Unpacking Teacher Beliefs through Semi-Structured Interviewing: Insights into the Interviewing Process in Context

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Abstract

This small-scale study has examined the interview-based methodology in which beliefs about English language teacher training and qualifications have been "unpacked" (Diaz-Maggioli 2002), that is elicited and analysed, among a group of English language teachers in Japan. Interviewing the native and non-native speakers of English in this case study has shown that the actual process of talking to teachers in semi-structured interviewing requires the compilation of contextual details about the interview and its participants to formulate an "ecological" (Erickson 1996) framework essential for the interpretation of the ensuing data. Also, of significant interest is that various personal issues not directly related to, and therefore seemingly irrelevant to, the interview themes discussed were frequently forthcoming and so were initially eliminated in the data reduction process. It is argued in this study that such eliminations, or "cuttings", may constitute an important extra insight into teacher beliefs (Wengraf 2001). Finally, the process of interviewing and reducing data creates what I term as its own 'methodological findings', in contrast to the data findings, which are important considerations for the final interpretation of the data.

1. Introduction

This study examines the methodological process of conducting interview-based research into teacher beliefs. It considers issues concerning both the actual interviewing of Japanese and non-Japanese teachers of English as a Foreign Language and the analysis of the ensuing data from those interviews. This process is described as the "unpacking" of teacher beliefs by Diaz-Maggioli (2002) and so, specifically, the research question to be addressed in this study is: *What methodological issues arise in the "unpacking" of beliefs?*

The structure of the study is firstly to look at the methodological process involved. This embraces the choice of interviewing as a research instrument for this study, an overview of the context of the interviewing process and background information about each participant, the means of reducing the large amount of interview data collected, and finally the interview questions themselves.   Following this, specific issues, termed here as methodological

'findings' as opposed to data findings, arising from the methodology pursued will be discussed.   The conclusions and implications for further research focus on what lessons this researcher's approach can reveal into the methodology of "unpacking" teacher beliefs (Diaz-Maggioli 2002) in similar contexts.

2. Methodology

The methodological approach undertaken in this research considers firstly the role of interviewing, the context and participants, data reduction and the interview format itself. It concludes by showing how the findings were finally represented.

2.1 Interviewing

The means to investigate this research area is one-to-one, in-depth interviewing, in this case of the semi-structured variety. It could be debated as to whether other means to gather such data would also be feasible, such as questionnaires, group interviews or observation. Admittedly, the ideal would be to triangulate a number of approaches over time with the participants to gain ethnographic depth; however, due to restrictions in time and resources, I have chosen to conduct a more direct means to gain access to the opinions and experiences of the participants. Interviewing, in this sense, provides such a direct route to the data, especially semi-structured interviewing which has a "free form" (Drever 1995) in its interactional style perhaps best suited to exploring the topics associated with the research. Rather than a rigidly structured interviewing style which would limit the interviewer to set questions, I prefer to have the ability to change question forms to suit the linguistic or conceptual 'competence' of the interviewees. This, as Gorden (1969) indicates is the pursuit of a standardization of 'meaning' rather than that of the question form itself.

Interviewing as a means to conduct research into attitudes and beliefs needs to be seen, though, as a potential source of over-subjectivity, and therefore bias, in the findings (Duranti 1997). This is broadly viewed as being too involved in the nature of the research to remain objective and it is a danger I accept. The original research question, to elicit beliefs, is, in brief, one that may 'colour' all of our attitudes about qualifications and those of our colleagues. It may manifest itself in our prejudices in workplace practice or remain hidden or

subconscious. However, it is the level of bias in those attitudes and beliefs which I wish to ascertain, i.e. the over-subjective expression of beliefs by the interviewees is acceptable and desirable from the viewpoint of the researcher wishing to discover their own view of world. Whether highly biased or openly liberal, each extreme is a valid piece of data, not to be discarded. To do so would represent a form of bias in itself by the researcher.

Interviewing a number of candidates has raised the question of actually who should be interviewed. My intention was to offer a cross-section of 'qualified' and 'unqualified' Japanese and non-Japanese participants working at a private language school, a junior college and a university in the same area of Nagano Prefecture in Japan. (By 'qualifications', I mean formal, accredited training to become a teacher). The objective was not to seek generalisability from the findings but to offer an insight into my particular working context, possibly resonant with those of others contexts.

2.2 Context and participants

The context for this small-scale research is considered to be essential in interpreting the responses from interviewees. This follows the ethnographic stance of viewing language in context (Hymes 1964, Malinowski 1923), not merely analysing its form. To provide this contextualisation, I have tabulated information (Table 1) about each participant, in the order in which they were interviewed. This information shows the backgrounds of the interviewees as advocated by Cicourel (1992).

Candidates were chosen are the basis of gender, institution, position and whether they were native speakers or not. I wished to find a cross-section of people working in ELT in my locality and invited 15, 5 of whom refused on various grounds. Of the 10 who accepted, all were informed as to the objectives of the research and that their identities would remain anonymous. Their details are shown below (see Table 1).

As seen in table 1, the presentation of such contextual information for each interviewee can serve the purpose of helping to explain what is said and how the interview discourse is constructed. As Cicourel (1992) notes, though, the chosen criteria are in themselves not a statement that the ensuing speech is solely interpreted by background features such as nationality, experience in teaching etc. Indeed, ethnographic researchers are constantly

surprised by what Erickson (1996) terms as "wiggle room", the propensity for those being researched to say something in a manner which cannot be traced to background details.

Table 1. Participant backgrounds and context

Interviewee/ Gender/ approx. age	Nationality/ NS/NNS	Interview location	Experience in teaching/qual/ Position/institution	Relation ship with researcher
1. F/mid-40s Ha	Jp NNS	Neutral classroom	10yrs/no qual FT Manager/ Priv. lang school	1 yr/ my manager
2. M/early 40s Gr	US NS	My home	10 yrs/MA ELT/ FT lecturer/ uni	1 month/ unknown
3. F/ late 40s Sei	Jp NNS	Her office	25 yrs/MA Lit./ FT lecturer/ uni	1 yr/ colleague
4. F/late 30s Asa	Jp NNS	Coffee shop	10 yrs/MA Intercultural Comm/ PT lecturer/ uni	1 month/ unknown
5. F/late 40s Mar	US NS	Her home	25 yrs/Cert ELT/ PT lecturer/ uni & college	1 yr/ colleague
6. M/early 50s Fr	US NS	Coffee shop	15yrs/ MA PT/lecturer/ uni	6 months/ friend
7. F/early 50s Sh	US NS	Her home	25yrs/ Cert ELT/ PT/lecturer/ uni	1 yr/ colleague
8. F/late 20s Ao	Jp NNS	Her office	3 yrs/ MA linguistics/ FT/lecturer college	1 yr/ colleague
9.M/mid-50s Fu	Jp NNS	His office	25 yrs/MA Lit/ FT lecturer college	1 yr/ my supervisor
10. M/late 20s K	Jp NNS	His home	3yrs/no qual/ FT teacher Cram school	1 yr/ ex- colleague

(M=male, F=female Ha = name code   Jp = Japanese NS = Native speaker of English, NNS = Non-native speaker of English no ELT qual = no English language teaching qualifications FT = Full-time, PT = Part-time MA ELT = Masters Degree in English Language teaching, MA Lit = Masters Degree in Literature   Cert = certificate with RSA, Trinity or Temple Comm = Communication   uni = university   Priv. lang = Private Language)

Extra context is needed, that which investigates what happens 'locally' in the interview setting itself. In my study, this level of detail is provided by field notes which provide comments on how the interviewee appeared to react to questions non-verbally. This kind of information takes the form of notes describing the "behavioural environment" (Goodwin and Duranti 1992) enacted in the interviews, that is, whether an interviewee laughed, grimaced, appeared unsure, sceptical, and confident in their verbal interaction and must be viewed in the sense that it represents only part of the "co-construction" (Jacoby and Ochs 1996) of the interview discourse. With this in mind, it was essential to consider not just interviewee background and reactions to each interview question as a potential influence upon what was said, but also interviewer background and my own reactions to interviewee responses, embracing the concept of "recipient design" (Eggins and Slade 1997, p. 29) and casting light on any potential changes of the researcher's "roles" (Stake 1995), or "positioning" (an expert, a friend, colleague, an insider etc) (Sarangi and Candlin 2003), in the eyes of the interviewee.   To aid the reader of this research in understanding how the addition of interviewer background information may influence the interaction, I provide my details alongside those of the first interviewee:

Table 2: Comparing interviewee and interviewer background

Interviewee/ Gender/ approx. age	Nationality/ NS/NNS	Interview location	Experience in teaching/qual/ Position/institution	Relation ship with researcher
1. F/mid-40s Ha	Jp NNS	Neutral classroom	10yrs/no qual FT Manager/ Priv. lang school	1 yr/ my manager
Interviewer/ Gender/ approx. age	**Nationality/ NS/NNS**	**Interview location**	**Experience in teaching/qual/ Position/institution**	**Relation ship with researcher**
M/early 40s	English NS	as above	18yrs/Diploma/MA and Ed.D./ Lecturer Priv. lang school	as above

In brief, field notes and an awareness of the relative backgrounds of the interview participants help the researcher to understand how the interviewee "frames" the interaction itself (Erickson 1996). The combination of table 1's interviewee background context and the field notes create a reference point which elucidates the "ecology of relations" (Erickson 1996) existing during the interviewing process. The background context, as part of this "ecology", requires the non-

verbal clues as to what is happening in the interview situation, since, without that, it is possible that the data is interpreted according to the stereotypes which emanate from knowledge given in table 1. Clearly, the audio-taped data alone cannot provide this important level of detail.

2.3 Data reduction

As with any lengthy interviewing procedure, a large amount of data is generated for each interview. The means to reduce such data into comprehensible chunks is important. For this purpose, I have adopted the use of "natural meaning units" Kvale (1996, p. 195.) which identify "central themes" in the interview discourse. These themes are directly related to the research question, however, I have also chosen to include some indirectly unrelated areas of discussion in the findings, called 'cuttings' (since they would normally be eliminated in the data reduction) if they are of interest to the research area as a whole. This is clearly a subjective decision in the data analysis process, yet one, I believe, which is essential in this particular topic of research which has a multitude of associated themes running concurrently with concepts of 'beliefs' and 'attitudes'. The divergences from central themes is a direct result of the "free form" (Drever 1995) adopted for the interviewing process itself. I turn now to the actual interview questions themselves.

2.4 Interview format and considerations

As can be seen in table 3, the interview format consisted of eight "introducing" topics in bold (Kvale 1996, p. 133) which fundamentally open the topic. If they failed to elicit immediate responses, supporting questions in non-bold, referred to as "follow-up" and "probing" questions by Kvale (1996, p. 133), were devised. As is the norm for semi-structured interviewing, numerous non-scripted extra questions were added to this format helping to extend a topic, clarify or reformulate it ("So what you mean is…"). The eight questions given as in table 2 were also open to alteration in the course of one interview and across the interviews to standardize the intended 'meaning' (Gorden, 1969) when levels of linguistic and conceptual competence arise. This was considered to be essential with this particular group of interviewees, ranging from fluent native speakers to non-native speakers of English.

Referring to the question themes themselves, questions 1. to 2. addressed the participants' beliefs towards the qualifications base of their colleagues. Question 3 requested their own qualifications in order to perhaps contextualise (or justify) responses to questions 1. and 2. Question 4 looked at past experiences (and preferences) of working with the two types of teachers, seeking to elicit narrative accounts which account for the beliefs expressed so far. Question 5. investigated what training courses should embrace for teachers coming to the particular working context of the interviewee. Question 6. looked at the relation between teaching competence and qualifications. In question 7., I attempted to elicit the beliefs and experiences held concerning hierarchies and cliques. This sought to ascertain what the participant believes about why those groups came to exist, and whether their existence was justified at the workplace. Finally, question 8. investigated the participants' own personal means towards development, whether that included studying for qualifications or entails informal teacher development. This question was a means to find out what beliefs exist about developing their teaching and whether those beliefs could be traced back to responses given earlier in the interview in questions 1. and 2. about qualifications.

It was intended that the nature of semi-structured interviewing allows for a flexibility in which cross-reference was made between questions, as in "You mentioned previously that you think…" or "I was going to ask you about that later in the interview but let's look at it now."

Questions 1 to 8 (see Table 3) in bold represent the research topics elicited, and re-initiated, in a variety of ways depending on the interviewer's perception of the interviewee's linguistic ability to understand the question clearly. Non-bold language below each topic represents follow-up questions or prompts to enable longer responses to be elicited.

Once the interviewing was concluded for ten interviewees, the process moved to the reduction of the large amount of audio-taped data and the reintroduction into the findings of selected 'cuttings'. Table 1's interviewee background information and field notes were available for the next task of interpreting, in other words, making sense of the data in terms of that "ecological" framework (Erickson 1996) whilst addressing the original research questions. It is important to reiterate at this juncture my current research aims of discovering what methodological issues arise in the actual interviewing process and ascertaining to what extent the data reduction process reflect the beliefs of the participants. These are methodology-

focused, different clearly to the original research objectives of seeking to "unpack" teacher beliefs. However, this original research objective needs now to be placed in the foreground of considerations since the next methodological step is that of actually finding a means to present, or represent, the elicited beliefs of the group of interviewees.

Table 3: Interview Format

1. Beliefs towards teachers with qualifications.
Do you admire them? Resent them? Tolerate them? What qualifications do you know about for ELT? Are such qualifications useful in ELT? Why? /Why not?

2. Beliefs towards teachers without qualifications?
Do you admire them? Resent them? Tolerate them?

3. The interviewee's qualifications.
If yes, may I ask you which ones? Have they been useful to you? In which way?
If no, why not? Do you have any plans for getting any in the future?

4. Experience working with qualified and unqualified teachers.
Who do you prefer to work with? Why?

5. Teacher training courses: what they should teach for this context.
Do you think qualified teachers with a Cert or Diploma are worth being paid more money than teachers with no qualifications?

6. Methodological superiority of the postgraduate qualified?
Why? /Why not?

7. Hierarchies among teachers based on qualifications.
Do hierarchies or cliques exist where you work (or have worked) and how?

8. Self- development.
(In-house formal/informal development, self-study, buying resource books for teachers, going to conferences, local teaching groups like JALT/JACET)

2.5 Presenting the findings

The task now at hand is to find a visual means to show the findings in a way which takes into consideration the "ecological" frames in which the data was produced. In simple terms, this means representation in the form of summaries, paraphrases and direct quotations form the interview data of the most important information relevant to the eight topic areas. For this purpose, I have represented each interview's data in grid format according to the eight topic areas and added an extra section for 'cuttings', so that the total visual representation embraces immediately what would normally be eliminated. In this way, the choice of the seemingly

irrelevant data is simplified. The decision whilst listening to the audio-tapes of what to eliminate is an instant one and does not involve re-listening to the tapes.

The sense-making accompaniment of the student background information and field notes also needs to be somehow visually represented in close proximity to the reduced data and 'cuttings'.   To enable myself to achieve this visual task of seeing data and "ecological" framing to aid its interpretation, I have added a row in the grid in the following manner:

Table 4: Interview 1 with Ha

Topic 1. Beliefs towards teachers with qualifications
Reduced data She believes that having "some kind of qualification" is better than having none at all, yet has had some bad experiences with Certificate-holders. "Certificates don't *make* good teachers."
Cuttings Her dream is to work with a group of NS and NNS EFL teachers who just "get on well with each other". She always looks to recruit Cert-holders if possible.
Ecological frame Japanese female, late 40s, 10 years experience, my manager. She is unqualified in ELT, and has spent many years abroad in an English-speaking country. She recruits teachers for a private language school. I had known her for 1 year prior to the interview since she was my boss. Her answers are very sure and she stresses her bad experiences with Cert-holders. As an interviewer, I wanted to probe her account regarding bad experiences with Cert-holders and followed up with an extra question of her ideal working team (hence the cuttings above) since we had gone off-topic into the area of teacher recruitment.

As seen in table 4 above, the chosen representation appears to place reduced data, cuttings and ecological frames in a sequence. This is unintended since all relate to each other equally. At times, cuttings may, as Wengraf (2001) notes, present more insightful information into that teacher's beliefs than the reduced data itself. This is illustrated above by the interviewee's wish to work with native and non-native speaker teachers of English who simply "get on well with each other". In the information provided for the ecological frame, I have included what I believe to be of relevance for the reduced data and cuttings. On reflection, this is a perhaps subjective decision open to bias in itself. The chosen background information, shown in table 4 in the information under "ecological frame" is followed by comments made on how she

answered the question, in this case, quite confidently and also, as in keeping with the concept of "co-constructing" (Jacoby and Ochs 1996) the discourse, my extra probe regarding her ideal working team. This shows how naturally the discourse can veer off-topic, yet somehow still maintain coherence.

2.5.1 Representing key discourse

Although the reduced data and cuttings are represented in summarized from along with their "ecological frame" (Erickson 1996) in table 4, I would also propose that some key findings from either category be presented in an extract form which accurately shows the discourse in its entirety. By this, I mean a representation which includes interviewer talk, hesitations, corrections and overlap. In doing so, this may, at times, give both content information, i.e. what was actually said, as well as the on-site 'ecology' surrounding that content.   As an example of one of the key 'cuttings' for interviewee 3 from question six on the methodological superiority of postgraduate degree-holders, the discourse can best be seen in the following format:

Extract 1 (with Se)

Interviewee: I am pressured to act like a traditional woman here…. but my research [requires me] have critical [thinking]. (*Se appears very serious suddenly*)
Interviewer: What do you mean…. I mean, what is the relationship between critical thinking….
Interviewee: Ah yes, thinking, thinking, yes…… (*Se. seems to be gathering her   thoughts on this topic)*
Interviewer: (*overlap*) Yes, critical thinking and traditional female roles?
Interviewee: …... I mean… they think I should have children, not be [a] researcher. Also, I need to argue my opinion… for <u>my</u> research. (*Speaking slowly and then angrily*)
(*italics*) show field notes, [   ] show my additions to aid linguistic clarity , ……. show a short pause, <u>my</u> denotes emphasis

In its summarized form in the cuttings section of topic six, this is represented as accurately as possible considering the powerful message that the interviewee intended to portray. In its original format in extract 1 above, though, the 'raw' emotion and means by which the interviewer seeks to make sense out of the interviewee's responses are more clearly seen. In brief, representation of the discourse in extract form with accompanying field notes can succeed in illustrating key data with greater impact.

3. Methodological 'findings'

This section now turns to an assessment of the methodological 'findings' from this study. In essence, this looks at the issues involved in the "unpacking" of teacher beliefs as in the original methodology-focused research question:

What methodological issues arise in the "unpacking" of beliefs?

In addressing this question, the first issue to be noted is the fact that this study itself has had an "intrinsic" (Stake 1995) orientation in which the process of analysis was conducted for each of the ten interviews, yet was not followed by a further summarising of all ten responses for each topic area. This last stage would have resulted in possibly the most difficult process of all undertaken. The further reduction of ten sets of reduced data and cutting, along with their accompanying ecological frames would have led to the same problems with "reduction" as had existed for the representation of data for each individual interview. Unavoidable as this is, it raises the issue of how relevant an "aggregation" (Stake 1995, p. 74) of all the individual cases would be in the form of a group summary, since generalisability beyond those interviewed was not the ultimate aim. In the case of the small "intrinsic case study" (Stake 1995, p. 3), the goal is surely to ascertain the beliefs of only those teachers around the researcher in their own working contexts, and so, in this sense, the personal discovery, or "direct interpretation" (Stake, p. 74), of each teacher's beliefs meets the researcher's needs. Aggregation is, therefore, a redundant exercise.

A second 'finding' is that the chosen methodological approach of using semi-structured interviewing has been enhanced by field notes and interviewee background information (table 1) to provide the "ecological" frame (Erickson 1996) to each interview.   Although, as

Cicourel (1992) and Erickson (1996) note, context does not necessarily explain all that happens during the interview, the fundamental concept of gathering contextual details on what both participants bring to the interview setting along with descriptions of how they behave 'on site' provides a feasible means to interpret interview talk.

Of further note is the fact that the analysis of the ensuing interview data on audio tape has involved a process of "reduction" (Miles and Huberman 1994), yet has taken the perhaps unusual step of reintroducing some of the eliminated data, termed here as 'cuttings', back into the findings. These are argued as being able to provide extra insight into teacher beliefs (Wengraf 2001) despite their apparent irrelevance to the original interview topics.

As a final methodological finding, I have argued that some key data is best presented in its original extract form from the interviews. This gives a 'raw' feel to the findings, showing its original "co-construction" (Jacoby and Ochs 1996) between interviewer and interviewee. This form of representation serves, then, the purpose of showing not simply the content of talk, but how teachers form it in the interview setting. Bearing in mind the belief-related issues under discussion, extracts provide insight into the actual setting where beliefs are exchanged about work. In brief, this setting can be argued as being similar to the classroom or staff room, a "site of professional practice" (Baker and Johnson 1998) itself where the teachers' "natural voice" (Cowie 2001) can be expressed. Findings which reflect how discourse is constructed and beliefs expressed can, therefore, most accurately be represented either in the form seen in table 4 (including what is relevant to the research topic, the 'cuttings' and the "ecological frame" associated with that talk), or in dialogue form

4. Conclusions and implications for interviewing

This study has proposed a methodological procedure for investigating interview data emanating from talk about teacher beliefs. It has shown how findings from this data present topic-related "reduced" summaries and also supplementary 'cuttings', information initially considered irrelevant to the interview topics yet still important as an insight into that teacher's belief system. Of major importance in the representation of these types of data is the inclusion of contextual information, expressed in this study as an "ecological frame" (Erickson 1996). This concept has embraced details of both participants' backgrounds and, importantly, their discourse and paralinguistic features during the interview setting itself.

Such contextual detail is seen as a means to interpret the findings yet it is recognized that interview responses cannot always be explained by such information. Finally, the visual representation of findings has been argued as being seen in two forms, the tabulated summaries of talk supported by "ecological frames", or key extracts showing the actual discourse as it occurred in the interview setting. This discourse in its original form (if original form is able to be accurately represented) shows the "co-construction" (Jacoby and Ochs 1996) of both participants and, in this form, puts forward the argument that interview talk is the result of the two participants' contributions.

The implications for interviewing which seeks to elicit beliefs are that, firstly, the process of data analysis requires a dual procedure: initially that which looks for topic relevance, and secondly (but arguably also concurrently) that which identifies data which, despite its irrelevance to the topic, nevertheless casts insights into that teacher's belief system. This would raise the issue of how important interview topics actually are, if, as in this study, findings also include non-topic-based 'cuttings'. To counter this doubt, though, it could be argued that talk on-topic may, in semi-structured interviewing, naturally veer off-topic. This results in interview data diverse in range of topic, something which must be seen as potentially providing richer insights into belief systems.

Finally, perhaps the only 'grey area' of judgement on the researcher's part lays in the methodological stage of data representation. Summarizing and paraphrasing the talk itself, along with contextual details, seems visually informative in its condense style. The use of selected 'raw' extracts, however, is an extra visual dimension to data representation which, I would argue, should be used sparingly to preserve its impact value on the reader. Methodologically viewed, a balance is needed between representing data which is topic-relevant, data which is non-topic-related yet insightful into teacher beliefs, and contextual details which represent 'on site' behavioural details as well as participant background information.

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