

INVITED RESEARCH ISSUES

TESOL Quarterly publishes brief commentaries on aspects of qualitative and quantitative research.

Edited by **CONSTANT LEUNG**

King's College London

Embracing Reflexivity: The Importance of Not Hiding the Mess

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doi: 10.1002/tesq.397

R-e-theorizing qualitative interviews has its origins in the social sciences (Mann, 2016), originating in calls to treat interviews as active, meaning-making ventures rather than techniques for eliciting data for the presentation of objective or subjective truths. Building on theories of social constructivism, interviews have been relabelled as places of interaction that result in knowledge being co-created by both the interviewee and the interviewer (Chase, 2005; Mann, 2011, 2016; Silverman, 1993). This has led to increased enquiry of contextual factors related to the interview, including the need to address the construction of participating identities and interactional context. However, applied linguistics has been slow to acknowledge the call for a more critical and discursive approach to interviewing (Block, 2000; Canagarajah, 1996; Pavlenko, 2007; Richards, 2009). Mann's (2011) survey of articles published in prominent applied linguistic journals highlighted "discursive dilemmas" (p. 12), revealing how the majority of articles presented content as objective fact, rather than as the result of reactions to interviews. Influencing this is criticism of personal disclosure from traditional views of knowledge construction, as well as publishing constraints of academic journals which limit the physical space available for elaboration on contextual factors surrounding interviews (Block, 2000). These factors result in researchers "sanitizing

their account of research” (Finlay, 2002, p. 531) in order to be published.

This article discusses reflexivity in action from a research project which employed semi-structured interviews to determine the origins of nonnative-English-speaking teacher (NNEST) beliefs about using the first language (L1) or the target language (L2) in the classroom. Rather than focus on the outcomes of this research, the current article demonstrates how reflexive analysis provides a more transparent account of the interview data in order to argue its importance in improving the integrity of applied linguistics research and its associated publications.

If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.

(Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572)

The Thomas dictum implies that, once a research project has been conceived, then the researcher and participants involved are bound to behaviours that tend to produce the expected results. If this is true, then it is important for the researcher to address inherent biases and unexpected results that accompany the process of completing the project. In other words, if a research project is a self-fulfilling prophecy, then it is the duty of the researcher to ensure that all actions and contextual features influencing the project are articulated clearly to ensure the integrity of the project. However, research literature often presents flawlessly designed and meticulously conducted studies. Seldom mentioned are issues encountered along the way. This can be quite daunting for novice researchers studying applied linguistics and teacher education, which tend to involve real world, “messy” contexts rather than safer “sanitized” environments (Rose & McKinley, 2017, p. 6). Traditional knowledge about research methods has shaped views on what is good article writing, but these positivist perspectives are rooted in the belief that reality exists separately from the knower of the reality. Knowledge in this perspective is considered objective and identifiable, and with an ability to represent generalizable truths (Johnson, 2009). However, these “oversimplified, depersonalized, and decontextualized assumptions” limit research that focuses on complexities of life (Johnson, 2009, p. 8). Applied linguistics, and its associated journals, need to continue to move on from traditional perspectives and accept that acknowledging life complexities improves research validity (Rose & McKinley, 2017).

Reflexivity is defined as “thoughtful, conscious self-awareness” that involves a shift from treating data as objective truths to considering it as subjective co-constructions of reality which need to be acknowledged within the analysis of a project (Finlay, 2002, p. 532). It recognizes and

reveals the impact that different contextual factors have on a research project and the researcher. It also allows the researcher to acknowledge these factors when writing about the research project (Mann, 2016).

Reflexivity is distinguishable from reflection; *reflection* is defined as thinking about a certain event that has already occurred, whereas *reflexivity* is defined as a continuing self-awareness relating to the research project itself as the project takes place (Finlay, 2012; Finlay & Gough, 2003).

DIFFERENCES IN UNDERSTANDING INTERVIEWS

The traditional view of interviews is as fairly unproblematic resources for collecting data (Talmy, 2011), with data generally reported as “truths, facts, and/or the attitudes, beliefs, and mental states” of participants (p. 27). The interviewer’s voice is second to the interviewee, giving rise to decontextualized utterances that focus on the *what* of the interviews. The underlying assumption is that the language from the interview represents truths or beliefs of participants which have been extracted due to the skill of the interviewer.

This approach does not account for contextual factors that influence the interview event, and it raises criticisms about the integrity of interview data, especially for researchers who embrace a social constructivist research paradigm. A “methodological self-consciousness” (Finlay, 2002, p. 533) that introduced a new genre for reporting research within ethnographic and anthropological researchers occurred in the 1970s, which valued the transforming personal experiences into valid data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Seale, 1999). The genre values how data is collected and the relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee, as well as the interview data itself. It also assumes that interview data only exists due to the interactions that occur in an interview process. The textualization, or writing out, of contextual influences in an interview process helps researchers better understand, as well as present, their data. This genre’s embracing of reflexive analysis makes it ideal for qualitative research in applied linguistics.

TEXTUALIZING THE PARAMETERS OF AN INTERVIEW

Writing about the different contextual parameters in an interview can, in theory, be an unbounded process. Therefore, this article limits itself to the parameters of context, sensitivity, and co-construction; Mann (2016) argues that these best address the dilemmas of interviewing that need more reflexive consideration. The elements of reflexivity

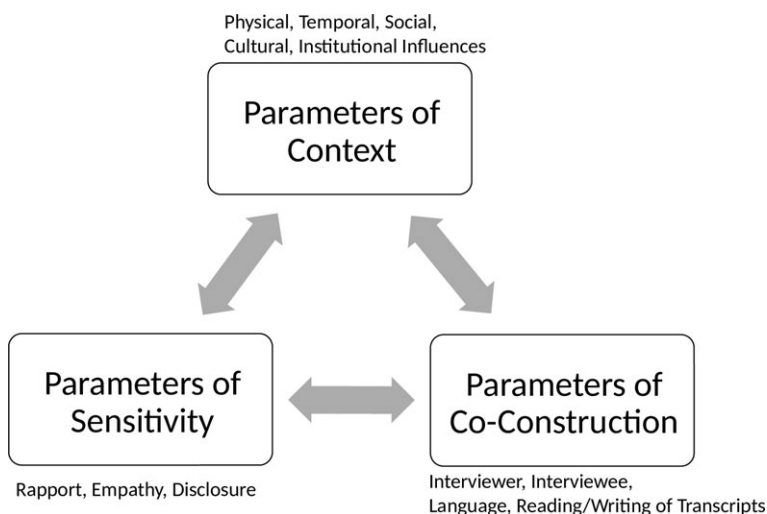


FIGURE 1. Parameters of Context, Co-Construction, and Sensitivity

central to the presentation of the research data are shown in Figure 1. This is not an exhaustive list; it merely shows the relationship between the different elements examined:

- *Parameters of context.* Context acts within, and on, interviews. More than just physical context, it also includes temporal, social, and institutional contexts. This raises questions of culture, status, gender, and other constructs that act in the greater context of the interview.
- *Parameters of co-construction.* These refer to the interviewer, the interviewees, the languages spoken, and knowledge of the interview genre. Also included is the actual text itself, because the production and checking of the transcript also act upon the participants.
- *Parameters of sensitivity.* These refer to the rapport, disclosure, and empathy (Mann, 2016) developed as a result of the co-construction. These parameters result from, and in, the co-construction and interaction during the interview process.

As Figure 1 illustrates, context directly influences the parameters of co-construction as well as sensitivity. These influence the interviewee and the interviewer, as well as the languages spoken in the interaction. During co-construction, parameters of sensitivity can often influence the success of the interview by acting on context and co-construction. Upon further reflection of my study, other contextual elements which were most likely acting upon myself as well as the participants included socioeconomic factors, religious/philosophical stands,

familiarity with students, personal relationships within the workplace, and living situation, to mention a few. These structural dimensions were overlooked as they were not mentioned by the participants in the interviews (and I was focused on my own concerns in regard to the interview), illustrating again how, during the co-construction of knowledge in an interview, participants often choose what they will say in the context of the questions asked and responses given (Finlay, 2012).

AN EXAMPLE OF REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS

The following is an example of reflexive analysis on an interview done as part of a PhD dissertation that investigated the use of the English and Korean languages by NNESTs in South Korea, and its impact on the social construction of the classroom. I acknowledge this focus as it guided the formation of the questions I used in the interviews. Writing questions led to research on the construction and conduct of interviews, highlighting my uncritical dependency on existing models, and changing my views on how to conduct interviews.

Interview Preparation

The participant was a former teacher trainee who had attended several programs in which I had taught during my time in South Korea. These courses were government-funded, and ran during vacation time. The programs were part of a governmental drive to make South Korea more globally competitive, so there was substantial funding for the training of Korean English teachers in communicative teaching approaches (Hu & McKay, 2012).

The physical setting of the interview was a classroom in the participant's school. The interview took place after she had finished teaching her classes for the day. Two weeks prior to the interview, I had emailed her the questions to ensure that she could prepare if she wished, as the interview was to take place in English, her second language. As it turned out, she did not read the questions prior to the interview.

The participant in this study was recruited because she fitted within a category membership predetermined by the research project itself (Potter, 2012), that is, a current elementary school nonnative English speaker teacher of English of Korean ethnicity. During her recruitment, she was made aware of how she was relevant to the study, which theoretically influenced her behaviour during the study. The disclosure of the research project positioned me as the researcher and her as the participant.

During the Interview

Within the interview, she narrated her experiences while guided and questioned as part of the data co-construction. She discussed experiences as a learner and as a teacher, sharing insights into these roles. Analysis of the transcripts led to the realization that questions during these discussions set me apart as someone who had never learned English as a student or taught English as an elementary school teacher.

Participant identity in research projects tends to be constructed by researchers at different stages of a research project (Foley, 2012). By acknowledging the dynamic nature of the identities within the interview, more transparency can be given to the formulation of the findings in a study. This involves acknowledging the identity of both the researcher and the participants in the process, and how each identity is both dynamic and influential in the interview. In this interview, the process of recruitment, the sociohistorical accounts given via interactions within the interview, and subsequent analysis of the interview revealed different elements (see Table 1) that acted through, and on, the participant and myself. The elements were determined at different stages of the project, and were subject to my own interpretation of the project processes. It is entirely feasible, or even highly probable, that a different researcher would have interpreted an entirely different set of elements.

From the Interview

This section provides examples of the exchanges, chosen to highlight the influence of reflexivity on this data. Initially, I adopted my researcher's persona, asked a question that was influenced by my reading on teacher beliefs and classroom language use as well as by discussions with my supervisor. The focus at this point of the interview was

TABLE 1
Elements Affecting Participants in Interview

Researcher	Participant
Role as a researcher	Role as participant
Role as a former teacher–trainer	Role as former trainee
Never taught elementary school	Current elementary school teacher
Native English speaker status	Nonnative English speaker
Language teacher	Language learner/teacher
New Zealander	South Korean
Inquisitor of experiences	Narrator of experiences

on what the participant perceived to be advantages to using an English only approach:

R: Any other advantages you can think of?

T: It's a kind of personal idea but when I use English ... I ... students feel more comfortable so when I speak in Korean they just look at me as a real teacher or an adult.

During the formulation of her response, she became unhappy with how she was expressing herself, possibly as she was speaking in her second language. She asked how she could express herself more accurately:

T: How can I say, kind of dominated?

In so doing, she appeared to revert to the role of student, inadvertently changing the dynamics of the interview. Her question invoked a change of role for myself, where I suddenly took on my previous role as her teacher, and helped her express herself (these role changes occurred quite naturally based on our established relationship). The next few exchanges were an interaction in which we went back and forth co-constructing the expression of the idea she was looking for.

R: An authority figure?

T: Yeah yeah but when I'm using English they feel like really comfortable woman in front of them

R: You mean not like a teacher?

T: Not actually that but feel like ah what I want to say is it lowers their tense

R: Their nervousness

T: Yeah right

The role change resulted in a lowering of the participant's nervousness, presumably as she realized that within the perceived interview genre there were opportunities for her to seek assistance in expressing herself. In addition, these roles were more familiar than the researcher-participant role and their associated formality. This increased comfort was evident in her almost confession-like admission:

T: Yes because when I say in English I try to be more (laughs) encouraging so they feel ...

Her laugh at this point, although not captured accurately in this extract, was part of a visible lessening of tension she had been feeling. These changes in roles greatly influenced the co-construction of knowledge, because without the role shift it is uncertain that the admission might have been made. My own reaction to her role shift is also indicative of my own relative inexperience as a researcher, as well as my comfort with that of a teacher. Perhaps, if I had been a more seasoned interviewer with a slightly more unyielding view of the interview genre, I might have been less inclined to react to her question, and might have tried to maintain a sense of neutrality, something which is associated with the traditional, positivist notions of research interviews. However, my reaction was one of empathy, because I realised that she was struggling to express herself, and that not being able to express herself in the language she taught was not a comfortable experience for her as an English teacher. This point in the interview is an example of what Rapley (2001) calls a tension between the “extra-local need” (p. 310) to collect data for my research project, and the present interactional event that is part of the collection process. It is the point at which I needed to read the situation and make a decision that would ensure the success of the interview as a whole.

Another parameter at work was the rapport we had developed prior to the interviews, which had led her to want to participate on the project, and probably meant she had certain expectations that I would help her if and when needed. This rapport was less evident early on, due to the perceived roles of the interview process, but grew as a result of exchanges like those discussed above. Rapport is acknowledged as an important element in building levels of trust (Bernard, 2012). Researchers need to be aware of focusing too much on the research goals at the expense of the process during interviews, which can in turn impede the development of rapport (Mann, 2016).

The parameters of sensitivity are elements of the interview process which are often overlooked in the presentation of data. Despite this lack of attention, however, they are vital elements that determine the success and outcomes of interviews. Rapport, disclosure, and empathy are all skills that interviewers can employ to ensure that participants are able to engage appropriately and comfortably with the interviewer. These parameters can be established prior to and during the interview, depending on the circumstances.

These exchanges are representative of the types of exchanges that took place during most of the interviews in this project. Contextual elements were highly influential in these exchanges, and need to be acknowledged in order to maintain the integrity of the research project as a whole. To simply sweep these contextual factors under the

rug and present the data as decontextualized misrepresents the subjective truth and the reality of the research project.

The final extract above highlights the relationship between the contextual elements and their influence on the interview as a whole. Previous encounters between myself and the participant were responsible for getting us to the point of the interview. Once in the interview, the physical setting saw the dynamics of our relationship change; first, I was cast as an outsider. This affected the tone of the first part of the interview. The contextual parameters acted on the parameters of co-construction as roles were established. Then, during the interaction, these roles shaped and were shaped by the parameters of sensitivity. Greater exploration of larger contextual factors occurred as we both became more comfortable with the context of the interview and the interaction that was taking place. As Denzin and Lincoln state, interviews “produce situated understandings grounded in specific interactional episodes” (1998, p. 353), and to better appreciate these situated understandings that develop in an interview a variety of factors needed to be accounted for. No utterance can be fully comprehended in isolation. To support claims about the interpretation of an utterance and the knowledge it communicates, its context needs to be elaborated.

THE VALUE OF REFLEXIVITY

Valuing analysis of subjective elements at play within interviews promotes the following:

- more balance between the what and the how of interviews;
- greater data transparency;
- development of a more critical approach to interviewing; and
- a (hopefully) more honest appraisal of one’s own role in the interview.

However, standard publishing practice is to omit the messy details often involved in qualitative interviews (Boden, Kenway, & Epstein, 2005; Canagarajah, 1996). Consequently, novice researchers may underanalyse the interview process due to a lack of exposure to such details, because standard research handbooks often view the interview as a tool for information extraction rather than a socially situated event (Mann, 2011). This in turn leads to interviews being presented as “a summary of participants’ observations” (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 163) that puts primacy on the presented data rather than on how the data came into existence. For researchers aligning themselves with, or learning to align themselves with, social constructivist approaches, this

can lead to a lack of transparency and credibility of the data they are presenting (Finlay, 2002; Kvale, 1996).

Researchers who acknowledge reflexivity learn more about the intricacies of qualitative interviews first hand. They better understand the elements in action during the co-construction of knowledge during interviews, and in turn learn more about their own roles in this co-construction. As Richards (2009) points out, carrying out microanalysis should be an important part of interview training, as it can encourage interactionally sensitive approaches. Reflexivity facilitates this by raising researcher awareness of the consequential nature of the contributing variable contextual factors.

This can then lead to a move beyond the dogmatic rules often found in textbooks that treat the interview as a tool rather than a social occasion (Roulston, 2011), and hopefully more acceptance of such writing in applied linguistics and teacher education journal publications. It is not that all reflexive analysis needs to be put on display in an article, but to ensure greater integrity of co-constructed data, the “genre of presentation” needs to change to allow for the inclusion of important subjective elements (Canagarajah, 1996, p. 329). Ultimately, though, decisions on including more reflexive analysis in academic journals is political (Finlay, 2002), and will draw consternation from some quarters, while others will feel empowered by the realisation that not all research is so neat and tidy.

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