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# Using E-Interviews in Research on Second Language Teacher Education

**Abstract:** Interviewing is a well-known method of qualitative data collection in applied linguistics research. It is widely used in diverse contexts and for a variety of purposes. Recently, the potential of e-mail interviewing, or e-interviews, has been discovered (e.g. James 2007, Bamptom, Cowton and Downs 2013). Consequently, it may be considered as an alternative to traditional face-to-face interviews. The purpose of the paper is to discuss some characteristics of the e-interview as a research tool in the realm of second language teacher education. For this purpose, the article draws on a study conducted among novice EFL teachers which integrated two important aspects of L2 teacher education, namely teacher beliefs and teacher reflection. The primary goal of the research was to encourage a group of teachers to reflect on and investigate their beliefs and experiences concerning autonomy in language teaching. Exploration and analysis of one's personal theories, in turn, are seen as indispensable elements of teachers' professional development. The study results are used to point out some benefits as well as limitations of e-mail interviewing in terms of gathering qualitative data. Most importantly, it was observed that using e-mail to carry out the interviews provided a considerable opportunity to draw on and develop teachers' reflective thinking skills.

**Keywords:** interviews, qualitative data collection, e-interviews, second-language teacher education, reflection, personal theories, learner autonomy

## 1. Introduction

The concept of second language (L2) teacher education has evolved over the years and several major shifts in how teacher training is understood have been observed. At first the focus was on skill-oriented training, that is, equipping teachers with the practical skills and techniques needed to teach effectively. Then, cognitive approaches to general education as well as teacher education became popular and they saw teachers as active decision-makers. Nowadays, constructivist and sociocultural conceptualisations, which take into account the situated nature of the teaching profession, seem to be dominant within the field. Despite the abundance as well as the complexity of these theoretical perspectives, L2 teacher education

is a relatively new field of inquiry with a history of approximately two decades
(Tsui 2011).

In addition, the introduction and application of information and communica-
tion technology (ICT) have not only broadened the scope of L2 teacher education,
but also set new research goals. Technology has transformed various spheres of
our lives, so it has also changed the way research is conducted. Indeed, ICT offers
interesting research possibilities which are now being extensively explored. One of
them is e-mail interviewing, also referred to as e-interviewing or the e-interview,
whose potential has been recently discovered (e.g. James and Busher 2009; Bamp-
tom, Cowton and Downs 2013). Interviewing, which is a well-known method of
qualitative data collection in applied linguistics and educational research, is widely
used in diverse contexts and for a variety of purposes (Dörnyei 2007). E-inter-
views, in turn, may be considered as a viable alternative to traditional face-to-face
interviews. Nevertheless, the discussion of such a research method in the domain
of L2 teacher education to date is scarce.

The present article focuses on the use and value of e-mail interviews as a
method of data collection in research on L2 teacher education. First of all, a theor-
etical overview of L2 teacher education is provided. Thus, the objective is to clarify
the terms, describe the main developments and trends, and indicate research per-
spectives within the field. Secondly, some characteristics of the e-interview as a
research tool are discussed, indicating the advantages as well as drawbacks of
e-mail interviewing.

## 2. L2 teacher education as a field of inquiry

Second language teacher education is a broad notion and, generally, it refers to
the training of L2 teachers. More specifically, the term is used to describe how
novice teachers acquire competences and skills and begin to develop their own
understanding of effective teaching (Wright 2010).

The field of L2 teacher education has undergone a considerable change over
the past 25 years, which has resulted in not only new approaches to teacher train-
ing, but also wider research perspectives. Let us now consider current trends in
L2 teacher education research and practice (see Wright (2010) and Tsui (2011) for
comprehensive reviews of research on L2 teacher education).

First, the impact of *teacher cognition* on classroom decisions and actions has
been recognised (Borg 2003; Tsui 2011). Exploring teachers' knowledge, thoughts
and past experiences, i.e. various components of teacher cognition, helps us better
understand who they are, how they learn to teach, and why they act in certain ways.
Consequently, another important trend in L2 teacher education can be observed,
namely more explicit engagement with *teacher beliefs* (Gabillon 2012). Williams
and Burden (1997) claim that beliefs are one of the main determinants of human

actions; thus, teachers should be able to recognize their own beliefs, values and knowledge about language learning and teaching in order to be aware of their impact on classroom practices.

Moreover, as Wright (2010) pinpoints, learning to teach and learning from experience lie at the core of current teacher education. Learning by doing, in turn, is closely associated with a growing concern with *reflection*. It refers to teachers as reflective practitioners, engaging in various forms of classroom research, discovering and developing their professional identity. It has been postulated that reflective practice should become an indispensable element of L2 teacher education, especially in the context of extremely difficult first-year teaching experiences which, according to Farrell (2012), involve two complex tasks: doing your job and learning to teach effectively. Teachers can engage in reflective activities, such as journal or diary writing, to assess and manage problems they face; thus they are more likely to become 'thinking' teachers. This view is directly compatible with the contemporary constructivist approach to learning and teaching.

## 3. Online interviewing in qualitative research

Taking into account past research on L2 teacher education, it can be noticed that both quantitative as well as qualitative methodologies have been applied, since the choice of the research method and instruments depends on the investigated area. The aspects of teacher cognition, for example, have been traditionally examined by means of questionnaires and narrative forms, such as reflective journals and diaries, through which teachers create written records of their learning and interpret their teaching practices (Borg 2003). Apart from that, in-depth interviews and observations, which are also considered to be narrative forms (James 2007), are employed to capture the nature of teachers' ways of knowing. As can be seen, the use of qualitative methods has emerged as a predominant means of exploring teacher knowledge and beliefs.

It is generally acknowledged that the aim of qualitative research is to gain a deep insight into complex phenomena. Dörnyei (2007) enumerates some of the features which accurately describe this type of methodology. Researchers take advantage of the emergent and flexible nature of qualitative data that allows them to answer open questions and deal with individual variability. In order to explore participants' subjective interpretations of a given situation, researchers have to maintain close contact with them for an extended period of time. Thanks to that, we are able to broaden our understanding of multifaceted and dynamic issues. There are, however, many limitations to this methodology, such as time, costs and access to participants, to name but a few. That is why, in search of ways of overcoming the drawbacks and improving qualitative studies, researchers started to integrate ICT into their research projects.

Taking into account the central role of computers in the everyday life of people around the world, it is not surprising that technology has entered the field of qualitative research. What is more, James and Busher (2009) report that employing ICT in qualitative research appears to be gaining in popularity; hence, a growing number of publications about conducting research in the online environment can be noticed. As Madge and O'Connor (2005) state, technology not only inspires new ways of thinking about qualitative research as it allows us to modify and improve existing methods, e.g. by providing access to geographically dispersed participants, but more importantly, it creates new methodological possibilities, e.g. by taking advantage of computer-mediated communication. So far, computers, thanks to the software that is used to organise information, have been mainly employed in the process of data analysis. However, modern technologies have the potential to facilitate other elements of research projects and they are used to collect data as well (Bampton and Cowton 2002). For example, online interviewing as a way of gathering qualitative data has been successfully applied in such academic disciplines as the social sciences, psychology, business studies, health studies, and education (Meho 2006; Salmons 2012a).

As Opdenakker (2006) indicates, there are two forms of Internet-mediated communication that are used to conduct online interviews. The first one is *synchronous*, that is, it takes place in real time, and the most common examples are online focus groups, chats and Voice over the Internet Protocol (VoIP) systems, e.g. Skype. In turn, *asynchronous* communication, which is independent of time and place, usually makes use of e-mail as the most popular means of exchanging information, but various social networks can be employed as well. The differences between these two forms of communication determine not only the way online interviews are conducted, but also the quality and quantity of obtained data (Evans, Elford and Wiggins 2008). For the purpose of the present article, the terms online interviewing and the e-interview refer to interviews conducted via e-mail.

Bampton, Cowton and Downs (2013) point out the main features of e-mail interviewing. Firstly, technology, which is relatively easy to use, provides the only means of communication between the interviewer and interviewees. Secondly, it entails a one-to-one transaction, so the information exchanged between the two parties is not revealed to, viewed, or influenced by other people. Thirdly, e-mail interviewing involves multiple exchanges over an extended period of time as the interviewer and interviewee do not meet in one place at the same time; hence, two types of displacement can be observed: time and space. In addition, this form of communication is text-based, which means that the common visual and verbal aspects of face-to-face interaction are very limited. The researchers who evaluated the use of e-mail in qualitative interviewing (e.g. Evans, Elford and Wiggins 2008; Opdenakker 2006) indicate that this feature constitutes a major drawback. However, "it seems premature at best to construe the absence of the visual and the verbal as a lack rather than as a simple difference" (Bampton, Cowton and Downs 2013:

332). All these features of the e-interview imply that there are certain advantages and disadvantages to using e-mail as a research tool which have to be considered by any researcher wishing to use the method.

## 4. The research process

In order to illustrate the use of e-mail interviewing, a study conducted on a group of novice EFL teachers will be presented. The study proper was divided into two stages, the first of which was a questionnaire exploring different facets of learner autonomy. The aim of the survey was to get to know teachers' beliefs, so the respondents were asked to rate 20 items using the five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire as well as the interview were designed in Polish in order to eliminate the possibility of misunderstanding. It was assumed that the questionnaire results would represent teachers' attitudes towards such aspects of autonomy as learning strategies, goal-setting, self-assessment, cooperation, use of resources, independent learning and the teacher's role. The data obtained by means of the questionnaire were treated as the starting point for the discussion on teachers' beliefs. Consequently, in the final part of the questionnaire the respondents were asked to give their e-mail address, providing they wished to participate in the second stage of the study, i.e. an e-mail interview. Out of 20 respondents who completed the questionnaire, 11 agreed to further explore the issues addressed in the questionnaire. However, only 8 participants replied to the first message that was sent to them to confirm their willingness to take part in the interview.

In the e-interview, as in any in-depth interview, the key matter is building a rapport between the researcher and the participants. The issue that had to be tackled concerned the feasibility of developing such a relationship online. The starting point for establishing the relationship and gaining trust was meeting with the participants when the questionnaire was distributed. It was also an opportunity to introduce the second part of the study and encourage the teachers to discuss the questionnaire results so that they could learn more about their beliefs as well as themselves as teachers.

The use of online interviewing as a research method should be justified, for it might not be entirely appropriate in all situations (Salmons 2012b). In this case, the aims of the interview were to engage the teachers in reflective activity, to develop their reflective thinking skills, and to verify their beliefs concerning autonomous language learning. Since the research method was supposed to capture the participants' narrative accounts, e-mail interviewing seemed the optimal way to provoke reflection on their understanding of autonomy in language teaching.

All the interviewees were students of English specialising in ELT methodology and they were also English teachers working in different types of schools in Lower Silesia, Poland. The sample included 6 women and 2 men, all of whom could be

described as novice teachers since their teaching experience ranged from one to three years.

Before the study could be conducted, the participants had to be acquainted with the procedure and the main objectives of the e-interview. These were described in the first e-mail that was sent to all the teachers who had agreed to take part in the interview. The interview guide was inspired by another study in which e-mail interviewing was used (see James 2007). Namely, the participants were informed that the questions would be sent one at a time, and that they should not delete any part of the interview. Apart from that, they were requested to reply in two days and it was anticipated that the interview would be completed within two to three weeks. There were no restrictions concerning the length of messages. Moreover, some ethical issues were addressed, i.e. the teachers were assured that their participation in the interview was anonymous and voluntary, so they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time. They were also notified how the information shared during the interview would be used.

The e-interview had a semi-structured form as it was based on seven main questions, all of which could become a starting point for a more detailed discussion, so then some additional questions were included. Also, if a participant addressed a side issue, it had to be responded to so that none of the topics considered in the course of a conversation was ignored by the interviewer. In few cases it was decided that not all of the main questions should be asked because they turned out to be irrelevant in these particular instances. In all, the number of questions ranged from 7 to 15.

Furthermore, the interview was organized around three time aspects: present, past, and future. The first time aspect was considered in relation to the teachers' present beliefs. Using the questionnaire as a reference point, the interviewer discussed different facets of autonomy in language learning. The next questions concerned the participants' past experiences, for example, whether and how their teachers promoted autonomy. The aim of those questions was to indicate some factors that might have shaped their present beliefs. Finally, the teachers were told to determine their future goals; consequently, it was possible to see if the interview changed anything in their perception of autonomy. The very last question that was asked to each of the interviewees referred to the evaluation of the interview. More specifically, by reflecting on the whole conversation, the participants could assess the interview process, its form and learning value.

## 5. Benefits and limitations of the e-interview

The discussion of the interview results will focus on some methodological aspects as well as the evaluation of the study. A detailed analysis of the results concerning teachers' reflections about autonomy in language learning is beyond the scope of the present article, but it can be found elsewhere (see Klimas 2014).

Let us start the discussion by considering the goals of the interview, as they determined the form of the study. It can be stated that all the objectives of the e-interview were achieved. Only one teacher described his participation in the interview as irrelevant in terms of professional development. The rest of the teachers claimed that it was a positive and valuable experience and indicated that after the interview their understanding of learner autonomy deepened. What is more, the participants' reflective thinking skills were developed due to the fact that they were asked to consider and comment on various aspects of their experience. Finally, the participants' beliefs concerning autonomy could be verified. Most of them admitted that they had come to realise how important it is to allow students to be more independent and that the role of a teacher should not be limited to providing knowledge, controlling and testing students. It has to be emphasised that the form of the interview was a crucial factor in achieving the research goals. E-mail communication, which gave enough time and space to consider the questions, provided opportunity for deep reflection. Interestingly, this form of communication also allowed the interviewer to engage in reflective activity by taking time to comment on the ongoing conversation.

Apart from being an optimal medium for fostering reflection, the e-interview has some other benefits. On the basis of the present study, it can be said that e-mail interviewing is a very convenient and efficient way of conducting qualitative research. The first aspect that needs to be mentioned is data quality. E-mail communication offers more time to think before giving an answer or asking a question; consequently, it was observed that the participants offered thoughtful and detailed answers. This, in turn, provided rich research material.

Moreover, since in e-mail interviews textual record is available all the time, it seems easier to manage the conversation in terms of its accuracy and clarity. In this way, spoken incoherence is not an issue because it can be easily overcome by considering and re-drafting the content of a message many times before actually sending it. This aspect facilitated the process of communication for the interviewees as well as the interviewer. In fact, this is one of the reasons why e-mail has become such a popular medium of communication (Herring 1999).

The fact that the interviewer is not physically present eliminates participants' anxiety, which might be the case when the conversation is recorded or the interviewer is unable to create an appropriate atmosphere during the meeting. The e-interview was conducted in a familiar setting in which the interviewees felt secure; as a result, possible inhibitions were eliminated, increasing the possibility that opinions shared by the participants were honest.

Another benefit that the participants mentioned is the fact that the interview created an opportunity to be heard, which seems to be immensely important in terms of professional development. Novice teachers are offered very little support despite the fact that the first years are especially demanding for them. Thus, any occasion to talk with someone else about one's professional duties is an invaluable experience. One participant admitted that she rarely analyses her work and that she

never talks about her problems with other teachers, so the interview allowed her to tackle and clarify at least one issue concerning her work, that is, learner autonomy.

The participants also indicated that the topic of the interview was interesting, and thanks to that, they were really involved in it and motivated to offer well thought-out answers. One teacher said that she was so excited about the interview that she could not wait to receive the questions and kept checking her mailbox. Another participant appreciated the possibility to reminisce about her teachers who, as she noticed, had an immense influence on her present approach to students.

Apart from the above-mentioned aspects connected with communication, the form of the interview offered a number of practical and economic advantages. The researcher had quick and convenient access to the participants, who otherwise might have been unavailable for a face-to-face meeting. There was no need to travel either for the interviewees or the interviewer and they could send messages at their own convenience. Because of this, the participants found the interview process undemanding and were less likely to withdraw from it.

Furthermore, conducting e-interviews can be time-saving for the researcher as it is possible to interview several teachers simultaneously. This, in fact, turned out to be a really valuable aspect in terms of leading particular conversations, giving the interviewer an opportunity to draw on the ideas expressed by some participants to formulate questions or comments that could be used in other interviews. Besides, the use of automatic text transcripts of the interviews, which are provided by e-mail messages, facilitated the storage, processing and analysis of the obtained data.

However, the e-interview is not devoid of some drawbacks, the most obvious of which are technological limitations. Computer failures and losing access to the Internet may cause time delays or even seriously interfere with the completion of such interviews. Indeed, in few cases some delays in receiving answers were observed. The causes of the delays were not always clear and they might have been trivial ones, such as having restricted access to the Internet, or more serious, e.g. losing interest in the interview, being tired or too busy, or forgetting to send a reply. Regardless of the reason for the delay, reminders were sent with either a comment or the reworded question to find out if the interviewee would continue the conversation. A slower response time obviously had an influence on the duration of the interviews and some of them took longer than had been initially planned.

What is more, the longer the interview lasts, the higher the possibility of participants dropping out. That is why it was crucial to monitor the regularity and quality of responses and react accordingly. Interpreting participants' emotions and mood is not an easy task for the researcher due to the fact that nonverbal cues, such as body language, facial expression and voice inflections, are lost in text-based communication. The role of the interviewer is to pay attention to any indication of negative emotions. A participant's weariness, boredom or discomfort, for example, might reveal itself in shorter messages. A long waiting time for a response may

signal a participant's intention to discontinue the interview. Whenever some negative signs appeared, the interviewer considered bringing the conversation to a close.

Finally, it has to be admitted that the participants' answers might lack spontaneity. On the one hand, we receive thoughtful responses to our questions, but on the other hand, the participants have enough time to adjust their messages to convey the desired impression. However, it was emphasised that there were no right and wrong answers and the authenticity of the opinions which were given would not be discredited. On the contrary, the interviewees openly communicated their beliefs, for example, concerning the role of a teacher. Most of the participants initially described it in a very traditional way, that is, the teacher was seen as a person who tightly controls students and is responsible for everything that happens in the classroom, even though such a view does not correspond to autonomy-oriented language teaching. Hence, in this particular case more time to reflect on the questions was not a disadvantage because, thanks to it, the teachers had a chance to verify their beliefs.

All in all, there are quite a few benefits of e-mail interviewing and they seem to outweigh the drawbacks that could be noticed in this particular case.

## 6. Conclusion

The potential of using e-mail interviews in research on L2 teacher education is enormous. The method offers great opportunities for qualitative studies by providing access to a wide range of participants and, most importantly, by producing rich research material. It is also a very convenient way of gathering and processing qualitative data. As the research results indicate, the e-interview proved to be an effective tool used to foster reflection among novice teachers. Reflective thinking skills, as many researchers (e.g. Wright 2010; Farrell 2012) claim, need to be taught because they are not acquired naturally, so the e-interview turned out to be a contributing factor to professional development. In addition, due to the fact that the participants were involved in reflective activity, they had a chance to verbalise and analyse their beliefs, which resulted in a greater awareness of their own attitudes to autonomy in language learning as well as the reconsideration of some mistaken beliefs.

However, we cannot forget that there are certain disadvantages to the method and that online interviewing "should not be perceived as an 'easy option'" (James and Busher 2009: 40). Provided that the study is carefully planned and conducted, the possible limitations of the method can be minimised. Thus it may be considered as a complementary way of data collection or even a reasonable alternative to face-to-face interviewing. Undoubtedly, more research is needed to fully explore the possibilities offered by the e-interview in the context of L2 teacher education. It is recommended that e-mail interviewing should be suitable for the target group and applicable to the purpose of the study. Consequently, it may be successfully employed in studies which aim at exploring teacher cognition and developing reflective thinking skills.

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