Chapter 2

Theme-Based Research in the Transdisciplinary Field of Educational Linguistics

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2.1 Introduction

Educational linguistics, like applied linguistics more broadly, is a field of inquiry that is not bound firmly to a discipline (Hornberger 2001; Spolsky 1990). Rather, it has long been an intellectual domain for cross-pollination among theoretical and methodological approaches from a broad spectrum of disciplines (Brumfit 1996). Accordingly, educational linguistics is, perhaps, best described as transdisciplinary (Martin 1993; Rothery 1996). This transdisciplinary nature lends itself to a certain intellectual freedom but also to practical and conceptual challenges to be considered along all phases of the research process.

In this chapter, I consider the intellectual benefits and challenges of transdisciplinarity for educational linguistics. Building on previous thinking about the nature of educational linguistics by Nancy Hornberger and myself (Hornberger 2001; Hornberger and Hult 2006; Hult 2008) as well as work by other educational linguists, I expand upon Halliday's (2001 [1990], 2007 [1990])[1] characterization of transdisciplinarity in order to reflect on its practical implications for doing educational linguistics. I focus, in particular, on his central tenet that the premise of transdisciplinarity is the need to move away from an intellectual emphasis on disciplines to a kind of inquiry that is thematic. Starting with the core principle that educational linguistics is a problem-oriented field (e.g., Hornberger 2001; Spolsky 1971), I discuss the ways in which it is fruitful to view Halliday's conceptualization of *theme* as a foundation for the nature of educational linguistics. I then explore how a thematic orientation serves to guide ways of approaching the topics encompassed by the field. Finally, I examine the practical implications of doing thematic research, identifying key benefits and potential pitfalls.

[1] These texts were originally published in 1990 and later re-printed. In the remainder of the chapter, I use only the dates of the re-prints, which are more easily accessible.

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2.2 The Thematic Nature of Educational Linguistics

Since its inception, educational linguistics has been defined not by disciplinary dogma but by a shared focus on investigating "the practice of (language) education, addressing educational problems and challenges with a holistic approach which integrates theory and practice, research and policy" (Hornberger 2001, p. 11). There is no set of prescribed theories or methods that drive educational linguistic research. Its governing principle is its problem-oriented nature (Hult 2008, pp. 16–20). This orientation was fundamental to Spolsky's original formulation of the field, and it continues to be its cornerstone today (Hornberger 2001, pp. 9–11; cf. Spolsky 1971). Underlying this problem-oriented approach is a central element that Halliday identifies for transdisciplinary research: the *theme* (Hornberger and Hult 2006, p. 78; Hult 2008, p. 17). As Halliday explains:

> I say 'transdisciplinary' rather than 'inter-' or 'multidisciplinary' because the latter terms seem to me to imply that one still retains the disciplines as the locus of intellectual activity, while building bridges between them, or assembling them into a collection; whereas the real alternative is to supercede them, creating new forms of activity which are thematic rather than disciplinary in their orientation. (2001, p. 176)

Educational linguistics is a transdisciplinary field *par excellence*. It is neither the intersection of the disciplines of linguistics and education nor a sub-field of the discipline of linguistics (Halliday 2007, p. 358).

While there are, of course, many fruitful areas of overlap between linguistics and education (e.g., Heath 2000; Hudson 2008; Adger et al. 2002), linguistic theories and methods may not always be directly applicable to pedagogy—to wit the now largely obsolete audiolingual method, which drew heavily on structural theories of language (Spolsky 2003, p. 503). In addition, educational linguistics has long been a nexus point for knowledge, theories, and methods that emerge from a wide range of disciplinary foundations such as anthropology, linguistics, psychology, and sociology, among others (Brumfit 1996, p. 12; Spolsky 1978, pp. 2–6). At the same time, it has never been epistemologically fettered to any of these disciplines, even linguistics proper.

Educational linguistics, then, is a form of 'intellectual activity' that is held together as a field not by 'building bridges between' disciplines but by its focus on "(the role of) language (in) learning and teaching" (Hornberger 2001, p. 19). The work undertaken with this focus often transcends disciplines, drawing upon theoretical and methodological approaches in novel ways that are mindful of the intellectual roots from which those approaches stem yet are not subservient to any particular discipline. In this way, echoing Halliday, educational linguistic research is "thematic rather than disciplinary in [its] orientation."

Halliday defines 'theme' as "not an object under study; it is not a content but an angle, a way of looking at things and asking questions about them, where the same question might be raised with respect to a wide variety of different phenomena"

(2007, pp. 358–359).[2] He offers mathematics as an example of a quintessential theme, a way of understanding the world that is more about process than content. This kind of thematic orientation is latent also in Spolsky's original vision for educational linguistics, in which he observes that one of our primary 'angles' should be to consider children's communicative competence at the point in time when they begin their educational experiences; we should then go on to develop a holistic understanding of how to help them build communicative repertoires that will maximize their social opportunities (Spolsky 1978, p. viii; cf. Hornberger 2001, p. 17). On his part, Halliday (2007, p. 360) articulates this notion in terms of the two core themes that together provide the 'angle' for educational linguistics: understanding the relationship between "how people mean" and "how people learn."

Taken together, Halliday's and Spolsky's vantage points suggest that the purpose of educational linguistics as a transdisciplinary field falls within the scope of two poles of a continuum: (a) to understand the full range of social processes that relate to the intersection of learning and meaning-making and (b) to formulate interventions that might facilitate relationships between learning and meaning-making. This may be conceived of as a continuum from reflection to action (Halliday 2007, p. 355), non-intervention to intervention (van Lier 1988, pp. 56–57), or perhaps even basic to applied (Perry 2005, p. 72). The reciprocal relationship between research and practice, in turn, takes shape within the spaces between these poles (Hornberger 2001, p. 11; Hult 2008, pp. 20–21). For ease of reference, I will use 'language (in) education' as shorthand for this binary core theme.

In this sense, the cohesion of the field of educational linguistics comes from scholars being in orbit together around this shared thematic core rather than from the "idiosyncratic interests or biographical chance" of individual researchers (Spolsky 1978, p. vii). In other words, it is not the content we share as educational linguists, but the angle. Indeed, a rather broad range of content/topics can be approached from this angle, and the perspective taken on the angle may be different depending on the topic. I consider these issues in the following two sections.

2.3 Thematic Topics for Educational Linguistic Research

Teasing apart theme and content highlights the fact that educational linguistics is not just a patchwork quilt made from a loosely assembled collection of topics. Indeed, with the binary core theme in mind, it becomes crystal clear that while there is certainly a broad range of topics, they have a common center of gravity. While theme and content are different in this view, there is a connection between them in that the nature of the content is mediated by the core theme: the content of educational

[2] Halliday's definition of theme departs from the way the term is used traditionally, both colloquially and in research (see Corbin and Strauss 2008, pp. 104–105). It is also different from the way I have used it previously to describe topics in educational linguistics (e.g., Hult 2008).

linguistics is grounded in educational practice. This is where major topics and questions originate, and it is the domain that educational linguistic research seeks to inform (Hornberger 2001, p. 19; Hornberger and Hult 2006).

Its thematic focus is the major characteristic that sets educational linguistics apart from applied linguistics more broadly (Hornberger 2001; Spolsky 1978; *pace* Kaplan 2009). As Buckingham (1980, p. 6) proffers, "applied linguistics, even in a quite narrow sense, is far more than language teaching." The thematic focus of educational linguistics is narrower than applied linguistics, yet it maintains the breadth of transdisciplinarity. In this sense, educational linguistics, Hult and Hornberger (2006, p. 77) point out, is a field with "a broad scope and a narrow focus" (see also Hornberger 2001, p. 17). It is narrow in its focus on language (in) education, and broad in encouraging open-mindedness and creativity by allowing for the possibility of investigating the core theme in a wide range of potential contexts, using theories and methods that are most appropriate to research questions that arise in relation to those contexts. For example, while much educational linguistic research has taken place in schools (Halliday 2007, p. 356), attention is also paid to a wider range of (informal) educational settings (Hornberger 2001, pp. 13–18; Leap and Mesthrie 2000, p. 354; Sykes, Reinhardt and Thorne this volume; Warriner this volume).

The binary nature of the core theme for educational linguistics, reflection and action around the intersection of 'how people mean' and 'how people learn' as posited by Halliday (2007), brings to light what it really means to say that the starting point for educational linguistics is educational practice. We all seek to conduct research that addresses some issue or question on a topic that falls within the scope of the two poles identified above, whether it be more reflective or interventionist. We identify a 'problem' within this scope and then begin to address it. Some topics may focus more on one dimension while others may relate to the dynamic relationship between them (Halliday 2007, p. 362). In any case, the ultimate goal will be to understand the complexities of language in and around teaching and learning and/or to identify and evaluate best practices for language (use) in and around teaching and learning. Research along these lines, moreover, is ideally mutually informative such that reflection informs action and action serves as a guide for reflection. In this way, educational linguistics "combines the brazenness of claiming breadth and depth of influence with the humility of realizing the complexity of finding useful implications for knowledge" (Spolsky 1999, p. 1).

Myriad content areas fall within the breadth of the thematic orientation of educational linguistics. Nested within each content area, in turn, is an array of more specific topics that reflect the depth of the field. Many of these content areas and topics may also inter-relate. A review of the full constellation of content areas and related topics is beyond the scope of this chapter. It is useful, though, to pause and point out some major areas by way of illustration. Table 2.1 represents a synthesis of major content areas and topics, drawn from two recent summary works (Hornberger 2008; Spolsky and Hult 2008) and informed by Halliday's (2007) notion of the reflection ↔ action continuum.

Table 2.1 suggests the broad scope of content areas and topics from global to interpersonal scales of social organization as well as connections among them, both across

Table 2.1 Selected content areas and topics for educational linguistics

Reflection ←----------→Action	
Language ecology and education	
What are the languages and varieties of languages that co-exist in a particular social environment?	How can education influence relationships among languages and varieties of languages in a particular social environment?
Which languages or varieties of languages are needed to gain access to which domains?	What needs to be done in (language) education to facilitate a student's development of communicative competence in a broad linguistic repertoire?
What economic, political, and psychological factors contribute to threatening or marginalizing some languages and not others?	What educational practices should be put in place to support sustainable multilingualism?
Language education policy and management	
Do policies tend towards assimilation or pluralism, monolingualism or multilingualism?	What political actions are needed to create equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of linguistic background?
What 'implementational spaces' exist in policies for fostering sustainable multilingualism?	What curricular developments can be implemented to provide multilingual education within the constraints of existing policies?
How is current knowledge about second language acquisition reflected in policies about language learning?	What changes need to be made to existing policies to align them with best practices based on current research about language learning?
Linguistically and culturally responsive education	
How are individuals socialized in practices for meaning-making in their homes and communities?	How can students' practices for meaning-making be used as resources for learning in schools and classrooms?
What kinds of access to education do majority and minority students have? What social, economic, cultural, and political factors serve as barriers to educational access for linguistic minorities, in particular?	What needs to be done to facilitate equitable educational opportunities for both majority and minority students, in terms of both physical access and access to knowledge?
What beliefs do students and teachers have about different languages and varieties?	How can classrooms become spaces for encouraging positive views about linguistic diversity?
Literacy development	
What genres are used in what domains in a particular social environment?	How should teachers build bridges between community literacy practices and academic genres in ways that help students access a broad range of domains (and related social opportunities)?
What culturally and socially situated literacy practices do students engage with in their communities?	
What pedagogical practices facilitate the development of biliteracy?	How should a student's first language literacy skills be used as resources for developing literacy in additional languages?

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

Reflection ←----------→Action	
What values are placed on different literacies in specific communities and social settings?	How should educators help students engage with dimensions of power associated with different literacy practices, particularly with respect to gender, ethnicity, economic status, and race?
Second and foreign language learning	
What are the social and cognitive conditions for optimal language learning and teaching?	What best pedagogical practices need to be put into place to facilitate language development?
What goals do students have for additional language learning? What goals do teachers have for their students' additional language learning?	What can teachers do to enhance a student's motivation to learn (an) additional language(s)?
What relationships exist between language use and language learning?	What kinds of opportunities for social interaction in the target language should be provided during instruction to facilitate language development?
What do teachers need to know about language, communication, and pedagogy in order to provide effective language instruction?	How should language teacher training curricula be structured so that prospective teachers gain the practical and theoretical knowledge needed to deliver effective language instruction?
Language testing and assessment	
How do current assessment instruments match (a) the language skills taught and (b) expectations for language use in specific social contexts?	What instruments should be used to evaluate the full range of a student's communicative competence?
How are assessment instruments used as gatekeeping mechanisms that hinder or allow access to different domains (and related social opportunities)?	How should critical awareness of language assessment instruments as gatekeeping mechanisms be raised for students, teachers, parents, administrators, and policymakers?
What factors are relevant to constructing instruments that are valid, reliable, and socially responsible measures of communicative competence?	What accommodations can be made without sacrificing validity and reliability when implementing an assessment instrument with populations who have different linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds?

Synthesis of Spolsky and Hult (2008) and Hornberger (2009); informed by Halliday (2007, pp. 354–356)

scales and across the continuum from reflection to action. This list is, of course, not exhaustive. Each of the topics listed here is easily broken down into even more specific nested topics. The common thread across all of them is that they center on the core theme of language (in) education. Educational linguistic research, as this table indicates, relates to both the 'front end' and the 'back end' of pedagogical practice.

Spolsky, for example, suggests that a central aim of the field of educational linguistics should be to inform educational policy (Spolsky 1974, p. 554). The

policy/practice connection is twofold: (1) conduct research about best practices that will inform sound (language) education policy; and (2) conduct research that will inform the implementation of effective (language) education as set forth in policy (Hult 2008, pp. 20–21). While not every educational linguist may share a focus on policy, this kind of attention to the evaluation and practice of language (in) education is central to the work of educational linguistics as a whole. It from this research–practice synergy that the core knowledge of the field emerges (e.g., Hornberger 2008; Spolsky and Hult 2008). Engaging with this thematic body of knowledge is a way for teachers, administrators, researchers, and policymakers to work together in order to find potential solutions to issues they face in classrooms and schools (Brumfit 1997; Hornberger 2009).

2.4 Doing Thematic Research in Educational Linguistics

Once one sees the theme as the core of the field, it is easy to understand why the focus of inquiry must transcend disciplines. The full investigation of the kinds of topics noted in Table 2.1 is likely not entirely possible from the vantage point of one discipline alone. Thematic inquiry goes hand in hand with a problem-oriented approach. To be truly problem-oriented one must place the problem, rather than disciplines, at the center of inquiry. Accordingly, the questions educational linguists attempt to examine are not anthropological, linguistic, psychological, or sociological—they are thematic questions related to language (in) education. This makes educational linguistic research somewhat different from what is done in traditional disciplines. There are unique benefits and challenges to working in this way.

2.4.1 The Practice of Transdisciplinary Research

The nature of disciplinary inquiry is to ask questions based on the epistemological foundations of a discipline. For example, psychologists ask certain fundamental questions about the human mind and cultural anthropologists ask certain fundamental questions about human society. A researcher operating in this manner is, in effect, conceptually blind to questions that fall outside of the given discipline.

Transdisciplinary inquiry, on the other hand, does not begin with a specific disciplinary foundation, but with a practical problem or issue related to its core theme (Hornberger and Hult 2006, p. 78). Transdisciplinary research, in this way, is also different from interdisciplinary research. Interdisciplinary approaches to inquiry, as Halliday suggests, retain the disciplines as the 'locus of inquiry' by focusing on potential research questions within a domain where there is overlap between two or more disciplines: for example, interdisciplinary work that integrates psychology and anthropology (Halliday 2001, p. 176; see Sapir 1993 for a well known example).

I am not suggesting that there is anything inherently wrong with an interdisciplinary orientation; however, it is not a truly problem-centered approach because

the very problem itself is identified from the perspective of disciplines. The transdisciplinary researcher begins with the problem and works outwards to identify the palette of theories and methods that are best suited to investigating it whereas disciplinary and interdisciplinary researchers build upon specific disciplinary foundations to identify questions for research and ways of investigating them (Hornberger and Hult 2006, p. 78; cf. Greene 2007).

Transdisciplinarity is certainly not without critics. Some suggest that it is simply not possible to view an issue from more than one vantage point; others argue that the result is a pale shadow of disciplinary work; and others still suggest that it may be epistemologically naïve (Benson 1982; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2003; Widdowson 2005; cf. Pavlenko 2008, pp. 169–171). Drawing together multiple methods and theories, however, is not *carte blanche* to operate without systematicity (Greene 2007). It might be better described as an eclectic yet principled approach (Blommaert 2005, p. 16). One must remain grounded in the problem to strike a balance between the two.

With a problem-oriented approach, the selection of methods is based, first and foremost, on what needs to be done in order to most usefully investigate the topic or problem rather than on disciplinary preconceptions about research. This is in contrast to disciplinary-based research, where there tends to be a limited range of methods that prescribe specific vantage points for inquiry (Greene 2007, pp. 20–30). Freeing methods from disciplines facilitates intellectual creativity and dialogue among different vantage points that might otherwise be stifled by disciplinary traditions about what can and cannot be done (Halliday 2007, p. 358).

Working in this way allows one to be guided by what Hornberger terms 'methodological rich points'. These are "points of research experience that make salient the differences between the researcher's perspective and mode of research and the world the researcher sets out to describe" (Hornberger 2006, p. 222). Deciding on the best method or combination of methods for examining a particular topic becomes a process of negotiation and reflection about what a researcher needs to see or understand and the limits and possibilities of different methods to facilitate that vision. The purpose of such negotiation is to craft a multi-faceted lens with which to view a topic rather than to build bridges across disciplines. In other words, it is a thematic rather than an interdisciplinary process (Halliday 2007, pp. 358–359; Hornberger 2006, pp. 229–232).

The notion of methodological rich points, moreover, highlights the critical thinking dimension of transdisciplinary inquiry. The process of on-going negotiation and reflection in which researchers engage may pinpoint ways in which "the conceptual tools they have for doing research are inadequate to understand the worlds they are researching. When we pay attention to those points and adjust our research accordingly, they become key opportunities to advance our research and our understandings" (Hornberger 2006, p. 222). By keeping one's gaze fixed on the problem, one becomes keenly aware when it begins to fall out of focus, and the methodological lens can be retooled accordingly. The transdisciplinary researcher, then, constantly (re-)evaluates the efficacy of the methods being used and their suitability for the problem at hand.

2.4.2 *Transdisciplinary Challenges*

Conducting transdisciplinary educational research in educational linguistics is easier said than done. The greatest strengths of the field also give rise to its major challenges—scope and focus. The scope of theories and methods that might be applicable to educational linguistics is unquestionably broad (Brumfit 1996, p. 12). Even its 'narrow focus' on language (in) education is deceptively vast (Hornberger and Hult 2006, p. 77). Educational linguistics is an open system (cf. van Lier 2004, pp. 193–219). As a whole, the body of educational linguistic knowledge is pluricentric, and, as individuals, educational linguists are nexus points for multiple methodologies (Hornberger and Hult 2006, p. 77; Hult 2008, p. 17; Spolsky 2003, p. 503). As such, the field is difficult to characterize. The fundamental challenge both for educational linguistics as a field and for individual researchers, then, centers on articulating an academic identity amidst fluid disciplinary borders, creative combinations of theories and methods, and transdisciplinary training.

2.4.2.1 Fluid Disciplinary Borders

With transdisciplinarity comes open borders, which may be both a curse and a blessing. It has certainly contributed to an identity crisis for educational linguistics, which we share with applied linguistics more broadly (Hult 2008, p. 11). For example, are we linguists or not? Is educational linguistics a field unto itself? Is it a sub-field? If so, is it a sub-field of linguistics proper or of the transdiscipline of *applied* linguistics? These issues have long been a point of debate and concern in both applied and educational linguistics (Hult 2008; van Lier 1994; Spolsky 2003; Hornberger 2001).

On the one hand, the nomenclature might not be as important as *what* we do thematically. On the other hand, the seemingly amorphous nature of educational linguistics raises questions about what educational linguistics is. Within the community of applied linguistics, for example, skepticism over the need to delineate educational linguistics remains (e.g., Davies 2005; Kaplan 2009; Markee 1990). In addition, as an open system, how do we conceptualize the relationship between educational linguistics and other disciplines? Educational linguists do not 'police the borders' of the field. Rather we draw freely from other disciplines and contribute knowledge in return (Shuy 1981, pp. 457–458; see also Leung, this volume).

This freedom may be beneficial for creativity and innovation since it provides a 'poetic license' to use theories and methods in the grey areas between disciplines and therefore with less baggage; however, it becomes potentially problematic when attempting to articulate academic legitimacy as a field. With no clear borders, how do we know where educational linguistics ends and anthropology, cognitive science, linguistics, psychology, sociology, *et cetera* begin? Are we borrowing our research tools from these disciplines or are we redeveloping them for our own purposes?

2.4.2.2 Theoretical and Methodological Creativity

With its open borders, educational linguistics does not claim ownership of any particular theory or method. Although there may be tendencies among educational linguists to use certain approaches for particular types of problems (e.g., Norris and Ortega 2003; Benson et al. 2009; Kasper and Dahl 1991; Richards 2009), there are no prescribed ways of doing research. Each educational linguist or research team is free to draw upon the constellation of approaches that best fits the problem being investigated, as noted earlier. While this does present freedom and the possibility for creativity, a potential pitfall is that researchers may be tempted to employ methods with which they are only superficially familiar.

In practice, then, a fundamental challenge with a problem-oriented approach is that the choice of possible theories and methods that can be integrated in the investigation of a problem will be limited to the scope of an individual researcher's training. Part of the negotiation of methodological rich points must be to strike a balance between the approaches in which one is trained and what is needed to holistically understand a problem. A potential risk to bear in mind is that the inquiry may become a process of convenience rather than truly problem-oriented or that the identification of the very problem itself may come to be determined by the limits of the researcher's current knowledge rather than by educational practice.

The negotiation of methodological rich points can serve as a safeguard by allowing the researcher to identify gaps between her/his current training and the needs presented by the problem to be investigated. With an understanding of this gap, the research plan may be adjusted by seeking additional training. Negotiating methodological rich points around complex problems, or topics with multiple related problems, may even bring to light the need for a team of scholars with complementary training (see Creese this volume for an example).

2.4.2.3 Transdisciplinary Training

Transdisciplinary inquiry involves a great deal of responsibility on the part of individual researchers to make decisions about the process of inquiry, both in terms of identifying problems and determining the specific combination of approaches to investigating them. Accordingly, one's training becomes especially important. Here, too, there are potential challenges, especially for novice scholars.

Without strong disciplinary traditions to fall back upon, such as one might find in linguistics proper or anthropology for instance, new researchers, especially doctoral students, are often faced with the double-edged sword of an open field of research possibilities and a dizzying array of options. A central challenge for the field of educational linguistics is to train new researchers in the art of critical thinking that will allow them to identify practical problems related to language (in) education, to put together the combination of theoretical and methodological approaches that are most useful for investigating them, and then to use those approaches in actual inquiry (see Hornberger 2001, 2004 for examples).

Developing such critical thinking skills calls for training in *transdisciplinary* research design. As a starting point, it would be useful to recognize that novice scholars, who may have prior undergraduate or graduate training in a specific discipline, may have difficulty with the manner of identifying a problem-oriented research topic. As such, a key component of learning transdisciplinary research design must involve developing an understanding of the dialectic process of identifying a problem that emerges jointly from what is meaningful for the researcher as well as from what emerges as salient in educational practice (Li Wei 2007; Halliday 2007, pp. 361–362; Hornberger 2001, p. 19).

Special attention to learning to negotiate methodological rich points, in turn, is needed to help the novice researcher learn to figure out what combination of theories and methods is most useful for investigating a problem. Without specific training in this kind of negotiation, it is easy to fall into the trap, noted above, where one's work becomes a study of convenience based on the approaches in which one happens to have received training. Ideally, a budding educational linguist should use their problem-oriented research topic as a starting point for seeking out advanced training in the theories and methods that are needed to investigate it.

Learning to use theories and methods in ways that transcend disciplines also requires special training. As Pavlenko (2008, pp. 170–171) has noted in her discussion of language and gender research, there is often a tendency to focus heavily on the nuts and bolts of data gathering without strong attention to theoretical underpinnings and techniques for analysis. Just as skillful code-switching requires command of both languages so, too, does synthesizing different theories and methods require thorough knowledge of their epistemological foundations. Such a foundation must be provided as part of research training alongside the aforementioned critical thinking skills needed to bring together different approaches. Transdisciplinary work is not a license to proceed in ignorance. In the absence of foundational knowledge about the tools we need to use, we run the risk of being (perceived as) second-rate linguists, anthropologists, or sociologists instead of first-rate educational linguists.

2.5 Conclusion

Despite the potential challenges and pitfalls discussed here, the transdisciplinary nature of inquiry inherent in educational linguistics since its inception has provided a strong legacy on which to build. The problem-oriented, theme-based approach is particularly well suited to the kinds of practical research problems that emerge in a multilingual and transnational world (Hornberger and Hult 2006, pp. 79–80). The issues we face in and around the practice of (language) education do not always fit neatly into disciplinary boxes.

Writing about language policy, Phillipson (2003, p. 17) points out that social science is "messy in the sense that it is difficult to do justice to the complexity of an on-going, dynamic scene and to identify a multi-faceted, shifting object unambiguously." Nearly 20 years ago, Halliday (2007 [1990], p. 362) predicted

that one of the major challenges we would face in educational linguistics for the twenty-first century is balancing "synoptic and dynamic perspectives." It is useful, he suggests, both to capture a phenomenon *qua* object at a particular moment in time (synoptic) as well as to tease out the processes through which a phenomenon unfolds (dynamic).

There is certainly a growing interest among educational linguists in capturing the dynamism that is taking place in educational settings today, particularly through processes of globalization but also in other ways (e.g., Block and Cameron 2002; García et al. 2006; Kumaravadivelu 2008; Leather and van Dam 2003; van Lier 2004). This interest follows the long tradition among language researchers of seeking to describe relationships along the continuum of macro-micro scales of social organization (e.g., Blommaert 2007; Fishman 1972; Hult 2010; Ricento 2000). Juggling this dual focus, close analysis of specific details and characteristics while also attending to contextualization in and impact on a larger social system, requires creativity in one's use of methods for data collection and analysis that may appear rather messy at first blush. Such creativity, though, must be tempered with rigor. For transdisciplinary areas of inquiry like educational linguistics, rigor may not manifest itself through dogmatic adherence to rigid disciplinary practices but through the disciplined critical thinking called for by thematic, problem-oriented research.

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