
**ETHICS AND PRACTICALITIES IN UNDERTAKING AN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH:
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ABSTRACT: *Research contributes new knowledge in the universe of knowledge in many ways but an effective research design is a must. A research design is comprised of several issues, such as, data collection and analysis methods, and techniques. However, research ethics and practical aspects of the context also play a significant role for getting rich data, reliable findings and eventually to generalise the results. This paper narrates the story of the ethical and practical issues encountered during my Ph.D fieldwork. This study demonstrates the ethical issues such as, to maintain confidentiality of the data collected, to make sure of participants' mental, physical, financial, and professional safety and security. This article further explores the practical issues, for examples, access in the field, rapport building, informed consent, transport and communication, weather condition of the research contexts, and participant teachers' training schedule. An analytical approach is undertaken to carry out this research and an assessment has been made that could be of help for other scholars and researchers.*

KEYWORDS: ethics, practicalities, access, rapport building, informed consent, educational research

INTRODUCTION

Research is the finest way to create and disseminate knowledge in the knowledge domain. Keeping the view of purposes multiple ways are adopted such as, qualitative, quantitative, educational ethnographic research, case study, questionnaire survey, and action research for undertaking research. Qualitative research is a kind of research deals with multiple data, such as, interviews, talks, dialogues, speeches, and conversation (Creswell, 1998). These are transcribed (Cook, 1990) and analysed by using various methods, thematic analysis is claimed as useful method for analysing qualitative data (Aronson, 1994; Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Quantitative research is one of the best and proven ways of doing research which mostly deals with quantification of data and their percentage. In this type of research, after statistical analysis findings are presented in percentage (Cohen et al., 2009). Educational research ethnography plays a vital role in understanding the social and cultural aspects in educational contexts (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004: 535). According to Holliday (1996) ethnographical research is an investigating tool to explore various issues of curriculum design and its implementation in academic institutions. In research field, case study method plays a vital role for investigating the in-dept understanding of the issues, for examples, teachers, students, classroom interactions, course design, assessment design, and management policy concerned with educational factors in a particular context (Razmjoo & Riazzi, 2006; Mackey & Gass, 2005). As far as questionnaire survey is concerned, it is mainly quantitative in nature designed for collecting responses from participants, and it can be used to gather plenty of data easily in various contexts (Rossi et al., 1983; Dornyei, 2003). Action research is generally undertaken in educational institutions. However, it can also be carried out for organizational and instructional purposes to take measures quickly to improvise the situation. It is mainly investigative, evaluative and analytical in

nature designed to find out the problems and weaknesses in the contexts concerned (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

In addition, ethical issues, for examples, to maintain data confidentiality, to ensure mental, physical, financial and professional security of the participants attended, and moreover, to be prepared adequately for practical issues, such as, access in the field, informed consent, weather condition, transport and communication, participants' availability in the research contexts. During my Ph.D study, I adopted a purposive sampling method to choose the contexts of the study, schools to conduct research, data sampling, such as teachers for observation and interview, and students for face-to-face individual interview and group interview. Considering the research ethics their names are anonymised. This study adopts an analytical approach to narrate the story of my Ph.D field work taking into consideration issues, such as, ethics, access in the field, informed consent and rapport building, and some significant practical issues, for examples, weather condition, teacher training programme, and school events.

Ethics

Prior to carrying out my Ph.D fieldwork, I gained Open University ethical approval (Reference Number: 807) from the Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee (HPMEC). My study was also consistent with the British Association for Applied Linguistics' recommendations for good practice in applied linguistics. Ethical issues are often complex in educational contexts when undertaking research with human participants (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009). To undertake my research study, I was concerned about ethical considerations such as morality, honesty, culture and relationship at various phases of the work: gaining access, collecting data and writing up. I was careful to protect human participants and to avoid risks and complexities (Flinders, 1992).

Because of my status of 'insider with an outsider's view', I constantly considered 'how much it is necessary to tell people' (Cameron 2001:22). Knowing the circumstances in Bangladesh, I wanted to respect the participants' right to know about my research and how the data will be used. But I was also careful about how much information I could share with participants to avoid 'contamination' by 'informing subjects too especially about the research question to be studied' (Silverman 2001/2006:270). I was particularly cautious when answering head teachers' and other teachers' questions about participant teachers' teaching practice to avoid their risks while observing. Doing a Ph.D for most students in Bangladesh remains merely a dream, particularly, in an English speaking country. Bearing this in mind, I tried not to convey the image of being the expert. During data collection, I always reminded myself and the informants that I am not the one who has expert knowledge; rather I thought of myself as a student learning from them. Silverman argues that 'the role of the social scientist is not to be more knowledgeable than lay people but, instead, to put an analytic method at their disposal' (2001:275). The detail ethical considerations are presented in the following sections I had during the study which include access in the field, informed consent, rapport building, the researcher's role, confidentiality, and data management and preservation.

Access in the field

The story of gaining access for my Ph.D fieldwork in Secondary Schools in Bangladesh is articulated in this section. For access, I first contacted with one of my relatives who were ex-secretary of the Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education. I phoned him from the UK to find out about the official procedures and guidelines regarding fieldwork access. He assured me that there would be no trouble to gain permission to conduct research in schools. He also gave me the mobile number of the present board secretary so that I could contact him. I then contacted the secretary. I talked to him several times over the phone from the UK to determine the official procedures of gaining access. Being informed about the application matters and the addressee, I wrote an application to the board chairman that was sent by DHL

overnight service. One week later, I phoned the board secretary to confirm whether he received the letters or not, but he said that he had not received any letters from my university. Further he suggested me to write two applications, one for him and another for the board chairman. Being so advised, I wrote two applications, one for the board secretary and another for the board chairman which were also sent to the board chairman packed in one envelop by DHL over night service. After sending the letters, I talked to the board secretary just to let him know about the letters and my arrival date in Bangladesh.

He said,

আশা করি, আপনার পাঠানো লেটার আমরা তারাতাড়ি পেয়ে যাব। আমি মনে করি, দুপলায় কাজ করার ক্ষেত্রে কোনো সমস্যা হবে না। আপনি যখন এখানে আসবেন, আমরা এর ব্যবস্থা নেব, চিন্তা করবেন না।

Hopefully we will get your letters soon. I think there will be no problem for your fieldwork in Duplah. We will do everything for your fieldwork access once you arrive here, don't worry.

I was thus assured that once I reached their office I would have the formal approval letter to do my Ph.D field work in all secondary schools (51) in Duplah upa-Zilla, Malah. I went to Malah Education Board office when I arrived in Bangladesh and I met the secretary and introduced myself, and talked about my research and activities. I also wanted to know about the present status of the letter and requested him for official permission to conduct research. He said that he did not receive any request letter. When I was explaining about the letters, suddenly he wanted to know whether I phoned him from Bangladesh or from the UK. It seemed that he was doubtful about my presence in the UK. I was interested to know the reasons for that. He said that every time he saw Bangladeshi numbers on his phone when I called him from the UK. I told him that we used a calling card for international calls and it was very common for calls to be made this way; due to this instead of a UK number you saw the Bangladeshi number when I called. I was trying to make him understand but it seemed that he was not convinced. However, he asked me to talk to the Education Board Chairman about my research. I went to the chairman and explained everything about me, my fieldwork and the letters which I had sent twice from the UK. He also said that he did not receive any letter. He listened to me and asked the head clerk to find the letters. The head clerk said that he had indeed received the letters but he was not sure where these letters were preserved. He then went to his office to find the letters, but came back empty handed.

I had thought something like this might happen, so I had brought with me two printed signed copies, one for the chairman, and another for the secretary. When the head clerk returned with no letter, I then gave one copy to the chairman. He then forwarded this copy to the secretary, and the secretary forwarded this copy to the secondary school inspector, and finally he asked the head clerk to take the necessary steps for further action. I then went to the secretary to find out the required process. The secretary said,

আপনাকে পারমিশন দেয়ার জন্য আমাদেরকে মিটিং করতে হবে। মিটিং এ এই ব্যাপারে ডিসিশন নেব, তাতে আমাদের তিন থেকে চার সপ্তাহ সময় লাগবে।

To give you a formal approval for this fieldwork access, we have to call an inter-departmental meeting and then we will take the decision. So you have to wait three to four weeks for this result.

I tried my best to convince the secretary to allow me to start with my research but unfortunately he was not interested in my concerns. I also went to the Education Board office several times and explained that my research work schedule was planned within a restricted time frame and it would be helpful if they could grant this approval quickly. Finally I understood that I could get their permission, and then I left the office without further comment. In the end I managed to obtain fieldwork permission directly from the head teachers of the schools where I carried out the research. After realized that gaining access from bureaucrats would be so difficult, I used my personal contacts to gain access to schools. Personal networks often create opportunities to select contexts, make access easy into organizations, and also make research activities easy and smooth (Pegg, 2009:73). Fortunately, I discovered some friends who were really cooperative and helpful and helped me gaining access. They contacted teachers by phone to introduce me. I then went to the schools to conduct research activities.

Informed consent

As part of my ethical approach, I gained participant consent before starting this research. For the questionnaire survey once I arrived in the schools, I first introduced myself to the head teachers talked to them about the purpose of my visit and research study. I then showed them the questionnaire and explained the study. Once I gained the head teachers' oral and written consent. I requested them to introduce me to the teachers who are responsible for IX and X grade English class. The head teacher then introduced me to the participant teachers in the teachers' room. I then talked to the teachers at a time convenient to them in a vacant room in the school premises to explain this study and my research aims, and to gain their oral and written consent for this study. Only once they agreed did I then conduct the survey.

For the observation study, my friends accompanied me to gain access in the schools. They first introduced me to the head teachers and I then introduced myself. They received me cordially, and appreciated my research intensions. This time I also explained about my research work and handed them a written consent form to read which explained my research activities, risks and benefits of the research, and their right to withdraw participation in research activities at any time. Once they read it, I then asked them to sign two copies of the consent forms: one for me and another for the participant. All the head teachers I talked to were really cooperative and friendly during my stay in the schools.

I gained consent from the head teachers as gate keepers of the schools; I then gained consent of participant teachers and students that I observed and interviewed. I was very open about my research activities with the participants. Before starting any observation, I talked to the participant teachers to inform them about my research. I also explained my role in the classroom while observing. I told them about the interviews I would conduct with them and their students after the observation. I then gave them the written consent forms to read for better understanding of my research activities, and the risks, benefits and their right to withdraw participation in the research activities. Once they read the details of the research activities mentioned in the consent form, only then did I request the participant teacher to sign two copies of consent forms; one for me and another for the participant. Following this method, I gained signed consent forms from every participant teacher.

I gained access to students to talk and to interview via the head teacher's consent. The head teacher is the chief administrator for the school management and is also held responsible for students' welfare on the school premises. Once I gained the head teachers' and participant teachers' consent I then went to classes along with them to start the observation. The head teacher introduced me to the students. I then introduced myself and explained my research activities, such as observations, interviews, and group

interviews, and talked about the risks and benefits, their right to withdraw participation, and my stay in their school, and requested their oral consent to stay in their class to observe the classroom activities, and for interviews once I finished observations. They welcomed me, and only then did I start observations. Following this technique I gained access for observation of students' in ELT classes.

I explained my research activities and requested their consent at every stage of working with students and teachers. I explained to the participant teachers the interview process and sought permission to use the audio recorder. I also discussed the risks and benefits of the study, the confidentiality of their interview data and the possibility to withdraw their participation. I then requested their oral consent to conduct the interview. Once I gained participant teachers' oral consent for an interview I started to ask about the classroom activities I had observed. I followed the same method to conduct both personal interviews and group interviews with students.

In reporting, I anonymised participants' names to maintain confidentiality. I was always cautious of my data management and preservation. All digital data were preserved securely in password-protected folders. Printed data are stored in lockers. Raw data could be destroyed or preserved after completing my PhD research considering its suitability for further research.

Rapport building

Good relations with participants and knowledge of their culture such as faith, beliefs, festival and social activities and being familiar with them in the context is one of the basic principles of collecting rich data in qualitative research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Given that I was born and brought up, and educated in Bangladesh, I am very much familiar with Bangladeshi cultural factors. I made use of every single opportunity to build a good relationship with the participants. I gave them assurance that I could be trusted to not do them harm. In the western countries research in education and linguistics is relatively common, but conducting research in the Bangladesh secondary level education context was challenging, as most of people have limited knowledge and understanding about how research works. In Bangladeshi culture, people tend to be afraid or suspicious of talking with newcomers, recording talks and also the signing of documents; nevertheless they may be willing to give information orally. 'Silence' has cultural values in Bangladesh. There is an idiom in Bangla, 'কথা কম ভুল কম' which literally means 'less talk, less mistakes'. People believe that if they talk more they will make more mistakes. There is also another proverb, 'ঘরের কথা পরকে বলতে নেই' which literally means 'do not disclose family matters with others'. These type of beliefs and values also reveal Bangladeshi cultural sensitivities. Considering the context, these notions can explain why people, when they have problems, tend to hide them away or tackle them on their own regardless of external conditions. However, people share ideas and exchange views if they find someone trustworthy and reliable. Classroom observation is always a sensitive issue because Bangladeshi teachers are viewed as the 'embodiment of knowledge' and there is a view that they are not supposed to make mistakes while 'lecturing'. So for the participants it could be intimidating to be observed and nobody would willingly to be interested to have their practice criticised. I therefore had to gain their trust that I would not be exposing any bad practice.

Keeping in mind the nature of the ethnographic thrust of this research study, I built a good relationship with the participants to gain a membership status into their school community. I used to talk to the head teachers and other teachers in their free time. I would sit in the teachers' room and had informal talks on issues such as our personal life, professional life, daily life, newspaper reports, daily essential commodities etc. We also had food and tea during the leisure period. Sometimes I also had tea and breakfast with participant teachers in the restaurants near the schools. I also passed time with participant teachers after school, and talked about our personal life, and professional life, and ELT matters. I treated them with traditional Bangladeshi foods like zilapi (জিলাপি), singara (সিংগারা) and puri (পুরি). They

also treated me. I enjoyed the cultural and sports programme rehearsal, and final events in the schools, and received an invitation letter to be present at the students' final cultural and sports programme. The head teacher asked me to play the role of judge for some events with other teachers which I did and very much enjoyed. The head teacher asked me to take some photographs of events for their school. Students also asked me to take photos when they performed. Finally there was a race event for the guests. I was really excited to participate but I could not do it because of my poor health. I also received an invitation to attend the S.S.C examinees' welfare programme, locally called, dua mahfil (দোয়া মাহফিল). This is a traditional event in Bangladesh secondary schools. Generally students organize this event themselves, with the help of teachers, to say good bye to their senior students and to wish them success in the S.S.C examinations. Students bear all the expenses for this event. Generally, invited guests, teachers and students speak at this event. Fortunately I too had an opportunity to speak which also helped to build a good rapport with participants in the schools.

It was S.S.C examination time when I conducted the fieldwork. Sometimes I would meet the participant teachers in the examination centre school after their exam duty. We had light food and tea at a near by restaurant and had an informal conversation about the examination. I found the teachers cordial, cooperative and friendly towards me and my research. My participation in various activities in the school and talk with teachers at different times in the schools and outside the schools helped to establish a close relationship.

I used to go to schools about an hour before classes started. I noticed that many students came early to school for private tuition. They usually passed time in the school corridor and in the school ground before they started. I made use of this opportunity to talk with them about our daily life, school life and family life. I found them curious, friendly and cooperative. Sometimes I played cricket with students in the school ground. I also attended students' assembly classes. In addition, sometimes I treated them with zilabi (জিলাপি), singara (সিংগারা) and purui (পুরি) before starting the interviews. These activities and interactions with students helped to gain their trust and confidence, which ultimately helped create an easy and comfortable setting for the interviews.

Finally, I cannot help but share a wonderful fieldwork experience. One day, I came to know that Grade 10 students at one of the schools were planning a self-funded study tour for the first time. The school authority could not give students financial support due to their limited capacity. The students finalised the plan and programme with the help of their head teacher and assistant head teacher. They invited me to join this programme. I could not but accept their invitation as they cordially accepted my invitation for the research work. I came to learn that some students could not join this programme due to their financial problems. I felt very bad when I got this information and I then talked to the head teacher to offer my contribution on their behalf. The head teacher accepted my offer cordially and thanked me. It was really a wonderful feeling. This little contribution made the students and teachers happy and afterwards they seemed to accept me as a close confidant. But unfortunately, due to rough weather they postponed the programme, and I could not join them, and after completing my research I then left the school before this programme happened. Due to in part to the close personal relationship, I found the head teachers, teachers and students welcoming, interested and supportive of my research.

Practical issues:

In an educational institution to carry out a research, a researcher needs to know about the practical and cultural issues of the contexts. I was aware of the issues of the school academic routine, even though, I had to reschedule my research plan because of some school managed programmes, such as, sports and cultural programme, book distribution ceremony, JSC examination (Junior Secondary Certificate), SSC examination (Secondary School Certificate), and teacher training programme.

I wanted to know about these issues while interviewing teachers and students. It was revealed that many English lessons did not take place. They further explored the causes of fewer classes and their impact on ELT classroom practice. Teachers reported that a number of classes interrupted the lesson plan and course programme which inevitably brought on problems in finishing the whole syllabus in time. Moreover, public examinations seem to have a great effect on teaching and learning activities, particularly in the centre schools. Centre schools are where public examinations are conducted. It was revealed, for example, that classes were cancelled in the centre schools during Junior School Certificate (J.S.C) and Secondary School Certificate (S.S.C) examinations in October-November and February-March in every academic year. Teachers also seemed extremely busy with examination-related work and activities which meant that their classes were not regular. As teachers report:

You see, now we are very busy with J.S.C examination. It is a newly introduced public exam which started in 2010. This is an additional exam in the schools. We keep busy with JSC & SSC exams in October-November and February-March. Classes are suspended for about two months in our school. As you see, we do not have enough classrooms. We cannot continue teaching during this exam time. You see, it is a long gap. Truly speaking, no one is thinking of this gap. But what we think; we have to finish the course and arrange term exams in our schedule. I think this is hampering our teaching acutely and students have been suffering. However, if we have enough classrooms and teaching staff we could have continued regular teaching in the schools. But this is a pity for us and for our students, indeed (Kader).

I think JSC & SSC centre schools have a problem. Classes are suspended for these exams in the schools. Two public examinations make a big gap in classroom teaching. Classers are also interrupted in our schools too. We cannot arrange our classes when we go for exam duty. To be honest, in our school classes are not held on regularly during this time. It is a problem for overall teaching. We are already short of teaching staff; we need more teaching staff (Alom).

Students also expressed their views about the cancelling of classes. They reported that during JSC & SSC examinations, students were in a festive mood and the centre schools turned into a gathering point for parents, friends, guardians and relatives. People regularly gather there to wish examinees luck and support them. As a result, classes were interrupted and not regular in the schools. Students reported:

S.S.C examination is going on now, and our teachers go to the centre school for exam duty. Students also go to the centre. Due to these reasons we do not have our English classes at this time (Student).

We feel good about JSC & SSC exams. We go to visit the centre schools; it's like a festival. Many people go to visit the centre school. We enjoy our time there. We are not worried about classes at this time. Our teachers go for exam duty. They are not regular in the classes. We miss our classes but what we can do? (Group interview)

In addition to exam-related work and activities, classes were interrupted due to book distribution in the schools. The government of Bangladesh provides free books for secondary school students. The Ministry of Education ensures that every student gets new books at the beginning of every academic year. As a result, teachers are busy distributing books in January, which apparently causes interruption of classes.

In addition, on the day of book distribution, it appeared that classes were suspended. This was because the upazilla chairman, a political person, inaugurated the book distribution ceremony in the school. As one teacher reported:

He is the upazilla chairman from the government party. If they want to distribute books among students, we cannot but arrange a programme for that day. I think it is our waste of time (Kader).

Moreover, the teachers and students seemed slow and less attentive in January. They appear relaxed, probably because there are not many classes. In addition, students also reported that classes were not rearranged during teachers' training programme. Students said:

Actually we see that we do not have full classes in January. Many students are not coming to the schools. We do sports, cultural programmes in January. Our teachers are also not regularly in the classes. We have to wait until we get new books. Sometime they reach us late. Our teachers are also busy, now they went to training for three weeks. We do not have regular English classes now. This is a problem for us (Group interview).

Research findings suggested that JSC & SSC examination; book distribution and teachers' training programmes resulted in class suspension and disruption which caused fewer classes in the schools.

In addition, it was winter season while undertaking my research. Suddenly, Bangladeshi weather becomes rough and rustically changes day by day. Due to severe cold wave schools remained closed several days. It was my plan to conduct research activities in time; I lost many days from my plan. As a researcher I had three plans for gaining access in the field, second plan worked for me. In the middle of the observation study, a participant teacher left school for training programme; it was very difficult to reschedule it; however, I managed another teacher to observe.

Contribution of this study

From the above discussion, it is evident that to be well equipped with research method is not enough to come out with success in conducting research, however, it is a must to practise research ethics, and to be well-known with, and to take on form preparation and plan to face practical issues effectively. This study shows that in the centre schools many classes are interrupted for JSC and SSC examinations. Data suggest that it would be more effective for academic curriculum in secondary schools if the government of Bangladesh could have created separate venue and management for conducting the public examinations. This paper further shows that it is also inevitably significant for teachers to be concerned and restricted to their academic routines for a successful completion of the academic syllabus and curriculum. This study, finally, could be of help for future researchers to take measures and plans for conducting research in the context of Bangladesh or in the similar contexts.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates the ethical issues, undertaken in my research, such as, to maintain confidentiality of the data collected, to make sure of participants' mental, physical, financial, and professional safety and security. Additionally, it also presents the practical issues, essentially needed for a researcher to be well equipped with, such as, to get access in the field, rapport building, to gain informed consent, to manage transport and communication, and to be familiar with weather condition of the research context, and finally to be informed before hand about the participants teachers training schedule. Moreover, it also shows that a researcher needs to be aware of some other potential practical issues, such as, public

examination schedule: JSC and SSC examinations, sports and cultural events, and book distribution ceremony in the research context. This research, in addition, explains a noteworthy guideline in terms of research ethics and contextual practical aspects could be of supports for carrying out a research in future. It is claimed that in a research it is essential to maintain validity, reliability and generalizability. In order to achieve these aims in a research work ethical and practical issues of the research context potentially important to maintain. Rapport building with participants could play a significant role in achieving these three research domains. Good relation helps gaining trust, and when participants start believing the researcher as one of their family members, and when they believe that there is no risk and harm for participating in research activities, they can then share everything easily and comfortably, and thus a good rapport building can help gaining rich data. In addition, for gaining valid data and reliable findings, it is also vitally important for a researcher to be well known with ethical, cultural, and practical aspects of the research context.

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