



Exploring the boundaries of research ethics: Perceptions of ethics and ethical behaviors in applied linguistics research



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ABSTRACT

Research ethics are a cornerstone of modern data collection, yet training in various areas of research ethics are often lacking in Applied Linguistics. This article explores the reactions that members of the field have towards scenarios in which the ethicality of action cannot be easily identified as right or wrong. Survey respondents read 10 scenarios in which actors completed ethical ambiguous action and then rate them for 1) level of ethicality, 2) frequency of similar issues, and 3) how frequent the respondent believed researchers faced similar issues. Results indicated that situations involving materials covered during ethical review training were rated as being less ethical compared to items that revolved around issues of academic integrity. Counter intuitively, more experienced researchers rated scenarios as being intrinsically more ethical, indicating that time spent in the field might result in a more lax view of ethics. Finally, participants relied heavily on ethical review board requirements as their guide to making decisions about what is ethical and what is not. Taken together, these data indicate that more discussion in research ethics is needed for the field, especially with elements of academic integrity and ethically gray areas.

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1. Introduction

Concern with ethical conduct in research is foundational to the research enterprise (cf. De Costa, 2016). In the field of Applied Linguistics, treatises on the topic have appeared in the literature beginning in the early 1980s when the TESOL Research Committee published “Guidelines for Ethical Research in ESL” which served as a strong statement about “safeguarding the rights of second- and foreign-language learners involved in studies on language learning/teaching ...” (p. 383). In the 1980s and 1990s, numerous other discussions ensued in research methods books (e.g., Brown, 1998; Seliger & Shohamy, 1989) and these discussions have continued in recent research methods books (e.g., Mackey and Gass, 2012 and 2016; Dörnyei, 2007), in *Handbooks* (e.g., Sterling, Winke, & Gass, 2016), and in journals (e.g., Kouritzin, 2011; Ortega, 2005a). Many of the issues are general in scope and deal with such issues as researcher behavior, as discussed by Harklau (2011, pp. 175–189). Other researchers address problems involved in dealing with unique populations (e.g., Ngo, Bigelow, & Lee, 2014) and still other treatises (e.g. Ortega, 2005b) are concerned with questions of research themselves.

Discussions of research ethics often turn to university review boards (see Bigelow & Pettitt, 2016; Duff & Abdi, 2016; Ortega, 2016); in fact, in the 18 pages devoted to a discussion of ethics in the research methods book by Mackey and Gass

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(2012 and 2016), most of the discussion focuses on review board requirements. These requirements are essential, but as a field, there are other issues which surface that are not strictly dictated by review boards (see the discussion in [Bigelow & Pettitt, 2016](#) on consent and [Duff & Abdi, 2016](#) on negotiating approval), or which need to be further negotiated. This paper takes review boards as a starting point and examines perceptions of requirements set up by review boards, with an emphasis on classrooms.

2. Ethics and review boards

All academic disciplines must adhere to research standards (see discussion by [Pimple, 2002](#)) and many disciplinary organizations have issued their own statements (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, American Anthropology Association [cited in [Duff & Abdi, 2016](#), p. 123]). Some standards are field specific (e.g., animal research), others, such as protecting the safety of human life, are standard across all disciplines.

Researchers across disciplines who deal with human participants¹ must be vigilant in protecting individuals from harm, either physical or emotional. When considering research within a classroom setting, there is the additional burden of maintaining the integrity of the goals of the curriculum while at the same time investigating the classroom itself and what takes place therein.² Furthermore, the classroom differs from research with individual participants in that in classrooms there may be participants who wish not to participate despite the fact that they are enrolled in the class.

Review Boards constitute the legal enforcer of ethical behavior. As De Costa, referring to the mid-2000s referring, in particular to [Duff \(2008\)](#), observes that “research methods books in applied linguistics started to address ethics more explicitly, due in part to the increase in institutional review board (IRB) involvement in the research process” (2016, p. 2). However, as is noted in many of the narratives presented in [De Costa \(2016\)](#), ethical review board regulations are often not sufficient and may need further refinement. If the field of applied linguistics is to formulate a coherent view of ethical behavior, it is important to understand how the field views research situations which are not rigidly defined by IRBs or similar organizations.

Research ethics is often viewed in terms of procedural ethics ([Guillemin & Gillam, 2004](#)) or the type of information required to receive clearance from a local ethics review board. But, ethical behavior incorporates a wider variety of topics and views. In their definition of ethical research; [Emanuel, Wendler, and Grady \(2013\)](#) include elements such as value to science or society, validity, and fair participation. Additionally, [Pimple \(2002\)](#) reduced ethical research to three values: (1) truth in reporting and representing data, (2) fairness in citing and using the work of others, and (3) wisdom to only conduct meaningful and useful research.

Our concern is motivated by a particular strand of research ethics known as the responsible conduct of research (RCR). RCR was established in the 1980s in the USA amidst increasing ethical scandals in the sciences (see [Broad & Wade, 1983](#) for a then-current perspective on these issues). RCR evolved into a formal training program ([Steneck & Bulger, 2007](#)), now mandatory at many universities for graduate students. The goal of RCR is to ensure that scientists receive the ethical training required to conduct research with human participants. The development of this training coincided with the growth and spread of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the USA university system. Together these trends produced an atmosphere that regulated ethics as a form of red tape to conducting research ([Van den Hoonaard, 2011](#)).

While RCR was developed as a training platform for research ethics ([Steneck, 2004](#)), it has since morphed into a recognizable perspective on research ethics. The Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (appe.indiana.edu) has a special interest track that includes RCR and Research Integrity Ethics. As seen in [Table 1](#), RCR consists of nine domains with overlap amongst them.

According to [De Costa \(2016\)](#), recent documents published by Applied Linguistics associations (e.g., [BAAL, 2006](#); [TESOL, 1980](#))³ in which good practices are stated “do not provide applied linguists with specific advice on how to negotiate ethical problems that emerge across the different phases of the research process” (p. 4). Without a firm consensus of what constitutes ethical behavior, a field is unlikely to articulate the boundaries of what is and what is not ethical.

Understanding how the field currently operates allows us to make decisions for shaping the future of the field. An initial step in this direction came from a 2016 paper by Sterling, Winke, and Gass. The authors surveyed 135 researchers in Applied Linguistics and reported on three sections: 1) biographical data, 2) ethical training received during graduate school, and 3) eight scenarios followed by questions about how ethical events were and how frequently each occurs in research. The researchers found the majority of training that scholars received on research ethics related to procedural ethics. Issues such as mentorship, collaboration, and issues of peer-review were largely left undiscussed during formal graduate training. The authors conclude that “research ethics training materials need to be developed and evaluated for the specific needs of SLA

¹ What to call a person who is enrolled in a research project can be problematic. Federal guidelines in the USA, medical, and other “harder” sciences opt to use the term subject, while those in the softer sciences tend to use participant. The history and implications behind the term subject go beyond the scope of this text. In order to stay faithful to the multidiscipline literature we read and quote throughout this paper, we will use both terms interchangeably when needed.

² We do not wish to imply that classroom-based research is inherently more or less challenging than laboratory research; our goal is to point out some difficulties in conducting classroom research that are not present in laboratory research.

³ The American Association for Applied Linguistics has constituted a Task Force that has been charged with developing ethical guidelines for Applied Linguistics research. The final document will be approved by the end of 2017.

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