(Re)Searching professional ethics in language education and myself: taking a reflexive route

Pesquisando a ética profissional na educação linguística e em mim mesmo: tomando um caminho reflexivo

Buscando la ética profesional en la educación lingüística y en mí mismo: un camino de reflexión

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ABSTRACT: Researching is unquestionably a social practice like any other, an understanding that is shared with applied linguists from different subfields. Nonetheless, what I believe does not seem to be common sense is that to research a particular topic, researchers shall reveal a significant amount of who they are, what they believe in, and what their hopes and fears are. This piece aims to share my own reflexive exercise regarding my doctoral study, selected based on my professional interest, which was a qualitative research grounded in the Applied Linguistics field and focused on professional ethics of Brazilian language teachers enrolled in undergraduate programs in the state of Paraná. In order to exemplify how reflexivity (Consoli; Ganassin, 2023) has been enacted in this doctoral study, a participant's story is recalled and reflected upon. In sum, the impacts that the research we carry out have on us, researchers, are not strictly professional; they genuinely (trans)form — i.e., transform and form — who we are and who we are becoming as human beings.
KEYWORDS: reflexivity; ethics; language education.

RESUMO: Pesquisar é, sem dúvida, uma prática social como qualquer outra, um entendimento compartilhado por linguistas aplicados/as de diferentes campos. No entanto, o que acredito não parecer senso comum é que, para pesquisar um tópico específico, os/as pesquisadores/as devem revelar uma quantidade significativa de quem são, em que acreditam e quais são suas esperanças e medos. Este artigo tem como objetivo compartilhar meu próprio exercício reflexivo sobre o estudo de doutorado que conduzi, selecionado a partir do meu interesse profissional, que foi uma pesquisa qualitativa fundamentada na área da Linguística Aplicada e focada na ética profissional de professores brasileiros de línguas, matriculados em programas de graduação no estado do Paraná. Para exemplificar como a reflexividade (Consoli; Ganassin, 2023) foi encenada neste estudo de doutorado, a história de um participante é relembrada e refletida. Em suma, os impactos que a pesquisa que realizamos tem sobre nós, pesquisadores, não são estritamente profissionais: eles genuinamente (trans)formam — ou seja, transformam e formam — quem somos e quem estamos nos tornando como seres humanos.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: reflexividade; ética; educação linguística.

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RESUMEN: La investigación es, sin duda, una práctica social como cualquier otra, una comprensión compartida por lingüistas aplicados de diferentes subcampos. Sin embargo, lo que creo que no es necesariamente de sentido común es que, para investigar un tema en particular, los investigadores deben revelar una cantidad significativa de quiénes son, en qué creen y cuáles son sus esperanzas y temores. Este artículo tiene como objetivo compartir mi propio ejercicio reflexivo sobre mi estudio de doctorado, basado en mi interés profesional, que se trata de una investigación cualitativa en el campo de la lingüística aplicada y centrada en la ética profesional de los profesores de lenguas brasileñas matriculados en programas de pregrado en el estado de Paraná. Para ejemplificar cómo se ha puesto en práctica la reflexividad (Consoli; Ganassin, 2023) en este estudio de doctorado, se recupera y analiza la historia de un participante. En resumen, los impactos que la investigación que llevamos a cabo tiene sobre nosotros, los investigadores, no son estrictamente profesionales; genuinamente (trans)forman —es decir, transforman y forman— quiénes somos y en quiénes nos estamos convirtiendo como seres humanos.
PALABRAS CLAVE: reflexividad; ética; educación lingüística.

Introduction

It has been about two years and a half since I publicly defended my doctoral dissertation at the State University of Londrina (Egido, 2022). Hectic as life is for all of us working in academia, I feel genuinely humble when I realized that I have not had or created the opportunity to think critically about the process that I had experienced and lived for almost three years and a half while conducting the research — especially in terms of how it changed me or how I changed the research process because of who I am. However, a couple of months ago, I read the book *Reflexivity in Applied Linguistics: Opportunities, Challenges, and Suggestions*, edited by Dr. Sal Consoli and Dr. Sara Ganassin (2023). Many of the chapters are authored by scholars who report on their experiences as PhD candidates, revealing the challenges, opportunities, messes, and successes of their respective studies. In sum, they seem to have sat with their life experiences while conducting their.

doctoral research and faced them directly. To put it differently, these scholars have self-reflected about their own researching experiences guided by the concept of reflexivity. While reading those chapters, my mode started changing from learning about the topic to creating self-awareness about myself and my own research-conducting experience, finally turning to a sort of discomfort as I have not meticulously done such a reflexive exercise

myself. Hence, this piece aims to share my own reflexive exercise regarding my doctoral study.

Researching is unquestionably a social practice like any other, an understanding that is shared with applied linguists from different subfields. Nonetheless, what I believe does not seem to be common sense is that to research a particular topic, researchers shall reveal a significant amount of who they are, what they believe in, and what their hopes and fears are. By going deeper into this, due to positivist research orientations, a lot of qualitative researchers — applied linguists included — thought that by suppressing their explicit fears, hopes, identities, and personal and professional stories from their respective research reports, they could argue for conducting a more scientific, clean, and objective research, which history and critical qualitative research have proven not to be the case (McKinley, 2019). In this day and age, researchers still struggle to find a place in research reports for their fears, hopes, identities, and personal and professional stories. However, hopeful examples emerge when considering, for instance, the positionality statements (Holmes, 2020) and reflexive analyses, the latter being the focus of this piece.

Thus, I have entitled it *(re)searching professional ethics in language education and myself*; although I have <u>researched</u> *professional ethics in language education* during my PhD, and argue that part of this experience concerned searching for myself, my beliefs, and my heart-kept truths[2], as well as understanding how they impacted my research design. To put it differently, I aim to exemplify with this title that there is no valuable qualitative research if the researchers do not search for themselves.

After this introduction, in the following section I comment on the concept and characteristics of reflexivity, the key concept to this piece. Later, I explain my doctoral research design in order to, in the next section, turn to my reflexivity regarding how I have impacted the research and how it impacted me. The last section is dedicated to some closing remarks.

Reflexivity in Applied Linguistics Research

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[2] As the examples further detailed will show, thanks to my interaction with others, I have changed my worldview on professional ethics in language education from an objective perspective to a subjective one.

Departing from the premise that "research is hardly ever a mechanical process developed through neat and precise pathways that automatically lead to clear-cut answers" (Ankiah-Gangadeen; Nadal, 2023, p. 55), most researchers would agree that we are not exempt from second-guesses, bias or even mistakes while conducting our investigations. This consideration is of the upmost importance as it sets the ground for my explanation of the reflexivity concept, which I now turn to.

Regardless of how much reading of research methodological concepts one does, there is no guarantee that their applications will go as planned. More than just learning about qualitative research methodology, I argue that it is necessary to implement a more nuanced approach, one in which our own choices are assessed. It is to say research methodological concepts are not a ready-to-go tool kit, but concepts that require deep reflection when being adopted in any type of investigation. Following this line of thought, I corroborate Consoli (2024) when stating "If we think critically about our research, methodology, and decisions, we are just thinking about who we are; we need to think about our sense of self as humans, but also as researchers, and in relation to whatever other professional roles we play in society." To put it differently, research-related decisions, the methodological ones included, are representative of who we are as humans who make such decisions, that is, "the 'humanness' embedded within our inquiries could be represented more fully and clearly if we openly acknowledged the complexities that characterise our research journeys from start to finish" (Consoli; Ganassin, 2023, p. 2).

A central concept to understanding how we, as researchers, impact and are impacted by the study conducted is *reflexivity*. According to Consoli and Ganassin (2023, p. 1), it refers to "[…] the sets of dispositions and activities by which researchers locate themselves within the research processes while also attending to how their presence, values, beliefs, knowledge, and personal and professional histories shape their research spaces, relationships, and outcomes". As far as the benefits of considering reflexivity in qualitative research, especially in the field of Applied Linguistics, Consoli (2024) reminds us that "[…] reflexivity brings to the fore our humanity as researchers or research participants".

Following this same line of thought, Consoli and Ganassin (2023, p. 1) state that "[…] reflexivity [is] an essential hallmark of quality research and argue that *doing* reflexivity confers greater transparency, methodological rigour, depth, and trustworthiness to our scholarly inquiries". Hence, researchers are expected to *do* reflexivity not simply because they shall, but for it imprints more 'transparency, rigour, depth, and trustworthiness' in the studies they conduct.

In the section entitled "The Research Impacts me as I Impact The Research", I discuss in greater detail the characteristics of reflexivity which orients the discussion in this paper. Now, I turn to doctoral research design.

The Doctoral Research Design

In this section, I dedicate a few paragraphs to contextualize the example of my doctoral study (Egido, 2022). The research, qualitative in nature, investigated language education professional ethics, specifically the professional ethics of language teachers, aiming at the proposition of a code of ethics for Brazilian language teachers' at the end of the study. Initially, such a code of ethics was idealized and created collectively with pre-service language teachers. Concerning the creation of such a code, in 2019, I conducted 11 workshops in three different public state universities in Paraná, Brazil. The number of participants in each meeting varied from 6 to 60, totaling 114. The workshops[3] were audio-recorded and later transcribed in full. During each meeting, participants were asked to discuss in groups what teachers' rights, duties, and prohibitions they thought should be included in a possible code of ethics addressed to them. They were also asked to write down their suggestions so, after, they could present their propositions and support them with examples, if applicable.

After the workshops, during the analytical process, I inductively-deductively categorized, following the Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Analysis (Reis, 2018), all participants' suggestions (viz. rights, duties, and prohibition) as well as their examples. I

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[3] At the beginning of each workshop, I explained my research design to the participants and the possible benefits and harms for them. During this moment, I answered their questions regarding the research. Then, they received a printed version of the Consent Form, which most of them signed. The research project was approved by the Ethics Review Board from the [information suppressed], Brazil.

found both their own and others' personal and professional stories illustrating why their suggestions for a code of ethics for Brazilian language teachers were necessary. With all this material, I was more than confident that I was ready for the Qualification Session and maybe very close to the end of the research itself, leading to the public defense.

The Qualification Session was, indeed, a success. I collected compliments on the work conducted until then, and some thought-provoking reflections concerning the 'real' need for a written document as the one I was trying to come up with (i.e., a code of ethics for Brazilian language teachers) and the level of importance I was providing to the stories that were told during the workshops (as exemplified in the following section).

As a result, after the Qualification Session, the study's primary goal turned out to be to "[…] know the life experiences of the research agents in order to understand the ethical principles that they consider dear to language education" (Egido, 2022, p. 12). As research questions, they were thought through and re-written as follows: "What life experiences do the research agents report influencing their ethical propositions in language education? […] What are the arrangements between the propositions of ethical components elaborated by the research agents? […] What are the relationships between their life experiences and the propositions of ethical components?" (Egido, 2022, p. 12) In sum, I left aside the idea of proposing a code of ethics for Brazilian language teachers and decided to focus on the participants' stories and what they revealed about the professional ethics already in place.

For the sake of brevity, other contextual, methodological, and analytical aspects of doctoral research will be mentioned in the following section, in which they are detailed and discussed through the reflexivity lens.

The Research Impacts me as I Impact The Research

What I refer to in the title of this section as *impacts*, either from me on the research or the opposite, is theoretically conceptualized under the terms *prospective reflexivity* and *retrospective reflexivity*, in which the former stands for "the effect of the person on the work" and the latter, "the effect of the work on the person" (Kennedy; Costa, 2023, p. 156) As I aim to argue in the following paragraphs, both phenomena may happen

simultaneously and are intrinsically co-dependent. To sustain my statement of such co-dependence between (re)search-(re)searcher, I recall Ushioda's (Kennedy; Costa, 2023, p. 11) reference to the poem "Among School Children," by William Butler Yeats, which asks rhetorically, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" — or, in the research context, "how can we separate the researcher from the research process, since the research does not exist or take shape without the researcher?". In that sense, I simultaneously discuss both kinds of impacts during my doctoral research, drawing from the change in the research design — and in myself, I shall confess — thanks to the Qualification Session and one of the research participants' shared story.

Turnbull and Wu (2023, p. 19) remind us that "reflexivity throughout the research process is facilitated by careful consideration of *issues of power*, values and *beliefs and how these influence the formulation of a research topic*, the identities of the researcher and the research participant(s) as well as the analysis and writing up of research outputs." The call brought by the authors motivated me to look back and make sense of how one specific research participant's story influenced the changes I did on the research design (i.e., *prospective reflexivity*) and how this shift in the research impacted me, as a researcher and as a person (i.e., *retrospective reflexivity*).

During one of the workshop sessions, while collecting data for the study, one participant stood to present her group's suggestions for the language teachers' code of ethics. After nicely reading the content that her group had just worked on, she turned to explain why she believed that the prohibition "Do not harass" should be included in such a code of ethics. Her denouncement is as follows:

> 'Do not harass'. Girls, mostly. I've seen cases, I've witnessed cases, I've been through cases of harassment, especially because we are women, which should definitely be a case of expulsion of a teacher. It is ridiculous that, in the middle of 2019, 21st century, women still suffer harassment within the academic environment. This is ridiculous. Girls, unfortunately, we still have a sexist society. Damn, most of this room is made up of women, about 90%, how many here have already been harassed? Seriously. Raise your hand, please. How many of you have been harassed... by a teacher, on the street, anywhere? [Silence] Folks, it is almost unanimous. This is ridiculous. Mainly in higher education, where we are studying to be 'somebody', as if we weren't already, but you are studying to have a future; especially when it comes from a teacher, someone who should respect you. This is unacceptable. It should be a case of expulsion, dismissal of a

> teacher right after the case is discovered. This is extremely [unfair] for us who suffer, because it's something that embarrasses you and, generally, we don't report it, which is a mistake, because we know it won't go anywhere. There has already been a case here at [university's name deleted] and nothing happened (Egido; Furtoso, 2022, p. 17-18).

After five years since the data collection, when I close my eyes, I can still picture the research participant, the place, and what I felt while listening to her. I shall confess that before the Qualification Session, I had not paid much attention to this story. One of the board members confronted me about what the research participants were revealing to me, as illustrated in the excerpt above. Looking back, I see that moment as an opportunity for collaborative reflexivity.

Gillway and Sanchez (2023) discuss collective and collaborative reflexivity. In the authors' viewpoint, the former concerns a "[…] shared background leading to confirmation of ideas," whereas the latter has to do with "sharing internal conversations with aspirational others, more in line with Lave's (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation to a community of practice or Vygotsky's scaffolding with more capable others through a zone of proximal development (Landolt *et al*., 2018)", (Gillway; Sanchez, 2023, p. 135).

Inspired by the concept of collaborative reflexivity, I see that thanks to one of the Board Members, I reconsidered the research that was in progress and decided to shift from a document proposition (i.e., a code of ethics for Brazilian language teachers) to an emphasis on "[…] the life experiences of the research agents, in order to understand the ethical principles that they consider dear to language education" (Egido, 2022, p. 12). At this point, my interaction with that Board Member had an impact on the research itself.

Moreover, it is important to highlight that such an impact does not rely solely on the research itself. The research also impacted me as far as my worldview shifted from an objective one to a more subjective one. Initially, I believed - which was the reason why I proposed the research - that Brazilian language teachers needed a code of ethics. However, after the experience and the interactions reported, I realised that those teachers were already daily living their versions of professional ethics. As a result, I moved from *proposing* to *understanding* the professional ethics. As a person, it directly impacted me

as I turned more careful about listening to others' experiences and life stories, that is, my worldview shifted.

To put it differently, what came next was equally important because I initially believed that to contribute to Brazilian language teachers, I needed to propose that code of ethics. However, as the research design changed, I noticed my contribution was subjective; henceforth, the research process itself also impacted me on how I understood the implementation of professional ethics by Brazilian language teachers. I helped them by "simply" — or, in better terms, powerfully — listening to the stories they shared during the workshops. Stories that portrayed cases of harassment, injustices, and calls for public educational improvements, no doubt, but they were also stories of resilience, hope, collective changes, and inspiration. When I changed the research design, I was able to see all that; I was able to finally pay attention to what the research participants were addressing in their stories. I felt like I was ultimately connecting to them. In sum, the research also impacted me and made me search for the new me: the research was leading to new searches, which were also about myself. It happened when I changed the goal of the study and the research questions, but it turned out to be even more evident as I was writing this paper. Echoing Ushioda (2023) when citing the poet Yeats, we cannot separate the dancer from the dance; we cannot separate the actor from the play; and, luckily, we cannot separate the researcher from the research.

The Reflexive Route Ahead

My doctoral dissertation has been publicly defended, and I gladly hold a PhD in Language Studies; it should feel like a case closed, but it does not. It reminds us that reflexivity regards an ongoing self-awareness. The impacts that the research we carry out have on us, researchers, are not strictly professional; they genuinely (trans)form — i.e., transform and form — who we are and who we are becoming as human beings. For instance, that research participant's story about harassment has made me constantly and more carefully consider the life experiences that are shared with me, either inside or outside a classroom, either while conducting an investigation or not. She revealed herself

and somehow trusted me with her story and feelings. I could not simply 'categorize' her life experience, and I am glad I did not.

This participant's story's impact on me and on the research I was conducting indicates what can happen when reflexivity is enacted. To put it differently, this example of mine is to argue that reflexivity work is not solely related to a methodological component, but an attitudinal posture that can redirect the investigation itself.

Ultimately, I corroborate Consoli and Ganassin's (2023, p. 12) statement that "[…] 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." Writing this piece has been a reflexive exercise for me regarding my doctoral research process. Inspired as I was by Dr. Consoli and Dr. Ganassin's (2023) book, I wish this writing of mine also motivates other researchers to look retrospectively at their investigative experiences and the personal and professional changes led by them.

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