

A cross-cultural journey into literacy research

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ABSTRACT: A significant body of literacy and language research over the last two decades has been informed by a sociocultural perspective and an associated qualitative design, which are often seen as valuable and appropriate for researching literacy. As an emergent researcher, whose understanding of language education was mostly informed by individualistic psychology and linguistics, I encountered a significant challenge in designing a project for my Masters research undertaken in Australia in which I aimed at examining international students' technology use in English as a second language (ESL) and their challenges. Researching the experiences with technology, which might be so unique and personal, required a major shift in the way I viewed the world and thought about literacy and technology. Informed by autoethnography, this paper is written in a form of a narrative in which I draw on my educational and teaching experiences in the USSR and, after its collapse, in the newly independent country Belarus, to explore the origins of my early positivist views on language teaching and technology use. I discuss how these understandings have been challenged and changed through a major epistemological shift during my Masters research and how this shift has influenced the research methodology of my current doctoral study. Some reflections about the value of autoethnography to explore research experiences are discussed. Finally, I argue that such reflective practice may help emerging scholars to understand who they are, how they are positioned and what their goals as researchers are.

KEYWORDS: Constructivist epistemology, epistemological shift, qualitative research, digital literacy.

INTRODUCTION

My research interest in technology use in language and literacy education has been informed by my personal experience as a teacher of English as a foreign language in Belarus, my native country. After the collapse of the USSR and fall of “the iron curtain”, the desire of Belarusian society and economy to gain entry into the global arena contributed to the growth in significance of the English language, which accelerated over the next decades. By the time I started my teaching career in 2000, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) had become more common in the lives of people in Belarus and early attempts were made to use technology for foreign language learning by some educators. As a teacher overwhelmed with the emphasis on English in society, education and the economy and interested in exploring the opportunities that ICT could offer to language learning, I was enthusiastic about the integration of technology (mainly computers) in my teaching. I initiated and established a computer-assisted, language-learning program at the school in which I worked. The program aimed at practising language skills with the help of technology-based, skill-and-drill exercises and “authentic” language resources. It was considered a great achievement in my teaching context.

When I migrated to Australia in 2004, I had to become a user of technology in a new sociocultural and linguistic context. Every day I dealt with numerous issues as I tried to settle down and learn about a new place, society and its practices. The use of technology in English was unavoidable. However, searching for information, engaging in communication, navigating and using different devices and even entertainment were all challenging and not always successful and, at times, stressful. I soon began to question my approaches to teaching with technology; however, with an understanding of language education as informed by psychology and linguistics, I could not move beyond drawing on these fields in my theoretical explanations. I decided to undertake a Master research project to explore some of the issues that concerned me personally and professionally. However, I experienced significant challenges, at least initially, with understanding contemporary theories of language, literacy, technology and their intersection as well as the notion of a qualitative research design and the value of associated methodologies that dominated the field I was interested in.

The relationship between epistemology and methodology are often articulated and explained in the research literature and it was also intrinsic to a *Research Methods* unit I undertook before embarking on research. Different epistemological stances were defined and their typical methodologies were suggested; however no explicit explanations and examples were offered to understand how different epistemologies shape understanding of reality and how they influence the ways in which researchers think about the phenomena they are investigating. In the context of the unit, I was not encouraged to reflect on my existing epistemology in relation to my research interests, to analyse its origins or to think about the epistemologies that inform the key theories in my field. Such an approach made the whole discussion of epistemology as a concept highly decontextualised and, thus, problematic for me and some of my peers.

I spent several weeks in anxiety and frustration before I realised that my perspectives on learning, language and technology were informed by a strong positivist stance, while those used in the current research and seen as valuable and appropriate for researching literacy and technology were constructivist. Conducting research which could contribute to informed and in-depth understanding of the role of technology in contemporary ESL education required a major shift from positivism to constructivism.

This paper uses autoethnography as the underlying research method (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Ellis, 2004; McIlveen, 2008) and aims at bringing into focus some aspects of research that are sometimes hidden. Written in the form of a self-narrative, the paper “places the self within a social context” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9) enabling me as a researcher to construct a critical understanding of the self in relation to research as a professional activity (McIlveen, 2008). The paper offers some insights into research experiences that research students like myself (coming from different socio-economic, cultural, religious and educational background) may be confronted with and often fail to articulate in the early stages of the research to explain their challenges in designing a study. While emerging researchers may find this narrative valuable in terms of relating their own research practices, experienced researchers may consider more nuanced understandings about the nature of the epistemological stance of the research students they supervise or teach and why challenging and shifting their stance may be problematic.

I begin this narrative by exploring my epistemological roots and explaining how they shaped my worldview and thinking about language education. Then I describe how these understanding were challenged and changed through my MEd research involving a major epistemological shift. I also elaborate on how this shift influenced the research methodology of my current doctoral study. Finally, I discuss the value of autoethnography in the form of a personal narrative in providing an opportunity for reflection on research practice, which may facilitate the development of researchers' professional knowledge.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL ROOTS

In the research literature, epistemology, or worldview, has traditionally been regarded as influencing researchers' choices, but often viewed as an easy personal decision (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Cresswell, 2009). In contrast, the work which explains what shapes a personal worldview is not as extensive. Although, Cresswell (2009) refers to "researchers' own personal training and experiences" (p. 19) as influencing the choice of methodology, his explanation does not elaborate on the origin of a personal worldview in depth. This suggests that more nuanced accounts of the nature of personal epistemology are needed to unpack the complexities behind the researcher's methodological choices. In this section, to explore the origin of my early positivist views on language learning and technology, I start with the sociocultural, economic and political contexts in which I grew up, established my identities and formed my worldviews. Next I explore how my experiences in higher education, also situated in this context, contributed to the entrenchment of my positivist views on language education and how altogether they shaped my early professional practices.

I was born and started my schooling experience in the USSR, the organisation and philosophy of which promoted a socially, culturally, geographically, linguistically and ideologically homogeneous society. The Soviet Union was structured under a highly centralised government and economy and was dedicated to the construction of communism. Soviet ideology aiming at creating a classless society did not recognise existing stratification and held that no considerable social differences existed in the society in terms of income, benefits, access to scarce goods and services, and prestige. The Soviet Union consisted of 15 republics, which were different ethnically, culturally, linguistically and geographically. However, the Russian language was the official language of the country and the first language for several generations of people across the country before I was born. While formally the native languages of the republics had equal status with Russian, they were gradually replaced by Russian in different domains of life, including education and the mass media. Similarly, the political concept of the "soviet people", conceived in the middle of the 20th century, implied a community of people sharing common territory, language and socialist beliefs. It was also well established as a strong *ethnic* identity by the time I was born. Although multiculturalism was recognised to a certain degree (mostly, in terms of wearing cultural dresses in national events as a symbol of ethnic diversity), I was unaware of existing sociocultural differences among the republics due to their geographical distance. All these factors encouraged me as a child to perceive the society I was living in as absolutely homogeneous. The collapse of the USSR in 1991

and a mosaic of chaotic events which followed in the 90s such as several economic and language reforms, decline in living standards, socio-economic inequality, political disappointment, identity crisis, moral degradation and depression brought some shifts in my thinking about the homogeneity associated mostly with ethnic groups and social classes. However, they did not incorporate in-depth understanding of diversity, its nature and implications.

In such a context I started my teacher education. Language learning was the major focus over six years of my studies. Similar to many other parts of the world, structural and cognitive views of language dominated at that time in the TESOL¹ field. Thus, language teaching was informed by grammar translation, audio-lingual and sometimes communicative paradigms, which assumed a strong focus on accuracy and fluency achieved through skill-and-drill practice and some communicative exercises. The various units I had to study throughout my undergraduate education focused on linguistics, a scientific study of language, or in other words on language structure – morphology, syntax and phonology. Psychology also constituted a significant component of my teacher education. It encouraged exploring such concepts as perception, cognition, memory, attention, emotions, motivation, personality, behaviours, their variations across different age-groups and their implications for education. There were also units related to pedagogy and language teaching techniques, but they also were informed by linguistics and psychology.

Anticipating a potential reader's question about Vygotsky, born in Belarus and working in Russia, who was the founder of cultural-historical psychology, I need to say that in my teacher education program Vygotsky was studied in the context of the *History of Pedagogy* unit (mostly his biography and main contributions) rather than focusing on the implications of his work for pedagogy and research approaches. Although there were significant changes in society, teacher education had not undergone any transformations at that time. It did not encourage me as a pre-service teacher to understand or at least acknowledge any other differences in the classrooms except psychological differences between individuals and any other views of language apart from linguistic.

Shaped by such worldviews, I started my teaching career. Influenced by my views of how individuals develop from a psychological perspective, I did not realise that each of my students had very complex reasons for studying (or not studying) English and these decisions as well as the way they were learning were all influenced by their experiences in their families and in the wider society, their cultural backgrounds, and their social and economic status. For example, one student came from a privileged background; both parents had higher education, well-paid jobs and were more or less fluent in English. They had resources for helping him at home, for private English language tutoring and an exchange program in an English-speaking country in future. In contrast, there was another student from a single-parent family, whose mother had to take two jobs to provide him with an opportunity to attend additional language courses for university preparation. The third example is a student from a working-class family, widely perceived as excessive users of alcohol, who was labelled as a “low-achieving” and “difficult” child at school. My view of these children (and perhaps the view of other teachers as well) assumed that they entered school on an

¹ TESOL stands for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

equal level – they were of the same age and gender, they lived in the same neighbourhood and attended one of the best schools in the area that actively promoted the idea of English as the “key to prosperity” in society. I believed that all these three students had the same opportunity to succeed in language learning. Although I started to realise that the students’ backgrounds might have some implications for their learning experiences (mostly in terms of resources available to them), I still had a strong belief that it was students’ psychological attributes and their relative commitment to language learning which I needed draw on to “explain” their success or failure.

Influenced by the view that linguistics is central to language education while adapting my personal experience of language learning as a model for my teaching practices, my teaching was informed by a structural view of language with some injection of a communicative language teaching approach. In an attempt to make the classroom experiences more interesting, engaging and effective, I designed and employed diverse techniques and methods; however, the dominating teaching approaches included direct instruction, constant corrections and textbook use. Typical activities included choral reading and reading aloud, reciting, memorisation, translation, dictation, vocabulary and grammar exercises. The focus of the classroom activities was the development of reading, speaking, writing and listening skills in a target language. Although sometimes the students were encouraged to participate in activities of a more collaborative and creative nature, the overall approach was teacher-centred, textbook-based and test (exam)-oriented.

When I had an opportunity to use technology in my classes, I saw a number of ways in which technology could benefit my students. First, I believed that technology use would increase their motivation because of this generation’s interest in technology and interactivity. Second, I hoped to access more authentic language materials, which we lacked at that time, in particular, reading and listening resources. As no adequate training was available and I was not aware of any approaches to the use of technology in language education, I did not see any other ways of using technology rather than as an “add-on” to my existing teaching practices or, in other words, as a tool to assist traditional approaches. While the students were more excited about doing a computer task than a print-based one, there were no dramatic changes in their progress, which signalled to me that my approach to the use of technology had serious limitations. However, my positivist views which were encouraged by soviet ethnocentricity and were the norm in my bachelor degree prevented me from seeing language, technology use, the learning experiences of my students and their challenges as deeply connected to and influenced by the contexts in which they were situated.

A NEW JOURNEY

When I started my Master’s research in which I wanted to investigate ESL students’ technology use and their difficulties in Australia, I experienced two major challenges. First, I found it difficult to understand contemporary perspectives on language, literacy and technology because they were fundamentally different from the views I had developed in my undergraduate studies and which were reinforced in teaching. A significant body of the literature I read was informed by a sociocultural perspective, which was seen as valuable and appropriate for researching literacy and technology.

In particular, a Literacy Studies approach (Scribner & Cole 1981; Street 1984, 2009; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic 2000; Gee 2000, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel 2003; Pahl & Rowsell 2005; Snyder 2009; Warschauer 2009) disrupted my view of literacy as primarily cognitive in nature, neutral and decontextualised. The scholars working within this field argued that literacy practices are always situated within certain social contexts, emphasising the importance of social and contextual accounts of literacy. Their work criticised the view of literacy as autonomous or as “an issue of measurement or of skill” (Street, 2009, p. 21), because such a view failed to acknowledge the complexity of literacy practices. These researchers argued for the need to rethink the concept of literacy and approach it as a socioculturally, historically situated practice, linked to people’s identities, having multiple forms and highly ideological in nature.

Further, the work of some researchers in this field challenged the view of technology as a tool (New London Group 1996; Lankshear, Snyder & Green, 2000; Beavis & Durrant 2001; Warschauer 2006; 2009). Drawing on the long relationship between literacy and technology, these scholars argued that technology had facilitated the emergence of new types of texts in digital environments and influenced significantly the ways people participate in social practices. These days people frequently have to deal with digital texts which have different features to traditional print-based texts: multimodal, created in a wide range of genres, characterised by non-linear ways of text connection, situated in numerous easily accessible contexts. Drawing on these changes in the nature of literacy practices, these researchers argued that the notion of literacy needed to be broader and include not only traditional print-based literacy skills but also new capabilities associated with a digital environment. To refer to these new forms of literacy, several different terms were used, such as “digital literacy”, “technoliteracy”, “electronic literacy” (Gilster, 1997; Lankshear et al., 2000; Warschauer, 2006) which all were totally foreign concepts to me.

The second challenge I experienced in this process of discovering new theories and approaches was associated with research design. Qualitative research design informed the empirical work in this field, the notion of which I also found difficult to appreciate as a result of a lack of research experience in education and only superficial awareness of such methods as surveys and experiments.

After long conversations with my supervisor, peers and re-reading again and again the literature on theory and research design, I began to re-examine my belief system, general orientations about the world and ideas about the nature of reality. The fact that Literacy Studies and a constructivist stance are consistent with each other – they both acknowledge the significance of social contexts in shaping individuals’ understanding, practices and experiences – helped me to develop more nuanced understanding about the value of “lived experiences”, whether of my former students or my future participants. Reflecting on my teaching experience, I started to realise that the nature of the three students’ English learning experiences described in the previous section was fundamentally different, because the contexts of their previous experiences associated with the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of their families. In the first case, the student was given an opportunity to explore his potential in language learning because of his privileged background. The second student was under constant pressure to learn English as a potentially life-changing experience for him. The third student did not necessarily have these values and attitudes towards

English and education in general as he did not have role models within the family or his world. Thus, simply sitting in my classroom did not make their experiences of language learning identical.

In a similar way I started to think about my research focus – individual student’s technology use. Living in Australia for several years by that time and observing striking ethnic, linguistic, religious and socio-economic diversity contributed to the development of my recognition of the complexity of practices when technology is used. I understood that it was important to describe these experiences and explain them so that educators could develop better understandings of ESL students’ practices with technology in particular settings (different domains of Australian society) and what distinguished their practices from those of others. My earlier view of technology as a neutral and decontextualised tool could not succeed in capturing the unique realities of individuals.

In contrast, viewing technology use as a socially and culturally situated practice that was offered by Literacy Studies seemed to have great potential for exploring the individuality of experiences with technology and the complexities. As a postgraduate student, I began realise that I needed to formulate a research design that would allow the different voices to recount their unique experiences with technology to understand the nature of these practices in depth. Importantly, I understood that these experiences cannot be captured in artificial settings such as a research laboratory or measured by tests, surveys and experiments because the idea provided by Literacy Studies is to understand social and cultural (we can add economic, historical, and so on) contexts which means they need to be explored as they comprise the “real life” of the participants. The fact that I was unable to see the important role of sociocultural contexts in an individual’s practices and experiences earlier suggests that it was my personal worldview that prevented me from doing so.

Some of the key ideas of Literacy Studies facilitated a shift in my epistemological foundations. They enabled me to redefine the research problem I wanted to explore (not technology as a tool but technoliteracy practice) and ask more generative research questions (what, why and how questions) that aimed at examining the “lived experiences” of the participants. Even the language I was using to talk about my study changed. I found the use of such terms as *language acquisition*, *behaviour*, *motivation*, *tool* and *skills* limiting. With the help of the literature I discovered a whole new language that enabled me to discuss and unpack the complexity of my research interests – literacy practices, contexts, identities. Through this shift I was able to understand the value of qualitative research and see it as a legitimate framework that matches best the phenomena I was interested in researching.

The newness of the paradigm for me, together with the limited time frame for a Master’s project, encouraged me to stick to the “traditional” research methodology and methods of a qualitative approach. The research involved a class of international students and their teacher at an English Language Centre, located in Melbourne. The study employed a case-study approach and focused on four students who were from Thailand, China, Saudi Arabia and France. The methods included classroom observations, participants’ diaries and individual interviews. Five classroom observations (two hours each) were carried out to record the students’ engagement with technology use in the context of formal learning. Detailed notes were taken to

describe the settings, classroom activities, students' and teacher's practices and interactions. The four main participants were invited to keep diaries of their technology use for one week. They were asked to record the technologies they used every day, to note for what purposes they used them, and what difficulties they experienced. Drawing on the data from the diaries and observation sessions, I interviewed each participant twice to explore their practices with technology in different contexts, their challenges and problems and, importantly, the nature of these challenges. The teacher of the class was also interviewed to obtain another perspective on the research issues.

Overall, I found that the chosen methodology and methods were appropriate for my research topic and consistent with the empirical work in the field. The design allowed me to obtain multiple perspectives on a research issue, which provided me with comprehensive and in-depth understanding of ESL students' technoliteracy practices and associated challenges. As a researcher I designed my study, interpreted participants' realities and reported the findings through my own understanding of the world, based on my previous experience in teaching, understanding of the theories and systematic analysis, reflection and synthesis of the research literature. Choosing a research topic, asking certain research questions, deciding on particular theories, methodology and the many other choices throughout this research, were all the result of who I was as a person and as a researcher.

A successful MEd study, as judged by the examiners' reports and a university prize, reinforced my belief in the value of a constructivist paradigm and qualitative research and encouraged me to pursue doctoral research, which is still in progress. In my doctoral study, I am examining the language teachers' (ESL, LOTE² and English language and literacy) digital literacy practices and connections (or disconnections) between these practices and the technology use they encourage in their classrooms. However, unlike my MEd project, I have entered my research program with a clearer epistemological standpoint. From the very beginning I have attempted to design a study that would allow different voices to speak about their "lived experiences" and their ways of seeing the world. The study employs a comparative case study approach and involves five teachers.

To gain the closest insights possible into teachers' real-life practices and perspectives, I have employed more sophisticated research methods than in my Master's research. First, this research employs participant-generated photography as a method. The participants were asked to use their cameras (pocket digital camera or mobile phone camera) to take two sets of photographs to document the realities of their daily lives: (1) typical practices with technology in everyday life and (2) metaphorical representation of how they understand the role of technology in language education. This method seemed potentially generative because it is socially constructed in the sense that producing an image is always informed and shaped by social positions and relationships. Taken from a particular point of view and for a particular purpose, photos embody participants' ways of seeing, thinking and doing, reflect who and what they are, and what values they have. However, it would be naïve to think that participants' images would speak for themselves; rather, they represent a more authentic version of their perspectives. The analysis of the images is informed by

² LOTE stands for Languages Other Than English

qualitative orientations and entails “reading” (Banks, 2001, p. 1) the images in a search for “patterns and meanings” (Collier, 2001, p. 35) or, in other words, interpretations. Drawing on work from sociology, anthropology and cultural studies, a specific framework for interpretation has been developed in keeping with the theoretical orientations of the study.

Second, these photographs were used during the individual interviews where, with the help of a photo-elicitation technique, the participants provided their narratives, comments and interpretations of the images. Together, interpretations of the images by the researcher and participants aim at discovering the richness and depth of the information about participants’ experiences and interpretations that the photographs carry.

Finally, online shadowing was employed as a method to observe the participants’ social networking practices such as Facebook, Twitter and professional blogs. The participants were aware of my presence and this awareness could of course have influenced their online practices to a certain extent. However, given the nature of social networking websites – my presence was not always simultaneous with their online practices and it was not technically signalled to the participants (except on Facebook), I had access to their earlier practices (before they joined the study), I was not interacting with them or participating in their discussions and conversations – this method allowed me to minimise the effect of my presence and allowed observing participants’ practices in a way very close to how they happened in their lives. During the interviews we also discussed teachers’ social networking practices, which allowed me to unpack the meaning that these experiences had for them.

Having a clearer epistemological stance, I thought more carefully about a research design for my doctoral study. As a result, the data I collected offers naturalistic, in-depth and multiple perspectives on the research issue and will enable me to develop a complex, multidimensional, holistic picture of language teachers’ practices with technology in and out of classrooms.

CONCLUSION

Autoethnography, and the narrative which it generated, is more than telling a personal story. It is “a specific form of critical enquiry that is embedded in theory and practice” (McIlveen, 2008, p. 15). It is part of a tradition of reflective practice, which addresses a practical problem that emerging researchers may experience. Loughran (2002) argues that across many professions individuals need to develop nuanced understanding about what they know and do to be “effective and informed” (p. 34) professionals. Professional reflective practices are often seen as a helpful and meaningful way for developing this knowledge through “reconsidering” (p. 34) and “questioning” (p. 34) what is learnt in practice. Reflective practice is recognised as “important in sustaining one’s professional health and competence” (Loughran, 2002, p. 34) and “equally valuable” (p. 34) for any professional practice.

In this paper, I have reflected on my research experience in an attempt to recognise and articulate the professional knowledge of research practice associated with the practical problem of intertwining epistemology and research design as a result of the

personal background of the emerging researcher. This narrative represents a search for meaning in learning about research to enhance the development of my professional knowledge and to encourage my reflective practices as a research apprentice.

In this narrative, drawing a link between soviet ethnocentricity, the educational system in Belarus and the positivist epistemologies that reigned at that time, I have argued that an individual's worldview is a complex combination of socio-economic, political, ideological, cultural and educational heritage. It is not easily challenged and changed; even if it is, the experience often goes unnoticed in the thesis. Reflective practices are crucial for emerging researchers to understand who they are and what they want to be. To make the whole research experience more meaningful, it is critical to understand one's personal standpoint and what has shaped it before designing a study.

At a personal level, understanding how and in what ways different epistemological stances shaped my view of reality and, in particular, my thinking about language learning and technology has been fundamental to my research experiences. Once I was able to see myself as holding positivist views on language and technology, unpack their origin and understand how these views are different from constructivist ones, it became clearer how I could design a study that would contribute to understanding the role of technology in contemporary language education and would be in alignment with current theories and empirical work in the field. Finally, this paper also illustrates how reflective practices have informed the research directions and methods adopted in my doctoral study. I have employed research methods which aim to produce finely grained understandings of the complex everyday digital literacy practices and perspectives of the participants, which is the ultimate goal of constructivist researchers working in a Literacy Studies framework.

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Manuscript received: March 29 2012

Revision received: May 30, 2012

Accepted: July 8, 2012