CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ethics and Applied Linguistics Research

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This chapter is situated within the larger and irreversible trend towards analysing ethical practices in applied linguistics, given the field's enduring commitment to addressing and resolving language-based problems in the real world (Bygate 2005). Indeed, most applied linguists would not disagree with the core principles of (1) respect for persons, (2) yielding optimal benefits while minimizing harm and (3) justice. Put simply, they are generally committed to an ethical protocol that averts harming research participants in any way. However, how applied linguists go about realizing these principles generally differ, and they are often influenced by the methodological paradigm they subscribe to, their training, the area of research in which they work, their individual personality and the macro and micro factors that shape their research process. Taking this constellation of factors into consideration, this chapter explores the distinction between macroethics and microethics before going on to address how ethical tensions can be addressed before, during and after the data-collection process.

Underlying assumptions

Ethics, according to Brown (2004), is 'an area where all research methods and techniques come together and tend to agree' (p. 498). Equally important to recognize is that what is considered ethical may vary from one researcher to the next. To some extent, what constitutes ethical research also depends on the research methods adopted, whether they are quantitative or qualitative, for example. As Kono (2013) puts it, 'if we consider the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research methods as a natural continuum, rather than an artificial dichotomy, we begin to see that each gradation of that continuum represents a different set of ethical questions' (p. 1). Looking at how ethics is interpreted from a paradigmatic perspective, however, Kubanyiova posits that a researcher working within the 'positivist paradigm tends to treat ethics in the same vein that is suggested in IRBs [Institutional Review Boards].[1] That is, ethical practice is ensured if rigorous procedures have been followed and ethical clearance obtained' (p. 2). By contrast, applied linguists working within a critical postmodernist paradigm would emphasize the values and ideologies of the researchers and issues of power surrounding the research process. On an ethical level, advocating for their participants and ensuring that social justice is served would be their primary objectives.

Admittedly, ethics can be examined from a variety of perspectives – quantitative versus qualitative (e.g. Kono 2013) – or along paradigmatic lines (Kubanyiova 2013; also Paltridge & Phakiti, this volume). A third way to explore ethics, while incorporating the first two approaches, is through a macroethical and microethical lens. Following Guillemin and Gillam (2004), Kubanyiova (2008) makes the distinction between *macroethics* and *microethics*. While the former refers to the 'procedural ethics of IRB protocols and ethical principles articulated in professional codes of conduct' (p. 505), the latter refers to 'everyday ethical dilemmas that arise from the specific roles and responsibilities that researchers and research participants adopt in specific research contexts' (p. 504). Building on this distinction, I have elected to use a macroethical/microethical lens to frame this chapter for two reasons. First, instruments used in applied linguistics straddle the qualitative/quantitative divide because a data collection tool such as an interview is used in both quantitative and qualitative research. Similarly, from an ethical perspective, the division between paradigms has become increasingly blurred. As observed by Phakiti (this volume), the potential influence of personal bias or values on research outcomes is also acknowledged by researchers working within a postpositivist paradigm and is thus not the sole reserve of postmodernist researchers. Second, in adopting such a lens to examine ethics in applied linguistics, it is my intention to emphasize that both macroethical and microethical concerns need to be addressed in a concerted manner at the start, during and at the end of the research process.

Macroethics and microethics

Much of the ethics literature to date seems to be influenced by macroethical concerns in that it offers guidelines, often described as *best practices*. According to Brown (2011), such practices have come under the increasing scrutiny of university-wide IRB protocols, which are also often aimed at protecting the institution as much as the research participants (Duff 2008). Further, field-specific applied linguistics journals have tried to complement IRB protocols by providing guidelines for contributors. Among the journals, *TESOL Quarterly* probably offers the most detailed informed consent guidelines. Guidelines for reporting quantitative research and three types of qualitative research also appear in *TESOL Quarterly* (see Chapelle & Duff 2003).

Applied linguists have also turned to professional organizations with their various statements on ethics for direction. For example, The British Association for Applied Linguistics'(BAAL) *Recommendations on good practice in Applied Linguistics* delineates the teaching, administrative and research responsibilities applied linguists have to manage in relation to the field of applied linguistics, sponsors, their own institutions and the public (BAAL 2006). BAAL's ethical guidelines have been adopted by the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA), who added an appendix to protect the linguistic rights of aboriginal and islander communities (ALAA 1998). In a similar vein, resolutions such as the *Resolution against Discrimination on the Basis of Accented Speech* (2011) passed by the membership of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) have also afforded applied linguists macroethical guidance.

As helpful as these guidelines have been in articulating good practices that ought to be adopted by applied linguists, the guidelines also need to be complemented by microethical governance, that is, actual examples of how to negotiate ethical dilemmas in specific research contexts (De Costa 2014; Kubanyiova 2008; Ngo, Bigelow & Lee 2014). Such insights are also in keeping with the reflexive turn in applied linguistics as observed by Kramsch and Whiteside (2007), who called for researcher positioning 'to be explicitly and systematically accounted for and placed in its historical, political, and symbolic context' (p. 918).

Techniques and instruments: Enacting ethical practices

Drawing on Creswell's (2013) framework for addressing ethical issues, I discuss the conduct of macro- and microethical practices over three phases: (1) prior to conducting and at the start of the study, (2) during data collection and data analysis and (3) reporting the data and publishing the study. Underpinning these practices is the need to maintain rigour throughout the research process, which includes adopting sound techniques and instruments.

Prior to conducting and at the start of the study

On a macroethical level, the protocols of university ethical review boards need to be observed. As mentioned, the primary concern of most ethical review boards is that respect for persons and minimal harm are observed. To some extent, meeting expectations has become increasingly harder to achieve as more research is conducted in digital domains. As asserted by Wang and Heffernan (2010) in their investigation of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) classes, CALL settings in particular are susceptible to having online security and learners' personal data disclosure compromised. These concerns surrounding online research are echoed by Ortega (2007), who questioned researchers' loitering or lurking into chat rooms as such actions constituted an infringement of participant privacy. There is also a growing concern over whether participants' virtual or real anonymity is protected in corpus research. For example, McEnery and Hardie (2011) observed that despite procedural ethics, examples of poor practice in corpus building, particularly with regard to protection of participants' anonymity, can still be found even in well-known corpora. In short, efforts need to be made to protect participant's confidentiality, especially in research contexts involving participants who can face tangible consequences of what they write or say.

Researchers also play a vital role in educating IRBs because not all cultural settings require the same forms of consent; as noted by Holliday (see Chapter 3), different settings require different degrees of formality, informality and understanding. Similarly, co-principal investigators in different institutions, especially at institutions in cross-national contexts, may need to be informed about the ethical protocol observed by the researcher's home institution and academic discipline. The latter context is particularly important when collaborating with a researcher from a different discipline. Finally, when seeking participant's consent, consent forms need to be made accessible and understandable by simplifying the language, translating forms into multiple languages and creating the option for oral consent, so that such consent is in compliance with local cultural practices.

On a microethical level, rather than rehearsing a description of the techniques and instruments related to the earlier chapters in this volume, I would like to reinforce several issues raised by other contributors to this book next. First, and following Phakiti (this volume), it is important that the instruments used be valid and reliable. Given that participants give up their time to take part in studies even though they may be compensated for their participation, it is essential that researchers be cognizant of the time allocated to conduct interviews and experiments, and to administer questionnaires. As Holliday (this volume) rightly observes, 'people will very likely have far more important things to do and think about than taking part in your research project' (p. 56). Hence, sufficient thought should also be given to data reduction; put differently, only data which address the research questions should be collected as implementing this practice will also ensure responsible data management later.

However, data-collection corners should not be cut too hastily either. With regard to tests, for example, Spolsky (1997) reminds us that tests may also have ethical limitations that are difficult to avoid, thus making it necessary to conduct multiple tests and use alternative methods. Relatedly, when designing tests, translation directions or the use of dictionaries should be prepared, and glossaries or use of simplified English provided because high-stakes tests can have various negative consequences on learners (Solórzano 2008). Similarly, the language used in interviews or questionnaires needs to be translated or at least be simplified to a level comprehensible to the respondents (see Wagner this volume).

One way to avert teething problems in general is to conduct a pilot study and minimize the ethical impact on participants. Such an impact is further reduced if the needs of participants are served. Put differently, among other things, acting ethically entails taking into account elements of social justice (Hafernik et al. 2002) when, for example, working with an under-researched population such as immigrant learners and heritage speakers of a non-English language (Ortega 2005). Hence, the effects of the research project need to be considered before embarking on the project, and this includes weighing the potential negative impact of treatments on participants when conducting experiments (see Gass this volume).

During data collection and data analysis

While pre-emptive measures can be taken to ensure that ethical practices are in place, the researcher also needs to adopt a flexible approach when dealing with ethical problems that may emerge in specific research contexts. In other words, a fluid disposition, that is, one which is perceptive to emergent circumstances, needs to be cultivated. For example, when administering a survey (see Wagner this volume), research bias needs to be factored in. This includes being aware that participants may (1) give answers that enhance their own standing (prestige bias), (2) provide responses that reflect how they would like to think of themselves as acting, rather than how they really act (self-deception bias), and (3) respond according to how they think the researcher wants them to respond (acquiescence bias).

Similarly, as noted by Talmy (2010), researchers conducting interviews ought to view interviews as more than just an instrument to collect data. Rather, they also need to see interviews as a form of a social practice where both the interviewer and the interviewee engage in acts of discursive positioning as each evaluates the other during the interview process, thereby mutually shaping the type of information that is yielded during the interview. In essence, to ensure that ethical practices are in place, the researcher would need to work on developing a relationship with his or her participants and treat the exchange as being more than a transaction. Underscoring the importance of building relationships with immigrant communities with whom they worked, Ngo, Bigelow and Lee (2014) point out that researchers should not consider immigrants only as participants that would serve their academic interests (i.e. being a variable in research studies); instead, they should build trust and design research in a way that would also benefit these communities. While their observation is illuminating and is reminiscent of Ortega's (2005) point that research should bear social utility, such a decision is not without ethical repercussions and responsibilities. Holliday (this volume) reminds us that it may be unfair to develop relationships within a research setting which cannot be sustained in their own terms. This exhortation is borne out in Lee (2011), who describes an ethical bind she found herself in. Even though she found out about racializations faced by her research participant, Lee was reluctant to help by raising this issue with her participant's colleagues and the school authorities due to her ethical duties of keeping the confidentiality of her participant. Thus, even though Lee followed procedural (macro)ethics, she concluded that individual researchers need to make situated, (micro)ethical decisions that supersede professional ethical codes.

Analysing data is also fraught with ethical demands. When analysing quantitative data, researchers need to select appropriate statistical tests (e.g. parametric or non-parametric) to answer research questions (Phakiti this volume). Knowing and understanding the logic behind statistical analysis and the standards for a particular statistical test may mean having to consider alternate types of analyses. For example, Plonsky et al. (2014) highlight that parametric analyses may not be appropriate for small samples and/or non-normally distributed data and recommend instead bootstrapping (Davison & Hinkley 1997), a non-parametric procedure that produces a more stable and statistically accurate outcome.[2] Emphasizing the importance of managing subjectivity in qualitative research, Holliday (this volume) underlines the need for transparency of method and recommends keeping a research diary throughout the whole process as well as following a four-step data analytic process that includes coding, determining themes, constructing an argument and going back to the data. In short, transparent, rigorous and informed data analyses contribute towards preserving the ethical fibre of research.

Reporting the data and publishing the study

Writing from the perspective of action research, Burns (this volume) urges researchers to consider if the ends and outcomes contribute towards educational improvement and to factor in to whom research findings will be disseminated upon project completion. Relatedly, but referring specially to the (macro)ethical guidelines for quantitative and qualitative research published in *TESOL Quarterly* mentioned earlier, Shohamy (2004) noted that these guidelines (see Chapelle & Duff 2003) did not focus on researchers' responsibility regarding the uses and misuses of research results. As observed by Shohamy, researchers generally think their tasks are complete when their research report or article is turned in or published; however, she warns about the potential abuse of research results, which may be used inappropriately by consumers for immoral and unethical purposes.

Indeed, while there is no foolproof way for researchers to prevent their work from being misappropriated, one possible way to evade this problem on a microethical level is to foreground the statistical and practical significance of one's findings. If anything, there have been increasing calls for quantitative researchers to highlight the statistical as well as practical significance of their work (Norris & Ortega 2006; Plonsky & Gass 2011).[3] As noted by Plonsky (2013), researchers regularly omit findings because they fail to reach statistical significance or because they contradict the expectations of the researcher. These practices, he added, introduce bias in the available literature and therefore prevent research from accurately informing L2 theory, practice and future research. By the same token, Phakiti (this volume) alerts us to the importance of the practical significance of research findings. As he explains, sometimes it is useful to know that there is no statistical significance because a non-statistical finding may confirm a theory by illustrating that two variables are not related. Thus, acting ethically entails taking note of the statistical and practical significance of quantitative findings, especially in light of the growing interest in research synthesis, which takes stock of accumulated evidence and seeks to provide conclusive assertions in a given domain of study (see Ortega this volume). Consequently, researchers need to act ethically towards other members of the research community by being more transparent when reporting their data and making their work available to other applied linguists. Such efforts include engaging in replication work and publishing supplementary materials on the online space provided by journals such as *Applied Linguistics* and *Language Learning* (Plonsky et al. 2014).

Another growing ethical concern that applied linguists have to contend with is the 'publish or perish' culture engulfing the academy today. In the wake of mounting pressure to publish, due diligence needs to be paid to plagiarism in the field (Hamp-Lyon 2009; Wen & Gao 2007) as well as issues surrounding co-authorship. Student–faculty collaborative research, in particular, is prone to abuse because a deserving junior researcher may be excluded from the author list or given less prominence than they should be. Equally controversial are the phenomena of *ghost authors* (i.e. those who contribute substantially but are not acknowledged as they are often paid by commercial sponsors), *guest authors* (i.e. those who do not make substantial contributions but are included as authors with the hope of increasing the chances of publication) and *gift authors* (i.e. those who are included on the basis of a tenuous affiliation with a study) (Council of Science Editors 2012). To some extent, the macroethical guidelines provided by IRB protocols and by the American Psychological Association (2010) need to be recognized. While the former generally requires researchers to declare any conflicts of interests with commercial sponsors, the latter offers insights on collaborative authorship. In a similar vein, journal guidelines have also been helpful in providing authors with direction on ethical conduct. For example, *The Modern Language Journal* explicitly states that it allows for the publication of articles previously published in another (i.e. non-English) language, while *Language Learning* requires authors to submit a cover letter providing background to the submission and to disclose any special circumstances that may raise potential ethical considerations. Further, *TESOL Quarterly* clearly states that it is the author's responsibility to indicate to the editor the existence of any work already published, or under review elsewhere. In sum, it is crucial that authors balance these macroethical guidelines with reflexive microethical practices when it comes to publishing. Ultimately, authors need to be wary of taking on too many writing commitments and overextending themselves. Such a course of action could result in unnecessary delays to other collaborators and/or result in work of a compromised quality which, in turn, could result in a skewed representation of the author's participants. In the long run, hurried and sloppy scholarship only creates room for further misinterpretation by consumers of the research.

A sample study

De Costa (2014) illustrates the ethical problems encountered during a year-long ethnographic study in an English-medium school in Singapore. My study explored how a group of immigrant students was discursively positioned in the school and examined the impact their positioning had on their learning outcomes.

Prior to conducting and at the start of the study

After obtaining the approval of the Ministry of Education in Singapore, I approached the principal of a school, Orchid Girls' Secondary School (OGSS, a pseudonym). Upon securing her support and that of my teacher and student participants, I applied for IRB approval from the US university to which I was affiliated at the time of the study and distributed consent forms. My participants were also given the option to withdraw at any point of the study without penalty, if they desired. In reciprocation for their participation, I helped implement a lesson study professional development project for the teachers. For my student participants, I provided supplementary English lessons to my focal students, organized fieldtrips and furnished them with information about the Singapore education system. In short, I positioned myself as a 'researcher as resource' (Sarangi & Candlin 2003, p. 279).

During data collection and data analysis

I was on-site at OGSS for the entire school year, which allowed for a persistent and prolonged engagement with my participants. My enduring presence in the school earned me insider status within OGSS and helped offset any hasty and preliminary generalizations. Further, my holistic understanding of my research site was enhanced by having multiple data sources: observations, interviews, audio- and video-recorded classroom interactions and artefacts.

I was also reflexive about the need to exercise an *ethics of care* (Kubanyiova 2008), and to avoid taking advantage of the hospitality of teachers, who had punishing work schedules, I made it a point not to turn up for every lesson. Instead, lesson observations were staggered, and ample notice was given to participating teachers before turning up for their class. To ensure that a distancing stance from my participants was maintained, I took occasional timeouts (Emerson et al. 2011) from my research and participated in other activities at OGSS. Such timeouts insulated me from empathizing too much with my immigrant participants or becoming overly critical of their teachers.

Classroom interactions were also video-recorded. To reduce any tensions between my focal immigrant participants and their Singaporean peers, who viewed the immigrant students as the 'Other', I decided to only videotape the teacher and my focal students while they were delivering class presentations. To capture more interactions involving my focal learners and the teachers and their Singaporean peers, I switched to and purchased five audio recorders with a lapel microphone for my focal students. This decision was made to respect the wishes of some of the Singaporean students, who felt uncomfortable being videotaped.

In order to problematize the status and nature of the interview and consider how these interactions constitute relations of power (Talmy 2010), any mention of 'positioning' or 'identity' was omitted from the interview questions. There was thus a conscious attempt to maintain a difference between my research questions (which were related to positioning) and my interview questions. These interviews were also held at a time that was convenient for my participants. To preserve confidentiality, closed rooms were used for the interviews. Ethical care was also taken when collecting personal artefacts like student journals. For example, in order to accommodate a student's request to protect her privacy, I did not read certain sections of her journal, which she had stapled closed.

Given that data analysis was also conducted during the data-collection process, I cycled back and forth between all my different data sources to arrive at a logically coherent and rigorous analysis of how relations of power affected the students' language learning outcomes. Overall, a recursive handling of my data enabled me to avoid drawing a simplistic and skewed conclusion about how the school authorities influenced their language learning outcomes.

Reporting the data and publishing the study

Having collected the data, I subsequently had to decide how to choose and represent my data. In particular, I was cautious not to cast myself as 'researcher as expert' (Sarangi & Candlin 2003, p. 280). Thus, when reporting my findings to the principal and teachers of OGSS, I was selective in disclosing and brokering information to evade harming my student and teacher participants. Since completing my study, deliberate efforts have also been made to share my findings with a broader audience through journal publications and presentations at conferences organized by professional organizations. Disseminating my research findings through these various channels allowed me to honour the participants, who so graciously invited me into their lives for a year and whose language learning experiences are underrepresented in the applied linguistics literature (Ortega 2012).

The purpose of this example has been to illustrate the ethical problems encountered before, during and after an ethnographic case study. In general, when conducting applied linguistic research, some problems can be anticipated, while others need to be dealt with in an emergent manner. There is no silver bullet to dealing with ethical issues. One way is to equip and educate beginning applied linguists about the ethical dimensions of conducting research through research methodology courses taught in graduate programs (Loewen et al. 2014). On their part, journal editors can also provide leadership by offering readers more detailed ethical guidelines and examples of good practice. Another way is to have experienced applied linguists share narratives of their own experiences (De Costa forthcoming). Ultimately, however, researchers will need to engage in greater reflexivity to ensure that ethical practices are observed.

Notes

1 At US universities, the human ethics research committee is referred to as the Institutional Review Board (IRB). These committees often have different names in other parts of the world.

2 As noted by Phakiti (this volume), parametric tests are conducted for (1) data which are normally distributed, interval or continuous, and (2) independent data scores across all measures. By contrast, non-parametric tests are suitable for analysing (1) data that are not normally distributed, and (2) discrete variables or rank-order data.

3 By contrast, issues such as statistical significance and generalizability are not primary concerns of qualitative researchers, who instead emphasize the need for a thick description of data, especially in ethnographic and case study research.

Resources for further reading

BAAL 2006, 'The British Association for Applied Linguistics: Recommendations on good practice in Applied Linguistics', viewed 19 June 2010, http://www.baal.org.uk/dox/goodpractice_full.pdf.

This white paper provides useful recommendations on how to manage ethical responsibilities towards a range of stakeholders involved in research.

Duff, P 2008, *Case Study Research in Applied Linguistics*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.

This book explores ethics from a qualitative case study framework and underscores the importance of maintaining clear lines of communication with participants and reporting findings responsibly.

Mackey, A & Gass, S 2005, *Second Language Research: Methodology and Design*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.

This book covers ethics from primarily an experimental quantitative perspective and provides a sample consent form for an experimental study and advice on preparing an IRB protocol.

Richards, K, Ross, S & Seedhouse, P 2012, *Research Methods for Applied Language Studies*, Routledge, New York, NY.

This book helps beginning applied linguists establish an ethical protocol. It provides a checklist of important consideration, a guide to useful reading, and information on two valuable websites.

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