# Presenting and publishing qualitative research

Never Stand Still | Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences | School of Education

Xuesong (Andy) Gao
School of Education, UNSW
xuesong.gao@unsw.edu.au

# Let us start with some basics

- Basic assumptions to do with research/qualitative: Ontological and epistemological ones
- Ontology: In simple terms, ontology seeks the classification and explanation of entities. Ontology is about the object of inquiry, what you set to examine (https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ces/research/current/socialtheory/maps/ology/)
- Ontological assumptions in a study: fundamental nature of reality or what were examined in the study (objective reality, subjective/social reality?)
- Positivism, realism etc. (focusing on meaning-making or cause-effect)
- Epistemology: how we know
- Epistemological approaches: positivistic, interpretative
- Qualitative research: Subjective/social reality, interpretative approach

# Sample studies

- **Chinese learners' Swahili learning investment trajectories**

- While increasing scholarly attention is being paid to the study of languages other than English (LOTE), scant research has been conducted on African languages. Yet how and why learners may choose (not) to learn Swahili remains relatively unknown. Drawing on the language investment model (Darvin & Norton, 2015), the present inquiry adopted a longitudinal multiple-case study approach to track ….
  - 1. What motivated their investment in Swahili language learning?
  - 2. What sustained their investment in Swahili language learning?
- What is the nature of these research questions?
- How did the authors understand the nature of 'investment'?

# Sample studies

- Research questions:
- What are the constraints and affordances governing the implementation of new College English Curriculum in China?
- In what ways do the affordances and constraints existing in the context of the case University impacts teachers' professional identity, motivation and pedagogy?
- Cause-effect relations? Positivist ontology?
- But the study is a qualitative ethnographic case study!

# What do qualitative researchers tend to say?

- Qualitative researchers' claims:
  - exploratory in nature
  - help us understand complex phenomena in an in-depth manner
  - limited in terms of generalisability
  - rich data
  - examine 'dynamic phenomena' to 'broaden our understanding' (Dörnyei, 2007, pp. 39-40).

# What challenges qualitative researchers need to address?

- '[whereas] in quantitative research the source of validity is known, qualitative research has to *show its workings* every single time' (Holliday, 2002, p. 8)
- A different set of criteria to evaluate qualitative research: e.g. transparency and trustworthiness
- Problematizing qualitative research:
- Overreliance on conceptual frameworks
- Writing: highly descriptive, sometimes superficial
- Data analysis: mysterious

# What challenges qualitative researchers need to address?

- Lack of organization (beans on the floor)
- Subjective/interpretive: how valid is it?
- Descriptive (not analytically and critically engaging enough)
- Lack of significance : nice story but so what?
- Fewer journals publish qualitative studies
- Journals that publish qualitative studies usually have no or low impact factor
- Qualitative research: research?

# What I experienced as a qualitative researcher

- Gao (2006): Retrospective interviews of 14 Chinese international students on their difficulties or challenges, strategy use and motivation in learning English in China and UK
- ‘This is a very nice story but so what?’ (from a reviewer)
- The comment invites me to reflect on relevant language learning strategy research: look for a conceptual and methodological gap
- Qualitative research: the need for conceptualization
- Sociocultural perspective :  learning communities mediate learners’ strategy use through “semiotic symbols (especially language)”, “objects”, and “(powerful) persons”’ (ibid).
- The crucial analytic foci when analysing the data in search for conceptual links.
- Revisions are not just to meet the expectations of reviewers and editors

# What I experienced as a qualitative researcher

- A not so recent rejection (it happens all the time):
- XXXX is committed to publishing high-quality studies that help build a sound theoretical understanding of the field. Unfortunately, your manuscript at present does not fulfil this criterion. We would be happy to reconsider a new submission with a substantial theoretical underpinning and contribution to new theory-building, rather than just a description and evaluation of XX. (Author's own data)

# Comparing two introductions: Qualitative one

- Every day people go shopping and try to provide different things that are needed for their survival such as foodstuffs. They choose these materials from among a wide variety of available things. Then at home, they sort out those things for short-term and long-term uses. When their stomachs send the hunger message, they have to prepare food using those stored materials. Using language is similar to this metaphor. In order to meet their needs, human beings have to utilize their potentials. For example, the camera which has not been used for years is taken out of the dusty cupboard when it is needed. Although we hear a lot of languages are spoken by people around us or hundreds of pages of another language are read, just the moment a person needs the language to carry out some deeds; he or she understands that how much he/she can show his abilities. What happens when he finds out that he is unable to use language to meet his needs? This is exactly like having the camera but not knowing how to utilize it. This is the time of perceiving the correct value of production. But it is important to know how to achieve this ultimate goal. The history of second language acquisition (SLA) has been characterized by an unending search for more efficient ways of teaching second or foreign languages. For more than a century, debates and explorations in this regard have often centered on issues such as the role of grammar in language teaching curriculum, the development of accuracy and fluency in language teaching. Deficiencies of the teaching methodologies and syllabi gave rise to the emergence of new insights in second language acquisition (SLA) research.

# From a quantitative study

- The ease with which we produce speech may lead us to think that the cognitive and brain mechanisms put at play in this skill are rather simple. However, speech production is a complex process which entails the orchestration of many processes that unfold over time (e.g., Dell 1986; Caramazza 1997; Levelt et al. 1999). In recent years, the amount of psycholinguistic experimental research exploring these processes has increased, leading to more detailed models of speech production. However, the same cannot be said regarding the investigation of the time course of the neural events underpinning these processes. The present article aims at helping to fill this gap by exploring the electrophysiological correlates of 2 robust psycholinguistic phenomena in picture naming; the frequency and the cognate effect.

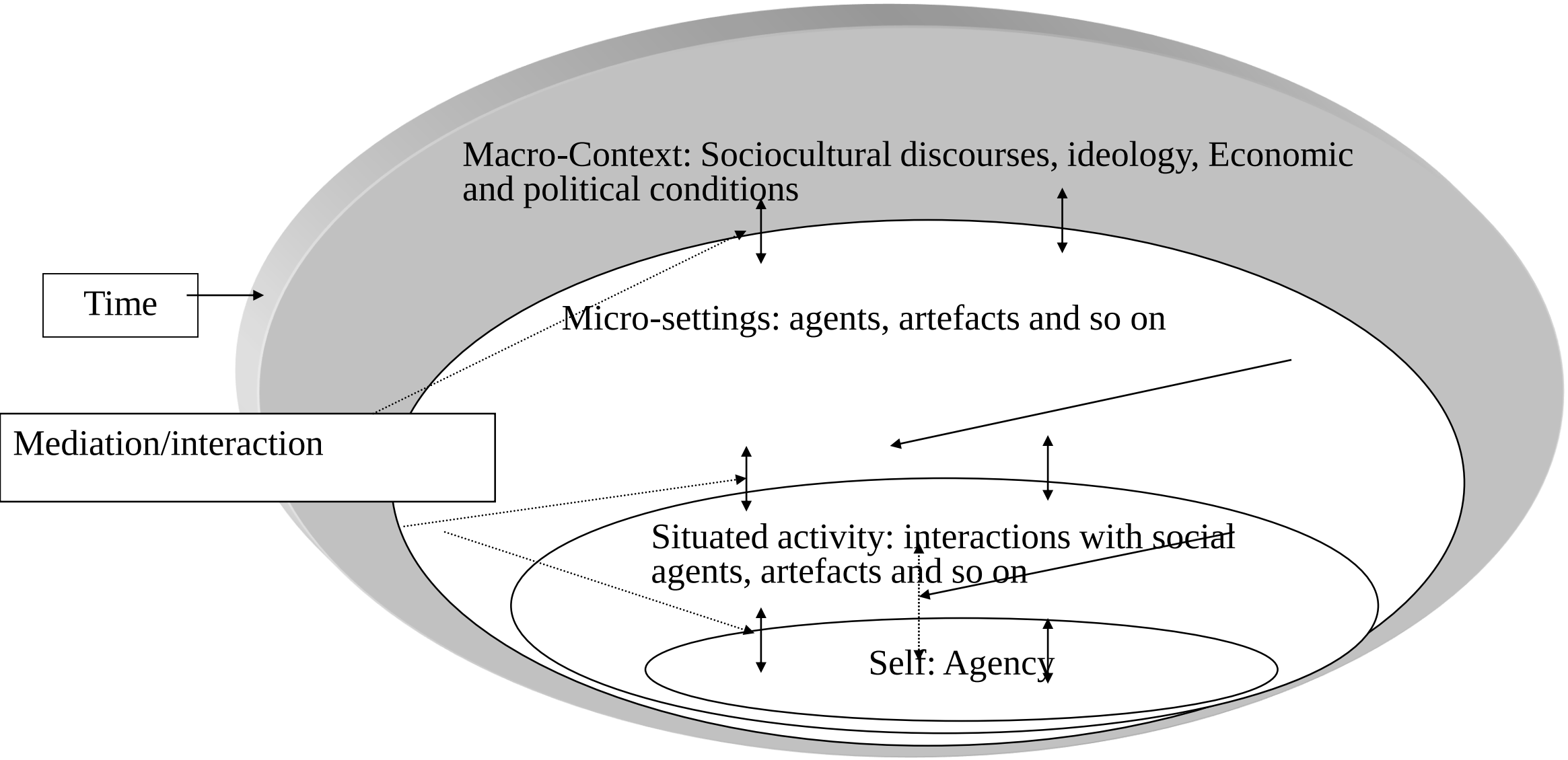
# Reflections

- Qualitative researchers are not always good at academic writing
- The importance of framing the research issue!!
- The clarity of (logical) thinking (confusion/incoherence often to do with our ontological assumptions and epistemological approaches)

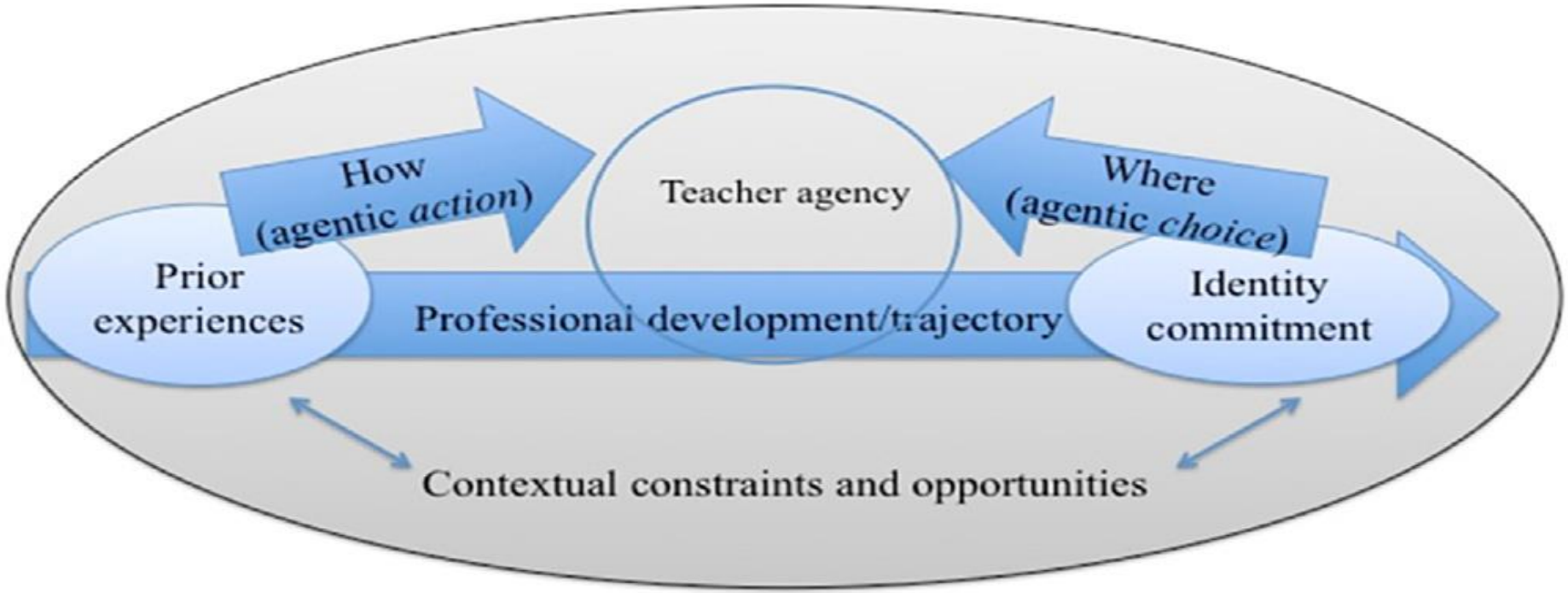
# In my own research

- How do my collaborators and I relate our inquiries to the bigger picture?
- A common strategy is to link the research narrative to:
  - Structure and agency
  - Individuals and context
  - An ecological perspective

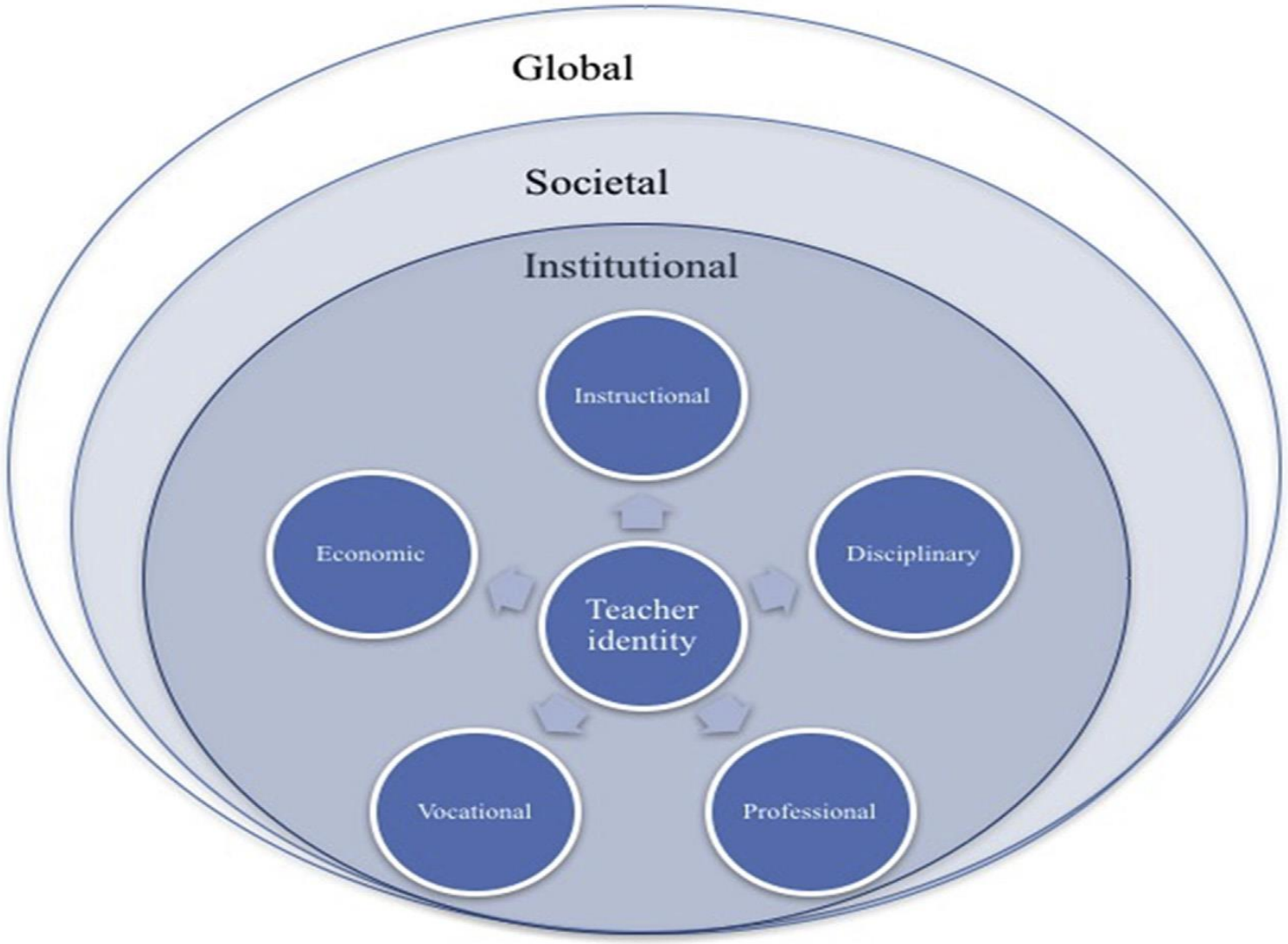
# Layder's (1991) research resource map



# Tao & Gao, 2017


How
(agentic *action*)
Teacher agency
Where
(agentic *choice*)
Prior
experiences
Professionai development/trajectory
Identity
commitment
Contextual constraints and opportunities

# Tao & Gao, 2018


Global
Societal
Institutional
Instructional
Economic
Disciplinary
Teacher identity
Vocational
Professional

# Methodological Presentation

- Interview data were analyzed to further address the research questions and explain some of the quantitative outcomes, or
- We read the interview data again and again till themes start emerging, or
- We use ‘grounded theory’ approaches to analyzing the qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

# Methodological Presentation

- All interviews were transcribed and then translated from Chinese to English to be analysed by the UK investigators. The interviews were coded, categorized and transferred into an analytical matrix (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to provide a framework for identifying the key influences, tensions, professional and personal concerns of Chinese returnees in different phases of their careers and in different work and life contexts for interpretation.  A cross-case matrix was constructed in order to analyse similarities and differences in the ways that Chinese returnees manage personal and career development over time in relation to the interplay of a range of personal, professional, sociocultural, and situational factors, as well as to offer a detailed look at their career trajectories after their return to China. Experiences and personal markers of transnationalism were late additions to this matrix as the salience of this framework emerged during the analysis.

# Methodological presentation

- The primary aim of the analysis was not to code the data according to the content of the messages and then count the numerical frequency of particular messages in the discussion. Rather, the analysis focused on what the netizens believed the status of Cantonese to be in relation to the Chinese language and the discourses that they used to justify their position in the discussion. The netizens' discussion posts were analysed in four stages in which 'paradigmatic analytic procedures' were used 'to produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the database' for the analysis (Polkinghorne 1995, 5). First, the posts were read for a general idea of the various issues involved in these discussions, with no intention of categorising them. […] For these reasons, the second stage in the analysis involved retaining the discussion posts that were related to the scope of the research questions and removing those that might be considered irrelevant and repetitive. […] Next, a third reading was conducted, in an endeavour to identify and categorise discussion posts in terms of their main messages. After this preliminary categorisation, a fourth reading of the data helped the researcher to refine the categories and establish the connections between the categorised data for interpretation. The following comment from the Youtube discussion in support of Cantonese illustrates how the data were analysed and interpreted: (Gao, 2012, 454)

# Reflections on methodological presentation

- **The importance of methodological rigor**
- Detailed methodological descriptions crucial in enhancing qualitative studies' rigour is to make the whole data collection and analysis transparent, open to critical censure

- It does not negate the fact that 'day-to-day research comprises short-cuts, hunches, serendipity and opportunism' (Holliday, 2002, p. 7)

# Reflections on methodological presentation

- Overview of study methods and Research questions (compatible with each other?)
- Phases of study (where applicable)
- Detailed description of the methodological approach(es) you have taken – justify it here.
- Describe participants (if any), school context etc.
- Data collection procedures
- Data analysis (easy to neglect)
- Ethical considerations (tend to treat them as box-ticking exercises, micro-ethics increasingly important)
- **Clear, explicit alignment between research questions and methods (data collection/analysis)**

# Presentation of findings

- Three popular models
  - Raw data model: First the question, then research participants' comments
  - Descriptive model: Summary description followed by illustrative quotes
  - Interpretative model: Summary description followed by illustrative quotes and interpretation
  - Readers often ask the authors to cite key references (especially those to do with conceptual frameworks) when reporting on the findings.

# Descriptive model sample

- These findings will be illustrated with selected answers from the participants to capture the differences and similarities between the two groups. As can be seen in Table 4 and Figure 1, the general trend is that both Hong Kong and mainland participants valued the importance of teaching lexical knowledge, including ‘word formation’, ‘usage’, ‘spelling’, and ‘meaning’, when teaching vocabulary: Teaching the meaning and pronunciation is important and the way how to spell the word are really challenging these days [for my students] (Hong Kong in-service, AM 25)
- [Teach] how to read and speak the words and […] the general meaning and basic usage of the words (Hong Kong Pre-service APP13)

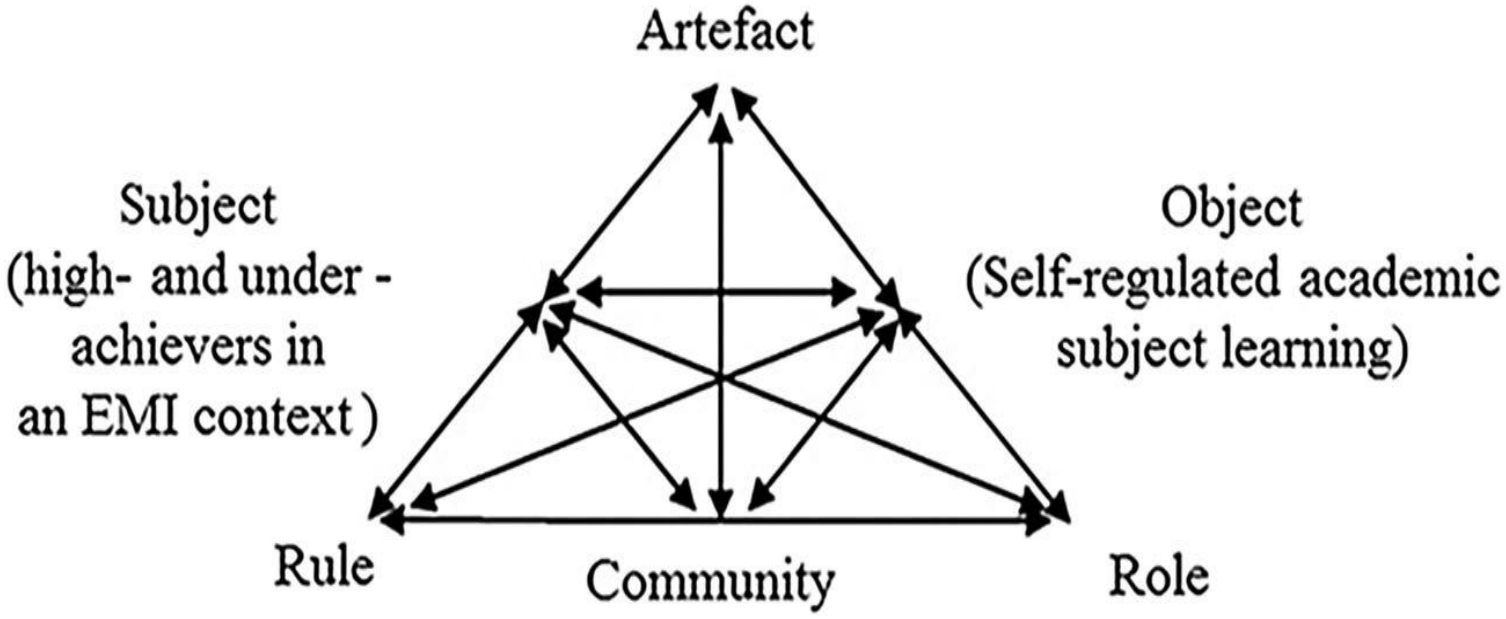
# Interpretive model sample

- Most participants in the enquiry saw themselves less competent in conducting research and in constant need of help from ‘experts’ (zhuanjia). Teacher 16 made the following response in the questionnaire:
  - We also need to have close engagement with university academics so that we can receive their guidance in our research. With these experts’ guidance, we can do our research better and improve our research capacity. And we can improve our teaching practices and develop our professional competence through research engagement. (Teacher 16)
- The participants’ perceived inadequacy as researchers is probably related to their conceptualization of good quality research in terms of ‘scientific’ research. As revealed in the questionnaire data and interviews, most of the participants associated quasi-experiments, questionnaire administration, and statistical analysis with good quality research. Most of these experiments were driven by problems in the teaching and learning of English identified by the participants and, for this reason, the experiments were expected to solve these identified problems. […] ‘experts’, whose expertise was considered indispensable in their research engagement.

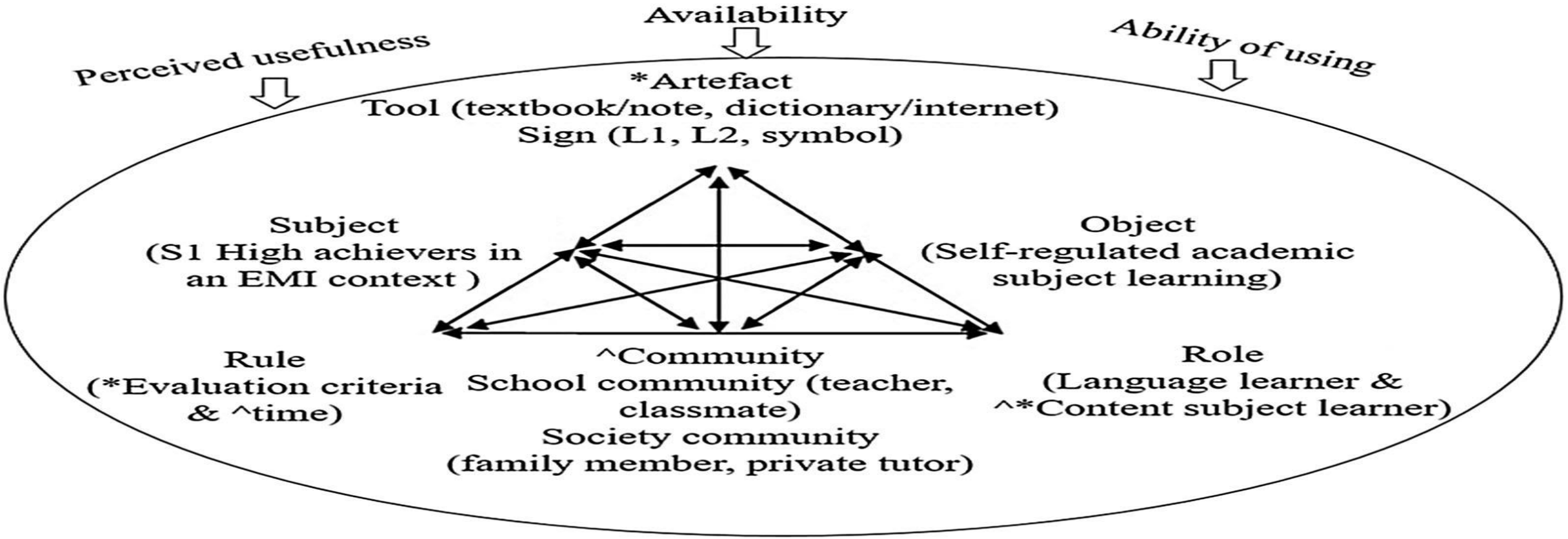
# In my own research

- Use figures to effectively convey our research's knowledge contributions
- Visualization strategies work better if you want to claim conceptual contributions

# Hu & Gao, 2018


Artefact
Subject
(high- and under -
achievers in
an EMI context )
Object
(Self-regulated academic
subject learning)
Rule
Community
Role

# Hu & Gao, 2018




Note: '*' refers to the resources often used by the high achievers; '^' refers to those often used by the underachievers.

# Sum up

- Our articles are all narratives about research
- In order for our qualitative research narratives to be critically and analytically engaging, they need to be constructed in terms of emplottment
- Tensions or conflicts need to be created in the introductory section in the form of significant research gap
- Tensions or conflicts will be resolved in the methodology and findings
- The importance of theoretical/analytic framework

# Sum up

- The field has been moving on
- Rising expectations from reviewers
  - Wary of interesting stories
  - Demand more methodological details and theoretical contributions
- We need to move forward


Q
A

# References


- Dörnyei, Z 2007, Research methods in applied linguistics. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Gao, X 2006, 'Understanding changes in Chinese students' uses of learning strategies in China and Britain: A socio-cultural re-interpretation', System, vol. 34, no. 1, pp.55-67.
- Gao, X 2015**, '**The ideological framing of "dialect": An analysis of Mainland China's state media coverage of "dialect crisis"(2002-2012)', Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, vol. 36, no. 5, pp. 468-482.
- Holliday, A 2002, Doing and writing qualitative research. Sage Publications, London.
- Hu, J., & Gao, X. (2018). Appropriation of resources by bilingual students for self-regulated learning of science. International Journal of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education.
- Tao, J., & Gao, X. (2017). Teacher agency and identity commitment in curricular reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *63*, 346-355
- Tao, J., & Gao, X. (2018). Identity constructions of ESP teachers in a Chinese university. Journal of English for Specific Purposes, 49, 1-13.