

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

SELECTED POSTER PRESENTATIONS FROM THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS CONFERENCE, PORTLAND, 2023

Relational applied research: A model for re-balancing research relationships for equity in applied linguistics

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(Received 19 May 2023; accepted 17 June 2023)

1. Introduction

Challenges have been issued for applied linguistics to include more diverse scholarly voices, more diverse research questions, and more deliberate confrontations with disciplinary systems of oppression and colonialism (e.g. Mackey et al., 2022). In the pursuit of a linguistics that is liberatory (Charity Hudley & Flores, 2022), researchers will need to rethink not only OF WHOM we ask our research questions (e.g. making our research populations more diverse and representative), but also HOW we conduct ourselves in our work; that is, researchers must critically examine institutional templates for “ethical” research in order to more purposely decolonize the discipline (Egido & De Costa, 2022).

In this short report, I propose a model that reframes research as a fundamentally RELATIONAL enterprise. This Relational Applied Research model centers principles of respect, reciprocity, and relational accountability with communities of language learners and users, and these guiding principles inform research questions, research design, and research dissemination. In this report, I briefly summarize the model’s key influences and main components, and then illustrate the model in practice with an example research study (examining second language (L2) motivation among language revitalization practitioners). I conclude with arguments for how this model can transform applied linguistics research.

2. Background: key influences

There are two key influences that this model draws from. The first is an approach to language documentation known as Collaborative Community-Based Research (CBR; Bischoff & Jany, 2018; Grenoble & Furbee, 2010). Language documentarians have in recent decades called for more collaborative and community-centered (rather than unilateral and researcher-centered) approaches to data collection and analysis. The CBR model emphasizes projects that are initiated by community needs, involve multiple stakeholders, and include training and capacity-building for community members to document and research their own languages.

The second key influence for this model is Indigenous research methods and Indigenous epistemologies (Brayboy et al., 2012; Wilson, 2008). Indigenous scholars highlight the importance of what are called the 4 Rs – respect, relational accountability, reciprocity, and rights (Snow et al., 2015). Indigenous theorists particularly emphasize the centrality of relationships; as Wilson (2008) says, in Indigenous framed research, “relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality” (p. 7, emphasis original).

3. Principles of the model

A Relational Applied Research model emphasizes:

- acknowledging, building, and respecting relationships with and within a community of language practitioners;
- researching topics that have been identified by these practitioners as having relevance and real-world consequences;
- consultations with key stakeholders in the development of the research project (see also Czaykowska-Higgins et al., 2018);
- observing appropriate avenues of introduction into new networks (i.e., “cold calling” participants may be inappropriate in many contexts);
- ensuring that research participants maintain control of their contribution to the project at all stages;
- sharing research products widely and accessibly.

4. Example study: L2 motivation in language revitalization

In this section, I illustrate this model with an example study. This example demonstrates what the model looks like at every step of the research design and practice (section 4.1) and also highlights research findings that, I argue, are novel precisely because of the way the research was conducted (section 4.2).

4.1. Research procedure

I developed this model during my research on L2 motivation among language revitalization practitioners (Taylor-Adams, 2022). In this study, I interviewed 28 practitioners who are working on seven Indigenous languages of the United States and one heritage language of Singapore. I visualize this project as a rich, multiplex network, a network of which I am a member; this visualization illustrates (and serves as a constant reminder to myself) that the research context is one of RELATIONSHIPS within these communities of practice.¹

The principles of Relational Applied Research, as outlined above, were observed at every stage of the research process. The research question (how do L2 learners become and stay motivated when revitalizing their heritage languages?) itself came out of practitioner literature and informal conversations with practitioners who identified motivation as a key practical challenge (e.g., Atkins, 2012; Viles, 2013). I was formally introduced to potential interview contributors by community leaders and respected community organizations. Individual learners were invited to contact me if they were interested in participating, meaning that contributors maintained agency over their participation even at the recruitment stage. During data collection, contributors had the option to be interviewed either individually or in a small group that they chose, and several contributors chose to be interviewed with a family member, or a set of classmates, or a teaching mentor. Contributors were sent the interview conversation guide several days before our meeting, and we took time before the recording started to identify questions they were not comfortable answering. Following the interviews, contributors were able to review the transcripts and request redactions or revisions. And as analysis proceeded, I endeavored to share the findings of the study widely and accessibly; for example, by participating in virtual conferences that were open to language community members. In these ways, each step of the research process honored principles of RESPECT, RELATIONSHIP, and RECIPROCITY.

4.2. Novel findings

In taking this approach, this research project generated findings that contribute to theories of L2 motivation and also point towards practical applications to support language revitalization. For

example, practitioners identified their language learning goals, which include not only language proficiency but also personal well-being and community healing. They described being motivated not only by the vision of a more hopeful future, but also by the example set by those in the long ago past. Most of all, they talked about relationships. They shared how family members and friends motivate them; how other learners of other Indigenous languages support and sustain them; and how they find the strength to face many difficult practical and emotional challenges because of their sense of responsibility to all their relations – past, present, and future.

These themes are not commonly discussed in the literature on L2 motivation.² Part of the uniqueness of these findings undoubtedly arises from the uniqueness of the context; language learners in contexts of language shift and revival may have very different motivation than, for example, L2 classroom learners of a global foreign language. Indeed, much of the findings I am describing here resonate with MacIntyre et al.'s (2017) notion of *ROOTEDNESS* in their study of motivation among heritage learners of Gaelic in Cape Breton.³

In fact, I would argue that this context demands a different approach to research, as these communities continue to grapple with historical trauma and continuing systems of violence and oppression. As a White monolingual English-speaking researcher, it was imperative for me to critically examine my relationships and behavior with respect to practitioners in these communities.

But in addition to this unique context, I would argue that these novel findings can also be attributed to this research approach. By observing principles of respect and relational accountability, the research project created a space where contributors felt comfortable discussing their personal relationships in depth, felt comfortable sharing their struggles and anxieties and the many difficult emotions that come up in the challenging work of language revitalization, and simultaneously felt safe enough to avoid topics that were too difficult to address. In other words, observing these principles made the research more ethical and trauma-informed while at the same time generating richer findings.

5. Conclusion

I offer the discussion of a study in L2 motivation among language revitalization practitioners as an example of one way to conduct applied linguistic research ethically, and as an example of how much richer our research relationships and research findings may be as a result of observing these guiding principles. Though other researchers will no doubt pursue other questions with other populations and other methods of analysis, the principles of this model can be applied to any research study.

These principles draw from two primary research traditions, as described above; importantly, they also draw from personal conversations with colleagues and mentors at the University of Oregon's Department of Linguistics, the Northwest Indian Language Institute (NILI), and the Institute for Collaborative Language Research (CoLang). I invoke these communities as a way of underscoring that this model has been co-constructed out of these contexts. This model is a work in progress. I am continuing to deepen my understanding of the guiding principles offered by Indigenous theorists, am continuing to reflect critically on my research approach, and am continuing to engage in dialogue with my research relations.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444823000277>.

Notes

¹ See online supplementary materials for the poster, which include this network visualization.

² Though see, for example, Norton's work on identity and investment (Norton, 2016), and especially Ushioda's call for an "ethical agenda" for language learning motivation research (Ushioda, 2020), for important parallels to what I am describing in this short summary.

³ I note that this research team also described close relationships and interconnection with the heritage Gaelic community that they worked with.

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