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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Exploring the feasibility of using unstructured interviews with Japanese learners

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Conceptualizing unstructured interviews as a co-construction between the researcher and the participant (Gubruim and Holstein, 2002), the study attempts to explore the feasibility of adopting unstructured interviews with Japanese learners who are generally considered as reserved in expressing their opinions. This paper will illustrate how the constructive nature of 'interviews' allows *knowledge* to be created through the interaction in the interview conversation where meaning is not merely discovered or conveyed, but constructed or co-constructed. In particular, it will demonstrate how the manner in which the questions are "framed" in the interview process is an important aspect in obtaining reliable, comparable and valid responses. By collecting and analyzing data obtained from interviewing several participants reflecting back on their English language learning experiences, the paper concludes by presenting a possible framework for obtaining responses from reserved interviewees.

近年、「インタビュー」はリサーチ手法として広く、様々な学問の分野において使用されるようになってきた。特にunstructured interviews(質的アプローチ)は従来の「質疑応答形式」のstructured interviews(量的アプローチ)にし、単に「情報」を収集する行為ではないqualitative researchにはかせないものになってきている。本章では、「インタビュー」をHolstein and Gubruim (2002)がいうところのアクティブ インタビューとして理解する。これはインタビューを相互行為として捕え、情報収集ではなく、「知識」を構築していくものという概念に基づくものである。これにより、今までインタビューに消極的な参加者からバイアスが生じることなく、研究者と情報提供者が共に「知識」を構築するフレームワークを大学生の実際のインタビュー プロセスに基づいて提案する。

The focus on the “learner” in recent SLA (Second Language Acquisition) studies has led to the emergence of an increased attention to the learner, and also to the particular learning environment in which they are situated (Benson and Nunan, 2005). This recent understanding has prompted

the rise of learner focused research in the form of various qualitative research such as in-depth interviews, narratives, bio(auto)ographies, and ethnographies (Benson and Nunan, 2005; Block, 2005; Norton, 2000). Building upon these studies, the focus here is also on the learner as it attempts to obtain first hand information from the learners themselves by conducting interviews to investigate how English learners at Japanese higher education experience their language learning process.

Rather than on reporting the substantive findings of the research itself, this paper is about the methodological issues surrounding “qualitative interviews”. In particular, it explores the feasibility of adopting qualitative studies in the form of unstructured interviews with Japanese learners who are generally considered to be reserved in expressing their opinions. By using the actual data obtained from the participants, the study seeks to explore ways to help such reticent interviewees form responses in unstructured interviews. With the increasing emphasis on the use of qualitative inquiries in research in different disciplines, there is a need to reconsider interviewing as a research tool with more attention paid to the participants, their subjectivities, and the subsequent interplay with data collection and meaning-making.

Situating the study

The intent in conducting unstructured interviews was that in contrast to a more confined fairly rigid formula of interviewing, the emergent nature of unstructured interviews would allow researchers to construct explicit accounts of the participant’s language learning experience..

Although an investigation into learners’ language learning process was the main research question at the outset of the study, after trailing questions with prospective participants, I realized that the use of unstructured interviews presented particular issues to be addressed for research in the Japanese context. The main concern that had emerged was the relatively ‘reserved’ interactional style of the Japanese, who, on the whole, regard it difficult to ‘open-up’ in front of strangers.

Since various factors such as personal attribute or character of the participants (and at times, the researcher) affect all interview situations, this issue may not be particularly specific to the Japanese context, but it becomes problematic when there is vast literature to support claims that the assumed Japanese ‘reluctance’ or ‘reticence’ in expressing themselves is presumed to be rooted in its socio-cultural patterns (Ryen, 2002; Shah 2004). As Adler and Adler (2003) succinctly note “...researchers occasionally find that potential respondents are reluctant to be interviewed. This may have nothing to do with the character of the social scientist or the intended subject, but may be rooted in social patterns...” (p.515).

Socio-cultural traits are important factors to be taken into consideration in framing the interview if the participants are to be respected as distinctly situated individuals. It apparently appears to have contributed to the reserved interactional style of the Japanese, and the question that has emerged was its obvious implications for data collection and data interpretation. How can the interviewer tap into an informant’s knowledge? How can we construct “knowledge” from the information obtained from the reserved

participants? This is the main research question of this paper, and it will, in particular, attempt to demonstrate how the manner in which the questions are “framed” in the interview process is an important aspect in obtaining reliable, comparable and valid responses from the participants.

Interview as a mean-making process in a social context

As Silverman (1993) points out, interviews are now an established social research tool that we use to generate information and to make sense of our lives (p.19). However, for researchers such as Denzin (2003), Kvale (1996), Gubrium and Holstein (2002), and Mishler (1991), interviews are regarded as a interaction for not only obtaining information, but also for both researcher and participant obtain *knowledge* from the views of the interacting participants. Here, participants not only respond to the inquiries, but they also “formulate in a dialogue their own conceptions of their lived world” (Kvale,1996, p.11). Kvale, in line with other prominent researchers such as Gubrium and Holstein (2002), Rapley (2004), emphasizes the constructive nature of ‘interviews’ whereby *knowledge* is created through the interaction of the partners in the interview conversation, where ‘meaning’ is not merely discovered or conveyed, as well as co-constructed.

Understanding interviews as a collaborative effort between the researcher and the participant implies that interviews are interpretively active and involves meaning-making activities. Here, interview is no longer regarded as merely a research methodology, but is conceived as “a social relationship” (Seidman,1998, p.79) that exists in a social context where

social forces of, for example, subjectivity, class, ethnicity, race, gender, social status, social identity and culture impose themselves (Seidman,1998).

Conceptualizing interviews as a form of a mean-making process also acknowledges the existence of an active subject behind both the respondent and the researcher. Likewise, appreciating the subject behind both parties bring forth a host of issues such as subjectivity, rapport, power, equity, and reliability. These issues are not free-standing entities, but are interdependent factors that intricately influence each other. In the traditional view of understanding interviewees as “vessels of answers” (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002), interviewers had to be careful in how they pose the questions lest their inquiries should contaminate the data. For instance, “the active interviewer might intentionally provoke responses by indicating, even suggesting, narrative positions, resources, orientations and precedents” (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002), but this does not necessary indicate that the interviewer is prompting or asking lead questions. The active interviewer does not tell the participant want to say, but instead, offers ways to help the participants formulate their responses. In other words, the aim here is to focus not only on the WHAT of information, but HOW that information was constructed.

Method and research design

Method

In a sense, “the structured and the unstructured” dimension of interview is problematic. Although there appears to be various views towards what constitutes as structured or

unstructured interviews, the form of interviews employed in this study will be “unstructured” in the sense that the researcher does not have a structured list of questions, but does have a range of topics or issues to be covered.

Design of the research

Participants

The participants of this study are first year students taking English language courses at a middle-sized private university situated in the suburbs of Tokyo. The group of informants is comprised of social science majors who are taking language courses as a required part of their degree.

From three different general English skills courses each comprised of about 35 students, the author asked for volunteers to participate in the study (the researcher did not ask for volunteers from her own classes).

Methods of data collection

This particular study consisted mainly of two parts: first, the actual interviewing process and, second, a reflection phase by the participants: all interviewee were asked to write up a short paragraph on how they felt about the interview itself. This aim here was to see if any relevant issues could be identified from these comment sheets. The author stressed that she was interested in not an extra account of their language learning experience, but their thoughts on the interview itself. Again, the written comments were in Japanese that was then translated by the author, and cross-checked by a third party (full translations of comment sheets available upon request). There were a series of interviews

where each interview lasted for about an hour to an hour and a half.

The interview sessions were conducted in Japanese, the language that the informants preferred, and their mother tongue. The transcripts were translated into English and triangulated by bi-lingual colleagues. To increase the reliability of the data, the interviewees went over the written transcript of the interview to avoid any possible misrepresentation. Written consent forms were obtained from both the participants and the university.

Analysis and discussion

Analyzing data

The interviews were analyzed based on the view that the collected accounts from the interviewees are not a set of ‘facts’, but rather as “utterances seen as contingent and locally constructed ‘versions’ of reality (Block, 2000, p. 54). Although the method of analysis employed in this study will follow a broadly ‘discursive’ and interpretive approach, it consists of certain concurrent flows of activity, where the aim is to understand the meaning of the participants’ actions and experiences. The goal is to see how specific ‘truths’ are constructed: here again, the focus is on the *how the information is constructed* more so than on *what is being said*.

Two groups of respondents

A total of six students (four female students and two male students) took part in this study. Limited in space, and also because the focus of this paper is not on presenting

the findings on the subject itself, but rather to discuss its’ methodological issues, the case of our two focal participants, Yuko and Eri (descriptive summaries of the participants are available upon request) will be presented.

As excerpts from the transcript in the following suggest, the common theme in these two cases was the participants’ concerns toward understanding the term, “language learning experience”.

Yuko

Well, I’ve always liked studying English. My sister had studied aboard for a year and she had quite a number of friends whom she kept in regular contact. English was not subject for me, well, until, middle school, where I had to start studying English to get good grades eh, what do you mean by “language learning experience”? what I’ve studied so far ?

Eri:

Hmm overall , I like English. I started studying English at middle school, I didn’t like it sometimes since I had to study for the tests I’m not quite sure what I should talk about language experience ???????

It appears that the term ‘language learning experience’ was problematic on two accounts: first, the expression required clarification; second, the ‘historical aspect’ that the concept entailed had to be addressed. This was due to the fact that it meant ‘digging into the participants’ memories’ that went back as at least six years. In other words, the researcher would often get comments such as “it’s such a long time ago.

I don’t quite remember...” (quoted from Yuko’s transcript). Some kind of “interjection” was necessary in order to bring to the forefront of the participants’ consciousness the memories of their past experiences.

Yuko’s and Eri’s interviews were interesting because they appeared to represent the opposite ends of the pole: the interview with Yuko was a ‘free-flowing’ conversation with little ‘intervention’ from the researcher. On the other hand, in Eri’s case, the interview was disrupted on several occasions characterized with pauses in speech, unfinished sentences, and hesitant behavior on the part of the participant. Compared to Yuko’s interview, for the researcher, it was difficult to keep the “conversation going” with Eri.

It was therefore possible to delineate two categories into which the participants might be grouped: “Yuko’s free-flowing style” and “Eri’s reserved style”. They were categorized primarily on the number of breaks, pauses, turn-takings and other extra-linguistic features as outlined in Ryen (2000). They were also identified by the topic of the “talk” when such “disruptions” occurred.

One can view the difference in these two groups of interviews by relating the interviews to the more obvious issues of personal style, rapport, or, in this case, in terms of the distinct Japanese interactional style, but the manner in which the questions are framed are as equally as important in eliciting responses from the participants. This will be illustrated by demonstrating how the participant and researcher arrived at a mutually agreed understanding of the term “language learning experience” by using interview data from Eri.

Constructing the meaning of “language learning experience”

It would have been possible for me to give an explicit definition to the term, “language learning experience”. But, instead, the interviewees participated in an exploration and construction of the meaning of the term with the researcher. This is not a straight forward procedure. For most participants, providing accounts of their English learning meant having to go back at least six or seven years. Reporting or recalling their experiences varies among individual, and can be usually be complicated because information or ‘knowledge’ maybe tacit and difficult for them to express. Thus, if we are to understand a complex, ambiguous, taken-for granted concept that is deeply embedded in consciousness such as a “language learning experience”, we would need to not just listen to their accounts, but to collaborate with them to construct their understanding of their experience to the forefront of their consciousness, and to be able to give explicit accounts of the situation.

An approach that the researcher took was to follow the interview procedure as shown below in Table 1. Although Table 1 represents the process diagrammatically, the discussion did not necessary progress in a linear fashion, but different stages were often revisited.

Table 1: Interview procedure

Stage 1	Defining the topic. Clarifying understanding the terminology: range of words, phrases, descriptors that it used to define the topic
Stage 2	General accounts of their English language learning experience
Stage 3	Presenting a specific language learning experience

An example of this approach in action follows using excerpts from interviews with Eri: (E=Eri, I=Interviewer)
Stage 1: Defining the topic and clarifying the terms.

*E: ... I'm not quite sure what I should talk about
..... language experience ????????*

.....(pause) when I started learning English?

I: Well ,that , too. Have you studied any other foreign languages? How do you feel or what do you think about learning a language in general?

E: Learning a language is fun. When I was little, I used to think learning a different language meant learning English. But ,over the years, I have come to realize that there are other languages: I would like to learn Chinese, for instance. I would like to learn a lot of different languages so that I can communicate with people from various countries.

I: Yes, yes. Good. Why do you say learning a language is fun?

E: When you recognize words that you've learned included in the lyrics of a song --- that is really

exciting! I get the impression that you are really able to USE the language.

The interview begins by establishing participants' understanding of the term "language learning experience" in a general sense by taking largely a discursive style. It also attempts to clarify their beliefs and values in learning languages.

Stage 2: General accounts of their English language learning experience.

I: What are your general impressions of learning English?

E: Before I started learning English at middle school, it was something that came natural to me. English songs were around me, my older sister would be writing letters in English to her pen pal in the U.S., and she would be talking about it to the family at the dinner table. I would hear the kids from ASIJ talk in English, so something that came natural to me.

At this level, based on the understanding of the term established in the early part of the interview, the participants explained their views of learning English. Here, for Eri, it is clear that "English" was something 'natural', 'real', 'useful', and 'alive' until she started to regard it as a one of her school subjects at middle school.

Stage 3: Describing a specific language learning experience

E: I think things started to change when I entered high school. At middle school, I had a great teacher. She could make the language come to life,

so to speak. You felt that you could communicate with her, and that English was not just something that is happening inside the textbook. But in high school, I think this changed - I had to study for the exams at school, for the mock college entrance exams, and so on. This was perplexing for me.

Here, the participants relate the term to a specific experience. Eri expresses her confusion and discouragement towards learning English. It appeared to her that her views of studying English as "a tool for communication" had been denied, and was feeling ambivalent towards her language learning process.

Such an approach enables both the interviewer and the interviewee to take gradual steps towards the research topic in quest. The interviewer in this case was not simply listening attentively to the participants, but to help them to become more explicitly aware of their subliminal knowledge.

Excerpts from Eri's written comment sheet after the interview confirms this point:

"I wasn't able to quite understand that what I was supposed to say at first. But after going back to thinking about, for instance, my first encounters with English, gradually, things were coming back to me". Listening to the teacher's experience was also helpful, and comforting to know that even teachers had hard time studying a foreign language".

In fact, although Eri's transcript included a lot of pauses, incomplete sentences, and very little turn-takings compared

to other interviewees, the unresponsiveness or the hesitation displayed on the part of the participants does not necessarily imply reticence or unwillingness. Rather, as illustrated above, it rests heavily on how the interviewer can tap into the informant's knowledge by framing questions in a manner that the participants can engage consciously in a collaborative effort with the interviewer. In this sense, the interview data is indeed a co-construction between the researcher and the participant.

Issues of power and rapport

Several methodological concerns associated with ethical matters arouse during this study. Areas pertaining to the issues of rapport and power appeared to be particularly relevant. Limited in space, I will not be able to present a detailed account on each of these areas, but I would like to discuss some aspects of these issues.

The starting point of this study was, in short, how to encourage the more reserved participants to “open-up”. The significance of equalizing power relationship in building and maintaining rapport cannot be over estimated. This seems especially relevant in the Japanese context, since the conceptual understanding of a “teacher” is basically one with authority (Rohlen, 1996). In this study, several technical measures were taken to obtain a balance. For instance, not interviewing students the researcher is currently in charge, attempting to create a relaxed atmosphere, opening up with general everyday topics, sharing the researchers' own experience, etc..

Such disclosure on the part of the researcher has dual purposes contributing in building up rapport between the researcher and the participant, as well as helping to establish the relationship between them (Ryen, 2002).

Interview convention such as probes and prompts can be seen as technicalities impeding the reliability of the data. Such an understanding implies that there is a “subjective” truth hidden inside the participant waiting to be uncovered. However, if we understand interviews as a collaborative effort between the researcher and the participant, this indicates that it does not *uncover* truths or meanings, but from the dialogues that occur between the two parties, *produces* them. The participants in this study reported that they had not ever thought about their language learning history since it was a taken-for-granted experience. The interviews provided an opportunity for reflexive thinking during which the participant undertook the process of construction with the researcher.

Concluding remarks

In qualitative studies, a certain phenomena is studied in its natural settings. What the participants attempts to convey, and what the interviewer derives from it and how it is interpreted are influenced by the subjectivities of the participants and the complex social forces present within that particular context. There is a vast array of literature emphasizing the interplay of a diversity of factors on interviewing such as age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, social class, identity, and culture. Topped with methodological issues of subjectivity, power relationship, rapport, and reflexivity, the complexity of these interactions intertwine

with each other. Obviously, it was beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all the interconnected variants individually, but it attempted to explore some of the methodological issues by focusing on the communicative challenges of interviewing. The paper concluded by presenting a possible approach for eliciting responses from a reserved interviewee, hoping that it would shed light for future studies on the matter.

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