The Qualitative Research Interview: Theory and Practice

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The qualitative research interview is a data collection tool which can aid in achieving an emic perspective to a classroom phenomenon. This paper describes the research interview and addresses some of its benefits and limitations. Practical issues such as location, time, recording equipment, and style are presented while the author offers insights into her own research interview experiences. It is suggested that the qualitative research interview should be either open or semi-structured, and it should be viewed as a co-construction of meaning between the interviewer and interviewee. Finally, this *active interview* relationship should be addressed when writing research for publication purposes.

質的インタビューとは、教室で生じている現象を内側から理解することを可能にするデータ収集方法である。本稿では、質的インタビュー研究について記述した上で、その強みと弱みを論じる。インタビューの場所、時間、記録装置、形式といった実際的な事柄について述べると同時に、筆者自身のインタビュー経験について省察する。質的インタビューは非構造的であるか、半構造的であることが望ましい。それは、インタビューをする者とインタビューをされる者による協働的な意味構築の作業だと考えられる。質的インタビュー研究を公刊する場合には、この「動的インタビュー」関係について記述することが望ましい。

This paper is written with beginner researchers in mind; it is for the researchers who are about to embark on their own journey into the unchartered land of classroom research with a focus on one particular data collection method: the qualitative research interview. A key aspect of qualitative research is that it often employs an emic, or insider view, of the phenomenon being studied (Duff, 2008);

the qualitative interview is a method of data collection that is particularly suited to doing this. Based upon my own struggles as a novice researcher exploring teachers' use of personal narratives, or stories, in English language classrooms in Japanese universities, this paper considers the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative interviews while providing theoretical background and practical tips for conducting them. I hope that researchers can gain insights into the art of interviewing for research in language learning and teaching.

The Qualitative Interview

Before discussing the reasons for conducting qualitative research interviews, I will briefly introduce three main benefits of qualitative research. First, qualitative research "is concerned with capturing the qualities and attributes of the phenomena...rather than with measuring or counting" (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p. 7); quantitative studies can only measure so much information (Richards, 2003). Second, qualitative research is people-focused, which is fitting for the field of language teaching and learning (Richards, 2003). Lastly, qualitative research can transform researchers and help them understand a particular environment in-depth (Richards, 2003), which is what Denzin and Lincoln (2011) term "the intimate relationship" (p. 8) between the researcher and the phenomenon. The emic approach offers a close understanding of the data (or of the participants' perspectives), and reporting their ideas helps bring their voice to the readers.

According to Kvale (2006), qualitative interviews have been regularly practiced in the social sciences since the 1980s. Interviews have been described in several ways: (1) as not simply a conversation (Rapley, 2006), (2) as a "professional conversation" (Kvale, 1996, p. 5), and (3) as a conversation "with a guiding purpose or plan" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 76). Therefore, it is important to look at the defining characteristics of an interview.

Types of Research Interviews

Research interviews can be categorized into three main types: structured, unstructured or open, and semi-structured (Dörnyei, 2007; Richards, 2009). Structured interviews are quite rigid, and researchers follow a set of pre-determined questions. This type of interview is often referred to as a *survey*

interview and is treated as a spoken questionnaire (Richards, 2009). It is used in instances where a written questionnaire is not feasible, for example, worries of a low return rate of written questionnaires (Richards, 2009) or the low literacy rates of participants (Dörnyei, 2007). Structured interviews are most closely associated with quantitative research.

Unstructured or open interviews are the most flexible of interview types. There is often no list of pre-determined questions and establishing a good rapport with the interviewee is important. The ultimate goal is "to explore in as much depth as possible the respondent's experiences, views, or feelings...the interview is largely determined by the speaker" (Richards, 2009, p. 185).

Semi-structured interviews allow for pre-determined questions to be addressed as well as any follow-up questions which may arise. An interview guide, that is, a set of questions, is prepared. With the questions as a guide, open conversation is encouraged so that certain points brought up by participants can be further discussed. By asking the participants the same types of questions, answers can be compared across respondents. However, questioning is flexible in that other questions and venues may be explored.

Qualitative interviewing is most strongly associated with open and semi-structured interviews because these types allow for more narrative to occur; in other words, new and different paths in the professional conversation may develop.

Roles of Interviewer and Interviewee

There are two opposing views of interviewers: the miner who digs for information, and the traveler who searches for information and through the journey has conversations with many people (Kvale, 1996). Holstein and Gubrium (2004) succinctly portray the miner metaphor when they declare, "[r]espondents are not so much repositories of knowledge—treasuries of information awaiting excavation—as they are constructors of knowledge in association with interviewers" (p. 141). The notion of the interviewer and interviewee as co-constructors of knowledge is aptly portrayed in the concept of *active interviewing* which explores the active and collaborative construction of meaning in interviews

(Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, 1997, 2004). In this view, which is consistent with the social constructivist approach to research, respondents are not viewed simply as "passive *vessels of answers*" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004, p. 144, emphasis in the original), as traditionally portrayed in interviews, but as "active constructor[s] of meaning" (ten Have, 2004, p. 77).

In an active interview, it is argued that the interviewee be regarded as a narrator or storyteller (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The interviewer can activate the interviewee's narrative production by suggesting "narrative positions, resources, orientations, and precedents" while "direct[ing] and harness[ing] the respondent's constructive storytelling to the research task at hand" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 39). The active interview concept is further explored below in the section *interview-as-local-accomplishment*.

Interviews can be viewed in two ways, through the notions of *interview-as-technique* and *interview-as-local-accomplishment* (Silverman, 1993, 2001), and these are explored in the next sections.

Interview-as-Technique

The concept of *interview-as-technique* considers the practicalities of the interview such as local and global timing. In other words, the researcher should address the following: when to conduct the interview, length of the interview, location of the interview, planning of the overall schedule and required equipment, and privacy of the respondents. Richards (2009) recommends asking these questions: "Who?", "What?", "Where?", "How long?", and "Under what conditions?" in order to better understand the issues which may arise. Interview practicalities such as location, length and timing, and equipment are further explored below.

Location

King and Horrocks (2010) argue that comfort, privacy, and quiet are key factors to consider when selecting the physical environment of an interview. A location convenient to the participants seems sensible since they are volunteers. The likelihood of interruptions by someone entering the room, by the telephone ringing, or incoming emails should be minimal.

The places in which I have conducted interviews are quite various, such

as a participant's home, an empty classroom, a teacher's office, or a parked car. The latter may seem like an unconventional place to conduct an interview, but because the restaurant which we had considered was too noisy at the time, the car turned out to be an ideal location due to its quietness. No matter the place for the interview, the participant's comfort and convenience should be priorities.

Length and Timing

One challenge to interviewing is that it is time-consuming for both the interviewer and interviewee (Dörnyei, 2007). Both people have to take time out of their schedules for the interview. An interview which lasts over two hours may be asking too much of the participants. However, an interview which lasts only 10 minutes may be too short and not comprehensive enough to gather the data needed. An ideal interview length would be one hour to one and a half hours.

In addition, the time of day of the interview can play a role in how the interview unfolds. If your participants have been in classes most of the day and you are interviewing them shortly after classes have finished, there is a chance they will be tired and not as responsive as you would like them to be. When organizing interview times with participants, I provided several options such as days and times of day. Finding a time of day in which both you and the participants are alert as well as striking a balance in terms of the length of the interview are all factors to consider when setting up a qualitative interview.

Equipment

An unobtrusive, high quality IC recorder works well in hopes that the participants will not take much notice to it, and the recording quality will be suitable for transcription purposes. In my case, I used a palm-sized, digital IC recorder which saves data as MP3 audio files and can be plugged in directly to a computer.

Furthermore, it is important to test the audio equipment beforehand to ensure how it works. By testing it out in various situations, audio recording problems came to light before my actual data collection process. Some examples of audio issues which arose were the IC recorder turning itself off and the participant's voice being too low. I treated audio recording issues as "valuable learning opportunities" (Richards, 2003, p. 178) and addressed them by making changes

to the recording process. For the former, I confirmed that the IC recorder was not touching anything to prevent the recorder from turning itself off, and for the latter issue, I placed the IC recorder on a slightly elevated platform between the participant and myself to better catch our voices.

I chose not to use a clip-microphone for the interviews, as I thought it would make the interviews seem more formal or structured. One reason for such an unobtrusive approach is to reduce the likelihood of participants feeling self-conscious, and thus more relaxed and open to providing self-disclosure statements.

Interview-as-Local-Accomplishment

Interviews should no longer be regarded as objective accounts of the interviewee's reality; they are constructed events with people playing contributive parts. Qualitative interviewers should recognize the importance of *interview-as-local-accomplishment* (Silverman, 1993, 2001), which views the interview as an interactional event of jointly constructed meaning between the interviewer and the interviewee, and as a speech event of its own (Mischler, 1986). It is this concept of *co-construction* that Mann (2011) discusses when he argues that what the interviewer brings to the interview process also needs to be analyzed in conjunction with what the interviewee is contributing, and that collectively this co-construction should be looked at in its entirety. He goes on to further demonstrate how previous research which claimed to practice co-construction failed to display it in the research analysis and findings (e.g., Hayes, 2005; Varghese & Johnston, 2007).

Supporting Silverman's *interview-as-local-accomplishment* concept, "interviews are *inherently interactional events*, that both speakers mutually monitor each other's talk (and gestures), that the talk is *locally and collaboratively* produced" (Rapley, 2006, p. 16, emphasis in the original). Words such as *interaction* and *collaboration* suggest two or more people, and this notion refers back to one of the previously mentioned benefits of qualitative research: it is people-oriented. The researcher and participants can both gain from this collaboration; the researcher can gain new interactional skills and deeper knowledge of the phenomenon being studied, while participants may learn more

about themselves and their relationship with the studied phenomenon as well as their connection to the wider world. With both the researcher and participants co-constructing meaning, a more in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon or environment can be achieved.

Thus, the notion of *interview-as-local-accomplishment* demonstrates how everyone in the research context may benefit. The essence of this idea is that a deeper understanding of the researched phenomenon or environment is constructed, and the interview as a speech event is accomplished. The interviewer's style as well as the idea of give and take are considered next.

Style

In a qualitative interview, the interviewer and the interviewee dually hold major roles and should be included in the analysis. Similar to Mercer (2007), I adopted an interview style with my teacher and student participants which was slightly less "gregarious than [my] natural disposition" (p. 11), or so it seemed at the beginning of the interviews. This style of interviewing was due to my media exposure to off-camera reporters who ask a set of pre-determined questions, who rarely interrupt the interviewees, and whom the television audience seldom sees; what can be termed the traditional interview model. I recognize now that I carried a premeditated intention of acting like a television reporter, but soon changed this mindset when I felt it was unnatural for me to act this way.

I acknowledge that in my interviews, I attempted not to interrupt by saying "Uh-huh" or intervene as much as I usually would in a regular conversation since I did not want to disrupt or influence the train of thought of the interviewee. However, as the interviews progressed, I found I inevitably became more involved in the interview and abandoned any pretense of being a neutral interviewer (Dörnyei, 2007; Rapley, 2001, 2006). I made a conscious decision to alter what I thought was the correct interview style, that of the television reporter mining for information, to that which was more reflective of a language teacher-researcher exploring the field with a participant. The benefit of this invested approach to the interviewer, interviewee, and interview is that it felt like we were working together, that is co-constructing meaning, to discover more about teacher use of

personal narrative in the language classroom.

Give and take

Prompted by what the interviewees said in all my interviews, I found myself sharing insights, ideas, and stories with them (Rapley, 2001, 2006). In some of the student interviews, like Hawkins (1990), I felt I had to share personal information to receive information from the interviewees; in some instances, it became an interview of *give and take* (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Some researchers argue that a researcher should not tell personal stories during an interview (Mercer, 2007; Seidman, 2006). However, I chose not to follow this suggestion; I used personal stories to help participants feel more at ease and to encourage them to share more of their own experiences of teachers' use of personal narratives in the classroom. Furthermore, I consciously acted as a *helping voice*, which is "a voice that makes itself available to help an interviewee articulate her- or himself more clearly" (Lillrank, 2012, p. 283) and is especially used with participants who may have a weak or elusive voice. In my case, I handled evasive answers with gentle prompting or exemplifying from my own experiences.

Below is an interview excerpt with Kanako (K), a student participant. In this excerpt, we are discussing which teacher personal narrative, or story, she most recalls.

1 S Is there a personal story that she [K's teacher] said that you really remember the most?

2 K Ah, I don't remember. ((laughing))

3 S There's nothing that stands out?

4 K Um... ((giggling))

5 S OK, don't worry if there's not a story that stands out. Then, maybe all the stories are kind of similar meaning to you. OK, um, why do you think [your teacher] told stories during class?

6 K Um, because like if we like share the personal story, it's seems more like similar to us.

7 S Oh.

8   K   I mean like American current situation kind of I feel like it's kind of far because I live in Japan. But like if someone I know tell me about this this make feels more closer or…

9   S   Yeah, yeah. OK and, um, what did you learn from her personal stories? Do you remember learning anything in particular?

10   K   Yeah, like for example, she told me that… uh… the university students have a charity event and like, for example, the horror house or that kind of stuff and then they donate all the money to the like poor child, children or…

11   S   Do they not do that in Japan?

12   K   Um, maybe, but I don't know.

13   S   Oh, OK. Do you belong to a like a club on campus or circle?

Lines 2, 4, and 12 show evidence of a weak voice or an evasive answer. Although I attempted to no avail a gentle push in line 3, I chose not to coerce an answer from Kanako. Instead, I returned to my original question (line 1) in line 9 through a rewording of my original question. One of my interview techniques for activating student participants' narrative production was to ask questions about Japan or about participants themselves, as seen in lines 11 and 13. In other words by acting as a *helping voice*, I hoped to give them opportunities to provide information which they felt confident in answering.

Conclusion

To review, this paper highlights reasons for conducting qualitative interviews and presents key aspects to aid researchers in getting started. The qualitative interview portrays the researcher-interviewer as a traveler who searches for information and through the journey has conversations with many people (Kvale, 1996). What distinguishes the qualitative interview from other interview types is the collaborative efforts between the interviewer and interviewee. Practical issues such as location, length and timing, recording equipment, and style, should be fully addressed before commencing data collection. Throughout my interviews, I strived to maintain the notion of the *active interview* (Holstein &

Gubrium, 1995, 1997, 2004) and to truly consider the interview as a *professional conversation* (Kvale, 1996). The interview is not only a data-gathering tool, but also an interactional event.

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Suzanne is a recipient of the Member Research Grant and consequently applied her grant to a contributing article.