Languages, layers and change: Newly-arrived children as research participants

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Abstract

Research with children who are contributing in languages other than English, or in English that is still being learned, can raise a number of additional methodological challenges for researchers. This paper highlights potential issues to keep in mind when recruiting the research participants, conducting interviews, eliciting responses, and then interpreting the words that are offered. Specific areas of concern, solutions and insights are discussed.

Key words: child interviews, interpreters, methodology, ESL, languages

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Qualitative research constantly draws upon words – transcripts are a record of the words spoken in interviews, research journals document conversations and third-person observations, and even non-verbal interactions and occurrences are represented through words. However, the elicitation of words and the meaning that is drawn from them is a complex undertaking, made even more so when additional layers of language and understanding come into the mix.

This paper considers some of the challenges of cross-cultural research interviews, referring to my experiences in interviewing children in the upper primary class of an inner-city school for recent arrivals. As part of my Masters research into the way newly-arrived children perceive music-making and music-learning, three children – Susan, 14, from Sudan, Kevin, 10, from China, and Lek, 12, from Thailand - took part in a series of interviews, assisted by interpreters. Regardless of whether the children's responses were delivered though their interpreter, or directly in English, there were layers of meaning, or interpretive possibilities.

A population in transition

Dislocation and transition can impact upon data gathering in different ways. Newly-arrived children and their families are in the middle of an intense life change, in which they must navigate their way through an often bewildering environment with new cultural rules, in addition to a new language. The challenges of immigration are compounded when the young new arrival is a refugee or humanitarian entrant. Their pre-arrival experiences have often been highly traumatic, including severely interrupted schooling, frequent displacement from one or more communities, growing up in environments of war, violence and instability, persecution, fear, and loss (DEECD, 2008; Gifford, Bakapanos, Kaplan & Correa-Velez, 2007; VFST, 2004).

The "chaos of the immigration process: culture shock, fears, the sudden inability to communicate, and the loss of the homeland" (Igoa, 1995, p. 15) can cause shock and even trauma, and demands an intense, even brutal amount of information processing (Doidge, 2007). The weight of this processing may impact upon a child's capacity to report their perceptions, as it may be difficult for them to make sense of all that is taking place. The extent to which people of any age can report on their motivations and emotions is dependent on the extent to which they are aware of them (Greene & Hill, 2005).

For many children, the transitions will continue throughout their schooling – from pre-arrival to Australia, from Language School to mainstream school, and from primary school to secondary school (Gifford et al., 2007). They may also need to relocate from temporary accommodation to permanent accommodation (often in another suburb or town). The transitional lives of young immigrants or refugees need to be taken into account when recruiting participants and building a sample, in addition to consideration of its potential impact on children's capacity to make sense of and describe their experiences.

Interviewing newly-arrived children

There is a scarcity of literature pertaining to methods and tools for research interviews with children from language backgrounds other than English. The small but growing body of literature that pertains specifically to interviews conducted with children for the purposes of research (Gollop, 2000; Greene & Hogan, 2005; Lewis & Lindsay,

2000; Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999) makes only brief reference to the needs of research interviews in multiple languages, or that take place with the assistance of interpreters. It was therefore necessary to identify common characteristics between English as a Second Language [ESL] contexts and other, potentially related settings for which specific guidance is available.

There are linguistic similarities between a child learning a second language and the language development of a younger child learning to speak his or her native language. The emotional and cultural inhibitors that may be present for new arrivals in interview settings bear some parallels (in terms of reluctance to speak) with awkward or uncomfortable topics for discussion. I adapted recommendations from each of these contexts when deciding the kinds of questions to ask, and the ideal order of questions.

The language of the interview

Children learning a second language are in an awkward hybrid world of two languages. While it is generally felt that children will express themselves most comfortably in their first language, Lefrancois (1990, cited in Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999) found that if the children are learning a new language that is also the dominant language outside the home, then the first language can become less functional or fluent.

Thus, an initial decision researchers must make is with regard to the kind of language they will use to ask questions. Even though I intended to use interpreters in every interview, these students already knew me as their music teacher, and were used to the simple, pared-back English that I used in class. I therefore felt it appropriate that I use a similar communicative style. The children could listen to the questions in translation, and were encouraged to answer questions in whichever language they preferred (English or their native tongue).

Questions – open or closed?

Most authors advise researchers to avoid asking ‘closed’ questions, or those that require yes/no answers or very precise answers, as this can lead to children becoming

passive. Closed questioning can also be more easily suggestive or leading (Dockrell, Lewis, & Lindsay, 2000; Greene & Hill, 2005; Wilson & Powell, 2001; Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999).

However, in the language school context students build great confidence in being able to answer questions easily, and 'closed' questions are essential in allowing students to build the trust and courage necessary if they are to later give the subjective, personal responses required from open-ended questions. This corresponds with advice pertaining to interviews with young children. Gollop (2000) and Nesbitt (2000) both recommend beginning interviews with younger children with factual questions that can be easily answered, as this serves to relax the children and increase their confidence in their abilities to answer the interviewer's questions.

When designing interviews for younger children, Saywitz suggests that language development stages be kept in mind (1990, cited in Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999), so that questions move from the most concrete ('who', 'what' and 'where') to more complex questions ('when', 'which' and 'how'). 'Why' questions are come later in a child's language development, therefore 'why' questions should also come in the last part of an interview schedule.

Accordingly, I designed my interview schedule to progress from concrete perceptions (*what* takes place in music classes), to metacognitive perceptions (*how* we learn new things, the processes we use), to abstract perceptions (*why* we are learning these things) to questions that asked for personal, emotional and hypothetical responses and opinions.

Framing questions

Another consideration is in the way questions should be framed, or placed in context. Within an ESL setting, teachers build confidence in their immigrant students by providing a great deal of contextual information around any question or task. However this has implications in a research context, where the framing or contextual information can make the question highly suggestive as to what the desired answer is (Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999).

In the following excerpt, Kevin struggles to find words (in Chinese) to describe the music in music classes, but when the interviewer offers him examples of possible answers, he finds the words to offer a detailed and specific response. It is important that the researcher has some knowledge about the kinds of words and vocabulary that will be familiar to the respondent and act as triggers.

> GH [*Clarifying the context for the question*] So… when we describe music, we can say, "This music is very *dreamy*" or "this music is *angry*" or this music is… pop music, or rock and roll music, or classical….
>
> Kevin [*less hesitant, and now in English*] One music, you can feel little bit like your heart is bumping… your heart is jumping, like this, maybe scary! Scared. Like this *[mimes an action from The White Room music, the teeth chattering]* – you know? Yeah.

A strategy proposed by Zwiers and Morrisette (1999) recommends that, when language or vocabulary familiarity is in doubt, researchers spend some time establishing this by asking more general questions about the topic at hand. I employed this strategy when asking the three participants to consider the different ways they learn things in music. Time was spent examining photographs taken by the students of different learning processes, or ways of learning, in their classroom. We discussed and labelled the different learning modes depicted, thus establishing vocabulary and placing it in context. I then asked the children to consider if this kind of learning took place in music classes, and asked them to give examples to illustrate this.

Therefore, in an ESL context, asking questions is a delicate balancing act between ensuring the child has enough context and information to answer the question confidently, and maintaining enough ambiguity or openness in the question that the child's response can be deemed an accurate reflection of his or her perceptions.

Visual tools to prompt descriptive language

The use of non-verbal communication tools and creative interviewing methods are effective alternative vehicles for both questions and responses in interviews with children. Creative methods are those that engage the imagination, and invite participants to use inventive processes to describe their experiences and give meaning to them (Veale, 2005). The tools used can include props, drawing, writing and pictures (Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999). Visual and creative methods enable children to "respond easily and… have the potential to provide meaningful insights" (McDonough, 2004, p. 1).

Throughout the three interviews I undertook with each child, I employed a range of different visual and creative techniques (Table 1). Visual vignettes (drawings and photographs taken by the children) were used as prompts for descriptions of activities and learning processes in music (Hazel, 1995; McDonough, 2004; Nesbitt, 2000); video footage from classes provided examples for discussion of the range of learning interactions taking place (McDonough, 2004); and the use of large hard-copy images provided an effective means for the participants to describe the feelings they have had in music classes.

Table 1: Creative methods used

Interview question	**Creative task/visual tool**
What sort of things did you do in music at school in your country of origin? *What sort of things do you do in music at this school?*	Child has drawn two pictures beforehand – of music classes in the country of origin, and of music classes in Australia. Detail in the pictures prompts further discussion.
What are the different ways that students learn new things at this school? *Do any of these ways of learning also happen in music?*	Child photographs different learning processes in the classroom. These are identified and labelled by the child, who then considers which processes also take place in music classes.
What interactions are taking place in the music lessons? What is being learned? Is	Child views video footage from previous music lessons. Interviewer pauses the

this work easy or difficult? Why do you think we do this particular activity?	playback at certain points and asks participant to describe what is happening on the screen.
How do you feel in the music classes? How did you feel when you first arrived? How do you feel now? Can you think of one time you felt differently? Think of another person in the class – how do you think they feel in music?	Child selects from a set of large hard-copy images of children displaying a range of different emotional reactions. A new image is chosen for each question.

These methods proved, on the whole, very effective in drawing the participants into discussion about their music classes. The photo selection task was particularly engaging, with each student displaying a relaxed and thoughtful demeanour throughout. This may be due to the physical nature of the paper images, which, as Hazel notes, "appears to relax the participants, providing them with an object to handle" (1995, p. 3). Viewing of video footage also seemed to engage the participants, and generated some detailed observations of the activities shown.

The weaknesses within the tasks all related to time – time prior to the interviews to complete the drawings and photography, or even time for class teachers to include them in the classroom as an English-learning opportunity (Gifford et al., 2007). Greater space within the overall timeframe of the data collection period would have allowed photographs to be taken by the students of learning processes in music as well as in the general classroom, allowing for a comparison between the two.

Time deficit is a pressure or source of frustration for most research projects (Stake, 1995), but it is important for researchers in ESL contexts to understand the impact that too little time can have on otherwise effective strategies. Newly-arrived children are often overwhelmed by the constant barrage of unfamiliar language and cultural systems. The processing of unfamiliar tasks takes much longer than it would in a mainstream setting with a similar age group. Allowing a generous amount of time will help to limit the stress or confusion children may feel, and add to the richness of insights you can acquire.

Layers - analysing and interpreting responses

There are many ways of examining the meaning of words offered in response to an interview question, and these increase when the additional layers of cultural confusion, second or third languages and interpreters are included in the mix. In my research project, an interpreter took part in each interview alongside the child. Two of these professionals were members of the school support staff, and so had well-established rapports with the children. The third child participated alongside an outside agency interpreter.

Working with interpreters

The use of interpreters in particular can "distance the fieldworker from the children's expression of their experience in multiple ways and complicate analysis" (Nesbitt, 2000, p. 139). Confusion can arise due to unfamiliarity with the vocabulary of an interview, or due to misunderstanding the communicative intentions to the researcher (Pence & Wilson, 1994, cited in Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999). These misunderstandings or subtle changes of meaning can also occur between the child and the interpreter.

Two issues in particular arose with relation to the involvement of interpreters in interviews. The first concerned vocabulary – the language required to talk about music did not flow easily for the interpreters, and this made the children's responses unclear. Or was it the other way around – that the interpreters merely translated the children's awkward language? The source of the awkward expression cannot be known without additional translations being made.

At times too, the pre-existing relationships between two of the students and their interpreters led to the possibility that they might be assisting the child to answer questions, suggesting possible answers during their interpretation of the question. It was difficult to ascertain this conclusively from the filmed interview footage, as the exchanges took place in languages other than English. In any case, where does

providing context or further examples slip over into providing an answer for the child?

Such concerns arose for me later, when reviewing the data for analysis. It is likely that the concern could be alleviated through a more extensive briefing of the interpreters on the project requirements. However this will increase the time burden and possibly the financial cost of the project, and thus should be factored in from the outset.

Cultural confusion and ambiguous responses

There are likely to be clashes of social and cultural rules that all newly-arrived children will be navigating, which can directly impact upon research interviews. One of these is the accepted interaction between a child and an adult, and presence of children's opinions in society. In some cultures it is not appropriate for children to address unfamiliar adults directly – "a smile or a look is a sufficient response" (Igoa, 1995, p. 54). In cultures where respect for adults and teachers is paramount, a question, answer, or opinion that is construed as disrespectful can lead to shaming or punishment for the child. Thus there is considerable risk and uncertainty for newly-arrived children in hazarding a guess to an unclear or open question.

Phrases like "I don't know", "I can't remember", and long pauses dominated several of the interviews I conducted, and additional interpretive effort was required to understand what these and other ambiguous signifiers might be revealing. Rogers (2005) suggests that these kinds of spoken and unspoken signifiers may be offered as a way to hint towards more personal information without making direct, potentially painful reference to it. Using an interpretative poetics approach, the researcher can make multiple readings of the text and identify patterns of occurrence in order to infer meaning.

While "I don't know" may simply be the most direct way of saying you don't know the answer to a question, it can also be used as a way of evading or avoiding a questions, or of indicating a reluctance to speak about the topic at hand (Igoa, 1995). This was probably the case with Lek, the Thai participant in my research, who

answered “I don’t know” and “I can’t remember” in response to all questions that asked for more detail following an initial, often brief, answer.

Lek’s inner world is closely guarded, and I felt she found the introspective nature of research interviews highly uncomfortable. The pattern that emerged from her evasive answers suggested a steely determination to reveal little beyond the most concrete and tangible of observations. Lek spoke most freely about the social interactions in music classes, and on the things that the students learn.

In contrast, Kevin’s frequent long pauses were followed by highly thoughtful responses, suggesting that he paused in order to think deeply about the question. An example of these pauses occurred when he was asked to compare the different ways of learning in the classroom to ways of learning in music, using the photos he had taken as a prompt. Each time, after a long pause, he offered a meaningful example of an occasion where the same kind of learning took place in music.

Kevin also answered “I don’t know” when faced with a question about something he’d never given any prior thought to – such as whether computers should be used in the music room, or whether things he had done in music in China should also be done here. The former question presented a kind of experiential impasse, the latter a cultural one.

Conclusion

Words as description, documentation, and report are essential in research, but bring with them multiple possible meanings. This paper highlights the importance of acknowledging and sifting through the additional layers created by multiple languages, which can be further complicated by the youth, naivety, vulnerability or misapprehension of child informants. Children’s motivations or capacities to respond to questions in an interview can never be fully known; a child in a time of transition, making sense of multiple layers of meaning and information in a new and alien world, is in a more complex setting than many. It is thus beholden upon researchers to *hear* the words, but carefully peel away the additional layers, if we are to understand the insights being offered.

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