# Ethical challenges in teacher research:
# the case of an ESP foreign language course in Taiwan

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## Abstract

Academic institutions and journals worldwide expect the research conducted by people in the life sciences, and, increasingly, the work of people in the humanities and social sciences, to be approved by an ethics board. Even if such approval is not required by a researcher's institution or research-site institution, one's target journal will usually require an explicit description of how the research was ethically conducted and the informed consent of participants obtained. For language teachers who conduct research, recruitment of one's own students into a research project is common. The author presents a case study of teacher research among nursing graduate students in an ESP foreign language classroom in Taiwan to highlight the ethical challenges faced by researchers who recruit their students as research participants.

*Keywords: ethics, students, teacher research, informed consent*

## 1. Introduction

The growing interest in research integrity around the world has paralleled a rapid rise in research on human subjects, particularly in the life sciences. Academic research ethics procedures are normally guided by international principles - set forth, for instance, in the 2010 Singapore Statement on Research Integrity - and then formulated into national regulations that local academic institutions, research site gatekeepers, and researchers themselves interpret and implement. International ethics standards for

research on human subjects require ethics board approval of recruitment and consent procedures and a clear description of ethical concerns in publically circulated work (Babbie, 2010: 72). Such standards have long been applied to researchers in the life sciences and are increasingly being applied throughout the world to researchers working in the social sciences and humanities, including language education researchers.

Language teachers generally do not carry out research (Borg, 2010), but the number who do or would like to is growing. Language teachers who carry out research based on their own students - i.e., conduct teacher research - tend to be those seeking advancement in or to a full-time university position as well as those who find it useful for improving teaching, teacher training, and student learning (see Borg, 2010). In Taiwan, for example, the dramatic increase in universities since the mid-1990s combined with a decreasing pool of students and increasingly technocratic accreditation and promotion standards centered on the production of research articles has increased expectations that university teachers, graduate students, and their institutions will conduct or support academic research. A governmental research integrity project recently has been exploring the research ethics practices and needs of social science and humanities disciplines in institutions of higher education in Taiwan. It appears that many people in these disciplines, including language teachers who carry out teacher research, are unsure if they need to, or how they might, follow the emerging standards of conduct. Language teachers in other countries where ethics protocols for research are also just beginning to be systematically formulated and implemented in the social sciences and humanities may similarly wonder when or why institutional research ethics approval and formal participant consent are needed. Even in countries with established research ethics regimes, in fact, there is still much disagreement and a wide range of practices regarding research ethics.

Some teachers may take the view that research on students is a natural part of educational development, of benefit to teachers, students, and society alike; therefore, no consent is needed, or collective oral consent is sufficient. Teacher researchers should nonetheless consider the basic human rights issues posed by their research. Moreover, if they wish to publish their findings in international academic journals, they should be

concerned about current international standards of ethical research practice.

This study explores the ethical challenges posed by teacher research. A test case involving adult ESP students in an institution of higher learning in Taiwan is chosen for presentation in this paper.

## 2. Literature review

The scholarly literature on educational research, including L1 and L2 language education research, has addressed issues of ethical research conduct (e.g., Master, 2005; McKay, 2006; McNamee & Bridges, 2005). However, the work done within and on teacher research, including ESP-related teacher research, has not adequately addressed the issue of human research subjects' rights, such as students' right to sufficient information and choice before, during, and after participating in a teacher's research project. Central to conducting ethical teacher research is informed consent. What is teacher research, and what is the role of informed consent in research by teachers?

*Teacher research*

Teacher research has a number of distinguishing features, related ethical issues, and advantages and disadvantages.

Classroom research, action research, and teacher (practitioner, insider) research overlap, but the following distinctions can be made: "the term **classroom research** refers to the location and focus of the study. **teacher research** refers to the agents who conduct the study. **action research** denotes a particular approach" (Bailey quoted in Borg, 2010: 394; original emphasis). Since this essay centers on the ethical challenges teachers face in conducting research on their own students in or out of the classroom and regardless of method, the term "teacher research" is used. Teacher research, despite variation in setting, duration, social relations, and goals and procedures, generally involves a teacher who is a participant-observer dealing with the same basic ethical issues faced by other social researchers (see Thorne, 1980). Reinharz (1992) defines research as the "production of a publically scrutinizable analysis of a phenomenon with

the intent of clarification" (p. 9). A vast array of social phenomena and myriad aspects of human social being are investigated and analyzed by social researchers. The teacher researcher conducts social research as a teacher who participates in some aspect of the social encounter out of which the educational phenomenon to be investigated emerges, whether the latter is a process involving social interaction with students or a product thereof. Borg (2010) defines teacher research as "inquiry conducted by teachers in their own professional contexts"; it is characteristically systematic and reflexive; and it may be collaborative (p. 393-394). Further, it should aim to benefit the participating teacher and students and, ideally, broader academic and lay communities. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) concisely define it as "systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers" (p. 7), and they say it tends to be qualitative and, specifically, interpretive.

Educators who conduct research on their own students must navigate the dual roles of teacher and researcher, which may be at odds with one another (Bell & Nutt, 1999). Since educational research still tends to "study down" (i.e., studying people of a lower social status) (Erickson, 2006) and students can be considered a relatively "captive population" (Moreno, 1998), the issue of teacher authority looms large in research by teachers on their generally less powerful students. Taber (2007), for instance, says of research by teachers: "If the teacher was also the researcher, and keen to collect the data, the students might feel under pressure to give up their free time and take part in an activity that may potentially make them feel uncomfortable" (p. 139). Reviewing pragmatist and critical social theory perspectives of ESP practice, Master (2003) writes that "all educational enterprises, although especially those within the English teaching profession…, need to constantly and rigorously question themselves. Not to do so is to run the risk that, while benignly helping students" succeed in a career, "ESP practitioners are unwittingly promoting the interests of those already in power" (p. 108). Teachers need to critically reflect on how conducting teacher research in ESP or other language teaching contexts might put students' freedom of choice and speech at risk, and how to limit the risk or balance the risks and potential rewards (on cost/benefit analysis of research plans, see, Weathington, Cunningham, & Pittenger, 2010, Chapter 2).

Informed by a critical social theory perspective, which entails "use of reflection to identify the conditions that would make uncoerced knowledge and action possible" (Burns & Grove, 2005: 567), teachers decide to forgo teacher research, instead focusing solely on teaching their or conducting research in another teacher's classroom (see Sikes, 2008). Ultimately, remarks Appleman (2009), "if your inquiry strains the relationships you have with administrators, fellow teachers, or students and their families, you may need to abandon the project to protect your long-term teaching goals" (p. 58). Taber (2007) suggests that, in many cases, an "external researcher" could probably carry out the research more ethically because more "gatekeepers" would be involved in the consent process. Yet gatekeepers must also wield their authority with caution: "In licensing research, gatekeepers should avoid acting exclusively in the professional interests of themselves, their colleagues or their collaborators, or upon the assumption that an overriding public good is to be served by their enquiry" (Homan, 2002: 35). In short, the dynamic mix of personal ties and multiple social roles, statuses, and purposes in teacher research can make it difficult for the teacher researcher to communicate motivations clearly or to avoid conflicts of interest or unforeseen consequences that may reverberate long-term in context-rich educational research.

However, as Mitchell (2004: 1430) asserts, teacher researchers are often in the best position to do research on their own students, and outside researchers who are likely unknown to the students and ostensibly present as observers cannot be assumed to be more ethically situated. In teacher research, it can be easier for teacher and students to share in the construction of the research encounter, empowering students to participate in the development of the learning process, and empowering teachers to act "rather than being acted upon" and to "become something other than consumers of educational dictums" (Chang, 2003: 154; see Sikes & Potts, 2008). Teachers have social relationships with students that are often imbued with trust and rapport, making research access and communication easier and the results richer and more relevant to local contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Insider research may yield less reliable data, but an outsider would not likely be able to elicit valid data to the degree an insider could (e.g., in interviews)(Hull, 1985).

*Informed Consent*

Is informed consent the answer to conducting teacher research ethically? Informed consent is principally the recognition and safeguarding of the right of a potential research participant to understand and assess risks, benefits, and options in a free and fair manner. Additionally, participants agree to give to or share with the researcher what can be seen as their intellectual or material property rights over the verbal, experiential, and physical artifacts that emerge in the context of the encounter between the researcher and the researched. In exchange for these use rights, the researcher, to some extent, guarantees to participants that the study will remain true to its original scope, protect participant anonymity, and benefit humanity in some way while doing no harm (or only agreed-upon levels of potential harm). Once they have been established as standards of behavior, failing to uphold these research values will be recognized as putting at risk participants' right to refuse, to privacy, and to biopsychosocial integrity, and also researchers' careers, institutional reputations, and the trust of various communities in academic endeavors.

Strongly opposing views have been asserted about the nature of informed consent in research by teachers on their students. On the one hand, Appleman (2009) argues that "the concept of informed consent is compromised in classroom research by the power differentials that already exist between teacher and students and by the question of whether our students/subjects are really informed about what they are consenting to" (p. 55; original emphasis). On the other hand, Mitchell (2004) contends that, given the special pedagogical relation of teacher to students, the seeming "conflict of the teaching and research roles" and possible "exploitation of students by teachers to gain benefits from research that are of no benefit to the students" is not really an ethical issue if the research is meant to complement and help the teaching purpose (p. 1422). According to Mitchell (2004),

> *teachers need no special consent and thus do not need to coerce students to try something new, nor to collect many forms of data. Moreover, the sorts of data collection that require student assent are very likely to fail to give useful data if there is any perception (let alone reality) of coercion: collecting good interview data, for example, requires students happy to elaborate initial comments. (p. 1430)*

Mitchell details the many advantages of research by teachers on their own students, but he does not fully take into account the teacher's authority over students. A possible consequence is that they appear to be willing to cooperate, but actually do so out of worry over how they will be graded in present or future courses if they do not consent. The blending of educational and research purposes in teacher research does not obviate the need to mediate the unequal social status of teacher and student using informed consent. Teachers take on responsibilities beyond course-related pedagogy and teacher-student social roles when research is pursued that will publically scrutinize students and their output as research subjects.

Within the parameters of institutional and disciplinary rules, ethics procedures may need to be fitted not only to the target population but also to the researcher, course, and research purpose and method. For instance, in disciplines with fairly rigid hierarchical social roles such as nursing, and in East Asian countries where teachers tend to be in a relatively formal position of authority over students who might be hesitant to question a teacher's decisions directly, the risk of involuntary oral consent-based participation might be relatively high. More research needs to be done on how ethical challenges and social risk to participants and teacher researchers (and their institutions) vary (cf. Marshall, 2001) and may be dealt with. Ideally, the approach taken should fit the particular situation and needs of the students.

Research subjects' rights are probably put most at risk as research artifacts migrate from the classroom or other research context, to be reconfigured for various disciplinary, bureaucratic, and lay audiences, since disagreements over the interpretation of data and unwanted revelations are common in social research (Appleman, 2009: 55). Students should be expected to participate in evaluations and innovations intended to improve their own educational experience. However, course preparatory and improvement activities, such as ongoing needs analysis in ESP teaching, need to be formally approved and consented if the teacher intends to communicate to a public - beyond the students in one's course - some part of the process or product of those activities that could be considered students' intellectual property, or that potentially puts students' right to privacy and free will at risk.

*Purpose*

This article presents and analyzes the case of an informed consent procedure used in a multipurpose, qualitative research project carried out by the author on adult students in an institution of higher learning in Taiwan. The purpose of this case study was to address and attempt to meet the basic ethical challenges faced by L1 and L2 teachers and, in particular, ESP practitioners, who teach and conduct research on or with their students.

## 3. Method

### Design

This study was a qualitative, exploratory, single-case study designed to describe, control, predict, and explain the research relations between a teacher and his students by exploring several research questions (see Woodside, 2010: 11-12). The case study is preferred "when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context"; further, the exploratory case study commonly seeks to ascertain the "feasibility" of a particular research procedure (Yin, 2003: 4-5). In this case study, the feasibility of an atypical informed consent procedure was explored in teacher research involving the content of an assigned essay in a required, one-semester EAP course in which 28 nursing science master's degree candidates were enrolled at a university in Taiwan. The case study was carried out in 2009 in the context of the author's attempt, as a teacher, to improve this course and, as a researcher, to conduct nursing communication-related research. An essay on students' workplace communication experiences was assigned (1) as a normal course assignment, (2) to improve the course by learning more about students' everyday practices and needs, and (3) as part of research on the genre system of the nursing workplace discourse community in Taiwan.

The author predicted that asking for oral consent in order to inform students about the essay-based research (and to do the case study), and to reflect on and discuss the ethical challenges of teacher research, while only asking for written consent after the course had ended, would make it possible to: (1) limit (i.e., "control") the influence

of the researcher's authority as a teacher over his students as potential research participants; (2) empower the students to make informed decisions about research participation; and (3) highlight and offer insight into (i.e., "explain") key ethical issues embedded in the timing and scope of informing and oral and written consent, which could then be compared to the existing literature on the ethical research conduct of teachers.

**Guiding questions**

The research questions guiding this case study were as follows: Is the role of the teacher as grade-giving authority figure at odds with the role of the researcher, putting undue pressure on students to consent to participate in a teacher's research project? How, to what extent, and when should recruits be informed of the teacher's research purposes and procedures and be asked to consent?

**Procedure**

Near the end of the course, on two occasions, the teacher asked for informed oral consent to inform students about the essay-based research project and to hear their views on the ethics of teacher research and consent procedures. The students were told that the time spent in discussion would be brief (10 minutes each time) and the teacher would try to protect students' anonymity by quoting no statements by individual students. After being verbally informed of the purpose of the study in English (and Chinese), all 28 students agreed to participate in the case study. The researcher next led the participants in a discussion of teacher research ethics. They were asked their opinion of situations in which a teacher asks for research-related informed consent in the classroom. Is it ethical to ask for permission to do research while in the role of a teacher, an authority figure who has the power to grade students? The teacher then stated that he wanted to try to avoid this problem by informing students in the classroom but waiting until the course was over and grades had been given before asking for their written consent regarding the essay-based research. On the second occasion, the participants' understanding of and their consent to discuss teacher

research ethics, to be informed of the essay-based study, and to try the latter's consent procedure were reconfirmed; everyone agreed and no one had questions about it. The students were then questioned about why they would agree to consent orally. Also, they were informed that, if they decided post-course to participate in the essay-based research, any identifying information in their essays, such as place and people's names, would be removed or changed.

The students were not asked for formal, written informed consent to share their essay content until a few weeks post-course. The essay-based research project's written informed consent form (in Chinese) stated the standard rights of participants - i.e., to anonymity, to refuse to participate, and to withdraw at any time. Three weeks post-course, the consent form was sent by blind carbon copy (bcc) to each student in the body of an email and as an attached file. In addition, 3 options were given in English about how to indicate consent. Consent could be indicated by (1) the act of replying to the email, (2) returning the consent form file with name and date inputted at the top, or (3) signing a hard-copy of it. (Email reply was treated as a form of written consent because emails are dated and printable, and each address could be verified through use during the recent course.)

Of the 28 students enrolled in the course, 12 consented to share their essay content after receiving the first request. Two weeks subsequent to the first email, a more detailed explanation of the research purposes and consent response options were written in Chinese and emailed together with the original email in an attempt to increase participation. This yielded 5 additional positive responses (now totaling 17/28). Due to the still relatively low response rate, a third email was sent 7 weeks after the second one, after which 2 more students consented, for a final total of 19/28.


## 4. Results

The 28 nursing master's students participating in the case study were all low-intermediate L2 English users, experienced professional nurses, female, and born in Taiwan. All of the students responded positively to the request in the classroom

by the teacher for oral consent to share their views on the ethics of teacher research and to learn more about the essay-based research project. Yet, in the discussion of teacher research ethics, close to one-third (9/28) of the students expressed the view that it would make them uncomfortable or it would be inappropriate for a teacher to ask students to participate in the teacher's research while a course grade was yet to be decided. When asked by the teacher at the end of the second classroom discussion if they still consented, again all of the students (orally) consented. Asked why they accepted oral consent in this case, and if the teacher's authority or grading worries were an influence, the single view expressed was that students' agreeing to answer questions about research ethics is different from a teacher's researching what students do in a classroom. In contrast to the number of oral consenters to the case study, only two-thirds (19/28) of the students consented in writing (or an equivalent to it, by email) post-course to participate in the essay-based research project. The students were not asked post-course why they did or did not participate in the latter project because the students had only consented in the classroom to participate in two brief classroom discussions of the consent procedures and teacher research ethics.

## 5. Discussion

This case highlights the mixed and potentially conflicted nature of teacher research, including the multiple and shifting roles of the teacher/researcher. Teacher research has a basic ethical quandary: i.e., it is difficult to be certain whether students have voluntarily consented, or if the teacher's authority has compelled students to participate. The teacher must develop a research plan that includes an ethical method of informing recruits and obtaining their consent. What follows is an analysis of the ethics of teacher research, illustrated by our example in dialogue with the relevant literature, and guided by the key research questions: How are the ethical challenges presented by the dual role of the teacher researcher best addressed? What is the value of oral compared to written consent? What is the significance of timing and scope in the ethics of informed consent?

Informing and obtaining consent in teacher research can be classified by type, place, timing, and scope on a continuum of "unilateral" to "collaborative" approaches. "Unilateral" is on one end, typified by research (e.g., quantitative assessment data-related research) that poses a lower risk of exposure of identity or sensitive information but is also less relevant to participants' growth and development as learners; "collaborative" is at the other end, typified by research (e.g., action research) that poses a higher risk of such exposure but offers more potential for meaningful collaboration and participant ownership of the learning process (cf. Loughran, 2004). The present case study's informed consent procedure featured elements of collaborative and unilateral data collection, crossing over the usual methodological domains in ways designed to test and raise ethics issues regarding teacher research.

**Informed consent oral and written**

Most of the research examples provided in the writing on the ethics of educational research are from studies originally done on topics other than the ethics of recruitment, and yet they usually do not mention having obtained informed consent. In other words, research ethics discussions usually rely on reflections on research done for other purposes, and few studies have been specifically designed and consented to explore ethics issues in educational research. In the use of secondary data to write essays on ethics in educational research, the original researcher's but not the participants' consent to use the information is commonly obtained by informal oral or written consent. The data are, nonetheless, usually anonymized to such an extent that it would be difficult for any non-participant to recognize the original research site or participants. In the present case, one purpose of which was to highlight the differences between oral and written consent, informed oral consent was obtained in the classroom to discuss teacher research ethics and to explore delaying written consent. The students were made aware that the consent procedure was exploratory research for the purpose of trying to increase awareness of, and to improve, teacher-student relations in a teacher research context.

Mitchell (2004: 1430) contends that students who feel at all coerced during data

collection will probably not provide useful data. It is even more likely, however, that inappropriate pressure—whether intentionally direct or indirect, or an unintentional consequence of power structure—will produce unreliable data that the researcher as well as one's students, if not critically reflective (Burns & Grove, 2005; Master, 2003), may not even realize is unreliable and ethically questionable. When asked, one-third of the students in our example indicated they were against the teacher's obtaining consent in the classroom for the essay-based project, and they identified the teacher's authority as the central problem. This view might be explained in part by the fact that many of the students had worked on research projects as a hospital employee or through an academic adviser and, therefore, were familiar with and able to be critical of informed consent procedures. However, they probably would not have expressed their critical views if they had not been explicitly asked for their opinions (and informed of potential ethical problems in teacher research) within the classroom. The significant difference in the participation rate between the oral consent in the classroom and the written consent post-course suggests that, when consent was moved outside the course context, the students who really did not want to participate were empowered to say "no," and, moreover, that the teacher's authority over the students was effectively limited.

Gravetter and Forzano (2009) argue that oral consent is sufficient if consent is well-informed, containing "complete information about all aspects of the research that might be of interest or concern to a potential participant" (p. 116). They point out that IRBs in the U.S. will usually use the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services rules to classify classroom-based research projects under "expedited review" involving "minimal risk to participants" and requiring only oral consent (p. 117). In our example, although one-third of the students preferred that the teachers obtain consent post-course rather than during a course, in practice, oral consent in the classroom to study the delayed consent procedure and discuss teacher research ethics achieved 100% participation, whereas written consent post-course to use course-related essay content received only two-thirds participation. It appears to be easier to increase compliance by asking for oral consent in the classroom rather than written consent out of the classroom. In the oral consent situation, it was difficult to ascertain what every student

was thinking or if they truly wanted to participate. In fact, the researcher's authority as a teacher may have played a role in creating the full participation. However, the research consisted of a collaborative effort between the students and the teacher/ researcher to understand the ethics of teacher research in a way that was respectful and enhanced learning. The collaborative approach in the classroom may involve more risks, but it also has more potential rewards.

Oral consent carries a greater risk of unwilling compliance, but it avoids some of the potential pitfalls of written consent. If a printed consent form is put before students, they might become cautious and hesitant because the tone and form of information will influence responses. Technocratic informed written consent forms can intimidate or alienate, and be so focused on the research project that they risk undercutting the spirit of learning and collaboration. However, written consent is necessary. The results of delaying written consent until a course could lower the participation rate, while emphasizing ethical issues, risks, and rights could lead to students' refusing to participate in a study (cf. Homan, 2002: 31). However, teacher researchers should not avoid discussing research ethics issues with students in or out of the classroom simply because they risk losing authority or research participants. McKay (2006) argues that it is necessary to show respect toward participants; additionally, it is required by "most institutions involved in research projects" as well as academic journals (p. 26). In addition, if a teacher research project involves both participants and non-participants, and the research could intrude on non-participants' lives in some way, consent should be obtained in some fashion even from the non-participants (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004: 105). However, more research is needed into how best to get permission from non-participants to conduct research in group situations where they can participate in learning activities that will not automatically become research content or make them feel uncomfortable or unequal. Incorporating both oral and written consent into a research project may be the best answer (see below).

**Timing and scope of informed consent**

The timing and scope of informed consent are key elements in navigating the dual

roles of the teacher researcher and in avoiding problems that may arise due to unequal power relations. On the issue of timing, it will generally be easier and more practical to recruit students and request consent either in class while teaching or out of class but during the semester. However, if consent is sought from students by a teacher who is currently teaching them or will have assessment authority over them in the future as an advisor, thesis committee member, program director, etc., asking for consent in the classroom or other face-to-face venue should be carefully planned out. Mitchell (2004: 1428) suggests delaying informed consent when using and reporting non-aggregated student work content; consent should be obtained only when the student's work has been completed so that the student can first judge the content the researcher intends to use. In other words, when reporting research containing individual, potentially identifiable and sensitive participant material, it might be best to delay or renew consent. When possible, researchers should aggregate and anonymize data with or without delaying consent.

In our example, the study data have been reported only in aggregated form, with no airing of potentially identifying statements by students. In addition, email was used post-course to ask for written consent to participate in the essay-based research, which was conducted with no recording equipment, no outsiders, and no unusual intervention in the classroom outside of introducing the research purpose and discussing the ethics of the consent procedure. The electronic communication of teaching and research matters is often a useful way to create co-presence without co-location (Beaulieu, 2010). The students were free to ignore the emails and not share their essay content for research purposes. Compared to a teacher in a classroom (terrestrial or virtual) with direct authority over one's students, it was more difficult to access students' time and attention if they were, for instance, uninterested, busy, or dissatisfied with their course grade.

The scope of informing and consent is also important. Consent should be asked for only after the students have been thoroughly informed of the research purposes, procedures, and potential risks, and given the opportunity to discuss ethical issues with the teacher researcher and among themselves. In the case of an interview, survey, or

other potentially stand-alone course content such as journal entries or essays, delaying written consent is likely to work well. Asking for oral consent to inform students about possibly participating in a study can take place in the classroom, and then written consent can take place later when the activity is to be done or after it is done. In such a situation, informing can be broad and consent can be relatively narrow and specific. However, teacher research in ESP is often collaborative and multipurpose, involving research content that is produced in direction interaction between the teacher/researcher and students, which makes it more difficult to separate informing from consenting. For example, if testing a course innovation in the classroom (to be reported on in public), students' time and effort commitments may be extensively blended into a collaborative course process. The scope of both informing and consent will need to be relatively broad, covering all or some types of classroom behavior and utterances. Still, the students can consent to be informed in the classroom and then given time to think outside the classroom about whether or not to consent formally in writing.

By consulting students at the beginning of the research process, the researcher can become more aware of what constitutes unacceptable, undesirable or uncomfortable research conditions and sensitive information in the eyes of potential participants. In turn, students are more likely to trust and respect the researcher's intentions, even if, in the end, they refuse to participate. Research participants should also continue to be informed and consulted if the research purpose or process changes in ways that could affect participants' rights (Appleman, 2009: 58). In the present case, the classroom discussion of ethics issues made the students aware, before they wrote their assignment, that they could omit from their essays any information they deemed too sensitive or personal. Besides helping to protect students' basic human rights, this kind of communication can have the added benefit of being educational, providing useful insights for students into teachers' and researchers' values and means of continuing the learning process. The classroom discussion of the ethical issues was more in English than in Chinese, whereas McKay notes (2006: 26), potential research subjects should be informed in a language in which they are fluent to avoid miscommunication and misunderstanding. Thus, use of Chinese as much or more than English would

have better assured that students were clearly informed. Nonetheless, in a foreign or second language learning situation, it can benefit students - as a language learning opportunity—to be informed in the target language as well.

It seems, therefore, that a comprehensive approach is best, providing "complete information" in multiple - oral and written - formats and carefully chosen times, places, and social situations. Delaying consent is really about giving students the time to consider their choices in a relatively neutral environment. If formal written consent is to take place in the classroom or during a course, the justification for it should be clearly explained and discussed. Ideally, oral consent to proceed should be obtained first; after that, students can discuss, and reflect on teacher-and-student and researcher-and-research participant relations while considering whether or not to participate; only then should written consent be pursued, preferably in a place or space that does not involve direct (e.g., face-to-face in the classroom) teacher-student contact.

## 6. Conclusion

Teacher research is often simply the most convenient way for time-strapped teachers to innovate and experiment more systematically and publically. Ethical challenges are present in all aspects of human-subjects research, including teacher research; however, a certain amount of risk to students and teachers is inherent in any good learning context (Loughran, 2004). Teacher researchers working in ESP and other language teaching contexts can benefit from participation in ethics policy debates, ethics committee training, teacher researcher training and community-building (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), and educational outreach to students and the public. Voluntary, anonymous participation and informed consent are not usually needed for students to engage in activities intended to improve teaching and learning. However, if those activities include public airing of some of the artifacts of the teacher-student encounter, especially ones containing sensitive information about students, voluntary consent that is informed and guarantees relative anonymity or sufficient information about the risk of exposure of identifiable content is needed. In addition, some forms

of data can be collected prior to the intent to do research, but the research topic should emerge within or be made a collaborative part of the classroom, involve only informed students, and, in addition to benefiting others through public presentation, go back into improving the educational encounter.

This analysis of one case has demonstrated the importance of planning informed consent procedures through consideration of the research context and, more critically, the researcher's relationship to the target population. The best way to avoid ethical problems is to ask students for permission (oral consent) to inform them thoroughly, openly discuss the ethical challenges, and consider what they think will be fair, and only then to ask for written consent. Teacher research should be conducted in a manner that will avoid disrupting students' lives, including their course experience, beyond what is needed for exploring a given research phenomenon. It should also empower students and limit the influence of the teacher's hierarchical status in determining participation, particularly in countries such as Taiwan where it can be relatively strong. Participants as well as readers of research reports should be made aware of the research process of producing knowledge and handling ethical issues. Finally, teacher research should be conducted in partnership with students as active participants and beneficiaries (see Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson, 1992: 15). This view fits well with ESP approaches, which aim to empower students through collaboration and self-learning while valuing teachers as students of learning.

In sum, this case-based analysis of the ethics of teacher research, focusing on adult ESP students in an institution of higher learning in Taiwan, has shown that the ethical challenges of teacher research can be better understood and faced if the researcher considers the various methods of informing research recruits and obtaining consent in order to minimize the possible effects of the teacher's authority over students.

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