

## **Dealing with Ethical issues in Qualitative Research: Experience of a Ph.D. Student**

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### **Abstract**

This paper highlights how a study was carried out by the researcher while preserving ethical elements. This paper entails the stages that the researcher undertook to get herself permitted to enter the place that homed her research and take her participants on board. This paper also illustrates ethical issues faced by the researcher in gaining information from the participants through interviews and observation, analyzing data, and reporting the research. This paper may benefit new researchers who are going to collect their data, predominantly with human participants in a research site.

**Keywords:** *ethics; ethical issues; ethical guidelines, researching children; informed consent, Malaysian classroom, English as a Second Language; Qualitative research*

## **Introduction**

Ethics revolves around doing good things and preventing harm (Beauchamp & Childress, 1989). This reflects another definition of ethics by Sieber (1993), 'the application of a system of moral principles to prevent harming or wronging others, to promote the good, to be respectful, and to be fair' (p. 14). In the context of research, ethics has become one of the major concerns of researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and it has mainly been connected to the function of ethical principles and approaches to pursuit knowledge (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC: TriCouncil Policy Statement, 2009). Therefore, ethics should be the primary consideration instead of an afterthought of researchers, and they should position ethics at the forefront of their research outline (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Besides that, all investigators in the educational field should be mindful of and foresee ethical issues in their study (Creswell, 2012). Of all of the phases in research, ethical issues are commonly related to data collection, research reports, and dissemination of data than any of the other stages of a study (Creswell, 2012). This paper discusses some of these ethical issues.

### **Ethical Elements concerning Data Collection**

Qualitative research is often carried out in settings comprising people's environment (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2000). In qualitative research, the aim is to explore, examine and describe individuals and their surroundings. In addition, a study that incorporates people needs an awareness of the ethical matters that may stem from interactions between researchers and participants (Orb et al., 2000).

#### **2.1. Seeking Permission**

According to Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2005), researchers need to obtain official permission before researching in particular research settings. For the researcher's study, ethical approval was applied to the School of Education Ethical Review Committee. In this respect, the research ethics application forms were submitted online. Application comprised of the Participant Information Sheet and a Participant Consent Form. The forms were approved after being reviewed by the University Research Ethics Committee which. Approval was also sought from the Economic Planning Unit (henceforth EPU) of the Prime Minister's Department to conduct the study and access the school in the researcher's home country. The application was done online by submitting all the necessary documents. After receiving a notification email informing that the approval letter and the research pass was ready to be collected, an appointment with the designated officer was made to fetch the letter and the pass.

Subsequent to the approval of the applications, the researcher was also required to obtain permission from the State Education Department of the researcher's home country. The process required the researcher to go to the State Education Department and fill in a particular hardcopy form before being granted with the approval letter. The permission letter for the school headmaster was not prepared because the research pass from the EPU and the approval letter from the State Education Department was considered sufficient by the school headmaster where the research was conducted.

## **2.2. Informed Consent**

One of the issues raised about collecting data is the negative outcomes of refusing to participate in the research (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). Participants could feel compelled to take part in a study due to their responsibility or because they have faith in the researcher's good (Holloway & Wheeler, 1999). Therefore, informed consent needs to be properly sought that uses methods that ensure the participants are not forced and influenced to participate in the study.

In the researcher's study, the researcher met with all the participants to brief them about the research in the various settings suggested by them, such as at school, home, and at their workplace. The participant information sheet was supplied to all the participants during these initial meetings. The document explained the description of this study, incorporating the topic, purpose, duration, and methods utilised. Participants were then allowed to ask any questions related to the study.

Participants' informed consent to participate was also sought by signing the form attached with the information sheet. The participants were allowed to ask questions if they needed to clarify any issues related to this study. The participants were also told that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage if they felt uncomfortable without even notifying the researcher (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Contact details of the researcher and the supervisor were also provided in the form. In addition, the participants were informed about the purpose of using video-recording and audio-recording, which was also included in the forms. After the participants understood and agreed, informed consent was obtained before recording commenced. Since the researcher was working with young people who were below 18 years of age, and who therefore constituted a high-risk group, separate consent needed to be sought from parents in respect to their child's participation. In other words, parents needed to provide consent for themselves and for their child. The parents were asked to talk about the research with their children at home, and based on their children's responses, parents would sign the consent form.

From the researcher's experience, verbal explanation must work hand in hand with the information sheet and consent form. This aims to facilitate participants' full understandings on the purpose of the study.

## **2.3. Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Another concern related to ethical issues in a qualitative study is the protection of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 187). Similarly, Creswell (2012) argues that participant confidentiality is of greatest significance. Creswell (2012) further mentions that "the lives and experiences of participants should be told, but the individuals from which the research was gleaned must be concealed".

The researcher was aware that the confidentiality of the data and anonymity of the research settings and participants must be considered (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). All the participants' identities and responses were kept confidential. Pseudonyms were utilised for all the participants in the research, and their responses were studied and reported anonymously. The researcher also kept the physical documents in a secure place and saved all the electronic

data obtained from the participants in a specific folder in a laptop, which was protected by a password that was only known to the researcher. At the end of this research, the original raw records of both the interviews and data will be deleted permanently, and the hard copy form destroyed by a paper shredder. The actions taken above were in line with the suggestions made by BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011): "individuals should be treated fairly, sensitively, with dignity, and within an ethic of respect and freedom from prejudice" (BERA, 2011, p.5).

#### **2.4. Avoiding Harm**

In any research, harm needs to be minimised. This includes harm for both the research participants and the researcher. If harm could potentially result from the research methods adopted, the researcher needs to look at whether it can be justified or mitigated (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). In this study, no potential harms were identified as likely to affect the participants or the researcher. The study utilised suitable research methods that were informed by literature. The study was also conducted in a safe environment, and the nature of the research did not risk participants' physical, psychological and cognitive states.

#### **2.5. Power Relations**

The participants in this study were the researcher's own students, and therefore, the researcher did not know them, their parents or the teacher who taught them. The researcher was in the position of being a researcher who undertook data collection for her study. It was suggested that "the power of certain people and groups to resist a researcher's investigations is also likely to affect the outcome of any research study" (Henn, Weinstein & Foard, 2006, p.74). This did not occur in the researcher's case since consent was obtained from multiple parties as required and followed the necessary guidelines and procedures before conducting the research with the participants. The researcher's presence among the participants were welcomed, and the researcher received good cooperation from all participants in the study. Additionally, even though the researcher came to the research field as a PhD student and a researcher from an institution, the researcher assured the participants that the researcher did not aim to assess their responses. The researcher also encouraged them to behave and respond naturally as judgment would not be made upon them and further emphasised that there were no right or wrong answer to their responses and actions.

#### **2.6. Ethical Considerations in Conducting Interviews**

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), in carrying out interview, participants may feel they have lost their privacy or their privacy has been interfered. They may also feel ashamed of revealing sensitive information or something embarrassing to the researcher (Creswell, 2012). To minimize such possibilities to happen, a highly structured interview format was employed at the beginning of the interview session with the parent and ESL teacher participants. This approach was utilised to break the ice and make the participants feel at ease as the questions revolved around the participants' profile and life. Based on their responses, the researcher also engaged in small talk to let the participants feel more comfortable to open up with the researcher.

#### **2.7. Ethical Considerations in Conducting Observations**

Observation is another data collection method in a qualitative study, and it also has its own ethical drawbacks, based on the researcher's role or engagement in the activity. Observations carried out without the consciousness of those being investigated will cause ethical concerns including privacy and informed consent (Merriam & Tisdell).

The researcher's role in this study was that of observer as participant because the researcher's "observer activities are known to the group" and the "participation in the group is definitely secondary to the role of information gatherer" (Merriam & Tisdell, 1026, pp.144-145). Adler and Adler (1994, p.380) mentioned, "This peripheral membership role" allows the investigator to "observe and interact closely enough with members to establish an insider's identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership". The researcher was largely an information gatherer and less a participant during the classroom observation. The people under the researcher study were aware of the observation activities.

Besides that, the original proposal of the researcher was to have eight observations. The teacher, however, was initially quite reluctant to allow me to observe the classroom as she might see me as an "external observers represent[ing] an intrusion into classrooms" who "can disrupt the regular classroom routine" (Shih, 2013, p.42). So, the researcher had to make do with what was achievable at that particular time.

Furthermore, the video recording was also useful. As suggested by Hackling (2014), two digital camcorders can be used when observing a teacher and students in the classroom. Two mounted on floor-standing tripods were utilised to record what happened in the classroom. One device pointed to the teacher's place or desk, and the other device was directed to the six focal students who sat in the same group (Hackling, 2014). This approach prevented the researcher from deliberately videoing other students who did not participate in the study (Hackling, 2014).

Apart from that, research has claimed that the existence of the observer in the research site may give a negative implication to the research participants. They may behave differently with the presence of others, such as the researcher (Patton, 2002), which is known as The Hawthorne Effect (Bolduc, 2008). It was hoped, however, that the rapport that had been built and maintained throughout the research journey might help reduce the non-natural portrayal of the participants.

## **2.8. Ethical Considerations in Research with Children**

Ethical concerns are specifically salient when dealing with young children (Flewitt, 2005). It has been suggested that "... our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline. The lives and stories that we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared them with us" (Denzin, 1989, p.83). Flewitt (2005) recommended ethical guidelines that needed to be taken into account while doing research with children. These are negotiation of initial consent, negotiation of ongoing consent, anonymity, confidentiality and visual data and participant consultation and research outcomes.

In relation to consent, Alderson (2004) asserted that consent is a crucial issue when research is conducted with children. Some academics choose to employ the word 'assent' over 'consent' to illustrate that children are not able to give consent legally (Flewitt, 2005). Nonetheless, it has been argued that children can provide legal consent if they have enough understanding on what is put forward to them (Alderson & Morrow, 2004). Hughes and Helling (1991) further stated that children between the ages of seven and twelve have the capacity to think rationally and understand the results or outcomes of actions taken. Since the study involved Year 1 primary school students, in other words, seven-year-old children, 'there is no reason researchers cannot obtain informed consent from these children (Hughes and Helling, 1991, p.229).

Seeking consent from children who are regarded as "vulnerable to persuasion" (Hill, 2005, p.63) needs to be carried out cautiously so that they are not coerced into participating in the study. Children may also not be able to understand their voluntary participation in the research. As such, the method of seeking consent to their level of understanding was applied by considering using simple words in the explanation to assist them to "give fully informed consent" in an authentic way (BERA, 2011, p.6). It was also explained to the children that they could choose whether or not to take part in the study and there was no problem if they decided to decline the invitation. A participant information sheet which consisted of several images and simple words or phrases was used to explain my research to the children (see Appendix 1). The idea was taken from a suggestion made by Alderson (2004) who mentioned that picture leaflets would be helpful when consent was sought from children. Children put their thumb up and gave verbal consent to show that they agreed to take part in the study.

The researcher also looked at their facial expressions to ensure that they were happy to participate in the study. Several important words were also repeated and phrases used during the explanation, as recommended by Brodzinsky, Singer and Braff (1984), in order to highlight the purpose of the researcher contact and meetings with them. Such repeated details included why the study was being done, what the study will ask from them, and what will happen to the data obtained. Children are also allowed to ask questions related to the study. Ongoing consent from children should also be obtained (Flewitt, 2005). Children were informed that they could opt-out of the research at any stage. Children were also observed throughout the research process so as to identify any signs of discomfort or other indication that they did not want to continue with the study. Such signals might also have resulted from them being tired or hungry. In terms of anonymity, confidentiality, and visual data, children were told that their identity would be protected and kept confidential. Consent was also sought from the children for their drawings and responses to be utilised in research reports, publications, or presentations. Children were also informed that they would experience no bad affects if their work was shared with the public since their names were made anonymous.

### **Ethical Issues around Analysis**

In the research, the researcher transcribed the interviews and classroom observations on the researcher's own. This process helped to safeguard the privacy of the participants, which was deemed to be part of ethical responsibility.

In addition to that, in qualitative research, the researcher acts as the main instrument in collecting data. Therefore, the researcher would decide what is necessary and what elements should be given attention to while collecting and analyzing data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This may seem an ethical issue because chances might exist for data exclusion; i.e., data that opposes to the researcher's views.

In research, however, the topic being investigated in a study is seen from the researcher's beliefs and perspectives on the world (Guba, 1990; Hughes, 2010). Furthermore, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state, "a qualitative approach to research is based upon different assumptions and a different worldview than traditional research" which is aligned to the constructivist paradigm adopted in the study. According to Creswell (2014), social constructivism deals with the development of subjective meanings and understandings of one's personal experiences concerning specific topics based on one's social and historical background. Even though interactions with multiple participants in this study is important to understand the phenomenon being researched, the researcher's personal opinions and judgments play a role too.

In this respect, member checks was utilised in this study to confirm that the data I collected agreed with the participants' actual meanings. Member checking, which is also identified as participant validation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), is regarded as "the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed" (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 126–127)

Apart from that, the researcher also became the translator of the data obtained from the participants because both parties spoke similar language. In this regards, another ethical concern might rise is queries about ownership, namely "Does the interpretation belong to those who have generated it or to those whose words and actions have been interpreted?" (Flick, 2014, p. 142). Being simultaneously a researcher and translator therefore demands that the researcher uphold the ethical responsibilities as suggested by Shklarov (2007, pp.534-535) which are "to protect the participants from any possible harm (in a broad sense)", and "to produce honest and sound scientific results free of any distortion that might result from language challenges, with respect to maximising benefits of research".

Considering the risk of misinterpretation that might occur, the researcher consulted a senior Malaysian teacher who majors in Teaching English as a Second Language, on the data translation of this study.

### **Ethical Issues during Fieldwork**

During the data collection phase method, it became evident that the participating parents were learning about their child's English reading progress, including their difficulties in reading, through the researcher, rather than directly through the school or teacher. The researcher had not anticipated this situation prior to the data collection but as it became apparent and as the researcher reflected on the interview with the teacher that the researcher conducted previously, the researcher came to understand that whilst the school had established a policy

that parents would be informed about their children's English learning progress through an online portal, in practice, some parents were not familiar with this system and were not using it.

Regarding how the researcher then responded, when the researcher was engaging with participating parents and expressed a lack of awareness about their children's English reading attainment, the researcher attempted to move the conversation on, tried to sound natural, and did not interfere with the parents' responses. The researcher did this because the researcher was worried that the researcher might influence the parents' views on the issue, and did not want to prejudice the relationship between the parents and the teacher. Reflecting upon this subsequently, however, the researcher has come to feel that it would have been better for the researcher to discuss this issue with the teacher; in other words, to inform the teacher that the parents did not know about their children's English reading performance at school, suggesting that the teacher and/or the school generally might want to consider how that information reached parents, and whether that process could be improved.

In this case, the researcher feel that the initial response was probably not in the best interests of the children, and this should have been the researcher's primary concern. In other words, on the basis that parents need to have a comprehensive understanding of their child's progress if they are to be able to support that child to improve, the researcher should have notified the school that this communication was not working. This would have had the additional advantage of tactfully alerting the teacher and the school that parents did appear to be interested in their children's learning; which the findings in general suggested the school was not fully cognisant of.

### **Ethical Issues in Reporting Data**

Creswell (2012) states that although much ethical discussion is focused on data collection and analysis, an equally important element of ethical research procedure is reporting the study's findings. It has been argued that in writing a research, the researcher must give credits duly to any works cited from other sources. Such a practice prevents the researcher from plagiarizing other people's work. (Creswell, 2012). The citation must include the name of the author and the publication year for the in-text citation. References must also be listed in the reference section. Apart from that, the findings should also be justly reported without alteration to suit the interest or assumptions of the researcher or other parties (Creswell, 2012). Although the findings conflicting the accepted standards, the findings should still be published and circulated.

### **Conclusion**

This paper aims to provide the readers with information about ethical practices throughout the Ph.D. research process. The paper describes some of the researcher's ethical principles throughout the research process, particularly in collecting, analyzing, and reporting the data.

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Appendix 1: Participation information sheet and consent form for the children

