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Lessons learnt from being an ‘insider’ to the research context: Gathering data ‘at home’ while enrolled as a PhD student overseas

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Abstract

This article retells the story of a researcher from the time she prepared for the data-gathering in her home country, to the time she was in the field. The story, in her own words, are reflections on how she utilised the advantages of being an insider to the studied context. The lessons illustrated by the researcher in this article may help other international postgraduate students studying in New Zealand—as well as their PhD supervisors—understand some of the multiple factors that affect the PhD students’ study, and how each PhD student may negotiate and adjust to accomplish their mission to gather data in their home country while enrolled in an overseas university.

Keywords

Insider; advantages; gathering data; home country; overseas.

Introduction

Myself as a researcher

I am from Vietnam, and I have been in New Zealand for three years doing a full-time PhD of Education at the University of Waikato since 2017. Researcher is one of my three full-time roles; I am also a wife and a mother of two primary-school-aged sons. These three roles have great influence on every decision of my PhD journey. In my PhD project, I am a decision-maker; and in my family, residing in New Zealand for my doctoral study, I am the ‘leader’ because my husband and my sons are not fluent in English, which makes them more dependent on me.

I chose to study my PhD at the University of Waikato, the world-ranked university in Hamilton, New Zealand, for three main reasons. The first reason is that the tuition and living costs here are affordable for my family. Then, I am fortunate to have three experienced supervisors in education and technology to provide me guidance in my research project. And last, but not least, both my family and I love the natural beauty and the kind hearted people of New Zealand. These three factors converged nicely and brought us to New Zealand.

Before coming to New Zealand to do my PhD, I had been working as a lecturer at Hanoi University (HANU) in Vietnam for 12 years. My two main responsibilities in HANU were teaching English language and training school teachers how to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT)



effectively in their language teaching. I was a member of the Vietnam National Foreign Language 2020 project, which aimed at “comprehensively renewing foreign language teaching and learning in the national education system ... in order to remarkably improve human resources’ foreign language proficiency” (MOET, 2008). As a member of the project, I had three years’ experience in providing blended learning courses on using ICT to Hanoi primary school language teachers.

In the role as an ICT trainer, I had chances to talk to teachers, received some informal feedback and listened to their anecdotal stories about how they used technology in their teaching practice. Based on their anecdotal stories, I developed an interest in getting to know how teachers perceived the use of technology in teaching and the effectiveness of associated professional development activities. I identified the topic of my study and set my thesis’s title as: ‘Vietnamese teachers’ experience on using educational technology to teach languages in primary schools’. The study aims to explore and gain further insights into language teachers’ experience of using educational technology in their teaching and to make a contribution to inform Vietnamese teachers, teacher trainers and policy makers to effectively design and implement the use of technology in language teaching. Interpretive phenomenology is used in this research because its ontology and epistemology serve my aim.

The ontology of interpretive phenomenology is that reality is constructed based on context and individual reference frames as each person lives in the world (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). This resonates with the thesis project as this research aims at exploring teachers’ perceptions and attitudes regarding the use of educational technology to teach English in primary schools of a big city in Northern Vietnam. These teachers’ perceptions are influenced by their lived experiences as they practised teaching. Moreover, the epistemology of this methodology which is based on data collected through participant-researcher interaction and the interpretations of researchers will help to ascertain an in-depth understanding of language teachers’ worldviews in this area. Therefore, this research adopts a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods which include survey, interviews and document analysis. This work of data collection was undertaken during a return trip to Vietnam for 16 weeks. My husband and children accompanied me there and back. I surveyed 127 teachers in six primary schools in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam. I also interviewed 20 language teachers, four groups of language teachers, six ICT coordinators and six school principals.

Home context where data was gathered

To understand the context of my research and what the gathering of evidence in my home country involved, this section describes some general features of the geography and education system of Vietnam and Hanoi.

Vietnam is located to the North West of New Zealand, 9,153 km in air travel distance (“Distancefromto,” n.d.). It takes at least 16.5 hours to fly from Vietnam to New Zealand with at least one transition from a third country because there are no direct flights between the two countries. Vietnam is an S-shaped country in South-East Asia bordered by China to the North, Lao and Cambodia to the West, and the Pacific Ocean to the South East. Vietnam’s capital city is Hanoi, which is in the northern part of the country. There are 754 primary schools in Hanoi out of 13,093 total primary schools in Vietnam in 2018 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, n.d.). The six primary schools where I gathered data are in different areas around Hanoi.

In terms of features of the Vietnam primary education system, the Vietnam primary education is compulsory and there is a national curriculum. The primary system comprises five grade levels, Grade 1 to Grade 5. A child’s primary education starts at Grade 1 when they are 6 years old and goes to Grade 5 when they are 10 years old. There are three types of primary schools in Vietnam: public schools, people-founded schools and private schools (Nguyễn, 2005). Public schools are established and funded by the government. People-founded schools are established and funded by the local community. Private schools are established and funded by social organisations, social-professional organisations, economic organisations or individuals.

Like all social institutions in Vietnam, the Vietnamese education system is hierarchical (Truong, 2013). Social status and political position are important in Vietnamese society (Jamieson, 1993). Schools within Vietnamese society are layered in terms of authority, and members in the system have

faith and trust in authority. For example, a principal of a school has to follow the guidance or directives from a representative of the higher management bodies like the Department of Education, or the Ministry of Education and Training. To be more specific, in my case, as a researcher, in order to be able to gain access to schools, I had to get a letter of introduction from the Division of Primary Education, which is a body of the Ministry of Education and Training. With these letters, I was able to meet the principals to get their consent to gather data in their schools.

With all my working experience and understanding of Vietnamese working culture, I consider my position was that of an ‘insider’ preparing and travelling to Vietnam for data gathering. In qualitative research, it is becoming more popular for a researcher to be a part of the context they plan to study, which is called ‘an insider’, as a number of the role’s benefits. Two of the insider’s advantages are:

- having a broader understanding of the being-studied context (Pugh et al., 2000; Torm-Orme, 1991); and
- having an established intimacy with participants which encourages them to tell and judge the truth (Leininger, 1985).

Preparation and transitions to home for data gathering—‘Insider’ advantages

As I worked in the education sector for 12 years and had the experiences of training primary school language teachers for two years, these experiences enabled me to have a broader understanding of the context of this research. In addition, as I established trust with the participants, they were open with me in their comments. My understanding of the context I was in and my familiarity with the participants assisted me both during my time in New Zealand while preparing for data collection, and during the actual data collection in Vietnam. Following is the story of the journey from the time I prepared to go back to Vietnam to the time I was in Vietnam for data collection.

In preparing to go home to collect data, with my understanding of Vietnam’s education culture, I knew that I had to consider two key factors: choosing a suitable time to contact schools, and searching for a contact person in the Department of Primary Education (DoPE) in the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (VMET).

Choosing a time that worked both for me and my family to go home and collect data after my proposal confirmation was not an easy decision to make. I was confirmed as a PhD candidate of the Faculty of Education at the University of Waikato in July 2018. It would have been ideal if I had been able to go to Vietnam two months later, literally, it was in September 2018. As it would be at the beginning of semester one in the Vietnam school year. I was aiming to make my journey happen by that time. But then, after discussing with my husband, I realised that it was not possible for me to go at that time because my tenancy agreement was a one-year fixed-term contract until 14 January 2019. It meant I could only make my journey after the contract ended. If I had terminated the contract before the due date, I would have had to pay a large amount of money which I could not afford at that time. So this financial issue was a major influencing factor for my decision making on what time to collect data in Vietnam.

One more factor to consider was Tet—the most important traditional festival in Vietnam—which is normally held from January to February in that year. My husband and my two sons, after more than one year overseas, were missing home and wanted to celebrate Tet with family and friends. Their well-being was very important to me as an international researcher because they were dependent on me but supported me as well. Going home at that time would mean adding one more month for data collection time as the schools did not return until the end of February for term two. Taking into consideration both the family’s well-being and the financial circumstances, I decided to go back home right after the tenancy ended so that we could all enjoy Tet in Vietnam, and then I could collect data in term two of the school year. So I changed my departure date to 15 January 2019, the end date of my tenancy. I felt it was worth making the decision to add one more month for data gathering time as the trip between Vietnam and New Zealand was long and quite tiring for a family with kids.

After making the decision on when to go home to collect data, having contact with a person from the DoPE was critical for me to be able to get access to schools in Vietnam. It was a characteristic of

the Asian ‘command and control’ system—from the VMET down to departments, school principals, and teachers (Hofstede, 2001). While I was thinking of who to contact, fortunately, I got an offer to work as an interpreter for a two-month educational exchange course for a delegation from the VMET. In this course, I got to know the Deputy Head of DoPE. I took this opportunity to talk to her about my project. She totally supported me and promised to write me introduction letters to primary schools when I was collecting data in Vietnam. I got her email and mobile phone so that I could contact her when I was back in Vietnam to collect data. So I had finished one more important task of having the ticket to get access to schools in Vietnam.

When I was in Vietnam to gather data, my understanding of the Vietnamese hierarchical working system helped me in two ways to carry out my work very much as I planned.

Firstly, I followed the hierarchical procedure to get access to schools. I made a phone call to have an appointment with the Vice Head of the Department of Primary Education in VMET to get the introduction letter. In the appointment, I briefly presented to her my project and my plan on how to gather data in schools. I also provided her with the information sheets about my project. As soon as she understood my plan, she wrote me six introduction letters to six primary schools in Hanoi. After getting the letters, I started making phone calls to the principals to make appointments with them to have a discussion on the project. In the meeting with the principals, I provided them with information sheets and consent forms. I also presented to them my detailed plan on how to collect data in the schools. After understanding my project and my plan, all six principals wholeheartedly supported me and ‘paved the way’ for me to implement surveys and interviews in their schools. We discussed and agreed on how to deliver the surveys, the times that I could interview both them and their teachers and got my consent form signed by the principals.

Secondly, as an insider, I understood that in the hierarchical working structure, my role in the interview may influence the ways the teachers gave responses. According to Shah (2004), the participants may not give certain information to an insider researcher because of fear of being judged. My understanding was that if I had had a senior role or power relationship with the participants, they would have had a tendency to provide answers to please me and to be safe for them. That was why I prepared information in both written and oral form which clearly stated that I had no power association over them. Specifically, in *written form*, the information sheet provided them with details about the aims of the research, and myself as a PhD candidate at the University of Waikato, which guaranteed that I did not have any power to have pressure on their work. Moreover, the information sheet also sought to guarantee that all of their answers would be kept confidential, and their names would remain anonymous. In addition, in *oral form*, when I met the teachers for interviews, I explicitly confirmed my status as an independent researcher and my personal motivation for conducting the research being to help the teachers have better teaching conditions with educational technology. In addition, I could not avoid any pressure that the principals might have put on the participants, so in the interviews, I gave the options to them for being volunteers or not. And my manner before, during and after each interview was friendly and empathetic, which made them feel relaxed and confident to give open responses.

Furthermore, I understood that Vietnamese teachers admired scholars, especially overseas scholars, and generally these people are active in seeking new knowledge. Before each interview, I assured them that I was willing to share any ideas or teaching resources to them. I encouraged them to talk or send me emails if they had any questions. Because of my preparation, I believe the teachers readily engaged in the interview with me and provided immediate and authentic answers without formal intentions to please or any noticeable level of anxiety.

Overall, the insider’s advantages did help me throughout the journey from pre departure preparation to the time I was onsite to collect data.

Implications and recommendations

My experience of preparing for going back to my home country to collect data showed that the decision of a PhD candidate in relation to collecting data in a home country while enrolled in New Zealand involved not just academic factors, but non-academic factors, especially family well-being and finance. This lesson is supported by Mitra and McAlpine (2017) who asserted that balancing study and family

life was the strongest of the life-work concerns amongst PhD researchers. In addition, Aiello (2017) found that female doctoral students normally experienced feelings of being stressed among obligations of their various duties in their nuclear family, and as a result they were not able to fulfill to their satisfaction the responsibilities of any single role. PhD candidates who study overseas accompanied by their spouses and children, will likely have to take into consideration the happiness of their family’s members in every PhD decision made. Being overseas in the country where enrolled for study for a while may make the family members of PhD students miss home. So the time gathering data at home could be a good chance for them to visit family and friends, ‘recharge’, and then go back to continue supporting the PhD candidate in their study journey in an overseas institution.

Data collection in the home country with the advantage of being an ‘insider’ helped researchers develop strategies and relationships that supported openness in participants’ responses. As an ‘insider’, I knew how things worked culturally and institutionally, which made the pathways to gather research data, such as gaining permissions and support, easier. However, the hierarchical working structure in a Vietnamese context may be in tension with the idea of participants being forthcoming in an interpretivist approach because teachers can be highly motivated to obey their principals and intend to say things to please the board of management. Therefore, the strategy to work in a hierarchical working structure would be better with two steps: firstly, being well prepared to argue for the potential benefits of the research both in paper and in oral form, and take any chance to persuade the leaders in order to get their support, which would enable researchers to get access to and assistance from participants; secondly, as working with the participants, communicating explicitly with them, their anonymity and the no-power association between the researcher and them, which aids encouragement of trust, open interaction and meaningful answers.

In conclusion, my story of gathering data in my home country when being enrolled as a PhD candidate in New Zealand illustrates that the well-being of a researcher’s family members who accompany them to study overseas is an unavoidable factor influencing their decision making at any stage of their PhD journey. Moreover, it also reaffirms the advantages of being an ‘insider’ in collecting data in the researcher’s home country. With appropriate preparations and adaptation to the situations of the home country, gathering data can be completed successfully.

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