and one needs to adopt multiple positions in constructing a dialogue with different parties in each situated context in LPP analysis and advocacy work. While the technicalizing of social life is worrying, a commitment to methodological pluralism and heteroglossia (despite/amidst tensions and multi-voicedness) is necessary, however difficult it seems. What is a pitfall is the failure to recognize the inherent partial and positioned nature of every research study (and researcher) that is inevitably located in a certain sociohistorical and epistemological position. Rather than just negatively critiquing individual studies and their positions, however, one can more productively argue for the need to become a reflexive "tweener" (Luke 2002), readily traveling between different epistemological positions and explicitly acknowledging the necessarily partial or limited nature of any single position/study/perspective. One first step can be revisiting some of the questions this chapter started with:

- Why (do you do) research? What kinds of interest motivate you?
- What kind of knowledge will you produce?
- What is the possible impact of your research (or the knowledge that you will produce), and for whom?
- Is there any value-free or interest-free research? Why/Why not?

The above are just some possible questions to ask and there are no universal practical guides, as each LPP research context confronts the researcher with its own complex specificities. I would, however, argue that along with the commitment to being explicit and reflexive about issues of researcher positionality, adopting a critical stance is very important if LPP research is to contribute to promoting social justice and challenging unequal relations of power often found in LPP contexts.

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