Discussion Note

It's not messy but it's not clean either: Reviewing and discussing an Applied Linguistics textbook through a research ethics lens

Johanna Ennser-Kananen, University of Jyväskylä
Taina Saarinen, University of Jyväskylä
Nina Sivunen, University of Jyväskylä

Reading with relief

One cold winter afternoon, we, three Finland-based researchers in Applied Language Studies, decided to share a reading experience. What started out as a book review exercise turned into a reading circle that critically explored ideas at the intersection of ethics, methodologies, and researcher identities in our field. In the introductory chapter to their edited volume, Heath Rose and Jim McKinley (2017) define the pedagogical and academic space in which they situate their book. *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics*: *Realities, dilemmas and solutions* promises the reader guidance and insights into how to deal with challenges arising in research conducted with, by and on "real people in real settings"; in other words, the authors present advice and reassurance for situations where things don't go as planned in research. Setting their work apart from existing textbooks in Applied Linguistics (e.g., Dörnyei, 2007; Mackey & Gass, 2005), Rose and McKinley promise to offer not merely "preventative" but also "curative advice" on issues that "arise and must be dealt with during the research process" (2017, p. 4).

As researchers at different stages of our careers (doctoral, postdoctoral, and senior), we were intrigued by this book because it dealt with questions we all were familiar with. We were excited to see a publication that discussed research so authentically and did not try to depict the process as (having to be) clean, smooth and polished. For instance, all of us, particularly in the early years of our academic trajectories, had felt pressure to create something completely new or discover uncharted theoretical territories and ended up getting caught in "academic crossfire" (Rose, 2017, p. 27) between conflicting theories or paradigms. This volume provides relief and support for all researchers, especially those who feel such or similar pressures, by uncovering the kind of tacit academic knowledge that is not always openly available but that we all need in order to cope with unexpected theoretical, methodological or processual shifts and challenges. Through conversations around such knowledge of coping, which had previously rarely been made explicit to us, we kept coming back to the authors' notion of "cure". Its implication that something in a research process is at fault or at risk, is, as the editors and authors go on to explain, due to the unpredictable and complex nature of human-subject and

particularly Applied Linguistics and educational research. As researchers, we felt a sense of relief when the cleanliness of research processes was called into question. Even more so, what really resonated with us was the editors' argument that idealistic representations of "clean" and "polished" research processes are, in fact, ideological in nature (Rose & McKinley, 2017, p. 3), and as such part of a hidden curriculum of academic gatekeeping: "You need to master this in order to be able to call your research academic." An approach that presents "polished" and "flawless" research may, in fact, discourage researchers at every career stage. In addition, such an approach has very limited opportunities for recognizing and addressing methodological issues within a research process and therefore cannot take full advantage of what a discussion and reflection on such issues could contribute to the field of Applied Linguistics. As the editors stress, we really need to embrace the messiness as "building blocks rather than stumbling blocks" (Rose & McKinley, 2017, p. 14). Our relief and agreement sparked new questions: What, if not flawless research, was the goal of our work? And how should we talk about unexpected challenges? Could the things that some authors seem to view as "missteps", "messiness", "sidetracks", or something else in need of "cure", instead be seen as integral parts of the actual real-life research process? Ultimately, this book could then be understood as a discussion of learning and knowledge construction rather than merely instructions for opening the methodological blackbox of research dilemmas. We elaborate on these ideas in the following sections.

Collecting some concerns

While our appreciation for this volume remains valid, we offer some points for consideration to its writers and users. First, despite initially agreeing with the general critique of idealistic representations of research processes, we find the discourses of "messiness" in this book (Bommarito, Matsuda, Liu, Racelis, Wu, Xia & Yanget, 2017; Gao, 2017; Rose & McKinley, 2017) rather problematic. The metaphor reinforces the idea of research as something that needs to be cleaned, thus undermining the book's original argument. We are left to wonder about the ideological origins of this metaphor beyond this book and wonder, whether it might be associated with a positivistic research paradigm. As mentioned above, we are simultaneously intrigued by and worried about the proclaimed shift from preventative to curative advice (Rose & McKinley, 2017, p. 4). Specifically, we wonder if this shift would mark unexpected challenges as something that needs to be fixed or cured rather than as a legitimate part of the research process. This, in turn, would leave researchers with a rather limited view on the research process and prevent us from acknowledging, and thus from working to develop it, in its entirety. We wonder if a broader, more inclusive conceptualization of research processes would help us conduct and report on our work in more authentic and thoughtful ways.

The book conveys the message that problems and dilemmas can occur at every stage of the research process, which is reflected in the structure of the book. As much as we appreciate this message, we believe it also reinforces a linear understanding of research as moving from one stage to the next in an orderly and consecutive fashion. While we understand the limitations of representing a complex process in a reader-friendly format, we wonder what alternative models exist to represent research processes that step away from such (implied) linearity. We also wish to stress that within all our critique, we understand from own experience that reporting and reflecting on research as well as editing or writing a textbook have their very own limitations and challenges. This, then leads us to larger questions concerning the representation of our work,

including but not limited to: How do we discuss non-linear problems while having to report about them in a linear manner? How do we discuss the integral role of methodologies in research processes without artificially detaching methodology from said processes? How can we begin to change our conceptualization of research processes to better understand the integrated nature of methodologies in research? As we reflected and discussed these questions in our reading circle, we came to realize that these are not merely technicalities of how to do research in Applied Linguistics. Rather, these questions are closely connected to how we think about our work, and how we relate to those who are affected by it, including, for example, the ways in which participants are approached, involved, and represented in the research, but also how prior work, academic standards, future readers, and affected communities are served by it. Many of these questions are ultimately ethical ones, which is why we took the liberty of reading this book (also) through a research ethics lens. This, for us, meant that we went beyond writing a book review and entered discussions of ethics as not just a technical part of research that needed to be dealt with either "preventatively" or "curatively", but as a fundamental basis to all research.

Emphasizing ethics

The contributors of the volume provide striking evidence that ethical questions permeate and shape every stage of the research process. As mentioned above, in each part of the book, from the "research planning stage" (part I) to data collection (part II), to data analysis (part IV), to research with "vulnerable groups" (part III), to reporting research (part V), important ethical considerations are brought to the fore. For instance, in her chapter on "[s]electing who to research" (p. 17), Kubota (2017) reflects on the ethicality of studying up, down, and across in research with human subjects. She understands this to mean working with participants of higher, lower or equal social status than the researcher, as, for example, indexed by participants' "experiences of marginalization in the social, economic, gendered, and racial hierarchy of power" (Kubota, 2017, p. 19). Relatedly, subsequent chapters address, for example, how to prevent participants from feeling pressured or obligated to be part of a study (Hedgcock & Lee, 2017), how to ensure that anonymity and confidentiality are preserved (Leeson, Napier, Skinner, Lynch, Venturi & Sheikh, 2017), and how to minimally disrupt the private lives and spaces of participants (Seals, 2017). Ethical questions are especially pronounced in section three on *Researching vulnerable groups*, where researchers are invited to reflect on opportunities and challenges of creating a child-friendly and safe research environment (Murphy & Macaro, 2017), to advocate for participants from disadvantaged populations such as refugees (Carson, 2017), to respect the wishes, needs, and agency of ill or disabled participants (Okada, 2017), to acknowledge their complicated relationship to their participants (Leeson et al., 2017), and to avoid coercion in asymmetrical relationships such as teacher-student situations (Galloway, 2017). Given the emphasis on ethical questions the book brings up, it seems relevant to take a closer look at what kind of questions surface, who they are directed at, and how they relate to methodologies and epistemologies in our field. We found the presented questions to fall squarely within three categories:

1) Questions about researcher identity and positionality
2) Questions about fair treatment and safety of participants
3) Questions about validity and trustworthiness of the study

Whereas questions of the first two categories are mostly raised by the authors mentioned in the previous section, interestingly, many of of the quantitative and mixed methods chapters (e.g., Coxhead, 2017; De Angelis, 2017; Phakiti, 2017) deal with validity, reliability, transparency, and thoroughness, or what the authors might call rigor. While these considerations are certainly important, we believe that it is worth paying closer attention to the difference between understanding ethics as rigor and understanding ethics as located within research relationships, hierarchies, and positionalities. Perhaps this relates to De Costa's (2016) comment in the foreword of his edited book *Ethics in Applied Linguistics Research*, in which he reminds us that the constituencies researchers have felt accountable towards have in much of the literature "fallen alongside the quantitative/qualitative divide" (p. 3). Keeping this in mind, the question remains with renewed urgency: Who are we as applied linguists accountable towards: Our colleagues, past and current? The ethics guidelines of our scientific communities? Our participants? Our local communities? Society as a whole? Clearly, our answers have to include all of those (as well as those we do not yet recognize), regardless of the paradigmatic or epistemological stances we subscribe to. Consequently, another question to consider is how we as a field equip researchers from different paradigms to make themselves accountable to a wide variety of constituencies. As we consider the depth and width of ethical questions, one characteristic that becomes rather obvious is their ubiquity. Ethical questions surface at every stage of the research process to researchers in all schools of thoughts and paradigms. What's more, not only do they permeate and shape our research activities, they also precede and succeed it, extending even beyond what we might consider our professional or paradigmatic responsibilities. Given this pervasiveness and ubiquity, an adequate response would entail a likewise continuous understanding and discussion of ethical questions. We wonder if the labeling of ethical questions as "dilemmas" or faulty processes that need "cure" is the most helpful way to look at them. It seems to us that such a dilemma-approach perpetuates the idea that ethics is a set of rules, outside the actual research process. Rather than thinking about ethics as a result of a dilemma, or an afterthought that pops up "as needed", we believe it would be more fruitful to begin our research with ethical questions (for instance, on how to select a topic or on the assumed necessity of answering any question that can be asked); discuss these questions (in systematic ways) along the way; and also end with ethical concerns. To put it bluntly, McKinley and Rose (2017) could simply have dropped the subtitle of the book as an indication that "dilemmas" are nothing more and nothing less than a part of the process.

Integrating insights

To conclude, our discussion of the research relationships, hierarchies, and positionalities along with ethics as a fundamental basis of all research works, we also want to remind and recognize that all research processes are rarely, if ever, linear, nor should they be depicted as such. We believe that such recognition would include looking at our research as a non-linear process (e.g., Phakiti, 2017), recognizing unexpected events as part rather than interruption of it, and paying attention to ethical issues. We understand the relationships between ethics and research somewhat like the spiral DNA double helix, with one strand of the representing research and the other one ethics, but both part of the same molecule, tied together at many different points. Just like the double helix, research and ethics are in constant motion, revolving around each other, and moving as a whole. Finally, we hope that our discussion beyond the traditional book review

enriches and offers a more sophisticated understanding of methodologies and ethics in all research stages and circles, making messines the rule rather than the exception. A quote by Lourdes Ortega (2016, p. xiii) in De Costa's edited volume (2016) on ethics in applied linguistic research eloquently sums up what we attempted to achieve with this review of the McKinley & Rose volume:

> Indeed, the distinctions between ethics, methodology, and theory - which other more traditional research approaches purport to maintain - are truly blurry and transformed under nonpositivistic ways of knowing. (Ortega, 2016, p. xiii)

The edited volume by McKinley and Rose (2017) stands as a reminder and encouragement to researchers at all career stages to recognize and share research experiences and processes in an authentic and inclusive manner. Without this volume, we would not have had this ad hoc reading circle and the ensuing fruitful discussions, and we warmly recommend this volume to anyone interested in doing research in applied linguistics. We are inspired to continue our reflections and discussions within and beyond our campus as part of our ongoing effort to foreground ethical considerations in our work.

References

Bommarito, D. V., Matsuda, P. K., Liu, J., Racelis, J. V., Wu, T. T., Xia, J., & Yang, Y. J. (2017). Doing collaborative research: Challenges and opportunities. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 47–57). New York, NY: Routledge.

Carson, L. (2017). Conducting longitudinal fieldwork among adult refugees. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 114–123). New York, NY: Routledge.

Coxhead, A. (2017). Dealing with low response rates in quantitative studies. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 81–90). New York, NY: Routledge.

De Angelis, G. (2017). Dealing with multilingualism in quantitative research. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 91–100). New York, NY: Routledge.

De Costa, P. I. (Ed.) (2016). *Ethics in applied linguistics research: Language researcher narratives*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Galloway, N. (2017). Researching your own students: Negotiating the dual practitioner - research role. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 146–156). New York, NY: Routledge.

Gao, X. (2017). Dealing with criticism when publishing qualitative research. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 225–234). New York, NY: Routledge.

Hedgcock, J., & Lee, H. (2017) Adjusting to contextual constraints:Methodological shifts in local research projects. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions (*pp. 61–71). New York, NY: Routledge.

Kubota, R. (2017). Studying up, down, or across? Selecting who to research. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 17–26). New York, NY: Routledge.

Leeson, L., Napier, J., Skinner, R., Lynch, T., Venturi, L., & Sheikh, H. (2017). Conducting research with deaf sign language users. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 134–145). New York, NY: Routledge.

Mackey, A., & Gass, S. (2005). *Second Language Research Methodology and Design*. New York, NY: Routledge.

McKinley, J., & Rose, H. (Eds.) (2017). *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Murphy, V., & Macaro, E. (2017). It isn´t child's play: Conducting research with children as participants. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 103–113)*.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Okada, H. (2017). Researching people with illnesses and disabilities: Ethical dimensions. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 124–133). New York, NY: Routledge.

Ortega, L. (2016). Foreword. In P. I. De Costa (Ed.), *Ethics in Applied Linguistics research: Language researcher narratives* (pp. xii-xvii). New York, NY: Routledge.

Phakiti, A. (2017). Dealing with longitudinal quantitative designs and data analysis. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 159–171). New York, NY: Routledge.

Rose, H. (2017). Responding to theoretical shifts in research design. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 27–36)*.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Seals, C. A. (2017). Dealing with participant attrition in longitudinal studies. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics. Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 72–80). New York, NY: Routledge.