Why should I care? Research ethics in the field of adult L2 literacy

Louise Shepperd[1] and Kaatje Dalderop[2]

[1] *Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen* | [2] *Universiteit van Amsterdam*

Abstract   The aim of research ethics is to ensure that research is conducted responsibly, with respect for the rights, dignity and wellbeing of participants. This viewpoint paper describes ethical challenges that can arise when conducting research with adult migrants who are learning an additional language (L2), while also acquiring literacy for the first time. Anchored in our own experiences, we reflect on how an ethics of care perspective corresponds to the relational and contextual realities of our research. Through this lens, we advocate for deeper consideration of the responsibilities and responsiveness of researchers and ethics committees when assessing and addressing the potential vulnerabilities of participants. In this paper we offer the following viewpoints for consideration:

1. Standard institutional (macro) research ethics procedures are often inappropriate when involving adult L2 literacy learners in research.
2. Ethics procedures do not prepare you for the reflexive, micro-ethical decision-making that is usually required when conducting research with these learners, and can create barriers for inclusive research practices.
3. Ethical procedures and practices should embrace an ethics of care framework, encouraging caring conduct throughout the research process and in consideration of all involved.

Keywords   adult literacy, LESLLA, ethics of care, research ethics

Ethical decision-making is foundational to every stage of the research process. From design to dissemination, researchers make choices about what questions to ask, who to involve, what approach to take, and how to communicate what they find. Each of these choices has the potential to impact the individuals and communities concerned, ideally in a beneficial manner and, as a minimum requirement, not causing harm.

International as well as national guidelines require researchers to reflect on research ethics (BERA, 2018; Fischer, 2006; NWO, 2016). These guidelines usually include core principles, such as "(1) respect for persons, (2) yielding optimal benefits while minimizing

harm and (3) justice" (De Costa et al., 2019, p. 122). Research ethics can then be further understood by distinguishing between ethical principles and procedures specified by professional institutions (macro-ethics) and contextual ethical decision-making that is local and time-sensitive (micro-ethics) (De Costa, 2024).

Institutional ethics committees examine research plans, assess them for ethical implications and, given that the participants' interests are believed to be protected, grant permission to carry out research. The importance of ethical conduct is a shared value among researchers; however, macro-ethical procedures can be criticised for being overly bureaucratic (Haggerty, 2004; Yaw et al., 2023). Conducting research with underrepresented and already marginalized groups can raise further questions about the extent to which participants' interests are prioritised. Such research contexts highlight where general procedures do not serve all participants and aims equally well.

In this viewpoint paper, informed by our own experiences, we highlight the limitations of existing procedures and guidelines when conducting research in the context of Literacy Education for Second Language Learning Adults (LESLLA), and propose the integration of an ethics of care perspective into both macro- and micro-ethical decision-making. We use this framework to reflect on our experiences of conducting the following empirical studies:

(a)   a qualitative study into language learning strategies, based on interviews with thirty adult literacy learners from Syria and Eritrea (Dalderop, 2024);

(b)   a mixed-methods psycholinguistic study, involving adult participants from across the Arabic-speaking world with diverse literacy experiences (Shepperd, 2022).

Throughout this viewpoint paper, we include vignettes of concrete experiences that illustrate ethical challenges we faced and the approaches we took in an attempt to address them. We embrace epistemological differences between our studies and demonstrate the relevance of our proposals to a range of methodologies. The following sections provide background information about adult L2 literacy learners and frequent ethical issues that arise when involving these learners in research. We then outline what is meant by an ethics of care, which is interpreted in relation to layers of vulnerability that LESLLA learners may experience during the research process. Suggested adjustments are proposed to mitigate identified vulnerabilities in our particular studies and demonstrate how this framework can be applied, including and beyond LESLLA contexts.

1 Adult literacy learners

LESLLA learners are a diverse group in terms of countries of origin, first languages, biographies, migration paths, gender, etc. They have in common that they are (1) adult migrants who have had limited or no access to formal education, (2) learning a new

language as well as L2 literacy, and (3) often in a highly literate and bureaucratic context (Minuz et al., 2022). In many European countries, they attend a mandatory civic integration trajectory (Rocca et al., 2020). Estimates of the group's size within Europe vary. A study from Belgium found that 16 % of asylum seeking migrants had less than six years of education in their home countries, contributing to the 27 % who struggled with most basic home language literacy tasks (Hooft et al., 2020). Swedish data from 2018 reported 18 % learners with less than six years of schooling in their countries of origin (Norlund Shaswar & Wedin, 2019). In the Netherlands, 20-25 % of asylum seeking migrants were estimated to be "illiterate" in 2020 (Uitvoeringsbrief Inburgering, 2022, p. 9).

In second language acquisition (SLA) research, LESLLA learners are underrepresented (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004), and there is a tendency to draw on narrow, highly educated participant samples (Andringa & Godfroid, 2020; Plonsky, 2023). This is problematic, for two reasons. First, it leads to questions regarding theoretical generalizability of SLA research, as we cannot assume our research findings to be representative if research only draws on specific participant groups (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Ortega, 2005). Second, adult language learning is broadly challenging, but the obstacles appear to be especially insurmountable for LESLLA learners (Deygers & Vanbuel, 2022; Housen, 2022; Strube, 2014, 2015). Since research has the potential to inform and improve practice and policy, there is clear ethical imperative to include this learner group.

2 Ethical issues in LESLLA research

When including LESLLA learners in research, it can be challenging to navigate the macro- and micro-ethical issues which inevitably arise. Reflective publications by LESLLA researchers have outlined a variety of ethical and methodological challenges, related to communication, recruitment, informed consent, confidentiality, translation, reciprocity and inclusive practices (Malessa, 2023; Michaud et al., 2022; Shepperd, 2022). As an obvious example, standard procedures for gaining informed consent usually rely on multiple pages of written documentation about the study and ask for a written signature upon comprehension of this information. This is clearly inappropriate for participants that are unable to read the information, sign their name, and participate in other literacy-based processes, such as complaints procedures.

An individual's capacity to give informed consent is a cornerstone of macro-ethical requirements. Flexibility for diverse groups is often available in how information is delivered and how consent can be registered (e.g., using oral methods). However, there is less flexibility in terms of (a) when during data collection information and consent should be given, (b) what information must be given, and (c) how related institutional procedures can be conducted. This can create a significant burden of understanding for LESLLA learners, as even oral information can be lengthy, involve legal phrasing, and outline risks and protections which may make little sense to participants before they

have begun the study. Alongside fulfilling institutional legal requirements, the intention is often to promote agency for the participant. However, for these learners the formality of the information and protocols can generate mistrust and be perceived as threatening, triggering difficult memories related to bureaucracy (Rodrick Beiler & Dewilde, 2024; Thomas & Pettitt, 2017).

A participant's ability to consent is often discussed in relation to the concept of vulnerability; a term that is frequently applied when conducting research in the LESLLA field (Fox et al., 2020; Malessa, 2023; Shepperd, 2022). Although vulnerability is commonly defined as a characteristic of certain groups of people (e.g. children), Perry argued that "vulnerability is not a characteristic inherent in the participant but is rather an interaction between the participant's characteristics and the nature of the study" (2011, p. 909). For example, a lack of formal schooling in and of itself has little bearing on an adult's ability to understand and consensually participate in an activity. However, when research procedures are unfamiliar, reliant on literacy-based practices, and situated in contexts of power imbalances, then risks, such as uninformed consent, coercion and exclusion, are heightened.

Luna (2019) has proposed the metaphor of vulnerability as layers. She foregrounded the multi-dimensional nature of vulnerability and argued that context may add layers of vulnerability to an individual, such that individuals in different circumstances potentially are affected by more or fewer layers of vulnerability. Shepperd (2022) applied Luna's metaphor to LESLLA research and identified the following potential layers of vulnerability for LESLLA participants:

> [-] (1) the coercive influence of power-relations between the researcher, participant, and connecting friend, (2) linguistic and cultural accessibility of information, consent, and debriefing, (3) experiences of trauma which may impact memory and attentional capacities, (4) potential for negative emotions, such as stress and inadequacy if tasks were found to be too difficult or unfamiliar, and (5) heightened potential for study completion to be a pressurised activity amidst the anxiety of life in a foreign country … (Shepperd, 2022, p. 3).

Thus, we understand that specific aspects of conducting research involving LESLLA learners may exacerbate particular vulnerabilities of participants. It is our responsibility to mitigate such risks and ensure tangible or proportionate benefits. Part of this responsibility is to critically evaluate procedures which may inadvertently exacerbate participant vulnerabilities or exaggerate risks. For example, procedures and policies which overemphasise risks may result in other harms, such as unjustified avoidance or exclusion of 'vulnerable' language learners, reinforcing existing sampling biases (Dingwall, 2016; Malessa, 2023). We propose that an ethics of care offers a useful perspective to both mitigate risks and empower researchers with alternative approaches to ethical decision-making when conducting research with LESLLA learners.

3 Ethics of care

Dating back to the eighties (Gilligan, 1982), the ethics of care philosophy embraces contextuality, relational capabilities, and emotions, such as empathy and responsiveness. This is proposed in recognition of the frequent dependencies that exist in human relationships, the need to consider caring responsibilities within such relationships, and the limitations of moral theories centred on human universality, autonomy and rationality (Barnes et al., 2015; Held, 2006). Tronto (1993) identifies four ethical elements of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness. Each ethical element corresponds to broader caring elements, where caring involves: (1) being attentive to where care is needed, (2) taking responsibility for care, (3) competently carrying out caring practices, and (4) being responsive to how care is received.

Caring practices are in the hands of so-called moral agents. Moral agents can be individuals, but also groups, institutions, or nations (Held, 2006; Pettersen, 2011). A moral agent recognizes and responds to the needs of others, values relationships and seeks to nurture them. Moral agents exercise empathy, aiming to understand others' experiences, and act responsibly in ways that promote wellbeing for those they are connected to. Applied to a research context, moral agents include the institutional ethics committee, as well as the researcher. Participants, too, can be seen as moral agents since care is understood as a shared practice, controlled by the carer as well as the cared-for.

In the researcher – participant relationship, the researcher typically holds power and control. In terms of the ethics of care, this asymmetry emphasizes the researcher's duty to protect the participant's rights and wellbeing. This means acting with sensitivity to the vulnerabilities and unique situations of those they care for. While care ethics acknowledges asymmetry, it also stresses the importance of empowering the more dependent party to whatever extent possible, fostering agency and self-respect within the context of care (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Pettersen, 2011). Besides the asymmetry between researcher and participant, the relationship between the ethics committee and the researcher is also asymmetrical, with the ethics committee in the position of power. For example, institutional rules and regulations may put a researcher in conflict with their own moral values (Thomas & Pettitt, 2017). Thus, there is also a duty of care for the ethics committee to protect and empower the researcher, as well as research participants.

In understanding the shared practice of care, we recognise researchers are frequently cared for and supported by collaborators, volunteers, mediators and participants. Indeed, care for those involved in conducting research and those who may benefit from the investigation are common motivations for research participation. An ethics of care understands and reflects on the potential to promote positive relationships between all agents, as well as being sensitive to power relations. Furthermore, care ethics highlights that dependency is not a weakness to be eliminated but a natural part of human life.

As a final point, ethics of care has frequently been discussed in relation to justice, where earlier articulations emphasised the distinction between the two ideals (Gilligan, 1982). For example:

> An ethics of justice focuses on questions of fairness, equality, individual rights, abstract principles, and the consistent application of them. An ethic of care sees the interests of carers and cared-for as importantly intertwined rather than as simply competing. Whereas justice protects equality and freedom, care fosters social bonds and cooperation (Held, 2006, p. 15).

More recent discourse, including positions by Tronto (1993) and Held (2006), have argued that care and justice are not mutually exclusive but can and should be combined. Indeed, both Tronto and Held suggested that each is insufficient without the other. This is the position we take in our account.

4 Layers of vulnerability and care

The remaining discussion turns to three layers of vulnerability that were identified when conducting our own research with LESLLA learners, namely: (1) informed consent, (2) voluntary participation, and (3) minimising harm and maximising benefits. We apply the lens of care in order to reflect on our experiences. The examples given below intentionally highlight our desire to avoid a one-size-fits-all guide to best practice. Instead, we acknowledge the complexity and contextuality of ethical issues that may arise when conducting LESLLA research. We encourage reflexive micro-ethical decision-making, where an ethics of care acknowledges the relational nature of research ethics and facilitates good research practice. Further, our intention is to promote deeper thinking about the responsibility and responsiveness of both ethics committees and researchers, and critique an overreliance on standard macro-ethical procedures to safeguard all involved in the research process.

4.1 Informed consent

As mentioned earlier, standard ethics procedures include an information brief as well as a consent form that the participant is required to sign before participating, thus stating that they have been informed about the project, that they have understood the information and that they consent to participate. Alongside study aims and procedure, this information refers to risks, benefits, data protection, confidentiality and complaints procedures. Oral explanations in plain language and alternatives to written consent are of course more appropriate with LESLLA learners (Michaud et al., 2022). Also, iterative models of consent have often been recommended in research with forced migrants, rather than a single

moment prior to participation (Mackenzie et al., 2007). However, issues may continue to arise around what information should be communicated to participants, and when. As such, beyond pre-defined protocols, reflection around concrete and relational encounters is necessary to inform ethical decision-making (Rodrick Beiler & Dewilde, 2024).

The formal character of the information brief, which includes abstract, culturally-specific legalese and potentially threatening topics, can be alienating and distressing for LESLLA learners. A research participant familiar with the academy and occasionally participating in research knows that negative consequences are unlikely when taking part in a study. For someone unfamiliar with research participation, this might be less obvious. Sticking to a standard procedure while anticipating that this might be inappropriate in the research context is an example where risks may be overemphasised to protect institutional liability, at the expense of participant comprehension and comfort. Furthermore, LESLLA participants may have negative associations with formality. Dewilde and Rodrick Beiler (2021, p. 1) described how, in their LESLLA research, formality was associated with "someone going to jail". If formality is linked to negative experiences, consent procedures may disturb rapport building (Dingwall, 2016), as well as have a negative impact on participant wellbeing.

> KD: Many of my research participants invited me to their houses to conduct the interview. Being treated as a guest, I would have preferred to behave as a guest and refrain from formality, especially when participants indicated that they would rather skip the 'official' part, or showed discomfort. When introducing the study to a participant, she repeatedly sighed and eventually said that she was reminded of the interview she had had at the immigration office. I apologized, but still felt obliged to finish my explanation on the participant's 'rights', as agreed with the ethics committee of my university.

Responsibilities around information practices can be complex, particularly when standardised and pre-agreed procedures result in feeling unresponsive to an individual context. Caution around inadvertent paternalism is needed, as we make decisions about what we believe participants need to know, but this requires reflexivity. We are always choosing what information to share about our study, irrespective of the population. However, when engaging with written information, a participant may have more agency in what they attend to, what they skip over, and when they want to respond. The pragmatics of orally shared formal information are quite distinct, meaning that additional attentiveness is required.

Another formalised aspect of the information brief is the complaints procedure. It is important that participants can communicate any problems they experience during research participation, including the option to speak with someone external to the specific research project. However, facilitating this in a way that is accessible and responsive to the needs of LESLLA learners is challenging.

> KD: When preparing the interview study among LESLLA participants, it took a while to negotiate a procedure with the ethics board. A point we disagreed on was the complaints procedure. The ethics committee insisted that I provided the participants with contact details of the complaints office, while I anticipated that the complaints procedure could cause confusion and discomfort. I felt it might communicate that something unpleasant was about to happen. I also found it problematic to inform people on rights, knowing that it was unlikely that they could exercise these rights. We eventually compromised on providing the contact details of the complaints office after the interview, when we would at least have established a shared understanding of the conversation. I applied the procedure as agreed, but felt embarrassed every time I had to hand over the sheet with contact details of the complaints office. Many participants spoke about how hard their lives were in the context of the Dutch bureaucracy. Referring them to the complaints office was as if I had not understood them.

In this scenario, justice and care appear to be in conflict. For the ethics committee, the principle of equality required treating all participants in the same way, whereas the researcher felt that caring for this particular participant group would have meant adapting the complaint procedures. The asymmetry between the institutional ethics committee and the researcher placed the researcher in conflict with their own moral values. On the institutional level more flexibility could have been exercised regarding the complaints procedure, recognising issues with competency and responsiveness. Alternatively, the address of the complaints office could have been given to the mediators, or made publicly available on a website in case a participant would have liked to make a complaint. Also, attentiveness to the ethical concerns and discomfort of the researcher could have been taken more seriously.

Communication of key information often relies on mediation and interpretation when participants and researchers do not share a common language, and written translations are not an option (Michaud et al., 2022; Perry, 2011). This, too, comes with risks and ethical concerns (Kosny et al., 2014). For example, the interpreter may not include all required information or may change the message in subtle but undesirable ways. This is a particular risk when working with individuals who have varying experience and training in translation, interpretation and research, including research ethics.

> LS: While I was able to speak some Arabic, if an interpreter was available this was preferable to help explain the purpose of my study to participants. I then understood enough to notice if what I was saying was not being translated fully or if information was being added. Sometimes interpreters would imply outcomes of the study or include some pressure to participate that I would not want to communicate. With other learner groups, this may be clarified in the written information

that they can read at their own pace. However, if interpreted spoken information is the only source of communication with participants it can be difficult to manage, especially if you do not speak the language at all.

Researchers, mediators and participants rarely have an affluence of time to lend to relationship building. So, it is worth considering the benefits of nurturing these relationships from the early stages of planning, and how this can be achieved economically. For example, working with one language background could promote deeper relationships with a smaller number of interpreters and mediators. This could then enhance consistency in communication and facilitate a space where both researchers and mediators are able to learn from each other, understanding where unforeseen barriers to communication exist and finding collaborative ways forward.

Assuming the need to develop such relationships early in the planning of research also addresses issues around the selection of interpreters. Crucially, the researcher must make sure that confidentiality is guaranteed. A case in the Netherlands revealed that interpreters may work for the very government the research participant has fled from (Terlingen & Jaspers, 2016). Thus, establishing relationships with mediators to understand their contexts could be advisable, and improve the attentiveness to the needs of participants if there was a threat to confidentiality. Conducting training and inviting mediators and interpreters to sign confidentiality agreements can also help communicate the importance of this point (Michaud et al., 2022).

4.2 Voluntary participation

Research participants should decide to enrol in a study of their own volition, but LESLLA participants typically do not respond to a public call for participation. Instead, they are invited by mediators, for example their teachers or key figures in their community. The relationship between this mediator and the participant may make it hard to refuse participation (Fox et al., 2020). For instance, when a teacher asks a LESLLA learner to participate in a study, the learner may feel obligated to do so. Researchers should ensure that the participant feels free to (not) participate, and does not feel pressured (Michaud et al., 2022).

> KD: When recruiting participants for my interview study, together with the interpreters I recorded short videos, explaining the study's aims and goals, in the potential participants' first languages. I then asked mediators, like teachers and key persons in the communities, to share the video with people they knew would qualify for participation. If interested in participation, the participant could indicate that. If not interested, no action was required. The videos thus were a practical way to communicate a request with a large amount of people, but also promoted voluntary participation.

We both used videos during recruitment, to orally communicate the aims of our studies and what would be involved, in the languages of the participants we aimed to include. This choice improved accessibility for a wider range of learners and facilitated an opt-in approach, which promoted the agency of individuals in deciding whether or not to participate. An additional layer of care could involve spending time and resources on nurturing relationships with mediators and participants outside of the research context, such as offering classroom support with teaching. This would provide more insight into the unique situations of potential participants, improving attentiveness and contextual responsiveness to a situation where a learner may feel obligated to participate. Additionally, increased opportunity to discuss the research aim and approach with mediators can improve communication with participants and ensure that a consistent message is shared about their choices in relation to participation. It could be argued that building trust and relationship in this way may have a coercive effect, where both mediators and participants feel a greater sense of obligation. However, this is the type of reasoning a researcher often has to weigh, depending on context, research design and individuals involved, in order to competently care for potential participants.

Coercion can also arguably occur through the use of financial incentives, which has been discussed by both Malessa (2023) and Shepperd (2022) in the context of LESLLA research.

> LS: It is standard practice to offer financial incentives upon completion of psycholinguistic experiments, particularly in the context of multi-session experiments. However, during my ethics review process, it was recommended that I should not offer any financial incentives to my participants, as they are considered a 'vulnerable' population. While I acknowledge that the potential for coercion may be increased for some participants who may be facing financial difficulties, I was uncomfortable with the broad brushstroke categorisation of the migrant language learners I was working with. This discomfort persisted throughout recruitment and the assumptions behind this choice were challenged by teachers and others looking out for the interests of these learners. The lack of nuance in the ethical guidance led to me pursuing a procedural approach that ultimately felt discriminatory and uninformed.

In this scenario, risk of harm to participants appears exaggerated and potential benefits are reduced by institutional procedures. Additionally, the ability of the researcher to be responsive to feedback during the research process was inhibited. While it is important to protect voluntary participation, a more balanced and caring response would have been to seek collaboration with those involved to devise an appropriate solution, rather than assume the avoidance of any such an incentive would solve the issue.

4.3 Minimising harm and maximising benefit

Institutionally and individually, we have a responsibility to mitigate risks related to participating in language research and improve the immediate and lasting impact of our research for participants. For example, the psychological wellbeing of participants is important to consider, as the prevalence of trauma exposure (before, during and after resettlement) is likely heightened for those who have been forcibly displaced. Also, for LESLLA learners specifically, a sense of competency around language learning and formal schooling can be more delicate than for language learners with more educational experience. A caring approach advocates attentiveness to these aspects of wellbeing, the nurturing of positive relationships and a contextual responsiveness with both the "carer" and the "cared for" in mind. This perspective acknowledges the need of the researcher for care as well, in relation to difficult topics and emotions that are likely to arise.

> KD: In my study, I had not anticipated the topic, language learning strategies, to be extremely sensitive. However, some participants discussed a severe sense of isolation as impeding their language learning and at times, those conversations became quite emotional. I felt that taking time to listen was the best I could do.

With quantitative approaches, care should be taken to avoid confusing and unnecessarily difficult tasks. Experimental tasks are often challenging and researchers should not underestimate the resilience and capabilities of LESLLA learners. However, level of difficulty and type of challenge should be well-justified. Clear and accessible instructions in the home language(s) of participants, without a reliance on print or digital literacy, are essential. Examples, interactive demonstrations and opportunities for practice may also facilitate understanding and completion of tasks (Shepperd, 2022). While these recommendations are arguably good practice for research design broadly, the importance of steps, such as piloting, come with additional responsibilities to contemplate learner wellbeing when risks are elevated. For those with limited experience of formal educational contexts, immersion in text-rich environments and participation in abstract language tasks can exacerbate a sense of disorientation that is likely pervasive in the lives of these learners. As a result, research participation may install or reinforce negative feelings around (language) learning. The consequences for a LESLLA learner's linguistic development and integration in the host country may be serious if ideas around linguistic inability are reinforced.

> LS: My study was designed to include participants with different levels of education. Even those who were highly educated and who performed well across all experimental tasks would apologise if they did not respond correctly to all items or suggest they were not good at learning languages. COVID-19 restrictions meant that I was not able to address these feelings during and after participation, apart

from through written debriefing and email exchange. The inability to communicate orally with participants and conduct the study in-person during lockdowns led to the decision that it was inappropriate to continue recruiting LESLLA learners.

While the systematic exclusion of a population from research is clearly problematic, here we again see the need for reflexivity and nuance in ethical decision-making. In this specific scenario, a caring micro-ethical decision was made to exclude learners, in order to avoid a potentially harmful experience. A further example of where LESLLA learners were excluded from research as a protective measure is outlined below. The decision was made as a response to the researcher's discomfort and observations about how macro-ethical procedures were experienced by participants.

> KD: After an interview study with LESLLA participants, I had planned a study in the LESLLA classroom. During the interview study I had been uncomfortable with certain aspects of the consent procedure I had agreed to apply. I had noticed that the formal introduction made many participants uncomfortable and also referring participants to the complaints office had caused confusion. Therefore, for the classroom study I refrained from collecting learner data and decided to focus my study on the teacher only. However, the classroom study was on co-construction of language learning strategies. Hence, not including learner data was a questionable decision, also in an ethical sense: did I assume the teacher to be the person most knowledgeable about the learners' strategies? And how can I advocate for including LESLLA learners in the research base while excluding them in my own study?

LESLLA learners are often and easily excluded from research participation. As outlined in the introduction, this limits the extent to which these learners can benefit from empirical findings, as existing knowledge may not generalise to their context and experience. Underrepresentation may then misinform both practice and policy, as well as limiting the development of support for LESLLA learners and their teachers. Drawing attention to the benefits of research inclusion, Perry (2011, p. 899) reported on participants from refugee backgrounds, "… who were eager to tell their stories and who believe that participating in educational research was an important means of advocating for themselves and their communities". This was echoed in our interactions with LESLLA learners.

> KD: In my interview study, many participants expressed gratitude for being invited to share their experiences and being listened to. Seeing me as a more powerful individual, a number of participants explicitly passed on messages for policy makers and decision makers in their municipalities and the government. The messages they wanted me to pass on included the need for more language classes and for more time when taking a test.

Sharing research outcomes outside the academy, with participants, practitioners and policy makers, may further contribute to the benefits of research.

> LS: As a way to thank mediators and participants and enhance the potential benefits of my research, I created a one-page, plain language OASIS-inspired summary (Open Accessible Summaries in Language Studies) of my findings. I created one version in English and one in Arabic, which could be shared with teachers and L1 literate participants. I received numerous positive responses to the shared information. Those who responded were often grateful for the opportunity to participate and that they were able to see what they had contributed to. If COVID-19 restrictions had not been in place at the time, I would have offered in-person oral information sessions, accessible to those with limited literacy.

Beyond the benefits of being represented in research and informed about outcomes, careful and collaborative approaches are needed to ensure appropriate, immediate and tangible beneficial outcomes from research participation. It has already been highlighted that the common use of financial benefits may be more complex in LESLLA contexts, and caution is required around overly extractive exchanges. Alternatively, participatory approaches with migrant language learners offer promising routes to explore how participants and their communities can influence and benefit from research participation (Sidaway, 2024). In line with an ethics of care, such approaches acknowledge power asymmetries, embrace the value of relational investment, and encourage attentiveness to the individual needs of all involved in the research process.

5 Why care?

In this viewpoint paper we have discussed layers of vulnerability that researchers may need to navigate when conducting research with LESLLA learners. Through reflection on our experiences, we have illustrated situations where institutional advice and macro-ethical procedures had undesirable outcomes for both researchers and participants. Despite the protective intention of such procedures, risks can be exaggerated and vulnerabilities can be exacerbated, as well as the agency of a researcher being restricted in their micro-ethical practices. We have proposed the integration of care ethics in how we conceptualise both macro- and micro-ethical procedures and practices to better address the scenarios we have outlined in this paper.

We propose a rethinking of aspects of the macro-ethical review process in light of this discussion. For example, evidence for 'careful' consideration of participants before, during and after data collection could be provided for ethical review, as well as anticipated micro-ethical dilemmas. We make the case for more flexibility on behalf of the ethics committee, acknowledging that a one-size-fits-all approach does not serve the needs

of LESLLA learners and other underrepresented groups, and may inadvertently lead to harms or injustice, like excluding these groups from research.

This is not to suggest a lengthier procedure for conducting research with LESLLA learners, or further bureaucratic obstacles to conducting research with more diverse or underrepresented language learners. Rather, we call for the development of insights and tools to support researchers seeking routes to contemplate and improve research conduct in LESLLA contexts. As stated, layers of vulnerability will vary depending on the research being conducted and the relationship between researcher, participant and mediator(s). Therefore, it may be the case that there are minimal risks to mitigate. In these scenarios, we recommend researchers and ethics committees to be mindful of where challenges may be exaggerated by formal procedures or misinformed by generic understandings of conducting research with 'vulnerable persons'. However, the vignettes provided above also demonstrate the need to reflect on and anticipate micro-ethical decision-making with care, where formal guidance alone is insufficient to address delicate issues which are likely to arise.

For this reason, we suggest that more contextual and flexible procedures could be developed, through collaboration with the individuals and communities we seek to include in research, and constructively critical conversations with ethics review boards. Additionally, we believe that the topic of ethical thinking deserves a prominent place in the education of students and researcher training to support the contemplation of ethics through different lenses, such as an ethics of care, and develop practical skills in relation to ethical dilemmas and contextual decision-making.

References

Andringa, S., & Godfroid, A. (2020). Sampling bias and the problem of generalizability in applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *40*, 134-142. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190520000033

Barnes, M., Brannely, T., Ward, L., & Ward, N. (2015). Introduction: the critical significance of care. In *Ethics of care: critical advances in international perspective*. (pp. 3-19). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447316527.001

Bigelow, M., & Tarone, E. (2004). The role of literacy level in second language acquisition: Doesn't who we study determine what we know? *TESOL Quarterly*, *38*(4), 689-700. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/3588285

British Educational Research Association [BERA]. (2018). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. BERA. https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018

Dalderop, K. (2024). Investigating Language Learning Strategy Use in Adult L2 Literacy: A Constructivist Grounded Theory. In N. Thomas, J. Schneider, & S. Zhou (Eds.), *Qualitative research on language learning strategies and self-regulation. Special Issue: AILA Review, 37*(2).

De Costa, P. (2024). What's ethics got to do with applied linguistics? Revisiting the past, considering the present, and being optimistic about the future of our field. *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, *3*(1). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rmal.2024.100103

De Costa, P., Lee, J., Rawal, H., & Li, W. (2019). Ethics in applied linguistics research. In J. McKinley & H.R. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. Routledge.

Dewilde, J., & Rodrick Beiler, I. (2021). *When we see that kind of language, "someone is going to jail."* https://ether.leeds.ac.uk/when-we-see-that-kind-of-language-someone-is-going-to-jail/

Deygers, B., & Vanbuel, M. (2022). Gauging the impact of literacy and educational background on receptive vocabulary scores. *Language Testing*, *39*(2), 191-211. https://doi.org/DOI:10.1177/02655322211049097

Dingwall, R. (2016). The social costs of ethics regulation. In W.C. Van den Hoonaard & A. Hamilton (Eds.), *The ethics rupture. Alternatives to formal research ethics review*. University of Toronto Press.

Fischer, B.A. (2006). A summary of important documents in the field of research ethics. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, *32*(1), 69-80. https://doi.org/10.1093/schbul/sbj005

Fox, A., Baker, S., Charitonos, K., Jack, V., & Moser-Mercer, B. (2020). Ethics-in-practice in fragile contexts: Research in education for displaced persons, refugees and asylum seekers. *British Educational Research Journal*, *46*(4), 829-847. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3618

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Harvard University Press.

Haggerty, K.D. (2004). Ethics Creep: Governing Social Science research in the name of ethics. *Qualitative Sociology*, *27*(4), 391-414.

Held, V. (2006). *The ethics of care: Personal, political, and global.* Oxford University Press.

Hooft, H., Vandermeerschen, H., Chakkar, S., Vandommele, G., De Cuyper, P., & Schiepers, M. (2020). *Laaggeletterdheid bij volwassen nieuwkomers in de Belgische asielopvang* [Low literacy in

adult newcomers in Belgian aylum reception]. https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/cto/onderzoek/onderzoek-geletterdheid/laaggelette rdheid-bij-nieuwkomers-in-de-opvang/fedasil-laaggeletterdheid-bij-nieuwkomers-isbn.pdf

Housen, M. (2022). Stagneren in het taalleerproces [Stagnation in the learning process]. *Les*, *40*(221). https://www.tijdschriftles.nl/inhoud/tijdschrift_artikel/LE-40-221-11/Stagneren-in-het -taalleerproces

Kosny, A., Maceachen, E., Lifshen, M., & Smith, P. (2014). Another person in the room: Using interpreters during interviews with immigrant workers. *Qualitative Health Research*, *24*(6), 837-845. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732314535666

Luna, F. (2019). Identifying and evaluating layers of vulnerability – a way forward. *Bioethics*, *19*(2), 86-95. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/dewb.12206

Mackenzie, C., McDowell, C., & Pittaway, E. (2007). Beyond 'Do no harm': The challenge of constructing ethical relationships in refugee research. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *20*(2), 299-319. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fem008

Malessa, E. (2023). Enhancing ethical research participation and inclusion of marginalized adult migrant learners: An early career researcher's perspective. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*, *24*(3), 1-23. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-24.3.4100

Michaud, A.H., Fortier, V., & Amireault, V. (2022). "Do I have to sign my real name?" Ethical and methodological challenges in multilingual research with adult SLIFE learning French as a second language. *Languages*, *7*(126), 1-16. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3390/languages7020126

Minuz, F., Kurvers, J., Neab, R., Rocca, L., &, & Schramm, K. (2022). *Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants* (*LASLLIAM*). Council of Europe.

Norlund Shaswar, A., & Wedin, A. (2019). Language learning strategies and teaching practices in adult L2 education: The case of Swedish for immigrants. *Apples Journal of Applied Language Studies*, *13*(3), 17-34. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.17011/apples/urn.201907063590

NWO. (2016). *Nederlandse gedragscode wetenschappelijke integriteit* [Netherlands Code of Conduct for research integrity], (pp. 1-51). https://www.nwo.nl/nederlandse-gedragscode-wetenschappel ijke-integriteit

Ortega, L. (2005). For what and for whom is our research? The ethical as transformative lens in instructed SLA. *Modern Language Journal*, *89*(3), 427-443. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781 .2005.00315.x

Perry, K.H. (2011). Ethics, vulnerability, and speakers of other languages: How university IRBs (do not) speak to research involving refugee particpants. *Qulaitative Inquiry*, *17*(10), 899-912. https://doi.org/101177/1077800411425006

Pettersen, T. (2011). The ethics of care: normative structures and empirical implications. *Health Care Anal*, *19*, 51-64. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10728-010-0163-7

Plonsky, L. (2023). Sampling and generalizability in Lx research: A second-order synthesis. *Languages*, *8*(1), 1-13. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8010075

Rocca, L., Carlsen, C.H., & Deygers, B. (2020). *Linguistic integration of adult migrants: requirements and learning opportunities*. https://rm.coe.int/linguistic-integration-of-adult-migrants -requirements-and-learning-opp/16809b93cb

Rodrick Beiler, I., & Dewilde, J. (2024). "When we use that kind of language … someone is going to jail": relationality and aesthetic interpretation in initial research encounters. *Applied Linguistics Review*. https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2024-0085

Shepperd, L. (2022). Including underrepresented language learners in SLA research: A case study and considerations for internet-based methods. *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, *1*. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rmal.2022.100031

Sidaway, K. (2024). Reflexive participant collaboration: researching 'with' adult migrant learners of English. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *24*(5), 443-457. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2024.2383250

Strube, S. (2014). Worstelen met de mondelinge vaardigheden [Struggling with oral skills]. *Les*, *32*(192). https://www.tijdschriftles.nl/inhoud/tijdschrift_artikel/LE-32-192-10/Worstelen-met-de-mondelinge-vaardigheden

Strube, S. (2015). Het is makkelijker gezegd dan gedaan. Kopzorgen in de alfaklas [Easier said than done. Concerns in the literacy classroom]. *Les*, *33*(online only). https://www.tijdschriftles.nl/inhoud/tijdschrift_artikel/LE-33-0-9/Het-is-makkelijker-gezegd-dan-gedaan-Deel-1

Terlingen, S., & Jaspers, H. (2016). *Intern onderzoek: Meer verdachte Eritrese tolken bij IND* [Internal investigation: More suspicious Eritrean interpreters at the Immigration and Naturalisation Service]. https://www.oneworld.nl/archief/intern-onderzoek-meer-verdachte-eritrese-tolken-bij-ind/

Thomas, M., & Pettitt, N. (2017). Informed consent in research on second language acquisition. In *Second Language Research* (Vol. 33, Issue 2, pp. 271-288). SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267658316670206

Tronto, J. (1993). *Moral boundaries. A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003070672

Uitvoeringsbrief inburgering. (2022). https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/ronl-76927808ece245766c77fab5cded38399f4b0a3f/pdf

Yaw, K., Plonsky, L., Larsson, T., Sterling, S., & Kytö, M. (2023). Research ethics in Applied Linguistics. *Language Teaching*, *56*, 478-494. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444823000010