Essay on interview as social practice - dissertation methodology

Media, Interview

The theoretical framework of interview as social practice

The interview as a construct is an immensely useful way of gathering data in the social sciences. However, there are two vastly different ways to approach study of an interview - the interview as research instrument or the interview as social practice (Talmy, 2010). These different perspectives are often confused for each other in social sciences research, and as such can yield vastly different results than are intended or should be expected in certain studies. The interview is a collaborative achievement between two or more parties, performing identity and co-constructing themes of social categories. The viewing of an interview as a social practice helps to classify these speech events in more accurate ways (Talmy, 2011). Active interviews are a method of interview in which the interviewee is also asking questions and participating in equal measure with the interviewer. This is the ideal manner of interview to be discussed in social practice settings, as this involves a much less informational and more casual manner of communication (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011).

Quantitative research has used interviews to " generate insights into matters as varied as cognitive processes in language learning... motivation... language proficiency and learner autonomy" (Talmy & Richards 2010, p. 1). However, interview theory is not studied as readily or as thoroughly as it should be, much less so as a social practice. Interviews are often dependent upon prior relationships in order to gather more or less information; people are more likely to confide in colleagues and friends than complete strangers. Interviews are a place where " what is said is inextricably tied to where it is

said, how it is said, and, importantly, to whom it is said" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). Closer confidantes can generate more data from interviews than strangers in a social practice setting.

Pavlenko (2006) discusses the notion of an autobiographic narrative as data in applied linguistics; personal narratives are often the subject of interviews, and are the main way in which individuals share information about themselves to another. This is a way to open themselves up as friendly and sociable beings to others, and these narratives are often exchanged in order to gather information about the other, including subject reality (2006). Applied linguistics can benefit greatly from the " collection, analysis and representation of qualitative interviews" (Mann, 2011). As a result, certain parameters of sensitivity must be exercised in order to report these interviews in a more reflective way.

The interview carries a great significance within the canon of applied linguistics learning methods; interviews are an advantageous way to perform field research and define " the range of different roles applied linguists can take on in their professional lives," contextualizing their intellectual practices into a useful, everyday application (Sarangi & Candlin, 2003). The qualitative interview can link content with context when used as a social practice, revealing not only information about the interviewee, but the interviewer and their relationship with the other party. Contextual issues become part of the conversation when used in an interview format (Clarke & Robertson, 2001). Qualitative studies and inquiries involve a greater level of subjectivity than in quantitative studies, due to the use of language instead of figures and

numbers to convey the results and observations found in these studies (Gergen & Gergen, 2000).

The study: Interviews as social practice

The purpose of the study is to determine how rapport is built in interviewing. The data for this study consists of interviews of English teachers in varying locations and districts. Four teachers were selected from one school, and two from another. Two of these teachers were selected from tuition settings. The relatively small number of teachers interviewed was intentional, because it allowed the researcher to gather relatively rich data and perform more sensitive analyses on the existing interviews than would be possible in studies that have greater numbers of informants.

The interviews for this study were conducted from January 2009 until September 2009. An ethnographic method was used for the conducting of these interviews, as I was already an insider within the school group. I was granted access to the school and the teachers at any time, and interviews were set up with each instructor through direct communication. I had worked in this school previously, and so I had already established a rapport with many of the instructors there, making it easier to gather consent for interviews.

Researcher's role in interview as social practice

The role of the researcher in this particular study remained consistent and ethical throughout. In the context of interviewing at this school in which I work, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee was perpetually

very familiar. As an ethnographic study, I was immersing myself in the culture of the school in which I was interviewing, and so my presence as an insider make interviewing very simple to accomplish. In some instances, I was also the supervisor to the teacher or student I interviewed.

A significant advantage to my specific ethnographic study is " the advantage of starting out with a normal role within the environment in which [I] work" (Holliday, 2007, p. 24). As I already work at this school, the pre-existing social routine and reality in which I operate permits wider movement within the environment, as well as behaving in a manner characteristic of myself as a researcher.

Data collection

There were no prior questions written to touch upon in the interviews; all of the comments were spontaneously generated over the course of the interview. These interviews were conducted in an informal manner in various places around the school, including the school staff room, the classroom or in school halls with the teachers. Interviews were also conducted with the students, with the same informal methods done around classrooms, school halls or in the compound. Once more, questions were created during the interview spontaneously while talking, or to comment upon an observation.

In addition to spontaneous talking, I arranged time for the teachers and the interviews by talking to the teacher and checking when they had free time - this was often during a free period, or sometimes in the minutes directly after the class. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the teachers

and students. I also wrote down the details in case the recorder might fail. For each interview, I ended up with both a written and audio recording of the entire conversation, allowing for maximum absorption of the information exchanged in these conversations.

Difficulties inherent in the practice of collecting interviews involved issues such as identifying a proper research site, being sensitive to the anxieties of the participants and being as flexible as possible to accommodate their concerns (Hobbs & Kubanylova, 2008). I attempted to accomplish this through lowering the level of time commitment and pressure placed on the participants, and keeping the interviews as informal and social as possible.

Data Analysis

After collection, interviews were analyzed using a number of factors, determining the nature of the interview as social practice. Attention was paid to the manner in which the interviewee spoke, their mood, and voice. The relationship between the interviewer and interviewee was also examined, and used as context for examination of the aforementioned attributes. These factors were written out qualitatively, identifying extracts that were significant in some way (Borg, 2001). For example, I recorded instances when I learned something new about the interviewee, where plans were made for future interviews/social situations, and when events that occurred in the interviewee's presence were discussed. Detailed content analysis focused on reflection of the interviews and how they were used as communication tools in social situations. Ethnographic experiences were

used to provide background information on these interviews and on the process as a whole.

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