

INVITED FORUM

“APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND APPLIED ETHICS”

COORDINATOR

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SYNOPSIS

This invited forum continues the discussions from ALAPP conferences over the past six years, between 2020 and 2025, with contributors joining in with their own situated perspectives on research ethics and professional ethics. While the embodiment of codes of ethics is presumed in the domain of professional practice, very rarely the epistemic and ethical positioning of applied linguistics researchers and their actions and decisions via contingent negotiations with professional practitioners receive due attention. The primary aim of the forum is to reflect critically on the ethical challenges in conducting applied linguistics research in the arena of professional practice, especially concerning collaboration/partnership across interdisciplinary and interprofessional domains. Beyond research ethics, professional ethics also receives due attention, notably relating to applied linguists in their role as professional practitioners.

Although there is an emerging body of literature addressing ethical issues underpinning the conduct of research (research ethics) as well as in professional-client and interprofessional communication settings, there is a void with regard to how, in practical terms, applied linguistics researchers orient to and solve nuanced ethical issues at different stages of the research process, including their own positioning as teachers-cum-researchers, their ongoing collaboration with other professional practitioners, interdisciplinary researchers and a wide range of stakeholders.

The challenges are broad-ranging as well as situation-specific and they permeate the entire research process encompassing ethics of access, ethics of participation, ethics of interpretation, and ethics of dissemination (Sarangi 2019). Individual researchers or a team of interdisciplinary researchers and professional practitioners as collaborators/partners routinely weigh up the risks and benefits emanating from their research environments in a contingent manner, while remaining sensitive to the uniqueness of the very domain of professional practice they are engaged in, including relationships built on mutual trust and expectations. In this sense, it is necessary to approach the emergent ethical issues in the conduct of ‘applied’ research both in terms of established principles and material practices with a sense of reflexivity (Sarangi 2024a, 2024b). Put differently, it is imperative to foreground “our engagement with our ethical practices both in terms of our research methodology and our interventionist agenda” (Sarangi and Candlin 2010: 3).

Drawing upon their professional and personal experiences, the contributors to the invited forum variably address relevant issues of interest: the differential stances taken by faculty and students towards GenAI in the university sector in USA, which raise practical and ethical concerns in the absence of any consensus regarding GenAI use in pedagogical practice beyond normative integrity and transparency (Alatraste); the ethical stakes of interpretation in qualitative inquiry, especially relating to the incommensurability between the accounts produced by professional practitioners and those that are later re-articulated/re-contextualized by applied linguistics researchers, which can be understood as an accomplishment of laminated accountability (Bartesaghi); the affordances and influences relating to the instructor-researcher’s positioning on the insider-outsider continuum in an empirical research setting in Singapore, foregrounding the ethics of participation and the attendant ‘participant’s paradox’ against the backdrop of role ambiguities, power asymmetries, informed consent etc. (Sabapathy); and the ethical challenges faced by applied linguists in the role of expert witnesses in the US legal system, particularly involving non-

native speaker clients, where maintaining professional distancing may not be so straightforward (Van Naerssen). The individual presentations will be preceded by an overarching framing statement highlighting the contingent ethical nuances surrounding professional practice as well as the conduct and reporting of applied linguistics research (Sarangi).

What is shared across the contributions are the tensions and potential resolutions across regulatory, normative principles and mundane, contingent practices relating to (inter)professional standards and parameters of research ethics and professional ethics.

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INDIVIDUAL PROPOSALS

Applied linguistics and applied ethics: Mapping an agenda

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Ethical issues have been at the forefront in the conduct of applied linguistics research for a long time. Some of the ethical issues become particularly heightened when studying professional practice within the qualitative research paradigm, especially in relation to the researcher's positioning as either outsider or insider or as collaborator, straddling the outsider/insider margins (Sarangi 2024a). Broadly referred to as 'research ethics', it is operationalized along a set of principles, e.g., researcher integrity, participant autonomy, informed consent, avoidance of harm etc. Previously, I have provided a breakdown of research ethics as follows: ethics of access, ethics of participation, ethics of interpretation, and ethics of dissemination/intervention (Sarangi 2019), while acknowledging the overlapping nature of these dimensions. Underpinning these dimensions of research ethics are the elements of engagement and relationship, which leads me to suggest a distinction between 'research ethics' and 'communication ethics'. As the label suggests, communication ethics foregrounds the communicative aspects of ethical practice – e.g., relationality and responsibility – both during the research process and beyond in terms of research outputs and various dissemination/intervention activities.

'Applied ethics' takes us beyond the rulebook of ethics to deal with ethical matters at a contingent, practical level, highlighting the ethical decisions researchers make at a given point in time and the consequences such decisions may have on research processes and outcomes. Of particular significance are: (i) accomplishing the intellectual rigour to remain credible while aiming for practical relevance and societal impact (Sarangi 2024b); (ii) managing the researcher positioning, especially when undertaking interdisciplinary research involving 'disciplinary others' vs. interprofessional research involving 'professional others'.

The contributors to the invited forum engage with applied ethical issues in their own areas of applied linguistics research and are committed to exploring ways in which specific ethical dilemmas can be mitigated, if not resolved.

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Laminated accountability: Ethics and the paradoxes of doing qualitative research

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Research ethics in qualitative inquiry is often considered a matter of procedure—in concerns of access, consent, and the protection of participants. Building on Sarangi's formulation of the paradoxes of doing qualitative research—namely the observer's, participant's, and analyst's paradoxes, alongside the tension between rigor and relevance (Sarangi, 2019, 2025)—this paper shifts the focus to the analyst and asks: what would it mean to pursue an ethics of interpretation? Taking up Sarangi's attention to the ethical stakes of interpretation, I argue that such an ethics can be understood as an accomplishment of laminated accountability.

Drawing on a discourse analysis of interviews with equine-assisted therapy professionals as an illustrative case of alternative practice, I show how practitioners strategically account for their work in the face of competing demands for legitimacy, credibility, and effectiveness.

I propose that accountability in qualitative research is laminated across how participants account for their actions and how analysts account for those accounts. Analysts do not simply create an accountability situation for participants; they also represent it in ways that give coherence to practices that are shifting and oriented to multiple demands, thereby risking the appearance of resolution where practice remains unsettled. In doing so, analysis can make participants' actions appear more stable, patterned, and strategic than they are in the moment, shift the locus of accountability into analytic categories, and close off alternative ways of making sense of the data.

The ethical problem, then, is not just one of accuracy or transparency, but of how analysis produces coherent and authoritative versions of strategies and moves. Analytic accountability lies in remaining answerable for this lamination—how our accounts rest on, and rework, the accounts of others. In this sense, research ethics is not external to analysis but something enacted within it, as a practical accomplishment of accounting for accounts.

Desperately seeking evidence of consensus on GenAI use at US-based universities

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Generative AI use has taken hold in USA colleges, but ethical rules guiding its use seem slow to come and, if they exist, they tend to be opaque, often leaving faculty to decide what is permissible and what constitutes an infringement of pedagogic practice. The variability of positions towards GenAI use by faculty to teach, or students to do projects, is broad: from openly embracing to downright vilifying it (Kim et al., 2025). Recent articles (e.g., [ox.ac.uk.news](https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2024-01-15-genai-ethics) 2024; Harvard university AI & Ethics) question the place of ethics in GenAI use in higher education given that ethics underlie faculty research, scholarship, teaching and student learning.

Ethical questions – when posed – tend to cluster around traditional concerns of "academic honesty" of the students, particularly in the production stages of course projects, and suggest "responsible use" — a surprising choice of words, as academic activities of other kind have very stringent ethical guidelines. However, ethical use of GenAI by faculty for teaching notes, lectures, creating and grading assignments, is less prominent. Velli et al. (2025) have found that faculty are harsher in judging student GenAI use than their own, and students tend to object —on ethical grounds—to faculty using GenAI for teaching notes/lectures.

This presentation asks: Is there any evidence of a consensus shaping across higher education institutions on ethical use of GenAI by faculty and students? The method of information findings was a randomized search of online sources. I have located USA university websites using search engines to identify a clear Academic Dishonesty policy versus complete ethical guidelines. The focus is both on student and faculty use. The finding reveals no consensus, with the thrust of ethical concerns resting on student academic dishonesty with minimal faculty focus. However, faculty themselves seem to want more guidance, based on the large-scale faculty interviews.

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Balancing affordances and tensions: A relational ethics perspective on the dual instructor-researcher role

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Drawing on Sarangi's (2019, 2025) framework, qualitative research in applied linguistics is an ethical act in which researchers must navigate contingent decisions that shape the relationship between inquirer and participant. When studies are conducted by insider researchers within their own institutions, the "ethics of participation" comes to the fore. The researcher's presence can introduce a "participant's paradox," where dual role identities, power asymmetries, and questions of voluntariness complicate how participants articulate their experiences.

To illustrate these relational dynamics, this presentation draws on an empirical case study of undergraduate computing students making sense of learning to present orally within a communication-integrated disciplinary module. Conducting the study within my own teaching context, with one-to-one semi-structured interviews involving students I taught in the same semester created affordances including insider access, contextual sensitivity and stronger rapport. These same conditions however produced ethical tensions around influence, disclosure, and participant comfort.

The presentation grounds these relational tensions both experientially and empirically, showing how the complex role-set was managed through contingent safeguards (Braun and Clarke, 2021) such as including independent recruitment, post-grades invitations, and distress protocol. By examining the limits of such procedural measures, I argue that dual insider roles should not be treated as contaminants to be bracketed out through compliance. Instead, they are analytic conditions that require ongoing situated ethical reflexivity. Ultimately, the presentation invites a broader conversation about how relational ethics and participation actively shape qualitative applied linguistics research and how research might navigate the affordances and tensions of insider positionality with greater transparency and care.

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Maintaining professional distancing in non-native speaker (NNS) legal cases

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Applied linguists may face ethical issues as expert witnesses in live legal cases. The proposal context is the US legal system with English generally as the working language. While expert witness rules may differ across countries, underlying ethical issues might be recognized. The issues might involve a scope of ethical concerns, e.g., (a) court standards and human language; (b) principles of protecting human subjects; (c) scope of legal questions; (d) effects of adversarial court systems; and (e) maintenance of professional distancing (objectivity).

Two legal contexts involving the ethical need for linguists to maintain professional distancing in non-native speaker (NNS) cases include: 1) when becoming engaged on a case; and 2) when conducting language assessment of the NNS. My focus is on the engagement stage with illustrative examples.

Five ethical topics are briefly mentioned from the legal contexts: (1) conducting a bias self-check; (2) checking your specific qualifications for the case; (3) developing the linguistic questions, with the hiring attorney; (4) separating your expert linguistic opinion from the hiring attorney's "agenda"; and (5) gathering information about the NNS and the case without learning too much about the case.

Ethical issues can develop out of tensions involving court and professional standards requiring scientific reasoning and objectivity as well as linguistic examinations of the individual communication needs of NNSs.

Linguistic experts bring professional training, from experts' field(s), including standards and ethics. Expertise is applied in legal contexts which have their own standards and ethical systems. An expert then must weigh the two sets of standards and ethics.