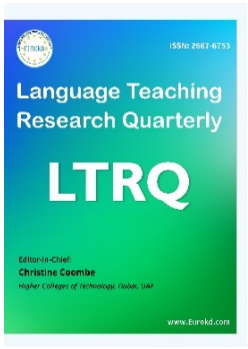

Language Teaching Research Quarterly

2025, Vol. 48, 277–284

A Reflection of Ethical Responsibility in Applied Linguistics Research

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Received *13 May 2024* ***Accepted*** *16 June 2025*

Abstract

This reflective paper raises important questions regarding ethics in applied linguistics research. Starting with understanding the need for an analysis of ethics in the field, the reflective paper opens with an excerpt from Ema Ushioda's abstract from the 5th Psychology of Language Learning (PLL5) conference in Madrid in May 2024, which provided an overview of unintended effects of applied linguistics research. The reflection continues, citing Lamb's (2018) longitudinal work and Tekin's (2024) dissertation as examples of some potential unintended affects. Then, a synopsis of the rise in popularity of positive psychology in applied linguistics is provided, citing MacIntyre's earlier work on the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) construct as a precursor to the more recent work in positive psychology. The reflective paper concludes with a summary of the need for increased public-facing scholarship to enact positive societal change.

Keywords: *Ethics, Positive Psychology, Willingness to Communicate (WTC), Public-Facing Scholarship*

How to cite this article (APA 7th Edition):

Thompson, A. S. (2025). A reflection of ethical responsibility in applied linguistics research. *Language Teaching Research Quarterly*, *48*, 277-284. https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2025.48.16

[1]Introduction: Ethical Considerations in Applied Linguistics Research

Ethics in research is a topic that is increasingly emerging in a variety of contexts; for example - What role does artificial intelligence have in the research process? Should reviewers refrain from asking authors to have the manuscripts read by "native speakers"? What mechanisms are in place to protect participants from historically marginalized communities? Research in

[1] This paper is part of a special issue (2025, 48) entitled: In Honour of Peter D. MacIntyre's Contributions to Psychology of Language and Communication and Second Language Research Methodology (edited by Mirosław Pawlak, Zhisheng (Edward) Wen, and Hassan Mohebbi).

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https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2025.48.16

applied linguistics is typically considered to be "low risk" from a human subjects point of view. After all, we don't administer drugs, take blood or tissue samples, or purposely deceive the participants. However, no human subjects research exists in a vacuum; every time we interact with participants, whether it be via quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods research, we inevitably have an effect – unintended or not. This reflection examines potential unintended effects of applied linguistics research from a variety of angles and also presents potential mechanisms for purposefully using research for the greater good.

Unintended effects of applied linguistics research was one of the topics in Ema Ushioda's superb plenary at the 5th Psychology of Language Learning (PLL5) conference in Madrid in May 2024: "Methodological progress in L+ motivation research: A reflexive turn." The main focus of this session was to provide an overview of methodological changes in motivation research over the past 30 years. In her abstract, she states:

> Of course, methodological progress and innovation do not necessarily make for better research or make us better researchers. Fundamentally, the quality of our research will depend not on the methods and tools we use but on our skills, values, and practices as researchers, and on our ways of thinking, seeing, and understanding at every stage of the research process. As I will discuss in this talk, our reflexivity as motivation researchers thus plays a critical role in enhancing our awareness of how we personally shape the research and its outcomes, whatever paradigms of inquiry and methods of investigation we follow (Ushioda, 2024).

What piqued my interest the most in the plenary, however, was the discussion of potential opportunities as researchers to improve society. In her talk, Ushioda specifically talked about motivation research and the effect that this type of research has on participants. She also discussed the need to consider the effect of research on both the participants and on the researchers themselves. She references Lamb (2018) who observed the effect that a longitudinal research project had on his participants in Indonesia and cautioned readers about the potential negative effects that research can have on participants, particularly those of the qualitative, longitudinal type, as a relationship is built between the researcher and participant(s). Most interactions that Lamb referenced resulted in positive outcomes; however, this was not true across the board. Lamb also discussed a participant who faced ridicule by classmates because of being chosen for the qualitative part of the study: "Because he was so clearly less proficient than the other participants, he had been subject to the ridicule of his JHS peers. When I visited him at his senior high school in 2008, teachers and classmates were curious about his connection with me and teased him further" (p. 365). For the majority of the participants, however, the interactions resulted in increased motivation:

> Dico's words above neatly capture the two prevailing aspects of my influence. On the one hand, there is the implication that as young learners they were subject to interrogation by this foreign intruder – *someone from England visit me, asking me 'what is your motivation in English?'*. This unusual and slightly intimidating experience prompted reflection: *why did he do that?* But the sense that he was being tested in some way was also a form of inspiration for him, encouraging him to

> respond positively to the challenge: *OK when he come again I will show him!* The participants' comments indicate their involvement in the project both created a sense of obligation, enhancing already well-developed ought-to L2 selves, and also served as an inspiration, strengthening incipient ideal L2 selves (Lamb, 2018. p. 362).

To this end, Lamb had inadvertently increased the English language learning motivation in the majority of the students who participated in the longitudinal part of the study. In further reflection on this topic, Consoli and Aoyama (2020) remind us that "These considerations indicate that while a researcher may make the best effort to put the participants at ease and reassure them of the intended non-harmful effects of the research processes and outcomes, a researcher cannot govern the participants' perception and internalised worldview of such research experience" (p. 179). In other words, even with the purported "minimal effect" that is most oftentimes claimed in social science research, every interaction that we have, whether via qualitative or quantitative methods, almost certainly causes the participants to think differently about the topic at hand.

Relatedly, applied linguistics research can also have unintended negative consequences. For example, I recently had the pleasure of serving as the external evaluator of the extraordinary Ph.D. thesis of Oguzhan Tekin at Concordia University, entitled, "A comprehensive look at intergroup relations and contact between international students and the host community." This was an extremely important topic examining the relative integration of and attitudes toward international students both from the perspective of domestic students in the university context, as well as of Canadian inhabitants living the surrounding community. Tekin examined several variables, including three main types of perceived "threats" ostensibly believed to have been created by the presence of international students in these contexts (see Stephan and Stephan's, 2000, integrated threat theory): Realistic threat (predictor variable 1), Symbolic threat (predictor variable 2), and Linguistic threat (predictor variable 3). Realistic and symbolic threat are described in Stephan and Stephan (1996), with linguistic threat being added to capture language attitudes. Realistic threats "concern political and economic issues as well as the overall wellbeing of a group" (Oguzhan, 2024, p. 9). Examples of items used to measure realistic threat include, "They take jobs away from local francophone students in Montréal (e.g., part- time employment as a barista off campus, teaching/research assistantships on campus)"; "They take valuable educational resources away from local francophone students in Montréal (e.g., financial aid, university housing, scholarships)"; "They decrease the quality of education in colleges and universities in Montréal"; "They bring new diseases to Montréal that would not otherwise be here" and "They bring crime to Montréal." All of these items, in line with the "threat" terminology indicated potential negative characteristics of international students. Likewise, symbolic threat, which are defined as "threats to a social group's worldview comprised of morals, values, and beliefs" (Oguzhan, 2024, p. 9), included items such as "They impact the academic and social life of colleges and universities in Montréal negatively"; "Montréal is losing its Québécois character because of the increasing number of these students" and "When they hold strong religious beliefs and openly practice them, it may jeopardize the value of secularism in Québec."

The items for linguistic threat, which was examined given the dominance of French in the context coupled with the varying levels of French proficiency of the international students,

were composed a bit differently, with a few positively worded items that were then reverse scored. For example, this construct included items such as, “They must respect and accept Quebec governments’ policy of French-only use in the public domain” and “They may jeopardize the status of French if they use English to communicate in their daily interactions in Montréal.” However, there were also items such as, “They don’t threaten the status of French in Québec because French is already well established” and “It is not necessary for them to learn any French prior to coming to Montréal” which were then reverse scored to maintain the “threat” theme. I would argue that researchers need to think carefully about using such items in survey-based research, as the repeated negative statements meant to gather unbiased options about a specific group could, in fact, sway the opinions negatively about this specific group. In other words, participants who perhaps never thought about international students “taking away resources” or “bringing diseases” now have these ideas in their minds. Consciously or subconsciously, negative attitudes towards a specific group have been introduced as a potential reality.

In the discussion during the defense, I asked about the choice or wording. Tekin responded (rightly so) that the wording was taken from previous research, and that in order to compare results, the same wording needed to be used. I don’t disagree; however, what concerned me was the potentially “unintended consequences” (as discussed in the Ushioda plenary) of conducting such a project. Were the participants, perhaps unconsciously, triggered to think more negatively about international students as a result of participating in the study? The human subconscious is an incredible thing – why else would companies pay millions of dollars to have brands displayed in films? To this day, I cannot eat Reese’s Pieces without thinking about E.T. (Wells, 2022).

The Rise of Positive Psychology in Applied Linguistics Research

In terms of topics in applied linguistics research, an increased emphasis on positive psychology is a way of positively affecting both participants and researchers. The concept of positive psychology does not imply that negative emotions should be ignored, and the construct has been aligned with constructs such as motivation (Gregersen, 2019). Positive psychology does not only focus on positive emotions; the idea is to include both sides of the coin, or as Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) put it, show the “Two faces of Janus.” The concept seems inherently logical – the field of applied linguistics should examine and analyze both positive and negative facets of language learning. Motivation research has done this for a number of years with an emphasis on a variety of motivating and demotivating factors. Nonetheless, the rise of popularity of systematically including positive emotional facets involved in language learning is relatively recent. There was an SSLLT special issue on positive psychology edited by MacIntyre and Gregersen (2014), and one of the first collected volumes, *Positive Psychology in SLA*, was published in 2016 (MacIntyre et al, 2016). Although arguably, one of the first well-researched constructs in positive psychology in applied linguistics (other than motivation) was spearheaded by Peter MacIntyre himself – the concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC, see MacIntyre 1994). MacIntyre et al. (1998) state the following about WTC “To recognize more explicitly the situational variation in WTC and to focus on L2 communication, we define it as a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” (p. 547). WTC has been examined in conjunction with a number of other variables,

such as those in the Motivational Factors Questionnaire (MFQ, Ryan, 2009). The MFQ consists of 18 pre-determined constructs: cultural interest, attitudes towards the L2 community, instrumentality, international contact, interest in foreign languages, international empathy, fear of assimilation, ethnocentrism, travel orientation, English anxiety, attitudes to learning English, milieu, parental encouragement, ideal L2 self, L2 self-confidence, willingness to communicate in the L1, willingness to communicate in English, and intended learning effort.

In the recent Psychology of Language Learning conference (PLL5) in Madrid, Spain, MacIntyre gave the closing plenary entitled, "Willingness to communicate: Lessons for the psychology of language teaching," during which he discussed the evolution of the WTC construct in tandem with the need for more N of 1 empirical research to truly understand the nuances of WTC (and other psychology of language learning constructs in the field). In this plenary, MacIntyre also emphasized the contextual importance of WTC, particularly when speaking in an L1, L2, L3, etc., and also depending on the specific situation (i.e. making small talk, describing your research topic, and explaining the innerworkings of the Canadian parliament). The fluidity of such a construct is in line with trends in the field in terms of recognizing the dynamicity of characteristics for what was previously conceptualized as static character traits. Along with the dynamicity of WTC, other individual differences, such as motivation and language aptitude, have also been argued to be dynamic in nature, particularly when multilingualism was considered as a factor (i.e. Thompson, 2013; Thompson & Erdil-Moody, 2016).

WTC and anxiety have oftentimes been explored in tandem (see, for example, MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2022). In terms of emotions involved in language learning, anxiety has been one of the most explored, oftentimes via the oft-used Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS, Horwitz, 1986). During the time it was published, and for a number of years afterwards, anxiety ruled the emotions world of applied linguistics. Using the same data collection tool allows for comparisons between different groups, which, in turn, potentially allows for meta-analyses and greater generalizations across populations. However, looking carefully at the items of the FLCAS, it can be seen that both positive and negative emotions are represented. When I started closely examining the FLCAS, I noticed that the items seemed to recognize more than simply anxiety. Several years ago, I used this data collection tool as part of a larger data collection project of English language learners in Turkey. Via an exploratory factor analysis with this data (Thompson & Khawaja, 2016), there were the expected items representing negative emotions that clustered together, such as those in factor one (16 items), which I labeled "English class performance anxiety." Examples of these types of items included item 23: "I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do"; item 19: "I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make" and item 31: "I am afraid the other students will laugh at me when I speak English." For factor one, all of the items positively loaded, meaning that the directionality was the same (i.e. all items indicated performance anxiety. The remaining factors were more mixed. For example, factor three (four items), which I labeled "Negative feelings towards English," contained items such as item 30: "I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak English" and item 17: I often feel like not going to my English class." However, negatively loading onto this factor was item 5: "It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes," which connotes a positive emotion towards English. Factor four (four items) emerged in a very

interesting way; I labeled it “fear of ambiguity,” but I was able to discuss the results couched in the literature of tolerance of ambiguity, which is a positive emotion/participant characteristic. Items that loaded onto this factor included item 4: “It frightens me when I don’t understand what the teacher is saying in the English class,” and item 29: “I get nervous when I don’t understand every word the English teacher says.” In terms of positive emotions, it was fascinating to see factor two (seven items), which I named “confidence with English,” emerge. Like factor one, all items positively loaded onto this factor, indicating the same directionality. Examples of these items are item 18: “I feel confident when I speak in my English class,”; item 28. “When I’m on my way to English class, I feel very sure and relaxed,” and item 2: “I don’t worry about making mistakes in English class.” Using this perspective as an example, it is indeed possible to take older materials that have a solid empirical basis and incorporate those materials into updated frameworks to provide a more balanced perspective in terms of emotions in language learning, while at the same time providing some consistency in data collection tools (see also Sparks & Ganschow, 2008, for commentary on the FLCAS).

The Role of Public-Facing Scholarship in Applied Linguistics Research

However, what if instead of attempting to have a neutral effect on participants, and in the larger scheme of things, society, we, as researchers, designed studies that, by virtue of simply carrying them out, would have positive effects on those involved. As scholars, many of us are perhaps more concerned about publishing as a means to an end (and rightly so, as this is what universities expect, and it’s how we keep our jobs), rather than conducting research to better society. One way to conceptualize researching for societal advancement is to engage in community-based research/public-facing scholarship. However, in order to do this, these types of publications need to “count” as part of our jobs. And the only way for public-facing scholarship to “count” is to have policies and procedures in place for them to do so. This type of change is not easy, as historically, the only types of noteworthy research has been in the form of peer-reviewed articles in highly ranked journals and/or books published in highly ranked presses. An even more extreme opinion stated during a conversation with an upper-level admin at a flagship institution in the U.S.: that the only type of research that “counts” at all is externally funded research – anything else doesn’t really matter. This concept was reinforced by the instances when an ethics approval at a former university was returned to me with the caveat that what I proposed was not research, and I should proceed ethically – I have since worked with university IRB offices to re-word these types of communications with social sciences and humanities faculty to avoid the perpetuation of the idea that what we do is not “real” research.

Going back to the concept of public-facing scholarship, the reality is that faculty are being pushed to do more public-facing work, but the evaluation processes oftentimes lag behind. This sentiment is echoed in Consoli and Aoyama (2020): “These days a novice researcher is preoccupied with a number of constraints related to time availability for data collection, analysis and write-up of their final report, as well as other institutional challenges such as limited or lack of funding; and others, especially PhD students, may be burdened with various deadlines or responsibilities (e.g. teaching, research training)” (p. 180). Indeed, during a recent campus visit, one of the faculty members in the unit asked what I thought about the need to publish for audiences outside of academia. I said that if academia is to remain an integral part

of society, scholars need to write for diverse audiences, not just for fellow scholars. But I also said that we need to credit this type of scholarship; it cannot be simply something that is expected to be done on top of the typical scholarship of the peer-reviewed variety. Changing university policies in this regard is excruciatingly slow, but changing department-level review guidelines is a step in the right direction. For example, when I was the Chair of the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics at WVU, I spearheaded the revision of our annual evaluation and tenure and promotion guidelines. Along with updating the credit assigned to co-authored work, we incorporated the role of "public scholarship related to field of study" as one mechanism to receive a "good" rating in scholarship. To receive an "excellent," the requirement remined a publication of the peer-reviewed variety, as we didn't want to set up the faculty for failure in promotion proceedings – after all, peer-reviewed work is still the expectation both internally and externally to the institution. That said, enough units changing internal guidelines may spur recognition of the importance of public-facing scholarship more uniformly across many different types of institutions.

Conclusion

In sum, we have the opportunity as applied linguists to positively enact change with our participants, and, more broadly construed, with society. We can do this by carefully thinking, not only about the topics of our research, but also about our data collation tools and mechanisms. Even when investigating well-researched variables, such as anxiety, we can analyze the data and frame the discussion in a balanced way. We need to pressure our universities to change policies in order to credit public facing scholarship so that we have an influence beyond our immediate scholarly circles. Conceptualizing and valuing research that produces products that communities can use, such as programming for refugee intake centers, for example, is a way to positively impact those around us. And certainly, we need to be cognizant of the trend presented by positive psychology, whereby we provide a balanced inquiry of both positive and negative aspects of and emotions involved in language learning. Taking these efforts in tandem, we can positively influence a range of individuals in terms of languages, cross-cultural communication, and a variety of other topics in applied linguistics. With intentionality, we can change our collective subconsciouses to enact positive change.

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Acknowledgements
Not applicable.
Funding
Not applicable.
Ethics Declarations
Competing Interests
No, there are no conflicting interests.
Rights and Permissions
Open Access

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