

# Gaining Ethical Approval: What Researchers in Japan Need to Know When They Conduct Research Overseas

日本の研究者が海外で調査を行う際の注意点：  
倫理委員会から了承を得ること

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**Abstract:** In the globalised world more and more scholars conduct international research. Every research project must be morally justifiable, and in some countries, it is mandatory for all researchers, no matter which field they are in, to gain official ethical approval before conducting research that involves humans or animals. I explain the importance of following ethical guidelines when researchers conduct study in other countries, giving an example of the process for gaining ethical approval for educational research in the UK. I aim to help Japanese academics learn about ethical clearance when they conduct international research.

**Keywords:** ethical approval, United Kingdom, Research Ethics Committee, Disclosure and Barring Service Check, research in multiple countries

**要旨:** グローバル化により、国際的な調査を行う研究者が増えてきた。研究プロジェクトには倫理的な正当性を持つことが義務付けられており、国によっては、人や動物を扱うすべての研究に、倫理審査の承認が義務づけられている。本稿では、国外で研究を行う際に倫理承認のガイドラインに従うことの重要性を説明したうえで、一例として英国での倫理承認のガイドラインとそのプロセスを紹介している。そして、日本在住の研究者が外国で研究調査を行う時の注意点なども述べている。

**キーワード:** 倫理審査の承認、英国、研究倫理委員会、前歴者就業制限機構による検査結果<sup>1</sup>、複数国に渡る調査

## 1. Introduction

While I was studying for my doctorate in education in the United Kingdom, an acquaintance of mine from an academic society contacted me from Japan. She asked me, on her behalf, to conduct a survey of school teachers, most of whom were my classmates in the UK, and sent me a questionnaire so that I could distribute it to them. She was unaware, however, that she needed to follow certain procedures in order for her research in the UK to be considered ethical. This may have been because ethical approval in educational research is not always required formally by the government in Japan,<sup>2</sup> or it may have been because she had no experience of conducting professional research

overseas. It took me a long time to explain to her both how and why she had to prove to the participants that she had gained official ethical approval before collecting data.

In this paper I introduce the process for gaining ethical approval for educational research in the UK. I aim to help researchers in Japan to gain an understanding of what they have to do before conducting investigations in another country.

## **2. Research Ethics Committee and Economic & Social Science Research Council**

Every research project must be morally justifiable, and in many countries it is mandatory for all researchers, no matter which field they are in, to gain official ethical approval before conducting research that involves humans or animals. When researchers at an institute, including research students, plan educational research in the UK, they must undergo an ethical review by their institute's Research Ethics Committee (hereafter REC). The doctoral school to which I belong maintains its own REC, and all research projects by staff, students or visitors which collect or use data from human participants, including secondary data analysis, systematic reviews, as well as preliminary and pilot studies, are required to obtain ethical approval before the project starts.

The REC reviews all ethics applications from staff and visitors. Student applications are reviewed by a supervisor and another member of the advisory committee or another member of the course team. If the research involves particularly complicated or sensitive ethical issues then it must be referred to the REC. The framework for research ethics is produced by a Non-Departmental Government Body called the Economic & Social Science Research Council (hereafter ESRC). The ESRC was established in 1965 for the purposes of providing funding and support for research and training work in social and science issues.<sup>3</sup>

There are six key principles of ethical research<sup>4</sup> that the ESRC (2008) expects to be followed, whenever applicable:

1. Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality.
2. Research staff and subjects must be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved. Some variation is allowed in very specific and exceptional research contexts for which detailed guidance

is provided in the policy Guidelines.

3. The confidentiality of information supplied by research subjects and the anonymity of respondents must be respected.
4. Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion.
5. Harm to research participants must be avoided.
6. The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit. (p.1)

It also describes the following procedure:

A research proposal must state whether a researcher considers that ethical approval will be required for their proposed research, and explain the grounds for their view. This may involve reference to the relationship of the proposed work to the appropriate professional disciplinary standards. The administering authority in signing the application form will be confirming that it concurs with that judgment and is prepared to administer any resulting award on the basis specified in the application, carrying out full (possibly iterative) ethical review where necessary. During peer review, referees and assessors will be asked to comment on the ethical self-assessment in the proposal and if referees or assessors disagree with the proposed ethical review, this could lead to rejection of a proposal or a conditional award requiring specific review. (p.2)

In Japan researchers may not find their research problematic when their participants are not vulnerable or minorities, but they always have to be careful about the participants' privacy, or their freedom of choice for participating in the research. No matter who is their participant, researchers must be able to elucidate that the whole of the research proposal contains no unethical conduct, and it must be authorised by a third party.

### **3. My Experience as a Research Student in the UK**

My research proposal was on English as a Foreign Language education and the research required an investigation into successful EFL education in other countries, as well as collecting data from Japanese EFL practitioners. I submitted an ethical approval form to my institute in the UK for a research project conducted in Japan in July 2015. I completed

my ethical review prior to data collection. I discussed any ethical concerns with my supervisors, and completed my ethical review two months before collecting the pilot data. In the event that the research design later changes significantly, it will need to go through another ethics review. I submitted the Ethics Form to the Research Student Administrator in the doctoral school (Appendix A), and followed the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association (those usually adopted by TESOL researchers in the UK).

Other organisations providing professional codes of ethics that TESOL or Applied Linguistics researchers in the UK follow (according to their research plan) are: The British Association for Applied Linguistics, British Psychological Society, British Sociological Association, etc. Researchers may be able to search for a proper organisation by using internet search engines or making an enquiry to the relevant academic society. The British Education Research Association provides a forum for independent researchers which is designed to support anyone in the field of educational research who is operating outside of academic institutions, so Japanese researchers might be able to contact the organisation in order to discuss how to gain ethical approval in the UK.<sup>5</sup>

On the ethics form I used for my doctoral work, researchers were required to provide the information listed below:

1. Project details – the period of research, the place where the research to be conducted, funding, etc.
2. Research summary - purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection, reporting and dissemination.
3. Security-sensitive material - Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.
4. Research participants, research methods, use of systematic reviews, and secondary data analysis.
5. Ethical issues - potential risks or harm that may arise as a result of research. Researchers should demonstrate that they have considered ways to minimise the likelihood and impact of each potential harm that they have identified. This section includes potentially vulnerable participants, child protection, sensitive topics, sampling, international research, and data storage.

6. Attachments to the ethics form – information sheet for research participants, informed consent form, research proposal, etc.

In order to obtain ethical approval from the relevant authority, it is also important that a researcher gain written consent from each participant in the research. Their agreement on engagement in the research is indispensable, and researchers should offer both spoken and written explanation of the research that they intend to conduct. They must not forget to have their informed consent sheet signed by the participants who have agreed to cooperate in the research (see Appendix B and C).

#### **4. Disclosure and Barring Service Check**

The DBS, previously known as Criminal Record Bureau, is a governmental body in the UK which provides certificates that prove whether a person holds a criminal record and whether he/she is unsuitable to work with children or adults. It may be needed for certain jobs or voluntary work, e.g. working with children or in healthcare or applying to foster or adopt a child. If researchers need to visit schools, or survey faculty members or students at school in the UK, they may first need to obtain Disclosure and Barring Service Certificates<sup>6</sup> and show them to the institutions where they are going to conduct the research. The DBS check form is available on the DBS homepages,<sup>7</sup> and applicants can submit the form online. In the event that a researcher with a criminal record should wish to conduct research at a school site, they may be asked to submit further forms to prove that they will do no harm to their research participants.

#### **5. International Research in Multiple Countries**

Nowadays many researchers conduct international research through the Internet and using online tools such as Skype or email. If researchers wish to undertake an investigation that involves a group of participants in various countries, it is advised that they first gain official ethical approval from the relevant institution or research body in their own country /countries and show it to the participants, so as to prove that there are no ethical shortcomings with the research that they plan to carry out. They should also gain ethical approval from authorities in the participants' countries.

Charles Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers (2002) states that there are significant differences in ethics between nationalities: citizens of the European Union demand strong privacy rights by law as established in the European Union Data

Protection Directive (1995), whereas U.S. citizens require somewhat less stringent privacy protections. It is vital for researchers to consider such particularities and carefully plan their research so that it satisfies all participants' expectations.

## 6. Conclusion

In the globalised world more and more scholars conduct international research. Researchers need to know, before they conduct their research, that there may be varying regulations in regard to research methods or the code of conduct for ethical practice in different countries, and they must be careful to follow those regulations. Any research involving human or animal participants – whether there appear to be ethically sensitive issues or not - must go through ethical review and be approved officially by a reliable third party. Without ethical approval a research project may not meet the necessary criteria or may be regarded as unprofessional. The best way for researchers in Japan to conduct research without facing problems is to work with researchers in a target country or at least gain help from them in order to obtain ethical approval. Japanese researchers should be aware that the process of ethical approval takes a long time: for example, at many institutes it can take about three weeks and a DBS check may take even longer in the UK. Researchers should therefore make sure that they plan accordingly.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> DBS Check の日本語訳は日本貿易振興機構(2018年3月)の書類を参考にした。

<sup>2</sup> As of 25th September 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Cram101 Textbook Reviews (2014) e-Study Guide for The Oxford Handbook of Political Science, textbook by Robert E. Goodin: Political science, Political science.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/ESRC\\_Re\\_Ethics\\_Frame\\_tcm6-11291.pdf](http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Frame_tcm6-11291.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bera.ac.uk/networks>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/disclosure-barring-service-check>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/e-bulk-submitting-multiple-applications-for-dbs-checking-formerly-erb>

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## Appendix A: An Example of Ethics Form

### Ethics Application Form: Research Degree Students

All research activity conducted under the auspices of the Institute by staff, students or visitors, where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants are required to gain ethical approval before starting. Please answer all relevant questions. Your form may be returned if incomplete. Please write your responses in terms that can be understood by a lay person.

For further support and guidance please see Ethics Review Procedures for Student Research [http://www.\\*\\*\\*.ac.uk/studentethics/](http://www.***.ac.uk/studentethics/) or contact your supervisor or [researchethics@\\*\\*\\*.ac.uk](mailto:researchethics@***.ac.uk).

Section 1 Project details		
a.	Project title	The Future of English Language Education in Japan: Conditions for Success in a Global Era
b.	Student name	***** **
c.	Supervisors	Dr ***** (lead), Professor *** **
d.	Advisory committee members	
e.	Department	***** and ***** Education
f.	Intended research start date	1 September 2015
g.	Intended research end date	31 December 2017
h.	Funder (if applicable)	Self-funded
i.	Funding confirmed?	N/A
j.	Country fieldwork will be conducted in <i>If research to be conducted abroad please check <a href="http://www.fco.gov.uk">www.fco.gov.uk</a> If the FCO advice against travel a full travel risk assessment form should also be completed and submitted</i>	Japan (nationwide)
k.	All research projects at the Institute of Education are required to specify a professional code of ethics according to which the research will be conducted. Which organisation's research code will be used?	British Educational Research Association
		If your research is based in another institution then you may be required to submit your research to that institution's ethics review process. If your research involves patients recruited through the NHS then you will need to apply for ethics approval through an NHS Local Research Ethics Committee. In either of these cases, you don't need ethics approval from the Institute of Education.



I.	Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?	Yes	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ⇒ go to Section 2
	<i>If so, please insert the name of the committee, the date on which the project was considered, and attach the approval letter in either hard or electronic format with this form.</i>		
	External Committee Name:	Date of Approval:	
⇒ If your project has been externally approved please go to <b>Section 9 Attachments</b> .			

## Section 2 Research Summary

Please provide an overview of your research. This can include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection, reporting and dissemination. *It is expected that this will take approximately 200-300 words, and you may write more if you feel it is necessary.*

**The purpose of the research:** To explore the conditions of successful English language education in countries where English is a foreign or second language, and outlines the views gleaned from various stakeholders in English language education in Japan on how to improve the English language education system.

**The research questions:** Q 1. From an analysis of international comparisons within the literature, what appear to be the conditions of successful English as foreign language education?

Q2. How might these conditions for successful English as foreign language education be applied to assess present and past policies and practice in Japan?

Q3. What are the views of the various stakeholders about the conditions of success in the Japanese context?

Q4. What do the stakeholders believe Japanese policy-makers need to know in order better to understand conditions for success in the national context? To what degree is there a consensus among the stakeholders interviewed about the conditions for success?

Q5. What are the major challenges going forward?

**The research design:** The research is going to be conducted with qualitative methods. The semi-structured qualitative interviews will be held one by one and also face-to-face. It is going to take approximately 45 minutes.

**The participants:** The twelve or more potential stakeholders who are engaged in English language education. All of them live and work in Japan.

**The reporting and dissemination:** The interviews and audio recording will be used as data for publication purposes. The data collected will be anonymized, treated as confidential and will be stored under the data protection act (1998). Any use of the collected data for research or publication purposes will have no reference, whatsoever, to the interviewees. Their names are anonymised, and only their status may be indicated as 'in-service secondary teacher'.

<b>Section 3 Security-sensitive material</b>			
Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns			
a.	Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?	Yes	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
⇒ If you have answered <b>Yes</b> please give further details in <b>Section 8 Ethical Issues</b> . Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations? Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?			

<b>Section 4 Research participants Tick all that apply</b>	
Early years/pre-school Primary School age 5-11  Secondary School age 12-16  Young people aged 17-18	Unknown Advisory/consultation groups No participants <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Adults <i>please specify below:</i> <i>Those who engaged in English language education            in Japan</i>

<b>Section 5 Research methods Tick all that apply</b>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Interviews <input type="checkbox"/> Focus groups <input type="checkbox"/> Questionnaire <input type="checkbox"/> Action <input type="checkbox"/> research <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Observation Literature review	Controlled trial/other intervention study Use of personal records Systematic review Secondary data analysis Other, give details:

<b>Section 6 Systematic reviews Only complete if systematic reviews will be used</b>		
a.	Will you be collecting any new data from participants?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
b.	Will you be analysing any secondary data?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Section 7 Secondary data analysis Only complete if secondary data		
a.	Name of dataset/s	Test of English as a Foreign Language Scores (TOEFL), Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), Programme for International Student Assessment Scores (PISA), Education at Glance, international literacy index (UNESCO, World Factbook).
b.	Owner of dataset/s	ETS (TOEFL), Education First (EF EPI), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (PISA, Education at Glance), The United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (international literacy index), The Central Intelligence Agency (World Factbook).
c.	Are the data in the public domain?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
d.	Are the data anonymised?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
		<i>Do you plan to anonymise the data? Yes</i>
		<i>Do you plan to use individual level data? Yes*</i>
		<i>Will you be linking data to individuals? Yes*</i>
e.	Are the data	Yes* No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
f.	Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No*
		<i>Was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?</i>
		Yes No*
		Yes No*
⇒ If you have ticked any asterisked responses, this indicates possible increased ethical issues for your research please give further details in <b>Section 8 Ethical Issues</b>		

## Section 8 Ethical issues

What are the ethical issues which may arise in the course of your research, and how will they be addressed? It is important that you demonstrate your awareness of potential risks or harm that may arise as a result of your research. You should then demonstrate that you have considered ways to minimise the likelihood and impact of each potential harm that you have identified. Please be as specific as possible in describing the ethical issues you will have to address. Please consider / address ALL issues that may apply.

*A minimum of 200 words is required. Less than this and your application may be returned to you. Ethical concerns may include, but not be limited to, the following areas:*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potentially vulnerable participants</li> <li>• Safeguarding/child protection</li> <li>• Risks to participants and/or researchers</li> <li>• International research</li> <li>• Sensitive topics</li> <li>• Sampling</li> <li>• Gatekeepers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informed consent</li> <li>• Assent</li> <li>• Methods</li> <li>• Confidentiality</li> <li>• Anonymity</li> <li>• Data storage/security</li> <li>• Data transfer/transmission</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data sharing/encryption</li> <li>• Data documentation</li> <li>• Data management plan</li> <li>• Data protection</li> <li>• Reporting</li> <li>• Dissemination and use of findings</li> </ul>
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**International Research:** This research is going to be conducted in Japan, where there are no formal or official ethical approval committees for language education survey. Hence I follow the British Educational Research Association code of ethics.

**Informed consent:** The aim of the research and its purpose will be disclosed with openness in approaching and establishing relations with the interviewees, and they are going to be provided with information sheet and informed consent form before the interview is conducted. Whether they choose to participate it or not will be completely their own free choice. The interviewees maintain the right to withdraw from participation from the research study, at any time, for any or no reason at all without bearing any consequence personally or professionally.

## Section 9 Attachments Please attach the following items to this form, or explain if not attached

a.	Information sheet and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the	Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No
b.	Consent form	Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No

c.	The proposal for the project, if applicable	Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No
d.	Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee, if applicable	Yes		No

### Section 10 Declaration

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project

Name	*****
Date	2 July 2015

Please submit your completed ethics forms to your supervisor/course administrator.

### Departmental use

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, you may refer the application to the Research Ethics Coordinator (via [researchethics@\\*\\*\\*.ac.uk](mailto:researchethics@***.ac.uk)) so that it can be submitted to the Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A Research Ethics Committee Chair, ethics representatives in your department and the research ethics coordinator can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the Research Ethics Committee.

*Also see 'when to pass a student ethics review up to the Research Ethics Committee':*  
[http://www.\\*\\*\\*.ac.uk/about/policiesProcedures/\\*\\*\\*\\*.html](http://www.***.ac.uk/about/policiesProcedures/****.html)

#### Reviewer 1

Supervisor name	***** , *****
Supervisor	***** is still at the early stage of her research process. However, the main points raised in this application should remain unchanged. She plans to undertake a pilot study in the autumn term.
Supervisor	*****

#### Reviewer 2

Advisory	*****
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Advisory committee member	
Advisory	**** *
<b>Decision</b>	
Date decision was made	
Decision	Approved
	Referred back to applicant and supervisor
	Referred to REC for review
<b>Recording</b>	Recorded in the student information system <input type="checkbox"/>

Once completed and approved, please send this form and associated documents to the faculty research administrator to record on the student information system and to securely store.

Further guidance on ethical issues can be found on the IOE website at [http://www.\\*\\*\\*.ac.uk/ethics/](http://www.***.ac.uk/ethics/) and [www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk](http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk)

## Appendix B: An Example of Information Sheet

\*\*\*\*\*  
 Research student 2015  
 Student ID: \*\*\*\*\*

Doctoral School  
 Name of A Graduate School  
 20 \*\*\*\*\* \*\*, \*\*\*\*\* \*\*, UK  
 Tel: +44 (0)\*\* \*\*\*\*\*

E-mail: \*\*\*\*\*@\*\*\*\*\*.com  
 Tel: 075 \*\*\*\*\* (U.K.)/ 090 \*\*\*\*\* (Japan)

### The Future of English Language Education in Japan: Conditions for Success in a Global Era Information Sheet

My name is \*\*\*\*\*. I am an ex-university lecturer in Japan, and currently I am a research student at the \*\*\*\*\*. My research area is Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages and this research study is a project for my doctoral thesis. The project starts in September 2015 and ends in December 2017.

This research is conducted in order to explore the conditions of successful English language (hereafter EL) education in countries where English is a foreign or second language, and it is going to outline the views gleaned from various stakeholders in English language education in Japan on how to improve the English language education system.

In my previous research I analysed the causes of gaps between a policy intention and its practice, and I drew out five major factors which hindered English language education: distrust within the power relationship, university entrance exams, money matters, cultural and linguistic differences, teaching environment and teacher-training courses. I then outlined EL education experts' mediation process.

This time in my doctoral thesis I would like to explore my previous findings more deeply at the same time to seek for more successful EL education. When compared internationally, Japanese people's English competence continues to fall short of government targets despite the fact that various policies have been introduced in the last fifty years to enhance EL education. I will use an international comparative approach as well as an historical approach to highlight issues in the Japanese education system.

The major part of this research is going to be about potential policy reforms in Japan: I investigate through interviews how Japanese people could translate the conditions that have brought about success in EL education in other countries into forms of best application in Japan. I will also seek to mediate the views of EL practitioners such that Japanese policy-makers will be encouraged to engage with them.

I would like to ask your participation in this study. If you choose to participate it will be completely your own free choice. You maintain the right to withdraw from participation from the research study, at any time, for any or no reason at all without bearing any consequence personally or professionally. The interview will be approximately 45 minutes long and it will involve a series of open questions based on your experience.

Thank you in advance for your time and support.

\*\*\*\*\* \*\*

(signed)



## Appendix C: An Example of Informed Consent

Research student 2015  
Student ID: \*\*\*\*\*

Doctoral School  
Name of A Graduate School  
20 \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*, \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*, UK  
Tel: +44 (0)\*\* \*\*\*\*\*

E-mail: \*\*\*\*\*@\*\*\*\*\*.com  
Tel: 075 \*\*\*\*\* (U.K.)/ 090 \*\*\*\*\* (Japan)

### The Future of English Language Education in Japan: Conditions for Success in a Global Era Interview Consent Form

One copy of this completed form should be given to the participating interviewee and the other retained by the interviewer. The interviewer asks the interviewee to tick boxes below to indicate the interviewee whether s/he understands and agrees to give her/his consent. The interviewee agrees to the following:

1. I have read and understood the information sheet of the research and agree to participate in this interview conducted in Japan.
  
2. I agree that the interview will be recorded by an IC recorder, and any data collected will remain confidential and stored under the data protection act in the UK (1998). It is to protect people's fundamental rights and freedoms and in particular their right to privacy with respect to the processing of personal data. In practice it provides a way for individuals to control information about themselves.
  
3. I agree that the information collected from this study may be used for research purposes including publication. I understand the use of any data will ensure my anonymity and will not in any way refer to me directly.
  
4. I understand that I can withdraw my participation any time.

**Printed Name (in CAPITALS):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_