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## **Challenges faced by young business professionals in using English as a language of work: Piloting a long interview guide**

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*The present study reports on the piloting of an interview study designed as the first phase of an exploratory sequential mixed methods research project (Creswell, 2014). The aim of the project is to explore the difficulties and challenges young business graduates face when they start work in an international environment. The interview study was designed to increase the depth of the analytical categories to be investigated in the quantitative phase. The primary aim of the pilot study is to reveal the weaknesses of the research instrument and the way in which the interviews were conducted so that the quality of the interview guide could be improved. The pilot study also contributes to the development of the researcher's expertise, and since in the qualitative research paradigm the researcher acts as a research instrument (McCracken, 1988), to the trustworthiness of the inquiry (Patton, 2002). The results show that the piloting process contributed to the improvement of the researcher's interview skills regarding the use of planned and floating prompts (McCracken, 1988), as well as the interviewer's ability to manufacture distance (McCracken, 1988). Moreover, the piloting process provided information as to how the interview guide should be modified to elicit the richest possible data.*

Keywords: *interview study, piloting, interview guide, data collection, exploratory sequential mixed methods research*

### **Rationale behind conducting a long qualitative interview to explore categories related to the needs of business students**

Analysing the needs of students has been a central issue in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course design. In fact, it is one of the defining features of ESP and, within this large field, that of Business English (BE) as well. Basturkmen (2010) goes as far as to suggest that needs analysis has become identical with the course development process. When a course is designed for in-service learners, that is to a group of business professionals at a specific workplace, the relationship between needs analysis and course design is straightforward. The course designer/teacher knows all that is necessary to tailor the course to meet their students' needs: the scope of the job they do, their tasks, the people they communicate with, the topics they need to discuss, the mediums and the genres they use for communication. Most importantly, the immediate needs of the students can be satisfied because it is possible to reflect on the problems and difficulties they encountered recently, and solutions or strategies can be learnt and practised to avoid similar problems in the future.

However, developing a BE course that satisfies the future needs of pre-service students in a business school is a more difficult matter as few of the above can be predicted. What can be predicted, however, is that they will most probably work in a multicultural and multilingual environment since companies today are either members of global supply chains or trade in global markets. Therefore, fresh graduates will need to use English as one of the working languages and often as the main language. Consequently, being able to communicate successfully in English is a basic requirement especially in multinational companies. It is seen as identical with being competent in one's job (Kankaanranta et al., 2015, Kankaanranta–Louhiala-Salminen, 2013) as employees receive instructions, do the job and report to their bosses about their work in English.

Designing courses that increase the employability of business students is a major concern in Hungarian business schools, which explains the heightened research interest in conducting needs analysis studies. However, these studies have so far focused on the activities, skills and competencies that business professionals need to do their jobs and less on investigating what it is like to work in English. Major (2000) investigated employers of various sizes in several sectors to find out what activities employees are expected to carry out in English. Szabó and Balázs (2020) conducted focus group interviews with employers and administered questionnaires to fresh graduates and teachers to find out what competencies employers, teachers and former students consider important and expect HE institutions to equip students with. Loch (2017) interviewed employers and language teachers in HE to explore what intercultural competencies fresh graduates need and what are those competencies that ESP courses should aim to improve. In an investigation, Szabó and Mátó (2015) compared the employers' competency requirements and employees' ideas about the foreign language competencies employers expect them to have. Most of them used quantitative methods in order to arrive at generalizable findings and mainly focused on employer needs and aimed to find out how ESP courses in higher educational institutions should be designed to better match the requirements of employers. While the goal of these studies was to improve university education, they provided limited insight into the difficulties fresh graduates face when they communicate in a multicultural and multilingual environment, as well as about the challenges they need to overcome to be able to do their job.

In order to investigate the issues above, I had two research methods to choose from: participant observation and the long qualitative interview. As it was not feasible to observe participants during work due to confidentiality issues and time constraints, I opted for the interview format. It has the advantage over participant observation in that it offers the possibility for the researcher to *"find out things we can't observe"* (Patton, 2002:340) and to see things from the perspective of the participants (Patton, 2002). The interview study is designed as the first phase of an exploratory sequential mixed methods research project (Creswell, 2014) the goal of which is to investigate the strategies business professionals use to communicate effectively in a multilingual work environment. The aim of the interview study is to elicit responses that shed a light on the participants' mental processes in challenging communicative situations. The categories that emerge from the participants' thoughts and feelings will be used as an important source of information for the questionnaire to be used in the large-scale study. They will help the researcher to *"specify variables that need to go into the quantitative study"* (Creswell, 2014:16).

### **The purpose of the pilot study**

Piloting an interview guide yields valuable information about the design of the instrument, the way in which the interviews were conducted and the content of the responses. It gives the researcher insights as to how the interview guide should be modified or expanded, whether the interviewer managed to establish rapport with the participant, and whether the prompts used were effective to elicit a rich enough response. The conclusions that such a pilot study provide will prevent wasting the opportunity of collecting rich data in the main study and help to avoid the potential pitfalls that await the researcher.

Although there are a number of mistakes that novice researchers especially can make which may affect the quality of the responses, only those will be discussed which are relevant to this study. The most obvious mistake is when a question is directive and leads participants in the way the researcher wants them to go (McCracken, 1988). As qualitative research (McCracken, 1988) is about *"understanding a situation as it is constructed by the participants"* (Maykut–Morehouse, 1994:17), the researcher must be able to distance themselves from the

topic of the interview and be as free of assumptions as possible (McCracken, 1988). Secondly, related to being unobtrusive and nondirective, interviewers must not use active listening strategies to avoid articulating hidden meanings they only assume to be there. When using such strategies, they do not provide the space for the participants to search for and formulate the experience in their own way (McCracken, 1988). Third, closed, unclear or too complex questions should be avoided (McCracken, 1988; Patton, 2002): They may jeopardize the quality of the data by being too demanding or confusing for the participant and some important data might not emerge as a result.

Following from the above, I set three aims for the pilot study: first, I intend to assess the data collection procedure; second, I evaluate the way in which I conducted the interviews; and finally, I evaluate the quality of the responses I managed to elicit during the process.

## Methods

### *Designing the pilot study*

In order to carry out an exploratory piece of research and to allow categories to emerge from the accounts of the participants, I prepared a semi-structured interview guide following McCracken's (1988) 4-step model. As the present study reports on the piloting of a research instrument, this article mentions only the first two steps.

The design of the interview guide started with the review of literature to find out what communication strategies are used by speakers of English in intercultural communication in order to negotiate meaning (Illés, 2011): repetition and paraphrasing (Dewey, 2014), building rapport (Pullin, 2010), accommodating to the partner's level of English and linguistic behaviour (Cogo, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2011). Conducting a thorough literature review was necessary because it helped to "*define problems and assess data*" (McCracken, 1988:31), and, at the same time it enabled me to recognize what is "*counterexpectational*" and "*provocative*" (McCracken, 1988:31). Following McCracken's (1988) qualitative methodology, in the second phase of the inquiry I started the "*process of using the self as an instrument of inquiry*" (McCracken, 1988:32): I carried out a self-examination to explore my own experiences and assumptions, thoughts and feelings related to what it is like to communicate with people from different parts of the world, what strategies I use to understand the other person, and what I do to avoid or remedy misunderstandings. I collected a list of situations from my experience when I met with communication problems in order to facilitate the participants' retrieval of memories of how they managed to negotiate meaning when they faced difficulties in communication.

The questionnaire was designed as part of the second phase of the design procedure. I drew up a detailed interview guide as suggested by Patton (2002) to help ensure systematicity and comprehensiveness while still allowing new topics to emerge. The interview guide covered the following topics: pragmatic awareness (being aware of those aspects of the communicative event which determine appropriateness), accommodation strategies (adjusting the manner in which information is presented in order to make the message understandable – complexity of lexicon, syntax, repetition), Target Situation Analysis (for what purposes and with who is English used at work – nationality of interactants, languages used, tasks, genres), discourse management (starting conversations, building rapport). The interview guide was sent to experts for peer-checking and modifications were made following their advice: I added, deleted, or reworded some questions, and modified their sequence.

Since the investigation focused on how participants deal with communicative situations, from Patton's (2002) typology I decided to use experience (e.g.: "*Please, tell me about a situation when you communicated with a new colleague or client and you felt that you did not quite understand each other.*") and behaviour questions (e.g. "*What caused the*

*misunderstanding? How did you clarify it?*”). In the interview guide each topic to be investigated opened with a very general grand-tour question (McCracken, 1988) (e.g. *“If I were there with you on an average workday, what would I see you do and in what language?”*) and was followed by planned prompts which were designed to fulfil multiple functions: first, to help the participant to put into words experiences or mental processes that are not easily accessible by breaking down the grand-tour question into aspects which are more specific, therefore easier to handle, and second, to ensure the emergence of a rich description of the participants’ experience.

The interview guide contained three types of planned prompts: category questions, special incident questions, and contrast questions. The category questions were used to explore all the characteristics of the experience which the grand-tour question inquired about but did not get answered (e.g.: Some of the category questions for the grand-tour question above were: *“How often do you have to use English at work?”*, *“What activities do you do in English?”*). As suggested by McCracken (1988), the special incident questions were used after the category questions and were designed to elicit categories that have not emerged spontaneously (e.g.: *“Please tell me of a case of (oral or written) communication in English which was unusual for some reason.”*). Contrast questions were also used to increase the richness of the data in cases where making contrasts was a viable option (e.g.: *“What do you do differently when you try to clarify a misunderstanding with a new colleague/clients as opposed to someone you already know well?”*).

### ***Participants***

I selected the participants with purposive sampling so that the sample *“possesses certain characteristics relevant to the study”* (Fraenkel–Wallen, 1993:383). I used two criteria, one of which was that participants should have completed their BE courses at university within the last 1-3 years. I set this criterion to ensure that the participants still have memories of the courses. The other criterion was that they should be working in positions where they need to communicate and work in English. The pilot interviews were conducted in Hungarian with three participants, all of them being young professionals working for multinational companies. Although English language communication is not restricted to multinational companies, it is only at these companies where the language of work and communication tends to be English. One of the participants was an intern, another had been working for the company as a student for almost eighteen months, while the third participant had been a full-time employee for a year.

### ***Data collection***

The interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Office TEAMS in January 2022. Although it is better to conduct the interviews in the setting the researcher intends to explore, there were obstacles that prevented this: the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and to security issues related to company data. Nevertheless, conducting the interviews in TEAMS offered some benefits. We did not have to wear masks which would have considerably reduced the communicative value of our exchanges, and the online platform made it possible for the participants to be physically in their workplaces during the interview, which made up for the loss of the natural setting, at least from the participants’ point of view. Another benefit of TEAMS was that I made a video recording of our conversations. As I have little experience in conducting a long qualitative interview and I do not have the opportunity to ask other researchers to observe the way I do it, watching myself how I ask questions and react to answers yielded valuable lessons as to what I did well and what I should not do next time. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and sent back to the interviewees for member-checking (Lincoln–

Guba, 1985). I asked them to provide feedback on whether the interview transcript is consistent with what they said and whether it captures the meaning of what they wanted to express.

### ***Data analysis***

Piloting a long qualitative interview guide fulfils its purpose if it helps improve the research instrument, the conduct of data collection and sheds light on the quality of data. The critical evaluation of the research process is an integral part of qualitative research: it does not only offer the potential of enhancing interviewing skills and expertise, but also contributes to the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln–Guba, 1985). In the following analysis I am going to systematically address the issues mentioned earlier and draw conclusions as to the method of collecting good quality data in the main study.

### **Findings**

#### ***Aim 1: Assessment of the data collection procedure***

The first aim of the pilot study was to reveal the weaknesses of the data collection procedure. I critically examined the questions of the interview guide because I wanted to find out to what extent the participants were able to relate to the grand-tour questions and the planned prompts, and whether they were suitable to elicit the data I was hoping to collect. While most of the grand-tour questions were meaningful for the participants and proved to be effective in producing rich data, one question led them in a direction which is less useful for the main research. The question was “*If I followed you on an average workday, what would I see you doing?*” The participants answered by listing the tasks they do in their job producing a long stretch of speech about job-related tasks which contained little information about the type and content of communicative events they engage in during the day. Their reaction to this question is quite understandable, since, deliberately, I did not provide them with a direction where I wanted them to go. Consequently, if I am interested in informal conversations as well as job-related communicative events, I need to support this grand-tour question with different prompts, such as this: “*Tell me about how you begin your workday*” or “*Tell me how you spend your lunch break.*”

The analysis of the interview transcript revealed that I missed a valuable opportunity to elicit rich data. Besides designing truly open-ended questions and good prompts, participants’ ability to provide rich data can be further supported by asking them to add anything they have not mentioned but might be relevant to the topic (Patton, 2002). It is an important lesson to learn when conducting the main study.

#### ***Aim 2: Critical evaluation of the way the interviews were conducted***

By pursuing this aim I intended to examine the way I formulated the questions on the spot, and if I resorted to active listening. Moreover, since I video recorded the interviews, it was possible to examine the body language and the facial expressions I used.

The critical assessment of the interview revealed that, although the interview guide contained truly open-ended, neutral, singular, and clear questions as advised by Patton (2002), sometimes the way I formulated the questions in the heat of the moment did not meet the above requirements. Some questions were dichotomous, such as this one: “*Has it ever happened that you misunderstood someone?*” Unfortunately, the answer was not much more than a ‘yes’: “*Yes, it has, but not due to language problems. It was just a simple miscommunication, but not because of the English language.*” Instead, a more suitable way of asking this question would

have been: Please remember a situation when a misunderstanding happened between you and a colleague. Tell me what happened.

Instead of singular questions, I sometimes used double ones, like this: *“How often do you use English and in what situations?”* Such a question is problematic because it may confuse the participant as to which one to answer (Patton, 2002). A more appropriate question would be: Tell me about the type of situations when you use English.

In the first interview I engaged in active listening and provided an interpretation of what the participant said. In the following excerpt, the participant is describing the communication practices of the company she is working for:

*“They are very good at communicating changes in a simple and clear way. They pay great attention to this. The same goes for organizational changes, although these are communicated in newsletters not in videos. We are informed about organizational changes even when we are not affected by them.”*

Although I engaged in active listening – *“I see, so communication within the organization is very transparent.”* –, it did not affect the quality of the data adversely due to the enthusiasm and good communication skills of the participant who managed to expand upon the topic when she replied to my comment like this: *“yes, and very informal...everybody with everybody”* and she went on to discuss cultural differences manifested in communication styles when it comes to the language-specific ways of being informal:

*“While in Anglo-Saxon countries being on first-name terms is simple and obvious, here in Hungary it is not common. Everyone in the company makes great efforts to be on you-terms with each other, and it reduces hierarchical differences, it gives the impression of the organization as one with a flat structure.”*

As regards my facial expressions and body language during the interview, I discovered a few automatic and unconscious reactions that may have led the participants in a certain direction instead of allowing them to go in their own. I noticed that I showed too great enthusiasm (by nodding) when they said things which were in line with my expectations, thus failed to “manufacture distance” (McCracken, 1988:24) to the desirable extent and allowed my assumptions to be manifested. Moreover, I did not take advantage of floating prompts (McCracken, 1988), the use of which allows a simple and nondirective way to encourage the participant to provide further details about a topic.

### ***Aim 3: Assessment of the quality of the data***

I assessed the collected data to find out whether the grand-tour questions and the planned prompts were sufficient and appropriate to elicit the amount and quality of data needed to answer the research questions of the main research. The analysis showed that the richness of the data increased as I became more and more experienced. Although the first interview did not yield data about oral communication strategies and practices of the participant, it proved to be very useful in terms of improving my interview skills. This interview was a great example to what I needed to pay attention to in the following interviews. The second and third interviews produced much richer data for at least two reasons. First, the participants work in positions where oral communication occurs, as well, therefore, it was possible to collect data about a wider range of communicative events. Second, having reflected on the way in which I conducted the first interview, I managed to improve my skills in going after categories that emerged spontaneously, and in manufacturing distance by using a more subdued body language and successfully refraining from expressing my assumptions during the interview.

## Conclusion

The process of piloting the interview guide has proved to be an extremely valuable experience. As the long qualitative interview, the piloting process of which is reported in this article, is part of an exploratory sequential mixed methods research project, the main goal of the interviews is to increase the depth of understanding the categories to be examined in the main project. Therefore, it was vital to test whether the instrument, consisting of the interview guide and the researcher, is suitable to achieve the depth needed for the main research project (Bassegy, 1999). Piloting the interview guide enabled me to draw important conclusions regarding the research instrument and the way in which the interviews should be conducted. In conclusion, the pilot study fulfilled its purpose by shedding light on what needs to be modified or done differently. However, it also helped me become more confident in the future success of the research project by showing a gradual improvement in my interview skills.

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