

A picture is worth a thousand words: The empowering potential of using photo-elicitation within research and teaching

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Abstract

This paper defines photo elicitation, traces its development and use within research, and explores its potential use within a teacher education classroom setting. The paper will argue that photo elicitation enhances the possibility of conventional research and reflection, particularly when researching across cultural and language boundaries. I will draw on the insights gained during a small-scale research project conducted using photo elicitation as one form of data collection while interviewing English Language Learners (ELLs), and the use of reflective photo elicitation within a teacher training classroom setting. This paper reasons that photo elicitation, when used as a basis for interviewing, teaching and reflection, can act as a powerful trigger for memories, and can evoke unexpected and varied topics of discussion within the research setting. The challenge is made to researchers and teachers within ELL fields to extend their use of photo elicitation as a means of gaining deeper insights into their ELLs.

Introduction

This paper describes a process called photo elicitation, which can be used within teaching and research environments. Photo elicitation is a term used to describe the simple idea of inserting a photograph, or in some cases a drawing, into a research interview (Harper, 2002), or the inclusion of a photograph within a classroom activity, in order to elicit information. It is a data collection method which uses photographs to guide the interview and as an aid to help stimulate discussion. The use of photographs is a familiar, everyday activity, which can be utilised within research as a tool for stimulated recall and, within the classroom, as a tool for reflective practice where retrospection and introspection is required.

Photo elicitation offers itself as a potentially valuable tool within qualitative research fields, and in particular within research crossing cultural and language divides. While much has been written about photo elicitation across a wide range of disciplines, there is limited data surrounding its use in research surrounding English Language Learners (ELLs) within a tertiary context, and the potential use of photo elicitation within the classroom. In order to utilise this valuable tool, we need to examine in more detail what exactly photo elicitation is and how it can be used.

It emerges that using photo elicitation in research evokes a different type of information. Within this paper I will consider some of the literature surrounding photo elicitation, highlighting benefits and limitations of this method of data collection. Rather than describing my research project, I will discuss reflections and insights gained while conducting research using photo elicitation and my subsequent endeavours to utilise it within my teaching environment. While I have endeavoured to maintain an impartial stance throughout this paper, I must acknowledge that I have found this method of research to be personally satisfying. I find photography, and the emotions and stories that each resulting photograph evokes, to be exciting. Sharing photographs with others, and the subsequent conversations, gives me a great deal of pleasure, as does the thought of using this form of data collection within my research. As a result, this may have influenced my views with regards to this research and teaching method.

Review of the literature

Photo elicitation was first conducted and classified in 1957 by John Collier, a photographer and researcher from a Cornell University research team. Collier noted within his research “that pictures elicited more language and more comprehensive interviews and at the same time it helped participants to overcome the fatigue and repetition of conventional interviews” (Collier, 1957, cited in Harper, 2002, p.14). Although John Collier is accredited with introducing us to today’s photo elicitation, it appears that a variant of photo elicitation, which is termed Photo-Interviewing, has been around a lot longer. Photo-interviewing was pioneered by Franz Boas in the early 20th Century, with his use of photographs while studying the culture of the people of the Trobriand Islands (Hurworth, 2003). Here he would show photos to participants in order to get them to speak about specific things.

There are many reasons behind why this form of interviewing is particularly useful when used within an ELL research and teaching environment. Harper (2002) suggests that the use of images induces deeper aspects of human consciousness than words alone. He contends “exchanges based on words alone utilise less of the brain’s capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words” (p.13). Strickland, Keat and Marinak, (2010) propose that pictures always have an untold story. They focus on the historical importance of storytelling and its importance for passing along cultural meaning systems. In addition Collier and Collier described the use of photos as being “communication bridges between strangers that can become pathways into unfamiliar, unforeseen environments and subjects” (1986, p.99). Likewise, in 2002 Harper suggested that photographs could be used as bridges between worlds that are culturally distinct. He expressed surprise surrounding its lack of use: “It is most remarkable how few investigations of local culture have used photo elicitation, an obvious choice for circumstances in which local cultures have a distinctive visual character” (p.20). Harper further stated that photo elicitation could help overcome the difficulties posed by in-depth interviewing as the focus is on an image, which is understood at least in part by both parties and it appears to help break down barriers, an important factor when teaching or researching ELLs. Harper (2002) alludes to a bonding and building of rapport when he commented that when “two or more people discuss the meaning of photos they try to figure out something together” (p.23). Parker (2009) suggests that this gap may also be bridged as the use of photographs takes the spotlight away from the interviewee and can be useful in comprehending events that may be difficult or challenging to articulate.

It appears that images can provide useful stimuli for responses from interviewees who are unaccustomed to the interview process. Meo (2010) suggested that when used as a basis for interviewing it has been found that photographs can act as a powerful trigger for both general and specific memories. Meo also advocates that the use of photo elicitation could be beneficial when interviewing someone who does not have the same first language or share the same culture. Pink (2001) explained how “photographs can be used to create critical representations that express experiences and ideas in ways written words cannot” (p.153). Recently there appears to be increased interest in the use of visual research. Epstein, Stevens, McKeever and Baruchel (2006) suggested that this may be related to technology such as digital cameras becoming more common and inexpensive. They discovered that this form of visual research allows for researchers to probe more deeply into the social and cultural relationships of people.

While photo elicitation has been used in the field of education, particularly in the early childhood fields (Diamond, 1996; Weiniger, 1998; Salmon, 2001), there is a limited amount of literature from other sectors within the education field. Mahruf, Shohel and Howes (2007) discussed the slow but steady increase in the use of photo elicitation within educational research and the significance of this method. They highlighted photo elicitations usefulness as a “powerful reflective tool that participants utilized as anchors and triggers for past memories” (p.54). While Magnini also acknowledged the use

of photo elicitation within pre-school and elementary education, there appears to have been limited use of photo elicitation within the ELL classroom and tertiary research fields. Within the classroom, there is evidence that photo elicitation is a valuable teaching tool. Zenkov, Ewaida, Bell and Lynch (2012) conducted research into the use of photo elicitation during writing tasks with their middle grade ELLs, in order to promote reflection and engagement of their students. They suggest that the use of images when used in writing exercises promoted “students’ abilities to share insights...that language centred methods cannot” (p.7). They further discussed how the use of photo elicitation with their ELLs resulted in their students sharing “powerful and unexpected insights about motivational factors related to their school success” (p.8). Within their research they concluded that the use of photos within the writing process allowed their ELLs to view themselves positively as both students and writers, and that the use of visual materials gave their learners a “powerful and safe starting point” (p.11). The use of photos appears to empower the learners. Importantly, for ELL teachers it seems that the use of photo elicitation in the classroom helps to gain an insight into your learners and it enables you to know your learners and gain an understanding of the difficulties they face.

Within the realms of photo elicitation there are many different variations. Although most elicitation studies use photographs, Harper stated that “there is no reason studies cannot be done with paintings, drawings, cartoons, graffiti” (2002, p.113). In addition, either the researchers or participant may be involved in creating the images. Photos may be made prior to the study or during the research. Van Auken, Frisvoll, and Stewart (2010) identified two main variants of photo elicitation – externally driven photo elicitation, where the researcher takes the photo and encourages participants to discuss those photos, and participant-driven photo elicitation where the participants take the photos. Participants then discuss their photographs, explaining their significance and what they mean to them. This process is seen as a tool of empowerment, as it redirects the power of authority (Parker, 2009).

Benefits of using photo elicitation

Regardless of the source of the image it has been argued that “photo elicitation mines deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews” (Harper, 2002, p.22). Van Auken et al. (2010) commented that when photo elicitation is used, participants come along to the interviews more prepared as they have had to ponder and think about their photo-taking tasks. They observed that participants enjoy this process and consequently were often “excited about discussing the fruits of their labour” (p. 384).

Clearly it appears that there are many advantages in using photo elicitation. In an interview setting the photograph can play a number of unique roles. Meo (2010) identified the following:

- a) they elicited longer and more enjoyable interviews
- b) they enhanced the participation and control of interviewees
- c) they enrich the data surrounding similar topics
- d) they reinforced what was already stated in the traditional interview
- e) they offered a closer look at what and whom participants considered important
- f) they allowed the emergence of unexpected topics
- g) they enabled making sense of some data which otherwise would have been difficult to interpret. (p.155)

In addition to the above, it has been suggested by Van Auken et al. (2010) that there appears to be a lower refusal rate of participants when using photo elicitation. It is thought that asking people to simply discuss photographs is perceived as being a lot less threatening than engaging in more traditional methods of research. Parker (2009) commented that the use of photos acted as a neutral third party within the interview setting. It can have the effect of focusing discussion on the image

rather than the interviewee and allows for silent reflection (Magnini, 2006; Van Auken et al., 2010). Magnini (2006) commented that photos can help overcome status differences and that they can assist with building trust and rapport (Magnini, 2006; Hurworth, 2003). Further Hurworth (2003), noted that the use of photographs can prompt spontaneous comments and can provide a means of getting inside a context, of bridging psychological and physical realities. Additionally, Hurworth discussed the advantages of using photographs in situations where language is a barrier, as it can allow for the combination of visual and verbal language. For those who do not like the more traditional interview situation it can be preferable and can promote longer more detailed responses (Hurworth, 2003; Van Auken et al., 2010).

Limitations of photo elicitation

While the many benefits appear clear, consideration must be given to the limitations of this method. There has been some debate in social anthropology as to the photograph's ability to represent reality. Mahurf, Shohel and Howes (2007) emphasized the need to be aware that a photo is a partial story without the accompanying narrative. Parker (2009) also suggested that the limitations of photo elicitation need to be taken into consideration particularly when the researcher has chosen the photographs themselves. Van Auken et al. (2010) highlighted the need to question concerns about representation and validity of the data when the researcher controls the stimuli. Additionally Kerstetter and Bricker (2009) discussed areas of concern surrounding the interviewer's interpretations, commenting on the need to be aware that the research is not an "expert on the lives of those being interviewed and the images shared with the interviewees may not capture the meanings elicited" (p. 687).

Clearly particular care must be taken in interpreting images as everyone can interpret a photo or picture differently. There has been some debate relating to the artistic interpretations of photos. It should be realized that photo elicitation does not offer a single lens perspective, but rather it allows for multiple perspectives and interpretations (Parker, 2009). Chiarantano commented that "photographs have layers of meaning and can be classified in a number of ways depending on the context and the intent" (2006, para.2), which needs to be considered when using this research method.

An additional issue was raised by Magnini (2006) who discussed the need for researchers to be aware of their own cultural bias and the need to understand that, although participants may provide accurate insights, the interpretation of these still are vulnerable to the interviewer's interpretations. While Magnini acknowledged the depth of insight gained by photo elicitation he also suggests the need for qualitative research techniques such as photo elicitation to be followed with some form of quantitative analysis such as a survey. This is a particularly pertinent consideration within the ELL fields; both in research and the classroom, where cultural diversity is often a factor.

Another consideration with regards to using photo elicitation within research is highlighted by Meo (2010) when she acknowledged that the length of time taken to conduct photo elicitation interviews is considerably more than traditional interviews. It is clearly important for researchers to recognize the circumstances and limitations of the photographs collected. Information surrounding what is discarded and what is retained may be just as important as the final photos presented (Parker, 2009). Thought needs to be given to the ways in which these limitations or circumstances might influence the findings and interpretations.

Reflecting on the use of photo elicitation in research

As previously stated, this paper does not report the findings of my research; rather it draws on the considerable insights I gained while conducting my research and my endeavor to utilise photo elicitation within a reflective classroom setting. I initially conducted a small-scale research project

regarding a group of international students' expectations and experiences while studying at a tertiary institute in New Zealand. For this research project I decided to use three methods of data collection. Firstly I conducted individual interviews in order to gain some qualitative data. Secondly I asked the participants to write a story about themselves, and thirdly I decided to give the participants a disposable camera and asked them to record aspects that had helped or hindered them during their study. After one week the students then brought their photos to me and explained and discussed the photos they had taken and the reasons for doing so.

While I had experienced the first two forms of data collection before, the third form was new to me and required some background research to be completed to ensure that I understood the method fully. Method one and two of my data collection reaped what was expected, while method three proved to be both the strength and weakness of my research. I had underestimated the depth of discussion that would result from the photo elicitation interview and I was not fully prepared with a recorder, for the sheer quantity of photos, and the depth of the resulting dialogue. Although offered a disposable camera, all participants preferred to take their photos on their telephones or own cameras. The participants' preference for their own cameras could be seen as an example of empowerment as suggested by Parker (2009); they not only had the ability to have their voice heard, but they had the ability to make their own choice, to use something that is familiar to their everyday life within this research. Additionally, I had miscalculated how many photos would result from the process. One participant produced over 100 photographs, with resulting dialogue. As this research was being conducted under a strict time frame, as part of my Post Graduate studies, I lost the opportunity to follow up on the vast quantity of information at a later date. It was a wasted opportunity; however this became a valuable learning opportunity into the scope of photo elicitation.

I was amazed at the depth of data that emanated from the photo elicitation interview. The participants' enthusiasm for the photo elicitation interview was noticeable in comparison to their initial interview, and not long after the commencement of the interview, I realized that the complexity of discussion resulting from these photos was priceless; the unexpected comments and topics of discussion were very interesting and much freer flowing than the conversations I had had within the interviews. Much of what was discussed in conjunction with these photos was new information and was not apparent within the individual interviews or their stories. This reflected Meo's (2010) findings when she argued that photo elicitation allowed for the interviewees to talk more freely and enthusiastically and that it "allowed for the emergence of unexpected topics" (p.155). I firmly believe that the use of photographs broke down barriers between me, as the researcher, and the ELL participants. The participants showed very little reserve during the photo elicitation interview, in comparison to their initial interview. They were animated and excited to share their photos. Photo elicitation broke through language barriers and it gave the interviewees the ability to really navigate the interview; they were in control leading me where they wanted to go as they discussed their photographs. There was a different dynamic to the relationship between them and myself. My experience with the photo elicitation mirrors Meo's, who argued that photo elicitation gave the interviewee a greater degree of control as they could control the image more than their words within an interview.

The participants came up with a huge array of photographs. As the visual images can be read both externally (what we can see in the image) and internally (what message has been sent), it was imperative that, as suggested by Mahruf et al. (2007), participants were given the opportunity to explain and discuss their photographs. Within my research, the interviewees individually presented their photographs to me and explained why they had taken that particular photograph and what it meant to them. Throughout this discussion students talked spontaneously and unreservedly about their photos. As Harper (2012) suggested, the participants had become the expert and I, as the researcher, had become the student.

Photo-elicitation within research and teaching

While there was a huge amount of resultant data, the following is an example of some of the insights gained through photo elicitation.

Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photos 1, 2 and 3: The discussion surrounding photos like these largely revolved around positive experiences. The use of these photos appeared to stimulate deeper thoughts and conversation of the participants. They were eager to talk and freely discussed new topics with examples of confusing situations and stories from experiences shared. Insights were gained about how important it was for the participants to have the opportunity to make more friends. Stories were willingly shared that were new, and which appeared to be prompted by the photographs. The resulting discussion impacted on my understanding of the participants as it offered, as the researcher, a closer look at what they considered to be important.

I discovered that not all of the photos taken were of positive or helpful aspects. These insights were completely new and had not been mentioned in the prior interviews or in their own stories. This suggested to me that the participants were more willing to share negative views with a photograph as the neutral third party as suggested by Parker (2009). The use of photographs appeared to have empowered the participants and they appeared more willing to discuss new topics as Meo (2010) concluded.

Photo 4



Photo 5

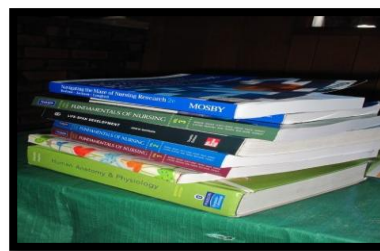


Photo 4 and 5: Discussion surrounding these photos highlighted negative experiences the participants had had thus far not mentioned to me. It gave me an insight into factors that were important to the participants and I believe that the use of the photos broke down the barriers between the participant and myself as they acted as the neutral third party, stimulating deeper thoughts and conversations..

The insights provided from the photos, and the depth and length of discussion in terms of the research aim were enlightening. They were equally enlightening in terms of the opportunities for the emergence of new and unexpected topics they afforded. This approach could have been developed much further had I been fully prepared for and able to examine in more depth the ensuing data. Conducting follow-up interviews based on a selection of photographs would have been beneficial in uncovering a clearer

picture. I have learned that sufficient time and preparation must be given to this form of data collection. As I have researched further, I now realize how little I initially understood. As a result of my first amateur foray into the use of photo elicitation within research, the benefits of this form of data collection within research are now much clearer to me. It is an area that excites me as I look at its potential and it will most definitely be used within my future research, particularly when researching ELLs.

Using Photo elicitation in the classroom

While enthusiastic to use this form of data collection within my future research, I have also explored ways in which I could utilise the principles of photo elicitation within my teaching. This semester, after some consideration I decided that a form of photo elicitation would fit in well with one of my Grad. Dip/Cert TESOL (Graduate Diploma / Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) modules. Within this module TESOL students learn another language and then reflect upon the experience.

Reflective practice is an integral part of teacher education. According to Davis and Waggett (2006), reflective writing helps to encourage trainee teachers to become more aware of their own self-knowledge. They suggested that while the classroom experience is important, it is often during reflection that most learning occurs. Reflective practice involves regularly examining your thoughts, feelings, strengths and weaknesses. It is about observing and listening and wondering. Kaplan and Howes (2004) commented on the ability of images to provoke reflection on aspects that are often taken for granted. Van Auken et al. (2010) proposed that using photographs as a trigger for reflection was indeed a logical development. I therefore decided that, as visual images can help to trigger memories; this could be a useful method to use within this class, especially for the students within my class for whom English is not their first language. When viewing a photograph we are 'seeing' again, not just relying on our memory. Berger (1992) contends that there is a salient difference between 'seeing' and 'memory'. He stated that "the thrill found in a photograph comes in the onrush of memory". He further commented that "memory is a strange faculty. The sharper and more isolated the stimulus memory receives, the more it remembers" (p.192). This therefore highlights the potential of photographs within reflective practice.

The module I decided to utilise photo elicitation within requires students to reflect upon their experiences of learning another language and to then record their reflections in a reflective journal. These reflections are then used as the basis of the two required essays. I decided to encourage students to take photos throughout the language learning experience, both inside and outside of the classroom, and then use them to help with their reflections within their reflective journal later to act as triggers for their memory. While some students have not taken up the opportunity, those who have, appear to have benefited from this process. The depth of comments within their reflective journals and the amount of unexpected detail given is outstanding. The resultant essays produced have been of an exceptional standard with an increased depth of critical reflection, which aligned with discussion by Zenkov et al. (2012) that the use of the photo elicitation process enabled students to share powerful and unexpected insights. It allowed me to gain insights into the difficulties they were facing. Arnold (1999) discussed the importance of images with regards to our mental processing and how it is important not to underestimate their value. Likewise Dat (2003) highlighted the way learners find it easier to discuss ideas when they feel emotionally involved. The resulting insights gained from the students' use of photos appears to have enhanced the learners' interests and their motivation. As Dat suggested, the use of photos encourages students to use language on a subject that they know and care about. Particularly relevant within the ELL field, Nunan (1991) while discussing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), converses on the importance of introducing authentic situations, including the learner's own personal experiences within the classroom and the importance of making links between the classroom

and outside of the classroom. Through this experience I have learned that the simple inclusion of photographs within the classroom is a valuable tool in order to get to know all of my learners, in order to encourage discussion and reflection, and in order to make links between the classroom and the outside world. This is definitely an area that I want to develop further within my teaching and I intend to encourage students to utilise this opportunity further.

Conclusion

Within research and within the classroom, pictures can help students overcome their shyness and can help break barriers down. They help trigger feelings and thoughts; they evoke memories and can help those struggling with a second language to articulate differences, cultural beliefs. As ESOL teachers we are all well aware of the power of visuals and how important these can be to our teaching. Pictures can be a valuable source of material for practicing speaking, or listening, for encouraging writing, for aiding vocabulary understanding or for grammatical purposes. Zenkov et al. (2012) confirm the importance of learner contributions and allowing for student voice, particularly when teaching ELLs. This aligns with more recent views on the communicative language teaching approach, where emphasis is placed on the importance of empowering students and to giving students voice (Simmons, 2010). Additionally the use of photo elicitation within the ESOL classroom allows for teachers to build a greater understanding of who their ELLs are and the difficulties they may be facing.

Although aware of the importance of visuals, I feel that as the teacher we are often the ones to provide the students with the picture; however, through my experience with this research method and within the classroom I have come to realise that it is also very important to give the learners the ‘power’ or the opportunity for them to share their own photos and thoughts. In doing so we open the door for them to express clearly how they are feeling and let them lead the dialogue. Photos “arguably have a narrative”, as suggested by Parker (2009, p.10), an inbuilt story that goes along with the photo. Narratives can emerge from the opportunity to see, share and talk. They are constructed through the dialogue that is prompted by the images. These stories have the ability to “teach, represent, identify, explain, persuade and reinforce social boundaries” (Ketelle, 2010, p.549). Getting learners to tell us about their photos gives the added benefit of helping teachers to really get to know their learners, of enhancing the learner’s personal experiences and allowing the opportunity to share their experiences.

As a researcher, I now realize the untapped potential of this method of data collection, in particular within situations where language and culture may be a barrier (Hurworth, 2003; Van Auken et al., 2010). The depth of data collected, the ability to break down barriers, the unexpected and new discussions that emerge through the use of photo elicitation has been highlighted and will shape my future research. Understanding the way in which photo elicitation can empower the participants, as suggested by Magnini (2006), by helping to overcome status differences has been enlightening. I have gained an understanding that it is imperative to be prepared; to allow for a considerable length of time to be allocated to this process in order to develop this method of data collection to its full potential.

I hope that some of my enthusiasm for the use of this method of research may also inspire the reader. My message to teachers and researchers is to not underestimate the power of a photo or picture and I challenge you to use this exciting tool within your future research and teaching.

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