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Percepción del estudiantado sobre la ética en la investigación de la lingüística aplicada en una universidad pública costarricense

Volumen 23, Número 1  
Enero - Abril  
pp. 1-25

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Charpentier-Jiménez, William. (2023). Students' Perceptions of Ethics in Applied Linguistics Research at a Costa Rican Public University. *Revista Actualidades Investigativas en Educación*, 23(1), 1-25. Doi. <https://doi.org/10.15517/aie.v23i1.51587>

## Students' Perceptions of Ethics in Applied Linguistics Research at a Costa Rican Public University

Percepción del estudiantado sobre la ética en la investigación de la lingüística aplicada en una universidad pública costarricense

William Charpentier-Jiménez<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article examines students' perceptions of ethics and ethical training in research on second language acquisition. The role of ethics in applied linguistics and research has received little attention, despite its relevance. This study, which was conducted from May to June 2022, involved 26 TESOL students enrolled in a Licenciatura program at a Costa Rican public university. It used a quantitative, direct needs assessment design. The researcher collected data through a survey designed to elicit students' opinions on this issue. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Data analyses indicate that: 1) students tend to reject unethical behaviors in research (68.75%); 2) some behaviors seem more permissible than others; 3) students consider ethics an essential component of research ( $\bar{x} = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ,  $Mod = 5$ ); and 4) the Licenciatura program does not incorporate a systematic approach to ethical training in SLA research ( $\bar{X} = 9.33$ ;  $SD = 8.08$ ). Consistent with the reviewed literature, these findings demonstrate the lack of ethical training in language teaching programs and second language research. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that direct instruction may broaden students' understanding of ethical issues when conducting research. Finally, these findings suggest that students would greatly benefit from a more structured curriculum that considers the ethical component of research.

**Keywords:** moral education, language instruction, ethics, research training

**Resumen:** El siguiente artículo examina la percepción del estudiantado acerca de la ética y formación ética en la investigación sobre la adquisición de una segunda lengua. A pesar de su relevancia, el papel de la ética en la lingüística aplicada y en la investigación ha recibido poca atención. Este artículo, el cual fue realizado durante los meses de mayo y junio del 2022, incluyó a 26 estudiantes de enseñanza del inglés como segundo idioma, matriculados en un programa de Licenciatura en una universidad pública de Costa Rica. Se llevó a cabo a través de un método cuantitativo con un diseño de evaluación de necesidades. El investigador recolectó los datos utilizando una encuesta diseñada para conocer la opinión de las personas estudiantes sobre esta temática. Los datos cuantitativos fueron analizados utilizando estadística descriptiva. El análisis de los resultados indica que 1) el estudiantado tiende a rechazar comportamientos no éticos en la investigación (68.75%); 2) algunos comportamientos se perciben como más permisibles que otros; 3) el estudiantado considera la ética como un componente esencial de la investigación ( $\bar{x} = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ,  $Mod = 5$ ); y 4) el programa de Licenciatura no incorpora un estudio sistemático de la formación ética en la investigación de ILE (inglés como lengua extranjera) ( $\bar{X} = 9.33$ ;  $SD = 8.08$ ). Consistentemente con la literatura, estos datos demuestran la falta de formación ética en programas de segunda lengua e investigación en una segunda lengua. Asimismo, este análisis sugiere que las personas estudiantes podrían ampliar su conocimiento de temas éticos al investigar. Finalmente, los resultados indican que las personas estudiantes podrían beneficiarse de un currículo más estructurado que considere el componente ético de la investigación.

**Palabras clave:** educación moral, enseñanza de idiomas, ética, formación de investigadores

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**Artículo recibido:** 28 de junio, 2022

**Enviado a corrección:** 08 de setiembre, 2022

**Aprobado:** 24 de octubre, 2022

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

In recent years, research has become an essential skill. Usually, books, courses, and advisors seek to help student-researchers develop two primary skills. First, the ability to retrieve, summarize, and interpret information constitutes the initial steps to becoming a good researcher. Second, the capacity to collect, process, and analyze data complements the research process. According to Ortega (2016), “we need ever deeper ethics training for new generations of applied linguists” (p. 12). Unfortunately, the ethical component of research is frequently overlooked, barely mentioned, or even excluded from the academy. Several features contribute to the relevance of ethical practices in applied linguistics. Ortega (2016) has provided an overview of the core aspects. First, in the case of professors and researchers, ethics review boards may hinder the publication of research that does not follow strict ethical norms. For students, the professor or revision committees may also disregard research efforts if certain ethical standards are violated. Second, with the corporatization of universities and the need to produce research at all costs, ethics has become a requirement in academic fields. Several entities have evaluated universities worldwide based on publications, research reputation, and the number of cited papers. In other cases, grants, promotions, marks on courses, or even graduation requisites lead to high demand for prompt research, which sometimes may curve ethical practices. Finally, applied linguistics encompasses various methods, lines of interest, and interdisciplinary factors that often may confuse (especially novel) researchers regarding what should be considered standard practices in an investigation.

Combined with the personal and moral implications that education embraces, these factors emphasize the critical importance of including ethics in applied linguistics programs. Therefore, the present study explores students’ awareness of ethical practices and the perceived preparation they receive on this topic through their major. Although the relationship between ethics and second language acquisition (SLA) started over forty years ago (Tarone, 1980), there is a dearth of research on ethics and applied linguistics. Similarly, Sterling et al. (2016) have mentioned that “in the field of applied linguistics and second language acquisition, scholars have yet to investigate the level of ethical training given in graduate school, nor have they systematically investigated beliefs about research ethics in the field” (p. 15). Thus, this study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the role of ethics in applied linguistics and, more specifically, SLA.

Because “research ethics and RCR [responsible conduct of research] principles are scarce in the SLA literature” (Sterling, 2016, p. 16), students have difficulty locating relevant information. Therefore, they can only rely on the course program, professors’ explanations during classes, or internet web pages. However, not having a solid theoretical foundation may make populations vary their research standards. Since this study focuses on undergraduate, non-native English speakers, it seeks to contribute to the existing literature to improve ethical practices and guidelines on ESL/EFL research.

Two groups will directly profit from the results of this paper. First, the course program will improve its current practices and materials on ethics and applied linguistics. In principle, the university’s guidelines establish that any major should be examined every five years. Therefore, examining to what extent some elements of ethics and research are excluded or not sufficiently emphasized will create a more robust program. In turn, more high-quality research is hoped to be conducted. Second, students will gain an understanding of the standard procedures for conducting research and their importance. These notions will help them better understand the different parts of a paper and how each section should be completed ethically. This knowledge will also improve students’ research skills and future or present job conditions. Indirectly, study subjects or participants may have access to better conditions and more information about how their participation will contribute to the study results. Finally, other institutions may replicate this study or propose curricular modifications in their majors or language courses where research is necessary.

## 1.2 Aims

The main aim of this article is to explore students’ awareness of ethical practices while conducting research related to second language acquisition. However, the article also aims at examining students’ perceived ethical preparation while taking a *Licenciatura* program on second language acquisition at a public Costa Rican university.

## 2. Literature Review

Over the last two decades, there has been a surge in interest in ethical research. The British Association for Applied Linguistics’ (BAAL) Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics (2021) and the American Association for Applied Linguistics’ (AAAL) Ethics Guidelines (2022) have demonstrated the growing importance of applied linguistics ethics. However, the idea of training in ethical research does not seem to have wholly reached second

language programs. As Sterling et al. (2016) have mentioned, “the fields of applied linguistics and second language acquisition have not placed research ethics first and foremost in discussions of research methodology” (p. 15). Therefore, this section explores the relationship between ethics and research, the possible causes of unethical conduct, the role of ethics in educational research, the inclusion of human participants, and ethics training.

## 2.1 Applied Ethics and Applied Linguistics

This section provides an overview of the main ethical research concepts. It is not intended to be a comprehensive review of all the associated terminology. However, these definitions should serve as a guide for the ideas discussed in this study. For example, applied linguistics is a term that includes many subdisciplines (Bussmann et al., 1996). As the name suggests, it deals with using linguistic principles to solve specific problems (Crystal, 2008). Some fields that adopt such principles are lexicography, clinical linguistics, language and aging, and forensic linguistics, among many other disciplines and perspectives (Matthews, 2014; Simpson, 2011). However, this paper uses the term “applied linguistics” in its most common sense: the application of linguistics to language teaching, especially second language acquisition (Brown and Miller, 2019).

Several scholars have varied definitions of ethics. It was defined as “the philosophical study of morality” (Audi, 1999, p. 284). For others, ethics is “an enquiry into how people ought to act in general, not as means to a given end” (Proudfoot et al., 2010, p. 125) or “the study of the concepts involved in practical reasoning: good, right, duty, obligation, virtue, freedom, rationality, choice” (Blackburn, 2016, p. 121). As can be seen, the concept is concerned with what is perceived as right or wrong, what makes actions moral or immoral. From these definitions, it is possible to conclude that unethical doings may be done intentionally or unintentionally, but always under the individual’s responsibility. A more specific field of ethics is applied ethics. Like applied linguistics, applied ethics is concerned with practical moral problems, such as environmental, medical, or professional issues (Audi, 1999; Blackburn, 2016). More specifically, Audi (1999) mentioned that applied ethics is not only the “mechanical application of a common morality to a particular profession or field, but an independent discipline that clarifies and analyzes the practices in a field or profession so that common morality can be applied” (35). For practical purposes, this analysis uses the more generic term “ethics or ethical” to refer to all prescriptive or descriptive moral practices associated with the research process.

Finally, research is commonly understood as the careful, systematic, and analytical study of a problem or inquiry. Its purpose is to understand an idea better, create a solution, or provide theoretical principles to help others understand certain concepts. Richards and Schmidt (2010) offered several relevant terms under the umbrella concept of “research.” First, they defined applied research as “designed to produce practical applications, contrasted with basic research, i.e., research that is designed to generate knowledge or validate theories that may not have any direct application” (p. 29). This distinction becomes relevant since student researchers work with people and apply theoretical principles in their research. More specifically, student researchers deal with action research, the primary goal of which is “finding ways of solving problems, bringing about social change or practical action, in comparison with research that seeks to discover scientific principles or develop general laws and theories” (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 8). Therefore, student researchers often deal with underage students who need their legal tutor’s approval to participate in research studies. Additionally, they do collaborative research, where research, especially in teacher development programs, is “carried out by a teacher in collaboration with others, such as another teacher or teachers, a school consultant, a university researcher, or between a teacher and learners” (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 95). This implies that student researchers depend on their peers and should trust them in their ethical judgment and practice. However, this may be beyond the individual’s control.

## 2.2 Causes of Unethical Conduct

Three distinct but related causes of unethical conduct have been established. First, research has been seen as a means to an end in recent years. Quality research has been linked to quantitative measures like publications, citations, and views. Institutions often allocate money, time, and other resources following these metrics. As a result, some researchers “may be tempted to cut ethical corners and take shortcuts to get ahead of others” (De Costa et al., 2021, p. 67). Second, in some institutions, “ethics is not adequately defined, theoretically or practically” (Kouritzin and Nakagawa, 2018, p 1). As stated earlier, higher education institutions do not always have explicit ethical guidelines that all students should follow. Therefore, an important number of researchers may be unaware of ethical practices related to their line of research or a specific section of their research (Hofmann and Holm, 2019). For example, many universities fail to guarantee ethical behavior and the consequences of research once it has been completed (Gharaveisi and Dastgoshadeh, 2020; Zhang, 2017). Finally, research

suggests that academic pressure leads to academic misconduct (Paruzel-Czachura et al., 2021). Thus, researchers and research students may depend on research to advance their careers, complete studies, or even get jobs. In contexts where resources are limited, competition is high, and time is limited, scholars may be tempted to omit some ethical guidelines.

### 2.3 Educational Research Ethics

Educational research and ethics have seen a growing interest in recent years, especially in human participant contexts. For example, De Costa et al. (2021) explained that research “should not only be a purely intellectual exercise; rather, we need to consider whom we conduct research on, the purpose of our research, the manner in which it is conducted, and the ways in which we disseminate our findings” (p. 60). The authors also propose seven tasks within the research domain. Three of the most critical tasks include making the research process transparent, protecting participant confidentiality, and eliminating authorship inequities. The responsibility of guaranteeing an ethical process resides with the ethics review boards (ERBs), the tutors, and the researchers.

In the same line, Tinker and Coomber (2005) have advocated in favor of raising awareness about ethics in research in higher education. One of the pivotal problems at the university level is caused by ERBs. The central claims against ERBs include poor experience, the application of incorrect parameters, and a lack of perspective, among others (Schrag, 2011). These problems often cause variation in how universities review research proposals (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2016), hindering inter-university and interdisciplinary research. As a result, an existing proposal in some contexts seeks to replace ERBs with other types of structures more suitable for social science research (Giraud et al., 2019). However, some authors have challenged these assumptions, proposing real-life models where social science and humanities research can thrive (Robertson, 2014). A third perspective asserts that ERBs may be friends or foes depending on their principles and relationships established with the researchers (Brown et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, students are not always required to submit their work to an ERB. In some cases, tutors are responsible for guiding students in their research. In this case, they assume the role of an ERB and are subject to the same challenges and criticism as ERBs. Especially in scenarios where these committees change constantly, standardizing procedures, guiding students, and providing ethical advice to students becomes more difficult.



## 2.4 Ethical Inclusion of Human Participants

While various types of research exist, some, especially in the social sciences, involve human participants. In this sense, De Costa (2014) mentioned that research should respect individuals, reduce or eliminate harm, and preserve justice. At the same time, it should produce the most favorable benefits. To achieve this, some authors suggest that, besides guaranteeing participants' privacy and confidentiality, researchers should provide a detailed account of the purpose of the research, the method, and data processing, among others (Dooly et al., 2017). Furthermore, strong agreement favors the use of written consent, especially in under-age groups (Israel and Hay, 2006; Mackenzie et al., 2021; Rees et al., 2007; Rodham and Gavin, 2006; Williams, 2006). Additionally, consent should include, among other aspects, a meaningful explanation of the research process, a guarantee of anonymity, and the possibility of opting out of the study in order to be valid. Finally, Hastings et al. (2016) argued that ethical protocols such as written consent guarantee responsible procedures that protect the participants and the researchers. Thus, explicit guidelines are meant to protect and respect participants and clarify the research objectives and methods.

Some authors argue against the view that a strong relationship exists between human safety and social research. For example, Schrag (2011) asserted that ERBs fail when comparing social science research with medical research. The author has argued that, in comparison to medical research, the risks to participants in social science research are negligible or non-existent. Taylor et al. (2020) agreed that social research does not resemble medical or psychological experiments. Therefore, both authors claim that social science research should be freed from the strict umbrella policies covering different research types.

## 2.5 Ethics Training

Although some authors argue that student research should not be strict in terms of ethics (Humphreys, 2008), others believe that student research should be under the same scrutiny as other types of research (Scott et al., 2008). Researchers who claim that student research should be more lax argue that ethics guidelines fail when students lack the moral judgment to follow them (Johnsson et al., 2014). Davies (2010) believed that, while all participants involved in a research study should understand the ethical components of the work, the (student) researcher must consider the ethical dimensions of the study from inception to its final results since they are ultimately responsible for its outcomes. Therefore, before creating courses to improve ethical research, society should first educate individuals with high moral principles. For



some researchers, ethics training should begin in high school (Lee, 2021; Todorov, 2021). This extra training would give them an essential insight into the fundamental moral principles needed to carry out research. For Braun et al. (2020), training in ethics may have some benefits; however, it does not provide ethics expertise as practice does. Thus, a more practical and guided approach is needed to improve ethical practices. Finally, Davies (2020) asserted that budget is often overlooked when considering ethical training. In this case, student research should not be so strict since institutions often lack the necessary resources to provide adequate training and follow up current research studies.

As can be seen, teaching and learning educational research ethics remains challenging (Smith, 2016). However, research has found that when student researchers perceive their institutions as ethically competent and dedicated, their own ethical behavior improves (Hofmann and Holm, 2019). Therefore, ethics training should be part of any research endeavor carried out by faculty or students (Tinker and Coomber, 2005). Research ethics courses should include ethical awareness and techniques to deal with ethical dilemmas (Yeo-Teh and Tang, 2021), scaffolding from an instructor (crucial for novice and student researchers), and a collaborative process (Tammeleht et al., 2019). However, to balance opposing claims such as lack of budget and practice, Gharaveisi and Dastgoshadeh (2020) proposed that ethical components should be part of existing courses and programs but systematically where every professor adheres to the same research principles and criteria. Institutions that pursue research tasks should seek to build ethical principles “that include training, providing ethical review and/or support during the research process and encouraging retrospective ethical reflection at the end of projects” (Bond, 2012, p. 109). Only a holistic approach will ensure that ethical behaviors permeate all stages of research.

### **3. Methodology**

The following section describes the study’s methodological framework.

#### **3.1 Approach**

This study used a quantitative, direct needs assessment design, conducted from May to June 2022 that explored students’ awareness of ethical practices and the perceived preparation they receive on this topic throughout the major. Students’ opinions were collected using an electronic survey. Results were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

### 3.2 Participants

The population of this study comprises adult Costa Rican students who have completed or are currently completing their thesis in an English Teaching *Licenciatura*<sup>2</sup> at the main branch of a public university. The convenience sampling method was used to reach as many participants as possible. The researcher created an electronic mailing list of 30 students interested in participating in the study. Of those 30 students, 26 responses were analyzed (86% return ratio). The participants were selected because one of the graduation requisites included conducting research on SLA. The list included every student who agreed to participate in the study. All students speak Spanish as their first language. The study included written consent, which students read before completing the survey.

### 3.3 Materials and Instruments

The materials include a written consent and a descriptive 28-item survey. The written consent was sent to students electronically. A checkbox labeled “agree to terms and conditions” was used to guarantee the voluntary participation of students. The survey was developed based on recommendations from the British Association for Applied Linguistics (2021), the American Association for Applied Linguistics (2022), and Sterling et al. (2016). However, all scenarios are original. The survey was pilot-tested with ten students similar to the target population. It was later revised based on the pilot testing.

The survey was divided into four sections: a) demographic information, b) perception of scenarios (this section also included an optional space in case students wanted to justify their answers), c) perceived ethical instruction received in the program, and d) an optional open-ended question. The survey used two question formats: forced-choice and several optional open-ended questions. It also contained mainly opinion questions about ethical behavior, and most items were presented as checklists or Likert scales. For example, some items asked the participants to rate the acceptability or unacceptability of certain research behaviors. These items were placed on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (Unacceptable) to 5 (Acceptable). This type of format, or a similar one, was also used for other survey questions.

The last part of the survey contained one open-ended question. This question invited participants to comment freely on ethics instruction. The total time to complete the survey was estimated at 15 to 25 minutes.

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<sup>2</sup> In Costa Rica, a *licenciatura* (licentiate) is part of the second level of education (grade). It is considered lower than a Master's degree but higher than a Bachelor's degree (Universidad de Costa Rica, 2004). As the BA, some courses are taken in Spanish, but most are taken in English.

The researcher created original scenarios based on what students in the pilot test considered the behaviors most likely normal in their context. Scenarios belonged to one of the possible actors in the research process: informants, colleagues, or researchers. Data collection, management, and storage were also included. The number of scenarios was limited in order to accommodate time constraints and elicit as many responses as **possible**. To collect data, the researcher solicited voluntary participation from students in a survey (see Appendix 1). The objective of the study was explained via Zoom. Following that, students were directed to a link where they could submit an email indicating their willingness to participate in the study. Afterward, a first email was sent with the written consent and a hyperlink to the online Web survey. Next, students were instructed to carefully read the survey sections and respond by selecting the best option. The order of the survey was 1) demographic information, b) perception of scenarios, c) perceived ethical instruction, and d) an optional open-ended question.

### **3.4 Data Processing and Analysis**

Data were processed and analyzed using the statistical package IBM SPSS Statistics 24.0 and Microsoft Excel 2016. Since most items in the survey included Likert scales, the analysis carried out included a quantitative summary of students' answers. Analysis included descriptive statistics where the minimum and maximum parameters were considered. Additionally, the arithmetic mean and standard deviation were included to compare students' answers.

## **4. Analysis of the Results**

The following analysis of the results describes students' perceptions of ethical behaviors when conducting research. The first section includes participants' demographic information. The second section provides a summary of students' perceptions of ethical practices when conducting research. Finally, the third section describes participants' perceptions of the ethical training received during the *Licenciatura* program.

### **4.1 Demographic Information**

Of the 26 students who answered the survey, 17 (65.4%) were females, seven were males (26.9%), one (3.8%) was non-binary, and one (3.8%) preferred not to answer the question. Overall, 18 students (69.2%) reported their ages between 25 and 34. Six students

(23.1%) belonged to the 18 to 24 age range. One student (3.8%) was between 35 and 44, and another (3.8%) preferred not to answer the question. All students are native Spanish speakers and use English as a foreign language. In terms of studies, the participants hold a Bachelor's Degree (n = 13, 15%), a Licenciatura Degree (n = 11, 42.3%), or a Master's Degree (n = 2, 7.7%). Some participants (n = 2, 7.7%) mention that they have written a research project or dissertation involving data collection, while only two (7.7%) claim that they have not conducted this type of research.

## 4.2 Students' Perceptions of Ethical Practices

To explore students' perceptions of ethical behavior, 16 behaviors or attitudes were extracted from a list of 25. Some items from the initial list were discarded based on the students' context and the pilot test. Sixteen scenarios (see Appendix 1) were created and analyzed to contextualize each behavior. After reading each scenario, students used a five-point Likert scale to rate the acceptability of each description. Table 1 provides a summary of the key findings of this section.

**Table 1**  
**Summary of students' perceptions of each scenario: mean and standard deviation, Costa Rica, 2022**

Scenario	Min.	Max.	$\bar{X}$	SD
Scenario 1. Written consent use	1.00	3.00	1.54	.70
Scenario 2. Right to opt-out from research	1.00	5.00	2.23	1.27
Scenario 3. Data confidentiality	1.00	4.00	2.00	.89
Scenario 4. Public accessibility to results	1.00	4.00	2.07	.97
Scenario 5. Parents' or legal guardian's approval	1.00	4.00	1.77	.95
Scenario 6. Clarity of instructions	1.00	4.00	1.96	1.03
Scenario 7. Compliance with standardized guidelines	1.00	5.00	1.73	1.11
Scenario 8. Intentional plagiarism	1.00	3.00	1.34	.69
Scenario 9. Distribution of responsibilities	1.00	5.00	1.61	1.06
Scenario 10. Data management	1.00	4.00	2.57	1.06
Scenario 11. Compliance with instructions	1.00	4.00	2.04	.91
Scenario 12. Intentional self-plagiarism	1.00	5.00	2.61	1.23
Scenario 13. Instrument design	1.00	5.00	2.88	.99
Scenario 14. Conflict of interests	1.00	5.00	2.31	1.22
Scenario 15. Faulty data collection procedures	1.00	4.00	1.81	.89
Scenario 16. Faulty data creation	1.00	3.00	1.23	.58

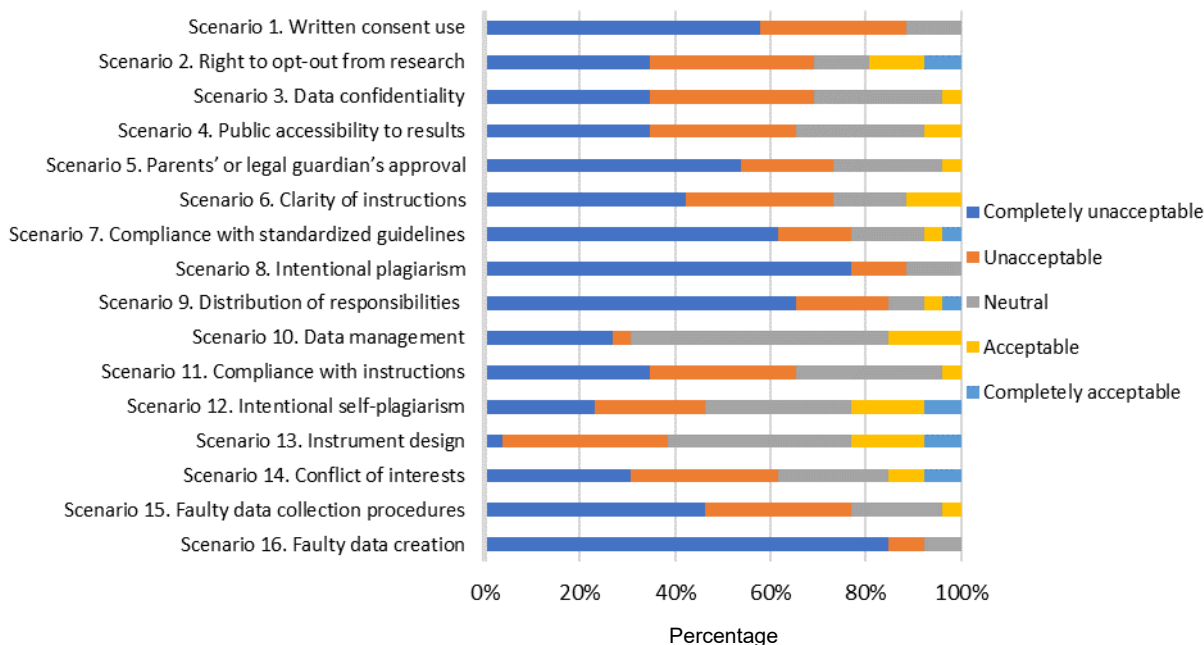
*Note.* N = 26. Min. = Minimum; Max. = Maximum;  $\bar{X}$  = arithmetic mean; SD = Standard Deviation

**Source:** Compiled by the author based on survey responses.

As can be seen, the standard deviation for Scenario 2 (Right to opt-out from research, SD = 1.27), Scenario 12 (Intentional self-plagiarism, SD = 1.23), and Scenario 14 (Conflict of interests, SD = 1.22) revealed a higher statistical variability and, therefore, placed these scenarios as the most divisive. In these three instances, students' responses ranged from a perception of completely unacceptable to completely acceptable. Despite this variability, the respective means of 2.23, 2.61, and 2.31 indicate a tendency toward an overall neutral perception.

On the other hand, the standard deviations for Scenario 1 (Written consent use, SD = .70), Scenario 8 (Intentional plagiarism, SD = .69), and Scenario 16 (Faulty data creation, SD = .58) shows lower variability levels. In addition, students' responses ranged from a perception of being completely unacceptable to a more neutral position. No student considered these scenarios acceptable. The means for Scenario 1 (Written consent use,  $\bar{X} = 1.54$ ), Scenario 8 (Intentional plagiarism,  $\bar{X} = 1.34$ ), and Scenario 16 (Faulty data creation,  $\bar{X} = 1.23$ ) indicated that students do not consider these attitudes correct in the research domain. As Figure 1 demonstrates, most students showed a similar pattern in most scenarios.

**Figure 1**  
**Summary of students' perceptions of each scenario: distribution values, Costa Rica, 2022**



Note. N = 26.

Source: Compiled by the author based on survey responses.

In an effort to provide a more detailed analysis of these results, the scenarios were divided into four quartiles depending on their perceived level of acceptability. Since all scenarios displayed some ethical misconduct, participants were expected to reject each. However, data indicated that not all behaviors were equally refused.

The first group of scenarios comprises Scenario 1 (Written consent use), Scenario 8 (Intentional plagiarism), and Scenario 16 (Faulty data creation). Participants' answers did not display any acceptability towards these types of behaviors. In general terms, faulty data creation was the most unacceptable type of behavior in the entire series, followed closely by intentional plagiarism. Finally, these three behaviors display the highest rate of complete unacceptability, where faulty data creation also ranked first.

A similar pattern was found in Scenario 3 (Data confidentiality), Scenario 4 (Public accessibility to results), Scenario 5 (Parents' or legal guardian's approval), Scenario 11 (Compliance with instructions), and Scenario 15 (Faulty data collection procedures). This quartile includes five elements since, compared to the scenarios described above, all of them display some level of acceptability. However, participants did not believe any of these behaviors were completely acceptable. Although participants did not evaluate these scenarios as acceptable, they presented the highest variability, from completely unacceptable to neutral.

The third group of similar scenarios includes Scenario 6 (Clarity of instructions), Scenario 7 (Compliance with standardized guidelines), Scenario 9 (Distribution of responsibilities), and Scenario 10 (Data management). Similar to the previous group, these scenarios display a high level of variability; however, some acceptability still persists. It is worth noting that Scenario 10 (Data management) obtained the highest number of neutral responses ( $n = 14$ ) and the lowest combined rate of unacceptability ( $n = 8$ ).

The final group includes scenarios with a higher level of acceptability. For example, some participants perceived Scenario 2 (Right to opt-out from research), Scenario 12 (Intentional self-plagiarism), Scenario 13 (Instrument design), and Scenario 14 (Conflict of interest) as ethical or accepted practices in the field of research. Particularly, intentional self-plagiarism and instrument design (pilot-testing) had the highest combined acceptability rate ( $n = 6$ ). Instrument design (pilot-testing) also had the lowest score in terms of unacceptable behavior ( $n = 1$ ).

As can be seen, the majority of participants avoided unethical behaviors or at least recognized them as unprofessional and improper in academic research. However, some participants also acknowledged that some of these behaviors are adequate or tolerable when conducting research.

### 4.3 Students' Perceptions of Ethical Training

In academic settings, not everyone naturally engages in ethical conduct. On the one hand, some people may deliberately break the norms to advance faster and more easily. On the other hand, other researchers, especially novices, may omit ethical practices because they are unclear or because some ethical rules seem too strict. In any of these cases, training becomes essential to avoid ethical misconduct in research. Taking this into account, this third section focused on participants' perceptions of ethical training in the *Licenciatura* program. Table 2 summarizes some of the main findings of this section.

**Table 2**  
**Summary of students' perceptions about ethical training: frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation, Costa Rica, 2022**

Item	No		Unsure		Yes		$\bar{X}$ (SD)
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
The Licenciatura program... Includes a course on ethics.	18	69.23%	6	23.08%	2	7.69%	11 (8.18)
Covers ethical components in any of its courses.	8	30.77%	5	19.23%	13	50%	9.33 (8.08)
Allows professors to refer to ethical issues.	2	7.69%	6	23.08%	18	69.23%	5.67 (0.58)

Note.  $N = 26$ .  $\bar{X}$  = arithmetic mean; SD = Standard Deviation

Source: Compiled by the author based on survey responses.

The data collected indicates that most participants ( $n = 18$ ) believed that the program does not have a course on ethics, while some ( $n = 6$ ) were not sure about its existence. However, all participants were taking or had already taken the last courses of this major. In addition, 50% of the participants ( $n = 13$ ) mentioned that courses included an ethical component; however, the others could not confirm this. Finally, participants asserted that professors referred to ethical issues when teaching. This information suggests that, although ethics is, to a certain extent, present in the major, its presence is neither systematic nor organized. When asked which component of the research process had received more ethical instruction, participants rated the literature review ( $n = 10$ ) as number one, followed by the data collection stage (including instruments) ( $n = 7$ ), the analysis of the results ( $n = 4$ ), all of them ( $n = 4$ ), and the reference section ( $n = 1$ ). The rest of the sections (introduction, methodology, and recommendations and conclusions) obtained no score.

Participants also provided their perspectives on the significance of ethical training and the quality of ethical training received in the *Licenciatura* program. Data revealed that participants consider ethical training an important component of research ( $\bar{x} = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ,



Mod = 5). No participants rated it as unimportant, and only one remained neutral towards this type of training. On the contrary, data showed that participants have a neutral opinion towards the ethical training received in the major ( $\bar{x} = 2.81$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ , Mod = 2). No participant rated ethical training as excellent.

The lack of direct information provided to students in this major was a recurring theme in the responses to the optional, open-ended question.

Example 5. It is necessary to include more information on this topic in the Licenciatura program. Personally, many times I got information only because I asked for it. (Participant 6)

Example 6. I took just one course where the instructor very briefly reviewed some issues on ethics, but most of the time, the ethical normative in Research in applied linguistics is completely absent. (Participant 10)

This analysis provided insight into students' perceptions of ethical behaviors and training. The findings also revealed which aspects required a more detailed emphasis or a more direct approach to better prepare students to conduct research in applied linguistics.

## 5. Limitations

The author would like to point out three main limitations of this study. This study included a small sample size. The Licenciatura program is rather new compared to other programs, and the number of graduated or advanced students, although growing, remains small. A second limitation was the size and scope of the instrument used. For practical reasons, the survey was limited to a number of questions and scenarios in order to guarantee adequate participation. Finally, this study was based on a Licenciatura program with TESOL students. The questions and scenarios were adapted to students' contexts and might not be suitable in other fields, countries, or programs.

## 6. Conclusions

To the best of the author's knowledge, this study was one of the first to investigate students' perceptions of ethical behaviors and training in a *Licenciatura* program in the field of SLA. It unearthed several compelling findings. First, the findings suggest a greater need for ethical training in applied linguistics research. One of the most important findings from this survey was that respondents' believed that not all ethical misbehaviors were equally wrong.

Most data was at peak levels, as found by Minifie et al. (2011) and Sterling et al. (2016). According to Sterling et al. (2016), this may indicate that participants seek to please the researcher. Although this may be true, a more plausible explanation is that participants realize that a scenario represents immoral conduct, even if they are willing to break or bend the rules to their favor by acting in that way.

Although participants, on average, rejected all scenarios, the degree of acceptability of some behaviors varied in several ways. Participants reported stealing or fabricating false information as the most despicable behavior. According to Kouritzin and Nakagawa (2018), students may lack a practical or theoretical background in terms of ethics. However, these two types of misconduct appear to be the most basic and can be reduced to doing no work at all. However, it is surprising that participants equate evading work with using written consent. Despite its importance, not having consent does not prevent a researcher from completing a project. In addition, students are frequently unaware of its significance in BA or even high school research conducted on a small scale. Nonetheless, students may link this conduct to a more general lack of moral values: trickery or lying.

In other scenarios, students still perceive these behaviors as unacceptable but with some freedom of choice. According to Sterling et al. (2016), a difference may exist between those “domains that cover procedural ethics and those that cover professional responsibility domains” (p. 34). For example, faulty data collection procedures are similar to faulty data creation; however, students may perceive the effort of trying to amend a disadvantageous situation as better than modifying results already obtained. Additionally, age may not be an essential factor for students compared to other figures. Besides, some other behaviors may be considered more procedural or seem not to affect the research outcome. Thus, keeping data confidential, asking for a legal guardian’s approval, complying with instructions, or making results accessible to the general public may seem less important to achieving the expected results. Moreover, some of these behaviors may seem relevant to students but may not relate to their specific contexts. For example, they may never have shared their data or asked for a legal guardian’s approval. Still, students deem these behaviors inappropriate.

On a more tolerable level are data management, compliance with standardized guidelines, and distribution of responsibilities. Similar to the cases previously examined, students may see these instances as more procedural, and such acts may not prevent a researcher from obtaining trustworthy results. However, clarity of instructions is an element students may be more familiar with, which may greatly influence the outcome of the research.

Since students deal mostly with non-English native speakers, using an advanced language to provide instructions may skew results and violate participants' right to protection and access to information.

Many did not perceive an ethical violation in informing participants of their right to opt-out from research, pilot testing and design of instruments, and conflict of interests. As previously stated, students may understand that these actions are flawed but do not see themselves in a position where they could do them. Also, as in the case of pilot testing and designing instruments, they may perceive such conduct as more acceptable since they may have trouble finding the time, population, and resources to pilot test their instruments. In addition, the scenario of intentional self-plagiarism is usually at odds with what students see as legal. It is a type of plagiarism, but at the same time, it is their original work. In these circumstances, ethical training becomes more urgent and crucial when students seem to imagine satisfactory justifications for certain behaviors.

In relation to ethical training, as stated by students, the *Licenciatura* does not seem to have a course on ethics or at least one that focuses on them. In addition, in accordance with Kouritzin and Nakagawa (2018) and Hofmann and Holm (2019), students are often unsure about the existence of ethical components in the course programs (n = 23). For professors, as for other disciplines, ethics is not limited to research. Teaching, assessing, and dealing with students and parents, if applicable, all fall under the purview of ethics. However, this program seems to lack a systematic approach to dealing with ethics. As previously stated, some professors do sporadically refer to proper behaviors when doing research. However, unless these efforts become sustained through the creation of specific content and objectives, the results will remain distressing. Students recognize the importance of ethical training, and this factor, together with professors' expertise and willingness, may establish a clearer path to including such an important topic for future researchers and professionals (Tammeleht et al., 2021).

The author recommends that other language programs replicate this or similar studies to reinforce or implement clear and orderly ethical training. Only in this manner will research advance the field of SLA. At the time of writing the present report, the *Licenciatura* program is in the process of renewing its curriculum and becoming a more integral part of the university. However, according to Sterling et al. (2016), "now is the appropriate time to ensure that best practices are implemented and to prepare scholars to face the ethical demands of research in our field" (p. 35.)

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