Language Teaching (2020), 1–13
doi:10.1017/S0261444820000257

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

THINKING ALLOWED

Research tasks on ethics in applied linguistics

Peter I. De Costa[1]*, Scott Sterling[2], Jongbong Lee[3], Wendy Li[3] and Hima Rawal[1]

[1]Michigan State University, Michigan, USA, [2]Indiana State University, Indiana, USA and [3]Nagoya University of Commerce & Business, Japan
*Corresponding author. Email: pdecosta@msu.edu

Abstract
The growing concern for ethics in applied linguistics may be attributed to attempts to stem the rising incidence of ethical lapses in order to ensure that the core ethical principles of (1) respect for persons, (2) yielding optimal benefits while minimizing harm, and (3) justice are preserved. Following a brief historical review of this topic, and building on the growing commitment to carry out ethical applied linguistic research, we map out seven research tasks that will enhance our understanding of how to extend this expanding research agenda. By inviting applied linguists to evaluate their methodological practices and those of their peers, we also argue for the need to develop the ethical dispositions of emerging applied linguists, with a view to create a more robust field.

1. Introduction

Applied linguistics is a transdisciplinary field, one that is influenced by theoretical and methodological developments in anthropology, sociology, and education, among other disciplines, as it holds up a mirror to real world problems. Relatedly, because applied linguists work within different (e.g., postpositivist, postmodernist) paradigms and in different cultures where ideas of research ethics differ, it is equally important to understand that they may have different interpretations of what constitutes ethical practice (De Costa, 2015). Regardless of their differences, applied linguists are, however, generally in agreement that the core principles of (1) respect for persons, (2) yielding optimal benefits while minimizing harm, and (3) justice needs to be preserved (De Costa, 2014). Guided by these three principles, we first provide a brief history of ethics in applied linguistics before building on the recent ethical turn in the field. Specifically, we identify seven research tasks that will enhance our understanding of how to conduct ethical applied linguistics research. These tasks run the gamut from studying how applied linguists make their research process transparent to exploring what type of ethics training students receive when enrolled in their respective graduate programs. In identifying these research tasks, our objectives are two-fold. First, like in any other research enterprise, we seek to build on the investigative momentum on this topic that has grown in recent years. Second, by inviting our colleagues to evaluate the methodological practices of their peers, we hope that the next wave of research on ethics in applied linguistics will have a positive knock-on effect by enhancing the ethical dispositions of emerging applied linguists. Together these two developments will only make our field more methodologically robust.

1.1 A brief history of ethics in applied linguistics

The 'ethics creep' (Haggerty, 2004) in research has become more firmly entrenched in applied linguistics as a result of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs as they are known in North America or ethical review boards elsewhere) and professional organizations such as the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) International Association (TESOL International Association, 2014).[1] In recent years, TESOL International and sibling organizations have 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. That ethics has been a concern of applied linguists is not an entirely new development, however. The earliest publication on this topic can be traced to TESOL's 1980 'Guidelines for ethical research in ESL', which appeared in an issue of *TESOL Quarterly* that year (Tarone & St. Martin, 1980). At the operational level, this document proved to be a landmark piece that ushered in the first batch of publications to address ethics in second language acquisition (SLA). These publications, which were research methodology books published in the late 1980s (e.g., Brown, 1988; Seliger & Shohamy, 1989) and early 1990s (e.g., Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991; Johnson, 1992; Nunan, 1992), described the logistical aspects of conducting research, that is, the formal procedures associated with setting up a research project.

Following Dufon's (1993, p. 158) critique that much of the methodology literature at the time emphasized 'theoretical and methodological approaches, statistics, validity, replication, and so forth', more empirical work (i.e., research on ethical practices, specifically in relation to pedagogy and assessment, position papers on ethics, explicit guidelines, and review pieces) subsequently emerged in the second half of the 1990s through the mid 2000s. By the mid 2000s, research methods books in applied linguistics started to address ethics more explicitly, due in part to the increase in IRB involvement in the research process (Duff, 2008) and growing interest in researcher identity (Ramanathan, 2005) and reflexivity (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007). This deepening interest in carrying out ethical research was exemplified in the coverage of ethics in Mackey and Gass (2016), McKay (2006), Dörnyei (2007), and Phakiti (2014) and has become more prominently addressed in handbook chapters (e.g., Sterling & De Costa, 2018; De Costa, Lee, Rawal, & Li, 2020), journal articles (e.g., De Costa, 2014; Tao, Shao, & Gao, 2017), edited volumes (e.g., Gass & Mackey, 2012; Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015), and special issues of several journals such as *The Modern Language Journal* (Ortega, 2005), *TESL Canada Journal* (Kouritzin, 2011), *Diaspora, Indigenous and Migrant Education* (Ngo, Bigelow, & Lee, 2014), and *Applied Linguistics Review* (Spiliotti & Tagg, 2017). Also noteworthy is the distinction made by Kubaniyova (2008) between *macroethics* (procedural ethics of review boards and professional codes of conduct) and *microethics* (everyday ethical dilemmas encountered in specific research contexts), with several publications (e.g., De Costa, 2016; Warriner & Bigelow, 2019) asserting the need to foster greater sensitivity among applied linguists as they work with various populations.

2. Research agendas and research tasks

Fostering greater attention to the microethical aspects of applied linguistics research, which emphasizes the need to raise researchers' awareness of ethical responsibilities toward their research constituents, is vitally important because much research today crosses cultures (Duff & Abdi, 2016; Shordike et al., 2017; Kouritzin & Nakagawa, 2018).

Researching participants with transcultural and translinguistic backgrounds can potentially pose ethical challenges that go beyond IRB protocols, as noted by Copland (2018), who reported that people from different cultural backgrounds might engage in different ethical practices when doing research. For example, some Indigenous communities understand what is ethical in their own terms (Kouritzin & Nakagawa, 2018). Similarly, Western-based ethical research protocols might be perceived as culturally inappropriate or even offensive in some other countries (Bowern, 2010; Duff & Abdi, 2016; Shordike et al., 2017). This problem is exacerbated when research is conducted by a team of collaborating researchers located at multiple research sites.

In short, and given the posthumanist turn (Pennycook, 2017) in our field, applied linguists need to conduct a humanizing form of research (Paris & Winn, 2013) that is respectful of different cultures practiced in varied (e.g., non-Western) communities, different contexts in which the research is conducted (e.g., digital domains), as well as different and underrepresented segments of the population (e.g., young language learners) who are studied. Equally compelling is the need to ensure that research is conducted in a transparent and accessible manner (Holliday, 2007) and that the research instruments be available to others through digital repositories such as IRIS (Marsden, Mackey, & Plonsky, 2016).[2] Further, there have also been growing calls for applied linguistic research to bear social utility (Ortega, 2012) and for applied linguists to give back to the communities that are researched (De Costa, 2015). One way to reciprocate the favor is to take on supportive roles such as being a friend, resource provider, and expert (Sarangi & Candlin, 2003; Norton & Early, 2011; De Costa, 2014). In other words, applied linguistic research should not only be a purely intellectual exercise; rather, we need to consider whom we conduct research on, the purpose of our research, the manner it is conducted, and the ways in which we disseminate our findings in order to benefit our participants, our academic peers, and the broader community. All these factors and the need to sustain methodological and theoretical diversity within applied linguistics need to be taken into account in the proposed research tasks that follow.

2.1 Making the research process transparent

One assumption made in the sciences is that researchers are actually carrying out the work they purportedly claim to be doing. Often, science takes it on blind faith that researchers are not fabricating data or including unnecessary bias into the results. While trusting colleagues to do the right thing is important, it is equally vital that a field establishes methods that enhance our ability to ensure that everyone plays by the proverbial rules. There have been calls in the past to improve transparency in research practices, though it is not always clear what form transparency should take. One possible approach is Holliday's (2007) exhortation to manage subjectivity in qualitative research by keeping a research diary and using systematic approaches to data analysis. These recommendations allow the researcher to return to earlier points in the research process to better understand what was being thought at that given time. For quantitative research, it has been argued that methods and instruments need to be well defined, validated, and offer reliability in their measurements (Norris, Plonsky, Ross, & Schoonen, 2015). In short, research practice transparency allows others to evaluate our research, replicate the results, and build a stronger foundation within the field.

However, data management is only one means to realize greater transparency. Research in applied linguistics is often reported in journal articles which appear ostensibly to outside observers as finished products that are arrived at without incident and yield largely positive with favorable results. However, anyone who has conducted research understands the number of decisions, both small and large, that go into completing each project. Put simply, understanding that research is messy, and that many people are confronted with ethical issues, which need to be dealt with, is of prime importance for the field.

Research task 1

Create spaces for authors to discuss the various issues that characterize the research process. Invite authors to compare and contrast the ways in which they wrestled with any ethical dilemmas that emerged and have them reflect on what methodological implications can be drawn from their analyses.

Most IRBs consider children to be a protected population, resulting in many researchers attempting to avoid drawing samples from this population. Oliver and Azkarai (2017) provide a review of the current literature on child SLA in an effort to show what efforts have been undertaken in recent years. Some insights that can be gleaned from Oliver and Azkarai include considerations of investigating children's perceptions of language learning, changing the orientation from viewing children as objects of research into more engaged participants, and issues of building rapport with them. The authors further offer questions of children's ability to consent to research, especially since 'child' is not a monolithic term but instead includes a range of ages and cognitive abilities, and finally whether or not children understand truth in the same way as adults.

Studying and understanding how authors negotiate ethical tensions that might arise before, during, and after the data collection process could help future researchers gain confidence in their ability to collect data on marginalized groups such as minority language speakers, refugees, and others facing oppressive conditions. To better understand the types of decisions made by individual authors, one could carry out a retrospective analysis of researcher journals, such as the ones touted in Holliday (2007). By embracing the practice of using retrospective researcher journal accounts, researchers could then embark on a new research project and recruit applied linguists as participants. These participants would be asked to fill out regular updates of ethical issues encountered by them, describe ethical decisions they had to make, and report on other general emotional responses that go along with the day-to-day actions of doing research. A retroactive content analysis could subsequently be conducted to find interesting patterns that emerged from either across a few selected cases or a more generalized sample. An illumination of how researchers wrestled with a range of ethical dilemmas will allow readers to learn from the experiences of their colleagues and thus contribute toward building a bank of best methodological practices for other applied linguists to emulate and modify according to their respective research sites.

2.2 Protecting participant confidentiality

More often than not, research participants volunteer to take part in our studies, and in some cases, are provided nominal compensation for their time. In return for their contribution, we need to make a genuine effort to ensure that they remain anonymous or that their data is confidential, if they elect to do so. One way to do this is to create consent forms that provide details on how this is to be done (Steneck & Bulger, 2007), as IRBs often ensure that participant confidentiality is preserved (Amdur & Bankert, 2011). However, in an era of digitization where online research is fast gaining ground and ethical research needs to flexibly respond to continually changing technologies (Markham, 2009), maintaining participants' confidentiality has become more challenging. Direct quotes taken from a website, for example, can be attributed to the original source through a web search and on several platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, where people use their real names with personal data (Hockly, 2017). Given that the internet is an open platform that can be mined for data without the knowledge or consent of the person (Tao et al., 2017), the usage of online data has precipitated much ethical struggle for applied linguists.[3]

Admittedly, some participants may choose to have their true identities revealed. For example, in instances where language and cultural pride and other sociopolitical issues are at stake, participants may remain steadfast in wanting their identities disclosed to the public. However, there are risks involved with doing so, especially when participants are members of at-risk communities such as refugees or undocumented migrants (Ngo et al., 2014). As a consequence, researchers sometimes need to take preemptive measures to protect and prepare their participants who might be unaware of potential dangers associated with their participation, especially if consent forms use challenging language making it difficult for language learners to fully comprehend what they are agreeing to (Sterling, 2018). In her ethnographic study, Lee (2011), for example, found that her teacher-participant was treated differently at her workplace due to her ethnicity. Because Lee knew that anyone familiar with her research context would easily make the connection between the anonymized participant and real-life person, she opted to wait several years until the participant no longer worked at the school before publishing that portion of her data.

Research task 2

Review methodological practices adopted by applied linguists in preserving the confidentiality in published research. What measures did the researchers take in order to minimize harm to their participants? How can you further improve on these measures?

Sterling and De Costa (2018) discuss an issue when participants were given the option on what pseudonym to use for publication. The participants immediately selected their own real names to be used in the published work and the authors realized that the participants had not fully considered the ramifications of their decision. As a consequence, the authors opted to use a numbering system instead, in their participants' best interests.

In published research, efforts are often made to protect the confidentiality of participants and to mask the details of a study by using pseudonyms or participant ID numbers. However, it is not always clear how much security either of these methods provides. In order to verify these general rules of thumb, a researcher might attempt to track down participants in a published study. Using the clues provided in the paper, the researcher could assign herself the task of trying to trace and identify the actual school, classroom, and students reported in the study. Alternatively, if a study was conducted online, another approach might be to use search engines or website searches to find quotes used by the participants in a study, and thus verify if indeed participants' identities have truly been kept confidential. Such a study could yield valuable suggestions on how applied linguists might go about taking stronger and more effective measures to preserve confidentiality of their participants.

2.3 Inequities surrounding authorship

As we transition from data analysis to writing up our research, one key ethical problem that might arise is that of co-authorship. This problem has become more pressing because of increased collaborative authorship, made possible through the growth of online tools such as Google docs and storage clouds such as Dropbox, and the growing demands of a 'publish or perish' culture that have permeated the academy in general. Junior scholars, graduate students and non-tenured stream faculty, in particular, are vulnerable in that they may be subject to exploitation by senior colleagues. Thus, from an ethical perspective, steps need to be taken to protect emerging scholars. In that respect, macroethical guidelines provided by the AAAL Ethics Guidelines Task Force (2017) have been helpful in safeguarding the interests of junior researchers. The potential for abuse and exploitation is amplified when we consider the plight encountered by applied linguists from periphery countries who have limited access to research resources crucial to developing discipline-specific rhetorical proficiency (Bennett, 2014). These periphery scholars are thus disadvantaged in acquiring 'the broader discourse practices that are often invisible to writers' (Hyland, 2016, p. 66). Indeed, as Arnbjörnsdóttir and Ingvarsdóttir (2017) noted, when publishing in international scholarly journals (often in English), periphery scholars have to recalibrate their ways of thinking and writing to fit a new targeted Anglo-Saxon and Western-centric academic discourse community. An accompanying danger of such an outcome, as Curry and Lillis (2017) observe, is the ratification of English and reification of Western epistemologies, which often comes at the expense of sharing one's work with scholar-peers in local communities. The access of these peers to such knowledge is generally impeded by their lack of English proficiency.

Research task 3

Examine how applied linguists describe and discuss how they addressed inequitable relations surrounding authorship. Additionally, investigate how they overcame these inequities, or at least minimized the occurrence of such inequities.

Li and De Costa (forthcoming) investigate how two Chinese visiting scholars at a U.S. university tapped learning resources available at their host university to become better academic writers. In light of this study, future researchers might want to explore how non-native language authors manage the ethical dilemma of having to balance the need to write in English in order to gain international recognition and continue publishing in their local language so that their work can be accessed by a domestic academic audience whose primary language is not English. For example, researchers might benefit from conducting in-depth interviews with the non-native language authors regarding their decision-making at different stages of research – from developing their research proposals to disseminating their findings – with a focus on examining how publishing in English impacted their decision-making processes.

Alternatively, applied linguists can also investigate the tenure expectations placed on these local non-native English-speaking authors by their respective universities by analyzing the university's tenure review policies and interviewing university administrators to find out more about publication expectations. Such an investigation would take into consideration the factors operating at the meso-institutional university level and contribute to a more comprehensive picture of the 'perish or publish' in English cultural phenomenon that has gripped academics located in periphery (i.e., non-English dominant and non-Western) countries. Similarly, prospective researchers, in particular those engaged in collaborative projects, might consider documenting: (1) how they made the publication process (from the germination of ideas through the conduct of research and eventually writing up the study for publication) as egalitarian as possible; (2) how they engaged in dialogue to resolve issues regarding perceived inequities with their research participants and within their own research project teams, and (3) project team member perceptions of the allocation and acknowledgment of assigned tasks.

2.4 Test score interpretations in language assessment

Language assessment research also needs to consider the administration of the language tests and their subsequent interpretation. Over a decade ago, Shohamy (2004) alerted us to the potential abuse and misinterpretation of language assessment scores because such scores could be exploited against the interests of those being studied. In line with Shohamy's critique of test score interpretation, McNamara and Ryan (2011) highlighted the distinction between FAIRNESS and JUSTICE, pointing out that FAIRNESS is defined as the technical quality of a test, which involves all aspects of the empirical validation of test score inferences, whereas JUSTICE embraces the values implicit in the test constructs and the social use of the test (see also Kunnan, 2014; Mirhosseini & De Costa, 2020). Thus, while a test can be fair in that equal treatment is meted out to a group of people, it might not be just an ethical concern as not all test takers receive the same type and quality of preparation prior to taking the test. Because of this inequity and recognizing that some level of subjectivity is both inevitable and essential, the interpretation of test scores and its impact on test takers have become the subject of much investigation in recent years. This aspect concerns applied linguists as well because they use such tests for different purposes, such as screening participants, or dividing groups by proficiency. It may not be possible to justify the results of their studies if they do not understand how the test is administered or interpreted.

In their critique of the misuse of proficiency criteria in the guidelines of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), Deygers, Zeidler, Vilcu, and Carlsen (2018) (see also Fulcher (2004) and North (2014)) lamented that the B2 level in CEFR is used in most European universities as the cutoff level, without taking into account the empirical data or performing a needs analysis on students. Deygers et al. found this practice to be problematic because such an arbitrary cutoff used by universities hinders access to equal opportunities for students across contexts, and thus mask students' needs as well as target language demands by following norm-driven labels. Put simply, the arbitrary use of proficiency criteria in language assessment could result in injustice encountered by students.

Recently, Winke and Zhang (2019) examined the Michigan Student Test of Education Progress (M-STEP) for English language arts which determines third graders' promotion to the fourth grade. As observed by the authors, an M-STEP English score of 1300 is a potential cut-off point between pass and fail. However, Winke and Zhang's findings revealed that if the 1300 cut-off point is used, few English language learners would pass. In addition, they found that other factors unrelated to language skills, such as economic status, contributed to the students failing the exam. As revealed by the authors, students who are economically deprived are more likely to fail than those who are not, which compromises the justness of the M-STEP.

Research task 4

Investigate the extent to which in-house university language test scores are being used justly or unjustly, and compare the academic performance of students who score just below the cutoff with that of students who score just above it.

Building on work by Winke and Zhang (2019) and Deygers et al. (2018), who sought to ascertain whether proficiency criteria have been used justly in testing individuals across diverse contexts, applied linguists in English-dominant countries that have large international student populations might want to investigate whether cut-off scores have been used validly. More often than not, these international students are offered provisional admission and expected to enroll in high tuition English as a second language (ESL) classes. These students are then required to take an in-house English language test to fulfill the university's language requirements and demonstrate a given level of English proficiency. In reality, however, other factors, such as economic status might contribute to differences in the students' test scores. Thus, applied linguists might want to investigate whether students who score just above or below the cut-off can succeed academically within their respective institutions. Specifically, and in the spirit of preserving educational justice, they might want to examine the relationship between the students' scores and demographic characteristics by conducting a longitudinal study that spans the students' undergraduate career at their university.

2.5 Researcher reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity has increasingly been discussed in applied linguistic Pérez-Milans (e.g., Starfield, 2013; Copland & Creese, 2016; Kirkham & Mackey, 2016; Mann, 2016; Pérez-Milans, 2017). Most of the discussions on reflexivity have focused on Pérez-Milans enactment of reflexivity in the research process (Sarangi & Candlin, 2003; Starfield, 2013; Pérez-Milans, 2017), that is, understanding reflexivity as the process in which researchers critically reflect on (1) their biases, theoretical predisposition, assumptions, and power relations vis-à-vis the researched, and (2) on how these aspects affect every stage of the research, from the disciplinary framing of the research questions, the choice of the research methodology, to how they present their findings (Schwandt, 2001; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Berger, 2015; Whitaker & Atkinson, 2019). The researcher, as Schwandt (2001) points out, 'is part of the setting, context, and social phenomenon he or she seeks to understand' (p. 260). Participating in reflexive practices allows researchers to reflect on the ethical aspects of their decision-making processes (Copland & Creese, 2016) and thus 'can be a means for critically inspecting the entire research process' so as to establish 'validity of accounts of social phenomena' (Schwandt, 2001, p. 260).

In the field of applied linguistics, studies that examine researcher reflexivity have mainly looked at the reflexive practices associated with specific research methodologies. For example, Mann (2011) conducted a survey of published articles that used interviews for data collection and revealed that the majority of the articles presented the interview data as objective content, rather than as a result of co-constructed knowledge by both the interviewed and the interviewer. Citing Mann, Rabbidge (2017) pointed out that this 'discursive dilemma' could be shaped by a positivist view of knowledge construction and the space constraints of academic journals, which often prevent authors from addressing the messiness of data analysis. To emphasize the importance of reflexive analysis, and drawing on his own dissertation research, Rabbidge documented the different factors that influenced his own research interviews at various stages (i.e., interview preparation, during the interview, from the interview). Specifically, he highlighted the value of reflexivity in achieving greater transparency and credibility of the data.

Research task 5

Conduct studies on how researchers' histories, experiences, theoretical predispositions, and disciplinary stance shape their research inquiries as well as understanding and interpretation of their findings.

McKinley's (2017) study provides a powerful illustration that researcher reflexivity is not simply a personal virtue; rather, reflexivity requires researchers to pay attention to the implications of their disciplinary understanding of knowledge production in the research process. McKinley discussed his positionality as an outsider in his doctoral research with Japanese university students' English writing activities in Japan. During the research process, he described being torn between choosing a situated qualitative (i.e., understanding the situation from his participants' perspective) and an objective (i.e., being free from his prior biases) perspective. Coming from a Western-dominated culture, however, made it challenging for him to remain objective, or to understand the situation from the perspective of his Japanese students. As a result, McKinley shifted from a positivist to a constructionist stance. According to him, this stance does not view researchers' positionality as limitations to the study. Instead, it constructs one's positionality as part of the situated reality and explores its impact on how the collected data are interpreted. In line with this study, more applied linguistic studies could look into how researchers engage in acts of reflexivity and explore the ways in which their positionality, epistemology, and construction of knowledge are inextricably linked (Kacen & Chaitin, 2006).

In addition, and drawing on Rabbidge's (2017) study described earlier, we argue that future studies could examine journal publishing practices regarding the inclusion of reflexive analysis. Survey studies or in-depth interviews could be conducted to examine how journal editors make decisions about how researcher reflexivity is presented in manuscripts submitted to journals. In addition, researchers can also track established applied linguists who have worked and continue to work in different paradigms. These applied linguists could be surveyed about the reflexive practices in which they engage when conducting their research. This survey could be followed up with an in-depth analysis of these practices, with particular attention given to examining how these researchers interacted with their participants and identifying whether their relationships with their participants influenced the interpretation of their research findings.

2.6 Complexities of multi-partner and multi-site research

Increasingly, because applied linguistics is a transdisciplinary field and as a result of growing calls for universities to engage in transdisciplinary collaborations within and across institutions, applied linguists have found themselves having to negotiate the complexities of multi-partner and multi-site research as collaborations – both domestic and international – have become an intrinsic part of applied linguistics. Working with multiple partners often also entails leading a research team that is comprised of members who include students and faculty of various ranks who are trained in different academic disciplines. Several applied linguists (e.g., Copland & Creese, 2016; Duff & Abdi, 2016; Bommarito et al., 2017; Tagg, Lyons, Hu, & Rock, 2017) have written about the ethical challenges of managing a diverse research team. Copland and Creese (2016), for example, reflected on the need to give graduate students and non-tenured team members equal opportunity to voice their opinions during team meetings (see section 2.3 for a discussion of dealing with power inequalities in research).

Relatedly, and working in the context of a collaborative project involving researchers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, Bommarito et al. (2017) discussed how their team were able to reconcile issues related to researcher 'insider' and 'outsider' positionalities and responsibilities, given that not all team members, who were working with Mandarin-speaking participants, could speak the language. As noted, applied linguists often work with colleagues from different disciplines within the same institution and across different institutions. Not surprisingly, because of disciplinary and cultural differences, it is not uncommon to encounter research partners operating with their own research ethics boards and protocols (Duff & Abdi, 2016). One way to address this problem, according to Shordike et al. (2017), is to have the various partners collect and analyze data from each site and subsequently make a conscious effort to create a working atmosphere characterized by mutual trust and respect of all members and all cultures.

Research task 6

Explore how applied linguists participating in multi-partner and multi-site collaborative projects respond to the fluid demands placed upon them. Specifically, focus on how they build a respectful work culture as they dialogue across cultural and disciplinary differences.

Duff and Abdi (2016) reported on ethical issues concerning a graduate student's master thesis project, an ethnographic multiple case study on children situated within different contexts (home and school) and different countries (Canada and China), and involving different languages (English and Chinese). The authors focused on how the field researcher (Abdi) had to explore a culturally appropriate practice of obtaining consent in China, while also having to liaise with and respond to queries from the ethics review board at her home institution in Canada. Based on this experience, Duff and Abdi (2016) recommended that researchers (1) engage in an active dialogue with different stakeholders as early as possible when designing a study, and (2) understand policies and protocols of ethics required by other institutions involved in the study. They also called for flexibility on the part of researchers who would need to make necessary changes in accordance with evolving demands placed upon them.[4] In response to this call, researchers could compare and contrast how applied linguists who work within different research strands within the broader field of applied linguistics (see De Costa et al., 2020) exercise flexibility in order to uphold sound ethical research practices.

In addition, and apart from the active engagement and transparent dialogues with stakeholders at a transnational level discussed earlier, researchers could also focus on equivalent ethical review protocols adopted by non-university partners. For example, if the research is sited in a K-12 school setting, schools tend to have their own research proposal protocols that need to be approved by the school district authorities. These applications, which embody an added layer of ethical complexity because the research is being conducted on minors, often include research agreements, assent from student participants and consent from their parents and teachers. Additionally, an agreed upon set of conditions on how to disseminate research findings is often put in place. Applied linguists might want to become involved in multiple dialogues with these various stakeholders, such as the participants' parents, especially if the student participants do not speak the dominant language (e.g., English) in school. Thus, unpacking multiple dialogues with different stakeholders and documenting the process could be another facet of the research task.

2.7 Ethics training

The field of applied linguistics is fairly young (de Bot, 2014), with more graduate programs being developed at both the M.A. and Ph.D. levels every year. However, given the lack of a centralizing authority to ensure that each program provides students with adequate levels of training in research ethics, the onus is thus on individual applied linguistics programs to prepare emerging scholars for the field. That applied linguists receive limited customized formal training in research ethics from their own graduate programs – forcing them to rely on generic ethical review board certification training administered broadly by their home institution – was demonstrated in Sterling, Winke, and Gass (2016). In a follow-up study, Sterling and Gass (2017) found that as a group, most applied linguists view research ethics as being centered on macro-level ethical review board concerns. In addition, the findings of Sterling and Gass's study revealed that many applied linguists viewed data manipulation and the lack of obtaining consent as being a greater violation of ethical codes as compared to other issues (some discussed in this paper) such as coerced authorship and the lack of mentorship by senior colleagues. This potentially conspicuous gap in applied linguistic graduate education has resulted in growing calls for ethics training to be made a core component of graduate methodology courses and not relegated to the margins of such courses.

Research task 7

Collect, analyze and compare data from various applied linguistics graduate programs across the world, and evaluate to what extent applied linguistics programs cover items 2.1–2.6 discussed earlier in their preparatory courses.

In a series of studies, Sterling and Gass (Sterling et al., 2016; Gass & Sterling, 2017; Sterling & Gass, 2017) set out to investigate the ways in which research ethics were viewed by members of the applied linguistics community. They administered several surveys and found that most of their participants received minimal research ethics training. Much of the training they did receive focused on procedural ethics (i.e., things that are done to gain ethical review board approval) instead of preserving academic integrity. Sterling et al. (2016) found that most researchers had a limited amount of ethics training, but it was still unclear what content, if any, was being covered in their formal graduate training. As such, future studies could focus on graduate-level programmatic reviews. Researchers could collect syllabi for any research methodology course in which research ethics is formally discussed. Graduate faculty could be surveyed to determine the coverage of ethics during classes, and an analysis of collated course materials (e.g., ethics related articles and book chapters) and course assignments (e.g., the completion of online modules sanctioned by the university and the course instructor) conducted.

These data could then be triangulated with survey data on how applied linguists interpret research ethics and correspondingly enact ethical research practices in order to gain a better picture of the depth and frequency of discussion on ethics in graduate applied linguistics programs.

3. Conclusion

The academy has become decidedly competitive in light of neoliberal demands placed on the education industry (De Costa, Park, & Wee, 2019; Li & De Costa, forthcoming). The commodification of research – applied linguistics has not been spared – has resulted in researchers being evaluated by performance-based metrics that value big grants and peer-reviewed journal publications. In pursuit of these rewards, researchers – including applied linguists and scientists like the one described in our introduction – may be tempted to cut ethical corners and take shortcuts to get ahead of others. To curb applied linguists from going morally astray, ethical guard rails need to be erected. This urgency to uphold ethical applied linguistic research standards has prompted a new methodological line of inquiry that has been the focus of this article.

Notes

[1] We use the terms 'IRB' and 'ethics review board' interchangeably throughout this article.

[2] At the time of drafting this paper, 36 applied linguistics journals had encouraged their authors to upload their materials and data to IRIS (Marsden & Plonsky, 2018). More recently, some journals (e.g., *Language Learning*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*) have begun providing open science badges to published research whose data and/or materials are made available through IRIS. Such badges appear on the first page of published work and are accompanied by a brief introduction to what each badge indicates.

[3] This need and push for greater online data protection must also be seen vis-à-vis recent legislature such as Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) that seeks to protect cybersecurity researchers who work to uncover abuses of personal data, after critics noted that the law could see their research be criminalised. https://www.wired.co.uk/article/what-is-gdpr-uk-eu-legislation-compliance-summary-fines-2018

[4] It should also be noted, that as of early 2019, the USA has updated its Common Rule to allow for easier multi-site research that allows for ethical oversight to be guided by the best option, instead of each researcher's local ethical review board.

References

AAAL Ethics Guidelines Task Force. (2017). AAAL ethics guidelines. Retrieved from http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.aaal.org/resource/resmgr/AAAL_Ethics_Guidelines_-_App.pdf

Amdur, R., & Bankert, E. (2011). *Institutional review board: Member handbook* (3rd ed.). Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett.

Arnbjörnsdóttir, B., & Ingvarsdóttir, H. (2017). Issues of identity and voice: Writing English for research purposes in the semi-periphery. In M. J. Curry & T. Lillis (Eds.), *Global academic publishing: Policies, perspectives, and pedagogies* (pp. 73–87). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Bennett, K. (2014). *The semiperiphery of academic writing: Discourses, communities and practices*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, *15*(2), 219–234.

Bommarito, D. V., Matsuda, P. K., Liu, J., Racelis, J. V., Wu, T. T., Xia, J., & Yang, Y. J. (2017). Doing collaborative research: Challenges and opportunities. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing research in applied linguistics* (pp. 65–76). New York, NY: Routledge.

Bowern, C. (2010). Fieldwork and the IRB: A snapshot. *Language*, *86*(4), 897–905.

British Association for Applied Linguistics. (2016). Recommendations on good practice in applied linguistics report. Retrieved from http://www.baal.org.uk/goodpractice_full_2016.pdf

Brown, J. D. (1988). *Understanding research in second language learning*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Copland, F. (2018). Reflecting on the ethics of researching communication in superdiverse contexts. In A. Creese & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language and superdiversity* (pp. 73–88). New York, NY: Routledge.

Copland, F., & Creese, A. (2016). Ethical issues in linguistic ethnography: Balancing the micro and the macro. In P. I. De Costa (Ed.), *Ethics in applied linguistics research: Language researcher narratives* (pp. 161–178). New York, NY: Routledge.

Curry, M. J., & Lillis, T. (2017). *Global academic publishing: Policies, perspectives and pedagogies*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

de Bot, K. (2014). *A history of applied linguistics: From 1980 to the present*. New York, NY: Routledge.

De Costa, P. I. (2014). Making ethical decisions in an ethnographic study. *TESOL Quarterly*, *48*(2), 413–422.

De Costa, P. I. (2015). Ethics in applied linguistics research. In B. Paltridge & A. Phakiti (Eds.), *Research methods in applied linguistics: A practical resource* (pp. 245–257). London, UK: Bloomsbury.

De Costa, P. I. (2016). *Ethics in applied linguistics research: Language researcher narratives*. New York, NY: Routledge.

De Costa, P. I., Lee, J., Rawal, H., & Li, W. (2020). Ethics in applied linguistics research. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of research methods in applied linguistics* (pp. 122–130). New York, NY: Routledge.

De Costa, P. I., Park, J. S., & Wee, L. (2019). Linguistic entrepreneurship as affective regime: organizations, audit culture, and second/foreign language education policy. *Language Policy*, *18*(3), 387–406.

Deygers, B., Zeidler, B., Vilcu, D., & Carlsen, C. H. (2018). One framework to unite them all? Use of the CEFR in European university entrance policies. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, *15*(1), 3–15.

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Duff, P. (2008). *Case study research in applied linguistics*. New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Duff, P., & Abdi, K. (2016). Negotiating ethical research engagements in multilingual ethnographic studies in education: Narratives from the field. In P. I. De Costa (Ed.), *Ethics in applied linguistics research: Language researcher narratives* (pp. 121–141). New York, NY: Routledge.

Dufon, M. (1993). Ethics in TESOL research. *TESOL Quarterly*, *27*(1), 157–160.

Fulcher, G. (2004). Deluded by artifices? The Common European Framework and harmonization. *Language Assessment Quarterly: An International Journal*, *1*(4), 253–266.

Gass, S. M., & Mackey, A. (eds.) (2012). *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Gass, S. M., & Sterling, S. (2017). Ethics in ISLA. In S. Loewen & M. Sato (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of instructed second language acquisition* (pp. 577–595). New York, NY: Routledge.

Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and 'ethically important moments' in research. *Qualitative inquiry*, *10*(2), 261–280.

Haggerty, K. D. (2004). Ethics creep: Governing social science research in the name of ethics. *Qualitative Sociology*, *27*(4), 391–414.

Hatch, E., & Lazaraton, A. (1991). *The research manual: Design and statistics for applied linguistics*. Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle.

Hockly, N. (2017). Researching with technology in ELT. *ELT Journal*, *71*(3), 364–372.

Holliday, A. (2007). *Doing and writing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hyland, K. (2016). Academic publishing and the myth of linguistic injustice. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *31*, 58–69.

Johnson, D. M. (1992). *Approaches to research in second language learning*. New York, NY: Longman.

Kacen, L., & Chaitin, J. (2006). 'The times they are a changing': Undertaking qualitative research in ambiguous, conflictual, and changing contexts. *The Qualitative Report*, *11*(2), 209–228.

Kirkham, S., & Mackey, A. (2016). Research, relationships, and reflexivity: Two case studies of language and identity. In P. I. De Costa (Ed.), *Ethics in applied linguistics research: Language researcher narratives* (pp. 103–120). New York, NY: Routledge.

Kouritzin, S. (Guest Ed.). (2011). Ethics in cross-cultural, cross-linguistic research. *TESL Canada Journal* *28*(2) (s1).

Kouritzin, S., & Nakagawa, S. (2018). Toward a non-extractive research ethics for transcultural, translingual research: Perspectives from the coloniser and the colonised. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *39*(8), 675–687.

Kramsch, C., & Whiteside, A. (2007). Three fundamental concepts in second language acquisition and their relevance in multilingual contexts. *The Modern Language Journal*, *91*(s1), 907–922.

Kubaniyova, M. (2008). Rethinking research ethics in contemporary applied linguistics: The tension between macroethical and microethical perspectives in situated research. *The Modern Language Journal*, *92*(4), 503–518.

Kunnan, A. J. (2014). Fairness and justice in language assessment. In A. J. Kunnan (Ed.), *The companion to language assessment* (pp. 1098–1114). Oxford, UK: John Wiley and Sons.
Lee, E. (2011). Ethical issues in addressing inequity in/through ESL research. *TESL Canada Journal*, *28*(31), 31–52.
Li, W., & De Costa, P. I. (forthcoming). Problematizing enterprise culture in global academic publishing: Linguistic entrepreneurship through the lens of two Chinese visiting scholars in a U.S. university. *Multilingua*.
Mackey, A., & Gass, S. M. (2016). *Second language research: Methodology and design*. New York, NY: Routledge.
Mann, S. (2011). A critical review of qualitative interviews in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, *32*, 6–24.
Mann, S. (2016). *The research interview: Reflective practice and reflexivity in research processes*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
Markham, A. (2009). How can qualitative researchers produce work that is meaningful across time, space, and culture? In A. N. Markham, & N. K. Baym (Eds.), *Internet inquiry: Conversations about method* (pp. 131–155). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Marsden, E., Mackey, A., & Plonsky, L. (2016). The IRIS repository: Advancing research practice and methodology. In A. Mackey & E. Marsden (Eds.), *Advancing methodology and practice: The IRIS repository of instruments for research into second languages* (pp. 1–21). New York, NY: Routledge.
Marsden, E., & Plonsky, L. (2018). Data, open science, and methodological reform in second language acquisition research. In A. Gudmestad & A. Edmonds (Eds.), *Critical reflections on data in second language acquisition* (pp. 219–228). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
McKay, S. L. (2006). *Researching second language classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
McKinley, J. (2017). Overcoming problematic positionality and researcher objectivity. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *Doing research in applied linguistics: Realities, dilemmas, and solutions* (pp. 55–64). New York, NY: Routledge.
McNamara, T., & Ryan, K. (2011). Fairness versus justice in language testing: The place of English literacy in the Australian citizenship test. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, *8*(2), 161–178.
Mirhosseini, S.-A., & De Costa, P. I. (2020). *The sociopolitics of English language testing*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
Ngo, B., Bigelow, M., & Lee, S. J. (2014). What does it mean to do ethical and engaged research with immigrant communities? *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, *8*(1), 1–6.
Norris, J. M., Plonsky, L., Ross, S. J., & Schoonen, R. (2015). Guidelines for reporting quantitative methods and results in primary research. *Language Learning*, *65*(2), 470–476.
North, B. (2014). Putting the Common European Framework of Reference to good use. *Language Teaching*, *47*(2), 228–249.
Norton, B., & Early, M. (2011). Researcher identity, narrative inquiry, and language teaching research. *TESOL Quarterly*, *45*(3), 415–439.
Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Oliver, R., & Azkarai, A. (2017). Review of child second language acquisition (SLA): Examining theories and research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *37*, 62–76.
Ortega, L. (Guest Ed.). (2005). Methodology, epistemology, and ethics in instructed SLA research. *The Modern Language Journal*, *89*(3)(s1).
Ortega, L. (2012). Epistemological diversity and moral ends of research in instructed SLA. *Language Teaching Research*, *16*, 206–226.
Paltridge, B., & Phakiti, A. (2015). *Research methods in applied linguistics: A practical resource*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
Paris, D., & Winn, M. T. (2013). *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Pennycook, A. (2017). *Posthumanist applied linguistics*. New York, NY: Routledge.
Pérez-Milans, M. P. M. (2017). Reflexivity and social change in applied linguistics. *AILA Review*, *29*, 1–14.
Phakiti, A. (2014). *Experimental research methods in language learning*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
Rabbidge, M. (2017). Embracing reflexivity: The importance of not hiding the mess. *TESOL Quarterly*, *51*(3), 1–11.
Ramanathan, V. (2005). Some impossibilities around researcher location: Tensions around divergent audiences, languages, social stratifications. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, *4*(4), 293–297.
Sarangi, S., & Candlin, C. (2003). Trading between reflexivity and relevance: New challenges for applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, *24*(3), 271–285.
Schwandt, T. (2001). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Seliger, H. W., & Shohamy, E. (1989). *Second language research methods*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
Shohamy, E. (2004). Reflections on research guidelines, categories, and responsibility. *TESOL Quarterly*, *38*(4), 728–731.
Shordike, A., Hocking, C., Bunrayong, W., Vittayakorn, S., Rattakorn, P., Pierce, D., & Wright-St Clair, V. A. (2017). Research as relationship: Engaging with ethical intent. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *20*(3), 285–298.
Spiliotti, T., & Tagg, C. (Guest Eds.) (2017). The ethics of online research methods in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics Review*, *8*(2–3) (s1).
Starfield, S. (2013). Researcher reflexivity. In C. A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics* (pp. 1–7). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
Steneck, N., & Bulger, R. (2007). The history, purpose, and future of instruction in the responsible conduct of research. *Academic Medicine*, *82*(9), 829–834.

Sterling, S. (2018). Investigating the complexity of consent forms in ESL research. *Journal of Research Design and Statistics in Linguistics and Communication Science*, *4*(2), 156–175.

Sterling, S., & De Costa, P. I. (2018). Ethical applied linguistics research. In A. Phakiti, P. I. De Costa, L. Plonsky, & S. Starfield (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of applied linguistics research* (pp. 163–182). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sterling, S., & Gass, S. M. (2017). Exploring the boundaries of research ethics: Perceptions of ethics and ethical behaviors in applied linguistics research. *System*, *70*, 50–62.

Sterling, S., Winke, P., & Gass, S. M. (2016). Training in research ethics among applied linguistics and SLA researchers. In P. I. De Costa (Ed.), *Ethics in applied linguistics research: Language researcher narratives* (pp. 15–37). New York, NY: Routledge.

Tagg, C., Lyons, A., Hu, R., & Rock, F. (2017). The ethics of digital ethnography in a team project. *Applied Linguistics Review*, *8*(2–3), 271–292.

Tao, J., Shao, Q., & Gao, X. (2017). Ethics-related practices in Internet-based applied linguistics research. *Applied Linguistics Review*, *8*(4), 321–353.

Tarone, E., & St. Martin, G. M. (1980). Research notes. *TESOL Quarterly*, *14*(3), 383–390.

TESOL International Association. (2014). *TESOL international association research agenda 2014*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

Warriner, D. S., & Bigelow, M. (Eds.). (2019). *Critical reflections on research methods: Power and equity in complex multilingual contexts*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Whitaker, E. M., & Atkinson, P. (2019). Reflexivity. In P. Atkinson, S. Delamont, A. Cernat, J. W. Sakshaug, & R. A. Williams (Eds.), *SAGE encyclopaedia of social research methods* (pp. 1–11). London, UK: Sage.

Winke, P., & Zhang, X. (2019). How a third-grade reading retention law will affect ELLs in Michigan, and a call for research on child ELL reading development. *TESOL Quarterly*, *53*(2), 529–542.

Peter De Costa is an Associate Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Languages and the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University. His primary areas of research are teacher and learner identity and ideology in SLA, language policy and qualitative methodology. He is the co-editor of *TESOL Quarterly*.

Scott Sterling is an Associate (after August 2020) Professor of linguistics and TESL at Indiana State University. His main areas of research are meta-research in linguistics, specifically in regards to ethical practices within the field, as well as research into humor usage by second language learners.

Jongbong Lee is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of International Studies at Nagoya University of Commerce & Business. Much of his current work focuses on the effects of genre and tasks on linguistic features in second language learners' writing. He conducts research on other issues in eye-tracking, language socialization, interactional feedback, and language assessment.

Wendy Li is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of International Studies at Nagoya University of Commerce & Business. Her research interests include language teacher identity and emotions, ethics in applied linguistics, second language socialization, and multilingual and multimodal literacy practices in higher education settings.

Hima Rawal is a Ph.D. candidate in the Second Language Studies program at Michigan State University. Her research interests include language teacher professional development, teacher identity/ideologies, teacher/learner emotions and wellbeing, study abroad, translanguaging in multilingual K-12 classrooms, linguistic landscape and South Asian languages in diaspora settings.

Cite this article: De Costa, P. I., Sterling, S., Lee, J., Li, W., & Rawal, H. (2020). Research tasks on ethics in applied linguistics. *Language Teaching* 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000257