

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Reports from British Association for Applied Linguistics with Cambridge University Press seminars 2023

Developing Researcher Reflexivity for Applied Linguistics

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(Received 12 January 2024; accepted 21 January 2024)

1. Introduction

In May 2023, I had the privilege of hosting the BAAL-CUP seminar ‘Developing Researcher Reflexivity for Applied Linguistics’ at the Moray House School of Education and Sport – University of Edinburgh.

Broadly speaking, reflexivity refers to the sets of dispositions and activities by which researchers locate themselves within the research processes whilst also attending to how their presence, values, beliefs, knowledge, and personal and professional histories shape their research spaces, relationships, and outcomes. (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023, p. 1)

The practice of reflexivity has percolated the wider field of social sciences for quite some time, and this has been evidenced by the ‘reflexive turn’ – a turn that invokes a close examination of the researcher’s ‘origins, biography, locality and ‘intellectual bias’ (Blackman, 2007, p. 700) whilst recognising the ‘humanness’ embedded in the processes, phenomena, and findings of our research (Dean, 2017). Applied linguistics has been no exception (Mann, 2016), but what does it exactly mean to be a reflexive applied linguistics researcher? And how can reflexivity be practised throughout a research project? This research seminar addressed these questions to discuss what reflexivity looks like in concrete applied linguistics projects and what practices of reflexivity may be conducive to methodologically robust and epistemologically insightful research.

2. Applied linguistics and the social world

Given the involvement of applied linguistics with real world problems and phenomena, we have always been engaged in research with/on/about/for people irrespective of our onto-epistemological affiliations and methodological preferences. Significantly, numerous calls have urged a stronger focus on the ethical and social utility of research (e.g., Hua, 2020; Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020; Ortega, 2005; Rose, 2019; Ushioda, 2020), and these have contributed to the emergence of new currents within applied linguistics, resulting notably in the well-documented ‘social turn’, ‘critical turn’, and ‘multilingual turn’. With their close attention to the core individuals and communities of our societies, these research perspectives have reconfigured our research agendas and procedures with a view to placing the very human beings of our investigations at the centre of the academic enterprise. This has been evidenced by studies that have given even more prominent space to learners’ and teachers’ voices and stories through

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practitioner research (e.g., Consoli, 2022b; Rebolledo et al., 2016), alternative forms of research engagement that foreground the main actors of language education (e.g., Jackson, 2014). Similarly, the sub-fields of intercultural communication and multilingualism have also highlighted the transformational power of reflexivity in contexts of displacement (Georgiou, 2022), migration (Ganassin, 2020), and student mobility (Holmes, 2014). There is also an emerging line of inquiry in applied linguistics that examines religious groups through the reflexive positionality of ‘coreligionst-researchers’ (Bhatt, 2023, p. 15) –that is, researchers who draw on the same faith tradition as their participants, and ultimately arrive at rich understandings of the linguistic practices of religious heritage.

In other words, applied linguists are acutely aware that building trust and developing sound relationships with our participants are not just critical processes to access a given research setting and generate data, but these are also crucial means to enhance the methodological rigour and epistemic depth of their studies. Therefore, putting the spotlight on how we understand and interact with the ‘humanness’ embedded in our research may help us do greater justice to (re)presenting and disseminating the complexities that infuse our research journeys from start to finish. Nonetheless, to date, we know little about how researchers practise reflexivity at different junctures of the research process and how they deal with issues of identity, self-positioning, and relationship(s) to their data and participants (see Consoli & Ganassin, 2023 for a rich discussion of this).

This seminar proposed a perspective on reflexivity that values our multiple identities as researchers, teachers, intercultural experts, as well as other dimensions of our individual life capital (Consoli, 2022a). Crucially, these identities, personal histories, and idiosyncrasies are not to be seen as forms of ‘data contamination’ but enriching elements of our research. As such, the researcher is portrayed as a fundamental resource connected to the methods we adopt, the participants we envision and select, the data we co-create, and the modalities of findings (re)presentation. This social practice of researcher reflexivity thus invites us to embrace the human dimensions of all those involved in our studies, participants, and researcher(s) alike. As such, this seminar encouraged the attendees to see themselves both as knowledge-makers and the critical onto-epistemological life force of their research. Specifically, this seminar represented a safe space for participants to develop a reflexive approach for their own studies through case study and interactive reflective tasks.

3. Focus of the seminar

With an audience comprising 35 people including Ph.D. students and full faculty members from across the UK, the event achieved the following objectives:

- To promote the practice of researcher reflexivity by helping researchers understand the best practices to represent their own researcher identity as well as other aspects of their positionalities in relation to their own research.
- To bring together academics from different areas of applied linguistics (e.g., language education, health communication, sociolinguistics) to discuss the theoretical stances and methodological challenges of being reflexive researchers in a range of applied linguistics contexts.
- To create networking opportunities for early career researchers and doctoral candidates and help them forge future collaborations with more established members of the academic community.
- To disseminate recent empirical insights on the notion of reflexivity as a social practice in applied linguistics.
- To discuss how researchers in different areas of applied linguistics deal with questions of identity and positionalities in relation to their participants and co-researchers.
- To offer guidance on how to practise researcher reflexivity and gain in-depth understandings of the power dynamics underlying the relationships between researchers and the researched.
- To promote researcher reflexivity as a novel and essential hallmark of sound and quality research in applied linguistics.

We had the honour of being joined by two remarkable keynote speakers: Dr Sara Ganassin and Professor Steve Mann. They both have renowned expertise in methodological reflexivity in domains of language education, sociolinguistics, and intercultural communication. Their joint expertise and perspectives facilitated the discussion of critical issues and questions related to researcher reflexivity in a range of applied linguistics settings and through various methodologies.

Mann's talk, titled 'Reflexivity: Dialogic dimensions for individuals and teams', considered different dimensions of reflexivity, concentrating on dialogic processes in qualitative research and analysis. Drawing on the Routledge volume, *Reflexivity in applied linguistics* (Consoli and Ganassin, 2023), this talk clarified key distinctions and argued for a balanced approach to the reflexive enterprise. The talk included data from qualitative interviewing to explore how aspects of identity are negotiated and constructed in talk and how this can become an important dimension of reflexive inquiry. In particular, Mann highlighted how others' reflexivity can help you make sense of your own analytic and reflexive framework. This is one of the reasons why being transparent and being reflexive in your work helps other researchers with their projects. The talk also considered how reflexivity in research projects needs to consider 'team reflexivity' and move beyond the individual frame, especially in collaborative analytic processes. This may entail opening up both the discourses of reflexivity and its representation within research.

With her talk, 'Doing reflexivity when researching multilingually: A perspective on migrant communities', Ganassin proposed how a systematic and theorised reflexive approach in research with displaced multilingual groups can enhance rigour and trustworthiness. This is because being reflexive involves bringing to the fore the humanity and 'life capital' (Consoli, 2022a) of both researchers and participants. Ganassin drew examples from a number of research projects with migrant and displaced groups, including highly-skilled refugee women, to illustrate how her own positioning and identity have shaped research spaces and relationships. The role of languages in the research process was explored through the lens of the RESEARCHING MULTILINGUALLY FRAMEWORK proposed by Holmes et al. (2013, 2016) and on its development (Ganassin & Holmes, 2020). The adoption of a 'researching multilingually' approach allows us to reflect on how, as researchers, we can draw on our resources in the linguistic spaces of the research context and in the relational and reflexive aspects of our positionality, power relations, and ethical choices. Overall, the talk encouraged researchers to be transparent about and be accountable for the reflexive, linguistic and ethical complexities of their work.

4. Conclusion

This seminar promoted a departure from discourses that construe the researcher as a source of methodological limitations or contamination. Rather, researchers are encouraged to become (self)aware and develop a disposition to identify, understand, capitalise on, and celebrate the impact they may have on their project planning, participants, data collection, analysis-(co)-construction, (re)presentation, and dissemination. Specifically, embracing researcher reflexivity means becoming not only honest and transparent about one's research(er) journey but also making oneself vulnerable whilst unravelling and documenting the various challenges and opportunities encountered throughout a study. I would like to emphasise that this sense of vulnerability is to be accompanied by a constant attention and care for both the researcher's and participants' wellbeing. It is only by creating a safe space to unearth relevant aspects of researchers' and participants' humanities, including inter alia our mistakes, trials, successes, and histories, that we develop new levels of epistemic depth and respect for the human phenomena we research.

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