
Editorial: Ethics in TESOL

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Editors

This special issue of *TESOL in Context* focuses on the topic of “Ethics in TESOL”. In it a number of issues are explored including accountability of ESOL teachers to their students and communities, the development of ethical responsibility for professional life and how research can inform and transform practice. Broader questions are raised about where does the notion of ethics take us as a profession in relation to research, practice and advocacy?

In 1980, “Guidelines for ethical research in ESL” were published in *TESOL Quarterly*, 14(3) (pp. 383-388). Sixteen active researchers who formed the TESOL Research Committee provided principles for conducting research into second language learning and teaching that would protect the rights of second language learners. These guidelines highlighted the need for TESOL researchers to reflect on the way they plan, conduct and report on research taking into consideration its scope and specificity (Dufon, 1993) as well as the potential vulnerability of the people being researched (TESOL Research Committee, 1980, p. 384).

In response to the original impetus, the idea of ethics in TESOL has been linked to the types of programs and practices engaged with in EAL classrooms that are located in a range of socio-economic and culturally diverse settings. Ethics has also become a central consideration for the bilingual education debate (Cummins, 1999; Gale, 2017), assessing student work (Lynch & Shaw, 2005), identity formation and second language teaching (Morgan & Clarke, 2011), pre-service teacher education (Hafernik, Messerschmidt & Vandrick, 2014; Tang, Lee, & Chun, 2012), as well as digital technologies and the teaching and learning experience in the EAL classroom (Figueroa-Flores, 2015). Addressing ethical issues provides opportunities to consider the teacher’s role in decision-making about pedagogy and curriculum; that is, is the pedagogical focus on the needs of the learner or with the curriculum (Dickey, 2018). One issue that emerges is whether teachers in an educational environment that values high stakes testing have the opportunity to inform such decisions.

In this edition, educators and researchers in the field examine the notion of ethics for ESOL teaching and research practices. They engage with the notion of ethics through discussion of political agendas such as assimilation and multiculturalism (Williams), by thinking about it philosophically in terms of “hospitality” and an “access paradox” (Kostogriz), and through adoption of a praxis-oriented approach that is holistic and considers ethics as a moral task (Kaukko & Wilkinson).

What is common across these different conceptual orientations is the reinforcement of the idea that ethics is significant for the field of TESOL. Ethics foregrounds how teachers are viewed according to professional standards, how students are perceived of as the “other” or as “equals” and the positioning of educators as reflective practitioners and perhaps advocates.

All the authors agree that ethics is an important tenet that underpins the field of TESOL but through the very process of considering it as a guiding principle, diverse ideas about how it can be discussed and understood are foregrounded. The authors discuss its various implications for teachers, researchers, students, pedagogy, curriculum and assessment practices, and for the profession as a whole. They argue for ethics to be explained within the socio-cultural context of educational settings suggesting that ethical principles can provide guidance in times of change and uncertainty. They point out that ethics is difficult to pinpoint and define and is not simply a regulatory tool but rather a complex and multi-layered set of principles.

TESOL in Context has been involved in the debate around ethics since the inception of the journal in the 1990s. Alan Williams in his 1992 article on ethics of TESOL argued that:

if we are not to be agents of assimilation it is essential that we retain a sense of our other vital role, which is to help sensitise and educate the mainstream to the cultures, values, rights, needs and concerns of those who constitute the various linguistic and cultural minorities in our society. (p. 5)

In this edition, Alan Williams reconsiders the idea of ethics against the wide-ranging changes in the TESOL field over the past 25 years. He contends that changes in teaching practices, professional knowledge and sociocultural contexts have transformed the field. He reassesses guiding principles for teachers and professional associations against a backdrop of globalisation and centralised curriculum and assessment practices.

These conditions, he suggests, reduce the capacity for individual teachers to have input into institutional decision making. What this suggests is the emergence of different kinds of ethical issues that are bound up with ethical responsibility for professional life.

Alex Kostogriz, taking a more philosophical stance, engages with the critical perspective of “access paradox” and prioritises the “ethical” in professional practices. He employs the notion of ethics as “hospitality” to critically discuss the potential provision of socially-just language and literacy education in times of multiculturalism. He argues for EAL learners to be recognised as “equal” in contrast to being labelled as the “other”. He extends this metaphor to outline how the educator can create opportunities for an interchange of cultural-linguistic “gifts” in the teaching and learning process.

Mervi Kaukko and Jane Wilkinson adopt a praxis approach to ethics, taking into consideration the socio-political context of educational settings. They argue that a praxis focused educator works “ethically, autonomously, reflectively and rationally.” Their intention is not to define and identify what “best” practice looks like. They are concerned with EALD/F2 teachers continually and critically examining their work within the context of the world that children are being educated for. This in turn reflects back on the idea of developing an ethical responsibility for a professional life.

We hope that you as the reader can relate to and engage with some of the ethical concerns discussed in this edition. The intent is to open discussion on the topic rather than to attempt to offer a comprehensive treatment of ethics in TESOL. Considering ethics as a practice, issue, set of guidelines, statements about rights and responsibilities and so on has strong implications for the TESOL profession. Whether ethics as a prescribed set of principles would enhance professionalism in the field is a question to be considered. Or is it of more value to continue to explore its principles through a range of conceptual and practice-oriented frameworks that take into consideration the diversity of educational settings and learners that contextualise the field?

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