Research by means of the Multiple Interview Method

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This article discusses the underlying themes behind the JALT2005 presentation where the Multiple Interview Method was discussed and advocated as a potentially effective means of eliciting and verifying interview participants' opinions, life stories, and experiences. While the idea of conducting several interviews with participants is not new, qualitative researchers in TESOL and fields related to language learning can benefit from this method and its approach to interviewing because it (a) allows for the best possible fit between the data sought and how that data should be elicited across several interviews and (b) works well when there are multiple interview participants because information can be gained and verified longitudinally with one interviewee or across all interviewees. In order to explain this method and its associated advantages and disadvantages, the author uses his doctoral research as a model and discusses the process behind deciding upon and using such a series of interviews for the purpose of collecting qualitative research data.

　本論文では、２００５年度ＪＡＬＴ大会でのプレゼンテーションで発表した基礎テーマを考察する。プレゼンテーションでは、"Multiple　Interview Method" が、インタビュー参加者の意見・背景・経験を引き出し、確証するのに効果的な手段であると議論、提唱した。インタビュー参加者に対して一連のインタビューを実施すること自体は新しい考えではないが、"Multiple Interview Method" とそのアプローチは、TESOLや言語学習関連分野の質的研究者に利益をもたらす。理由は（１）複数に渡るインタビューから引き出されるデータが、捜し求めているデータにこの上なく近くなること（２）参加者が複数に渡る場合、一名に対しても複数に対しても長期的に研究でき、情報が得られ確証されるため、効果がより発揮されることだ。筆者はこの方法とその長所・短所を説明するため、例として自己の博士論文を使用する。そして、質的研究のデータを収集する際、インタビューを実施すべきなのか、"Multiple Interview Method"を使うべきなのかを決定するまでの過程を論ずる。

For millennia, people have tended to rely heavily upon numbers to help them gain an understanding of the world around them. Ancient thinkers like Pythagoras saw wonder and cosmic harmony in numbers, and via the application of mathematics they even sought to obtain a type of religious refuge in them (Jones, 1970). While the mathematical formulae used to uncover and manipulate numbers have continued to prove practical and useful in many areas of scientific inquiry and exploration, numerical figures cannot always be considered acceptable answers, especially for the various kinds of questions asked

by modern educational researchers and those in various other social science fields.

Recently, such researchers have been increasingly aware of—and dependent upon—alternative methods of data collection that do not necessarily utilize averages or statistical significance, such as case study and ethnographic fieldwork research. In such research, the actions, thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and experiences of each study's participants are examined and analyzed, with the results often unquantifiable. The questions asked in these research settings therefore require alternative research approaches outside of quantitative methods of inquiry. One such approach that represents a mainstay of qualitative research methodology is the conducting of interviews.

Interviews with research participants have proven to be a popular and useful qualitative research method as they allow researchers to delve into and uncover people's thoughts and beliefs. However, in many cases and for a variety of reasons, they have traditionally been of the same general one-shot type: the time and place for the interview are decided, the researcher asks questions of the participant, the interview concludes, and the interviewer and interviewee part, never to cross paths again. Researchers may benefit from knowing that there are other ways of going about the interview process that may not only improve the interview experience for researcher and interviewee alike but may also improve the quality and quantity of the resulting data.

One such way is to conduct multiple interviews with each participant. While the conducting of multiple interviews is not a new idea, qualitative researchers in TESOL and fields related to language learning should become familiar with what I term the Multiple Interview Method. Because this method requires researchers to carefully consider the various aspects of their research situation, it allows for the best possible fit between the data sought and how that data should be elicited from interviewees across several interviews. Though not without its drawbacks, employing this method presents advantages likely unobtainable from single interviews and is flexible enough to lend itself to a plethora of research settings.

In order to introduce the concept of conducting multiple interviews based on a careful scrutinizing of the many facets of one's research situation and the data one wishes to obtain, I shall illustrate by example from my own doctoral research the process behind and the potential benefits to be had from using the Multiple Interview Method. It is hoped that providing a successful example, including the reasoning behind my choosing and using this method, will give other language researchers an idea of the advantages and disadvantages associated with multiple interviews and help them make an informed decision about their choice of research methodology.

The doctoral research

Before an explanation of the process behind conducting the Multiple Interview Method can be presented, some background information concerning the doctoral research must first be provided since, as detailed below, each research situation must be carefully analyzed and understood before the Multiple Interview Method can be employed. The research for my dissertation (Rubrecht, 2004) was carried out at a university preparatory high school in central Japan.

It meant to explore the language learning motivation and obligation orientations of high school students studying English and involved two classes of Japanese high school seniors and two of their Japanese English teachers.

The focus of the dissertation was to examine the motivation and obligation orientations of these students because I thought the highly competitive nature of Japan's university entrance examinations would have a direct bearing on the goals of senior-year students (hence potentially altering their motivation orientations) as well as on their obligation orientations. I suspected that their need to study for and pass these examinations would result in students abandoning the collectivistic morals valued by Japanese society and instilled in youth from elementary school as they adopted more individualistic leanings in their attempts to gain coveted slots at Japanese universities. The reasons why I considered this research important were many (see Rubrecht, 2004), with the research question itself being "How does the influence of perceived group needs versus perceived individual needs of Japanese EFL high school students affect their foreign language learning motivation?"

As discussed in the dissertation, a mixed-methods approach (i.e., using both quantitative and qualitative methods) was deemed most appropriate under the circumstances for several reasons. First, language learning motivation in EFL locales has been under-explored. As I meant to expand the motivation framework, I incorporated a personal motivation orientation along with the more commonly known and used integrative and instrumental motivation orientations. A questionnaire was therefore used in the first stage of the research so I could ascertain the students' overall motivation as well as obligation orientations. Second, a questionnaire was thought helpful because it would be indispensable in selecting interview participants who showed a range of motivational and obligation orientations.

Third, and most importantly, as evinced from the research question itself, the study explored student perceptions (i.e., their *perceived* group versus individual needs). Along with perceptions come constructed meanings. In the case of my research, it was meanings made by students in the context of their being seniors in a Japanese high school. Such "meaning in context" is precisely the basis of qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 1998). It became very important to know what meaning these students had constructed from their perceptions of what English and their fellow classmates meant to them as individuals. In order to uncover these perceptions, I deemed direct information elicitation essential, so after the questionnaire I used interviews so the students could express their perceptions in ways I could comprehend. Based on the questionnaire results, six students were selected to participate in interviews, to which they agreed.

The Multiple Interview Method: Putting it to use

In using the Multiple Interview Method, which is what I termed my doctoral dissertation research method *ex post facto*, I essentially followed two separate yet interrelated steps: first, I carefully considered all research methodology alternatives and weighed them against all extant dimensions of the research situation. Second, I ascertained whether or not multiple interviews would work best as the means to gather the data I was seeking, and, as such interviews were

deemed feasible, how to best structure the interviews. As described below, utilizing multiple interviews was not my first choice of methodologies. The decision to use multiple interviews – and more specifically, *how* to use them – came later.

Although I had sufficient reason to conduct interviews, I found Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) advice regarding qualitative research endeavors invaluable once my research was underway: one must consider the three dimensions of *time*, *people*, and *context*. Because my intent to uncover students' perceptions of motivation and obligation orientation in the context of their lives required a certain level of deep probing and because I had selected interviews as the best possible data-collection method, I originally planned to spend upwards of two months at the school with the students, interviewing as many of them as possible to get the richest data possible. However, taking Hammersley and Atkinson's three dimensions into consideration upon arriving in the research setting directed me to a more appropriate and potentially more gainful research method.

Initially, I found the first dimension of *time* to be most pressing. Although I was granted access to the high school from the middle of May and had my questionnaires completed by the students rather quickly, I was hampered by the timing of mid-semester examinations and other events (see Rubrecht, 2004, for details). With time a serious concern, it became imperative that I conclude all data collection prior to the middle of July when the students would enter summer vacation and I would no longer have access to them.

The second dimension of *people* was intimately connected to *time*. As my available time with the students rapidly decreased, I had to be more selective in the process of choosing student interviewees than I had originally intended. Instead of interviewing two dozen students with various orientations, I narrowed down my interviewee base to the absolute minimum number of students.

The final dimension, *context*, could not be divorced from the first two dimensions. I was fortunate enough to have been allowed access to incredibly busy and often stressed senior high school students who were making their initial preparations for the final round of studying for their university entrance examinations. To take time out of their hectic schedules and ask them to talk to a foreign researcher almost bordered on the ludicrous. I therefore had to be as unintrusive as possible yet remain true to my research goals. Carefully examining and appropriately balancing these three dimensions was not easy, but my assessment of the situation showed I could remain confident that interviews were still the best methodology to use and would work to my advantage, with the reasons being as follows.

First, I was interested in the meanings created by people in their social setting (in the case of my research, seniors studying English in a Japanese high school) and how their social setting influenced their perceptions (see Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Second, as exploring language learning motivation was one major aspect of my research, qualitative research methodologies in general were attractive. Dörnyei (2000) points out that motivation theories attempt to explain human thinking and behavior. Qualitative research is consistent with such theories in that it is used to explore how

people think, behave, and, not unrelatedly, how people think about their behavior. For instance, because Ushioda (2001) states that "[language learning] motivation may be defined not in terms of observable and measurable activity, but rather in terms of what patterns of thinking and belief underlie such activity and shape students' engagement in the learning process" (p. 96), qualitative research methods seemed appropriate. It was precisely such patterns of thinking that I aimed to uncover and explore because of the value I hypothesized they possessed.

Finally, as I had an increasingly limited amount of time to be with the students, I knew I would be hobbled in any attempt to deeply probe student perceptions. Fortunately, interviews still provided the best alternative. I was attempting to focus on student perceptions via the meanings they voiced, and interviews provide access to the context of people's behavior (Seidman, 1998). Vygotsky (1987, cited in Seidman, 1998) said that every word a person uses to tell their story is a microcosm of their consciousness. Asking the students in interviews to voice those meanings therefore made the most sense.

Even with interviews decided upon, I was still confronted with the problem of gaining sufficiently deep data from a shrinking window of interview time and a reduced pool of participants. Needless to say, I was concerned that my data would not be sufficiently rich enough to allow me to generate themes and draw conclusions.

I then decided to work with what I initially thought was a risky and untried interview method. I opted to utilize an adaptation of what Seidman (1998) describes as the Three-Interview Series approach. Originally designed by Dolbeare and Schuman (Schuman, 1982, cited in Seidman, 1998), documented use of such a series of interviews for research purposes has continued for at least a quarter of a century and did not represent a completely novel approach to conducting interviews. It does, however, represent a method of interviewing that remains relatively unknown to many education and social science researchers and hence goes underused in a vast number of fields.

Seidman calls this series of three interviews a "model of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing" (p. 11) used to combine life-history interviewing (the first interview) and focused in-depth interviewing (the second interview) with participants' reflections on phenomenological issuances (the third interview). In short, the series allows for a participant to relate who they are (their history) with what they did (details of their experiences) and connect these to what their experiences mean to them (reflection upon meaning).

Seidman argues strongly for the many advantages of such a series of three interviews. First, it allows interviewers "to demonstrate respect, thoughtfulness, and interest in that individual [interviewee], all of which can work toward ameliorating skepticism" (Seidman, 1998, p. 84) on the part of the participant about the researcher and the research. It keeps researchers from gambling on one-shot interviews, which could have disastrous consequences if the interviewee arrives late, is ill, is in a bad mood, or is unresponsive. Second, if each interview has a set of parameters decided and known ahead of time, there will be no unnecessary straying from the interview topic. Furthermore, each interview provides a foundation that helps to illuminate information collected in later interviews. Additionally, this

series shows that the researcher is genuinely interested in what the participant has to say because he or she continually returns for new and deeper information. Finally, such a series can be used to overcome distrust or misunderstandings between people of different cultures and first languages, something I personally found to be a crucial element of my own research.

While essentially an unknown and consequently unused research method for second and foreign language researchers, such a three-part interview pattern has proven effective for researchers in other fields (see Seidman, 1998, for specific successful studies). Even so, some readers may harbor initial doubts (similar to those I experienced) and question how applicable this pattern would be to education researchers, including but not limited to those conducting research on Japanese learners of English. Fortunately, the Three-Interview Series approach is not inflexible, nor is it meant to be. Seidman states that "as long as a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives, alterations to the three-interview structure…can certainly be explored" (p. 15). This is sensible, as different contexts require different approaches. Just as it is ill-advised for researchers to take questionnaires or standardized tests designed for one locale and mechanically apply them in another (Dörnyei, 2001), neither should researchers adopt a research method without carefully analyzing it and adapting it to the locale under scrutiny.

In the case of my research, because I had followed Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) advice and knew the *time*, *people*, and *context* of my research situation, I could weigh these dimensions against the data I was aiming to collect. I also considered the factors of my being a foreigner, my having Japanese as my second language, and the students' busy schedules. I concluded that an altered version of the Three-Interview Series might work quite well for my purposes. I therefore opted to conduct three interviews with each of the six students, but instead of interviews with phenomenological underpinnings, I dedicated each interview to a single topic or theme, namely, introductions, motivation, and obligation orientation, respectively.

There were other reasons for me to adopt this adapted approach. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) state, "People in the field will seek to place or locate the [researcher] within their experience" (p. 80). I would have been unrealistic in my expectations had I assumed that I as a Western foreigner could have coaxed truthful and generous responses from the students on the topics of motivation and obligation orientations after appearing suddenly at their school. I therefore needed my first interview to allow the students time to meet and talk with me, to become familiar with how I speak Japanese, and to understand the kinds of questions I would ask them in the later interviews.

As my research involved motivation and obligation orientations, it was reasonable to devote one interview each to these topics. The number of orientations I was attempting to examine (i.e., three different motivation orientations times the two obligation orientations of individualism and collectivism) combined with the data collection time allotted me (three weeks for interviews) only strengthened the notion that I should select six students who together evinced the full range of these orientations and engage each of them in a

series of interviews. My context also forced me to conduct interviews either during lunchtime or after school, making single 90-minute interviews untenable but three 30-minute interviews possible.

Finally, and certainly in line with Seidman's reasoning, because one week's interviews could be dedicated to a single theme, I was afforded a weekend after each set of interviews to transcribe and analyze the interview data before the next set of interviews. Emergent themes from one interview set (be they themes from a single interview or across interviews) could be further explored, even if only briefly, in subsequent interviews. In this way, emergent themes as well as conflicting data could be confirmed or rejected via member checks with one or all of the interview participants, thereby strengthening the data being collected. I realized that being able to identify, assess, and verify emergent themes became one of the strongest benefits to conducting multiple interviews in this way.

Using multiple interviews: A model of success

I found my first experience using the Multiple Interview Method an incredible success, with several specific ways in which this method aided my research. As stated above, multiple interviews meant each interview could be dedicated to exploring one main topic or theme. This had the benefit of reducing confusion (i.e., participants knew the topic of each interview beforehand), it allowed the entire interview process to be cut into shorter and more manageable timeframes (which made interviews with my participants possible in the first place), and it meant that I had time to transcribe and analyze participant responses before the next

set of interviews, yet there was still time for clarification or follow-up questions in subsequent interviews.

To give a concrete example on just this final point, one of the recurring themes from the first two interviews was that the English students were learning in school would be a foundation for what they wanted to use English for in the future. When probed further in the third set of interviews, the students all generally agreed that the English they were learning would eventually be applied to some endeavor in the future. This "foundation" topic–first emergent, then explored, and finally verified–became a major theme from the interviews and helped me generate one of my dissertation's three conclusions.

Examples such as this one are too numerous to relate in full here. Readers are encouraged to refer to Rubrecht (2004) for fuller and more specific details of the research, including reliability and validity issues, the particular questions asked in each of the interviews, and what data and conclusions were extracted from the interviews and from the research as a whole. Suffice it to say that by carefully examining and weighing the kind of data I needed to collect against all the constraints encountered during data collection, the planning and conducting of multiple interviews was the most appropriate method. By means of these multiple interviews, not only could I set the pace for the entire interview process, but I also gained unforeseen insights such as an understanding of the relation between students' goals (i.e., their motivation) and their obligation orientations. These multiple interviews also provided the students what others in my place could have easily overlooked but which I considered a crucial factor in the ultimate success of the

data collection process: time for the students to consider the topics to be discussed. Because the focus of Interviews 2 and 3 were outlined in Interview 1, students were given the opportunity to reflect upon their own motivation and obligation orientations prior to the interviews. Such time for reflection appears to have alleviated quick and unreflective responses.

Conclusion

This article discussed how I took Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) three dimensions and combined them with an adaptation of Seidman's (1998) description of the Three-Interview Series in order to create the Multiple Interview Method for my doctoral research. I advocate this method because it first promotes a careful assessment of a research situation and then encourages the researcher to see if and how a multiple interview approach will fit the research based on that assessment. This method is an important and beneficial alternative to other data-collection procedures, provided its advantages and disadvantages are examined and understood and it is deemed the most appropriate method under the circumstances.

While I have shown by example the issues involved with selecting and using multiple interviews in this way, readers should realize that this was a brief explanation using just one example study that ended with favorable results. No single research method is appropriate for all research situations, and neither this nor any method involving multiple interviews can be considered foolproof, even when interviews are chosen as the means of data collection. Although I believe this method worked better than expected for my research, there was always the possibility of failure. For instance, students may have greeted my request for three interviews with resentment or confusion, thereby causing a backlash by students providing marginally relevant or trivial amounts of information. I believe I circumvented this problem by devoting part of the first interview to explaining the nature of the research and the reasons for conducting multiple interviews with them.

I was also fortunate in that I was granted sustained access to the students. As long as I visited the school the students would be accessible to me, making multiple interviews possible. Other research situations may not allow this. Interviewing people burdened by busy travel schedules (politicians or pop music singers, for example) may mean that single interviews are the only option. Thus, sometimes, the schedule and willingness of participants may take precedence over a researcher's preferred data collection method.

By way of conclusion, a few final reminders should help researchers' chances of success using this (or another) research method. While Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) three dimensions are important to consider *prior* to conducting research, they should not be forgotten while the research is *ongoing*. Researchers should also work hard to adhere to the interview timeframes agreed upon with interviewees. While the information gleaned from participants is important, researchers risk alienating participants if they are not treated and respected as people. Piloting research methods (be they interviews or other methods) should also help researchers stay on track. After all, a focused method will likely bring focused results, even when they are not as simple and as easy to express as Pythagoras' numbers.

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