Use of Semi-Structured Interviews to Investigate Teacher Perceptions of Student Collaboration

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Abstract

Researchers face interesting challenges while interpreting qualitative data. In this study, the authors report the challenges faced in conducting and interpreting semi-structured interviews of English language teachers in a qualitative study. The study was situated with an aim to investigate the strategies that Thai and Singaporean students use while working on collaborative English writing projects. The objective of the teacher interviews was to explore the strategies used by the teachers in encouraging collaborative student work. English language Teachers from Thailand and from Singapore were asked questions related to five facets of student collaboration: intrinsic value, perceived value, noise, teacher intervention, and assessment. The interview responses were then used to create a dual perspective and to support data generated from a student survey. This approach helped researchers explore the potential of collaborative learning for sharing the cognitive load of the learning task. This paper reports on the challenges faced, strategies used, and benefits enjoyed while using the tool of semi-structured interviews.

KEYWORDS: Collaborative Writing, Student Collaboration, Interviews

Background of the Project

The aim of this project was to explore some aspects of collaboration in two separate contexts in which students were engaged in collaborative projects aimed at producing audience-oriented writing. The subjects in this study were in two groups: Thai students in King Mongkut's University of Technology, Thonburi (KMUTT) and Singapore-based students from Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Each group consisted of forty second year engineering students studying for their Bachelor's degree in Engineering. Both groups of students were studying core courses that required a group writing project in which the students had to work collaboratively and cooperatively. All students involved in this project were non-native speakers of English.

Both groups (Singaporean and Thai) were working on assignments that were similar in some ways. Both groups aimed to produce a longish piece of audience-oriented writing. Although students were free to choose their audience, they were expected to have a clear and specific idea about their audience through within-group deliberations. They were encouraged to formulate a communication strategy that is appropriate to that audience, and subsequently implement that strategy in the production of a discursive piece of writing. While Singaporean students were restricted to the choice of a technical topic and were asked to produce a technical report, Thai students were given a free hand in the choice of topics and were asked to produce an *ezine* related to their topic.

To attain a more complete description of the styles, the following two methods of data collection were employed: student responses to questionnaires and teacher interviews. Our analysis focused on social interaction within the groups as well as the students' styles of collaborative work and

autonomous learning. The first instrument used in the study was a questionnaire for students. Findings from this analysis have been reported elsewhere. (Pathak & Intratat, 2010)

In this paper, we focus on the interviews of teachers. The following six questions were posed to the teachers teaching the course:

1. Do you see collaborative work in the classroom as having intrinsic value?

2. Do you think your students see collaborative work as valuable?

3. Does collaborative work generate too much of noise in the classroom? Is that a problem?

4. What strategies do you use to make collaborative work more useful and valuable to students?

5. What assessment issues do you face in collaborative work?

6. Are there any other challenges you experience while dealing with collaborative work in the classroom?

The format of the interview was open (semi-structured) and teachers were encouraged to explain their views in detail. All teachers involved in the study were non-native speakers of English.

Findings based on an integrated analysis of data obtained with the use of these two tools (questionnaires and interviews) have been reported in Pathak and Intratat (2011). In this paper we focus on the research methodology of semi-structured interviews. Our aim is to document some of the strategies we used while administering the interviews and to describe the benefits of this method in the context of our study.

Uses of semi-structured interviews

We used semi-structured interviews because they provide a very flexible technique for small-scale research (Drever, 1995). Our study involved obtaining information from students as well as teachers. Since our study involved 80 students (a fairly large number), we decided not to use interviews for the students. However, since we interviewed only ten teachers, it was considered best to use semi-structured interviews in the case of teachers. In fact this method seems to provide more useful data when the sample size is relatively small. It also allows thematic analysis of the qualitative data. (See Alvarez & Urla, 2002).

Semi-structured interviews are used when the research would benefit from a fairly open framework. They are also used when more useful information can be obtained from focused yet conversational two-way communication with the participants. In a structured interview, it is usual to formulate detailed questions before the interview. On the other hand, "semi-structured interviewing starts with broad and more general questions or topics" (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.5). While preparing for such interview only topics and sub-topics are identified rather than specific questions. It is hoped that specific questions would emerge as a matter of course during the exploration of these topics and sub-topics. This gives the interviewer more freedom to explore issues as a matter of course rather than pre-empting the issues.

We set up a general structure for the interviews by deciding in advance the main topics and subtopics. More detailed questions were asked as when they emerged during the interview. Because of this approach the interviewee had flexibility and freedom in deciding what needed to be described/ argued, how much explanation to offer, and how much detail to be used.

Ways the interviews were handled

Since semi-structured interviews are more about flexibility and generation of more useful data, the following three techniques were used during the interviews.

Rapport-building: Some time was spent building a rapport with the interviewee. This was done sharing common ground and common experiences at the beginning of the interview. This rapport building helped gaining perspectives and counter-perspectives on the issues under scrutiny.

Thought-provoking interjections: Since the format of the interview is not strictly journalistic, the interviewer is allowed and encouraged to use thought provoking interjections during the interview. These indicate to the interviewee that the interviewer would like to hear more about an issue. The technique presumes that the interviewer has as much expert knowledge of the subject as the interviewee.

Critical event analysis: Since abstract thinking and replies in abstraction may not be useful in some instances, the interviewees are encouraged to describe critical events and talk about them. Such analysis helps in better elaboration and exemplification of the points under discussion.

The three strategies mentioned above have been described in some detail in the sections below.

Rapport Building was useful in getting perspectives and counter-perspectives. Here is an example of perspective. Answers to some interview questions from Thai teachers suggest that they (teachers) actively managed conflicts and disagreements. Because of the active role of the

teacher there was less scope in the group for disagreement(s) and conflict. The following extract from an interview provides us a perspective of Thai teachers and tells us how active they are in managing group interaction. We could get such quality responses only because we used *Rapport Building* while conducting the interviews.

One challenge is to manage student motivation. Students are motivated to work in groups. They are more motivated if they can choose their own topic. However, some students tend to choose topics that have less research potential. Here the students need to maintain a balance by guiding them to make the topic academic and research-oriented. A second challenge is the language proficiency of students. Students who have weak language proficiency may not necessarily benefit from collaboration. Teacher intervention becomes necessary in such cases. Also, students tend to use Thai during group work. Hence we have a presentation assignment where they are forced to use English.

[Teacher #1, Reconstructed from notes]

On the other hand, the same technique (Rapport building) was also useful in gaining a counter-perspective on the issue. Singapore-based teachers seem to have a different perspective. Unlike Thai teachers, they tend not to micromanage or 'supervise' interactions. Commenting on the 'noise' generated in the classroom, a Singapore-based teacher said:

I have never thought noise to be a problem. The problem would actually be silence, if students choose not to have active discussion. When I see that students are animated, excited, I know that the collaboration process is on the right track even if it generates some noise.

Most of the time noise indicates that students are being resourceful and are actively involved in collective decision making.

[Teacher #8, Reconstructed from notes]

The second technique we employed was the use of *Thought-Provoking Interjections*. Such interjections helped us in getting comprehensive responses. An example of such a comprehensive response is given below. This response was provided in the context of discussion on students' adherence to project deadlines. In our analysis of interview data, some teachers did point out that adherence to deadlines could sometimes have a negative effect on the collaboration process. Since groups are likely to have members that are 'more capable' or 'more proficient', such members might dominate the group processes, and other group members might tend to 'give in' in order to meet the task deadlines. Commenting on such tendencies a Singapore-based teacher opined:

In terms of classroom behaviour, I believe there should be great deal of value attached to collaboration. However, we see that in actual practice this value is sometimes not reflected. This is because although the concept of collaboration is valuable, some students may not actively engage themselves in collaboration. This leads to a diminished value for themselves as well as their group members. Secondly, it is also observed that some groups are dominated by a single member or a few members. This could be because in terms of language as well as content proficiency, each student is on a different footing. Since some students speak or write better than others, they tend to dominate the group processes leading

to a reduced form of collaboration.

[Teacher #8, Reconstructed from notes]

The third interview technique- *Critical Event Analysis* helped teachers to provide concrete answers on abstract and/or complex issues. For instance, on the issue of 'happiness level' in a student group, teachers indicated that contentment and satisfaction among group members can vary. Here is a representative reaction:

I think group work is useful for sharing ideas and for helping each other. However, I have also seen that group work tends to allow dominance of academically stronger students over the weaker ones. It is therefore essential that even in designated group work, students should be given individual responsibilities. The main task of the group should be integration of the tasks completed by individuals. (It can be compared to a jigsaw puzzle.) Another important issue is the encouragement given to original research where field work and interaction is involved. Secondary research should be discouraged in project work.

[Teacher #4, Reconstructed from notes]

Conclusion

We learnt several aspects of semi-structured interviews in this study. We realized that prepared questions should be broad and limited. We had prepared only six questions and this really worked well. The interviewees experienced more freedom and flexibility. We also realized that it would help if the broad questions are given to participants (interviewees) beforehand. This helps

the interviewer to use strategies such as Rapport-building, Thought-provoking interjections, and Critical event analysis which have been discussed in the earlier sections of the paper.

While using Semi-Structured Interviews as a method of data acquisition and data analysis, two precautions are necessary. First, the interviewers must use their expert knowledge to their advantage. Such expert knowledge can be useful for meaningful interjections. However, if the interjections get too frequent or too long, there is a danger of pre-empting the interviewer's responses. Second, while analysing the responses, it would be useful to focus on the themes and issues that recur in the responses. Such recurring themes would give the researcher useful clues to the interviewees' concerns on issues of significance. Other researchers have reported similar experiences with this tool. (Briggs, 2000; Horton et al, 2004)

In conclusion, this interview technique, if used carefully, provides rich data for qualitative studies.

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