

Revised ethical guidelines for educational research in practice: a qualitative analysis

By

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Any research endeavour needs to conform with some endorsed research ethics, such as the BERA ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2018). These ethical guidelines can be applied to many research stages and procedures, including dealing with human participants (e.g. getting consent and approvals), data collection and analysis, and using pseudonyms instead of real names in the research report itself. Drawing on British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) as an authoritative source in this regard, I will explore how these ethical guidelines apply to educational research in the Arab world, and how they might inform and shape research practices in the light of a chosen experimental research study in language learning (Al-Jarf, 2006) by discussing the key ethical issues and concerns evident in the study, and suggesting alternative ways when needed. This would develop a methodological understanding of the proper conduct of the research process, and hence contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the educational arena. To investigate ethical issues in this paper, focus will be on the following points considering to what extent the researcher considered them: the researcher's qualities and virtues (honesty, objectivity, clarity, etc.), her interaction with participants, tackling previous literature, and research procedures.

The target study under analysis (Al-Jarf, 2006) reports results of an experiment with two groups of sophomore students majoring in translation (an experimental group and a control one). The control group was taught British culture using in-class instruction only, while the experimental group was taught using a combination of online and in-class instruction. Experimental students used the online course from home as the internet was inaccessible from campus. Both groups were pre and post-tested, and the experimental group scored higher than the control one, indicating a significant effect of online learning when combined with in-class instruction. The impact of online instruction on cultural

awareness, the relationship between the online course frequency usage and cultural awareness, and the impact of online instruction on students' attitudes are reported.

To investigate ethical issues in this paper, focus will be on the following points considering to what extent the researcher considered them: the researcher's qualities and virtues (honesty, objectivity, clarity, etc.), her interaction with participants, tackling previous literature, and research procedures.

The researcher considered some research ethics: she considered a confidential and anonymous treatment of her participants' data as she did not mention any names or personal information (BERA, 2018); she used good, clear and straightforward language for communicating her research and talked about other researchers in a respectable and professional manner; she contributed significantly to relevant literature by specifying the research gap; finally, she was honest admitting that results cannot be generalized to male students studying the same course.

However, there are many ethical drawbacks. For example, the researcher used her authority as a professor to force students to participate in the experiment as the course was part of their study. She could have selected other students in another university or mentioned that students participated voluntarily to eliminate the power relationship. This is clearly related to the researcher's moral virtues (Pring, 2004, p153). Also, dangers resulting from using the Internet should have been clarified to the participants before starting the experiment. "Social researchers must take into account the effects of research on their participants" (Cohen, et al., 2007, p58) and should make participants aware of any physical harm or psychological impact that may result from the experiment (Grix, 2004, p144). She could have stated some instructions and guidelines into how to use Internet safely. Another point is that in reviewing literature, the researcher stated the positive results of using Internet facilities with no regard to any negative results. This may render the researcher as subjective in the sense that she takes only what reinforces her ideas, and ignores other data.

Further, she mentioned dividing her 80 students into two groups (experimental and control), without stating how she controlled other variables to remove any privileges of one group on the other or how she minimized the effects of the design she used. She did not state that all the participants in the group understood the process. More specifically, there was no orientation, which is considered a fundamental procedure in

experimental research, and in which the researcher is supposed to explain many things related to her experiment including objectives, procedures, arrangements, etc. Participants have the right to know beforehand what the researcher looks for and for what purpose (Pring, 2004, p151).

Maybe the experiment was exhausting and/or uninteresting to some students, and therefore, any student in the group should have the right to withdraw at anytime and for any reason (BERA, 2018). The researcher did not inform them of that right and stated in her discussion that many students reported being uninterested in the online course. Besides, the researcher should have considered the workloads students had with other courses. The topics she dealt with were too many to be covered within only 6 weeks. The last point is that she did not report anything about debriefing participants at the conclusion or providing them with any copies of any reports or publications arising from their participation.

Hall and Eggington (2001: 91-94) suggest that language classrooms are not isolated from the real world as the external social, political and cultural conditions affect, and are affected by, what goes on there. It seems that the socio-political context in which the research was conducted influenced, and was influenced by, this study. In Saudi Arabia, as an Arab Muslim country, despite the great pace of growth the Kingdom has witnessed, traditional culture and social values have been maintained steadfastly (The Saudi Network, 2007). Men and women typically dress in cultural and religious dress, and women must cover their heads and bodies. Mixing of the sexes in public areas is strongly discouraged. Women are not allowed to drive or ride bicycles on public roads. Adult men and women may not interact in public, unless they are married or close relatives.

This context has an evident influence on the educational system in the Kingdom; males are segregated from females in the educational institutions. Direct contact between male instructors and female students is completely prohibited (except through teleconferencing or closed circuit TV). Males and females study different courses. Therefore, it was not possible for the researcher (as a female) to conduct the same experiment with male students. Similarly, it was not possible for a male instructor to conduct the same research in the same college. However, online learning can be integrated into the educational context, and educational policy should be flexible enough to allow for more self-paced instruction to take place outside the formal educational institutions. This will reinforce lifelong learning that is greatly required in this information age.

In Riyadh there is a recognition that changes are needed, that the country needs to open up, and that the old style of domestic politics may need to be adjusted to fit the Internet era (The Gale Group, 2007). This implies a need for changing the political agenda of the Kingdom to cope with the world developments. E-learning is a new trend in the Arab world and it can be used effectively to improve the quality of education, especially this provided by higher education institutions. Consequently, data concluded here can be used by the university to improve academic performance in the Kingdom.

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