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Retrospective

Reflexive insights from applied linguistics

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Retrospective: Reflexive insights from applied linguistics

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The articles in this Special Issue exemplify different forms of reflexive practice in applied linguistics PhD projects. In bringing these threads together, it is imperative to consider the dimensions and transformative potential of reflexive practices in applied linguistics. Reflexivity involves critically examining one's own perceptions, biases, assumptions, and preconceptions, and it thereby fosters awareness of one's positionality and its influence on the research process. This self-aware approach adds to the validity and reliability of academic work by promoting transparency (May & Perry 2017).

In contrast to a historical emphasis on objectivity, reflexivity acknowledges the subjectivity of scholars, particularly within fields employing qualitative methods. It promotes active recognition and examination of sociohistorical contexts, thereby challenging traditional notions of objectivity and positioning investigators as active participants in shaping the outcomes of their studies (Starfield 2012).

Despite a reflexive imperative in various social sciences, applied linguistics has been relatively slow in recognizing and incorporating

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this dimension into practice (Consoli & Ganassin 2022; May & Perry 2017). However, the significance of this concept in the field is becoming more apparent, as numerous studies show (e.g., Copland & Creese 2015; Giampapa & Lamoureux 2011; Pérez-Milans 2013; Sharma 2021). The conceptualization of reflexivity in applied linguistics draws on the broader “reflexive turn,” a change in perspective during the 1980s in many of the social sciences (Archer 2010; Bachmann-Medick 2016; Foley 2002). It involves an ongoing, multifaceted, and dialogical process where scholars critically reflect on their own origins, biography, locality, and intellectual bias. Therefore, reflexivity transcends mere self-observation in the field; it encompasses discourses or representations that involve acknowledging and embracing the complexity and messiness inherent in the process of conducting a study (Byrd Clark & Dervin 2014: 25).

Particularly for junior scholars, there is a tendency to view successful research as a linear and seamlessly transitioning process without obstacles between the initial conception of an idea and the eventual publication (Copland & Creese 2015). However, the reality is far more nuanced, involving a continual oscillation and reassessment of various elements, including oneself, methods, data, and results. These processes often unfold unconsciously, becoming apparent and rationalized in hindsight during a retrospective examination of events (Fleck 2019). Embracing reflexive practices allows academics, especially those early in their careers, to confront the complexities of their work in order to get a better understanding of the iterative nature of the research process.

Yet, the view of an idealized research practice extends beyond early-career academics. No matter their career stage, scholars always risk becoming seduced by the idea that adhering to “correct” methodologies, or “eating your methodological greens” as described by Najjar (2014: 196), guarantees high-quality outcomes. Subscribing to this mindset can cultivate feelings of self-moralization and self-doubt when real-world outcomes differ from the anticipated results of meticulously followed methods. In such situations, there is a temptation to politely ask reality to align with our prescribed methodologies, rather than

engaging in adaptive approaches that address the complexities inherent in empirical work (Law 2007).

Reflexivity holds transformative potential as well. Its significance becomes apparent when we try to transition from established paradigms to alternative theoretical traditions. Letting go of seemingly set-in-stone procedures while acknowledging the advantages of exploring alternative approaches contributes to both personal projects and broader academic contexts (Tsang 2022).

Roshanak Nouralian's paper portrays the pursuit of new theories in the field, often requiring a complete reorientation to understand them. Through her work, she emphasizes the vital role of openness and curiosity in advancing PhD studies and academia as a whole. Roshanak's contribution can serve as an inspiration for young scholars, encouraging them to question established methodological norms. Further, she highlights that embracing the unfamiliar also fosters innovation and facilitates intellectual growth within the community.

In my own contribution, I (Carina Lozo) show how reflexivity can be used to assert a stance amidst conflicting perspectives. By providing a reflexive account, I offer insights into the complexities of my own liminality, thereby shedding light on the obstacles and tensions inherent in navigating multidisciplinary perspectives. Additionally, my contribution points to the importance of a supportive community, emphasizing that collaborative environments are essential for fostering individual growth, idea exchanges, and collective advancement in the respected field.

As PhD students often grapple with challenges diverging from the "expected" issues in the field, the exploration of uncharted and niche-like research gaps becomes a common experience. This unfamiliar terrain occasionally imposes a responsibility on junior scholars to address problems, the scope of which sometimes proves unpredictable. This aspect is vividly illustrated in Vinicio Ntouvlis's paper, which provides a thorough analysis of the methodological decisions required to establish contact with study participants in digital settings. Reflecting on his doctoral project, Vinicio emphasizes the importance of dynamic decision-making that considers the role of the researcher, the

researched, and the instruments (communication channels in this case) to overcome unexpected obstacles encountered along the way.

Jenia Yudytska's paper shows the dual significance of PhD research: Addressing emerging challenges during one's own project while also shaping the field's future trajectory. Her innovative privacy measures set a precedent for scholars facing similar conundrums. By navigating ethical complexities, Jenia demonstrates the importance of reflexive research approaches and how they contribute to advancing knowledge in the field with ethical integrity.

As positionality and disposition strongly influence their projects, it is also important for academics to turn their attention inward. By meticulously documenting and critically analyzing their experiences, academics can enhance the transparency of their methodologies and decision-making processes. This is exemplified by Florian Grosser's paper, which provides a reflective account of his fieldwork in Japan. Originally intended to investigate communicative competence, Florian's study evolved into an ethnographic exploration. He looks into the ways in which his presence in the field affected him personally, prioritizing this aspect over solely focusing on its effects on participants and the study's environment. The paper stresses the integration of personal experiences with academic rigor and highlights the importance of incorporating subjective perspectives into scholarly practices. Through reflection, Florian demonstrates how his presence in the field directly informed adjustments to his methods.

In the end, reflexive practices in PhD work serve as a tool for self-efficacy and enable early-career scholars to reflect not only on their challenges but on their achievements as well. Recognizing personal growth and accomplishments fosters a sense of resilience, a crucial element for those traversing the demanding terrain of doctoral studies (Tsang 2022).

This collection of papers shows how important it is for early-career academics to recognize their responsibility and agency in shaping the research process. The authors advocate for departing from traditional methodologies; they instead encourage the adoption of more flexible stances that are responsive to the dynamic nature of their projects'

contexts. The contributions highlight the value of embracing new trajectories, whether by exploring innovative tools, addressing emerging gaps, or challenging established paradigms.

In acknowledging that the role of emerging scholars significantly adds to and shapes new directions for the field of applied linguistics, this Special Issue has served as a dedicated platform for delving into methodological reflections, showcasing both achievements and challenges faced during doctoral studies.

As we look into the future, it becomes evident that reflexivity in applied linguistics offers a gateway to understanding the intricate pathways of academic work. By embracing a self-aware approach which considers the interplay between researchers and their contexts, we pave the way for more transparent and inclusive scholarly practices. This journey illuminates the complexities inherent in our studies and empowers us to embrace challenges with resilience and adaptability, ultimately shaping the trajectory of applied linguistics.

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