

Navigating Research Ethics

Much research in the various areas of linguistic enquiry involves the collection and analysis of data from human participants. This can of course take a number of forms; for instance, as part of a research project one may ask individuals:

- to complete a questionnaire,
- to answer questions as part of an interview or focus group session, or
- to complete a language performance task or test.

Linguists frequently gather data (which may be spoken, written or signed) involving a range of human interactions ‘in the field’ in a variety of professional and social contexts. Here, the focus may be (to cite just a few examples):

- professional-client interactions in a consulting room or office
- teacher-student or student-student interactions in a classroom
- interactions between members of a family at home
- e-mail correspondence between members of an organisation
- team meetings or business meetings

Before examining some of the practical procedures involved in obtaining ethics clearance for the research project that you will be undertaking as part of your postgraduate degree program in the Linguistics Department at Macquarie University, it is useful to consider some important issues that arise as part of most research projects involving human participants. These can be summarised under the following headings: **Conflict of Interest, Consent, Coercion and Confidentiality**.

Before embarking on a piece of research, a good starting point in considering the ethical dimensions of the research is to think through your ‘identity’ with regard to your potential participants. For instance, are you...

- a researcher only?
- a researcher AND their teacher?
- a researcher AND their parent?
- a researcher AND a colleague?
- a researcher AND a friend?
- a researcher AND their carer?
- a researcher AND their treating clinician?

I. Conflict of Interest

Novice researchers commonly overlook the fact that embarking on a research project adds an extra dimension to their pre-existing relationship (if there is one) with potential participants. Recognising these distinct dimensions of the relationship and the way in which one could potentially impact upon the other is an important step if one is to avoid a conflict of interest. Avoiding such conflicts is not only desirable in

the interests of respecting principles of ethical research, but also in order to minimise the risk of damaging a friendship or professional relationship that you may have with those who will be helping you by participating in your research.

Consider the following case study:

Tom Jones (no relation to the singer) teaches IELTS¹ preparation classes at a private English language college. He has been allocated two classes of 15 students each, and (in line with the school's policy) students have been placed randomly into each of these two classes. Tom is enrolled in a PhD program at a nearby university, and is interested in researching the effects of different pedagogical approaches to preparing students for this particular test. As part of his research he decides (the day before classes are due to begin) to teach one of his classes using a standard IELTS preparation textbook that is commonly used at his college, while the other class will follow a less structured approach that he has developed and wishes to evaluate. At the end of the 10 week program, all of the students have registered to take the test officially, and Tom plans to compare the mean IELTS scores for the two classes at that time.

An initial mock test confirms that the two classes are very similar in their initial performance. Tom carries through his plans, and half way through the term, the students sit another mock test, which is scored by two of Tom's teaching colleagues. It emerges that a number of students in the 'experimental' class are performing well below expectations. What should Tom do? As a researcher, he would like to follow through with the two separate approaches he has planned for both classes, but as a teacher he wants to do what is best for the students, particularly as this is a 'high-stakes' exam for many of them.

The situation in which Tom finds himself is one where there is a conflict between his role as researcher and his role as teacher. This kind of conflict of interest can usually be anticipated if one considers the dual role that the researcher must play here, and the design of the study can then be modified *before* the research begins. **In other words, if one recognises and acknowledges the potential for conflict of interest up front, one can then take steps to avoid it.**

In this case, Tom's supervisor may well have been able to point out the potential for conflict, and would then have helped him to re-design the study before it commenced. A second 'line of defence' against such a project getting to the stage where these problems occur would have been Tom's application to the relevant Human Research Ethics Committee. The ethics review process would therefore not only be safeguarding the interests of the potential participants and the university (in whose name the research was being done), but would also assist Tom by (a) pointing out any potential ethical issues that he had not anticipated, and (b) endorsing his final project

¹ International English Language Testing System – a test of English language proficiency in the four macro-skill areas, commonly used for university entry and immigration purposes in Australia.

plans once changes had been made. By rushing into the study without thinking through these issues, Tom has ended up in a rather awkward situation.

Key Point: Be sure that you discuss your plans for data collection with your supervisor and have your project approved by the relevant Ethics Committee BEFORE you begin. Ethics approval is usually impossible to obtain retrospectively, as the committee is not in a position to make any recommendations about the conduct of a study that has already taken place.

II. Consent

It is a basic principle of ethical research that those who participate in this research (known in the past as ‘subjects’ but now more commonly called ‘participants’) should give their consent to being part of the research. This consent should be both *informed* and *voluntary*.

In most cases, the researcher *informs* the participants of the aims of the study and what participants will be asked to do if they decide to participate by means of an Information and Consent form. Some guidelines (and a template) for designing this form can be found on the Macquarie University Research Ethics website at:

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/researchers/ethics/human_ethics/forms

The relevant document is the third from the bottom on the table on this web page, and can be downloaded. It is best to follow the template closely in designing your own information and consent form, as it will act as a ‘checklist’ to ensure that you have included the essential elements.

While written consent is the ‘default’ requirement, there are some situations where asking people to read and sign a consent form is clearly not practical or appropriate. In situations where participants are not literate, or where asking for signatures on pieces of paper can be seen as threatening or culturally inappropriate, researchers can apply to use verbal consenting procedures. In such cases, the system for documenting the verbal consent must still be rigorous.

In certain types of research, giving information to participants about the exact aim of the study tends to compromise the validity of the data collected, so that researchers may want to withhold this information, or even engage in initial deception about the true purpose of the study. This sort of practice is sometimes approved, but a clear justification of the need for deception must be provided, and a ‘debriefing’ procedure (for use after the data has been collected) must be set out in the ethics application. Participants are generally asked to give consent a second time to their data being used after the data collection has been completed AND they have been informed of the true aims of the study.

Where a researcher is conducting an anonymous questionnaire or survey, written consent is not generally sought. The act of returning the questionnaire is taken as an indication that the individual is willing to participate. An information statement (without the ‘consent’ portion) is still provided, however.

In addition to the need for consent to be given by participants who have been *informed*, the consent must also be given *voluntarily*. This raises the issue of potential coercion in the recruitment process.

III. Coercion

In the case study above, no information was provided as to whether or not Tom had obtained consent from his students to participate in his research project. If he had chosen to inform them of the project and had then simply asked them to sign consent forms and give them back to him on the spot, it is very likely that all students would have done exactly this. However, because of Tom's other role as the teacher of these classes, this approach to obtaining consent would generally *not* be seen as acceptable by an ethics review committee. The issue here is one of potential coercive influences arising from Tom's position of power as the teacher of these students, and 'consent' obtained in this way would not be seen to have been voluntarily given.

In cases where a researcher has no 'other' relationship with potential participants, and would not be seen to be in a position of power with respect to them, avoiding coercion can be achieved with relatively simple measures. Generally, all that the researcher needs to do is to ensure that individuals are given time to consider whether or not they wish to participate in a project, and avoid putting them in a position where they are asked to give an answer – 'yes' or 'no' – on the spot. Recruiting by e-mail is therefore usually seen as less coercive than recruiting by telephone, although the latter is often perfectly acceptable if the potential participant is given time to consider the request and is able to respond later if he or she wishes to be part of the study.

Where a researcher or person recruiting participants is also (for instance) the teacher, supervisor or manager of the individuals being recruited, extra care is necessary to avoid coercion. In addition to the sorts of measures outlined above, it is wise to stress that the decision to participate or not participate will have no bearing on other aspects of the relationship. If the researcher and potential participant are teacher and student respectively, a guarantee is usually given (on the information/consent form) that the grading of the course is not dependent on their participation in the study. If it is possible to design the study so that the decision to participate is communicated to a third party, so that the researcher does not know whether any one individual has agreed to participate, this is often an effective way of minimising coercion. Naturally, however, this is not possible in some studies.

Most linguistics research is not unpleasant or invasive, and potential participants are in many cases very pleased to be asked to help, and may also be interested in the outcomes of the research. However, it is still important to bear in mind that it is a person's right to decide whether or not they wish to be part of a piece of research, and that they should not feel obliged to participate simply because they happen to be a student, friend, co-worker or family member of the researcher.

Finally, it is also considered good ethical practice to offer participants access to a brief summary of the important findings of a study in which they have participated.

This can be provided in hard copy to participants who request it, or the information can be posted on a website for interested participants to access.

IV. Confidentiality

The results of academic research are generally published or disseminated in a publicly accessible forum. They may form the basis for a research thesis or dissertation, and they may also be published in scholarly journals or presented at conferences.

As a researcher, it is vital to respect the privacy of people who assist you with your research. In some cases, data is collected **anonymously**; this is common in the case of questionnaire surveys, for example. In this sort of research, the researcher has no way of tracing individual responses to individual participants. While it is usual to assure participants that they can withdraw from a study at any time without having to give a reason, this assurance is *not* given in the case of anonymous surveys as it is (of course) impossible to identify one participant's survey form if it has been submitted anonymously.

In many cases, the researcher does know the identity of the participants and needs to be able to match data with individuals. In most cases, however, the identity of these participants is not revealed in dissertations, papers or presentations, where numbers or pseudonyms may be used to refer to different participants. In this case, the data is not collected anonymously, but is said to have been **de-identified** prior to publication.

Key Point: In completing your ethics application, it is best to show that you are aware of any ethical issues that your project raises and explain how you will seek to address them. An application that demonstrates a frank acknowledgement and awareness of ethical issues is more likely to proceed smoothly than one where the researcher appears to be unaware of the issues raised by the project in question.

V. Obtaining Ethics Approval at Macquarie

At Macquarie University, the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) is made up of academic representatives from a number of Departments across the university, and includes a medical practitioner, a lawyer and a community representative. The procedures for obtaining ethics clearance will naturally vary from one institution to another. The Macquarie HREC website contains detailed information about the procedure for obtaining ethics approval at this university.

It is a good idea to become familiar with the HREC website, from which you can access the documents and information that you will need for your application. The main page can be found at:

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/researchers/ethics/human_ethics

Your Department's Ethics Representative

This person (also known as the Research Ethics Advisor) is your first point of contact with the ethics committee, and can provide advice and assistance if required as you are completing the ethics application. The ethics representative reviews the application, and can provide comments on it to the applicant and supervisor before they submit it to the ethics office.

To find the name and contact details for the Linguistics Department representative, go to the following website:

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/researchers/ethics/human_ethics/contact

Application Forms

As indicated above, all of the forms that you need can be downloaded from the Macquarie Research Ethics website. To download a copy of the application form, go to:

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/researchers/ethics/human_ethics/forms

It is best to download the version WITHOUT appendices. Individual appendices can be downloaded separately if they are required. The only appendices that researchers in the Linguistics Department usually need are:

Appendix B – if the research is being done outside Australia

Appendix C – if the research involves participants who are under the age of 18

Appendix D – if the research involves accessing private or personal information or files stored in a database

At Macquarie University, students completing research degrees (or research components of coursework degrees) list their names and details first on the ethics applications. The supervisor's details also need to be provided, and the supervisor signs the application along with the student.

Online Review Process and Meeting Dates

The ethics committee meets monthly between February and November, inclusive. Many applications are now able to be reviewed online by the committee, and may not need to be tabled at a committee meeting. Details of the review process can be found at:

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/researchers/ethics/human_ethics/application_pr

In some cases, applications are deferred for consideration at the committee's monthly meeting. Further details are available on the site above. For a list of meeting dates, go to:

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/researchers/ethics/human_ethics/meeting_dates

After the Review

Following the review of the application by the committee, a letter is sent to the applicant and supervisor outlining the results of the review process. In the vast majority of cases, applications are approved subject to conditions. This means that the researcher is asked to respond (in the form or a memo or e-mail) to any outstanding concerns or questions that the committee has. This response should be sent directly to the Ethics Office, and does not need to go via the Department representative. Once the Committee Chair is satisfied that these points have been addressed, a letter of final approval is sent out to the applicant.

Key Point: While the ethics committee may comment on aspects of the research methodology if they feel that it has ethical ramifications, it is not the role of the committee to tell the researchers how best to design a study to answer a given research question. This is properly the domain of the student researcher and his or her supervisor. It is therefore vitally important that research students and their supervisors work through and agree upon the details of the study design before submitting the ethics application.

VI. Final Words

While complying with research ethics procedures certainly adds to the workload of a researcher, it is worth remembering that most members of ethics committees are researchers themselves, and that their own projects are subject to the same scrutiny. Without such procedures, a handful of unethical projects would be enough to put at risk the reputation of academic research in general in the eyes of the community. Thus, while they can seem burdensome at times, ethics procedures do protect both the researchers and the institutions concerned.

As a student researcher in the Department of Linguistics, remember to make good use of the resources available to you (most importantly your supervisor and the department's ethics representative) in navigating the research ethics maze!

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