

Interviewing as Understanding: Principles and Modalities for Transforming a Qualitative Research Instrument into a Stage of the Integration Process for Immigrants



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Abstract This chapter reports on a qualitative research within the [MATH.E.ME](#) project undertaken by the GreekLangLab of the University of Thessaly, aiming at providing lessons in Greek Language, History and Culture for immigrants who are unemployed, mothers, with disabilities and illiterate immigrants. An initial stage of this project was the investigation of the needs of immigrants as learners in the perspective of their empowerment and integration. The semi-structured interview was transformed into a critical instrument to understanding people. This transformation is only possible by adopting a new way (cf. Kaufmann, L'entretien compréhensif. Armand Colin, Paris, 2000, 39 seq.) of constructing the research questions and other interview parameters, such as the plan, the guide and the sample; it is with an open and evolving way of designing the interview. In conducting the interview, focus on understanding means breaking the hierarchy between researchers and participants, keeping people present in the research (Mears, Interviewing for education and social research. The gateway approach. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009), showing empathy and commitment.

Keywords Interview · Immigrants · Empowerment · Integration · Greek language · History · Culture

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1 Introduction: The Project MATH.E.ME

The chapter rests on the research findings and experiences of the project ‘**MATH.E.ME**: Lessons in Greek Language, History and Culture for immigrants who are unemployed, mothers, with disabilities and illiterate immigrants’. The starting point of this project is the respect of the needs of immigrants as learners. The concept of “needs” includes – apart from language and communication – societal and integration needs. It presupposes the will to ‘give voice’ to immigrants and to take account of this voice before designing courses, learning materials and tasks. In this chapter, we discuss our research strategies in exploring these needs, while we search ways to establish the interview process as a stage towards the empowerment and integration of our immigrant participants. Offering an overview of the research aims and objectives, we present the process of designing the interview guide and a discussion on the interview modalities to serve our purposes. We then offer a glimpse of how a non-deficit, empowering view of the immigrants was travelled into the data analysis process; and, finally, we ponder upon the limitations in challenging the asymmetries of power in the research.

The ‘**MATH.E.ME**’ project was implemented by the Greek Language and Multilingualism Laboratory (thereafter GreekLangLab) of the University of Thessaly and consisted of the organizing of lessons in the Greek language, history and culture for third-country, ‘official’ immigrants that fall into four categories: those who are unemployed; mothers; immigrants with disabilities; and illiterate immigrants. It was administered by the Greek Ministry of Interior and funded under the 2013 Project of the European Fund of Integration of Third Countries (E.I.F.) with 150,000 €. The project expanded in seven Greek cities, namely Athens, Piraeus, Thessaloniki, Ioannina, Larissa, Patras, and Iraklion, where lessons were organized at three levels of Greek language proficiency (beginners, intermediate, advanced). Each level was taught 60–80 h in total, depending on the number of registered students per level at each city. The number of students attending the course was 414, who received a small allowance (ca 60€ after taxes). The project implementation had seven major stages, each coordinated by a different team:

- *Recording of the target groups (immigrants who are unemployed, mothers, with disabilities or illiterate) and making preliminary contacts.* By capitalizing on existing networks and collaborating with communities and organizations, the team recorded the national, linguistic and educational profile of the target groups, while registering prospective students.
- *Needs analysis.* This stage involved the research and analysis of the immigrants’ communication and language needs, and their social expectations and integration strategies, a part of whose findings are reported in this chapter.
- *Course design.* Using the reported outcomes of the needs analysis, the respective team designed the learning goals to be achieved, compiled a syllabus for each target group and delivered training to teachers, communicating the course’s agenda, content and methodology.

- *Design, development and adjustment of teaching material.* The team produced teaching material in print or multimedia format, as well as educational activities.
- *Course implementation.* This stage included the organizing and implementation of free lessons in Greek language, history and culture in appropriate learning spaces in the seven aforementioned cities. Intercultural ‘mediators’ (speakers of minority languages) worked together with the teachers.
- *Project evaluation.* Through various means (i.e. field research, teacher and mediator journals, etc.) as well as project meetings and a closing workshop, the assessment of and reflections on the implemented lessons were carried out. A resource pack was compiled to be used by future similar project.
- *Dissemination and exploitation of results.* This stage included events for the public and the press, publications, scientific meetings and a web portal.

2 The Research Agenda

The main aim of the needs analysis was to explore the integration and communication needs of the prospective immigrant students, in order to be utilized in the next two stages of the project, that is the designing and delivery of lessons in Greek language, history and culture. The research objectives were:

- (a) To give space to the participants to express their worlds, so that their capitals (cultural, social, linguistic, etc.) could be acknowledged and implemented in the course design.
- (b) To investigate the integration processes which are implicated in the participants’ everyday living, so that practices of empowerment could be activated through the lessons.

The research questions were formulated as follows:

1. Which forms of capital do the participants negotiate through their narrations and how?
2. What are the experiences and expectations of the participants in relation to their integration processes?
3. What is the importance of the Greek language in their everyday lives?
4. What are the participants’ expectations from the prospective lessons?

Our point of departure was that the needs of immigrants as learners stem from the particular social structures to which they have to accommodate themselves. This had a twofold meaning for our research. First, that immigrants were not neither to be seen as inferior ‘others’ nor through a ‘deficit’ lens. Second, that since those structures cast immigrants ‘less powerful’, we had to unpack these structures by positioning ourselves not as outsiders but as enactors and communicators of those structures. Therefore, we sustained that on the one hand a needs analysis should look into the immigrants’ linguistic, communication, social and integration needs,

while building our understanding of those needs upon the various skills and qualities immigrants already possessed; and on the other hand, that we tackle the power asymmetries in the research process and minimize the researchers' hegemony. Theory, research methodology (questions, plan, methods, modalities) and analysis targeted the unpacking of discriminatory processes and the reinstating of power to immigrants through the implementation of the **MATH.E.ME.** project. Therefore, our research had an explicitly critical agenda that was shared among the research team and other teams through training workshops and meetings.

The concept of capital (Bourdieu 2004) was essential in conceptualizing the immigrant's integration process within a critical paradigm. According to Bourdieu (2004), capital has three main forms. The *economic capital*, which is to be understood in its literal sense (monetary value, assets, etc.); the *social capital*, which refers to one's network of family, friends and contacts; and the *cultural capital*, which describes cultural competences and skills (i.e. linguistic, educational, personal qualities, ethics and beliefs, etc.). In a nutshell, the capitals are a person's resources which can be used to maintain or advance her/his social positioning and, thus, acquire a symbolic value of one's social status (Bourdieu 2004).

The question of capitals guided us through the research to explore what resources our participants possessed, in what ways they used them, and how they negotiated them in the interviews. This was of utmost important, since it gave weight not to what we assumed their capitals were, but to what they voiced as being such. In addition, we were able to identify those resources which the programme could help them acquire or develop, and which could contribute to eventually gain equal civic participation.

2.1 The Research Outline

Regarding the research procedure, 12 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with prospective **MATH.E.ME.** students. The sampling process was based on the register sheet of immigrants, who had been enrolling for the course, compiled by the community 'mediators'. This register sheet contained information such as name, sex, age, country of origin, mother tongue, other languages, educational background, years in Greece, linguistic competency in Greek (written & oral speech), designated category (immigrant mother, unemployed, with disabilities or illiterate immigrant). The selected participants were also meant to be representative of the students' group as a whole. They were 9 men and 3 women. Most participants belonged to more than one project category, since the categories emerged as overlapping (i.e. mothers could also be unemployed, unemployed and illiterate, etc.) Thus there were 9 unemployed immigrants, 8 mothers and two illiterate immigrants. Although pursued, no participant with disabilities took part in the interviews eventually, which is however in correspondence with the extremely small representation of this category in the whole student group.

Regarding their nationalities, 5 participants were from Albania, 1 from the Ukraine, 1 from Georgia, 1 from Armenia, 1 from Nigeria, 1 from Congo, 1 from Pakistan and 1 from Serbia. They spoke a variety of languages (either as mother tongues or second languages), namely Ukrainian, Serbian, Albanian, Georgian, Italian, Lingala, Kikongo, Igbo, Urdu, English, French, Russian, German and Arabic. With reference to Greek, the majority (9) of them had an A0/A1 level in written Greek (lack of formal language learning) while their oral competence varied from beginner to advanced depending on the years of residence in Greece. The cities where the interviews took place were: Athens (2), Piraeus (2), Thessaloniki (4), Patras (2) and Larisa (2). 9 interviews were conducted in Greek, 2 in English and 1 in French. The researchers,¹ who conducted the interviews were six, all women, aged from 30 to 45, white with a background in linguistics or sociolinguistics.

The research work was team-based in all its stages. This arrangement had variable positive effects: literature review, interview guide and the analytical process were produced through multiple understandings and a collaborative process of meaning-making, established on shared critical intentions. Thus, acknowledging that no researcher came from the communities of our project to contest possible hegemonic understandings, working in teams challenged the control and hegemony of one researcher over the research process.

2.2 Modalities: Conducting the Interviews

In conducting the interviews, we shared the object of the research by informing the participants about the research aims and content in order to build mutual trust. Forming a connection with the participants based on empathy, honesty and breaking down barriers was one of our main modalities in conducting the interviews. Keeping people present in the research (Mears 2009: 48), by giving them space to narrate their own stories through their own voices, was an integral part of our interview procedure. We asked meaningful questions by hearing with more comprehension (Mears 2010) what the participants considered important to share about their lives. “Telling one’s own story is an empowering experience that potentially restores a sense of continuity and wholeness” (Richman 2006 in Mears 2010:10). Showing empathy, commitment, genuine interest and active involved listening to the participants’ narrations was crucial in achieving a connection with them. Responding to their narrations with encouragement, positive feedback and rewarding them by emphasizing their “strong” elements played an important role in empowering them through the interviews. Empowerment in the process of the interview moved beyond simple positive feedback towards allowing the participants to ‘voice’ their own realities, their own life narrations by deciding on their own what is relevant and

¹The researchers were the authors of the present article plus the colleagues Sofia Tsioli and Evi Kompiadou. George Androulakis was the coordinator of the project.

important to share. It is also achieved through creating a deeper understanding of their experiences and narrations via the connection in the interview with them (Cooper 2009).

Showing respect and sensitivity to issues that may affect participants negatively was also an important modality underpinning our interviews. Taking care of the participants' emotional well-being during the interviews without installing however a therapeutic relationship with them (Seidman 2006:107) played an important role in interviewing them. We also aimed at keeping the participant present by selecting the 'best question' for each participant and each interview, by being attentive to each profile and individuality, by 'seeing' and understanding the specific realities and lives narrated in the interviews.

3 Data Analysis: Keeping the Participants Present

As stated earlier, keeping the participants present at all stages of the research was essential in our agenda. This section presents our immigrant participants as they negotiate and reinstate their power by voicing their resources – their capitals (Bourdieu 2004). The participants utilize and draw from a rich pool of capitals, which they mobilize in flexible ways that showcases their agency. Apart from the *economic, social and cultural capital*, other countenances of capitals have emerged through the analysis to be working as the immigrants' resources. In the literature, these are usually referred to as specifications of the cultural capital. They included the *educational capital* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), which describes a person's knowledge and skills deriving from formal or informal educational experiences; the *linguistic capital* (Reay 1999), which includes language skills and knowledge (i.e. reading, writing, etc.) and meta-linguistic abilities (i.e. talking about a language); the *familial capital* (Yosso 2005), which refers to values, beliefs, ethics and experiences that originate from one's participation in their family; and the *emotional capital* (Reay 2000), which refers to those emotional resources a person draws from to maintain or advance their position, such as self-confidence, determination, patience, etc. We have also used the concept of objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu 2004), that is resources which translate into objects, which in this research regarded immigration documents, passports and other official certificates.

Through their narrations the participants negotiate different forms of capitals, mostly in combination with one another, since different aspects of capital interact in multiple ways. One form of capital may facilitate the acquisition of another or it may be utilized by the participant to cover the lack of another (Bourdieu 2004). In the following excerpt, the linguistic capital is shown to interact with the economic, social and emotional capital of the participant.

Excerpt 1

Greek is the only hope because my husband always says "you have everything, you just need Greek" and I always tell him you think big of me but actually if it is like he

is saying, if I learn it, I will gain many things, I will go to work, I will have friends because right now my only friends are the friends of my husband, because I don't go out a lot, because I am not comfortable to go out and make friends, if I work I will have many colleagues, many friends and I will get self-esteem, right now I feel like I am useless and am not that kind of woman, who wants only her husband to work and stay at home, well I know cooking, I am cooking but I believe a woman has to work.

Armenian woman, 23 years old, 10 months in Greece.

(interview language: English)

Having one form of capital is used by the participants to cover the lack of another. For instance, as shown in the excerpt below, skills that have been acquired through family practices can compensate for the lack of the Greek linguistic capital. The extract also shows the challenge of power asymmetries (the Georgian woman appears more 'able' in doing household chores in a foreign country than the researcher):

Excerpt 2

Shopping I went to the supermarket, it is easy here, you mustn't ...in Georgia now it is like that, in the past it wasn't, you have to say what you want, here wherever you want you get in, take it, pay at the cashier, you go. [the researcher shares the difficulties she met herself shopping at the supermarket abroad, when she had to pick out among different types of the same food product]. About these I have...I have worked, since I was young. I have been working since I was 8 years old [...] because my mother worked 24 hours [...] Generally I had taken on everything else, I was a little child but [...] As I grew up, after I had done [these jobs], an 11–12 year-old child but ... [...] I gained, this job is nothing for me [...] And you need to be clever, with your mind, I can't remember a day that I didn't understand anything, let's say. I would go, I didn't know, for instance, "beef" [the word] I didn't know it, but I understood what beef was and what pork.

Georgian woman, 11 years in Greece, 35 years old.

(interview language: Greek – translated into English)

Our participants have also claimed a 'new' cultural capital, which contains not only the culture of the homeland but also the culture and values the participants embrace in the course of their lives in Greece. It is an emergent, hybrid, cultural capital evolving from the interaction between the past and the present, depicting the fluidity and complexity of the participants' identities as well as the transformation of their capitals.

Excerpt 3

Greece has now become a part of us... you might say... difficulties, but when we leave, this is what we do... we stay for a month in Albania and when we come here we say: aaah! We came home, oh how nice! How much we relax here. I don't know how it will be like to live there...In Albania there is my parents' house, I didn't have a house of my own there, here there is my own house, because I had, for instance, my first bed, I had a family, I had two children, there are so many things I did here in Greece. In Albania, I hadn't done so many things, do you understand? The only

thing I did was going to school and then since I was 17 years old, I got engaged and we stayed for three years... and then I came here.

Albanian woman, 12 years in Greece.

(interview language: Greek – translated into English)

Excerpt 4

I was young, we came so many years [ago], 16 years, now I have lost, we are more Greece here, we grew up in Greece, they are good guys, the Greeks are good guys, they gave me bread [work] and when I go back to our country, at Christmas, for two months, we will never lose Greece. I like Greece only, not any other country, I have been here for so many years, we will never lose, I like all of them, they are good guys, I ate bread from Greece [made a living], we will never lose, because all my life will be here, since I was small up to now I grew up here.

Pakistani man, 18 years in Greece, 32 years old.

(interview language: Greek – translated into English)

Through the above examples of interview moments we sought to let the immigrant participants voice themselves, to talk about their life stories, to tell us not only about their needs, but also their various strengths.

4 Limitations in Challenging Power Asymmetries

Before concluding our chapter, we should refer to the limitations we faced with our research approach. So far, we have described how the research aims, methodological tool and analysis aimed at understanding the integration and communication needs of the immigrant students participating in the [MATH.E.ME.](#) project. We have also discussed how we set out to do this through a critical lens, which questioned the social structures that create particular needs for them, but also question the research teams' own implication in enacting particular asymmetrical power positions. Even though we actively challenged them before, during and after the interviews, it had not been possible to overrule the deeply-rooted social hierarchies that we embodied.

Excerpt 5

Participant: -...This is what I told you [using plural to express politeness].

Researcher: Talk to me in singular, don't...

P: OK.

R: We have the same age. [both laugh].

P: Never mind, you have more than me...

R: What more?

P: Knowledge and everything, many things...

Georgian woman, 11 years in Greece, 35 years old.

(interview language: Greek – translated into English)

The researcher wishes to minimise the 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu et al. 1999) of the interview by eliminating the asymmetrical social positions expressed in the use of the plural of politeness deployed by the Georgian woman. Nonetheless,

even though the researcher's efforts were good-willed, they show that this attempt addresses only superficially the immigrant woman's social positioning. The 'reality check' comes from the Georgian woman herself, who names things as she experiences them, not only during the interview but also in her everyday life. This and other similar instances in our research remind us that deeply-rooted hierarchies and arbitrarily-won privileges are difficult to overcome. Nonetheless, by constantly making them obvious to ourselves and others, we can be more honest towards immigrants, and so reach collaboratively better understandings and ways forward.

5 Conclusions

In conclusion, this chapter focused on the principles and modalities followed in conducting a qualitative research, using the interview as a tool towards understanding the participants' narrations in all their complexity and multiple meanings (Mears 2009). The scope objective was to empower the participants through the research (design, modality, analysis) by giving them space and a 'voice' to share their experiences and realities. At the next stage of the project, this 'voice' was taken into account and utilized in designing the courses, the learning materials and tasks. Thus, the integration process of immigrants is crucial and integral to all stages of the project, from the needs analysis (presented in this chapter) to the implementation of the courses.

In the scope perspective of the participants' empowerment and integration, the modalities in designing and conducting the qualitative research were: sharing the object of the research with the participants, keeping them present in the research, giving the participants space to 'voice' themselves, showing active, involved listening, empathy and commitment, and avoiding 'deficit' understandings. The interview was designed and used as a tool for the empowerment of the participants by challenging the researcher's power throughout the research process in order to break down the researcher – participant hierarchy and build a connection. However, acknowledging the limitations of unresolved social hierarchies is a necessary step to gain more honest, and thus deeper insights.

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