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Child-centred ethics in second language education: navigating the ‘ethical maze’ when working with child participants in research

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Abstract

This article aims to provide an overview of the types of questions and concerns adult researchers working with children in L2 education need to consider when it comes to navigating research ethics. Questions and dilemmas relating to ethical practice in child-focussed research are complex, and will be rooted in political, legal and contextual concerns, and interpretations of what is ethical in any one project will depend on the adult researcher’s convictions about research paradigms, their epistemological stance and their beliefs and priorities in the given situation. This article suggests five main questions to consider when it comes to research with children. All five components are equally important and decisions relating to one component will influence all others in the framework. This paper examines the complexities in more detail, discusses some differences relevant in the two main ‘paradigms’ of child-focussed research and how these principles interact with the constraints and the affordances of the local contexts, the focus of the intended study and the background and personal theories of the adult researcher. (171 words)

Key words: research ethics, school-based research, ethical dilemmas, conceptions of childhood; child-centred research

1. Introduction: why this topic now?

What is child-centred ethics in second language education? How is it defined and how is it different from principles of research ethics with adult research participants? Ethical practices in the social sciences (including second/ foreign language education) have originally been derived from principles of medical ethics, and in most fields, such as second language education, have been formulated based on guidelines for adults. Given this complexity and the lack of focus by researchers on ethics with children, this topic is worthy of attention in our field.

Interpretations of acceptable/ ‘good’ ethical practice differ across different contexts in different times, as well as across institutions and educational cultures. What might be considered as good or acceptable practice in one context may not fit with the requirements and expectations of the individual researcher’s own beliefs and personal theories or indeed with the expectations of a particular institution the researcher is affiliated with. Thus tensions between contrasting understandings and interpretations of ethics, and how they should apply to children as research participants are likely to come to the surface in any one study. Despite the obvious complexities involved, most novice researchers do not receive adequate training or preparation when it comes to addressing ethical issues in their work.

More and more children around the world are learning English as a second or foreign language in pre-schools and elementary /primary schools, and more and more research has been targeting this age group (e.g. Bland, 2016; Copland & Garton, 2014; Enever 2011; Enever & Lindgren 2017; García Mayo, 2017; Garton & Copland 2019; Mourão & Lourenço, 2015; Nikolov, 2016; Pinter, 2011, Rich, 2014). Yet, despite the ever-increasing number of young language learners worldwide and the growing interest in research targeting them, child focussed research ethics in second/ foreign language education, i.e., what it may mean and what types of concerns it may throw up, have not been discussed or problematised much in published literature (but see Pinter & Kuchah, 2021).

Research methods training manuals and handbooks in the field of second language education tend not to pay much attention to child participants. Paltridge & Phakiti (2015) in their comprehensive overview of research methods in applied linguistics devote only one chapter (out of thirty-one chapters) to child research participants, while Dörnyei (2007), in his widely used research methods volume makes only occasional mention of children when gathering data in schools is discussed. Gass & Mackey (2005) refer to children on a handful of pages (such as 32-33 and then 209-213) but with very little detail, such as a mention that consent forms need to be understandable to participants, including children. More recently, Murphy & Macaro (2017) discussed some of the practical difficulties and challenges that researchers face when working with children as research participants in schools and several of their points relate to ethical dilemmas. These include issues around the difficulties of gaining access and getting signed consent forms from parents and guardians, as well as additional assent from the children, and practical concerns about finding suitable spaces in schools for the research where privacy from other adults can be guaranteed. They also discuss the difficulties around recruiting research assistants who can strike up good rapport with the children, something that is of utmost importance in order to make sure that the resulting data is valid and meaningful. Detailed reflections about ethical dilemmas are rare in the literature and most peer-reviewed journal publications present studies with children as tidy and unproblematic in terms of ethics (Rose & McKinley, 2017), or do not have space to address ethical issues which are ‘ticked off’ with default statements such as ‘consent was sought from all participants’ and/ or ‘the children’s parents and guardians have given permission to undertake the research’.

The aim of this paper is to address some of the complexities in more detail, discuss some differences relevant in the two main ‘paradigms’ of child-focussed research and how these principles interact with the constraints and the affordances of the local contexts, the focus of the intended study, and the background and personal theories of the adult researcher.

2. Origins of child-focussed ethics

Whether child or adult, all research participants need to be treated with utmost care with regard to ethics, and at a basic level the same principles should apply to everyone irrespective of their age. These include the right to confidentiality and anonymity, respect for autonomy, justice, beneficence, non-maleficence and the right to withdraw from the research without negative consequences (e.g. Beauchamp & Childress, 1979).

However, while in theory this sounds uncontroversial, in the case of children, the situation always appears to be more complex because parents /guardians and other adults take responsibility and ultimately control what children can do or agree to. Interestingly, this blanket rule of adults/ parents taking full control was challenged as early as in 1964 when the Declaration of Helsinki was signed, a document which clearly promoted the idea that in research it was important to obtain ‘informed consent’ from both parents/ guardians and the children themselves. However, this dual requirement does not simplify things, but instead, it makes things more complicated. In fact, the debate and the discussion are still ongoing about at what age, in what contexts, and circumstances children may be interested, able to or could be encouraged to give their own consent to participate in research.

One important milestone in the history of this debate relates to a famous legal battle fought in 1985 in the UK. In this case the judge proposed the so-called ‘Gillick criteria of competence’, confirming children’s right to make decisions about their own health and consent to their own medical treatment, without the involvement of the parents. Accordingly, under 18s, who possess sufficient maturity and who understand the nature and the likely outcome of their treatment, do not require their parents’/guardians’ consent but can consent to go ahead with the treatment without the knowledge of the parents. Even though this was a legal precedent and clearly relevant to medical practice rather than social research, the influence of this ruling on research in the social sciences, in policy and practice has been wide-ranging with the consequence that children’s voices have been listened to and taken more seriously in the decades following.

3. Two different paradigms to view children in research

What exactly is understood by child-focussed or child-centred research and child-centred ethics in applied linguistics? There is certainly no consensus among scholars in child L2 education about this issue. This is perhaps explained by the fact that applied linguistics is a relatively young field of study and has until quite recently been dominated by an adult focus (Oliver & Azkarai, 2017). To date much of the work in child SLA, for example, is still derivative of the adult literature addressing questions, using tools and methods that mirror adult studies. Oliver and Azkarai, in their recent review of child SLA comment that ‘the constructs that SLA researchers explored [in child SLA] all followed an adult agenda’, suggesting that child SLA is unsure of its own identity (2017, p. 9).

Looking around in other fields of study where children as research participants have been extensively written about (such as in sociology, anthropology, health care, education, law, and others) two opposing paradigms of child-centred research have emerged. The first one of these, which is the more traditional approach, is gradually being replaced by a so-called ‘alternative paradigm’. Depending on which paradigm one signs up to, priorities and dilemmas about ethical issues will vary.

3.1. The traditional paradigm

The traditional paradigm is associated with children portrayed as passive, unknowing research participants who cannot speak for themselves. Where does such a view originate? Research interest in childhood itself is surprisingly recent (Aries, 1986), and even though children’s presence can be traced back to the Middle Ages in terms of historical records, paintings and other artefacts, serious and consistent scientific attention to childhood and

children only dates back to the late 19th and early 20th century when large scale research with school populations first became possible. Going back just over a century, Developmental Psychology (the scientific study of childhood) was established with its main aims of documenting children's patterns of development and milestones toward adulthood and in measuring the impact of environmental influences on this development (Woodhead, 2009).

What we know about children is largely based on observations and experimental studies geared towards studying children's average performances and abilities at different ages on a variety of tasks. While developmental psychology and its methods and approaches have diversified a great deal since the beginnings, still, it is very much associated with a largely positivist approach to the study of children, one that tends to '*objectify*' children, describe them in terms of what they are *lacking* and generally considering them as unreliable informants when participating in research. Montgomery (2014, p.181), contends that there is still the assumption that in research '*children are not useful or proper subjects [....] and are unreliable informants: they do not communicate in proper sentences, they tell tales and lie, and their perspectives are very partial and limited*'. Such a position has been softened and somewhat revised following to the efforts of scholars who have demonstrated that children are more insightful than previously believed (e.g. Donaldson, 1978), and given familiar contexts and familiar tasks, they can report their experiences reliably.

3.2. The alternative paradigm

The traditional paradigm, associated with the objectification of children, interested in universal developmental patterns and rooted in the 'growth metaphor', is a way of conceptualising children that is consistent with the social status quo in modern societies where adults control all aspects of children's lives and make all important decisions for them. This version of 'childhood' is so pervasive and deeply engrained in our consciousness that it is hard to think of alternative conceptualisations of children and childhood.

Yet, more than 30 years ago, an alternative way of thinking about childhood became influential. The traditional mainstream conception of childhood was challenged and a new paradigm, often referred to as 'New Childhood Studies' was promoted by scholars in sociology first, spreading to other disciplines as well (James and Prout, 1990; Kehily, 2008). This paradigm rejected the objectification of children and the focus on universal childhoods and universal patterns of development. They declared that childhood was a social construction and children had voice and agency, and were capable of meaningful participation beyond adults' expectations. They promoted a genuine interest in children as active research subjects rather than just passive objects of adult gaze. Instead of looking down on children as objects of dispassionate study, the interest shifted to looking up to children, to appreciating individual childhoods and pledging a commitment to understanding children from their own perspectives. This paradigm suggests that children should contribute their views to research and these views are always worthwhile (Fraser, Flewitt, & Hammersley, 2014). New Childhood Studies scholars argue that it is the adults' duty to create opportunities for children's views and opinions to take centre stage. The implications of this shift in the study of children have been profound (Woodhead, 2009, p. 19) in terms of broadening the scope of possible research methods as well as raising new questions relevant to research ethics.

The alternative paradigm was also politically motivated and closely associated with the publication of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), which gave children rights and elevated them to the status of citizens. For more than 30 years now, since the UNCRC was first ratified, child-focussed research has been discussed with reference to the key articles of this document, emphasising the legal obligation of adults to listen to children’s voices and respect their rights to express their views and perspectives about important matters in their lives. The most often quoted article, Article 12 says:

Article 12

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

If research can be conceived as one of the important matters in children’s lives, then it follows that voice-based or rights-based research must uncover children’s perspectives as a priority as opposed to adults’ perspectives alone. Following this line of argument, child-focussed research inspired by the UNCRC is rooted in children’s lives and experiences rather than the adult’s interests and priorities. Child-centred approaches give children more active roles in research and respect children as experts of their own lives, leading to roles such as children as partners and co-researchers or children being enabled to do their own research (e.g. Kellet, 2005, 2010; Thomas, 2017; Pinter, Mathew & Smith, 2016).

In the alternative paradigm child status in research (following Christensen & Prout, 2002, p. 480) can be associated with four types of roles: ‘object, subject, social actor and active participant’ roles. These roles should be viewed as a spectrum/ continuum.

Principles such as appreciating and listening to children’s voices link closely with the child-centred democratic education principles (Fielding & Moss, 2015), viewing children as equals in a democratic educational context where both adults and children work in true partnership. Democratic education and listening to children’s voices has a long tradition historically, going back all the way to ideas promoted by thinkers like Rousseau, Froebel or Dewey. These theories emphasise the principles of freedom, autonomy, creativity, ongoing dialogue and democratic relationships between adults and children, with a likely consequence of extending the possibility of engaging children in roles that go beyond the conventional approach of promoting their roles as data sources, to roles such as consultants, research assistants or co-researchers and researchers (Pinter, 2019).

Table 1: Child roles in research: adapted from Mayne & Howitt, 2015, and Christensen & Prout, 2002.

Object	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children are unknowing objects • Paternalistic methods are used • Underlying assumption: children are not capable of understanding the purpose of research • Children lack the ability to consent and to have any input
Subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing subjectivity

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children’s level of involvement is defined in accordance with adult judgments regarding ability (usually age based criteria) • Everything is still conceptualised and presented from an adult perspective • Children may be aware of the research and they may be asked for their consent
Social actor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct link with New Childhood Studies • Recognizing children as equals • Co-constructor of knowledge • Capable of interpreting the world around them and make decisions • Participatory flexible approaches to methods
Children as active participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link to the ethical imperative in UNCRC Article 12 • Social actors who contribute to the research process (all or some stages) • Fully aware of the research

Depending on the adult researchers’ beliefs and conceptions about research - whether they align themselves with the developmental psychology or traditional paradigm, or the new childhood studies/ alternative paradigm, or indeed position themselves somewhere along the spectrum, they will be approaching their research and their own and the children’s roles in different ways.

4. Ethics decisions relating to the two paradigms

Even though the two paradigms should be seen as two ends of a continuum, to illustrate the main differences, it is helpful to draw up a list of contrasts which have direct consequences for ethical thinking and practice.

Table 2: Consequences of working within a given ‘paradigm’

<i>Paradigm 1: Traditional</i>	<i>Paradigm 2: Alternative</i>
Passive objects	Active participants
Starting point: adult tools and approaches;	Starting point: tools and approaches negotiated with children; participatory and/ or emancipatory approaches;
Parent/ guardian consent (with or without child assent)	Child consent is important (although parent/ guardian consent cannot be ignored)
Reliance on verbal data elicitation	Alternative data elicitation (such as art-based, visual, participatory);

Adult - child relationship in research: hierarchical but usually not problematised;	Adult-child relationship in research is designed to be less hierarchical; rapport building and relationship building is a priority;
Children's role is limited: they are data sources;	Children's roles are broader: in addition to being data sources, they can be consultants, partners, co-researchers and fully fledged child researchers;

4.1. The traditional paradigm

In the traditional paradigm, adults control everything. The hierarchical positions and the power gap between children and adults are underplayed and accepted as unremarkable, and children's roles in research is to provide data passively, often without any consultation at all.

Securing parents' / guardians' consent is the priority (with children's verbal assent being secondary if considered at all). While parents' consent is a legal requirement and once it is granted the research can go ahead, some scholars point out that parents' control is far from unproblematic. Coyne (2010) comments that most parents cannot reliably evaluate risks and benefits of research and they may volunteer their children just to please the researchers and the teachers. Further, parents may put pressure on their children to participate and this can be conceived as coercion. On the other hand, parental decision not to consent might block children's participation when they themselves would wish to participate. Darian-Smith & Henningham (2014) further comment that in most social research children actually benefit from participation rather than suffer harm, and when parents do not agree for a child to participate, the child might miss out on a positive, enriching experience.

The traditional interpretation of child-centred research aims to focus on, document and measure differences between adults' and children's capacities as research participants and thus takes adult approaches, methods and tools as the starting point by asking questions such as: How can these tools be simplified, made accessible and useable with children of different ages? How can children's relevant developmental characteristics (such as cognitive, metacognitive, social, emotional, linguistic, etc) be taken into account when planning a study? For example, what language do the children understand, how long are they able to concentrate, what literacy levels can they cope with, what instructions will they be able to process and understand, and what memory demands they can cope with in relation to the research tasks or tests.

Assessment of children's developmental characteristics is typically based on generic findings in the developmental psychology literature, associated with evidence that concerns what an 'average' child of a certain age can do. It is however important to note that, paradoxically, such data has limited meaning when applied to specific children or a group of children, who will inevitably be different from the average child. In addition, what tends to happen is that, rather than making close reference to specific developmental studies, an assessment of what might be suitable, accessible, or appropriate for the children in question, the decision is sometimes made based on adults' experience or personal judgment, and tools and tests are administered on a 'trial and error' basis.

This approach to child-focussed research that considers adult methods and tools as their starting point is rooted in a ‘traditional deficiency paradigm’, where children are automatically assumed to be lacking certain capacities and are being constantly compared to adult ideals (Walkerdine 2009, p. 117). One of the biggest challenges is that in this unfair comparison adults may underestimate children’s abilities and will potentially miss opportunities to uncover children’s unexpected strengths and hidden potential.

If and when children are given tasks and tests in second language education research, a potential problem is that these tools may be unfamiliar and as a consequence the children may be unable to showcase their second language skills or knowledge. Also, Murphy & Macaro (2017) warn that shy children may not be performing to the best of their abilities due to anxiety levels caused by the research project or the outsider researcher and the inherently hierarchical power relationships because they understand very little or nothing at all about the research.

Traditional approaches in language-focussed research tend to rely on verbal contributions and accounts. This means that language proficiency and language choice, L1 and L2 knowledge and language skills of different populations (such as linguistically diverse populations) can be a source of disadvantage. For example, linguistically diverse groups of children tend to underperform academically as compared to their monolingual peers in traditional tests but as Murphy (2021) points out underneath these outcomes lie hidden skills and abilities that need to be uncovered.

4.2. The alternative paradigm

The alternative paradigm puts children at centre stage and claims that they are resourceful and reliable informants when it comes to research that concerns their lives.

If children are fully informed about the research and they can have a say in it as active participants, it is certainly not sufficient to obtain consent from the parents’/guardians’ alone but instead adult researchers must make sure that children themselves fully understand the research and their roles in it and they themselves can confirm that they are happy to participate.

As mentioned above, the imperative to seek children’s informed consent dates back to the Declaration of Helsinki (1964), which argued for inclusion of both parents’ and children’s consent, but in practice this principle continues to be challenging to implement. How does the adult go about presenting the research to the children in a way that they understand it fully and how does the adult involve the children to engage with the research and even shape it? Is this always desirable or even possible? Innovative tools and ideas for gaining informed consent from children (Parsons, Sherwood, & Abbott, 2016) have been promoted and discussed in the literature but what is reasonably successfully implemented with one group cannot be generalised to other groups thus individual adult researchers need to spend time and effort establishing what kind of consent is possible to achieve in any given situation.

Explaining to children the purpose of the research is something that researchers aligning themselves with the traditional paradigm also do. Many emphasise the need to ‘use language

that the children understand' although as argued above it is challenging to tune into particular children's language use and make judgments about their understanding. The adult researcher needs to think of ways in which such understanding can be achieved using 'child-friendly information' leaflets, briefing sessions with the warning that children often do not choose to ask questions even if they do not understand and many would argue that full understanding is simply not possible (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). Instead of aiming for full understanding adults can monitor children's consent by revisiting the issue frequently during the study and keep an eye open for any signs of lack of interest or engagement or boredom, or signs of upset or distress. In these cases it is the adult's responsibility to notice that some children may want to opt out. As Gallagher, Haywood, Jones, & Milne (2010) argue, ultimately, the challenge of gaining consent from the children boils down to two questions: What is the researcher's view of consent and what is the children's view of consent and how close these two views can become?

While traditional approaches silence children and strip them of any real control in adult dominated research, alternative voice-based research must be 'participatory' in an emancipatory sense (Freire, 1970, 1973). Accordingly, child-centred research should give a voice to 'the oppressed', by finding alternative ways in which children's voices and perspectives can come to the surface, using methods that do not rely on verbal responses alone. Such participatory methods include the use of drama, photo elicitation, arts-based approaches, visual approaches, and other creative approaches. Other participatory methods may include a range of routinely performed activities (such as story-telling or circle time) which have obvious ecological validity with certain groups of children (Turek, 2013). Butler (2021) comments that participatory activities can be an attractive option both ethically and pedagogically by allowing children to engage more actively and directly benefit from the research. In participatory research, tools are negotiated *with* children rather than simply selected by the adult (e.g. O' Kane, 2008). This approach is in direct contrast with the developmental perspective in that here the aim is not to *modify* adult tools and methods but instead to encourage new, alternative methods and tools to be used, those that are specifically suitable for children, even suggested by the children themselves. For example, artefacts or collages have been used successfully in language education research (e.g., Prasad 2021; Ibrahim 2021) because they aim to prioritise children's concerns and ideas as a starting point rather than focusing entirely on the adult's agenda. Artwork, photos or other visuals collected and collated by children themselves rather than suggested by the adults have the potential to draw out unique insights and perspectives from the children. Such open-ended techniques where children can have substantial control over the process of data gathering lead to a more organic and emergent research design. Very young children and pre-schoolers can also make decisions and act responsibly in participatory research. For example, the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2005) invites children to take photos or produce drawings or artwork relevant to the theme of the research, which can then be used as a basis for dialogue and further reflection.

According to the normal social order, the relationship between adult researchers and children is based on a firm hierarchical setup with an inevitable power gap. Researchers need decide to what extent such a 'power gap' presents a problem in their own studies, and how much effort they can devote to bridging the gap, if at all. If it is decided that it is desirable to try to break down the hierarchy at least to some extent, one important, effective way is to build rapport and trust over time by interacting with the children and getting to know them. Harcourt & Conroy (2011) refer to this as spending 'quality' time with the children. This may mean observing children by following them engaging in their normal routine activities or

developing a rapport and a dialogue with them prior to the research. More horizontal rather than hierarchical relationships and children's roles as potential active participants will go hand in hand when it comes to the design of the study planned.

No matter how carefully relationships are developed with the children, they will still often surprise you with their responses and reactions. They may struggle to make sense of the adult researcher's hybrid identity (e.g., Kuchah & Pinter, 2012) and/ or they may be behaving in an unusual way because of the absence of their regular authority figure. So, as Punch (2004, p. 111) suggests, *'it should be recognised that children as competent social actors may choose to respond to the request and demands of others with a mixture of obedience, compliance, defiance and resistance. Equally they may act on their own initiative rather than just respond or comply'*.

5. School-based research and the paradigms

The basic ethical principles as outlined earlier by Beauchamp and Childress (1979) do not work well in school contexts at all. Schools are traditional, hierarchical places where any research is difficult to accommodate, and especially so, when the alternative paradigm is considered. Children's every move is tightly controlled and therefore respecting them in terms of autonomy and their rights (to withdraw from the research, for example) is really problematic in reality. Full confidentiality can rarely or never be promised in school contexts (e.g. Zandian, 2021) because adults/ teachers are ultimately responsible for children's wellbeing with the consequence that this latter imperative overrides the ethical principles of guaranteeing research-related confidentiality. Should a child report or even hint at physical or psychological abuse or bullying, the adult's immediate responsibility is to break the promise of confidentiality and seek help by reporting the incident to the relevant child protection authorities, usually via a member of staff at the school. In schools staff are considered as legally recognised surrogate decision makers (Felzmann, 2009) and therefore teachers and other staff members may not remember to respect the children's privacy when research is going on and may even consider it their adult right and responsibility to interfere or at least oversee the research process from the background.

At school children are used to listening to and obeying adults, so withdrawing consent, or voicing questions, let alone doubts, may seem like a risky strategy, which would upset the adult researcher or may even be interpreted as disobedience. (Tinson, 2009). Asking children whether they want to participate is putting them in a difficult position because their teacher and the parents may have already agreed to support the project (Garcia Mayo, 2021). Even if adult researchers explain that they are genuinely interested in the children's questions and views and there are no right answers to their questions or tasks, and that and they are not being evaluated or tested in any way in the research project, children's long-standing experiences tell them otherwise and they typically act cautiously, say what they think the adult expects to hear, say very little or even stay completely silent (Spyrou 2015).

Komulainen (2007, p. 26) suggest that communication is characterised by multi-voicedness and therefore especially in school contexts where adult discourses dominate, it is of utmost importance to reflect on not simply 'what one 'hears' as a researcher, but what one expects to hear, and how these expectations may frame the dynamics of adult-child interaction'. For example, responding to invitations to talk about their lessons and their teachers when

discussing their language learning experiences, what children say is always embedded in adult discourses influenced by institutional norms as well as community norms. Negative evaluation of adults even if given anonymously is unimaginable in some contexts (Kuchah & Milligan, 2021).

From a legislation point of view school-based research remains a very messy affair. Despite the fact that UNCRC (1989) has been incorporated into legislation around the world, for more than 30 years, and schools and other institutions need to engage with its messages, concrete implementation of children's rights remains highly controversial. The UNCRC and its articles are open to interpretation and those who believe in promoting children's participation interpret it differently from those who do not. The document also suffers from contradictions between what is understood as the 'best interest of the child' (as decided and firmly controlled by adults) and the children's own rights to express their views, allowing adult researchers to align themselves with either firm adult control or the promotion of child participation. Coppock & Gillet-Swan (2016) suggest that while on a superficial level schools have taken on board the UNCRC messages, in reality their hierarchical and patriarchal structures stand in the way of real, meaningful implementation.

6. Bringing it together: the five components of child-focussed ethics

Given the complexity of ethical dilemmas around school-based research, when planning any project with child research participants, it is suggested here that at least 5 different factors are considered. The five areas are represented by 5 circles in the figure below. All of these will further trigger a set of relevant ethical questions to ask. In the process of answering these questions, researchers can develop meaningful links between the 5 areas and construct a study with a coherent ethical basis.

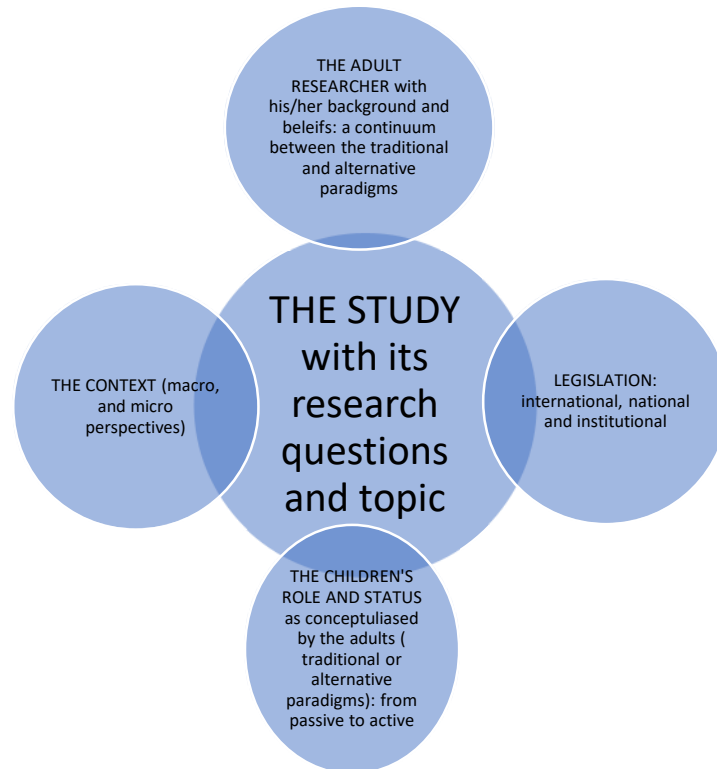


Figure 1: Components of child-focussed ethics

Legislation covers all relevant national or international law but also guidelines and frameworks in place in a particular context and institutions. There is a plethora of guidelines/ ethics frameworks to consult internationally and is not clear which one/ ones may be most suitable for researchers working with children in second/ foreign language education. The most often consulted ones include the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL 2016) or its equivalents in other countries. Guidelines applied more broadly in educational research are often consulted as well such as the British Educational Research Association, (BERA, 2011), or its equivalent in other countries (such as the AARE 1993, or the AERA 2011 in the USA or Australia, with similar guidelines in place in many countries). In particular, with younger children in mind, such as pre-schoolers, The International Charter and Guidelines for Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC 2016) is also worth consulting, while other applied linguistics researchers find psychology-based guidelines most helpful to their research, such as the ethical guidelines provided by the American Psychological Society (APS, 2017), or the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2018). Researchers may be familiar with one or several of these or their local or regional equivalents, and will choose to align themselves with guidelines depending on their own personal preferences, their institutions' requirements, or simply according to which framework they may be familiar with.

The circle 'children's status' refers to how the adults conceptualise the roles children will play in the research. These can vary from traditional roles to more active roles, including objects, subjects, active participants, co-researchers or researchers.

The context encompasses both macro-issues such as political cultural, institutional influences, norms and practices, and micro-issues such as where exactly the research is undertaken under what specific circumstances, i.e. in a classroom, on the playground or in the library, with how many participants involved.

The adult researcher category refers to the adult's insider/ outsider roles, their background, their identity, such as their age, gender and race, their experience and their research skills, and importantly, their conceptions of childhood and children and where they position themselves on the continuum between the traditional and the alternative paradigms. The otherness of the adult (Bucknall, 2014) cannot be understated and the power gap explained by the normal social order will always prevail. All adult researchers also have a set of beliefs about children and childhood and these beliefs have an influence on the kind of study they might be planning and the kinds of methods they consider or roles planned for the children. Adults also bring so-called conscious and unconscious biases. As Sargeant & Harcourt (2012, p.73) argue even unconscious verbal and non-verbal communication/ behaviours needs careful attention. Adult researchers may be teacher-researchers, in which case they are familiar with the children, and have a solid relationship already to build on, while university academics/ outsiders (typically unfamiliar to the group of children they intend to work with) have a different relationship or no relationship at all at the beginning. Such adult roles can also overlap and lead to hybrid identities that need to be carefully thought about when presented to the children. A hybrid identity (i.e. being the researcher and the teacher at the same time) is difficult to navigate. Teacher researchers conducting action research in their own classrooms are presented with ethical dilemmas such as the balance between a focus on teaching and researching and the extent to which their action research is just part of their everyday practice or indeed a formal project that requires additional ethical scrutiny. (Mourão, 2021). If the teacher is undertaking research that will be published and disseminated in conferences, it is imperative that formal ethical clearance is sought. Such projects cannot be interpreted as simply experimenting with different ideas and approaches to teaching and learning in one's classroom (Dikilitas, 2015).

Finally, in the middle of the diagram is the circle which refers to the question about the focus of the study and the extent to which it is negotiated or discussed with the children and the amount of control the children can exercise. In some studies in second language education the children will have zero control. For example, when the adult researcher is interested in how the children can re-produce recently learnt grammatical constructions accurately, discussing the focus of the study with the children would be counter-productive and would likely influence the outcomes in an unhelpful way. If the focus of the study needs to be masked from the participants in order to secure valid findings, any negotiation, discussion and sharing control over the study is not possible. In other types of studies where children's active participation is key, such as when they talk about their motivation or make suggestions about how to change/ improve tasks in the textbook, exploring the purpose of the study together is a worthwhile and insightful exercise before data collection begins.

The process of shaping a study from an ethical point of view can start with exploring any of these components in the framework. For example, if a certain adult researcher has particular beliefs about childhood and is comfortable to work within one particular paradigm only, these

beliefs will narrow down the type of project that will be undertaken and in turn the type of ethical considerations that become relevant. Once epistemological questions have been decided and relevant approaches and methods have been selected, there are implications for what kinds of roles the children and the adults will play in the research.

In the process of exploring the ethical challenges relating to each segment/ circle, here is a breakdown of some relevant questions under each heading. These lists are not intended as exhaustive but instead researchers would need to add their own questions:

6.1. Legislation:

What laws and/ or guidelines apply to undertaking research with children at national/ international/ and institutional levels?
Has the adult researcher consulted one or more relevant ethics frameworks/ guidelines? Which ones and why?
If the project straddles different cultural contexts, what is the impact on ethical decisions? Is there a conflict between different guidelines for the two contexts, and can the conflict be resolved satisfactorily?
What is the school's or local educational authority's role in managing research projects?
What are the parents'/guardians' understanding of research in school? What is the school's policy regarding communication with parents/guardians about research?
Will both children and their parents/ guardians be asked for consent/ assent? How?
What happens to children who do not participate while the research is happening?

6.2. Children's role and status

Who are the child participants? How were they selected? Who will be involved? Will it be on a voluntary basis or by appointment by teacher/ researcher? Will the whole class be involved or only small groups or small numbers of individuals?
How old are the children? What is the children's previous experience and current understanding of research, ethics, consent?
What cognitive/ metacognitive and social/ emotional as well as linguistic abilities will the research tools and methods demand?
What are the children's proficiency/ literacy levels in their language(s)?
What accommodations will be made (if any) based on what evidence (or criteria) to design the tools used in the research?
How will the study be presented/ explained to the children? Will the children play passive or active roles? If active roles, will the children receive research training? To what extent will the children control/ shape the research? Which stages? What evidence will be used to gauge their understanding of the research, their roles in it and their consent/ assent?

6.3. The context

Where will the research take place?
What hierarchical or other norms apply in this context?
What rules and routines apply in this context that the children are aware of? Does the research intend to fit with or break these rules?

Who will be present during the research and in what capacity?
What is the adult researcher's role in that context?
How long does the research last?
In what local circumstances will the data be collected? Will the children be familiar with the tasks and circumstances?

6.4. The adult researcher:

What is the adult's relationship with the school?
What is the adult's relationship with the children?
What is the adult's background/ experience of research with children?
What is the adult's conception of research, childhood and children, and research ethics?
What is the adult researcher's (assumed) identity?
What are the adult researchers' own (hidden or overt) biases? What are the adult researcher's assumptions?
What is the epistemological and ontological stance of the adult researcher?

6.5. Types of studies

Types of study	A combination of concerns based on children's roles, adults' agenda, context and relevant legislation
Observation	<p>Have they been asked for their consent/assent or only parents' consent has been sought? Has any potential conflict between child and parent been thought about with possible resolutions?</p> <p>Do children have a real opportunity to opt out? If yes, what will they do while the research is going on?</p> <p>Have the children been told about the observation? Should they be? Can they be? If the focus of the observation cannot be revealed, what information should the children be given?</p> <p>How has the research and its goals been explained to the children?</p> <p>Is the adult observer physically present? Is this unusual?</p> <p>Is the adult observer familiar or unfamiliar to the children?</p> <p>Is the observation in the ordinary classroom or in an unfamiliar place?</p> <p>How long does the observation study last? How many sessions are observed?</p>
Experiments and interventions	<p>Have they been asked for their consent/assent or only parents' consent has been sought? Has any potential conflict between child and parent been thought about with possible resolutions?</p> <p>Do children have a real opportunity to opt out? If yes, what will they do while the research is going on?</p> <p>Will the children be communicated any feedback and outcomes?</p> <p>Are the children familiar with the tasks or activities administered as part of the intervention?</p> <p>Is the experiment undertaken by an outsider adult who has no rapport or relationship with the children? What are the consequences of this?</p> <p>How has the research been explained to the children? Has it been made clear that it is not a test or a learning task?</p>

Interviews:	<p>Have they been asked for their consent/assent or only parents' consent has been sought? Has any potential conflict between child and parent been thought about with possible resolutions?</p> <p>Have the consequences of the relationship between the adult and the children been considered?</p> <p>What rapport building has been put in place?</p> <p>What types of interviews have been considered for use, such as group, pair, individual, participatory, visual or art-based etc?</p> <p>What accommodations have been made to encourage children's views to come to the surface, if any? Based on what evidence?</p> <p>What roles have been considered for the children?</p> <p>Is the topic sensitive?</p> <p>What group dynamics have been considered? How have groups or pairs been selected?</p> <p>Have the children been encouraged to ask questions too?</p>
Surveys:	<p>Have they been asked for their consent/assent or only parents' consent has been sought? Has any potential conflict between child and parent been thought about with possible resolutions?</p> <p>Have the items been generated entirely from adult ideas/ language?</p> <p>Have any children been consulted in the process of constructing the tools? Has a draft been piloted with children?</p> <p>On what evidence were the items based on (e.g. literacy levels, familiarity with surveys, familiarity with question types);</p> <p>What help (if any) did the children have when filling in the questionnaires?</p> <p>Are the children familiar with the question types?</p>
Receptive responses, tasks and tests	<p>Have they been asked for their consent/assent or only parents' consent has been sought? Has any potential conflict between child and parent been thought about with possible resolutions?</p> <p>Have the tools been carefully examined in terms of suitability with regard to language use? On what evidence or criteria?</p> <p>Have the tools been piloted or shown to other children?</p> <p>Have the adults explained that this is not a test?</p>
Participatory tools/ tasks	<p>Have they been asked for their consent/assent or only parents' consent has been sought? Has any potential conflict between child and parent been thought about with possible resolutions?</p> <p>How have these been selected/ negotiated with the children?</p> <p>How will the data be evaluated/ interpreted?</p> <p>How much control do the children have?</p> <p>Who owns the art, the visuals, the photos and other creative artefacts?</p>
Children in co-researcher/ researcher roles	<p>Have they been asked for their consent? Has any potential conflict between child and parent been thought about with possible resolutions?</p> <p>Have children shown interest/ enthusiasm to participate in active roles?</p>

	What active roles have been considered? Has the research project been negotiated between the children and the adults? Has research training been provided for the children? Has the whole school been informed about the children's research? Have children been enabled to undertake their own research? Has their willingness to take these active roles been monitored?
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7. Conclusion

This paper attempted to give an overview of the most commonly applicable ethics-related questions in order to assist researchers in working through their own ethical dilemmas. The paper also hopes to spark discussion and sharing of experiences in the research community to uncover and explicitly examine approaches and principles in research ethics with children, which are currently kept under wrap.

Thinking about ethics is a nonlinear process where links and connections are built by carefully bringing components of the framework together. No matter where we start planning the study, whether the starting point is the researcher's conviction about themselves and their interpretations of childhood and the kinds of roles they want children to take, or the contextual affordances, or the children's existing relationship with the researcher, all other components must be considered and brought in line, so that the links and relationships between the components can be fully developed. Tackling ethical questions in this non-linear manner can be illustrated by the often-used metaphor of a 'rhizome', originally proposed by Deleuze & Guattari (2004) to describe non-linear learning processes. In contrast to a tree or a staircase with their linear steps or branches, the rhizome is a plant with a tangled mass of roots that goes off in all directions. A rhizome has no fixed beginning or end point; it is something that always changes; it is never complete or perfect but instead always a form of compromise. As Moss (2019, p. 118) contends '*a rhizome with its endless possibilities for making new connections provoking new lines of flight going in new directions moves us away from closed and binary thinking, where we can always find new possibilities, new directions to take*'. Such an approach requires heightened levels of ethical awareness, a constant re-visiting of the questions and their connections across the components in the above framework. There is no right way of going about the planning but instead a constant cross-checking across the five components is mandated.

More sharing of experiences relating to ethical dilemmas is also desirable among researchers, in order to gather more evidence to reflect on common dilemmas. '*Any research with children has to create some space for reflection by all participants*' (Butler 2021, p. 42). Finally, more space in teacher education programmes should focus on questions of ethics and more research into researchers' teachers', parents' and children's awareness and understanding of research ethics will be needed in the future.

Due to the increasingly tighter child protection laws in place in most contexts, leading to an increased level of surveillance both inside and outside schools, children's vulnerability (in general and as research participants) has been (over)- emphasised in institutional ethical

guidelines, with the consequence that gaining ethical clearance is becoming more complex and ethical applications lengthy and bureaucratic. In fact, it is not uncommon for graduate students, for example, to opt out of undertaking research with children because obtaining ethical clearance is much more challenging and time-consuming than in the case of research with adult participants. This is rather unfortunate because we need more research with child language learners. What is suggested here is that what we need is more transparency, more sharing of experiences and more training about ethics for both novice and experienced researchers working with children in second language education.

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