

CRITICAL COMMENTARY



The ethical work of openness in qualitative L2 research

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Abstract

Open scholarship (OS) is increasingly visible in second language acquisition (SLA) and applied linguistics as a means of supporting transparency, rigor, accountability, and knowledge sharing. In qualitative L2 research, however, the ethical implications of openness depend on context, participants, data type, and conditions of circulation. This critical commentary argues that responsible openness is best understood as circulation ethics, or the ethical reasoning required when qualitative materials move across languages, infrastructures, audiences, and political conditions. Drawing on two vignettes, one involving an externally funded fellowship with Ukrainian refugees in Poland and another involving research connected to Cuba, we distinguish broader qualitative research ethics from concerns generated or intensified by OS. We then develop a relational and CARE-informed framework for evaluating decisions about openness, including decisions to limit, delay, control, or refuse access. Refusal is accountable when it is documented and reasoned, not when it is simply asserted. The commentary proposes an ethical access statement and a decision framework for documenting access decisions related to consent, translation, contextual detail, risk, reuse, and institutional support. We argue that qualitative L2 research can contribute to OS by shifting evaluation from the quantity of materials made public to the accountability of the decisions that govern circulation. Responsible openness requires shared support among researchers, institutions, funders, journals, and reviewers.

Keywords: open scholarship; qualitative L2 research; research ethics; relational ethics; transparency

Introduction

Open scholarship (OS) has become increasingly visible in second language acquisition (SLA) and applied linguistics, particularly in discussions of transparency, reproducibility, data sharing, and research accountability (Liu, 2023; Plonsky, 2024; Sterling, 2024).

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These developments have been important for the field, but their ethical implications are not identical across methodological traditions. In qualitative second language (L2) research, data often consist of interviews, classroom interaction, ethnographic fieldnotes, recordings, translations, and contextual descriptions produced through situated relationships. These materials may carry traces of biography, institutional location, migration history, political vulnerability, or community membership that cannot be fully neutralized through anonymization. In L2 research, linguistic form may itself be identifying, while translation can redistribute interpretive access and authority toward some audiences and away from the participants whose accounts are being circulated.

Here, we understand OS as an umbrella term for practices intended to make research processes and outputs more accessible. Within that umbrella, we distinguish open-access publication from access to qualitative research materials. Open access expands access to a scholarly output; opening the underlying materials changes who may encounter, interpret, translate, recombine, and act on knowledge produced within a particular research relationship. We use circulation ethics to name the ethical questions that arise when such materials move beyond those relationships. This framing shifts attention from whether materials are simply open or closed to how decisions about access and restriction are justified. We argue that responsible openness requires evaluating the benefits of transparency in relation to the relational, linguistic, institutional, and political conditions under which qualitative materials circulate.

We develop this argument through two deliberately asymmetrical vignettes. The first concerns an externally funded fellowship and the demands it placed on a researcher working with a multilingual, sensitive dataset. The second concerns research connected to a politically repressive context, where circulation carries risks beyond those usually addressed by research ethics protocols. These reflexive vignettes are not presented as equivalent or representative cases; rather, they illuminate different conditions of circulation. This commentary asks how responsibilities for access, restriction, interpretation, reuse, and refusal should be negotiated when qualitative L2 materials circulate beyond the relationships in which they were produced.

Vignette 1: Funder-mediated openness and multilingual refugee research

During a recent externally funded fellowship, Anna experienced firsthand how funder-mediated openness requirements can shift ethical, administrative, and financial demands onto individual researchers. The fellowship required all resulting publications to be open access and placed strong expectations on compliance with open science practices, including detailed ethics documentation, data management plans, and the preparation of qualitative materials for possible archiving in repositories such as the Open Science Framework. These requirements were presented as markers of rigor, transparency, and ethical responsibility. For Anna, the difficulty was not the commitment to openness itself, but how these expectations were communicated and operationalized in relation to a multilingual qualitative project involving participants whose accounts were potentially sensitive and whose circumstances could change quickly.

The research focused on Ukrainian refugees pursuing higher education in Poland. Interviews were conducted in Russian or Ukrainian to allow participants to express themselves fully and capture the nuances of their experiences, emotions, and perspectives. However, as these requirements were communicated and operationalized during the fellowship, Anna was expected to fully translate transcripts into English and prepare them for public online access. Although English translation increased accessibility for external audiences, it also complicated participants' ability to verify, recognize, or respond to how their words appeared in the public record. This concern was not simply

about translation into English, since translated excerpts are common in multilingual research, but about the scale and permanence of making full translated transcripts publicly accessible beyond the original language and relational context of the interview. Some participants hesitated to speak openly about their experiences, concerned about friends and family remaining in Ukraine, whose safety was uncertain. Others were navigating the excitement and opportunities of life in Poland, making disclosure of traumatic or sensitive details emotionally complex. Such hesitations did not indicate that participation itself was inappropriate, nor were they produced solely by OS. Rather, they reflected the careful self-positioning involved in speaking about displacement, family, opportunity, and war within a research relationship. The ethical significance of these hesitations, therefore, was not specific to OS at first; it arose from the broader relational ethics of working with participants whose lives were shaped by uncertainty and ongoing conflict. However, openness requirements intensified these concerns because the issue extended to whether fully translated transcripts might circulate publicly beyond the original research relationship.

Decisions about what could be shared, how, and under what conditions required ongoing, interpretive ethical judgment. Ethical care meant more than mere procedural consent: Anna had to consider how even small details, such as names of universities, discussion of social networks, or descriptions of local events, might affect participants' sense of privacy, dignity, and safety. Translating transcripts into English amplified these concerns, as meaning could shift or become decontextualized, and participants might not have been able to trace their own contributions in the public record.

Practical and financial challenges exacerbated these ethical pressures. Although the fellowship included funds earmarked for open-access publication, institutional and publisher-level barriers prevented their use. The research promotion office instructed Anna to negotiate directly with publishers, leaving the practical burden of compliance entirely to the researcher. Because the fellowship's open-access requirements had never been clearly defined at the outset, Anna ended up producing additional open-access outputs that could satisfy the publication requirement while avoiding the public release of full, sensitive, translated transcripts.

This experience highlights a recurring tension in funder-mediated openness. Openness requirements can support transparency and rigor, yet the infrastructure to support them may be insufficient, and the ethical, logistical, and financial burdens may fall unevenly on individual researchers. The ethical and relational labor required to produce "open" research is time-consuming, cognitively demanding, and emotionally charged, yet it is rarely rewarded in academia. In this case, the ethically responsible outcome was not a refusal of openness, but a differentiated form of openness, with open publication and transparent justification of limits alongside restraint toward full public transcript sharing. Without systemic support, OS shifts labor and risk onto individual researchers and participants instead of distributing responsibility across the institutions that create, fund, and evaluate openness expectations.

Vignette 2: Coercive circulation as a boundary case in research connected to Cuba

The second vignette concerns research connected to Cuba, a politically repressive context in which political expression, association, and dissent are closely monitored and punished (Amnesty International, 2026; Freedom House, 2025). Luis Javier was born and raised in Cuba, later escaped the country, and continues to work with individuals and communities shaped by this context. From this position, openness is

not experienced as a neutral or uniformly ethical good, but as a practice entangled with risks, fears, and long-standing structures of surveillance. Depending on the form it takes, openness can increase the visibility of participants, places, affiliations, or networks in ways that are difficult to anticipate once materials circulate beyond the research relationship. For clarity, the concern here extends beyond raw data. Metadata, contextual description, and translated or excerpted accounts may also make people and relationships traceable. Notably, risks can extend from individual participants to family members, colleagues, and local networks, particularly where retaliation and collective punishment are routine features of governance. Even when researchers employ anonymization and obtain informed consent, coercive political conditions can shape what participants feel able to disclose and what future circulation may make visible. As a result, decisions about openness remain a persistent ethical challenge in Luis Javier's research practice with Cuban participants both inside and outside the island, requiring ongoing negotiation, restraint, and, at times, refusal in order to minimize potential harm to participants and their families.

This problem becomes especially clear in cases of coercive access. Luis Javier experienced firsthand and is aware of multiple instances in which scholars conducting research in Cuba had data confiscated at airports by state or military authorities, resulting in the seizure of devices, loss of research materials, and, in some cases, subsequent consequences for individuals and their families who had been interviewed or informally consulted. In this manuscript, we therefore withhold identifying details about these cases to avoid compounding risk for those involved. Importantly, these events should be understood as coercive state action rather than scholarly openness. The point is that politically repressive settings expose a boundary condition for openness, because circulation may cease to be voluntary, academic, or governed by the terms under which participants consented. When devices or research materials are seized, control over access and participant protection is displaced from researchers and participants to coercive actors. This possibility matters for OS because decisions about what to archive, translate, richly describe, store, or make available must take into account scholarly reuse alongside the possibility of appropriation by nonacademic audiences.

The Cuba vignette is a boundary case that is useful because it brings assumptions about circulation into view. In routine discussions of openness, access is often imagined as voluntary, academic, and controllable by the researcher. Research connected to Cuba unsettles those assumptions and asks how the possibility of coercive access should shape decisions about what researchers retain, translate, describe, archive, make available, or withhold from circulation. In Luis Javier's research practice, responsible openness has sometimes meant limiting contextual detail, summarizing rather than archiving participant narratives, or declining to share when circulation could expose participants, relatives, or local networks. The Cuba vignette thus sharpens our claim by showing that openness decisions must consider the benefits of transparency alongside the political conditions under which materials may become legible, traceable, and vulnerable to coercive use.

From vignettes to circulation ethics

The two vignettes combined show that responsible openness is less a matter of maximizing visibility than of making decisions about circulation ethically accountable. They also clarify a distinction between research ethics broadly and circulation ethics specifically that is central to this commentary. Many of the concerns discussed above are not unique to OS. Consent, representation, translation, anonymization, participant vulnerability, and researcher responsibility have long been central to qualitative inquiry

and to applied linguistics research more specifically (De Costa, 2016; Duff & Abdi, 2016; Iphofen & Tolich, 2018; Wiles, 2013). Because these concerns are already well established in qualitative research ethics and applied linguistics, our argument focuses on how openness changes the conditions under which they are addressed. When qualitative materials are prepared for broader circulation, decisions made within a particular research relationship may become more durable, searchable, and reusable, and may become recognizable to audiences beyond those originally imagined by researchers or participants. OS does not replace research ethics; it extends them into questions of circulation. The ethical issue, then, is not simply whether approvals, consent, and anonymization are in place, but how later access, reuse, translation, storage, and restriction are justified.

The first vignette illustrates this shift through multilingual displacement-related research. Participants' hesitations about disclosure belonged first to the broader relational ethics of research with people whose lives were shaped by war, mobility, family separation, and uncertainty. What openness changed was the possible trajectory of participants' accounts once fully translated transcripts were expected to circulate beyond the language, audience, and relational context of the interview. The second vignette brings the same distinction into a politically sensitive setting. Research connected to Cuba raises familiar qualitative ethics questions about safety, identifiability, consent, and contextual detail. It contributes by showing how those questions sharpen when circulation cannot be assumed to remain academic, voluntary, or controllable. Both vignettes point toward what we call circulation ethics, by which we mean the ethical reasoning required when qualitative materials may move across contexts, languages, infrastructures, audiences, and political conditions.

For qualitative L2 research, circulation ethics can mean public sharing of instruments, analytic procedures, or de-identified excerpts in some studies, and controlled access, delayed release, participant-facing summaries, metadata without participant narratives, or a documented justification for non-sharing in others. Such practices should be understood as forms of scholarly responsibility that make transparency accountable to the relational and contextual conditions under which qualitative knowledge is produced. This reframing is consistent with qualitative data-sharing scholarship that cautions against treating openness as a purely technical matter and emphasizes the interpretive, ethical, and infrastructural work required to make sharing meaningful and safe (Lamb et al., 2024; Steltenpohl et al., 2023).

For clarity, we do not argue against OS or against transparency as a scholarly commitment. Instead, we ask what the principle of "as open as possible, as closed as necessary" entails when data are multilingual, relational, politically sensitive, or difficult to de-identify (OpenAIRE, 2026). This "as open as possible, as closed as necessary" formulation matters because it treats openness as a matter of degree, recognizing that access may be limited or delayed when ethical or legal obligations require such limits. For qualitative L2 research, the unresolved question is how necessary closure is identified, justified, and supported when the risks of circulation are relational, interpretive, linguistic, or political. Existing OS frameworks thus already make space for degrees of access. Our contribution is to specify how these degrees of openness operate in qualitative L2 research and what forms of judgment they require. We use ethical labor to name the practical and relational work through which researchers translate commitments to transparency, care, and accountability into situated, revisable judgments about access, restriction, documentation, and refusal.

The next section develops a framework to guide decisions about whether, how, and under what conditions qualitative materials should circulate. The framework draws on

relational ethics, the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance, decolonial scholarship, and structural analyses of academic responsibility.

Responsible openness as relational and CARE-informed practice

Relational ethics offers the first element of this framework. We use the term to refer to an orientation toward research ethics that ties responsibility to the ongoing relationships among researchers, participants, the contexts in which those relationships unfold, and the possible consequences of representation. Ethics approval, consent forms, anonymization protocols, and data management plans are procedural safeguards. They set a baseline of protection and give researchers a shared standard to be held accountable to. In qualitative L2 research, these mechanisms also establish starting points for later judgments about access, reuse, translation, contextualization, and refusal. Relational ethics complements procedural approaches by emphasizing attentiveness to participants' changing circumstances, responsiveness to context, reflexive judgment about representation and circulation, and a willingness to revisit earlier decisions as new risks or responsibilities emerge (Ellis, 2007; Hosseini & Haukås, 2025; Neale, 2013). We find this relational approach to ethics especially relevant to OS because circulation decisions often arise after data collection, when participants' circumstances, political conditions, institutional affiliations, or the ethical significance of particular details may have shifted. In practice, consent forms and data management plans should guide later access decisions and leave room for renewed judgment about whether, and in what form, interviews, recordings, transcripts, or contextual details can circulate responsibly.

The CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance provide another resource for specifying what responsible openness requires. They are useful here because they were developed in relation to dominant data-governance conversations, including FAIR-oriented frameworks that focus on the findability, accessibility, interoperability, and reusability of data (Wilkinson et al., 2016). FAIR provides an important vocabulary for describing the technical and infrastructural conditions that support data discovery and reuse. CARE extends this conversation by foregrounding collective benefit, authority to control, responsibility, and ethics (Carroll et al., 2020). For qualitative L2 research, this distinction matters because ethically responsible circulation depends on the people and relationships implicated in data, as well as on the accessibility of the materials themselves. A CARE-informed openness decision asks who benefits from wider circulation, who can shape the conditions of reuse, and what obligations remain after publication. CARE clarifies why responsible openness is not a single outcome: sometimes it means expanding access, because wider circulation benefits participants or communities; sometimes it means conditional reuse, because authority over interpretation matters; and in other cases it means delaying release or refusing outright, because risks change over time or circulation itself could cause harm.

Decolonial and Indigenous scholarship adds a second layer to this by clarifying why authority over circulation and the legitimacy of refusal matter for qualitative research (Jules et al., 2026). These traditions challenge the assumption that knowledge generated through research automatically belongs to researchers, institutions, or a generalized public, especially in contexts shaped by extraction, surveillance, and epistemic inequality (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Visibility can matter to participants for reasons beyond the study itself, such as recognition among peers, a wider audience for their language practices, or a public record of experiences and claims they want on record. Others may view circulation as risky, appropriative, or misaligned with local priorities. The central issue is who participates in decisions about sharing, attribution,

interpretation, restriction, and withdrawal. Refusal thus operates as ethical boundary-setting that can make circulation more accountable (Page, 2025; Tuck & Yang, 2014). In practice, this authority may be enacted through participant review of excerpts, negotiated anonymity or attribution, reuse conditions, limits on contextual detail, and decisions to keep selected materials outside public repositories.

The two vignettes do not draw on this framework in the same way. Vignette 1 turns primarily on relational responsibility and CARE-informed authority, where participants' circumstances shift over time, and the question is who controls the terms of reuse as a funder's expectations conflict with a researcher's ongoing judgment about disclosure. In that case, no refusal occurs. What happens instead is a differentiated form of sharing. Vignette 2 turns on circulation risk and refusal as boundary-setting, conditions under which access is no longer voluntary or academic at all. In this vignette, Luis Javier's positionality and long-standing relationships with Cuban communities inform the assessment of circulation risk and the ethical case for refusal. This does not mean that only researchers with comparable positionalities may refuse access; rather, the grounds for refusal must be situated in, and proportionate to, the relationships, risks, and conditions of circulation in each study. As seen here, the framework's dimensions are not activated uniformly across cases. Each case determines which forms of judgment matter most.

The implication for qualitative L2 research is that responsible openness should be evaluated through the quality of accountable judgment, with public access understood as one possible outcome among several. Researchers can make this judgment visible by specifying the materials selected for circulation, the forms of access attached to them, the contextual and translation choices that shape interpretation, and the reasons for limiting, delaying, or withholding particular materials. This reasoning allows a study to remain transparent even when participant data are kept private. Refusal counts as transparency only when it is documented and reasoned; an unexplained absence of data is not equivalent to a justified decision not to share it. Transparency can be demonstrated through accounts of consent negotiations, analytic procedures, redaction decisions, translation choices, access restrictions, community consultation, and rationales for non-sharing. Restraint, understood like this, becomes one condition of ethical openness because it makes the terms of circulation explicit. In Table 1, we present the framework as a set of decision points that qualitative L2 researchers, reviewers, institutions, and funders can use when evaluating whether, how, and under what conditions openness is warranted.

Recognizing and redistributing the work of responsible openness

Table 1 organizes responsible openness into decision points, but each point requires work that can disappear from view when OS is discussed mainly through policies, repositories, or badges. In qualitative L2 research, this work may include writing consent language that distinguishes publication from archiving, identifying details that become traceable across languages, deciding whether a university or city name should be generalized, preparing an analytic memo in place of a transcript, or drafting an access rationale that explains why some materials remain restricted. These tasks require technical competence, interpretive judgment, familiarity with the social worlds represented in the data, and time. Existing research has documented barriers to OS related to skills, resources, and infrastructure (Klebel et al., 2025), and qualitative data-sharing scholarship has emphasized the difficulty of making qualitative materials meaningful and safe for reuse (Lamb et al., 2024). For multilingual, displacement-related,

Table 1. A decision framework for responsible openness in qualitative L2 research

Framework dimension	Guiding question	What this may look like in practice	Possible openness outcome
Circulation risk	What harms may emerge as materials move across audiences, languages, infrastructures, or political contexts?	Mapping possible audiences, reassessing political or institutional sensitivity, and identifying details that may become traceable over time	Delayed access, controlled access, selected sharing, documented risk rationale
Relational responsibility	Which participant circumstances, relationships, or risks should be revisited before access is granted?	Revisiting consent before archiving, reassessing contextual identifiers, consulting participants about future circulation, and using layered consent options	Revised consent, participant-shaped access, selected excerpts, limited circulation
CARE-informed authority	Who benefits from access, and who shapes the conditions of reuse?	Participant or community review, reuse conditions, data-use agreements, participant-facing summaries, documentation of obligations after publication	Controlled access, conditional sharing, community-shaped circulation
Context and interpretation	What contextual information supports interpretation, and which details heighten identifiability?	Redacting locations, altering institutional details, explaining translation choices, providing analytic memos or protocols	Contextualized excerpts, metadata sharing, analytic transparency, and modified identifiers
Refusal and boundary-setting	Which materials should remain outside circulation, and how should that decision be justified?	Withholding sensitive narratives, declining repository deposit, documenting reasons for non-sharing, explaining why access would create disproportionate risk	Ethical refusal, restricted access, transparent justification for closure
Institutional support	What support is needed to make openness responsible rather than merely compliant?	Ethics consultation, legal or data-protection advice, secure repositories, workload recognition, reviewer and funder guidance	Supported decision-making, justified limits, and accountable documentation

Note: This table is intended as a heuristic for ethical decision-making. The appropriate form of openness will vary by study, participants, data type, and conditions of circulation, and a given study is unlikely to engage every dimension equally. Some projects will draw mainly on relational responsibility and CARE-informed authority; others will turn on circulation risk or refusal.

classroom-based, or politically sensitive projects, the central issue is whether circulation has been made ethically defensible.

One practical mechanism for documenting some of the ethical and interpretive work involved in access decisions is an ethical access statement. Such a statement would explain which materials are shared, which materials are restricted, what alternatives to public sharing were considered, and how participants’ interests shaped the final access decision. It could also specify whether consent covered future reuse, whether contextual

identifiers were modified, whether translation affected participant review, and whether controlled access, delayed release, metadata sharing, or non-sharing was selected. Such a statement would give reviewers, editors, funders, and readers a concrete basis for evaluating openness without treating public data release as the default measure of transparency. It would also allow researchers to document restraint as part of scholarly accountability. Instead of simply stating that data cannot be shared, the researcher shows how the decision was made, which risks were considered, and why the selected form of openness fits the study.

Institutional support should follow the full timeline of openness decisions and not end at initial ethics approval. Research offices and ethics boards could offer consultation before data collection, when consent and future circulation are being explained; before archiving, when materials are being selected, redacted, translated, or withheld; and before publication, when access statements and data availability language are finalized. This support could include templates for layered consent, examples of ethical access statements, guidance for documenting non-sharing, legal or data-protection advice, secure storage options, and access to staff familiar with qualitative, multilingual, and politically sensitive data. Shahiwala et al.'s (2026) CLEAR-Qual framework offers one model worth adapting. Their tiered participant-informed consent form separates permissions into independently selectable categories, covering recording, data sharing, and future reuse, so that participants retain ongoing, granular control. Editable templates of this kind, alongside data-use agreements that formalize terms for secondary access, reduce the burden on individual researchers to build layered consent infrastructure from scratch. Institutions can also recognize ethical data preparation as research labor in workload models, grant reporting, and promotion materials. These changes would preserve researchers' ethical judgment and give them stronger support for making and justifying careful decisions.

Funders, journals, and reviewers also shape whether responsible openness is feasible. Funders can permit data management plans that include controlled access, embargoes, metadata-only sharing, or justified non-sharing, and they can budget for the labor required to make these options viable, including translation review, redaction, participant consultation, secure storage, and repository fees. Journals can invite ethical access statements in place of generic data availability language when qualitative materials cannot be publicly released. Reviewers can evaluate the clarity of the access rationale, the fit between data type and sharing decision, and the extent to which participant interests, political context, and reuse risks were considered. These practices preserve the values of transparency and accountability and recognize that responsible openness in qualitative L2 research may be achieved through carefully justified limits as well as through public sharing.

Conclusion: Toward responsible openness in qualitative L2 research

Open qualitative L2 research has transformative potential when openness is treated as an ethical practice of circulation and not as a single technical outcome, which we have called circulation ethics. The two vignettes in this commentary show why circulation ethics cannot be applied the same way in every case: the Ukrainian-refugee vignette turns on relational responsibility and CARE-informed authority, and the Cuba vignette turns on circulation risk and refusal as boundary-setting. The framework's dimensions are not activated equally; a study's circumstances determine which forms of judgment are most appropriate and fitting. The two vignettes combined show what qualitative inquiry can contribute to OS by providing a vocabulary for treating access and

accountability as separate questions. Visibility does not guarantee responsibility, and sharing is not the same as ethically justified circulation.

Responsible openness requires practices that make ethical reasoning visible, including layered consent, participant consultation, careful redaction, controlled access, delayed release, metadata-only sharing, contextualized excerpts, ethical access statements, and principled refusal when circulation would create disproportionate risk. These practices also require institutions, funders, journals, and reviewers to support the labor such decisions involve. A qualitative L2 study can demonstrate transparency even when some underlying materials remain restricted, provided that its access rationale is clear, its contextualization is careful, and its limits are accounted for. No single actor can make this shift alone; it depends on the shared support among researchers, institutions, funders, journals, and reviewers described above. Open qualitative L2 research can therefore shift what counts as evidence of openness, from the volume of materials released to the integrity of the decisions that govern their circulation. The ethical work of openness lies in remaining answerable for what is shared, what is withheld, and the consequences of both.

Data availability statement. This study did not involve the novel creation, generation, or analysis of primary research materials. All relevant literature is cited in the References.

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