

# More Than Just a Qualitative Interview in Cross-Cultural Language Education

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## Abstract:

*Qualitative interviews in cross-cultural language education are often perceived as simple tools for gathering information. However, in TESOL contexts, interviewing extends beyond data collection to become a relational, emotional, and pedagogical practice. This article reexamines the qualitative interview as a space for trust-building, identity negotiation, and reflective dialogue. After briefly defining qualitative interviewing within educational research, the discussion highlights the role of emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and ethical awareness in shaping meaningful interview encounters. Drawing on real classroom-based experience, the article presents an example from placement speaking tests also framed as course consultations, where coaching-oriented questions invite students to articulate their learning goals, motivations, and self-perceived language proficiency. While such conversations can empower learners, they may also surface anxiety, self-doubt, or fear of evaluation, especially in cross-cultural contexts. The article offers practical insights into navigating these tensions by fostering psychological safety, encouraging reflective thinking, and responding to linguistic vulnerability with empathy. By positioning interviews as dialogic and developmental rather than merely extractive, this paper argues that qualitative interviewing in language education is not only a research method but also a transformative pedagogical encounter. Clear, experience-based strategies are provided to help TESOL practitioners design interviews that generate both meaningful data and meaningful human connections.*

## Qualitative Interviews in Language Education

In language education, qualitative interviews are widely used to explore learners' experiences, identities, motivations, and emotional journeys. A

qualitative interview is a purposeful, semi-structured or open-ended conversation designed to understand how participants construct meaning from their lived experiences. Unlike surveys or standardized assessments, it emphasizes

depth, nuance, and personal voice (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

However, interviews are not neutral instruments. They are relational encounters shaped by emotion, culture, and power. In cross-cultural contexts, trust-building is therefore not an optional interpersonal skill but a methodological necessity.

### **Emotional and Cross-Cultural Vulnerabilities**



Language learners often participate in interviews using a second or foreign language, which heightens vulnerability. Linguistic insecurities such as fear of making mistakes, losing face, or being judged may limit openness and compromise authenticity.

Interviewers are also frequently perceived as authority figures, particularly when they are teachers or institutionally affiliated. In cultures characterized by high power distance or strong face-saving norms, participants may avoid disagreement, soften criticism, or provide socially desirable responses.

Such emotional and cultural dynamics directly influence the depth and credibility of interview data.

### **The Role of Emotional Intelligence**

Emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), especially self-awareness and empathy, plays a central role in managing these relational dynamics. Self-awareness enables interviewers to recognize personal assumptions and monitor emotional reactions. Self-regulation supports a calm, respectful tone even when responses are unexpected or critical.

Empathy is particularly crucial in cross-cultural interviews. Subtle cues like hesitation, silence, or shifts in tone must be interpreted within appropriate cultural contexts. Silence may indicate respect rather than disengagement, and indirect responses may reflect communication norms rather than avoidance. An emotionally intelligent interviewer responds with sensitivity instead of judgment, fostering psychological safety and deeper disclosure.

### **A Classroom-Based Illustration**

My experience conducting placement speaking tests that also serve as course consultations illustrates these principles in practice. I incorporate coaching-oriented questions that invite learners to reflect on their goals and self-assessment

of their English proficiency, framing the interaction as dialogue rather than opinion.



Many students struggle to articulate targets or evaluate their level honestly. Apprehension of criticism and limited experience with self-reflection often constrain their responses, making the interview an emotionally sensitive space.

To reduce anxiety, I emphasize that the conversation explores direction, not worth, and that ideas matter more than accuracy. As the tone shifts from evaluation to collaboration, responses deepen. Trust ultimately enhances the legitimacy and richness of insight.

### **Strategies and Implications**

Trust-building begins before the interview through transparent explanations of purpose and reassurance that language accuracy is not being judged. During the interaction, warm-up questions, adaptive pacing, active listening, paraphrasing, and non-judgmental responses create

psychological safety. Afterward, member checking and expressions of appreciation reinforce ethical integrity.

For researchers, trust enhances validity by eliciting richer narratives. For teachers, the relational competencies cultivated through interviewing: empathy, cultural responsiveness, and emotional regulation transfer directly to classroom practice.

Qualitative interviews in cross-cultural language education are therefore more than data collection tools; they are human encounters shaped by emotion and culture. Building trust and rapport remains central to methodological rigor and ethical, human-centered language teaching.

### **References**

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