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Gatekeeping and gate-opening: Ethical and reflexive research with LESLLA stakeholders

A response to "Why should I care? Research ethics in the field of adult L2 literacy"

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With their self-reflective article and vignettes, Shepperd and Dalderop (2025) provide valuable insights into their personal quest for ethical and reflexive research and make an important contribution to research ethics in applied linguistics. In our viewpoint, we would like to elaborate on their reflections on informed consent and voluntary participation by providing our thoughts on potential gate-openers/ gate-opening in LESLLA research. Their article considers three core areas of ethical care (consent, participation and minimising harm while optimising beneficence) to be exercised in LESLLA research and frames these as "layers of vulnerability" (Luna, 2019). Similarly to Shepperd and Dalderop (2025), we navigated these layers of vulnerability in our individual LESLLA research contexts in Norway (Live), Australia (Skye and Jemima) and Finland (Eva) through various institutional and research gatekeepers and will discuss relevant personal and contextualized reflections of our own in this viewpoint.

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1 Gatekeeping and gate-opening in LESLLA research: Perspectives from researchers in Norway, Australia, and Finland

As research in multilingual, multinational settings can create complex challenges, LESLLA (Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults) learners have traditionally not been at the centre of research ethical discussions (Malessa, 2023a). Our research experiences across international LESLLA contexts in Norway (Grinden & Botha, 2025), Australia (Playsted, 2022; Playsted et al., 2024; Playsted & Thomas, 2025; Rillera Kempster, 2023, 2025) and Finland (Malessa, 2023b, 2025a, 2025b) lend support to Shepperd and Dalderop's (2025) perspectives that ethical complexity is multi-layered, often complicated by multiple challenges and enabled by various "gate-openers" (Boufarss & Harviainen, 2021). We also found that a reflexive stance taken in relation to our vulnerability as researchers opened gates to ethical engagement with complex, microethical issues (De Costa, 2024) that arose during our research journeys.

During the last decade, applied linguists' (e.g., Pennycook, 2018; Toohey, 2019) calls for the field to move beyond the agency of humans and to reach broader understandings of language use and teaching, have become louder. Similarly, in the field of L2 literacy education, it has been recognized how materialities constitute the learning environment and enable literacy learning. Altherr Flores (2021), for instance, exemplified the importance of artifacts attached to our culturally bound conventions of formal schooling by illustrating how a new learner enters and navigates her classroom. Watson (2019) highlights that most LESLLA learners share a background in Indigenous knowledge systems, where principles of relationality not only with humans but also with non-human materialities are important. Against this backdrop, research ethics do not only entail the agency of humans and their personal and intercultural abilities to respond to microethical dilemmas, but framed in a performative, socio-material approach (Fenwick & Edwards, 2013, 2018; Hultin, 2019), extends to the recognition of artifacts, human and non-human, in creating and enabling understandings of formal, Western institutionalized research.

As for research processes with LESLLA learners, Roderick Beiler and Dewilde (2025) report on participants' negative associations with the formal procedure of signing a consent form, while Shepperd and Dalderop (2025) reflect on being uncomfortable when handing out the complaint form. Both procedures are based on standard, macroethical principles, yet as the authors describe, they need adaptations when researching with LESLLA learners. By acknowledging the effects of legitimized practices along with the artifacts that constitute our Western research processes, we can move beyond the typical deficit statements related to what LESLLA learners do not "understand" regarding *our* research practices. Instead, we can engage in a two-way learning event for participants and researchers to develop familiarity with the research process and of each other.

In her study with LESLLA learners in Norway, Live engaged potential participants in an informing process that allowed them "to develop, firstly, a familiarity with the concept of research and the interactions and tools that it may involve, and, secondly,

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appropriate relationships with all of these human and non-human components of the project" (Grinden & Botha, 2025, p. 154). This process was conducted in three combined sessions, where 1. visual stimuli with the use of pictures of culturally diverse lifestyles enabled a space for introducing each other to different lifeworlds and asking relevant questions, and 2. using a specifically designed board game with instructions, dice, game pieces, authentic questions, as well as the questions used in the later semi-structured interviews. Language assistants in relevant languages also joined and aided in translating when necessary. The visual prompts and the game playing served to prepare the potential participants to gain insight into the qualitative research process and particularly the later interview. Live believes that a performative process like this, where materials share equal relevance to the agency of humans, can be a means for both potential participants and researchers to form a mutual understanding of potential research collaborations before the researcher asks for participants' consent.

Building on Shepperd and Dalderop's (2025) discussions of participation in research with LESLLA learners, Skye's reflections on ethical care stem from her experiences as a doctoral researcher conducting classroom observations of teaching practice when collaboratively researching with LESLLA teachers in Australia (Playsted et al., 2024; Playsted & Thomas, 2025). Her motivation to conduct research with teachers as co-researchers grew out of her LESLLA teaching experiences in an Australian adult migrant education program (Playsted, 2022) and her care for colleagues who shared experiences of limited opportunities for engagement with contextualised professional learning. Skye used a qualitative, practitioner research methodology (Allwright, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009) that offered an emergent, flexible design in which teachers and she interacted to co-construct research (see Alvesson et al., 2022) about their use of pronunciation-related activities.

Classroom observations of teachers' practices formed part of the data gathered during the study. Ethical protocols were in place to protect students' and teachers' privacy during the video-recorded observations. However, teaching pronunciation in a LESLLA classroom involves a high degree of interaction between teachers and their students and often includes movement and gesture to convey concrete meanings of new concepts (McCurdy, 2025). It was challenging to separate who influenced what when capturing teachers' practices. Skye was observing Julia, a teaching participant, who asked her to sit with a group of students and operate the video camera, as there was limited space to set up a tripod. Doing so, Skye was able to capture Julia's teaching practices on video, but the experience also prompted her reflexive awareness of the complexity of observational research, as shown in the following vignette:

> Once I was sitting in the classroom (I sat at a desk with three of the students …), with the dynamic nature of adults moving around the room, Julia's engaging and dialogic teaching style where she moved in between desks, talked to individual students, encouraged movement, participation and verbal interaction … used questioning

> extensively and drew on individual responses from students throughout the lesson, it was clear that there was no way to have a "non-invasive" approach to capturing the teacher on video (Research journal entry, 25th August, 2022).

Maintaining a research journal throughout her research gave Skye a space to record concerns about such micro-ethical issues that arose during the research. Reflexive journaling also provided insights into the vulnerabilities (Consoli & Ganassin, 2025) she navigated as a doctoral researcher in LESLLA classrooms. Journal entries of an observation with another teacher, Mika, captured her reflexive development:

> I was emotional when I left the College today. It impacted me as I left Mika's classroom just how much these teachers and students are giving to me – they give more than just their time, they entrust me with their thoughts, hopes, motivations, their aspirations. I got the impression when Mika introduced me as a student, a research student, that I shared something already with the students in her class – we were students together (Research journal, 31st August, 2022).

Skye entered her research motivated by a desire to foreground the contributions of practitioners to research concerning their classrooms. By recording critical incidents in her developing reflexivity, she was able to embrace a depth of awareness of her participation and the "loss of [researcher] autonomy, agency [and] self-power" (Consoli & Ganassin, 2025, p. 11) with the honesty and care needed in LESLLA research.

Similarly to Skye, Jemima's work with LESLLA learners led to her doctoral research examining the impact of educational experiences of adult migrant English learners on their language learning in Australia. Seeking to understand the social and spatiotemporal impacts of learning experiences (Futch & Fine, 2014) of adult migrants on their sense of identity, belonging, and direction, Jemima turned to mapping methods as a critical qualitative research lens (Marx, 2022). Drawing on her experiences of integrating creative and expressive arts with language learning in the classroom (Rillera Kempster, 2023), Jemima employed Education Journey Maps (Annamma, 2018) to enhance communication with adult migrants from diverse educational backgrounds, particularly allowing LESLLA learners to represent their stories beyond text and words. However, gaining access to her participants' stories was not straightforward, as her following vignette demonstrates:

> As I stepped away from my teaching duties to focus on the research ethics application, LESLLA learners became a "hard-to-reach" group (Hurley, 2007) requiring gatekeepers such as teachers and school administration to access. One campus director I approached was not convinced that students in the pre-beginners class could take part in my research project. Although I presented my "credentials" as a teacher with LESLLA students, and assured that interpreters or participant advocates are welcome to be part of the interviews, the campus director repeatedly

expressed her concerns that students with limited oracy and literacy in the L2 could not possibly interpret official research documents, or express themselves fully in research.

As Shepperd and Dalderop (2025) rightly pointed out, gatekeepers can function as "moral agents" voicing legitimate concerns and protecting potentially vulnerable LESLLA learners from possibly harmful research practices. At the same time, this seemingly benevolent gesture can also be viewed as actively preventing LESLLA learners from directly participating and contributing to knowledge. Ideally, however, research relationships with LESLLA participants should not only respect, but further promote/support "their autonomous agency" as highlighted by Mackenzie et al. (2007). Through their Education Journey Maps, adult migrant language learners in Jemima's study are positioned as valid and credible knowledge holders and contributors, rather than vulnerable or marginalised persons (Kubanyiova, 2012).

One of the main aspects found to impact participants' agency and vulnerability in cross-cultural and multilingual research contexts is the language choice taken by the researcher(s) to inform their participants and obtain informed consent (Perry & Mallozzi, 2015). To enhance LESLLA learners' consent and contribution, researchers need to make informed decisions on which language(s) and representation(s) to use during research processes. On the other hand, research stakeholders are often faced with rigid requirements on the documentation of consent procedures and proof of participants' "voluntary" consent that impact their participants' consent procedures. Instead of viewing informed consent as the documented and static product of consent procedures, genuinely informed consent should ideally be assured in a continuous process of mutual negotiation between research stakeholders and agents (Mackenzie et al., 2007).

To highlight how underrepresentation of LESLLA learners is prolonged by researchers' ethical dilemmas and decisions, Eva reflected on her LESLLA research experiences, particularly informed consent procedures and reciprocity (Malessa, 2023a, 2023c). Contextualized discussions on solutions to ensure meaningful research participation of marginalized adults in applied language research are essential not only to promote marginalized populations' participation in research but also to support individual researchers' attempts to recruit marginalized participants. To ensure compliance with current legal regulations as well as ethical values, we agree with Shepperd and Dalderop (2025) on the need for training and guidelines beyond procedural ethics and an increased focus on ethics-in-practice.

2 Ethical and reflexive research with LESLLA stakeholders: We care

It is encouraging to see a growing interest in research ethics regarding LESLLA learners, as demonstrated by Shepperd and Dalderop's (2025) latest contribution. In this view-

point, we have built on their discussion regarding an ethics of care by focusing on its application in international contexts. By reflecting on shared experiences of LESLLA research in Norway, Australia, and Finland, we sought to expand views on the ethical reflexivity and responsibility of qualitative research(ers). A reflexive stance to research seeks to open gates to new conversations about how ethics in LESLLA research is realised. For example, through regular reflexive journaling, researchers can maintain an ethical and open stance to inquiry and a space to debrief, record uncertainties and critical incidents or interactions throughout the research journey. Mapping her educational experiences, as her participants did, also allowed Jemima to take a reflexive stance in her study. Pivoting from a litany of identity markers to demonstrate reflexivity, an Education Journey Map allowed her deeper reflection on personal and educational experiences that influenced her viewpoints and vantage points in the study. Recognising her orientation and immersion in print-centric (Western) educational systems through this reflexive process allowed her to be sensitive and responsive to emerging ethical dilemmas during the research process. This aligns with an ethics of care approach that sees "researcher vulnerability … not … as a deficit, but as a necessary part of ethical engagement with social research" (Consoli & Ganassin, 2025, p. 13).

Complementing Shepperd and Dalderop's (2025) personal reflections and vignettes, with our own, we have illustrated situations where institutional advice and macro-ethical procedures might have undesirable outcomes for both researchers and participants. Despite the protective intention of such procedures, risks can be exaggerated and restrict research stakeholders' agency. We have also addressed how the principle of relationality between humans and artifacts becomes important when researching with LESLLA learners and suggested constructively utilizing all the "things" that constitute our Western research practices, in learning events, to enable a deeper two-way understanding of one another in the participant-researcher relationship. Furthermore, we have called for institutional support that fosters collective and personal responsibility for meaningful research participation among a group of learners with unique, multilayered backgrounds. As we have demonstrated, research is a highly relational activity (Kubanyiova, 2012), even more so with LESLLA learners, as Shepperd and Dalderop (2025) have highlighted in their article. Hopefully, the growing awareness of the necessity to rethink current, standard practices and reflect on macro- and microethical issues, as well as different theoretical perspectives, will enhance research with marginalized/special learner populations including LESLLA learners.

Author contributions

Eva Malessa: Investigation, Conceptualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing; Skye Playsted: Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing; Jemima Rillera Kempster: Investigation, Writing – Review & Editing; Live Grinden: Investigation, Writing – Review & Editing.

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Statement of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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