An Interviewer's Reflection of Data Collection in Building an Archive of Language Learner Experiences

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Abstract

Interviewing is one of the most common data collection tools in qualitative research. It is widely discussed in research methods classes and literature and considered as an invaluable tool for gathering facts and feelings. In this paper, I reflect systematically on the first 270 interviews conducted for a large-scale investigation into the English language learning history of Hong Kong university students. I discuss how existing literature served as a guide to interviewing but once in the field, I reflect on how I adapted and improvised to improve my interviewing skills. I also analyze and discuss the strategies I employed to encourage undergraduates in Hong Kong universities to reveal aspects of their English language learning experiences and the methods that I used to limit personal influence. I benefitted from recording my progress and reflecting on the interview process internally and with peers and supervisors. I hope my autoethnographic-like style will give fellow researchers the freedom to reflectively explore themselves and their interviewing techniques.

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Interviewing is one of the most common data collection tools in qualitative research. It is widely discussed in research methods classes and literature and considered as an invaluable tool for gathering facts and feelings. In this paper, I reflect systematically on the first 270 interviews conducted for a large-scale investigation into the English language learning history of Hong Kong university students. I discuss how existing literature served as a guide to interviewing but once in the field, I reflect on how I adapted and improvised to improve my interviewing skills. I also analyze and discuss the strategies I employed to encourage undergraduates in Hong Kong universities to reveal aspects of their English language learning experiences and the methods that I used to limit personal influence. I benefitted from recording my progress and reflecting on the interview process internally and with peers and supervisors. I hope my autoethnographic-like style will give fellow researchers the freedom to reflectively explore themselves and their interviewing techniques. Keywords: Interviewing, Autoethnographic, Reflection

Introduction

Over a period of 2 years, I was the lead field researcher in a project that required a team of interviewers to collate 3,000 oral language learning histories (LLH) from undergraduate university students in Hong Kong. I conducted 706 interviews over 8 months on four university campuses. My paper is a systematic reflection of the first 270 interviews for the Hong Kong Archive of Language Learning (HALL; Lee, Gao et al., 2016). My reflections were developed with the aim of sharing my thoughts and feelings with peers to enable a greater understanding and appreciation of the process of interviewing. It is my hope the reflections will inspire fellow researchers as they discuss and conduct field interviewing in academic settings.

Throughout this paper I will discuss my reflections alongside interview excerpts and existing literature that provide a broad understanding of interviewing and similar personal accounts. I am an Australian English-speaking monolingual male who has lived in Hong Kong since 1990 and was aged 50 when I started the HALL interviews. Prior experience as the chief transcriber of a corpus of Asian Englishes and a researcher on a project investigating the attitudes of Hong Kong secondary school students led to my role in HALL. As a middle-aged White male, I fitted the profile of a stereotypical native English teacher, a feature of the Hong Kong education system (Trent, 2012). Such roles have been experienced by foreign researchers in other settings (Hubbell, 2003) even though I had lived in Hong Kong for around 25 years at the time of the interviews. I reported directly to the principal investigator (PI) who charged me to train a team of mostly Cantonese-speaking fresh university graduates who used English as a second language.

The data collection approach for HALL was pre-planned and its overall design is not scrutinized in this paper however the choice of interviewing needs to be explained. HALL's research design valued interviews as one of the leading qualitative tools for gathering data on

how people experience different situations (Hatch, 2002; Qu & Dumay, 2011), particularly LLHs for research into English as a second language (ESL; Barkhuizen et al., 2014). HALL interviews have been analyzed to explore student reading habits (see Lee & Patkin, 2016). The popularity of interviews in social science research has led to criticism about their rigor and overall suitability (Delamont & Atkinson, 2014; Talmy, 2010) but this may be stymied by providing a more in-depth understanding of the interview process in this paper and further discussions.

Since the goal of the HALL project was to complete at least 3,000 oral LLHs, I wanted to be the first to experience the demands of the field and be cognizant of how this may affect my colleagues. As Seidman (2006) foregrounded in his manuscript on interviewing, I felt it was also valid to provide some background to my reasons for being involved and why. Understanding the methods and approaches for the recruitment of participants (Cohen et al., 2011), the suitability of the interview questions (Hatch, 2002) and reliability of recording equipment (Taylor et al., 2016) needed to be explored along with the more complex issue of maintaining neutrality (Talmy, 2010).

Role of Reflection

The hundreds of different situations I experienced in the initial stages of data collection left a strong impression and mirror the experiences of Wiesner (2020) and Palaganas et al. (2017). Their papers reflect on their personal experiences during the research process. Wiesner's (2020) autoethnographic narrative provides an insight into an individual's self-study. Wiesner's conformity can be considered as standard practice while "heretic" non-conformity or shift are examples of reflexivity. Reflexivity therefore can be an agent of change that conflicts with tradition. Palaganas et al. (2017) used notes, discussions, and published literature that built their participants' experiences into their own reflections. These autoethnographic-like styles resonate with my experience in previous projects and support the decision to make notes about the different interview situations as I transcribed them (see Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Taylor et al., 2016). De Fina's (2009) discussion of how her interview questions and the personality of the respondent affected the length and depth of responses were central to my early reflections when I was transcribing the first 270 interviews.

Interviewers often keep diaries about their work for future reference and reflect on successes and failures (Riessman, 2002; Taylor et al., 2016). My reflective and self-critical notes were diarized during the first draft of transcription usually within a day or two of the original interviews and thus ensured the experiences were fresh in my mind. Based on the recommendations of Connelly and Clandinin (1990), the transcription process was used as a tool for recalling situations. As I transcribed the interviews, I remembered how I had approached an interviewee and how I had warmed to them. Tilley (2003) reported this method following interviews with her transcriber colleague, "Ken," who kept "personal notes while transcribing" (p. 753). Data can be isolated from notes during the process of transcribing interviews (Hatch, 2002; Love, 1995; Matheson, 2007; Qu & Dumay, 2011) which may seem mundane to some but the administrative functions such as typing up the information from the demographic data sheet brought back more memories of the experience. These experiences were included in weekly progress reports which were emailed to the PI and were discussed at fortnightly research team meetings. In the spirit of Roulston's (2010) reflections on postgraduates learning to interview, HALL research group meetings allowed both shy and outgoing colleagues to reflect on their fieldwork. In building my confidence and leveraging my age and status as a native speaker, the literature helped guide my interactions with interviewees.

Interviewing Approach

Interviews are one of the key data collection tools in the production of personal experiences (De Fina, 2009). The length, frequency, and style of interviewing can vary. I used a combination of standardized (Hatch, 2002) and semi-structured approaches. The first part was standardized to meet the rigid requirements of the project's original research design of asking every interviewee the same two questions, "What is your most memorable English language learning experience?" and "What is your most memorable English language reading experience?" These two questions echoed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) purposes of eliciting past experiences in the present and led to a semi-structured approach by adding follow-up questions to clarify some of the points made by the participants. The combination of standardized and on-topic open questions follow the concept of semi-structured interviews which Barkhuizen et al. (2014) employed in language learning research to provide a rich source of data and speakers' stories.

A specific format and tools (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012) can ensure focus while building a working relationship with the interviewee (Tong et al., 2007). The HALL format followed a sequence: observe space of target population, approach target participant, interviewee gives oral permission, ethics release form is signed, demographic data sheet is filled, recorded interview is conducted, recording ends, researcher thanks participant, researcher adds written notes to data sheet, and researcher moves to next target and repeats. Each step required a unique tool including my employee ID that was revealed to initialize the contact, the ethics form, the data sheet, and a recording device. The ethics release form allowed me to proceed with the interview, publish it on the HALL website, and use the content for research purposes such as the anonymized excerpts which will be discussed later in this paper.

What Shaped My Approach to Interviewing?

Before becoming an academic researcher, I had worked as an English language broadcast journalist and presenter in Hong Kong for around 20 years. I had interviewed a wide variety of people including high-profile community leaders, famous athletes, and random strangers in different settings such as crowded news conferences, public spaces, and intimate studios. Interviews for sound bites and research differ in terms of content and the power relationship between the interlocutors. The image of an inquiring journalist or talk show host contrasts Seidman's (2006) discussion of ego contaminating data collection. HALL required me to focus on the interviewee's responses rather than the entertainment value which had been typical behaviour for my previous media career.

The confirmability consideration. Qualitative researchers proposed confirmability as a concept to describe the extent to which results can be corroborated by others (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Morse et al., 2002). Biddix (2018) described confirmability as a data analysis concern, verifiable when researchers include clear details about data analysis procedures such as how data sources became codes and codes became themes. This approach, sometimes called an audit trail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) provides sufficient detail that another researcher could follow the same steps and arrive at similar results. Thomas (2006) recommended independent parallel coding as an alternative strategy that can be conducted during data analysis. The procedure involves two researchers independently coding a data source and comparing the two for congruence, consistency, and clarity. Put simply, confirmability is the extent to which the results can be achieved by others, ideally (although rarely possible) through replication (see also Elliott et al., 1999).

Comparing My Interviewing Technique to Others

The quality of qualitative interviewing techniques and methods are influenced by research design, how they are conducted and data analysis (Roulston, 2010). The main criteria for HALL interviews where they were audible and included responses to the two questions without making any personal comments or judgements. It was hoped that each interview would be at least 2 minutes long. Meeting these criteria acted as a form of quality control which involved adopting elements from a broad spectrum of interviewing methods that considered meeting the overall research target of 3,000 interviews in one year.

Once an interviewee is recruited it is better to start with general questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Icebreakers (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012) such as the filling of the demographic data sheet helped me learn about the interviewee's background and encouraged them to focus on the topic of language learning. Changing the focus of an interview from an interrogation to a personal conversation (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012) alleviated tension on both sides and allowed the encounter to progress to the stage of audio recording. This echoes Turner (2010) who sought consistency during "relaxed" interactions. Such practices are necessary to quickly establish trust for one-on-one interviews (Seidman, 2006) and contradicted with Taylor et al.'s (2016) approach that suggested multiple visits and hours of interviews. Interviewees feel more comfortable if they are being asked questions by someone who seems to be knowledgeable in the field and can relate to the responses and help move the discussion along (Cohen et al., 2011). My prior experience in interviewing Hong Kong secondary school students about their English language learning experiences (Benson & Patkin, 2014) enabled me to use vocabulary related to the curriculum. I focused on transforming interviews from a formal research practice to a social one (Talmy, 2010) through a friendly and personal approach while maintaining a professional distance (Hubbell, 2003). Some have described formal interviews as a product or instrument as opposed to a social practice. The "product" emphasis is more rigid and controlled while the "social practice" is true to its namesake of being social and considering a holistic approach and relationship (Talmy, 2010). My approach created situations that built a social relationship with the interviewee (Cohen et al., 2011) even though we were strangers (Seidman, 2006).

Interviewing may come naturally to some through their talent to carry out a conversation (Hatch, 2002) or curiosity of others (Qu & Dumay, 2011), while some may struggle due to a lack of experience, age, gender, religion, and confidence. Some of the obstacles can be overcome by studying situations listed in guidelines that consider location, timing, body language, personality, and so on (Cohen et al., 2011; Kervin et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). As maintaining focus and avoiding sensitive issues are key to data collection for some (Taylor et al., 2016), I used information from the demographic sheet such as educational background and languages that are spoken to generate follow-up questions or clarify responses.

How I Conducted Interviews

The interviews were audio-recorded in an open-access air-conditioned indoor free seating space of a teacher-training university. Few students sat outside as the all-weather environment protected them from the heat and torrential rain. All the interviewees took part voluntarily and signed a consent form. They did not receive any compensation. Convenience sampling was mostly used, but in some cases, this led to snowballing as students sitting together and nearby joined in. The snowball effect worked in reverse as one rejection sometimes followed another. Avoiding further rejections involved skipping a few tables or pausing until the population changed. Underscored by the aim of keeping interviewees at ease (Hatch, 2002), students were approached as individuals or in groups as I moved from one end of the common

area to the other. Wearing a university branded lanyard that displayed my staff card, I introduced myself to prospective interviewees, "Hi, I'm John from CityU and I am doing research about the use of English among Hong Kong students. Would you have a few minutes to answer a couple of questions?" Interviewees were encouraged to ask questions about the interview and project while I made efforts to ensure the research did not interfere with assignments or exam preparation. If they asked what the interview was about, I let them read the two questions which I had been printed in large text on an A4 sheet.

The interviews were conducted on weekdays, weekends, and public holidays but during daylight hours as it matched the schedule of undergraduate classes. The same institution was populated with postgraduate students attending night classes. Taylor et al. (2016) suggest researchers can adapt to interviewees' schedules by identifying the time when targets populate suitable locations.

Heuristics Gave Me Confidence

Heuristics describe the successive stages of a decision process (Gigerenzer & Todd, 2000). The intersection of available literature on interviewing and LLH research, past experiences and present ones led to an unconscious set of rules or guidelines that developed in the field. The ordering of the stages of the interview process including the choice of a location, the most suitable time to target participants and the ordering of the demographic data sheet questions were developed heuristically. These heuristic approaches can become embedded in further research exercises and when organized into a coherent history of activities can be shaped into formal guidelines. The experiences I had in the early stages were used to shape how I and my colleagues conducted interviews on other campuses. For example, we reviewed campus maps to find all-weather locations where students would gather to snack and chat.

Soft skills such as observing someone's breathing, body language, and facial expressions and controlling our speech (Qu & Dumay, 2011) help us to make heuristic judgements about how we can comfortably probe interviewees. Probing is used to clarify some aspects which may need further explanation (Taylor et al., 2016) such as following up with a "why" or "how" open question for shorter responses. Interviewees can take time to recall their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), so I learned to relax and remain silent until they finished answering. "Dead air" conflicted with my prior experiences of doing live radio interviews as silence would trigger alarms and is considered a technical failure.

My First Language was Foreign to the Interviewees

Interviewees probably give a better response and feel less intimidated when they use their first language (L1; McKay, 2006) which is Cantonese in Hong Kong; however, one of the aims of the HALL was to produce an online audio library of English language LLH that would impress younger learners. I felt that interviews with varying levels of language proficiency would make younger learners feel more comfortable. Some research indicates that using a second language may stymie the interviewee's ability to express herself clearly because questions asked in an L2 may not translate or culturally fit the L1 (Cohen et al., 2011). Such situations may evolve into a relationship giving the researcher more power but can be alleviated by supportive body language and speech (Kervin et al., 2016), so I smiled, nodded, and maintained eye contact while speaking slowly, clearly, and softly. As Hong Kong students have an elevated view of native English teachers, particularly Western males (Trent, 2012), I downplayed my language and "perceived" cultural power to minimize the effect on interview responses (Qu & Dumay, 2011). This was done before the interview by making positive

comments on information shared while filling the demographic data sheet. For example, most students were trilingual, and I explained that this was unique.

What Was I Curious About?

The discussion so far has shed light on how I was guided by the available literature and previous experiences in conducting LLH-focused interviews. As I transcribed the interviews and reflected on the literature and interviews, some situations followed norms and others needed further explanation which I have grouped into three sections:

- *How I encouraged interviewee responses*
- *How I managed my self-perception*
- *How reflective practice informed my interviewing approach*

In the following three sections, I will provide excerpts from HALL interviews as I unpack my experiences and reflections. The full-length audio interviews can be found by using the code such as "4CJ009" (excerpt 1) in the search box at www.narratives.hk.

How Did I Encourage Interviewee Responses?

Interviewers need to build a good relationship with their participants (Seidman, 2006; Talmy, 2010). I did this while filling the demographic data sheet and during the interview; however, some students found it difficult to answer the reading question. This excerpt from a 45-second recording in the 9th interview exposes my lack of preparedness to follow up on short responses to the reading question which I could have been improved by simply asking "why?"

> *Student: My most memorable English learning experience maybe is at DSE period, yes. Because I remember that I read a lot of newspaper from online Internet and plus a lot of exercise to practice my skills. Yes.*
>
> *Researcher: How about reading apart from that? Any books or other reading?*
>
> *Student: I read newspaper. BBC from Internet, yes. {speaks in Cantonese (2): 有冇睇書呀? Do I read any books?} I did not read books @@.*
>
> *Researcher: No novels?*
>
> *Student: Yeah.*
> (Excerpt 1, 4CJ009, Female, General Studies teaching major)

If I had paused and asked why, the interviewee may have given a longer answer. In reviewing the first 10 interviews, the PI and I felt that the length and content of some of the responses such as excerpt 1 needed to invoke a deeper memory. An interview tool (see Jacob & Furgerson, 2012) in the form of a reading prompt was developed and introduced after the 50th interview. It was hoped it would help elicit past experiences (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) which was one of the main aims of the interviews. The colorful A4-sized laminated poster featured titles based on publications that students had discussed as well as ones that had been used in the Hong Kong school curriculum. It also included magazines and electronic content that had been seen on campus. Excerpt 2 evidences how the reading prompt was successfully employed when students had trouble remembering what they had read.

Researcher: And how about reading? Do you have any memorable reading experiences in English?

Student: Yes. About some English reading. {struggles with answer}

Researcher: {Reveals reading prompt} You know what. Maybe I can show you a poster here and you can look at that and see if it reminds you of your reading experience.

Student: Oh. The Hunger Games and Harry Potter @ @. We can watch the film. After watch the film I sometimes want to read the books too. I tried to read it and it is the most memorable English reading experience because when I read the books, I remember picture from the film. Then I can read it more easily and can easily understand.

(Excerpt 2, 4CJ058, F, Philosophy major)

Eliciting responses about reading was one of the hardest aspects of the data collection, so it was surprising when an interviewee considered it as the most memorable learning experience – the answer to the first question. In excerpt 3, I had to develop a strong follow-up question. This situation supports the need to be well-prepared by being knowledgeable about the topic (Cohen et al., 2011).

Student: Should be the Speech Festival, in my Secondary 6, yes. Why it is very memorable is because this is the first experience that I have a chance to read all the materials in English as the scripts. And I can read word by words and someone will teach me how to pronounce it well… (edited)

Researcher: I want to talk a little bit more about reading and literature, okay, because that's our second question. And what's your most memorable English language reading experience?

Student: Memorable? Memorable? But actually, I remember what the learning process is, but I don't remember about what is it about already.

Researcher: Yeah, so is there a favourite book that you've read or perhaps something else you've used to read that, apart from the Speech Festival, of course, that is quite memorable?

Student: I think it's still inside, about the Speech Festival. It's still about Speech Festival.

(Excerpt 3, 5CJ226, M, Liberal Studies teaching major)

Excerpt 3 demonstrates how I made a heuristic decision (Gigerenzer & Todd, 2000) about whether to end the interview or continue with a different approach due to the redundant answer. If the interview had run less than 2 minutes, an attempt was made to elicit responses that may answer the two questions indirectly or provide depth where answers were short.

Some questions need to be adapted in order to elicit a richer response (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Excerpt 4 reveals how I elicited a longer response by rephrasing a closed question to an open one.

Researcher: And I know you play the violin, you're a music major.

Student: Yes.

Researcher: So, how important is the use of English in learning the violin.

Student: I think this is very important for me in studying music because most of the scores or the reference or some books are in English. Normally I need to read the books in English or lecture notes are all English. So, it's quite important for me in my music studies.
<div align="right">(Excerpt 4, 4CJ075, F, Music teaching major)</div>

Using "how" and information from the demographic data sheet allowed me to ask a valid question which earned a rich response.

As only 18% of senior secondary students in Hong Kong are able to secure a place in a publicly funded university degree programme (Yeung, 2017), exams for subjects such as English create great pressure. When students mentioned these terminal exams, I was mindful of the literature that suggested interviewers approach sensitive topics in a casual manner (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012) while probing to extract more information (Taylor et al., 2016). The following excerpts (5, 6, & 7) demonstrate how I developed my interviewing skills heuristically to elicit a natural response. In excerpt 5, I attempt to find out the student's exam grade without explicitly asking.

Researcher: How about the result in the A-level exams? Were you happy with that?

Student: Yeah, I'm happy with it.
<div align="right">(Excerpt 5, 5CJ033, M, English Language teaching major)</div>

It is possible that 5CJ033 did not state his grade because he was embarrassed with the result. In excerpt 6, 5CJ047 was asked a similarly worded question and provided the grade.

Student: My most memorable English language learning experience is in my secondary school. My teachers told me a lot about English and told me how to improve my English. Just like she need me to just remember some sentence patterns and to mainly have a good result in my DSE.

Researcher: So, did you get a good result in the DSE?

Student: No, @@. I get Level 3. Okay.
<div align="right">(Excerpt 6, 5CJ047, F, Sustainable Development teaching major)</div>

Marked as @, laughter is used by Chinese second language speakers to mask embarrassment (Walkinshaw & Kirkpatrick, 2014). Through my years of transcribing Chinese speakers of English, I could tell the difference between a humorous and embarrassing laugh. In excerpt 7, I could feel that reminding a student about her senior secondary school examination grade made her feel uncomfortable.

Researcher: Okay, let's just go back to school again, and you said that it was hard, and the classes weren't interesting, I'm just curious about the final result that you got in DSE.

Student: A-level.

Researcher: A-level, A-level. The final result you got in A-level. Were you happy with that or not?

Student: No, sad ending @@ because I fail @@.
                    (Excerpt 7, 5CJ048, F, Sustainable Development teaching major)

A research interview is a formal event but also relies upon quickly building trust between the researcher and interviewee. I used tools such as open questions and visual aids and heuristic skills to help build rapport and richer responses.

How I Managed My Self-perception

I felt I was viewed as the stereotypical White native English speaker type (Trent, 2012), and wanted to downplay the power position so that interviewees answered freely. The use of ESL presented another challenge as low proficiency speakers may provide inaccurate answers and/or misunderstand questions (McKay, 2006). During interviews, I needed to quickly identify areas requiring clarification but was careful not to make it sound as if I were an interrogator. For example, in excerpt 8, one student felt studying course material did not count as reading and could be interpreted as a cultural attitude towards the use of her L2 (Cohen et al., 2011).

Researcher: And how about these days? Do you do much reading in English?

Student: Actually, these days, usually I'm focus on my project and some assignment, so there are not many time for me to read some English books, less than before.

Researcher: How about some of your course material? Is that in English or Chinese?

Student: Those are in English actually, because actually, for example, when we do some project or assignment, we need to use a lot of citation, we need to read some journals or newspaper, and those things are usually in English.

Researcher: I have an interesting question for you because I asked a lot of students about what they're reading in English at university and they say they're not reading anything, but then I say what about the course work, and they say, "Oh yeah, they're all in English," so why would you think that perhaps people don't think of their course work as reading? Is it because it's not fun?

Student: Maybe it's not fun and it's a little bit boring. They may think this is just a work and, or some works, they don't think that is the interesting thing because they think it's just a work they need to do. And because some is the professor or

push them to do the work, not they willing to do the things by their own, so they
may think it's not considered as reading English books or something like that.
(Excerpt 8, CJ245, F, General Studies teaching major)

In the above example, a follow up question elicited a deeper response but in excerpt 9, further probing led to a coy response. 5CJ039's evasive answers in response to the reading question propelled me into an interrogation mode with successive *what* questions. The power position of interviewers can be interpreted negatively (McKay, 2006) but when used deftly can produce a positive response.

Student: Reading? Not much. Just reading some regular English books. Don't
have any…

Researcher: What's a regular English book?

Student: Harry Potter. Something like that.

Researcher: What made you want to read Harry Potter?

Student: I think that it is attractive, the storyline. And the character are quite, I
like the character. Specific characteristic. Something like that.

Researcher: So, if there are more books in English with these kinds of
characters, you'd be interested in reading?

Student: I think so.
(Excerpt 9, 5CJ039, M, Chinese Language teaching major)

Excerpt 9 confirms that leadership helps keep an interview on topic (Kervin et al., 2016). In excerpt 10, the student's most memorable English language learning experience occurred the morning of his interview. Although I did not want to discourage the interviewee or lead responses, the following excerpt displays how I countered 5CJ033's use of the availability heuristic.

Student: Oh, maybe this morning. I took a course this morning and the tutor
showed a video to us and asked us to copy as much words as possible because
words are moving very quickly. The thing she wanted to present is we have to
read very fast to get the meaning. Sometimes we read slowly but we cannot get
the meaning so we read fast and we may have a better understanding of the
passage.

Researcher: That's a very recent learning experience. Let's go back a little bit
to say senior secondary school when you were studying for A-levels. Anything
happen or were there some activities that made learning English interesting?

Student: I guess no, because we were so busy doing the past papers. We spend
most of the time on exercise on the past paper, so we didn't learn much during
the 2 years. We did a lot of practice I would say but not a lot of learning.
(Excerpt 10, 5CJ033, M, English Language teaching major)

Excerpts 8-10 show how I was self-conscious of my role and perceived image. Being a middle-aged native English-speaking White male may not have influenced responses but may have raised my awareness and empathy and suggests that interviewers should use their power position to provide leadership when they feel it is needed.

How Reflective Practice Informed My Interviewing Approach

My reflective notes address interviewing and data collection from a personal view (Tilley, 2003) that aim to inform others so that they can carry out their research more efficiently and with minimal effect on participants. The reflection was serendipitous because the PI had requested weekly progress reports which included the sharing of problems and suggestions for junior team members such as student helpers and fresh graduates in fortnightly team meetings.

My ethnicity and linguistic background required me to pay close attention to the interview dynamics (De Fina, 2009). Even before approaching students, I was acutely aware they were preparing for an interview. I observed how they would look at me and whisper to each other while I was interviewing other students. In excerpt 11, some implied they had been waiting for their turn to interview to practice their English language skills.

> *Student: And also, I think this time is also a good English learning because I know I'm not good at speaking English, so I think talking with the foreigners is a good way to practice my English too.*
>
> *Researcher: So, this interview becomes a memorable learning experience?*
>
> *Student: Yes.*
>
> *Researcher: Okay, thanks.*
> (Excerpt 11, 5CJ031, M, General Studies teaching major)

Interviews should be transcribed within a day to allow a clearer reflection (Riessman, 2002). In the above excerpt, it helped me recall how I interviewed students who had been sitting together at the same table. Due to the quick turnaround in transcribing interviews, I was able to reflect on early mistakes as revealed in the 40th interview, excerpt 12, in which I hopelessly failed at humor. This judgment echoes Roulston's (2010) view that researchers reflect on their perceptions of quality in interactions with interviewees. In this case, I tried to joke around with the interviewee by using the traditional Australian English greeting of "G'day". The interviewee did not understand and the interview only lasted 70 seconds because I had not expected the response and my focus shifted from the interview to thoughts of having failed myself.

> *Student: In my secondary school, I joined a study tour. I go to Australia for 2 weeks, yeah.*
>
> *Researcher: G'day!*
>
> *Student: @@*
>
> *Researcher: Did you learn that?*
>
> *Student: No @@.*

(Excerpt 11, 4CJ040, F, Greater China Studies teaching major)

Even though the student laughed, it was nervousness (Kirkpatrick, 2007) and not in response to my use of a traditional greeting used in Australia and reminded me that researchers need to find a space where they fit into the process but not let their ego dominate (Seidman, 2006).

As researchers become more experienced and familiar with responses (De Fina, 2009), they can better anticipate how an interviewee will react. In excerpt 12, 5CJ094 forgot the name of the series of books she liked and instead of butting in with a prompt, which would have been almost natural, prior experience gave me the patience to let her finish her train of thought before making a suggestion.

> *Researcher: What about reading experiences? Do you have any memorable reading experiences in English?*
>
> *Student: Yes. I love to read the books that called, what's it? Forget the name.*
> *Researcher: Maybe I can show you a poster, some of these? They might be there in our poster?*
>
> *Student: Maybe I can talk about the Harry Potter, but I only read Harry Potter in films, in the movies. But I like to read story Harry Potter because it is so magical and it's not in reality life, so it was quite interesting for me.*
>
> *Researcher: The book series you can't remember the name of, what kinds of stories are those?*
>
> *Student: Some detective story. I love to read some detective story because it is not happen in our reality life, so I think it is interesting for me. And I want to know more about how to figure out the case for the detective, the man who figure out the case.*
>
> *Researcher: Like Sherlock Holmes?*
>
> *Student: Oh yes. I forget how to pronounce the name. He use different methods to figure out the case and I love to figure out with him when I was reading the case.*
>
> (Excerpt 12, 5CJ094, F, Liberal Studies teaching major)

The example of a researcher and participant working together in excerpt 12 allowed me to enjoy what would otherwise be described as a serious job. Excerpt 13 had a negative effect on me because it made me feel as if the student had not wanted to conduct the interview. I was scared that others nearby may overhear the comment and have negative thoughts.

> *Researcher: So, anything else you want to mention about your English language experience?*
>
> *Student: I hate English @@@.*
>
> (Excerpt 13, 4CJ084, F, Visual Arts teaching major)

The response in excerpt 13 should be celebrated for its authenticity however it still made me consider moving to a new area where I could get a fresh start and also reflect on my approach.

How I Visualized My Progress

This is a qualitative study but as a systematic person, I like to organize processes and information in tables and lists. Rather than labeling this record keeping as quantitative, I see its semiotic value in the same way fellow researchers use handwritten journals and diaries. Semiotically, Table 1 below illustrates progressively taller buildings that more or less level off. The addition of text reveals the average length of interviews increased over the first 150 from 2 minutes and 19 seconds to 4 minutes and 11 seconds. The introduction of the reading prompt after the first 50 interviews increased the average length of interviews by almost one minute. The average length of interviews increased for the next 50 interviews and stabilized for the remaining (n=170).

Table 1: Progressive length of interviews (mm:ss)
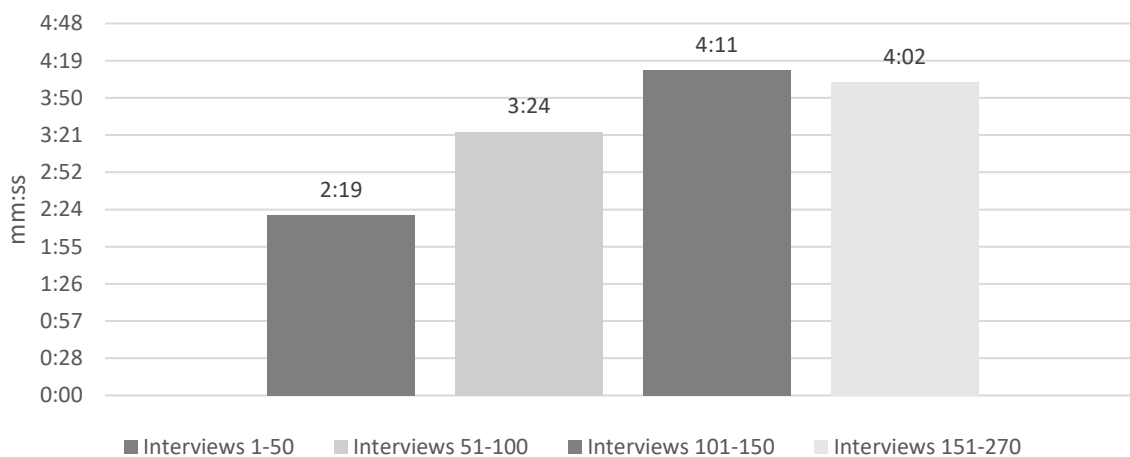
The visualization of the increase in the length of the interviews supports my position that the introduction of the reading prompt after the first 50 interviews as well as experience through reflection helped me become more confident and proficient. Overall, this benefited the research aims by producing richer data that included more background about language learning experiences.

Conclusion

The sheer number of interview situations and obvious improvement over time with reflection and heuristic growth show that the richness of data can improve with a detailed progress record. The reflection and brainstorming after the collection of the first 10 interviews which led to the development and introduction of the reading prompt and subsequent increase in the length of interviews (Table 1) changed my focus from a research target to a personal experience (see Seidman, 2006; Talmy, 2010). The excerpts confirm that richer responses were collected as I improved and adapted my interviewing techniques through heuristics (Gigerenzer & Todd, 2000) and knowledge (Cohen et al., 2011). I found the right location to recruit participants, warmed them up by chatting while filling in the demographic data sheet and had a back-up plan such as a reading prompt to help elicit responses (see Cohen et al., 2011; Kervin et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). Overall, I was able to relax and enjoy the interviews. These

experiences and reflections were used to train and coach other members of the research team who began their data collection after me. Some colleagues were naturally curious and liked interviewing (see Hatch, 2002; Qu & Dumay, 2011), while others lacked confidence. My willingness to expose my weaknesses and failures along with successes were crucial to build their confidence and encourage them to create a relaxing atmosphere for interviews (see Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Turner, 2010). Therefore, the planning of research projects with similar aims should include time to pilot and adjust interviewing techniques and train team members.

My experiences are unique and familiar (see De Fina, 2009). I am a middle-aged white male who reluctantly assumed the role of a native English teacher (Trent, 2012). As an English-speaking monolingual, I have been immersed in a predominantly Chinese society that uses English as a second language for most of my adult life and feel I have blended in despite obvious physical differences (see Hubbell, 2003). I felt my influence was minimal because I used a set of familiar research tools that allowed me to seek the trust of interviewee's as I asked personal questions. These tools are the familiar approaches and methods that are used in interviews and qualitative data collection (see De Fina, 2009; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012) and were combined with a heuristic appreciation of ESL which developed through daily interactions and organized research over 2 ½ decades. Reviewing the interviews for this paper and discussing them confirms that qualitative research offers a broader scope to collect and discuss data and is connected by a familiar language which values the research experience (see Palaganas et al., 2017; Roulston, 2010; Talmy, 2010; Tilley, 2003; Wiesner, 2020). As suggested by Talmy (2010), researchers of all levels should be encouraged to share their reflections on their fieldwork so as to inform others. Such sharing should provide a unique insight but broadly familiar methods and allow interviewers to explore their self while exploring others (see Wiesner, 2020).

Researchers in similar circumstances may report different experiences to those I have discussed, however, the value in the reflection reported in this paper should be considered as holistic (see Tilley, 2003). I felt the pressure of the tight format of two questions and answers in 2 minutes but also a form of relief knowing that I did not need to come up with a unique set of questions for each interviewee. That is why the concept of intimately knowing the respondents through multiple interviews was not needed (see Taylor, 2016). The daily targets and weekly tallying of the interviews may seem like a production line, but I did get to know my respondents. As I kept working in the same location for a few months, I remained in contact with some of the interviewees who introduced me to their peers. No formal follow-up interviews were conducted but I feel that my ongoing presence and recognition of previous interviewees were a good indication of my sincerity.

Novice and experienced field researchers can both benefit from established checklists and guides (see Hatch, 2002; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Riessman, 2002; Seidman, 2006; Taylor et al., 2016; Tong et al., 2007) but should also adapt and modify them after piloting and reflection. The free-thinking individual represents an asset and a liability for data collection. Well-informed and focused researchers can quickly adapt to the myriad of spaces and interactions yet can be easily divagated by misunderstanding interviewee responses. In large scale interview studies involving multiple field researchers using open questions, greater consistency can be attained by reviewing the length of the interviews and reading the transcripts. Reflecting on the interviews while transcribing or with peers and supervisors increased my confidence and ability to collect data (see Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Taylor et al., 2016; Tilley, 2003). Interviewing can be a cathartic, joyful, and rich experience that should be valued by all interlocutors. Interviewees may relish the opportunity to tell their stories while interviewers become trusted confidantes that are allowed to capture and analyze them. I am grateful to the thousands of interviewees who have shared their stories with me and broadened my life experience.

Building a paper on reflections challenged me epistemologically because I have never been encouraged to share my experiences and often dismissed the autoethnographic spirit as navel gazing. Like Wiesner (2020), I too was liberated and was able to come out from the bondage of templated empirical mixed methods approaches which had appealed to my systematic personality. I was assessed as a "quirky person that sits somewhere on the (autism) spectrum" in my later 40s. I like to plan ahead and organize systematically. I do this to avoid surprises that take me out of my comfort zone. My prior experiences, observations, and reading about interviews have helped me develop an empathy towards participants which is closely linked to a childhood interest in lizards. Adults and peers advised me that, "If you lift a stone, make sure you put it back as you found it," a belief that I carried into the early years of my research career. Having read extensively about field research and experienced it firsthand, I feel that we should be more careful about lifting stones because we may disrupt someone intentionally. I may take a systematic approach, but I am able to make conscious decisions about who I approach and what I will ask them.

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