

A critical evaluation of qualitative research methods, focussing specifically on semi-structured interviews and referencing two peer-reviewed education articles to highlight the use of the chosen research method

Jaime MORRISH*

Introduction

In this paper, I provide an analysis of semi-structured interviews in the context of a broader discussion around research methods. I offer a breakdown of research descriptions, with a particular focus on semi-structured interviews, and provide a rationale for the analysis undertaken. I critically assess two peer-reviewed articles around education in order to demonstrate the significance of my analysis, examining the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the research methods detailed. I then consider the wider research methods discourse and offer a projection of how this broader discussion might inform my future research endeavours.

Aims:

1. To present an overview of research methods, including qualitative and quantitative research, mixed methods research, and semi-structured interviews.
2. Critically analyse two peer-reviewed articles demonstrating their use of semi-structured interviews.
 - a. Focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the research methods section.
3. From the literature review and analyses of the two chosen papers, how will this affect my own future research projects?

When conceptualising a research project, the historical stance is to view it as either a quantitative or a qualitative endeavour. Traditionally, these were the two models of research to choose from, but in the aftermath of the paradigm wars (Gage, 1989) where researchers aligned themselves to one or the other of the two methods, notions of mixed methods research (MMR) began to emerge. The idea of MMR highlighted the need for a greater understanding and acceptance between the two different models of research and ‘less confrontational approaches’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 31) to either paradigm. It is also cogent to consider the multiple method research model, which, as the name suggests, uses more than one method. However, where it differs from MMR is

* *School of Cross-Cultural Studies, Department of Foreign Studies*

that multiple methods aims to answer different parts of the research project as a whole. As Fielding (2009) argues, multiple methods research is a means to avoid focusing solely on one part of the research question, by using multiple methods, ‘it is a way to achieve analytic density’ (p. 435). However, for the basis of this paper, I will focus on the area of qualitative research, particularly the area pertaining to semi-structured interviews.

What is research?

The term ‘research’ is not straightforward and can have numerous interpretations. However, I align myself with the definition posited by Cohen *et al.* (2018), when they refer to research as ‘activities and undertakings aimed at developing a science of behaviour’ (p. 1). Similarly, the term ‘educational research’ requires a flexible acceptance of the same principles but is directly or indirectly associated with addressing the problems associated with teaching, learning and education as a whole.

What is quantitative research?

Creswell (2007) states that quantitative research can be characterised as using a postpositivist approach for developing knowledge. This includes using, amongst others, the use of measurements and observations, the development and trialling of hypotheses and questions, cause and effect deliberation and the testing of theories. By means of surveys and experiments, the data collected is published via statistical data.

What is mixed methods research?

Crocker (2009) describes MMR as research combining quantitative and qualitative methods to address the same study question(s). Using an MMR approach is advantageous when the integration available from MMR will provide a more thorough understanding of the research question. Crocker (2009) highlights that one of the main strengths of using MMR is the ability to triangulate the data and that by viewing the data from several different angles will provide a more accurate representation.

What is qualitative research?

In his book ‘What is Qualitative Research?’ Hammersley (2013) states, ‘the question “What is qualitative research?” demands a definition of some sort’ (p. 1). There are numerous definitions to refer to in research literature across many fields of academia. Hammersley (2013) concludes that there are various explanations, and none seem able to grasp the full entirety of what qualitative research is, making it a ‘phenomenon that is not easily characterised’ (p. 2). He further suggests that the act of defining it ‘is almost certainly a hopeless venture’ (p. 4). However, in the context of

providing a working definition for this paper, I hold that the definition should be tailored to the needs of the particular research that is being carried out. I will, therefore, apply a synthesis taken from Croker (2009), Hammersley (2013) and Cohen *et al.* (2018) that covers both the social sciences and the applied linguistic field in which I will conduct my research.

Qualitative research is an all-encapsulating term used to refer to a ‘complex and evolving research methodology’ (Croker, 2009, p. 5) that focuses on smaller research projects in a more natural setting. It uses spoken, written, or other semiotic modes, both embodied, such as gestures, proxemics and haptics but also non-embodied, such as space, place and sound, rather than numerical data analysis.

The question, ‘What is the value of our research?’ (Rossetti, 2014, p. 482), is one of the most important factors to be considered before undertaking research of any kind. By considering this question, we can hopefully come to a salient conclusion of what we want to achieve with our proposed research idea. A common misconception Freeman (2009) highlighted is that any research project must be initiated with a question. In reality, the inquiry or interest in a particular area drives the desire to conduct research, and the question itself may change as the research design is formulated. Freeman (2009) explains that ‘the role of the research question(s) is to put into words the area of inquiry so that it can be studied’ (p. 27). This suggestion should be taken into consideration – and answered – before any research project is initiated.

Choosing a method for a qualitative research project

Thus far, I have dealt with the background to research and qualitative research. The next logical step that needs to be decided in any research study is the data collection method(s). Cresswell (2003) states that ‘it is useful to consider the full range of possibilities for data collection in any study’ (p. 17), reflecting the notion of ‘fitness for purpose’ that is a central theme of Cohen *et al.*’s (2018) seminal book ‘Research Methods in Education’. With this in mind, it is imperative that selecting the appropriate method or methods should be a carefully considered process of weighing up the available options and selecting which best suits the needs of the study regardless of personal preference.

Why I chose to focus on semi-structured interviews

When researching the literature for previous research projects, I focussed on a teaching phenomenon that has vastly expanded in Asia over the past twenty years: namely, Japanese universities that have implemented English Medium Instruction (EMI) courses. Of the 34 journal articles and government reports I read, 15 used either semi-structured interviews or interviews as the principal method or one of the main methods of collecting data. As this is an area of research used for my doctoral thesis and countless other research projects, I considered it relevant to explore further the nature of this research method to have a more complete understanding. Rowley (2012) considers the use of interviews pertinent when:

1. The research objectives centre on understanding experiences, opinions, attitudes, values, and processes.
2. There is insufficient known about the subject to be able to draft a questionnaire.
3. The potential interviewees might be more receptive to an interview than other data gathering approaches

(Rowley, 2012, p. 262)

Ostensibly, interviewing appears to be a relatively straightforward method of data collection. The researcher asks a question or series of questions and records the answers of the subject. However, on further inspection, there are several kinds of interviews that can be utilised in educational research, depending on the subject matter. Regardless of the type of interviews being used, a frequently repeated aspect of interviewing, which runs throughout the extensive literature on this topic, is the notion of ‘centrality and the complexity of ethical, respectful and meaningful relationships’ (Brown and Danaher, 2019, p. 78).

Interviews

Interviews are a commonly used method for collecting data (Cohen *et al.*, 2018) and have been used both historically and continue to be utilised in modern-day research, particularly in educational research (Brown and Danaher, 2019) where the researcher needs to grasp a more in-depth understanding of the issue at hand. There are many different kinds of interviews that a researcher can choose. However, the researcher should always keep in mind the notion of fitness for purpose. Cohen *et al.* (2018) outline a total of 14 different interview types from four different sources all with their relative merits and demerits depending on the situation¹. In essence, if a researcher requires more personal and original data then the interview questions will be more open-ended and will be shaped towards eliciting more non-standardised and unique answers. Alternatively, when more comparable answers are required, more in line with a quantitative study, then the interviews tend to be more rigid and structured, most likely resulting in more directed, standardised answers from respondents.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews are an intermediary position between the more rigid, quantitative type interview questions and their alternative: the open-ended, more unique interview questions associated with qualitative research. During semi-structured interviews, the participants should feel relaxed and at ease to help build trust and rapport while the interviewer should have a list of topics and questions prepared beforehand for use during the interview. However, it is important that the questions are able to produce the open-ended, more original answers that are desired for this type of research method. These unique answers may well be entirely unplanned and unforeseen by the interviewer when making the questions, and this, therefore, adds to the originality of the interview

and can possibly lead to unscripted follow-up questions by the interviewer also (Brown and Danaher, 2019). Moreover, it is crucial that a researcher wishing to use semi-structured interviews should undergo formal training and have some experience in this area, therefore enabling them to deal with the unexpected side of this method. Rabionet (2011) concludes that semi-structured interviews are a useful and versatile method to collect the opinions of people and there are six stages that need to be adhered to in order to conduct these interviews successfully:

1. Selecting the type of interview
2. Establishing ethical guidelines
3. Crafting the interview protocol
4. Conducting and recording the interview
5. Crafting the interview protocol
6. Reporting the findings

(Rabionet, 2011, p. 563)

In addition to these six stages, Brown and Danaher (2019), in their recent article posit that there are three guiding principles to observe when undertaking semi-structured interviews. They note that ‘the values of the CHE principles of Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy [should be followed] as a guiding framework for maximising the ethical and methodological advantages of semi-structured interview research practices’ (p. 76).

One of the primary benefits of conducting semi-structured interviews is the ability to record the subject’s opinions and allow them to voice their thoughts freely. The unstructured interview is used more appropriately when the interviewer is not aware of what they do not know and is completely reliant on the interviewee to inform the researcher (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). A semi-structured interview is different to other interview types because the researcher and respondent are co-constructing the data together, whereas an entirely unstructured interview may not be able to fully elicit answers which will entirely answer or be relatable to the themes and topics of the research aims. Conversely, a completely structured interview will not allow for the freer, open-ended answers that prompt the more unique and original answers from the participants giving ‘a window [in]to their stories’ (Rabionet, 2011, p. 563).

The interviews in focus

The two articles I am primarily focussing on all show appropriate examples of using semi-structured interviews in their respective research projects. The two articles are:

- Brown, H. (2017). Investigating the implementation and development of undergraduate English-Medium instruction programmes in Japan: Facilitating and hindering factors. *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly* 19(1), 99–135.
- Galloway, N., Kriukow, J., & Numajiri, T. (2017). *Internationalisation, higher education*

and the growing demand for English: an investigation into the English medium of instruction (EMI) movement in China and Japan. London: British Council.

In order to critically analyse the chosen articles comprehensively, I have decided to focus on each article in turn rather than assessing the merits or demerits as a whole. Both articles referred to were thoroughly examined in previous research I conducted (Morrish, XXX). The articles were recent, peer-reviewed journal articles examining higher education institutions (HEIs) that had recently implemented EMI, with my particular focus being on HEIs in Japan. Out of the 18 research articles that I previously used (Morrish, XXXX), all but three of them used interviews as either the principal source of collecting data or as a significant part of it. Most of the interviews conducted in all the papers were either semi-structured interviews or the specific mode was not stated, and the method was classed as interviews.

Article one

Brown, H. (2017). Investigating the implementation and development of undergraduate English-Medium instruction programmes in Japan: Facilitating and hindering factors. *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly*, 19(1), 99–135.

According to the author, this exploratory study of EMI at Japanese universities' main goal was to identify factors that may facilitate or hinder EMI programmes. Brown (2017) states that the data were collected via publicly available documentary evidence and interviews from 15 interviewees with varying teaching positions at eight universities and that they shared their insights and experiences via semi-structured interviews.

Brown (2017) further acknowledges in the data and method section that semi-structured interviews were decided upon for both 'practical and epistemological grounds' (Brown, 2017, p. 108). He clarifies this by explaining that a more flexible way of collecting data and facilitating the unpredicted unique responses desired for his research project was to use semi-structured interviews. This is also reinforced by Cohen *et al.* (2018) who observe that semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to capture a person's originality or situation. Brown (2017) also claims the relaxed atmosphere of using semi-structured interviews was essential in building trust and rapport with the interviewees, especially as the interview was the 'initial meeting with many [of the] participants' (p. 108).

This is a particularly salient point that is highlighted in greater detail in Brown and Danaher's (2019) article, where they state that good rapport building is essential 'to maximising the interview's potential as a dialogical source of knowledge and meaning making' (Brown and Danaher, 2019, p. 79). Epistemologically, Brown (2017) regards the use of semi-structured interviews as not solely a policy issue in reference to EMI implementation but also a social paradigm allowing the issues of identity and workplace politics to be examined alongside the interviewees' interpretations and valuable experiences in co-constructing the data with the interviewer.

This is a stance also proposed by Brown and Danaher (2019), who state that semi-structured interviews, epistemologically speaking, allow for knowledge to be ‘co-constructed in environments that foster dialogue and engagement and that help to scaffold learning and reflection’ (p. 79). Mann (2011), however, focuses more on the position of a reflexive epistemological stance, positing that the researcher has become more visible in the co-construction of interview data collection and requires an examination of how the researcher’s involvement affects and informs the research project holistically.

Brown (2017) does counter this last point; however, by writing that he follows Seidman’s (2006) advice of not influencing the research data with the interviewer’s interests. Seidman (2006) continues that although the relationship between researcher and participant is vital in constructing the interview, it should not become an equal relationship as ‘the resulting discourse would be a conversation not an interview’ (p. 98).

Brown’s (2017) article is an in-depth piece covering many of the positive aspects highlighted in the interview literature. One particularly good example of this is on page 109 when Brown states that during the final stages of collecting the data, the interviewees were given a summarised version of the transcribed interview in order for them to ‘both fact check the contents and correct any possible misinterpretations’ (p. 109). Brown explains that at any time during the research process, this access to the data was freely available and that two of the participants, after reading one of the draft versions of the paper, did ask for minor changes to be made.

This is an essential stage of the interview procedure; it is important that participants being interviewed can feel that their comments will not be misconstrued in any way, further building up the trust and rapport that is so important between researcher and responder. Hammersley (2014) advocates a similar position in that he advises people should be kept informed during the research process and give their consent freely on all matters, from the beginning of the interview process up to the publication stage.

However, one unintended consequence of this approach that not only occurs in Brown’s (2017) article but in all the research articles using interviews that were previously examined, and that is the lack of full transcript data. In most cases, excerpts of the interview data were given to highlight a particularly salient point, but no full interview data was included in the appendices or links to the researcher’s website. Brown (2017) writes that ‘descriptions will be supported with extracts from participants’ interview responses in order to present better their actual voices and their understanding of the program in which they work’ (p. 110). Naturally, there are occasions when it is not possible to show sections of the data due to i) sensitivity, ii) possibility of deductive revelation or iii) permission issues (Mann, 2011). If more complete interview data are not made available online or in the appendices, Mann (2011) argues, ‘then researcher and potential researchers are impoverished’ (p. 21). A further relevant point on this issue is that in order to develop our approach to qualitative interviewing, it is essential to move beyond the tempting act of only selecting the quotable parts that serve our needs (Mann, 2011).

Another final issue is that of any conflict of interest and the ethical soundness of the research project. Brown (2017) clearly states that his research ‘was partially supported by the Japan Society

for the Promotion of Science, Grants in Aid for Scientific Research ©, Project Number 25370638' (p. 99). An additional concern relates to the co-researcher Bethany Iyobe. She is thanked for her contribution with the data collection, but it is not made clear how involved she was in doing the interviews. Kvale (2007) remarks that by conducting 'interviews the importance of the researcher as a person is magnified because the interviewer is the main instrument for obtaining knowledge' (p. 32). Therefore, by having two different researchers conducting the interviews raises the issue of subjectivity and questions such as:

- How many of the interviews were conducted by each researcher?
- How was the rapport building different between the two researchers?
- As semi-structured interviews allow for the uniqueness of each situation to develop, were the same questions asked by both researchers?
- How were the interviews divided? Randomly, equally, by location or by gender? Which also raises its own set of questions.
- Would having two different people and two different sexes give different results in the interviews?
- Culturally speaking, how does a female interviewer affect the data collection in the predominantly male-dominated society of contemporary Japan (Lee, 2019).

If the full set of interview transcript data were accessible, as Mann (2011) advocates, then we could possibly answer these questions. Ethically speaking, Kvale (2007) maintains that the independence of research can be affected in two different areas, the funding received for a project or the participants being interviewed. Given that Brown's (2017) research for this particular project is, in part, financed by the Japanese society for the promotion of science, it is imperative that the research's neutrality not be questioned. One sensitive issue that Kvale (2007) brings to our attention regarding this, and which cannot be verified without examining the full transcript data, is the researcher ignoring or emphasising individual sections of the data to the detriment of the investigation. That is not to say that Brown's (2017) article is in any way compromised; on the whole, the article is extremely well researched and written with numerous excerpts from the data. However, with the benefit of being able to access the complete data, it would be possible to eliminate any doubt about the bias or otherwise of the research. An excellent example of this is Macaro, Curle, Pun, An and Dearden's (2017) article where they have made the additional, extensive, appendices available online.

Article two

Galloway, N., Kriukow, J., & Numajiri, T. (2017). *Internationalisation, higher education and the growing demand for English: an investigation into the English medium of instruction (EMI) movement in China and Japan*. London: British Council.

As with the Brown (2017) article, this research project also examines EMI at HEIs, specifically,

seven institutions in Japan and eight in China (Galloway, Kriukow and Numajiri, 2017). Also similar to the Brown (2017) article, Galloway *et al.* (2017) used more than one data collection method: semi-structured interviews were used alongside online questionnaires; and there were four focus groups. In total there were 18 students and 28 staff members interviewed from six of the universities selected. The main goals of this research project as set out in the abstract of the article were to gain ‘insights into the differing approaches to, driving forces behind, and attitudes towards EMI’ (Galloway *et al.*, 2017, p. 3). One further reason given for this research project was in response to Dearden’s (2014) claim that staff and student perceptions of EMI were needed at a national and international level. As a result, Galloway *et al.*’s (2017) article was intended to act as a springboard for staff training and more extensive research into the rapidly expanding area of EMI in Japan and China.

There are no definitive reasons given for why the researchers chose to use semi-structured interviews, only that ‘semi-structured interviews were used to guide the discussion towards common questions’ (Galloway *et al.* 2017, p. 12). With regards to the research design, very little is explicitly said about how and why semi-structured interviews were used, which is somewhat surprising given the thorough and comprehensive manner of the research article as a whole.

On page 12 of the article, Galloway *et al.* (2017) state that the interview questions were trialled with a small number of Japanese students in 2016 and then adjustments were made ‘by the main researcher’ (p. 12). It is also established in the research design section that the interviews were only carried out by the principal researcher in person, who visited the selected universities and conducted the interviews in English. Furthermore, it is noted that consent was given but that it was a lengthy and challenging process. Lastly, it is made clear that the focus group prompts, questionnaires and interview questions were forwarded prior to the scheduled meeting times and that all the research methods elicited responses to the approaches and experiences with EMI.

However, there are some crucial elements of the interview process which are excluded from Galloway *et al.*’s (2017) article. For example, although we are informed of how many interviewees were selected, we are not privy to how the participants were selected, which both Hammersley (2015) and Brown and Danaher (2019) view as an essential criterion for rigorous research. Other elements that are not included which could be considered important are in creating the interview questions so that the research questions are fully addressed (Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick, 2008). As stated previously, we are made aware of the trialling of the interview questions to a small group of Japanese students which are then modified, but we are not made aware of what the final questions are or how they address the research questions.

One further central element that needs to be considered is raised by McCormack (2004), who advocates the importance of analysing and disseminating the interview data that is elicited throughout the interview process. Galloway *et al.* (2017) confirm that the qualitative data was analysed using NVivo 10 and, furthermore that the interview data was analysed thematically. It is further reported that the data was divided into two cases, analysed separately, from which a thematic framework was developed for both the student respondents and the teachers. However, the ‘authentic interactional encounters’ (Brown and Danaher, 2019, p. 78) were not maximised in a

manner that suitably highlighted and represented the full interactions between researcher and interviewee. As with the Brown (2017) article, we are given numerous vignettes of what transpired but we are unable to view the complete data set, which would show full transparency. Mann (2011) concedes that allowing full access to transcribed data is a contentious issue, but I agree with Mann (2011) that by giving the reader full access to the transcribed data enables us to evaluate the reliability of the co-constructed data fully.

Ethically, Galloway *et al.*'s (2017) article has both positives and negatives. Firstly, consent was obtained for all the participants while they were also given a chance to remove themselves from the project at any point. It is also noted that the interviewees were given pseudonyms to protect their identities while they were also given a copy of the results, an important aspect recommended by Kvale (2007), Mann (2011) and Hammersley (2014). Moreover, Galloway *et al.* (2017) have adhered to what Hammersley (2014) refers to as the definition of research ethics, respecting and considering the well-being of our interviewees. Galloway *et al.* (2017) stress that in addition to offering them full transcripts to clarify the interviews, participants 'were made to feel comfortable and questions were asked based on their narrative in the interviews, which enabled them to talk openly and extensively about their attitudes' (p. 13). Brown and Danaher (2019) also refer to this in their article on the CHE (Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy) principles, where they advocate making the respondents feel as comfortable as possible in order for interviewees to relax and answer as openly as possible.

A less admirable quality of this article is the possible overall subjectivity. The lead researcher, Galloway, is a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, while Kriukow obtained his PhD under the supervision of Galloway and Numajiri is listed as a current PhD student (Galloway *et al.*, 2017). There are clear and apparent links here, but the reader is not made aware of the input from each researcher, only that it was not possible 'for other members of the research team to travel to Japan and China' (Galloway *et al.*, 2017, p. 13). Moreover, this article is published in the research papers series by the British Council (BC), and it states on the BC website that 'the British Council works closely with universities and other research institutions to fund and publish ELT research. The Research Papers series gathers together the outputs of these partnerships and collaborations' (British Council, n.d.).

The keywords here are 'fund' and 'collaborations'. Cohen *et al.* (2018) bring our attention to the fact that partnerships and backers may want research carried out that has immediate or direct practical results or that is even dedicated to reaffirming government policy. Furthermore, Galloway admits that as a TESOL lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, this research project was of 'direct interest to her' (Galloway *et al.* 2017, p. 13) and that she 'was interested in understanding the EMI phenomenon to inform her own teaching practice on the MSc TESOL' (Galloway *et al.* 2017, p. 13) due to the lack of availability at her current institution. Consequently, Cohen *et al.* (2018) conclude that this 'may suppress critical or sensitive research' (p. 115).

Ultimately, issues that remain unsaid or leave the reader uncertain of the article's reliability could have been avoided. It is not necessarily that there is anything radically suspicious with the research project, but as the input of the BC or the co-researchers are not clearly detailed, Kvale

(2007) and Mann's (2011) advice regarding the importance of transparency is not adhered to.

Critiquing the two articles holistically

Interviewer–interviewee relationship

We are informed in the Galloway *et al.* (2017) article that the researchers have links with Japan and China, but there is no further information regarding the relationship between the lead researcher who conducted all the interviews and facilitated the focus groups. Conversely, in the Brown (2017) article, we are told that this was the first meeting for many of the participants, but not all, and that we are not made aware of which researcher did the interviews. The varied relationships between interviewer and interviewee, such as no previous relationship other than arranging the meeting, to a relationship of peer professionals, can have significant implications for what occurs and is co-constructed in the interviews (Mann, 2011). In the next section of this paper, I discuss some of these implications in the context of my professional experience.

Identity and cultural issues

As a Western male living in Japan and working at a Japanese university, I know the cultural dynamics of living in this country and how my status could affect my research. Galloway *et al.* (2017) also highlight this in their ethics and limitations section, as the lead researcher, Galloway, notes that as a British university professor there were possible issues with the power relationships between the participants and Galloway. Galloway *et al.* (2017) also hypothesise that due to Galloway's position, there could be possible bias where the respondents give what they feel as the best or desired answers. Galloway *et al.* (2017) continue that it was not possible to recruit an external or local researcher to counter this possible negative impact.

Conversely, Brown (2017) does not address the issue of identity or culture in any aspect. This could be due to the difference in gender between Brown and Galloway, or that Brown is living and working at a Japanese university while Galloway was visiting purely for the purpose of the research project. Lee (2016) addresses these issues of identity and gender succinctly by commenting that researchers are often seen as insiders or outsiders during the interview process. For example, interviewees might regard the interviewer as an insider based on gender, nationality or a common ethnicity.

One final consideration regarding the matter of cultural differences and ethics which I had not previously contemplated is posited by Brooks, te Riele and Maguire (2014) and Cohen *et al.* (2018). They discuss the possibility that asking for individual written consent is a predominantly western and masculine trait. Although Brooks *et al.* (2014) agree that written consent is the main course of action in the majority of educational research projects, as well as other fields of social enquiry, it does not take into account the 'communitarian perspectives' (Brooks *et al.*, 2014, p. 84).

Lee (2016) brings our attention to the fact that China, Japan and South Korea all fall under this category and that the community is more important than the individual. Therefore, by asking for

individual written consent in these Asian cultures, researchers may be putting unforeseen pressure or difficulties on the selected individual. On a final note regarding this complicated issue, I agree with Lee (2016), who states that the difficulties and barriers that are encountered during cross-cultural research are impossible to overcome completely. As a result, ‘respecting face and harmony may function equally well or prove even better at building trust and rapport during interviews’ (Lee, 2016, p. 45). This is also a consideration encouraged by the CHE principles of Brown and Danaher (2019).

Conclusion

As a teacher and a researcher, using semi-structured interviews allows me the opportunity to not only capture the voices and interpret my participants’ experiences but through this research method, I am able to use interviews as a window into people’s lives. When conducting qualitative research, ‘semi-structured interviews are a popular qualitative data gathering technique’ (Brown and Danaher, 2019, p. 86). As previously stated, out of the 18 research articles I previously examined, 15 used either semi-structured interviews or interviews. Furthermore, from Macaro *et al.*’s (2017) systematic review of 83 EMI studies in higher education institutions, 40 of them either used semi-structured, qualitative or non-specified interview methods. However, there are certain precautions, guidelines and preparation needed before embarking on a research project using semi-structured interviews (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, Brown and Danaher, 2019).

There are numerous articles, books and academics that have various definitions on the issues needed for consideration in order to successfully complete a research project using semi-structured interviews. Brown and Danaher (2019), Cohen *et al.* (2018), Lee (2016), Mann (2011), Rabionet (2011) and Kvale (2007) are just some of the researchers whose work informs this paper. For ease of clarity and because of word count limitations, I have chosen the recommendations that are most frequently repeated throughout the literature and those I instinctively align with most closely.

Possibly one of the most critical factors in research and one that is mentioned in the majority of the associated literature is the ethical and moral considerations required for any research project. Rabionet (2011) reminds us that in conducting qualitative interviews, we are entering into – and influencing – the lives of other people, and they are donating their time to benefit our research. Considering associated ethical and moral issues as we are designing and planning the interview will benefit the relationship and interaction that we will have with our interviewees (Mann (2011) warns against empathising with participants too strongly as this may lead to emotionalist and unethical interviewing).

Other essential pre-research considerations, especially for the novice interviewer, are training and preparedness. Rowley (2012) and Brown and Danaher (2019) highlight the necessity of formal training and having a pre-prepared set of questions, follow up points, prompts and probes for semi-structured interviews, although the interviewer also needs to allow for the open responses that will help develop the conversation in a manner possibly unpredicted when designing the interview. As a result, planning and designing semi-structured interviews is a crucial skill that is particularly

pertinent for the inexperienced researcher and why Mann (2011) describes this form of interviewing as one of the most challenging.

Trust and rapport are two important criteria that are intertwined with each other and will inevitably help the interviewer to extract – to use Kvale’s (2007) miner analogy – the desired information from the interviewee. As Cohen *et al.* (2018) point out, building rapport and trust promotes a feeling of togetherness, and in the pursuit of common goals, a better relationship between interviewer and interviewee will naturally develop. Lee (2016) further elaborates by claiming that cultural barriers which naturally occur in cross-cultural research can be dissipated by ‘building trust and rapport during interviews’ (p. 45). Whereas Brown and Danaher (2019) assert that as one of the most popular qualitative research techniques, the success of a semi-structured interview ‘rests considerably on the relationship, rapport and level of trust established between researcher and the researched’ (p. 86).

In the course of researching for this paper, the two most useful and germane articles were Rowley (2012) and Brown and Danaher’s (2019). As a relative novice researcher and interviewer, Rowley’s (2012) article was particularly poignant as she states:

Other research methods texts offer advice on research interviews, but their advice is not tailored specifically to new researchers engaged in research for a thesis. They tend to offer options, but provide limited guidance on making crucial decisions in interview planning, design, conduct, and data analysis. (Rowley, 2012, p. 260)

As I move closer to developing my research project for my final thesis, and with initial thoughts of using semi-structured interviews for this, Rowley’s (2012) article will be invaluable. Similarly useful, although for different reasons, was the Brown and Danaher (2019) paper, as this is a very recent article that provides up to date information and advice on using semi-structured interviews. Many of the key elements used for this paper are distilled in the principles of CHE with their reflexive questions (appendix 1) for these principles providing a great deal of deliberation. Although it is challenging to produce a one size fits all framework for conducting semi-structured interviews, my aim in doing this research project was to delve further into the, at first glance, straightforward nature of semi-structured interviews but in reality, a very complex research method. Additionally, by analysing the two EMI research articles, I would be able to identify and build on positive aspects while learning from the negatives and avoiding making the same errors.

Notes

- 1 (i) standardized interviews; (ii) in-depth interviews; (iii) ethnographic interviews; (iv) elite interviews; (v) life history interviews; (vi) focus groups. (vii) semi-structured interviews; (viii) group interviews. (ix) structured interviews (x) exploratory interviews. (xi) informal conversational interviews; (xii) interview guide approaches; (xiii) standardized open-ended interviews; (xiv) closed quantitative interviews. (p. 508–509).

References

- British Council (n.d.). *Research Papers*. Accessed 09/08/2019 from:
<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications-research/research-papers>
- Brooks, R., te Riele, K., and Maguire, M. (2014). *Ethics and Education Research*. London: Sage.
- Brown, A., and Danaher, P., A. (2019). CHE Principles: facilitating authentic and dialogical semi-structured interviews in educational research. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 42(1), 76–90
- Brown, H. (2017). Investigating the implementation and development of undergraduate English-Medium instruction programmes in Japan: Facilitating and hindering factors. *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly*, 19(1), 99–135.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education*; 8th ed. London. Routledge.
- Cresswell, J., W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. 2nd ed. Sage.
- Croker, R., A. (2009). ‘An introduction to qualitative research’, in Heigham, J. & Croker, R., A. (ed.) *Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics: A Practical Introduction*. London. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dearden, J. (2014). English As a Medium of Instruction. *The British Council ELTRA Reports* 1–35.
- Fielding, N., G. (2009). Going out on a Limb: Postmodernism and Multiple Method Research. *Current Sociology*, 57(3), 427–447.
- Freeman, D. (2009). ‘What makes research qualitative’, in Heigham, J. & Croker, R., A. (ed.) *Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics: A Practical Introduction*. London. Palgrave Macmillan. 25–44.
- Gage, N., L. (1989). The paradigm wars and their aftermath. *Teachers College Record*, 91 (2), 135– 150.
- Galloway, N., Kriukow, J., & Numajiri, T. (2017). *Internationalisation, higher education and the growing demand for English: an investigation into the English medium of instruction (EMI) movement in China and Japan*. London: British Council.
- Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E., and Chadwick, B. (2008). Methods of Data Collection in Qualitative Research: Interviews and Focus Groups. *British Dental Journal*, 204 (6), 291–295.
- Hammersley, M. (2013). What is Qualitative Research? (*The What is? Research Methods Series*). London. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hammersley, M. (2014). On the ethics of interviewing for discourse analysis. *Qualitative Research*, 14(5), 529–541.
- Hammersley, M. (2015). On ethical principles for social research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18(4), 433–449.
- Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing Interviews*. Thousand Oaks. London. Sage.
- Lee, J., F., K. (2019). In the pursuit of a gender-equal society: do Japanese EFL textbooks play a role? *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(2), 204–217.
- Lee, M., C., Y. (2016) Finding cultural harmony in interviewing: the wisdom of the middle way, *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 39(1), 38–57.
- Macaro, E., Curle, S., Pun, J., An, J. and Dearden, J. (2018). A Systematic Review of English Medium Instruction in Higher Education. *Language Teaching*, 51 (1), 36–76.
- Data regarding the breakdown of the 83 EMI studies taken from Appendix 2, accessed 13/08/2019 from <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444817000350>
- Mann, S. (2011). A Critical Review of Qualitative Interviews in Applied Linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, 32(1), 62–24.

- McCormack, C. (2004). Storying Stories: A Narrative Approach to In-Depth Interview Conversations. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 7 (3), 219–236.
- Rabionet, S., E. (2011). How I Learned to Design and Conduct Semi-Structured Interviews: An Ongoing and Continuous Journey. *The Qualitative Report*, 16 (2), 563–566.
- Rossetti, K., R. (2014). Qualitative research interviews: Assessing the therapeutic value and challenges. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(4), 482–489.
- Rowley, J. (2012). Conducting Research Interviews. *Management Research Review*, 35 (3/4), 260–271.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A Guide for researchers in education and social sciences*. New York: Teachers' College Press.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Taken from Brown and Danaher, 2019, p. 85.

Table 1. Reflective questions for enacting the CHE principles in semi-structured interviews in educational research.

Connectivity

- What strategies can be adopted to help to build trust and overcome experiences of vulnerability, cautiousness and apprehension?
- How should I dress when meeting and conducting interviews with research participants?
- Is the language of the participant information sheet and consent form sufficiently clear and informative without being inaccessible?
- How can I provide potential participants with enough information to ensure that they give their fully informed consent to participate without influencing their responses?
- How can I maximize credibility and trust with participants whom I have never previously met?
- How can I read accurately the verbal and non-verbal signals to understand how I am perceived by the (potential) participants?
- Is it possible to balance aspects of reciprocity in terms of how much information I give and share as part of building relationships and connections?
- How can I shorten the distance between myself as the researcher and the participants?

Humanness

- How can I demonstrate humanness and a degree of informality without being seen as unprofessional?
- How can I use the interview to identify the separate and shared interests held by the participant/s and myself?
- How can I avoid making inaccurate or inappropriate promises or commitments about how potential interviewers might benefit from participating in the research?
- Are there specific aspects of semi-structured interviewing to consider and employ when interviewing people who are variously constructed as ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘marginalised’?
- What is the balance between sharing relevant aspects of my own humanness on the one hand and my voice and experience dominating the discussion on the other?
- How far should I go in terms of blurring the boundaries between my role as a researcher and those of being a ‘sharer of information’, a ‘confidant’ and a ‘friend’?
- How can I overcome emotions expressed by participants such as vulnerability, cautiousness and apprehension?
- How can I recognize whether there is an appropriate and equitable balance of power in the relationship between myself and the participants?
- How can I convey that participants are not being judged and that I am genuinely interested in their stories and the uniqueness of their contexts?

Empathy

- How can I move the interview process away from being one of interrogation to one that is much more in tune with developing enduring relationships with participants and that in turn acknowledges and values their contributions and positions?
- How easily can empathy shade into being perceived as endorsing or critiquing specific attitudes, behaviours and values on the part of the participants or others?
- To what extent can and should empathy function as the bridge between self and other/ness?
- How might participants portray my empathy with other community members and/or others after the conclusion of the interview or the research?