

## **“I Thought I Should Give You Good Answers”: Evidence of Demand Characteristics Bias in a Research Interview**

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This article documents how ‘demand characteristics bias’—participants’ tendency to harmonize responses with perceived research expectations—unfolded during a research interview. Drawing on a Japan-based study, I present explicit evidence of a participant unmistakably acknowledging that she adjusted her responses to provide what she believed the researcher wanted to hear, hence unveiling the ways research encounters can inadvertently elicit performative compliance rather than authentic responses. The participant’s candid admission—“I thought I should give you good answers”—surfaced during a closing prompt (“Is there anything else you want to share?”), after which she continued to offer further revealing accounts. The analysis and discussion of this particular case brings together insights from demand characteristics bias, the Hawthorne effect, and positioning theory to account for the mechanisms through which research interactions influence participant responses. Implications include the need for more reflexive methodologies and a critical reconsideration of such research.

**Keywords:** demand characteristics, qualitative methodology, research bias, interview method, Japan

For nearly four decades, discourse surrounding Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program has produced consistent messages. Study after study and testimonial after testimonial have celebrated three key aspects of the program: (a) the motivational impact of JET foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) on Japanese students, (b) their role in advancing intercultural exchange within communities, and (c) the program’s contribution to Japan’s diplomatic soft power. This consistency spans different researchers, participants, methodologies, and time periods—thereby amassing what appears to be robust evidence of the program’s effectiveness (see Adachi et al., 1998; CLAIR, 2025; Estampador-Hughson, 2020; Johannes, 2012; McConnell, 2000; Metzgar, 2012, 2017; Roloff-Rothman, 2012; Tajino & Walker, 1998a, 1998b). Nevertheless, this very consistency becomes troubling when weighed against the complex realities of educational implementation. My skepticism toward this uniformly positive

portrait began during my own work as a local Japanese teacher of English in senior high schools, where I witnessed a far messier reality. Some ALTs were indeed inspiring professionals who transformed their students' relationship with English; others arrived woefully unprepared or found themselves entirely marginalized within Japanese school systems. Some students thrived in team-taught lessons by ALTs and JTEs, whereas others dismissed them as confusing or unhelpful for their examination-focused learning goals (see Hiratsuka, 2013, 2015a, 2017). Despite this unevenness, published accounts have largely spotlighted stories of success while pushing aside and ignoring the voices of those whose experiences fell outside official aspirations (e.g., students, JTEs, and Japanese community members) (see Hiratsuka, 2022, 2023a, 2023b).

A recent interview brought this disconnect into sharp focus for me. A former student who had experienced ALT lessons—and who was participating in my study—devoted more than 30 minutes in her interview to offering positive assessments of her experiences. This was exactly the kind of narrative that dominates the existing literature. However, when I asked a closing prompt, “Is there anything you want to say before finishing the interview? Is there anything I should have asked during this interview?” everything changed. It became clear that her earlier responses exemplified the workings of ‘demand characteristics bias’—the tendency of research participants to orient toward what they perceive the study expects and adjust their responses accordingly (Orne, 1962). Her response to the closing prompts, in contrast, did not reflect such bias. She candidly stated in Japanese: “I thought I should give you good answers.” And then, she further admitted tailoring her stories to what she thought I wanted by placing extra weight on her positive experiences. This participant’s explicit acknowledgment of performative compliance can call into question both the validity of collected data and the broader legitimacy of research itself. It can be surmised that if participants sometimes perform what they believe researchers want to hear rather than express authentic accounts, at least some research literature may reflect institutional expectations rather than lived realities (McCambridge et al., 2012).

This article takes a participant’s unexpected revelation as a point of departure to interrogate and document how demand characteristics bias operates in a research interview, and what this means for (re)interpreting participant experiences. Its contribution lies in presenting explicit evidence of the bias unfolding within the research interview itself, thereby advancing an argument for more reflexive approaches that can distinguish genuine accounts from those shaped by performative compliance. Whereas earlier studies on demand characteristics largely speculated about the existence and implications of demand characteristics, this inquiry records what I believe is the first documented case of a participant openly admitting to such bias in an interview—thereby showcasing that participants actively construct folk theories about research expectations and their own role within academic inquiry.

## **Theoretical Framework**

For this article, I leverage demand characteristics bias as the primary theoretical lens, which is supported by the Hawthorne effect and positioning theory, in order to probe the intricate processes that dictate participant responses in research interviews. Demand characteristics bias is concerned with how research participants may, consciously or unconsciously, decode and respond to (a) perceived researcher expectations and (b) perceived research objectives themselves (Orne, 1962). In other words, research participants are constantly assessing researcher intentions and calibrating their accounts accordingly (Orne & Whitehouse, 2000). In experimental studies, for example, Nichols and Maner (2008) found that “participants tended to respond in ways that confirmed [as opposed to disconfirmed] the hypothesis, yet this tendency depended on attitudes toward the experiment or experimenter” (p. 151). A systematic review affirmed that this phenomenon is well known and extensively acknowledged, especially

within the field of psychology (McCambridge et al., 2012). Importantly, the researchers accentuated that despite its widespread concern, “there have been few dedicated studies of the effects of demand characteristics on research participant behaviors outside laboratory settings” (McCambridge et al., 2012, p. 1). One significance of this current inquiry, therefore, lies in the fact that it is an illustrative example of demand characteristics bias in a non-laboratory setting with the participant’s own admission.

Concurrently, I incorporated in this inquiry the Hawthorne effect and positioning theory as complementary constructs that bring to light related but distinct pathways through which research contexts influence participant behaviors. Although all three concepts accept that participants are agentic meaning-makers, they differ in their explanatory focus. Demand characteristics bias attends to the cognitive processes of research participants’ expectation-reading and response-calibration, the Hawthorne effect hinges upon participants’ behavioral modifications due to observational awareness (Adair, 1984), and positioning theory pertains to participants’ strategic identity performance within discourse (Davies & Harré, 1990).

At its core, these three concepts consider participants’ consciousness of being the subject of study—hence all resulting in their adjusted behaviors one way or another. As a result, all three concepts cast doubt on ‘authenticity’ in terms of data collection in research. This particular analytical combination is useful within the current inquiry because it addresses, in an interconnected fashion: (a) the expectation-interpretation processes through which participants infer what a study is about and adjust their words or actions to correspond to perceived research goals (the essence of demand characteristics); (b) the behavioral modifications that occur simply because participants know they are being observed, thus prompting them to act in ways that they believe will be viewed favorably (the hallmark of the Hawthorne effect); and (c) the strategic identity work by which individuals present themselves within the power-laden space of an interview, actively configuring how they are positioned and understood (as explained by positioning theory). By attending to these dynamics in tandem, the most significant contribution of this inquiry rests in documenting the ways a research participant enacted these phenomena in real time during an interview. To my knowledge, such an unfolding in an actual research encounter has not been documented or analyzed in any field, let alone in language education.

### **The Case: Performative Compliance Revealed**

The interview underpinning this inquiry was scheduled for approximately 40 minutes, but it continued well past that mark following the participant’s response to the closing prompt. The interview formed part of a larger study investigating how former students remember their experiences with JET ALTs. The participant, Miku (pseudonym), was a Japanese woman in her late twenties who had taken part in ALT lessons during her schooling. She was recruited through snowball sampling via a mutual friend, and I had no previous acquaintance with her. Prior to the interview, she received a research information sheet in Japanese describing the study’s objective—exploring the legacy of the JET program—along with standard ethical considerations including voluntary participation and right to withdrawal. Ethics approval for the study had been granted by my institution, and consent was obtained from Miku before the interview commenced.

At the interview’s outset, I reiterated that I wanted to hear about any experiences she had with ALTs during her time as a student. From the beginning, Miku shared detailed positive accounts of her ALT experiences. For instance, when I asked about her impressions of ALTs and their classes, she responded:

ALT teachers really had a completely different style compared to Japanese teachers, so whenever an ALT was coming, you could tell that everyone in class was excited. It wasn't just textbook-based learning. We were able to enjoy ourselves while being exposed to English. I remember those lessons as being lively and fun—something we all looked forward to.

She elaborated on how ALTs had sparked her interest in international travel and cultural exchange by describing their influence as formative: “From that kind of experience, I personally grew a desire to go abroad, and it became a trigger for me to take actions like traveling overseas. So, in that sense, I really enjoyed classes taught by ALTs.”

For more than 30 minutes, her narrative arc was coherent and positive: ALTs brought authenticity to English lessons, motivated students through cultural exchange, and provided exposure to elements like pronunciation and slang that Japanese teachers could not deliver. As a researcher, I found myself both pleased and uncomfortable—pleased because she was presenting rich accounts that seemed to confirm positive aspects of the program, uncomfortable because her story felt remarkably polished and was altogether concordant with institutional narratives about JET's success.

However, the interview took a dramatic turn near its conclusion. After discussing the program's background and some previous positive research findings, and after sharing some of the more negative experiences and criticisms that other participants in my study had expressed about ALTs, I suggested that her positive experiences might have resulted from her existing interest in English. I then asked my closing question: “Is there anything you want to say before finishing the interview? Is there anything I should have asked during this interview?” What followed was not additional commentary but a complete turnaround. Miku's response exposed the performative nature of everything that had preceded:

Actually, I don't think ALTs were useful at all. Most of the time they were just sitting in the teacher's room or standing there in the classroom while the Japanese teacher did everything. They didn't understand the curriculum, and their activities were often just games that didn't help us learn. Personally, I really hope more people will start speaking out about the current state of the JET program or ALTs.

I was stunned. After a moment, when I pressed her about her initial positive responses versus her later critical assessment. She made an extraordinary admission about her research participation approach:

OK. I will be honest with you now. When you asked me to join this interview about my thoughts on ALTs, I somehow guessed that you might want to hear more positive stories, so I thought it would be better to give answers that matched that expectation. I thought I should give you good answers. So, I'm sorry, but that's why I mentioned a lot of positive remarks in this interview.

When I asked why she thought I wanted positive stories, she explained her folk theory of research participation:

When I hear the word “research,” I tend to think it's not really about asking critical or negative things. Even when they [researchers] say, “Please tell us honestly,” in the end, they're usually looking for good points, right? This might be just my own interpretation, but that's how I feel. I tend to think that people don't really share critical opinions.

Her remarks illuminated a tacit awareness that research is a social event governed by expectations—one where participants negotiate what it means to be “good” informants. This orientation may have stemmed partly from the fact that this was her first experience

participating in research, but it could also reflect broader cultural tendencies in Japan to maintain harmony and accord with perceived authority figures.

### **Understanding the Shift: Multiple Lenses**

Miku's case elucidates demand characteristics bias with crystalline precision, while simultaneously uncovering the magnification of these dynamics via observational tension and discursive positioning (Adair, 1984; Davies & Harré, 1990; Orne, 1962). Despite (or by virtue of) never having engaged in research previously, she had ossified a folk theory about what scholarly inquiry entailed by assembling favorable narratives to substantiate positive conclusions. This postulation was not rooted in explicit cues from me, the researcher, but primarily materialized from her expansive cultural conception of research as an institutional practice engineered to legitimize phenomena (in this case, programs and policies). It is noteworthy that this occurred irrespective of standard research protocols being followed appropriately; she had received comprehensive ethical information, been assured of voluntary participation, and been explicitly invited to share any experiences. The persistence of demand characteristics bias in the face of these safeguards suggests that such tendencies operate at a deeper level than procedural ethics might be able to address. Much of her testimony was not an unmediated chronicle of episodes but an orchestrated enactment crafted to satisfy what she perceived the research necessitated and what she thought the researcher wanted to hear. In the end, however, she explicitly acknowledged how she had customized her responses: "I somehow guessed that you might want to hear more positive stories, so I thought it would be better to give answers that matched that expectation." This confession illustrates participants as active interpreters and performers rather than passive sources of information, fundamentally questioning the assumed straightforwardness of interview data (see also Block, 2000; Friedman, 2025; Hammersley, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Mann, 2011, 2016; Talmy, 2010; Talmy & Richards, 2011).

What makes this case documentation particularly significant is the ways in which demand characteristics intersect with educational discourse and cultural presumptions. Miku's supposition that scholarly inquiry seeks affirmative outcomes mirrors the wider sociocultural milieu in which educational programs, especially prestigious and long-standing international initiatives like the JET program, are conventionally framed. In Japanese educational environments, moreover, there likely exists a pervasive presumption that participants will express gratitude for educational and developmental opportunities offered to them. This cultural blueprint was likely instigated when she found herself within a research scenario, thereby producing strong demand characteristics that sustained her extended fabricated accounts (see Day, 2012; McCambridge et al., 2012).

The Hawthorne effect functioned as a supplementary mechanism, which amplified these demand characteristics through observational awareness (Adair, 1984). Recognizing that she was being interviewed by a university professor about an internationally acclaimed program, she possibly experienced heightened pressure to present herself as an appropriate representative of Japanese students' educational and cultural experiences. This observational apprehension might have reinforced her impression that the research setting required positive narrative. Positioning theory provides additional insight into the discursive processes by which these dynamics transpired (Davies & Harré, 1990). Her narrative involved positioning herself as the 'successful JET recipient'—the learner whose perspectives were expanded and whose life trajectory was positively impacted. Her later confession can be interpreted as a repositioning: transitioning from compliant research respondent to critical stakeholder, from appreciative program beneficiary to analytical former student, and from someone protecting institutional reputation to someone relaying honest individual assessment. This repositioning became

possible only after she understood that the research context did not require the positive performance she had constructed all along. Her change in response appeared to have come, at least partially, from exposure to alternative perspectives and explicit permission to be critical.

The timing of her disclosure is methodologically crucial. Her authentic perspective surfaced only at the interview's (supposed) conclusion, when asked if there was anything else she wanted to share. This suggests that straightforward interview protocols are perhaps insufficient for accessing genuine participant views, particularly when dealing with topics surrounded by institutional or cultural expectations of positivity. The phenomenon raises pressing questions about what researchers think they are capturing during interviews and what participants think they are contributing (see Block, 2000; Friedman, 2025; Hammersley, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Mann, 2011, 2016; Talmy, 2010; Talmy & Richards, 2011).

## **Implications for Applied Linguistics Research**

By and large, researchers used to treat interviews as transparent windows into participants' experiences, citing accounts as evidence without much-needed attention to how they are produced within specific research contexts. Miku's explicit acknowledgment of performative compliance exposes the naivety of this approach and the potentially systematic ways research may inadvertently construct rather than discover positive narratives about language education, where the field may have been inundated with celebratory discourse—that is, accounts that highlight transformative aspects of education programs and language education (cf. Adachi et al., 1998; CLAIR, 2025; Estampador-Hughson, 2020; Johannes, 2012; McConnell, 2000; Metzgar, 2012, 2017; Roloff-Rothman, 2012; Tajino & Walker, 1998a, 1998b) while perhaps giving comparatively less attention to experiences of struggle or failure (see Hiratsuka, 2025). When participants enter research contexts familiar with these dominant narratives, they may unconsciously align their accounts with perceived appropriate ways of discussing phenomena under study. As Day (2012) contended, “the ways in which the qualitative researcher claims to practice reflexivity matter for our particular research outcomes” (p. 61). If demand characteristics bias operates as powerfully as this case suggests, interview data should be deemed, even more strongly than they are typically treated, as situated performances rather than unmediated reports (see also Rabbidge, 2017; Roulston, 2010).

Alongside previous studies, this case reiterates profound questions about validity in qualitative applied linguistics research, particularly regarding how interview data can be analyzed and interpreted in relation to language education experiences (Block, 2000; Friedman, 2025; Mann, 2011, 2016; Talmy, 2010; Talmy & Richards, 2011). Traditional validity approaches focusing on triangulation, member checking, or prolonged engagement may not be sufficient when the integral data-generating process is compromised by entrenched bias toward positive accounts (see Hiratsuka, 2015b). Miku's transition suggested that validity cannot be secured through conventional means alone because bias is in effect at the intrinsic level of participants' assumptions about appropriate research participation. In fact, her narrative would have passed most traditional validity checks: it was detailed, coherent, emotionally convincing, and consistent across her accounts—until her revelation in response to the closing prompt exposed its performative nature. Only her candid confession unmasked what seemed genuine testimony was actually strategic positioning on her part.

Being cognizant of demand characteristics bias requires practical strategies. Researchers must establish interview relationships that sincerely invite complexity and dissent through tone, follow-up questions, and responses—demonstrating that critical views are more than accepted but truly appreciated (Hammersley, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Pessoa et al. (2019) advocated for ‘reflexive interviewing,’ where “interviewees, with the support of interviewers, have the opportunity to share the meanings of the reality surrounding them” (p. 2). This requires

casting researchers as earnestly curious about participants' perspectives rather than as evaluators of language education effectiveness. Building explicit disruptions into research protocols represents another promising approach. When participants are made aware that others have, as a matter of fact, communicated critical perspectives, this knowledge can open space for repositioning and more authentic expression. Such strategies, however, are effective only when they reflect reality; researchers must not fabricate or exaggerate. It is equally important that researchers make clear they hold balanced views, rather than siding themselves with any single end of the continuum (Rabbidge, 2017; Roulston, 2010). In other words, researchers must work continuously to minimize conditions that give rise to performative responses, with an awareness that complete elimination is neither possible nor necessarily desirable. In addition, the ethical implications extend to core questions about whose voices are heard in academic knowledge production. When participants feel compelled to perform compliance rather than express candid points of view, their authentic narratives are systematically silenced. This is especially problematic when research informs policy decisions affecting the people whose stories have been distorted. In this respect, validity is not simply methodological but an ethical imperative, since invalid research may contribute to educational policies that fail to serve stakeholders' needs productively.

Researchers need concrete strategies to address demand characteristics bias and, simultaneously, be sensitive to cultural and institutional contexts. Explicit bias discussion amounts to a crucial starting point—going beyond mentioning that critical perspectives are welcome to include substantive conversation about how research taken-for-granted beliefs might dictate responses. This might involve acknowledging that participants may feel pressure to provide positive accounts and explicitly discussing alternative ways of understanding their role in the research process. The structural aspects of interviews themselves require reconsideration. Miku's revelation occurred only at the final stage when asked an open-ended question about what else she wanted to share. This suggests that traditional structured interviews may inadvertently constrain authentic expression by giving priority to researcher-determined topics and questions. Building in opportunities for participants to direct the conversation, reflect on their own responses, or comment on the interview process itself—especially from the beginning and throughout—may play a pivotal role in accessing unfiltered perspectives.

Multiple interview rounds afford another promising strategy because it acknowledges that participant comfort may evolve over time (see Pessoa et al., 2019). Follow-up interviews could specifically explore tensions participants may not have felt comfortable discussing initially. Diverse question framing becomes valuable for disrupting implicit convictions about expected responses. Rather than presupposing positive outcomes, researchers can design protocols explicitly acknowledging the possibility of negative or complex responses. Reflexive analysis must become formalized in data interpretation as well. This means that we should explicitly consider how demand characteristics bias might have guided responses and, thereby, develop interpretive frameworks accounting for the co-constructed nature of interview data (see also Block, 2000; Friedman, 2025; Hammersley, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Mann, 2011, 2016; Talmy, 2010; Talmy & Richards, 2011). In this sense, training researchers to recognize signs of performative compliance constitutes another vital area for development. Miku's responses, while positive and detailed, had a quality of being “too polished” and conspicuously synchronized with prevailing narratives. Developing sensitivity to these patterns—responses that seem carefully constructed, overly positive, or incredibly well-matched with anticipated results—could help researchers identify when demand characteristics may be at play. Furthermore, we need theoretical frameworks that combine insights from demand characteristics research with reflexive and performative approaches. For instance, greater

attention should be given to frameworks such as Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical account of self-presentation, which views participants as managing their image like actors on a stage, and recent work on reflexivity in applied linguistics that critically interrogate researchers' own influence on research processes and outcomes (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023).

## Conclusion

When Miku said, "I thought I should give you good answers," she exposed the hidden curriculum of research participation—the complex web of unspoken expectations, (un)conscious performances, and calculated self-presentation that conditions what participants feel able to say in research encounters. Her confession made visible what typically remains invisible: demand characteristics bias operating in real time during the interview itself. To the best of my knowledge, this represents the first documented case in which a participant explicitly acknowledges such bias, allowing us to trace how it unfolded within the research encounter. Miku's confession also showcased that interviews are, by their very nature, social events where multiple elements interact to influence both what is said and what remains unsaid (see Mann, 2011, 2016; Talmy, 2010; Talmy & Richards, 2011).

This case calls our attention to the interplay of demand characteristics bias, which leads participants to dovetail with imagined research expectations, the Hawthorne effect, which creates performative pressure through observational awareness, and positioning theory, which untangles the manner in which participants position themselves within culturally available roles. In conjunction, these phenomena signify research as delicate balancing acts between participant assumptions about researcher desires and their own authentic experiences. Miku's 180-degree reversals in her narrative arc and positioning from positive respondent to critical stakeholder occurred not through different questions but through recognition that alternative viewpoints were sincerely welcome—a shift that happened only when given an open opportunity to share additional thoughts. Miku's case foregrounds overarching ramifications for applied linguistics. The field's overall emphasis on positive effects and teaching and learning success may have unwittingly yielded research contexts where participants feel pressure to reproduce positive narratives—regardless of their actual experiences. If our methodologies tilt findings toward favorable outcomes, we risk contributing to educational policies that fail to properly wrestle with real challenges of language education (see Adachi et al., 1998; CLAIR, 2025; Estampador-Hughson, 2020; Hiratsuka, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Johannes, 2012; McConnell, 2000; Metzgar, 2012, 2017; Roloff-Rothman, 2012; Tajino & Walker, 1998a, 1998b). Miku's experience accentuates the construction of folk theories that individuals develop about research participation, assuming studies seek positive outcomes—assumptions that may be more influential than researchers generally acknowledge, particularly since they operate beneath the surface of formal protocols and ethical guidelines. This risk, I argue, is perhaps even more worrisome when the researcher is also the participant's teacher and the participants are current students, rather than when the researcher is a third party and the participants are former students.

Moving forward, we must develop even more robust reflexive approaches than currently that explicitly account for and work with the performative underpinnings of research participation. This necessitates considerable modifications in how we design studies, conduct interviews, analyze data, and report findings. The challenge is not simply about devising better techniques for detecting bias but about nurturing research environments where honest nuance and subtlety can organically arise. The ethical considerations cannot be overlooked, either. When participant voices are, intentionally or unintentionally, distorted through performative compliance, research becomes complicit in silencing true-to-life experiences—particularly problematic when studies inform policies affecting the very people whose stories have been misrepresented.

Ensuring credible data collection becomes not just a methodological concern but an ethical mandate across research as a whole.

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