

Building Trust Before Data: Resilience and Relational Work in Qualitative Interviews

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Abstract:

This essay presents two often overlooked dimensions of qualitative interviewing in TESOL and applied linguistics: participant recruitment and the creation of relational depth during interviews. It argues that trust must be negotiated before data collection begins and sustained through ethical, reflexive, and emotionally attentive interviewing practices. Drawing on methodology, the author discusses how recruitment challenges, vulnerability, and power dynamics shape the quality of qualitative inquiry. It also suggests that the emotional labor involved in interviewing can contribute to researchers' resilience and professional growth. By framing trust as both a methodological concern and a relational practice, this discussion offers practical insights for teacher-researchers conducting qualitative interviews.

The Hidden Hurdle of Recruitment

In TESOL and applied linguistics, qualitative interviews are often described as a powerful tool for accessing learners' experiences, teacher cognition, and the layered realities of language classrooms (Talmy, 2010). Yet trust must often be negotiated before the interview itself begins, particularly during recruitment. Finding participants is frequently the first and perhaps most underestimated challenge in qualitative research. Teacher-researchers often work within

their own institutions or professional networks, where colleagues and students may already be overburdened by teaching, assessment, and administrative responsibilities. Invitations to participate may be met with silence, polite refusals, or hesitation rooted in concerns about confidentiality and professional risk. In some contexts, hierarchical structures further complicate recruitment, as potential participants may worry about how their words could be interpreted or circulated. The challenge of recruitment,

then, is not merely logistical. It is also relational and ethical, requiring patience, transparency, and a willingness to accept rejection without personalizing it.

Creating Relational Depth

Once participants are identified and consent is obtained, another challenge emerges: creating a space in which vulnerability and honesty can unfold. Consent forms alone do not produce candid narratives. Interviews may invite participants to revisit uncertainty, doubt, frustration, or moments of conflict. Supporting such conversations requires more than technical skill in asking open-ended questions. It demands relational presence. Interviewers must listen without judgment, manage their own emotional responses, and remain attentive to power dynamics, particularly when interviewing within their own professional community (Talmy, 2011). Generating rich and trustworthy data depends on the interviewer's ability to cultivate safety while maintaining ethical boundaries (Richards, 2011).

Resilience through Relational Work

These challenges, recruitment and relational depth, show that qualitative interviewing is as much an art as it is a method. At the same time, the emotional labor involved can strengthen researchers in unexpected ways. Facing

rejection during recruitment and navigating delicate conversations can mirror other challenges in academic life, including manuscript revision and grant applications (Yang et al., 2022). Rather than viewing such difficulties as signs of inadequacy, researchers may reframe them as formative experiences (Chan et al., 2021). The resilience developed through patient recruitment, careful listening, and ethical decision-making extends beyond a single project. Ultimately, the art of qualitative interviewing lies in aligning methodological rigor with relational integrity and in embracing the slow work of trust-building.

Practical Takeaways for Teacher-Researchers

- Treat recruitment as relational work, not just participant logistics.
- Expect silence or refusal and do not interpret it as personal failure.
- Be transparent about confidentiality, purpose, and participant risk.
- Create interview conditions that support honesty without pressuring disclosure.
- Stay attentive to emotional labor and power dynamics during interviews.

- Reframe interviewing challenges as part of methodological and scholarly growth.

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