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Before the Methods Section: Researcher Positionality, Researchability, and Resource-Mediated Research Decision-Making in Gulf Higher Education Applied Linguistics

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Abstract

Researcher positionality in applied linguistics is commonly considered in relation to participants, interpretation, representation, and knowledge production, but less attention has been given to how positionality may shape research agenda formation before formal data collection begins. This study examines that earlier methodological space through a collaborative reflexive inquiry involving four non-citizen applied linguistics/education researchers with substantial professional experience in Gulf higher education, particularly in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. Through structured reflexive accounts, collaborative dialogue, cross-case comparison, and individual positionality mapping, we examined how professional biography, institutional and employment location, work-visa arrangements, resources, language, and anticipated ethical and professional consequences entered research

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decision-making. The analysis suggests that positionality shaped not only how research could be conducted but also what appeared realistically and responsibly pursuable in the first place. We develop this argument through three working concepts: researchability, positional risk, and resource-mediated researchability. Across the four accounts, anticipated professional consequences, unequal resources, ethical concerns, and linguistic positioning shaped whether inquiries were pursued, modified, postponed, or set aside. We argue that positionality should therefore be examined not only as a reflexive account of who the researcher is but also as a situated force participating in the construction of what can become research.

Keywords: collaborative reflexive inquiry; Gulf higher education; researchability; researcher positionality; resource-mediated researchability

Introduction

Applied linguistics researchers are increasingly expected to account for positionality in relation to participants, interpretation, representation, and knowledge production, yet positionality is often made visible only after a research problem has already been constituted. Recent discussions have questioned the value of positionality statements that disclose identity categories without examining what those positions do within research practice (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023; King, 2024). Less visible is an earlier methodological question: how does where a researcher stands shape what becomes available, or appears feasible, responsible, or worth pursuing, as a research problem in the first place?

This question has a distinct relevance for mobile academic labor in Gulf higher education. Here, *Gulf higher education* refers specifically to the applied linguistics research contexts encountered by the four researchers across Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. These contexts bring into relation internationalization, multilingual academic work, institutional expectations for research production, substantial non-citizen academic workforces, and differently configured research infrastructures. We do not treat these national or institutional contexts as constituting a homogeneous "Gulf" research environment. Rather, our interest lies in how four non-citizen academics employed through work-visa arrangements encounter differently configured conditions from their respective institutional and professional positions.

We approach positionality, therefore, as a situated force in research agenda formation, using three working concepts. We use *researchability* to describe the situated judgment of what appears realistically and responsibly pursuable;

positional risk to describe anticipated consequences arising from a researcher's particular relationship to a topic and setting; and *resource-mediated researchability* to describe how differential access to material and institutional resources expands or contracts those possibilities. We examine how they enter decisions to choose, avoid, soften, delay, or reframe research before formal data collection begins.

Conceptual Grounding

The inquiry draws on collaborative inquiry as a cyclical and relational mode of knowledge generation (Mealman & Lawrence, 2002), alongside scholarship challenging fixed insider/outsider binaries (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013). This distinction matters because describing oneself as an expatriate, multilingual, female or male lecturer, or partial insider says comparatively little unless these positions are connected to their consequences for access, interpretation, risk, and research choice. King (2024) similarly cautions against positionality becoming disclosure without reflexive analysis, while Consoli and Ganassin (2023) locate reflexivity within the conditions through which applied linguistics knowledge is produced. Studies suggest that institutional positioning shapes expatriate academics' professional agency (Masri & Lu, 2026; Rajabieslami & Troudi, 2024), while publication resources shape scholarly opportunities (Smith et al., 2021). Consequently, the question informing our analysis comprises both who the researcher is and what becomes researchable from the position that the researcher occupies.

Methodology

This study used a staged collaborative reflexive inquiry involving four non-citizen researchers with substantial professional experience in Gulf higher education. Researchers are identified throughout as R1–R4, with these identifiers not corresponding to the order of authorship, and since the researchers are also the authors of the inquiry, these identifiers provide pseudonymization rather than absolute anonymity. Institutional names and combinations of biographical or professional details that were not analytically necessary were therefore withheld or generalized to reduce deductive identification.

As summarized in Figure 1, the inquiry moved from collaborative brainstorming and development of structured reflexive prompts to individual reflexive accounts, collaborative dialogue, cross-case comparison, positionality mapping, and conceptual synthesis. The prompts provided a common framework for generating individual reflexive accounts. Each researcher revisited experiences related to teaching, leadership, research and publication,

resources, employment and residency, language, ethics, professional priorities, successes, setbacks, and moments of hesitation. The framework allowed researchers to leave questions unanswered and to pursue experiences that had not been anticipated. The individual accounts were subsequently read across and discussed collaboratively to question interpretations, clarify experiences, and identify points of convergence, divergence, and tension.

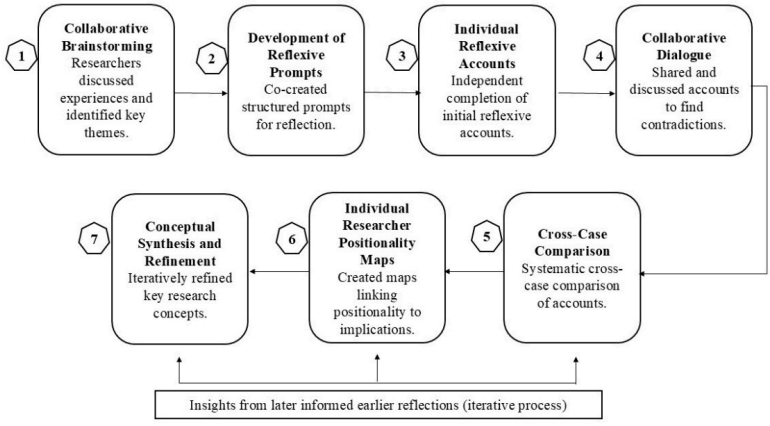

Figure 1. Staged Collaborative Reflexive Inquiry

Reading across the four maps and reflexive accounts informed the cross-case conceptual synthesis in which the three working concepts were examined and refined. The maps linked positional dimensions, including non-citizen status, employment, gender, language, mobility, family, and resources, to consequences for access, power, ethics, risk, and research choice. The mapping process thus moved analytically from position to consequence and then to research implication. The four maps were subsequently read alongside the reflexive accounts to examine how differently situated configurations shaped research agenda decisions.

Convergences, differences, and contradictions across stages were retained as analytically meaningful rather than automatically reconciled. This stage was particularly important where researchers' initial perceptions of autonomy did not fully correspond with conditions that became visible through subsequent reflection and mapping. R3, for example, initially described time and funding as relatively unimportant to researchability, while elsewhere recounting workload, deadlines, article processing charge (APC)-dependent publica-

tion decisions, and annual output expectations. Rather than treating this discrepancy as an inconsistency requiring correction, the staged inquiry allowed it to remain analytically productive. It suggested that some material and institutional conditions become normalized and hence are no longer recognized as constraints.

Findings and Discussion: How Positionality Shaped Researchability

Positional Risk and Anticipatory Calibration

Across the four accounts, professional embeddedness coexisted with structural non-citizenship. Researchers possessed substantial pedagogical, disciplinary, linguistic, and institutional knowledge while remaining differently dependent on employment-linked residency and institutional continuity. We provisionally describe this configuration as conditional insiderhood. We use the term as an empirical description of belonging that is professionally substantive while remaining structurally conditional, rather than as a replacement for established insider/outsider debates.

Researchers described how topics involving institutional governance, labor conditions, nationality differences, sponsorship, leadership, workload, or identifiable institutional practices required greater caution and sometimes indirect framing, postponement, or avoidance. The mechanism was not necessarily prohibition. R4's account illustrates how employer-linked status can make professional and personal continuity interdependent, while family residence, healthcare, schooling, and future mobility extend the possible cost of professional conflict beyond the researcher. Positional risk therefore operated anticipatorily, in that some questions were calibrated before they became proposals.

Resource-Mediated Researchability and Feasible Possibility

Resources did more than facilitate already-chosen projects. Across R1 to R4, access to institutional research funding, APC support, conference participation, time, and publication infrastructure varied substantially. R1, for example, reported explicit encouragement towards Scopus, Web of Science, and Q1 and Q2 publications alongside limited research support for expatriate faculty.

The consequences were methodological as well as financial. Projects requiring travel, extended access negotiation, transcription, or incentives could become less researchable than bounded studies that draw on accessible

populations, existing expertise, documents, or supported collaborations. R3's movement between institutional settings makes this relationship unusually visible. Greater access to research and open-access infrastructure expanded the range of projects that appeared possible, leading to the retrospective observation that "my range of researchability expanded because my resources did." On this account, resource allocation has epistemic effects because it influences not only how research is conducted but also which questions survive long enough to be conducted.

Ethical and Linguistic Anticipation

Ethical reasoning also appeared before formal ethics procedures. Researchers anticipated deductive disclosure within small professional networks, institutional relationships, participant vulnerability, employment consequences, and the distinction between formal permission and participants' felt ability to decline. Formal ethics forms may record consent, confidentiality, and data protection while leaving employment-linked residency, hierarchical consent, reputational circulation, and researcher vulnerability comparatively invisible. What reaches formal review may therefore already be the project that survived an earlier, largely undocumented ethical filtering process.

Linguistic reflexivity added another dimension to this filtering. R3 reflected that although multilingual in English, Urdu, and Punjabi, their research had overwhelmingly operated through English, leaving not only linguistic resources unused but also potential participants outside the imagined field of inquiry. Language choice in this sense concerns more than translation after recruitment; it can help determine who becomes reachable, whose knowledge enters the study, and therefore what becomes researchable (Hamid & Oyinloye, 2025).

Figure 2 presents a cross-case conceptual synthesis developed through reading the four researcher-generated positionality maps alongside the reflexive accounts and collaborative analysis. Positionality is conceptualized as a situated configuration whose professional, institutional, employment, linguistic, relational, and material dimensions shape researchability. Positional risk and resource-mediated researchability help explain how inquiries are pursued, modified, postponed, or abandoned before formal data collection. The figure represents relationships that became visible across the inquiry rather than an individual positionality map or a deterministic model. The same positional condition did not produce identical decisions across R1 to R4, nor was researchability fixed over time. Its boundaries shifted with institutional location, resources, professional roles, linguistic possibilities, and anticipated consequences.

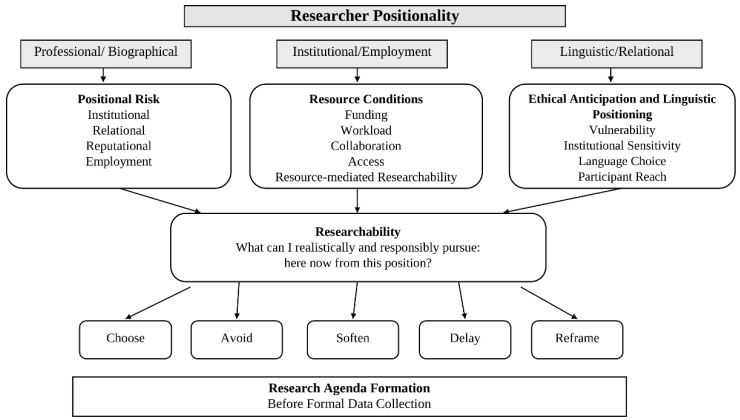

Figure 2. Positionality as a Situated Force in Research Agenda Formation

Conclusion

Across the four accounts, positionality became consequential before formal data collection began. Researchers' professional, institutional, and personal circumstances shaped judgments about which questions were feasible and worth pursuing. Reading these experiences shifted reflexivity from the declaration of identity towards an examination of consequence, making visible how the boundaries of researchability were constructed differently across researchers and could change across institutional and professional contexts.

The process revealed that some constraints had become normalized. Conditions repeatedly negotiated across academic life could become sufficiently ordinary that caution, delay, or methodological adjustment appeared as a professional preference rather than as a response to material or positional circumstances. Positionality, therefore, shapes both how researchers interpret the world and which questions appear available for investigation.

For applied linguistics, teacher education, and related higher-education research, this study suggests caution in reading an absence of scholarship simply as an absence of scholarly interest. What eventually enters literature is the research that has survived conditions of access, risk, resources, language, ethics, and institutional possibility. Researchability, therefore, is not an inherent property of a research question; it is situated, relational, ethically negotiated, and materially mediated. Positionality does not merely accompany research. It participates in producing the boundaries of what can become research.

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