

Ethics in applied linguistics research

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Introduction

Given our field's commitment to addressing 'real-world' problems (Phakiti, De Costa, Plonsky & Starfield, 2018), applied linguists inevitably have to deal with uncontrollable data variables and the attendant messiness that often accompanies the data collection process (Rose & McKinley, 2017). Part of that messiness involves the ethical dilemmas that emerge not only during the collection of data but also before and after the data are collected. To address such ethical dilemmas and to ensure that core principles are preserved – (1) respect for persons, (2) yielding optimal benefits while minimizing harm and (3) justice (De Costa, 2014, 2015) – professional organizations and publications in our field have in recent years focused much attention on developing and enacting ethical research practices. The British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL, 2016) and the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL Ethics Guidelines Task Force, 2017), for example, have published guidelines on how to conduct ethical applied linguistic research. These associations are joined by other subfield-specific organizations such as the International Language Testing Association (ILTA, 2000) and the Literacy Research Association (www.literacyresearchassociation.org/ethicscommittee) in providing ethical guidance to its respective members. In addition, applied linguists also often have to abide by the stipulations of the ethical review boards at their home institutions, which impose their own set of ethical checks and balances.

Macro-ethics vs. micro-ethics

Together, the guidance of professional organizations and ethical review boards are macro-ethical in nature in that they provide generic guidelines that subsequently need to be interpreted and applied in accordance with a given research context. The codified ethics provided by ethical review boards, in particular, have come under criticism for reducing ethics to “a proceduralist and formalist enterprise”, and because ethical practices are often constructed as “homogeneous closed systems that protect their institutional home rather than their research population.” (Christians, 2018, p. 75). In their review of research on indigenous language learners, Kouritzin and Nakagawa (2018) point out that Western-dominated research ethics

boards have a hidden agenda of subordinating and making other cultures of ethics comply with a Western academic framework, thereby compromising protection to research participants (on non-Western research methods in applied linguistics, see Severo & Makoni, this volume). Kouritzin and Nakagawa add that consensus, and not consent, should be the goal of building ethical research conduct.

More recently, several applied linguists (e.g., De Costa, 2016; Kubaniyova, 2008) have argued in favor of micro-ethical practices, that is, practices that are customized to manage ethical dilemmas in an emergent manner, as opposed to subscribing to a one-size-fits-all approach to ensuring that ethical practices are adhered to. Such an ethical stance is necessary because, more often than not, ethical issues such as coerced relationships and professional misconduct cannot be predicted by the protocols of ethical review boards (Anderson, 2017). Central to the micro-ethical agenda is the need to disclose and examine the values and ideologies that circulate in the research process, along with the power relations between the researchers and the researched (Kubaniyova, 2013). The contributors to an edited volume of language research narratives (De Costa, 2016) describe how they wrestled with ethical tensions during data collection, and several authors specifically reexamined the inequalities that existed between themselves and their research participants. In addition, earlier calls to carry out advocacy research on and for subjects have also been replaced by exhortations to conduct empowering research, that is, research on, for, and with subjects (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson, 1993; Rice, 2006). One way to achieve such empowerment is through creating the social infrastructure to support community research, where participants take part in carrying out the research themselves within the setting of their own language and culture.

Key ethical concerns in applied linguistics and their subfields

To ensure that research is conducted ethically, applied linguists would need to juggle both macro-ethical and micro-ethical concerns. It is against this evolving backdrop of having to address these dual concerns that we situate our chapter, which also views applied linguistics as a wide field that is constituted of subfields.¹ Given the breadth of our field and space limitations, it would be impossible to trace ethical research developments across all the subfields. Instead, we have elected to discuss ethical research developments in relation to four subfields: second language acquisition (SLA), assessment, literacy and sociolinguistics. We have selected these four subfields as voluminous ethical research has done within them. Because of their different research foci, each subfield also has its unique set of concerns that can be attributed to ontological and epistemological differences (De Costa, 2015). At the same time, however, overlaps exist across these subfields, and it is these common and representative concerns that bear significance to the broader field of applied linguistics, a field that is increasingly shaped by globalization and digitization.

SLA

In their oft-cited article, titled “Cognitive and sociocultural perspectives: Two parallel SLA worlds”, that was published in the 40th issue of *TESOL Quarterly*, Zuengler and Miller (2006) underscored the ontological and epistemological divide that has characterized SLA. Whatever their orientation, however, SLA researchers are ethically committed to maintaining transparency. Working within a post-positivist paradigm, several SLA researchers (e.g., Marsden, Morgan-Short, Trofimovich, & Ellis, 2018) have appealed to colleagues to demonstrate transparency in their research and reporting practices. In the spirit of promoting transparency,

several prominent SLA journals (e.g., *Language Learning*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*) now recommend that researchers make their materials and data fully available in a publicly accessible repository such as IRIS (Marsden, Mackey, & Plonsky, 2016).² Relatedly, the Center for Open Science (<https://cos.io/our-services/open-science-badges/>) awards badges for researchers who share data and materials for future research, which also helps to facilitate replication studies. To date, within the broader field of applied linguistics, open science badges have been awarded to research published in *The Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *Language Learning*, *The Modern Language Journal*, and *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*.

While study replication is a primary objective of post-positivist oriented SLA research, postmodern-inspired SLA researchers have called for the social utility of research as an ethical consideration as well as for colleagues to anticipate how their findings might be interpreted by the public and to report these findings cautiously (Ortega, 2005a; see also Shohamy, 2004). Another primary concern has been the treatment of second language (L2) participants in research contexts and the challenges they encounter. Within L2 writing, and building on Silva's (1997) earlier call for the ethical treatment of English as an additional language (EAL) students, Tardy and Whittig (2017) recently argued that researchers and teachers need to be mindful of the gradual process of writing development as they consider the impact of testing on students.

Assessment

McNamara and Ryan (2011) make a distinction between fairness and justice (see also, Kunnan, 2014). Fairness, according to them, refers to the technical quality of a test, which involves all aspects of the empirical validation of test score inferences; by contrast, justice entails the values implicit in test constructs and the social use of a test. To further distinguish these two concepts, McNamara and Ryan recommend that the term 'fairness' be used in relation to the equal treatment of a group of people, while 'justice' be used in the ethical discussion of the consequential basis of test score interpretation. This distinction comes to light when we consider Winke and Zhang's (2019) analysis of the Michigan Student Test of Education Progress (M-STEP) for English language arts. This test determines a third grader's progression to the fourth grade. Given that a M-STEP English score of 1,300 is a potential cutoff point between pass and fail, Winke and Zhang found that if the 1,300 cutoff point were to be used, few English language learners would pass the test. Thus, even though the test might be fair, one could argue that it is not, just because it overlooks the linguistic disadvantages encountered by language learners. Crucially, such insights build on an established body of assessment work such as the special issue of *Language Testing* (Davies, 1997) and *Language Assessment Quarterly* (Davies, 2004) that focused on ethics. The ethical guidance provided in these special issue publications needs to be understood in conjunction with the second principle of ILTA's code of conduct (2000), which notes that "language testers shall hold all information obtained in their professional capacity about their test takers in confidence and they shall use professional judgement in sharing such information" (Principle 2). However, as more testing is conducted in online settings, the private information of test takers is at risk of being disclosed and disseminated; this contemporary reality has in turn prompted the urgency for language test results to be carefully managed and kept confidential.

Literacy

As noted, ethical concerns are influenced by epistemological and ontological considerations. Applied linguists who take a social and postmodernist perspective of literacy often focus on

researcher positionality, reflection and answerability (Rhodes & Weiss, 2013). By addressing the researcher's positionality in a particular literacy study, issues such as manipulation of the research at different stages, researcher bias and the extent of the researcher's participation in the research are problematized. Reflection, in a similar way, provides a researcher with tools to look back onto or reflect on their conscious decision making at different stages of the research study. With regard to answerability, researchers are expected to demonstrate traits of accountability and responsibility when carrying out their research. Collectively, these heuristics provide literacy researchers with ways to address ethical concerns that might arise at a micro-level, that is, when researchers are working with their participants. On a macro-ethical level, literacy scholars also have the benefit of guidance provided by the Literacy Research Association, which has established an ethics committee that serves as a resource to its membership regarding ethical issues arising in aspects of their research. Underrepresented groups such as bilingual or dual language learners have also received much attention among literacy researchers who caution against adopting a monolingual lens when working with this group of learners. To evade a monolingual bias, Leung and Brice (2013) recommend (1) selecting culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments, (2) including researchers of the same ethnic and linguistic backgrounds in studies, (3) ensuring all researchers and graduate students working on research studies are knowledgeable about second language acquisition and (4) conducting research studies in culturally and linguistically appropriate settings. In sum, some literacy scholars posit that ethical care can be expedited through taking a socially situated and sensitive approach to working with under-represented groups to protect their interests.

Sociolinguistics

Early evidence of ethical research practices in sociolinguistics can be found in Labov (1972) and Heath (1983) as they, like many of their peers, advocated for the marginalized speakers of non-standard dialects. Subsequently, further discussion of ethics was centered on issues of power relations between the researchers and the researched (Mallinson, 2018; Trechter, 2013). Working within the area of language endangerment, several sociolinguists and anthropological linguists (e.g., Besnier, 2013) have articulated their ethical responsibility to revive endangered languages. Often taking on an empowering research stance, these applied linguists are generally committed to equipping their local participants with the necessary skills to conduct research in their respective local settings. Sociolinguists have also expanded their ethical responsibilities by studying vulnerable populations such as transgender communities (e.g., Zimman, 2013) and refugees (e.g., Carson, 2017). Of the former community, Zimman (2013) reminds us that trans individuals are highly sensitive to how their language and ideas are presented to the public and academy. In addition, he offers valuable advice to cisgender researchers, alerting them of the need to (1) understand trans policies, (2) critically examine their underlying assumptions and ideologies toward their trans participants, and (3) adopt a reflexive approach when interacting with their participants. At the same time, however, as a result of social changes brought about by super-diversity and globalization (Copland, 2018) and digitalized affordances that have transformed participation in globalized social networks (Spotti & Blommaert, 2017), the traditional notion of bounded communities has come under siege, resulting in what several sociolinguists (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2014; Georgakopoulou, 2017) have described as "context collapse" As Georgakopoulou (2017) aptly points out, ethical clashes can occur in the interplay between the conventional sociolinguistics priorities (e.g., the tradition of a descriptive approach and the slow pace of analysis) and context collapse processes and outcomes. Writing specifically regarding sociolinguistic research into

social media, she notes that we need to consider the “wide distribution, multi-authorship, and elusiveness of audiences” (p. 1). Because of this contemporary reality, she adds, sociolinguists need to be “reflexive about their own ideological and political stance and taking a stand as a result” (p. 3).

Future directions

To move in sync with an evolving applied linguistic research landscape, it is vitally important that applied linguists expand their ethical research repertoire. Moving forward, we recommend that measures be taken to navigate digital-based research, provide adequate ethics education, and protect researchers.

Navigating a digital world

As mentioned, the digital penetration into our everyday lives requires applied linguists to rethink how they conduct research in an ethical manner. To guide us, the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL, 2016) describes some challenges related to informed consent and confidentiality based on internet-based research. In addition, to highlight the urgency and significance of upgrading our methodological tool kit, the journal *Applied Linguistics Review* dedicated a special issue titled “Ethics of Online Research Methods in Applied Linguistics” in 2017. In their special issue article, following their analysis of how the authors of 72 journal articles addressed ethical issues, Tao, Shao, and Gao (2017) called for a “need for researchers to enhance critical awareness and assessment of potential ethical issues when conducting internet-based research” (p. 321). In another article in the same special issue, focusing on mobile messaging data, Tagg, Lyons, Hu, and Rock (2017) examined the dynamics surrounding researchers and participants in that given digital space. Their findings prompted them to conclude that there is a “need for an awareness not only of how our participants’ media ideologies shape their use and perceptions of digital technologies, but also how our own assumptions inform our handling of the digital data” (p. 271). This acute observation is borne out in Georgakopoulou’s (2017) study of people’s participation and reaction in their social media sites (e.g., YouTube and Facebook) regarding a public assault incident between two politicians in a Greek morning TV show in 2012. In the course of her own analysis, Georgakopoulou realized that her own political beliefs led her to align herself with a specific group of people who shared her political beliefs. As a consequence, Georgakopoulou put forward the notion of ‘virtue ethics’, which she maintains “emphasize practical experience and thus embraces unpredictability and re-considerations of ethical requirements for research” (p. 17). Put differently, researchers are therefore expected to disclose their own ideologies and how these ideologies might shape the interpretation of their data. Relatedly, and given how technology has shaped language education and the flourishing use of digital platforms in teaching and researching, it is equally important that language educators be provided digital training (Carrier & Nye, 2017) so they can address emergent ethical dilemmas.

Ethics education

In their evaluation of ethics training in graduate applied linguistics programs, Sterling, Winke and Gass (2016) found that there was a general lack of education in research ethics in PhD training. This disturbing trend was exacerbated by their finding that some applied linguists place a high degree of faith in their institution’s ethical review board, thereby foregoing their

agency to make decisions on complex ethical issues, and generally deferring to a board that often puts the institution's interests above those of individual participants. A follow-up study by Sterling and Gass (2017) further revealed that procedural ethics were generally covered more extensively during institutional review board (IRB) training or in research methods courses. By contrast, other key aspects of ethics – such as academic integrity items, mentorship, authorship, collaboration, and peer review – were barely discussed and, if so, merely at an informal level. In light of this dearth in ethics education, scholars in graduate applied linguistics, working in tandem with professional organizations and their respective ethical review boards, ought to devise field-specific training materials in future. A core part of that education should also include statistical training to help emerging applied linguists adopt rigorous statistical tools (Gonulal, Loewen, & Plonsky, 2017) that would contribute to maintaining and advancing methodological rigor in the field. Moving forward, applied linguists who are interested in studying the state of ethics in our field may examine the efficacy of ethics training (Sterling & De Costa, 2018).

Protecting the researcher

To date, much of the applied linguistics research about ethics has been on research participants. The primary objective of many of these studies is to protect the interests of research participants, whether they are learners (e.g., De Costa, 2014), teachers (e.g., Hafernik, Messerschmitt, & Vandrick, 2002) or members of colonized linguistic groups (e.g., Kouritzin & Nakagawa, 2018). However, ethical provisions also need to be made to protect the interests of researchers, because not all researchers are of equal standing. Junior researchers working within a larger research team, for example, are not immune to exploitation by their senior colleagues. Often absent in the applied linguistics ethics literature are explicit discussions about the varied roles played by different members of a research team. One notable exception is Copland and Creese (2016), who interrogated the power structures that existed within a research team that comprised full tenured professors and postdoctoral researchers. Copland and Creese remind us of the need to create opportunities for the latter so they can participate equitably during research meetings. It is in this spirit of safeguarding the interests of junior researchers that the recent guidelines produced by the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL Ethics Guidelines Task Force, 2017) were conceived. Significantly, these guidelines also provide guidance about how to administer ethical care when handling teaching and service obligations involving vulnerable emerging applied linguists.

Conclusion

Over the past three decades, positive inroads have been made in enhancing the ethical quality of applied linguistics research. While much of the applied linguistics work on ethics in the 1980s (e.g., Brown, 1988; Tarone & St. Martin, 1980) and the early 1990s (e.g., Dufon, 1993; Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991) focused on the logistical aspects of conducting research, later work in the 2000s started to address ethics more explicitly, due in part to the increase in IRB involvement in the research process (Duff, 2008). This growing interest in conducting ethical research is demonstrated in the discussion of ethics in research methodology books such as Mackey and Gass (2016), McKay (2006) and Dörnyei (2007) as well as book chapters (e.g., De Costa, 2015; Sterling & De Costa, 2018), journal articles (e.g., Chapelle & Duff, 2003; De Costa, 2014; Mahboob et al., 2016) and special issues of several journals such as *The Modern Language Journal* (Ortega, 2005b), *TESL Canada Journal* (Kouritzin, 2011),

Diaspora, Indigenous and Migrant Education (Ngo, Bigelow, & Lee, 2014) and *Applied Linguistics Review* (Spilioti & Tagg, 2017). While these recent publications continue to adhere to the basic ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice, the conversation about ethics within applied linguistics has evolved to include a consideration of the micro-ethical dimensions of research, in particular the political facets of researcher and researched relationships, and efforts to empower both parties. Concurrently, the field is also moving towards enacting greater transparency as applied linguists are increasingly expected to discuss their researcher positionality, share their research tools and data through digital repositories, and upgrade their analytical skills, all in the name of elevating methodological rigor. To a large extent, developments in a rapidly digitized and globalized world have hastened these shifts in ethical practices. However, as we advance as a discipline, we need to make ethics education a centerpiece of graduate applied linguistics programs. After all, we bear the important responsibility of nurturing the next generation of applied linguists.

Notes

- 1 Instead of using the term 'subfield', the American Association for Applied Linguistics, for example, lists 21 strands, thereby illustrating the breadth of the field (www.aal.org/news/2019-call-for-proposals#Strands).
- 2 IRIS stands for Instruments for Research into Second Languages (www.iris-database.org/iris/app/home/index.jsessionid=9C224BDAEDC8AF2457F894E2EADA3930).

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