

***Basic Research and Ethical Inquiry for EFL Students: Implementation and Reflection***

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**Abstract**

Ethical inquiry and reasoning are essential types of critical thinking. Developing and understanding research skills are necessary components of a university education. This paper details the rationale, implementation, and instructor reflection of an integrated research skills, ethical inquiry, and essay writing unit in an undergraduate, low to low-intermediate proficiency, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university course in Japan. The rationale will be discussed in terms of why ethical inquiry may be a useful and appropriate vehicle for student research in an EFL context. The implementation will be discussed in terms of unit planning choices that make the project accessible and meaningful for students, as well as how to structure the project in a way that avoids telling students what to think ethically in favor of allowing students to utilize their own pre-existing ethical reasoning capabilities. The instructor reflection will be discussed in terms of perceived outcomes, benefits, and challenges. Overall, the paper describes a flexible student research unit that provides opportunities for meaningful target language use and can be modified for a wide variety of teaching and learning contexts.

Keywords: Ethical inquiry, Ethical reasoning, Student research

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## **Introduction**

In some ways the term ‘critical thinking’ operates as a buzzword in English Language Teaching (ELT) settings. It is not always clear what is meant by the term, how or whether it should be taught or included, or what the objective of critical thinking in ELT should be. Often in ELT, critical thinking as a focus of instruction arises in spoken or written debates on controversial issues or in the context of analyzing the values, assumptions, and biases in advertisements, news, or other media (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2016). However, there is a more straightforward, and potentially helpful, way of considering critical thinking: “Critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it” (The Foundation for Critical Thinking, n.d.). The idea that critical thinking presupposes the purpose of improving thinking informs the project described in this paper.

This project engaged English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students from a Japanese university in ethical inquiry and research. They conducted survey research on self-generated ethical topics, presented and wrote about their research, and developed skills and strategies for expressing their thinking and reasoning in a clear and orderly fashion in English. Fundamental to every stage of this project was the activation of students’ own powers of reasoning and thinking carefully about how to explain their reasoning; in other words, students had to think critically, or think about improvement, regarding their own thinking and reasoning.

## **Rationale**

The students on this project were second-year university students in Japan, and were of low to low-intermediate English proficiency. The course was a genre-based EFL writing course which included a research essay module. The exact nature and requirements of the research essay module were flexible and could be determined by the instructor.

EFL student research projects can suffer from an array of issues. One issue is that the purpose of research may be unclear. In, for example, an engineering course, students might conduct research related to engineering. Language education courses, however, are not so straightforward; they are not necessarily ‘content-driven’. What students should, or even could, research is not always clear. Additionally, even if students have a subject for research in mind, they may lack the necessary background knowledge and/or English proficiency to conduct the research.

Ethical inquiry, as conceptualized in this project, avoids such concerns about students’ ability to do research. In this project ethical inquiry is distinct from the teaching of ethical principles. Rather, it is about reasoning, or asking ethical questions and explaining or justifying choices. Ethical reasoning, then, is not the teaching of sets of principles about what is right and wrong, but about how one thinks and approaches issues of right and wrong (Sternberg, 2010). These are things students are already capable of doing, though perhaps they do not have experience doing so in English. They do not need a formal background in ethics or philosophy or subject-specific academic vocabulary to engage in ethical reasoning. Thus ethical inquiry was selected for this project as something that all students could undertake.

In fact, everyone already engages in ethical reasoning all the time. This project harnessed this reality to structure the research essay module in such a way that it would be interesting and illuminating, with student-generated topics, and allow for language development appropriate for the genre without requiring an overwhelming amount of new language.

## **Implementation**

The format of ethical inquiry for this project was based on The Ethics Game (Leave No Trace, n.d.). This ‘game’ presents participants with three ‘bad’ behaviors, then asks participants to explain which one they think is the worst. None of the behaviours are objectively worse than the others, so participants must engage in ethical reasoning to come to a decision. While there is no right or wrong answer, the ‘game’ illuminates different ways of thinking about ethics and how different people can come to different conclusions. The ‘game’ is flexible and accommodates a wide range (in terms of the degree of severity) of ethical concerns. It also allows participants to reflect on their own reasoning and the reasoning of others, which creates space to improve reasoning (i.e. critical thinking).

Using this format as a foundation, the project was structured with five ‘modules’. First, the ‘game’ would be introduced and students would practice reasoning and explaining their reasoning. Second, students would develop their own “The Ethics Game”-type questions. Third, students would create and conduct surveys based on their questions. Fourth, students would present their survey results. Fifth, students would write an essay in which they compare their results to their own opinion about the ‘game’ questions they designed.

This structuring resulted in a project that lasted for 10 90-minute class periods (two weeks). The first two periods introduced the ‘game’ and focused on language and strategies for expressing opinions and giving reasons. For example, the students were asked which of the following three behaviors they thought was the worst: 1) littering, 2) spraying graffiti, 3) being extremely noisy in public; then, in small groups, the students were asked to explain their choice. In the third period, students worked in groups to develop ‘game’ questions that were posed to the rest of the class. In the fourth period, students developed ‘game’ questions individually and began preparing questionnaires (conducting surveys was homework). The fifth period was spent preparing presentations, and students presented their results in the sixth period. The remaining periods were spent drafting and editing essays.

At every stage, tasks were modeled. Example ‘games’, explanations, questionnaires, a presentation, and an essay were provided to students. In addition, explicit language development activities were undertaken in every class period. In this manner, English development was connected to the students’ ethical inquiry.

## **Reflection**

There were several benefits and positive outcomes from this project. In general, students responded very positively to the project, and many students put in an impressive amount of effort despite some language difficulties. Having students generate their own ‘game’ questions helped to create a sense of personal investment

in the project. That is, conducting surveys based on topics they came up with provided a personal connection to the project. This connection could be rooted in the project being more meaningful to students than if some semi-random subject about which they lack prior knowledge and research interest had been selected. It may also be due to the students having a sense of autonomy about the topic, and that, because they are already capable of ethical inquiry, they can feel a sense of learning to do something in English that is personally valuable. Furthermore, there were several skills involved in this project, both linguistic and academic, and students found that they could actually conduct and report basic research using English.

There were, of course, also some challenges that arose. For instance, there was a significant amount of scaffolding needed in the early stages to help students organize their explanations of their reasoning, and to see how to connect ideas and express details clearly. Another issue was that the linear design of the project meant that if students missed any class, especially in the first half of the project, it was difficult for them to keep up. Furthermore, while clear modeling of reasoning/explaining was very important, there was a constant concern that the modeling might stray into a top-down teaching of principles.

## **Conclusion**

The project described in this paper demonstrates how ethical inquiry can be used to structure a student research project in an ELT context. Utilizing ethical inquiry this way allows students to learn to conduct research in a way that is personally meaningful and does not require background knowledge or specialized academic vocabulary about any particular subject; as such, it is appropriate and useful for EFL students, even those at lower proficiency levels.

Ethical inquiry as the basis of student research conceptualizes critical thinking as having the objective of the improvement of thinking. It helps students to develop clarity and rigor in presenting opinions, explanations, and reasoning; and it connects well with other, more general language development objectives. Furthermore it affords students the opportunity to reflect on their reasoning and the reasoning of others that, which is essential to critical thinking.

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