The Researcher's Positionality, Ethics, and Research Methods in Language Education Research

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Being a critical linguist requires a critical understanding of the researcher's positionality, which involves a critical examination of interactions with research participants. A consideration of ethics is crucial in relation to the researcher's positionality and provides opportunities for researchers to critically reflect on their position and identity in relation to the project and research participants. Although the notion of research ethics is specific to each culture and society, and Japanese universities rely on certain assumed shared morals in relation to appropriate ethical considerations, it is important to understand that the researcher's positionality and research ethics shape research methods and outcomes. This article addresses issues surrounding the researcher's positionality, research methods, and ethics, using some of the author's own experiences as a researcher as examples.

批判的言語学者であるためには、研究者の立ち位置を批判的に理解することが必要であり、それには研究参加者との関わり合いを批判的に検証することが含まれる。倫理への配慮は研究者の立ち位置との関係において不可欠であり、プロジェクトと研究参加者との関係において、研究者が自らの立場とアイデンティティを顧みる機会を提供する。研究倫理の概念はそれぞれの文化や社会に特有であり、日本の大学では適切な倫理的配慮は一定の当然とされる道徳観に依存しているが、研究者の立ち位置及び研究倫理が、研究方法と結果を方向づけることを理解することが重要である。この論文では、筆者の研究者としての経験を例に挙げながら、研究者の立ち位置、研究方法、そして倫理を巡る問題を取り上げる。

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Being "critical" is essential for a researcher of language policy. In his article on critical applied linguistics in this journal, Bouchard (2022) states that "criticality is inherent to AL [Applied Linguistics] rather than a mere addition to it" (p. 154). Tollefson (2013) argues that critical linguists understand "the processes by which social, economic, and political inequality are created, masked, and sustained, as well as how language policies may undermine hierarchical systems and offer instead a wider range of life options for speakers of all language varieties" (p. 30). Researchers of language policy have a responsibility to be critical not only because our research deals with power but also because we are involved in the process of making changes that address such inequalities. Johnson (2018) further argues that being a critical linguist requires a critical understanding of the researcher's positionality, which involves a critical examination of interactions with research participants. When a researcher acts as an advocate for the minority, rather than simply presenting generalised findings (Canagarajah & Stanley, 2015), a consideration for ethics is crucial in relation to that researcher's positionality and subjectivity.

This article addresses issues surrounding the researcher's positionality, research methods, and ethics, using some of my own experiences as examples, for readers of this journal who are teacher researchers of languages in Japan. I chose this topic because even though a researcher's positionality and ethics shape their research method, I often find that there is a lack of attention to or consideration of these aspects in research conducted in Japanese universities. As each country has its own education system, and its research culture has been nurtured and developed within that system, understandings of positionality, method and ethics are likely to be influenced by cultural differences, including academic practices. The article begins with an overview of ethical approvals for human research in Japan.

Ethical Conduct of Research

Research integrity is of utmost importance to protect and advance our research, and "ethics and ethical behaviour (often linked to 'responsible practice') are the fundamental pillars of a civilised society" (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2021). In many countries and institutions, appropriate measures have been put in place to set standards for ethical behaviour. While the Japanese government has urged scientists to act responsibly in conducting their research activities, condemning misconduct such as fabrication, falsification and plagiarism (Japan Science and Technology Agency, 2024),

the same attention has not been paid to humanities researchers. A disparity in understandings of and approaches to ethical approval processes for non-medical human research between researchers has been reported in Japan and Europe (Morimoto, 2023; Sivasubramaniam et al., 2021). The most notable aspect of ethical review for non-medical human research in Japanese universities is, however, that it is largely left to the judgement of institutions and/or individual researchers.[1]

Okada (2015) argues that universities are not obliged to follow the government's administrative guidance for ethical review and that it is sufficient for universities to ensure that non-life-threatening human research follows the appropriate regulations, without scrutinising the specific content of such projects. The notion of ethical review requirements as a bureaucratic imposition has changed over the last ten years, and the benefits of receiving an ethical review have gradually been acknowledged by humanities researchers (Morimoto, 2023). The calls to minimise administrative processes, however, remain strong, in order to reduce the burden on researchers as well as review committee members. Morimoto (2023) suggests a simplified review process for research projects that do not need ethical approval but are required to obtain it solely because their findings will be presented publicly, for example at a conference. This suggests that if researchers do not intend to present or publish their findings, they do not need to apply for ethical review. Indeed, universities inform researchers that they only require ethical approval if they intend to present and/or publish their findings and/or if it is required by their funding body or publisher (University of the Ryukyus, 2024). This raises a few questions. Do researchers ever conduct research without the intention to present or publish their findings? Can researchers do anything they like in their research as long as they do not present or publish their findings? Don't Japanese academic publishers require proof of ethical approval upon manuscript submission?

International publishers, such as Taylor & Francis, require a statement confirming ethical approval to be included with manuscript submissions. This statement provides details of the name of the ethics committee and reference/permit numbers (Taylor & Francis, n.d.). *The Japanese Journal of Language in Society*, published by the Japanese Association of Sociolinguistic Sciences (JASS), provides authors with advice to avoid inappropriate data collection (JASS, 2022). One such piece of advice is to obtain consent from participants after explaining the purpose of the survey/experiment, but the journal does not require proof of ethical approval. In other words, it relies on authors' self-declarations in relation to whether they have observed the

journal's research ethics guidelines. This reliance on self-declarations is also evident in universities' ethics guidelines for researchers. For example, the flowchart of research that require ethical review in the research ethics handbook of Ritsumeikan University (2024) includes the following:

> (5) Is there any possibility that the research has an impact on the participants physically or emotionally or on the society, and causes ethical, legal or social problems?
>
> ↓ No
>
> (6) Does the research require ethical review for joint research, research grant application, conference presentation, and/or paper submission?
>
> ↓ No
>
> It is not necessary to apply. (p. 16, author's translation)

This means that it is left to the researcher's judgement whether their research has an impact on the participants or society more generally, and that judgement is subjective. Sivasubramaniam et al. (2021) point out that many ethical guidelines are based on society's moral "beliefs" in such a way that the words "ethics" and "morals" are often used interchangeably. In fact, as we have seen, the web address of Kansai University guidebook uses "morals" and Ritsumeikan University uses "ethics". Sivasubramaniam et al. (2021) explain that morals are "the beliefs of the individual or group as to what is right or wrong", which "may differ from society to society and culture to culture", while ethics are "the guiding principles, which help the individual or group to decide what is good or bad".

Msoroka and Amundsen (2018) call for a more culturally diverse interpretation of what constitutes "ethical research conduct". Examining human research ethics procedures in New Zealand, they argue that ethical norms endorsed in one culture or society may not always be considered "right" in another culture and society. This suggests that ethical review involves a researcher's belongingness and identity. In contrast, Japanese universities' reliance on researchers' self-determination of whether or not they need to go through an ethical review seems to be based on a belief in shared morals.

Like Ritsumeikan University, Yokohama National University (2023) provides a guidebook for human research. The guidebook specifies that if

the research satisfies all nine criteria, ethical review is not required. Two of these criteria are: (1) "It provides appropriate consideration for protecting participants in terms of issues relating to procedure, harassment and pressure" and (8) "In the questionnaire survey and experiment prompts, items that are beyond the scope of social and daily life are not included (e. g. Have you been bullied? What is your recent sexual appetite? Have you wished to die?) (p. 2, author's translation). The first criterion indicates that there is an assumed consensus about what is "appropriate consideration" in such areas among academics at the university. The second criterion suggests that only extreme questions are considered to be problematic as question items.

In terms of conflict of interest, the application form for Kansai University (n.d.b) ethical review asks the applicant whether they are "ready to explain that they will not be disadvantaged by refusing to participate in the research (if there are benefits of participating in the research or if there are power relationships between researchers and participants who are students, clients or colleagues)" (p. 8, author's translation). This question suggests that it is researchers who decide whether there is a conflict of interest in their research, and a statement that ensures that participants will not be disadvantaged satisfies review requirements. It appears that it is common and acceptable practice in Japanese universities to collect data from the current students of researchers. University of the Ryukyus provides a sample ethical review application form, using a research project that examines the abilities of pre-service teachers who are currently enrolled in the course the researcher teaches. The sample entry for the written consent section includes a statement that "refusal to participate will not affect your grade at all; agreement to participate will not affect your grade at all" (University of the Ryukyus, n.d., author's translation). Since it is impossible to prove that participation and non-participation in the research does not affect a student's grade because they are currently enrolled in a course for which the researcher has the power to determine their grade, this kind of statement remains a token gesture.

Another important point in relation to ethical review in Japanese universities is that the treatment of student research varies from university to university. While Yokohama National University (2023) applies the same rules as those for staff research to student research apart from pilot studies, University of the Ryukyus (2024) takes the view that research for a postgraduate thesis is conducted under the supervision of their advisor and therefore exempt from review. Kansai University considers students to

be researchers if they are expected to present and publish their findings in future and applies the same rules to them as to staff researchers (Kansai University, n.d.a). These various approaches to student research in terms of ethical review suggest that preparation for ethical review is not necessarily included in student research training programs at Japanese universities. The next section discusses how ethical review is related to the researcher's positionality.

The Researcher's Positionality and Ethics

A researcher's positionality is about where the researcher stands in relation to the topic and data. By acknowledging this positionality, the researcher has an opportunity to critically reflect on their position as a researcher in their chosen research project. This is important because the researcher's positionality directly influences how their research is conducted, how the data is analysed, and whose voices are represented in the findings (Rowe, 2014). Yip (2024) reports on how her insider-outsider position influenced her relationships and interactions with the participants in her PhD research project.

As mentioned above, in Japanese universities, it seems common to collect data from students that researchers currently teach during class time. In Australia, all human research must obtain ethical approval, apart from research that handles existing publicly available data. At my university, The University of Queensland (UQ), researchers are not normally allowed to conduct research that focuses on students who are currently enrolled in the course they coordinate and/or teach. This is due to the perceived conflict of interest. Researchers have power over students because they determine their academic grades, and the teacher-student relationship could have an impact on their participation and non-participation in the project as well as their responses to or performance in the project. Another related issue is regulations surrounding teaching practices. At UQ, course profiles specify teaching content, assessment, and class schedules, and are published prior to the beginning of the semester, and making it impossible for researchers to introduce their individual research into their teaching. It appears that in Japanese universities, academics have greater power and freedom over their courses, which allows them to collect data from their students.

One of my current projects received ethical approval to use assignments submitted by my students for my research. This project differs from my other projects that involve survey questionnaires and interviews. In this project, I wanted to use short essays that students had written in Japanese

and their reflections, which were written in English. They were submitted as assignments in an advanced Japanese course that I coordinated and taught last year. There were 39 students enrolled in the course. The assignments relate to the students' Japanese language learning experiences and their reflections on their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The assignments were marked and returned to students, but the original submissions are still available on Blackboard, which is a web-based learning management system controlled by the university. Even though student assignments are considered to be university property, it was necessary to ask students' consent because students did not submit their assignments to be used in my research. I initially thought that I only required consent from the students to use their assignments, but the university research ethics and integrity office advised me that I also needed to provide a Participant Information Sheet, as there was also interaction between the investigator and participants in the process of seeking consent. In terms of conflict of interest, since the grades for the course were finalised last year, I initially eliminated students who had failed the course as potential participants. The university office, however, pointed out that "if the students have not graduated yet, they might need to take another course by the course coordinator/researcher and therefore feel pressured into accepting" (Email to request additional information, UQ Research Ethics and Integrity). In response to this request, I excluded students who might be likely to take another course of mine. For students who were already enrolled in another course I coordinated, I contacted them only after their grades were finalised and published. As a result, the number of students who agreed to participate was smaller than I had hoped (total 13) but going through the proper procedure also provided participants with opportunities to understand research ethics. The students were happy to have their writing used in my research partly because they were familiar with my research interests—where I stand in the research field— through my teaching, and partly because I have established positive relationships with them, showing an interest in and respect for their individual experiences and backgrounds. This experience of ethic approval made me realise the importance of positionality and sensitivity towards power-imbalanced relationships in the process of data collection.

Regarding consent forms, I recall that I had difficulties in obtaining a written consent form from some interview participants for a project on administrative language practices for local foreign residents that I conducted in Japan some time ago. It was in the pre-COVID era, and the interview participants I could not obtain a written consent form from were

local government employees at prefectural offices in different locations. They agreed to be interviewed, but since they refused to sign the consent form, I was not able to record the interviews. They seemed to believe that once they signed the consent form, they would be held responsible for what they said. The fact that the participant information provided clearly ensured anonymity seemed to mean little to them. This tendency seemed strong in people who were in lower positions in their workplace. Similar experiences were reported by some of my PhD students who collected data in Japan from Japanese people. This suggests their unfamiliarity with consent forms for research purposes and a lack of understanding of the need for consent to participate in research. This is not surprising given that ethical approval is not mandatory for all human research in Japan. In a society where shared morals play an important role, perhaps a written consent form is seen as too formal and makes participants suspicious and wary. On reflection, I also realise that I was a total outsider to them in terms of the topic, and my positionality certainly did not make them feel inclined to have their voices recorded for my research.

Ethics and Research Methods

I recall one project in which I took advantage of being an outsider. I interviewed Vietnamese university students who were studying Japanese in Vietnam during a month-long stay in Hanoi (see Hashimoto, 2022). The project was on their views of learning Japanese language in relation to their future pathways. Since I do not speak Vietnamese, and I was advised that they spoke Japanese better than English, I decided to conduct the interviews in Japanese by myself. I did not want to use a Vietnamese interpreter because I wanted to have full control over the interviews. As the project description clearly stated that interviews would be conducted in Japanese, the students who signed up for the interviews seemed to be confident in their Japanese speaking ability. All of the students (28 in total) were able to be interviewed face-to-face in Japanese for 20 minutes. Some were curious to meet a Japanese teacher from Australia, commenting on me in comparison to the Japanese people they knew. They also seemed comfortable with critically describing their learning experiences at their university and in Japan. This was probably due to my outsider but neutral position as an Australian researcher.

When I submitted my paper to the journal, one of the reviewers' comments was on how I analysed the interview data, given that the interviews were conducted in Japanese, which was not the first language of the participants. In response to the question, I clarified that content analysis, rather than

discourse analysis, was applied to the interview data because the level of Japanese proficiency of the participants varied. A researcher's linguistic ability is extremely important in data collection and analysis, partly because it determines the range of data that the researcher can access and the depth of analysis possible, and partly because it shapes the researcher's positionality. Some researchers might hire interpreters and use translated materials for data collection without thinking carefully, but we must be mindful of the gap caused by linguistic differences and interpretation of these differences. Not being able to have access to primary sources is a fundamental weakness of researchers, and it requires considerable effort and training to overcome these weaknesses—effective use of research assistants, interpreters, and translators requires experience and skills. I often encounter journal submissions that rely heavily on secondary sources. Often such authors do not state their positionality.

In a team project whose membership include international researchers with different linguistic skills, such weaknesses would not be a concern, but researcher diversity in multiple locations can sometimes cause disagreement over research methods. I had one such experience—as part of an international joint project, one member wanted to interview colleagues who were her subordinates about the program she was running. Since the study was meant to be a comparative one, if this was agreed to, we would have needed to conduct the same survey at my university. I objected to the method because it would not have passed UQ's ethical review due to the obvious conflict of interest, but my concern was not well received because of different research ethics practices in the two countries and the other researcher's research experience as an exchange student in Japan. Ultimately, the project did not proceed in the way the member wanted.

Lastly, I would like to point out that most Japanese universities seem to only provide research ethics information in Japanese. Such a practice is understandable given that these days Japanese language skills are required for academic positions at Japanese universities regardless of nationality. At the same time, however, many universities have also made an effort to attract international students by offering English-medium courses. As I believe that researcher training should be available in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs, and research ethics is essential part of this, perhaps it is time to make ethics guidelines available in English for these students. Hopefully, the process of preparing English guidelines would help to develop research ethics at Japanese universities in a way that is more applicable to researchers with diverse backgrounds.

Notes

1. For example, in Kansai University's guidebook on human research ethics, the response to the question "Does 'human research' that researchers of the university conduct need to go through ethical review?" is that "the university respects researchers' decisions on whether to go through ethical review" (Kansai University, n.d.a, p. 5, author's translation).

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