

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED ABOUT COLLECTING DATA AS A NOVICE RESEARCHER

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This paper is an attempt to describe the experiences I have gone through, as an undergraduate student researcher, during the data gathering process. I will explain the different steps I have followed, for instance, reading how to carry out the data gathering process in order to understand what my contribution and what my role as researcher would be. In addition, I will illustrate the bracketing process I did in order to avoid interference with my assumptions and preconceptions on methodology and teaching materials. I will also describe the changes I have made as a result, in part, of a reflective process; for example, why I decided to narrow down the focus of my research based on the first three classroom observations. I will then describe the experiences of conducting a qualitative interview for the first time, from piloting the interview questions to the interviewing process itself. Finally, I will share my feelings on the affective experience of doing research with a co-researcher.

Before starting the data gathering process, I learned from Hatch (2002) and Patton (1990) about strategies to identify the appropriate methods to carry out the gathering of data. I realized that teachers who become researchers may improve their own practice and contribute to enrich their



student's learning process. I was surprised and glad at the same time to be part of this journey as I learned first-hand as I collected data.

One of the first aspects I was curious about was to know how to bracket out my assumptions and to understand what my role as an undergraduate student researcher would be. Therefore, I read several articles and papers in order to be aware of what I could do and avoid when conducting the data gathering process. For example, I understood that although I was an undergraduate student researcher, I was the main instrument of data collection. Taking into account that bracketing is used to "...describe a specific strategy for separating impressions, feelings, and early interpretations from descriptions during qualitative data collection" (Hatch 2002, p. 86), I wrote down my understandings on methodological issues when learning and teaching a foreign language in an attempt to remove them from the study. I realized that I had to put aside all my assumptions and preconceptions in order to keep a "neutral stance" (Patton, 1990) during the data gathering process.

The first step I followed during my bracketing process was to identify my assumptions with regards the appropriate way to teach English as a Foreign Language. The following paragraph illustrates my assumptions regarding the influence of the methodology on students' learning process:

I'm interested in knowing what the influence of methodology on the students' learning process is when learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). I consider that learning a new language involves a particular procedure; it is not the same



What I Have Learned About Collecting Data As A Novice Researcher

teaching math as teaching history, or indeed teaching a new language. Among the factors influencing students' achievements, "...the role of the teacher is the most important inside the classroom" (RAND Corporation, 2012). Therefore, what the teacher knows and what the teacher does to teach the language might affect students' learning process; obviously, it is not the only aspect to take into account, but it is indeed one of the most important.

However, the bracketing process was just the starting point for me to become aware of the complexities of teaching methodologies. I decided to write about four elements that I considered crucial when thinking about teacher's methodology. The following paragraph illustrates the first element, the different methods and approaches that each teacher follows when teaching EFL:

With regards the methodology, I consider that the teachers must adopt and adapt the best from each method, strategy, technique, material and activity to accomplish their objectives because every method has its own advantages and disadvantages, none is perfect. As a result, being focused on just one method is not enough to teach effectively; teachers should know what the best approach, methodology and strategies to teach a foreign language are. The methodology basically involves everything that the teachers do inside the classroom to teach the language; for instance, the methods and approaches they use, the activities, the materials, the strategies, their beliefs, their attitude and their control over the class.

I have come to understand that methodology involves basically all that the teacher does inside the classroom to teach the language. In consequence, I wrote about methods, approaches, activities, materials, the strategies, the teacher's beliefs, the teacher's attitude and their control over the class in order to bracket out my assumptions of them. I learned from RAND Corporation (2012),



What I Have Learned About Collecting Data As A Novice Researcher

a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decision-making through research and analysis that “many factors contribute to a student’s academic performance.” However, research suggests that, among school-related factors, teachers matter most” (p. 1). In other words, what teachers do inside a classroom facilitates / hinders a successful students’ learning process. The following paragraph illustrates the second element, activities that each teacher develops during the class in order to teach each lesson:

Similar to the methods, the activities cannot be repetitive because that might discourage students, and being predictable is synonym to boredom. So teachers should prepare a large repertoire of activities to motivate students and make each class interesting and unique.

The following paragraph illustrates the third element, the materials implemented by the teacher during the class; at that time I did not know that this subject would become the new focus of my research as I will explain later on:

Materials are also an aid to teach as they are a support to carry out an enjoyable activity. It is not the same learning from the board all the time as having recordings, videos, flashcards and countless resources to learn each topic. It is important to include the most appropriate material according to the students’ needs and the objective of the lesson. However, planning a vast number of activities and having a large quantity of materials it is not enough. The strategies are also important because it is not only about including a lot of materials and activities, but knowing how to use them wisely.



Opening Writing Doors Journal - ISSN 2322-9187

What I Have Learned About Collecting Data As A Novice Researcher

The following paragraph illustrates the fourth element, the role of teachers. I believe that they are the bridge connecting knowledge and the students' learning process.

On the other hand, the importance of beliefs is evidenced in the way teachers teach. The way they teach grammar or pronunciation will influence the selection of methods, strategies, materials or activities. Therefore, teachers should be aware of their responsibility while shaping and guiding learning instead of being a factor of inhibition. Similarly, teachers' attitude is equally important since they serve as mediators. Then, positive teachers' attitude might help students become successful learners.

Personally speaking, I would say that the subtle interplay of all these aspects represents the most suitable methodology to teach EFL. However, these are only my own assumptions. Supposedly, having stated them would help me avoid biases during my research.

With regards the changes I have undertaken while conducting the data gathering process, I realized that, at the beginning, I was too ambitious. I wanted to study the teacher's methodology. Nevertheless, having conducted three non-participant observations I realized that methodology was a complex subject to be investigated in only three and a half months. Then I decided to narrow down the focus of my study to the teaching materials and their role in an EFL classroom. This decision was made based on what I had previously observed, where I perceived that students worked with an array of materials implemented to develop their four skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking). Another motive was the limitation of time. That is to say, I would be able to observe only one session out of four my case's participants have during the week. As a student researcher, I am taking four more courses resulting in crossed schedules. Consequently, the data



Opening Writing Doors Journal - ISSN 2322-9187

What I Have Learned About Collecting Data As A Novice Researcher

gathered in this research would not be enough as I would be able to observe only one class every Thursday.

I wrote down a new paper reflecting on the role of materials to teach a foreign language. In doing so, as I narrowed the topic down, I bracketed my ideas on teaching materials. The following paragraph is an extract of the aforementioned paper.

Materials are tools which facilitate the teaching process; they are a support for the teacher because they can make the explanation easier. However, the teacher must not forget that they are tools. That is to say, the teaching materials are useless if the teacher does not exploit them appropriately. Similarly, the teacher must avoid at all costs letting the teaching materials be the core of the class, because they are just a support and, the one in charge of the class is the teacher.

Having reflected on my preconceptions of the topic under study has allowed me to become aware of my role as a researcher. Hopefully, this reflective process would help me to prevent any biases throughout the data collection procedures.

Once I started observing participants in the setting, I wondered whether my presence in the classroom would interrupt the normal pace of the lesson that I attempted to observe. At the beginning I was seated at the back part of the classroom and students seemed to be uncomfortable, peeking at me several times during the class. Therefore, for the second observation I decided to change my sitting spot, and I moved to the front of the classroom. This simple change enabled me to observe everybody's faces and to keep track of their reactions towards different class activities. Fortunately, students seemed to be at ease with my presence. I suspect that while seated at the back students might have been worried about what I was doing, what I was observing and who I was



Opening Writing Doors Journal - ISSN 2322-9187

observing to. Conversely, being seated in front of them, students felt more relaxed. Maybe, I assume, they were able to watch over me then they did not see me as a threat anymore.

Regarding the interviewing process, I was afraid of being insufficiently trained to carry out an effective interview. Based on what I had learned in class, I prepared the questions and piloted them along with my co-researcher to verify that they were understandable. I was also worried about being recorded because I do not like hearing my own voice from a recording device. When the time came to conduct the interview, we went to the designated place and started recording. Although I was feeling anxious, I felt more relaxed as the interview unfolded.

Four key informants were interviewed. The first key informant was interviewed by my co-researcher. By modeling the first one, my co researcher helped me confirm the necessary steps for a successful interview and boosted my confidence. From the second key informant's interview onwards we divided our roles; my co-researcher would be in charge of the introduction and I would be in charge of asking the questions. I felt confident when conducting the second interview as our key informant seemed to easily understand each question. The third interview, however, was more challenging because our key informant seemed to be shy. When asked, she hesitated to answer the questions. She sometimes forgot what she wanted to say. I tried to make her feel calm. However, I shared her nervousness as I struggled asking her the interview questions. It was really hard to control my nervousness. Somehow I managed to successfully interview, though. Sadly, I think that the answers she gave me did not provide enough data but that was all that I could get from her. I have been thinking that we may need another session with her but first we would have to prepare



What I Have Learned About Collecting Data As A Novice Researcher

better to obtain the information we needed. She seemed to have problems when being recorded. I can infer it since she was speaking freely before starting the interview; nevertheless, once I started recording, she became nervous and insecure. Finally, the fourth key informant provided more information than the others. In a way he was contradicting some of his classmates' statements. This made me realize the importance of knowing our participant's perceptions because each one had their own opinion about the way the materials were implemented in the class and which we would not be able to know otherwise.

With regards the experience of doing research with a co-researcher, I have identified four advantages, as follows: First, it was easier for me to defend the proposal with a co-researcher. It made me feel more confident. I assume that as undergraduate researchers we all feel anxious during our performance. Second, when writing the proposal, working in a team saved us a lot of time. For example, we divided the papers that we were supposed to read. It was a relief having a co-researcher because we were able to make better use of our time. Third, we were able to rehearse together for the oral defense which helped us to correct our mistakes in pronunciation, and to be focused on the content. Four, during the observations, it was beneficial to observe in pairs. We complemented each other's data. For instance, my co-researcher noticed key aspects I missed, and vice versa. We also split the focus of our observations to reduce the possibilities of missing some aspects and, moreover, we clustered her perceptions and mine to obtain a higher panorama of the class.



What I Have Learned About Collecting Data As A Novice Researcher

Regarding the disadvantages, I found three: First, I have always worked alone since I was a kid; therefore, I was worried whether I would be able to get along with my co-researcher because doing research with somebody else implies extra responsibilities. Fortunately, I adapted to this new working environment. In fact, my co-researcher and I made a good team. Second, we usually spent too much time deciding on specific aspects and procedures about our proposal. Discussing these types of issues may have enriched our proposal. Third, we had time constraints during the oral performance because we had to fix it in a way that we were both able to participate; therefore, I sometimes had something I wanted to say but I had to save it to not waste too much time.

Despite the difficulties I do not regret the decision of having been part of a team research because I feel that there are more benefits than problems. For example, it is a great experience to have overcome my shyness. In addition, the advantages of having a co-researcher will remain throughout the project. Although I have made a good progress, I am looking forward to see what other changes I may make next time. I am certain there is a long way to go and I am training myself to become a better observer to gain more experience and, of course, to always leave my biases aside.

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What I Have Learned About Collecting Data As A Novice Researcher

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