Ensuring Trustworthiness in Autoethnographic Research in Applied Linguistics: Criticisms and Coping Strategies

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Article info	Abstract
	This paper critically examines the concept of trustworthiness in autoethnographic research, a qualitative approach often challenged on various methodological and epistemological grounds. It begins with a personal narrative, illustrating how autoethnography resonates deeply with the author's academic and professional identity. The paper then engages with four recurring critiques frequently directed at autoethnographic work, namely invisible data, over-subjectivity, misrepresentation of others, and navel-gazing. Each critique is explored in depth, followed by practical and theoretical strategies to mitigate its impact. These include data triangulation, reflexive questioning, collaborative validation, ethical representation, and alignment with established qualitative research criteria. Drawing on constructivist epistemologies, the study argues that when handled rigorously, personal experience can serve as a legitimate and valuable source of knowledge. The paper concludes with implications for both autoethnographers and critics, advocating for more reflexive, transparent, and dialogic practices that elevate the scholarly value of autoethnography while preserving its distinctive voice and transformative potential.

My Story

When I first arrived in Istanbul, I came as a practitioner – someone who saw their identity rooted in the classroom. My daily life revolved around students, lesson plans, and practical concerns. I had done research before, but not with the seriousness or depth I would soon come to embrace. Back then, I used to tell myself, "I'm a teacher first. Research? That's for the academics."

But my new university had other ideas. It actively encouraged faculty research, not in a superficial, checkbox kind of way, but through meaningful incentives: research grants, publication bonuses, time off for writing. These weren't just perks, they were an invitation. I remember thinking, "If the system is making space for this, maybe it's time I make space for it too."

At first, I approached it out of duty. But slowly, research started to feel less like an obligation and more like an opening – a way to understand the deeper layers of my professional and personal journey. I found myself scribbling ideas on the margins of my notebooks, recording fleeting thoughts during quiet commutes, and wondering, "Why haven't I looked at this part of my experience more closely before?" However, academic writing still felt like an alien language – structured, distant, and rigid.

Then I discovered qualitative research and with it, a sense of belonging. It was what I had been seeking: not the cold certainty of numbers and figures (an essential part of science and knowledge which doesn't resonate with me), but the richness of ideas, the subtlety of voices, and the texture of lived experience. In this space, I began to feel more at home within the academy, particularly in the realms of applied linguistics and second language teacher education. As my confidence grew, so did my contributions. I began to write, to question, and to publish – work that now finds form in publications such as Kamali (2025), Kamali and Javahery (2024a, 2024b), Kamali et al. (2024), and Kamali et al. (2025), among others.

While my passion for qualitative research runs deep, I yearned for a form that embraced greater freedom and fluidity. Yet, nestled within me was another longing – a profound affection for literature. Novels, poetry, memoirs: these were never mere diversions, but vital lifelines sustaining my spirit. Often, in quiet moments, I found myself pondering: Might there be a way to weave this love of storytelling into the fabric of scholarly inquiry? Then, as if in answer to this inner quest, I encountered the concept of autoethnography. The more I read, the more something clicked. It was as if someone had written a method just for people like me. "Wait," I remember whispering to myself, "you mean I can write about my own life, reflect deeply, explore cultural meaning, and still call it research?" It felt revolutionary.

Autoethnography let me bring everything I cared about into one frame. It allowed me to write honestly, vulnerably - even poetically - while remaining

within the realm of scholarly work. I thought, "This is it. This is what I've been searching for."

I began to dive deeper. And that's when I found the work of Bedrettin Yazan. His voice was different – warm, reflective, and at the same time, sharply analytical. His narratives didn't just share experiences; they interpreted them in ways that illuminated broader cultural and educational truths. I remember reading one of his articles late at night and saying out loud, "This is what I want to do. This is how I want to write."

And that's how I arrived here – somewhere between teaching and telling, reflection and research. not through a neatly planned academic trajectory, but through moments of quiet recognition. I didn't find autoethnography. It found me. Or maybe, I was just finally ready to listen to the part of myself that had been asking all along, "What if your story is enough?"

1. Introduction

The emergence of autoethnography in applied linguistics and TESOL, while not entirely novel (e.g., Canagarajah, 2012; Park, 2014), has gained momentum in recent years. Its roots can be traced back to earlier calls for more reflexive, narrative-driven inquiry within the field. Notably, Mirhosseini (2018) urged scholars to embrace what he described as a "less-treaded path" (p. 76), inviting researchers to draw from their lived experiences to challenge dominant paradigms and expand the epistemological boundaries of the discipline. More recently, autoethnography has been recognized as a promising and innovative approach within the future of applied linguistics, TESOL, and teacher education (Kamali et al., 2024), offering a critical space for situated, context-sensitive knowledge construction.

Although definitions of autoethnography vary, one of the most comprehensive and widely cited formulations is offered by Adams et al. (2016, pp.1-2), who conceptualized it as

a research method that:

- Uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences.
- Acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others.
- Uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as reflexivity—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political.
- Shows 'people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles.' (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111)
- Balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity.
- Strives for social justice and to make life better.

Autoethnography is characterized by what Chang (2008, p. 48) refers to as a "triadic balance," encompassing three integral elements: auto (the self), ethno (culture), and graphy (writing). For a study to qualify as autoethnographic, it must maintain this balance by aligning itself methodologically with ethnographic practices, interpretively with cultural analysis, and substantively with autobiographical content. This approach enables researchers to delve into their own lived experiences, employing introspection and reflexive thinking to deepen their understanding of their behaviors and interactions within cultural contexts (e.g., Kamali, 2023; Kessler, 2023).

Various terms have been used in the literature to describe what is commonly known as autoethnography, including autobiographical ethnography, auto-observation, autopathography, critical autobiography,

emotional narratives of the self, ethnobiography, ethnographic autobiography, ethnographic memoir, and ethnographic poetics, among others (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000, pp. 739–740). Despite this range of terminology, the core concept remains consistent across these labels. To borrow from Shakespeare's timeless reflection on naming, "What's in a name? that which we call a rose. By any other name would smell as sweet" (Shakespeare, 2005, Act 2, Scene 2). For clarity, this paper will use the term autoethnography to refer to this broad and multifaceted approach. Additionally, autoethnography encompasses multiple forms, such as analytic (Anderson, 2006), critical (Yazan, 2019), evocative (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), narrative (Berger, 2001), poetic (Yang et al., 2024), performative (Sughrua, 2020), and reflexive (Grant, 2020), among others, each with its distinct focus and style.

Autoethnography serves multiple purposes as a qualitative research method. One of its primary appeals is the opportunity it provides for researchers to critically explore and make sense of specific personal experiences within broader cultural or institutional frameworks. "An autoethnographer may have a specific subject-area in mind that they hope to reflect upon and understand." (Kessler, 2023, p. 3). This reflective focus often stems from a desire to gain clarity on complex, identity-shaping situations. For instance, Wall (2006) employed autoethnography to unpack the difficulties she encountered as a doctoral student attempting to assimilate into the academic community, highlighting how personal narrative can illuminate institutional challenges. In a similar vein, Koay (2023) adopted autoethnography to examine his responses to various professional development initiatives, both self-initiated and those mandated by his institution. His findings emphasized the more meaningful impact of self-directed professional development activities, underscoring how autoethnographic inquiry can offer insights into one's evolving professional identity and learning preferences. Through such personalized yet culturally situated accounts, autoethnography produces rich, nuanced understandings of individual experience and also contributes to broader discourses within education, identity, and institutional practice (Yazan, 2024).

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is a major consideration (Riazi et al., 2024), and autoethnography often challenges its conventional understandings, which are typically framed around criteria such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Ellis et al., 2011). These traditional markers of rigor present unique difficulties when applied to a research method as subjective and introspective as autoethnography, where the researcher is both the investigator and the subject (Miyahara & Fukao, 2022). A central challenge in ensuring trustworthiness in autoethnography is the balance between personal subjectivity and academic rigor. Autoethnography invites researchers to explore their own experiences, often offering rich,

nuanced insights into cultural, social, and psychological phenomena. However, this introspective approach also raises concerns regarding bias (Poerwandari, 2021), selective memory (Muncey, 2005), and the researcher's dual role (Miyahara & Fukao, 2022), which can lead to questions about the credibility of the data. Another significant challenge is the ethical dimension of autoethnography. Since the research often involves not just the researcher's personal experiences but also interactions with others, ethical issues surrounding consent, privacy, and representation are paramount (Edwards, 2021). In addition to questions of trustworthiness and ethics, autoethnography also faces criticism from both ethnographers and autobiographers regarding its methodological and literary legitimacy. Ethnographers often view autoethnographic research as lacking in methodological rigor, theoretical grounding, and analytical depth, while autobiographers tend to see it as insufficiently literary or artistically compelling. Chang (2008) also mentioned five potential pitfalls that autoethnographers need to be careful about:

> (1) excessive focus on self in isolation from others; (2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation; (3) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source; (4) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; and (5) inappropriate application of the label 'autoethnography.' (Chang, 2008, p. 54)

Autoethnography is also sometimes criticized as a "personal blog" (Yazan, 2024, p. 20) rather than a legitimate scholarly endeavor. Such critiques often stem from the genre's heavy reliance on personal narrative and subjective experience, which some view as incompatible with traditional expectations of objectivity and generalizability in academic research. This perspective, however, overlooks the methodological depth and theoretical grounding that many autoethnographic studies demonstrate, as well as their potential to illuminate complex sociocultural phenomena through the lens of lived experience.

Rather than trying to reconcile these opposing critiques, autoethnographers have positioned their work as part of an alternative paradigm that challenges traditional research conventions. The aim of autoethnography is not merely to achieve factual precision but to produce meaningful, socially engaged scholarship that is accessible, personally transformative, and capable of fostering change in the wider world (Holman Jones, 2005). This transformative and justice-oriented ethos has contributed to the growing appeal of autoethnography across the social sciences, including its emergence as a valuable methodological approach in TESOL research.

Nonetheless, there have been some attempts to address these criticisms. One of the attempts to overcome these criticisms was the advent of duoethnography, which is sometimes referred to as "co-ethnography,

collective autoethnography, co/autoethnographic, collaborative autoethnography, community autoethnography, and community-based ethnography" (Yazan, 2024, p. 26). Chang et al (2013) preferred collaborative autoethnography and described the as: "(1) collective exploration of researcher subjectivity; (2) power-sharing among researcher-participants; (3) efficiency and enrichment in the research process; (4) deeper learning about self and other; and (5) community building" (pp. 25–30).

Against this background, the focus of this paper is primarily on the academic rigor and trustworthiness, as these issues are central to ongoing debates about the credibility and scholarly value of autoethnographic research. By critically examining the standards of methodological rigor, transparency, and validity within autoethnography, this paper aims to demonstrate how such work can meet established criteria of academic scholarship. Addressing these concerns is essential to legitimize autoethnography within the broader research community and to provide researchers with practical guidance on ensuring that their autoethnographic inquiries maintain intellectual rigor and produce trustworthy, impactful knowledge.

2. Criticisms of Trustworthiness in Autoethnographic Research and Coping Strategies

This section identifies and critically examines four key criticisms of trustworthiness in autoethnographic research, drawing attention to methodological concerns that often challenge the credibility and scholarly value of such work. Central to these criticisms is the inherent tension between personal authority and academic scrutiny, which complicates the balance between subjective experience and objective evaluation. For each criticism, I propose practical and theoretical strategies to mitigate its impact, emphasizing reflexivity, transparency, and methodological rigor. By addressing these challenges head-on, this section aims to contribute to the development of more robust and credible autoethnographic practices.

2.1. Criticism 1: Invisible Data

One of the most persistent criticisms of autoethnographic research concerns the inaccessibility of its data sources. Unlike conventional empirical studies that rely on publicly verifiable datasets or participant transcripts, autoethnography often draws upon internal and deeply personal recollections, such as memories, emotions, reflections, and embodied experiences. Critics argue that this reliance on introspective data undermines the trustworthiness of the research, as no one except the autoethnographer has direct access to these sources. As Yazan (2024) notes, this has led some to dismiss autoethnography as akin to a "personal blog" (p. 20), questioning its validity within academic discourse.

2.2. Strategy 1

However, this apparent threat to trustworthiness can be addressed through deliberate methodological strategies. One such strategy is data triangulation, which allows the autoethnographer to substantiate introspective insights with multiple forms of evidence. These may include written memoirs, archived field notes, analytic memos, Critical Autoethnographic Narratives (CANs), photographs, institutional documents, and even correspondence such as emails or journal entries. These data sources serve not only to enhance the transparency of the research process but also to ground subjective reflections in a broader, more verifiable context. For example, a recalled classroom incident might be supported by contemporaneous lesson plans, supervisor feedback, or reflective journal entries (e.g., Egitim & Watson, 2024; Kessler, 2024; Park, 2013), thereby reinforcing the credibility of the narrative.

2.3. Strategy 2

A second, more philosophical strategy reframes the issue not as a threat, but as an epistemological strength of autoethnography (Chang, 2008). In contrast to traditional paradigms that separate the knower from the known, autoethnography assumes that the researcher's perspective is not a liability but a resource. Who is better positioned to interpret a lived experience than the person who lived it? From this perspective, the autoethnographer becomes both the researcher and the researched (Miyahara & Fukao, 2022), bringing unique interpretive authority to their narrative. Rather than attempting to simulate objectivity, this approach emphasizes reflexivity, positionality, and the relational nature of meaning-making, aligning with constructivist and poststructural paradigms of inquiry. This reframing aligns with constructivist and interpretivist epistemologies, which view knowledge as co-constructed and context-dependent.

In sum, while the private nature of autoethnographic data presents challenges to conventional notions of trustworthiness, these challenges can be addressed both methodologically and philosophically. Triangulation offers empirical reinforcement, while reflexive interpretation highlights the value of insider knowledge. Together, these approaches help reframe private data not as a flaw to be corrected, but as a distinctive feature that, when handled rigorously, can offer deeply insightful and trustworthy autoethnographic research.

2.4. Criticism 2: Over-subjectivity

One of the central critiques of autoethnographic research concerns its inherent subjectivity, as the data are typically interpreted through the lens of a single individual: the autoethnographer. This perspective risks confirmation bias, where the researcher may unconsciously favor interpretations that support

their own views or experiences, potentially limiting the study's validity and raising concerns about *epistemic injustice* (Fricker, 2007, 2016).

2.5. Strategy 1

To mitigate these challenges, researchers can adopt a variety of reflective and collaborative strategies that enrich interpretation and promote trustworthiness, one of which involves annotating written data with clarification questions and critical reflections. Consider the initial autoethnographic narrative presented at the beginning of this paper as an illustrative example. By reading the passage, stating, "But my new university had other ideas. It actively encouraged faculty research…" one can pose several probing questions: "What are the underlying reasons for the institution's emphasis on publication? Could there be political or ideological motivations influencing this encouragement?" By systematically revisiting and interrogating their narratives, autoethnographers can challenge initial assumptions, identify inconsistencies, and reveal deeper layers of meaning. This iterative process fosters greater self-awareness and reflexivity, encouraging the researcher to consider alternative explanations or counter-narratives within their data rather than taking their initial interpretations at face value (Yazan et al., 2023).

2.6. Strategy 2

A second complementary strategy is to engage in collaborative ethnography (e.g., Truong & Nguyen, 2024; Zhu et al., 2022), or at least seek peer feedback on narratives. By inviting colleagues or mentors to review and question the researcher's interpretations, the process becomes more dialogical and less insular. Peers can provide fresh perspectives, highlight blind spots, and prompt the autoethnographer to substantiate claims with more evidence or reconsider subjective biases. This communal scrutiny supports epistemic justice by democratizing the interpretation process, helping to balance personal insights with intersubjective verification.

Together, these strategies (rigorous self-questioning and peer collaboration) address the epistemological concerns surrounding subjectivity in autoethnography. They help transform the autoethnographer's voice into a credible academic inquiry, where personal experiences are contextualized within broader scholarly conversations and critically examined for validity and fairness.

2.7. Criticism 3: Otherness

One of the subtle yet significant challenges to trustworthiness in autoethnographic research is accurately representing others. These others may share similar experiences with the researcher ("others of similarity") or take opposing roles ("others of opposition") (Chang, 2008, p. 26). In either case,

their presence in the autoethnographer's story is often unavoidable, especially when narrating relational experiences central to identity and transformation.

The issue lies in the fact that these individuals are interpreted and portrayed solely through the researcher's lens. As such, they are vulnerable to reductive characterizations, omissions, or biased attributions. When a narrative centers on personal transformation or conflict, these others can easily be presented as foils or background figures, not as autonomous subjects. This one-sided representation can reduce trust in the narrative and raise concerns about fairness, particularly if the reader perceives a lack of complexity.

Moreover, when the autoethnographer shares identifiable stories involving colleagues, family, or students, the boundary between private reflection and public accountability becomes blurred, Chang (2008, p. 56) acknowledges the difficulty: "Because main characters reveal their identities in autoethnography, it is extremely difficult to fully protect others intimately connected to these known characters." Though ethical in nature, this concern also relates directly to the credibility and relational validity of the study.

2.8. Strategy 1

Autoethnographers can enhance trustworthiness by combining ethical sensitivity with methodological strategies that promote balance and fairness. First, they can draw on ethical research principles to guide their representational choices. As Adams et al. (2016, p. 56) state, there are three elements we need to consider:

- Respect for persons, which means we must treat research participants as autonomous persons and acquire their consent to participate in our research projects or provide protections for persons who have diminished autonomy, including seeking consent from their guardians to participate in research
- Beneficence, which means we must work to ensure participants' well-being by doing no harm and maximizing possible benefits of the research for participants, including protecting their identities
- Justice, which means we must work to ensure a fair distribution of research benefits and burdens.

These principles can guide not only ethical but also trust-building decisions, such as anonymizing identities, negotiating representation, and discussing the inclusion of others' voices with care and consent.

2.9. Strategy 2

Second, researchers may involve peers or collaborators in the meaning-making process. Peer reviewers or collaborators can be invited to read and respond to key narratives, ask clarifying questions, or raise concerns about fairness and framing. This dialogic approach not only brings alternative

perspectives into the account but also prevents overgeneralization or misrepresentation of others' experiences.

By combining ethical mindfulness with reflective and dialogic strategies, autoethnographers can move toward more trustworthy portrayals of relational experiences without sacrificing narrative integrity.

2.10. Criticism 4: Navel-gazing

One of the most persistent criticisms of autoethnographic research is the charge of "navel-gazing", that it is overly self-indulgent, introspective to a fault, and lacking the rigor or systematic structure expected in academic inquiry. Such critiques often question the methodological validity of autoethnography, suggesting that it prioritizes personal emotion over analytical clarity and narrative over evidence.

This perception poses a challenge to the trustworthiness of the work, as readers unfamiliar with or skeptical of qualitative paradigms may perceive it as anecdotal rather than empirically grounded. The issue becomes particularly acute when the writing lacks transparency in how experiences were selected, interpreted, and woven into broader cultural or theoretical contexts.

2.11. Strategy 1

To respond to this threat, methodological transparency is essential. Autoethnographers can bolster trust by explicitly documenting their research process. This includes specifying how memory-based data were revisited or supplemented (e.g., with journals, lesson plans, or feedback sessions), how narratives were constructed, and what theoretical lenses guided the analysis. Making visible the iterative movement between self, culture, and theory helps demonstrate that the work is both reflective and rigorously analytic. Peer engagement offers an external layer of validation, too. Sharing drafts with trusted colleagues, mentors, or critical friends – especially those outside the immediate research context – generates constructive feedback. Such dialogic interaction ensures that the work is not sealed within a solipsistic frame but is tested against broader interpretations. Feedback from a community of practice also enables refinement of tone, structure, and analytical clarity, helping to avoid the risk of unchecked subjectivity.

2.12. Strategy 2

The study needs to be grounded in established criteria for evaluating qualitative research. Ellis et al. (2011) suggested that high-quality autoethnography should include evocative writing, researcher vulnerability, intellectual contribution, and resonance with readers. These criteria highlight that emotional engagement and personal insight do not undermine trustworthiness; rather, they are vital components of how autoethnography makes knowledge meaningful. Demonstrating how the narrative meets such standards can validate the work both within and beyond the autoethnographic

community. By combining methodological clarity, evaluative criteria, and collaborative critique, autoethnographers can reframe the *navel-gazing* accusation as a misreading of a genre that is both introspective and methodologically robust. This not only strengthens the credibility of the work but also affirms its academic legitimacy.

3. Conclusion

Like all autoethnographers, I have faced all these criticisms while conducting my own autoethnographic studies. I encountered the difficulty of relying on deeply personal memories and emotions (Muncey, 2005), which some critics argue make the data *invisible* or inaccessible (Yazan, 2024). To address this, I supported my reflections with artifacts such as CANs, curriculum, and feedback, as well as reflective journals, grounding my narrative in tangible evidence and thereby enhancing trustworthiness (Kamali, 2023). Subjectivity was another challenge I faced (Adams et al., 2016). It was easy to fall into confirmation bias, interpreting experiences through my own lens. To counter this, I embraced reflexivity by critically questioning my assumptions and seeking peer feedback (Kamali, under review). This dialogue helped me broaden my perspective and strengthen the credibility of my interpretations. Representing others fairly in my stories required careful ethical consideration. I aimed to protect their identities while maintaining relational integrity, often consulting mentors to lead this sensitive balance. Finally, I wrestled with the accusation of *navel-gazing*, which challenged the academic legitimacy of my work. By maintaining methodological transparency and linking personal narrative to theory, I demonstrated that autoethnography is both deeply personal and rigorously analytic (Kamali, 2023). This journey taught me that despite its challenges, autoethnography offers a powerful way to create meaningful and trustworthy research grounded in lived experience.

All in all, autoethnography is not the only way of doing research, but it is an alternative way. Therefore, although I believe that autoethnographers should strive to enhance the trustworthiness of their work, critics, too, must learn to see its gifts – the kind of insight that only lived experience can offer, the depth of meaning that emerges when one turns inward with honesty and care. Autoethnography invites us to listen closely, not only to others, but to ourselves. It reminds us that research can be tender, imperfect, and still true. That knowledge can come from our stories wrapped in memory, voice, and silence. And "What if our story is enough?"

Acknowledgements

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