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Transforming a methodological dilemma into a rewarding research opportunity

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on an investigation of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher (de)motivation in Spain which underwent a methodological transformation from mixed methods to a qualitative approach. Unexpected statistical results from the questionnaire in the piloting phase led to the creation of interview prompts, a dynamic data collection instrument based on reliable items from the questionnaire which was disregarded from the main study at a later stage. The interview prompts provided a card-based data collection method which engaged participants in reflective and challenging tasks. This paper will discuss an unsettling challenge in the research process, how it was seized and the positive outcome which emerged from this unpredicted pitfall. A research breakdown welcomed a methodological turn enabled by the researcher's reflection on the research dilemma. Authors are encouraged to defy and embrace research obstacles while learning from them and sharing the solutions with the research community.

KEYWORDS


Research dilemmas; challenge; qualitative research; qualitative interview; interview prompts; reflection


Introduction

The research design for a study on EFL teacher (de)motivation in Spain used a mixed-methods approach with an online questionnaire as the quantitative component. However, unforeseen statistical results at the piloting stage led to disregarding the questionnaire and designing a different instrument, the interview prompts. The development, practical use and advantages of this tool will be discussed in this article. This paper will present an unexpected challenge in the research process, how it was tackled and the positive outcome which arose from this messy opportunity.

Statistical constraints from the pilot study were confronted by transforming the research design. This methodological change is a clear example of the dilemmas that researchers encounter at all levels in their careers. Unlike most published research, I have decided to describe the problems faced in the present study because these challenges led to making compromises, changes and improvements which provided a better understanding of EFL teacher (de)motivation in secondary state schools in Spain (Gadella Kamstra, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). The discussion provided in this article may enlighten novice researchers and support them to resist their discouragement and distress when unpredicted events occur in the research process.

This article defies unexpected obstacles and brings the methodological challenges to the forefront of this investigation. By doing this, an improved understanding of best practices in overcoming similar research problems in the future may be achieved. Other researchers have also made

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significant changes in their investigations while immersed in the project which resulted in respectable pieces (see Rose & McKinley, 2017 for a compilation). The major alterations made in this study allowed answering the research questions more thoroughly while maintaining the main aim of the project. Sharing the dilemma and how it was addressed may encourage readers with similar difficulties to face these obstacles and share them in publications.

Regardless of how thorough the preparation of a project has been, scholars may still encounter problems, but early career researchers are not often exposed to a scenario with research complications, instead, a perfect investigation is expected because that is what is usually revealed in textbooks and publications. The ‘messiness’ of research in applied linguistics is often concealed by showcasing neat descriptions of research projects and by doing so, other investigators are denied the opportunity of knowing that ‘messy’ research can also result in valid research and that there is room for learning in researchers’ challenges (Rose & McKinley, 2017, p. 13).

Published research hardly ever reviews methodological issues encountered during the development of the research (Rabbidge, 2017). Researchers may do this mechanically assuming that their data will be weakened if methodological problems are illustrated. On a similar note, writers often discuss the limitations of the study eliciting the idea that they were aware at all times of those limitations (Rose & McKinley, 2017). If researchers would consider ‘breakdowns’ as ‘a constructive rather than destructive process’, they would be encouraged to embrace the ‘mystery’ found in the challenges in their investigations (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 61), and to share those with other academics in publications.

This article will highlight the importance of recognising the obstacles faced in an investigation by underlining the positive outcome of unforeseen pitfalls. Readers are encouraged to embrace the unexpected mess in their studies, confront the challenges and learn from them while allowing others to learn too by sharing these in publications. This paper will also discuss the development of an engaging tool which can be employed in research interviews.

Literature review

Obstacles, although unexpected, are common and they may favour research and guide authors towards a better outcome when the problem is handled carefully, and therefore, obstacles must be seen as learning opportunities. Unpredictability should be embraced as a virtuous process within any project (McArthur, 2012). Importantly, Mellor (2001) argues that ‘errors, side-turnings, blind-alleys, uncertainty render the text more believable, not less’ and thus, these issues should not be overlooked because ‘the admission of uncertainty becomes a source of authority’ (p. 474). In other words, by recognising the challenges in a study, the author gains credibility.

In action research studies, Cook (2009) acknowledges the ‘messy area’ as a crucial area in research where changes arise and a ‘messy turn’ occurs. The messy turn allows reflection to assess the messy area which in turn, enables the production of a more rigorous description of the research (Cook, 2009). Presenting frank descriptions of the research process, embracing mess, and honestly reporting it as part of the investigation will ensure the research’s strength or validity (Mellor, 2001) and a rigorous research process (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Cook, 2009). In agreement, ‘carefully considered mess’ is ‘virtuous’ and ‘encompassing aspects of uncertainty enhances, rather than diminishes, rigour in research’ (McArthur, 2012, p. 423). Depicting a realistic view of the project and providing an honest account of the problems encountered will augment the research’s validity.

Although the concept of ‘mess’ has positive implications, it is often regarded as negative and ‘the unexpected or unplanned’ is viewed ‘as problems or evidence of something having gone wrong’ in the project (McArthur, 2012, p. 424). Engaging with the mess in the research process is difficult, not careless (Mellor, 1999), and it does not imply lazy or sloppy practices, but a thoughtful evaluation of challenges (Cook, 2009), which need to be tackled by a skilful and competent researcher (McArthur, 2012; Mellor, 2001). Good social science is enabled through ‘mystery’ which is often born in

'breakdowns' and these transform research and defy current theories since new ideas or approaches are needed to solve these 'breakdowns' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011).

Researchers may think that discussing the problems they face risk their chances to publish in top journals and research challenges are believed to be unfavourable and unsuitable (Cook, 2009). Nevertheless, offering an idealised version of a research project is not an honest account of the real work and is not useful to readers. By presenting a smooth and spotless investigation, researchers will be limited to communicating '*what fits* rather than *what is* or finding out *what could be*' and the changes made for the 'messy turn' will be wasted when they are not reported and disregarded (Cook, 2009, p. 289).

In various disciplines, obstacles and breakdowns seem to be purposively hidden by authors and the literature is messier and more complicated than what is usually showed (Cook, 2009; McArthur, 2012). Research accounts are depicted with 'the wrong sort of clarity' (McArthur, 2012, p. 428) and are 'rarely fully transparent' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 77). In agreement, Law (2004) advocates the notion of mess and concurs that to understand concepts there is no need to 'tidy things up' (p. 423). By not articulating the mess, Cook (2009) criticises that a valuable part of the process is being lost and regards the report of the research as being incomplete and dishonest.

Unexpected issues can be met by any researcher at any stage in their career and at any time in the research process, but these challenges can be transformed into opportunities; the study of Hedgcock and Lee (2017) is an example of this. The authors experienced major changes in the research design that was enabled by a flexible mixed-methods approach. Despite the variations, the research provided an answer to the questions created initially. In educational psychology research, Mellor (2001) also openly describes the problems in his practitioner-based investigation, including the errors he made and the struggles he faced during his PhD research.

Applied linguists and education researchers often deal with the 'real world', which is considered an advantage of qualitative research but 'the real world is messy' and there are many chances for something to go wrong and this is to be expected (Rose & McKinley, 2017, p. 6). By not disclosing these issues, investigators are depriving novice and experienced academics from learning valuable solutions to common struggles. Regrettably, investigators tend to not reveal these decisions and as Dörnyei (2007) contends 'researchers are often ashamed of the compromises that they need to make, not realizing that making compromises is part and parcel of being a researcher' (p. 309). The research community should acknowledge the importance of embracing challenges and the benefits of sharing the obstacles found. Doing research is not an easy task, it is rather chaotic, but from overcoming challenges, a solid study can emerge.

Research methodology

Context and participants

This article draws on a larger qualitative investigation of EFL teacher (de)motivation in secondary state schools in Spain (Gadella Kamstra, 2020). In this project, 23 in-service EFL teachers ($n = 23$) participated. Interviews with interview prompts, classroom observations and field notes were the research instruments employed. This paper will only report on the creation, use and analysis of the interview prompts.

In the main study, large-scale semi-structured interviews with interview prompts were conducted face-to-face (8 out of 23) and online (15 out of 23). The face-to-face interviews were conducted in the schools where the participants worked, and online interviews were arranged via Skype due to the researcher's inability to be in Spain at that time. Participating teachers were employed in secondary state institutions and had an average of twelve years of teaching experience (mean = 12.08). All of the interviewees were Spanish and only three of them were male.

Although this paper focuses on the interview prompts, these were based on reliable items from the online questionnaire used in the pilot study. In this article, information and data from the

preliminary questionnaire will support the analysis. During the piloting phase, EFL teachers from the capital of Spain, Madrid, were invited to take part. Thirty-three participants ($n = 33$) completed the questionnaire but only 23 teachers ($n = 23$) completed the biodata section; six respondents were male and seventeen were female. Four of these teachers agreed to be observed in the classroom and to be interviewed to pilot the other research instruments. Statistical results from this questionnaire led to changes in the research design.

Research design

A mixed-methods approach was initially chosen for this investigation. Quantitative and qualitative methods would support each other in finding answers to the research questions. Phenomena are said to be thoroughly understood when combining both research techniques (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) and a mixed-methods approach was believed to enable a more systematic understanding of teacher (de)motivation. More importantly, mixed-methods research is often encouraged since mono-method investigations have been regarded as ‘extremely limiting’ and a ‘threat to the advancement of social sciences’ (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005, p. 384).

A questionnaire was designed and chosen as a research instrument because it would provide longitudinal data in a short period of time and it would enable a comparison among respondents (Mackey & Gass, 2005). A questionnaire would enable gathering data from more teachers and providing a wider generalization of the data. Additionally, the participants’ context would be eliminated by creating ‘a static view of social life that is independent of people’s lives’ (Bryman, 2016, p. 166). This would have contributed to the questionnaire’s external reliability, a factor which is often difficult to meet in qualitative research (Dörnyei, 2007). The data originated from the quantitative and qualitative instruments would have also empowered the generation of new complementing findings as a result of the comparison of the multi-faceted data.

However, it is clear that ‘mixed method analyses are not always possible or even appropriate’ (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005, p. 381) and researchers must decide whether quantifying or counting may be unsuitable and problematic (Sandelowski, 2001). It is important to mention that a mixed-methods approach could have revealed other insights into the topic of teacher (de)motivation, but a qualitative approach was gainful as will be demonstrated in the discussion section.

The dilemma

The pilot study was conducted in 2017 and a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were the research instruments. The questionnaire was carefully designed specifically for this investigation because other available questionnaires in the field did not fit the purpose of this study (Butler, 2007; Roth et al., 2007; Watt & Richardson, 2007). At that time, to the researcher’s knowledge, there was not a validated teacher motivation questionnaire for in-service EFL teachers. The questionnaire used was adapted from and based on a combination of items which were meticulously chosen and integrated from previously published reliable questionnaires by Jacques (2001), Kassabgy et al. (2001), and Kim and Kim (2015). Although these questionnaires were successful in studies conducted by these established researchers, in the specific context of this project, the questionnaire did not generate a positive outcome in the piloting stage. A methodological dilemma originated from the statistical results which showed no variance and low levels of reliability and correlation in some groups of items.

Adjustments and re-piloting the questionnaire may have provided improved results but still, modifying, re-piloting and analysing data from a second pilot study would have been inconvenient in terms of time and with no guaranteed success. After reflecting on the questionnaires’ contribution to the study and on the complications implied by the statistical results, the questionnaire was discarded from the main study. However, the questionnaire was not completely excluded from the

project, some results from the pilot study were used to shape a new instrument, the interview prompts, and a purely qualitative approach was considered more suitable.

The solution: interview prompts

The questionnaire was disregarded but some reliable items and key questions were kept in the shape of interview prompts, for example; 'Having a job in which I can learn and develop my abilities to my full potential' ($\alpha = .705$), 'Having a profession that is prestigious' ($\alpha = .629$), 'Teaching this course is important to my career development' ($\alpha = .726$).

Interview prompts are cards or pieces of paper with ideas, statements, and tasks ([Appendix A](#)). They were used to bring topics to the conversation, which were of great importance for the interviews and the project holistically. At the prompt stages, the cards would be placed on the table and the participant would be encouraged to answer a question or complete an activity and to elaborate their ideas. The cards allowed interviewees to comment freely on what they believed was important to mention regarding the statements and to complete the tasks.

Aloud, participants completed sentences 'A motivated teacher is ...', filled in gaps 'I am [adjective] with the degree of respect and fair treatment I receive from society in general' and moved pieces of paper with statements to a particular opinion to rank its importance 'Having a good relationship with my students' parents' (Yes/So-So/No) or to share an opinion 'I often think of quitting this job' (Agree/Neither Agree nor Disagree/Disagree). These prompts led to discussions about the participants' decisions and to justify their answers, while guaranteeing their engagement with the activity. Participating teachers were not asked to write their responses but just to focus on the ideas they could find in the prompts and talk about them. In the case of face-to-face interviews, participants were able to physically *play* with the pieces of paper by sorting the cards in terms of agreement or importance and this favoured their active participation during the interviews by moving the cards towards the chosen option.

Although the quantitative component was no longer part of the project, by using interview prompts, a different way to pursue research was found. Interview prompts were included in the interview as a way of deviating from the standard question-and-answer interview and to gather information from participants in a more interactive way. They could visualise the ideas and the choices, which allowed them to rest from answering several questions in a row. Prompts were used at different stages during the interview, as breaks from the more in-depth questions and as a transition from one topic to another, to help participating teachers feel at ease and relaxed. All interviewees were given the same instructions at the beginning and the prompts were introduced at the same stages in every interview.

During the interview prompt stages, the interaction between the researcher and the participant was not prioritised and this reduces interviewer bias ([Dörnyei, 2007](#); [Rowley et al., 2012](#)). The interviewee focused on completing the tasks and the role of the interviewer was not regarded as key. The focus was not on the interviewer-interviewee interaction but on the teachers' responses to the task at hand. The prompts also allowed pacing the interview and tailoring the questions depending on the answers to the activities in the prompt cards. The interviewer could control the interview by cueing the next card and thus, the pace was determined by the prompts.

The interview prompts are a technique which invite the participating teachers to take part in certain activities and therefore, enrich the interview process and the data. By completing tasks, interviewees engaged in reflection and produced comprehensive responses to challenging tasks. More importantly, the interview prompts facilitated reflection and confirmation of factors mentioned in the interview. The fact that the prompts enable revisiting topics covered in the interview which may have been superficially answered is another advantage of this method. In addition, by using interview prompts, participants were able to change their choices if they changed their mind while discussing their ideas and this would not be possible after submitting a questionnaire. As was the case in one of the projects examined by [Rowley et al. \(2012\)](#), the cards also encouraged the

interviewees to focus and to revisit the idea if lost in their thoughts while elaborating their arguments.

One limitation was found when conducting these interviews with interview prompts online. In Skype, the researcher's screen was shared with the teachers at the prompt stages, who could see the colourful ideas and sentences to complete and make decisions about. The interviewer would move or complete the prompts according to the interviewees' indications and wishes. Although online interviews have numerous advantages (Bryman, 2016; Salmons, 2015), the interview prompts are a technique which works better in a face-to-face interview in which participants can move the cards themselves while focusing on the task at hand and easing the pressure from the traditional style of the interview.

Data collection

After making the decision to change from mixed methods to a qualitative approach, the interview was re-piloted to include the interview prompts which emerged from the disregarded questionnaire. Three experienced teachers ($n = 3$) of foreign languages participated in this stage. In this second piloting phase, the prompts were tested at the beginning and at different stages during the interview. These interviews evidenced the suitability of the prompts for the main study.

The main study was open to a wider community of EFL teachers in different cities in Spain. The non-probability sampling was purposive and only in-service EFL teachers in state secondary institutions were invited via email, postal mail, and social media posts. Data were collected from interviewing 23 EFL Spanish teachers ($n = 23$) and from observing five of these teachers in several classes. The semi-structured interviews had thirty questions and four interview prompt tasks which were pre-arranged, but flexibility was allowed. Each in-depth recorded conversation lasted an average of eighty minutes in which EFL teachers discussed their motivations and the struggles they faced in their professional careers. After interviewing 23 teachers, online and face-to-face, there were approximately thirty hours of interview data to be analysed.

Data analysis

In the piloting phase, the online questionnaire was analysed using IBM SPSS v25 and its results led to a transformation of the research methodology. In the main study, the recorded interviews were manually transcribed verbatim. The qualitative data were scrutinised using NVivo.12. This computer software helped to identify patterns and themes in the data which enabled the analysis of the participating teachers' insights into their (de)motivation.

The interview schedule included the interview questions and the different tasks in the interview prompts. The prompts were used to structure the interview and they enabled clearly arranged interview guides and transcripts, which benefitted the data analysis by allowing a simpler evaluation of the data (Rowley et al., 2012). The transcripts included the interviewees' responses to the interview questions but also the ideas the participants shared while using the interview prompts and completing the activities. The prompts were coded and analysed as if they were dynamic interview questions, they were not all individually scrutinised, as would be the case in analysing a quantitative survey.

When the transcription was finalised, words, sentences and paragraphs were coded in a non-linear process (Dörnyei, 2007) in which new topics emerged throughout the coding phase. Comparing participants' responses to the same interview prompts supported the understanding of the data more clearly and allowed finding similarities and differences in their reported viewpoints. Responses to the tasks in the interview prompts also enabled a straightforward cross-comparison between teachers when needed. Graphs aided the report of some of the findings from the interview prompts. These graphs portrayed interviewees' responses to some of the prompts which were key to answering the research questions or which related to crucial findings.

Main results emerged from a combination of data from all research instruments used but the interview prompts led to crucial arguments and findings.

Findings and discussion

A comparison of the data generated from the preliminary questionnaire and the interview prompts

The questionnaire limits participants' thought process

It has been argued that the descriptions and the data analysis that quantitative tools provide are not as rich as those enabled through qualitative data collection methods (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Researchers have analysed the limitations of the use of questionnaires and it has been claimed that 'the depth of the knowledge obtained through questionnaire survey is limited' (Codó, 2008, p. 175).

In the preliminary questionnaire, participants had to indicate to what extent they agreed with various statements. One of them was 'Students' attitudes in English classes are a source of demotivation'. Participants selected a choice from strongly agree to strongly disagree but there was no further contribution from the teachers regarding this item. In contrast, in the main study, the interview prompts allowed developing a discussion and strengthened the researcher's understanding of the participants' point of view. 57% of the participants agreed with this statement whereas 43% of them neither agreed nor disagreed. This led to the conclusion that learners' attitudes were an important factor affecting teacher motivation. However, the conversation enabled by the interview prompts showed that this was a simplification of the issue and teachers elaborated their arguments:

T18: Yes, I agree, of course [. . .] all kind of attitudes, because you have, I have students who are all the time interrupting and everything, but they don't care at all about the subject. Then, you have those students who want to participate but they don't do it well, so you are not motivated with that because they are not doing it well and then you have those students who work but they don't participate, they don't contribute to the classroom and that demotivates you, so every type of attitude, not only the bad behaviour. (Main Study, Interview Prompt)

This interviewee explained that there were three types of attitude which demotivated her and this helped the researcher to envisage the reality of the participants' classrooms. In addition, teachers who agreed with this item described the challenges they faced in the classroom when dealing with students' attitudes. Teachers claimed that learners' attitude could lead to frustration, depression and indeed, demotivation. Additionally, one of the teachers discussed other demotivators:

T9: Neither Agree nor Disagree, because they can partially be, yes, I can be personally demotivated, but I said before that I think that there are more external things that are demotivating than . . . like the school environment, or requirements or administrative tasks, rather than the students' specific, development, or yes, interaction with other students in class. (Main Study, Interview Prompt)

This participant revealed that teachers could be affected by students' attitudes, but she uncovered other demotivating factors which were relevant for the study and this shows another advantage of using the interview prompts instead of the questionnaire. The slim output of the questionnaire from the pilot study can be compared with the thorough arguments that participants provided when the prompt was shown to them. It can be argued that the questionnaire would have limited the richness and depth of the data as has been posed in the literature (Codó, 2008; Mackey & Gass, 2005).

In a different section in the questionnaire, teachers had to indicate how important this statement was for them: 'Having a job in which I can learn and develop my abilities to my full potential'. Participants responded by choosing an option from very important to not important at all. In the main study, teachers' opinion about this item was further developed in the discussion which arose using the interview prompts. Participants agreed on the importance of learning and developing as

a vital part of their professional careers but their clarifications after choosing an option provided insights into their motivation while using the interview prompts. The following quotes show not only that the participants assigned a high degree of importance to this statement but that this issue was vital for their teaching career and their willingness to teach:

T13: Yes, for me yes, because I like to learn all the time so if I don't have fun in my job or if I don't learn anything doing teaching, I wouldn't do it. (Main Study, Interview Prompt)

T5: Yes, if not, what's the sense of that job. (Main Study, Interview Prompt)

More importantly, the interview prompts enabled exploring the reality of their teaching life, as can be seen in this example:

T22: It is important but in this sense I would like to have more opportunities of going to courses, training courses to learn new strategies or new ways of working, just to keep on learning which I think it is quite important in this job and there are new methodologies and new ways of teaching and I also would like to have more opportunities to practise English, in the country, in an English speaking country. (Main Study, Interview Prompt)

This participant considered the item to be important but acknowledged the lack of training opportunities available. Knowing the importance teachers ascribe to learning and developing, the lack of opportunities could trigger teacher demotivation and this information was discovered by using an interview prompt and confirmed by other research tools (Gadella Kamstra, 2020, 2021a). These quotes show another example of the interaction which resulted from the interview prompts and this can be compared with the responses that would be obtained from the questionnaire. Interviewing approaches provide a more holistic understanding of participants' beliefs than questionnaires (Brannen, 2005; Mackey & Gass, 2005) and the interview prompts showed participants' motivations more clearly.

As a further example, in the preliminary questionnaire, teachers had to complete the following sentence: 'As a teacher, the main demotivating factors in the classroom are ...'. 33 teachers took part in the questionnaire in the piloting stage, however, only 21 completed this task. Most of the participating teachers only mentioned one demotivating factor, for example, 'lack of interest and demotivated students' (Respondent 4) or 'students' behaviour' (Respondent 16). In contrast, the interview prompts allowed asking for further information regarding these factors. The researcher could encourage teachers to go beyond the first demotivating factor that came to their minds, which was usually students' misbehaviour, by using probing techniques. The following interview extracts can show the depth of the discussion which was reached by using interview prompts:

Exchange 1

T11: Lack of respect in the part of students, when they don't pay attention, even when you say 'please, please, be quiet, please sit down' and they just ignore you, that is really, really demotivating, I don't think it has anything to do with the teaching, I think it has to do with their social environment, with the atmosphere they were raised in. [...]

R: Any other demotivating factors for you?

T11: When the people, the society in general, in particular Spanish society criticizes teachers and they say that we don't teach properly, we are not well prepared [...] we are not valued by society. (Main Study, Interview Prompt)

Exchange 2

T20: disruptive behaviour, not having sense of achievement, not having a clear a goal, not being supported by your supervisor, not being able to do the activities you like the most because they

don't want you to, or because they don't want you to do them at all, or because there is very little room for creativity [...] there is no, exchange of ideas, or your ideas are rejected [...]

R: Regarding the sense of achievement, is that regarding your own sense of achievement or students'?

T20: I think it is a complicated thing, it is not only, my sense of feeling, I think this has to be shared by both, so I think it is not real if I feel it, but my students don't feel it, then it doesn't make sense, I mean, I think it has got to be a shared feeling of achievement

R: and what about when you were saying 'they, they, they don't want you to', do you mean the students don't want you to do those activities, or you mean your supervisor?

T20: My supervisor (Main Study, Interview Prompt)

The interview prompts encouraged participants to reflect on and consider other demotivating factors. The above interactions facilitated the identification of demotivators such as students' social context, lack of recognition and uncooperative relationships, which were also confirmed by other participants.

The questionnaire oversimplifies complex issues

It could be argued that qualitative approaches are more suitable to study complex topics since they enable the exploration and discovery of thorough data on complex issues (Bowling, A, 2002). The preliminary questionnaire only asked participants to indicate how important 'Having a profession that is prestigious' was for them, with options from very important to not important at all. In contrast, the interviews with interview prompts used in the main study showed that the topic of prestige was complex, and participants thoroughly discussed their views on prestige and recognition. Teachers revealed that being recognised by society was considered as something positive, which could promote the respect of parents and students, and could facilitate their work by triggering better student behaviour. Other participants also mentioned that being recognised by society, including colleagues, parents and students would boost their self-esteem, self-realization, motivation, and happiness.

With respect to this question of recognition and prestige, during the interviews, participants went through a process of reflection which allowed them to answer this interview prompt and it was clear that the choices in the questionnaire were limiting and simplified a complex issue. By selecting a choice in the questionnaire, participants could not offer further explanations and express what they really thought about the concepts of recognition and prestige. The following quote shows how difficult it can be to categorise one's opinion:

T16: So-so [...] it is important, but if we take, take into account the effect that that is going to have in your job, for example, if it is a very prestigious and respected profession, I would imagine your students would respect you, because you are important and prestigious and respected, right? but for me, personally, I don't really care what people think about my profession, what I care is what I do with my students, in my job with them, like something more personal, I don't know if I am making myself clear, not something like people think 'oh my god, you are a teacher, you are so respected and you have so prestigious job', I don't care about that, what I care is about the job that I do with my students, so it is important in some way but not very, very, very important for me. (Main Study, Interview Prompt)

This participant and others were strongly demotivated by student misbehaviour in the classroom and although this teacher stated that she did not mind what others thought about the profession, she underlined the effect a prestigious profession could have on student behaviour. Other teachers also mentioned the intrinsic and altruistic value of their profession:

T23: No, I don't think so, or maybe so-so, but no, I don't think so [...] the important thing is, I mean, for me is to be happy with what you do, I mean, I don't mind what other people think about what I do, I want to feel good and I want to be a good professional but only that, I mean other people's opinion is not, it's not important, well on the other hand, respect, is different, I mean, valued and prestigious, that is not important for me, but respected, all the professions should be respected. (Main Study, Interview Prompt)

The importance of teachers' enjoyment of the profession and teachers' intrinsic motivations were uncovered by using this interview prompt. These data would have not been produced by the questionnaire item which would have provided a simple *not important at all* answer.

Doing research creatively

To the researcher's knowledge, the method used in the present study; the interview prompts, has not been mentioned in research textbooks. Nevertheless, interview prompts share advantages with visual data techniques, in which images are employed as stimulus along with other research instruments. Similar methods are common in commercial market research (Rowley et al., 2012), and in projects which use visual methodologies in the disciplines of psychology and social sciences (Banks, 2018; Frith et al., 2005). For instance, in the photo elicitation method, a photograph is included in an interview (Harper, 2002), a technique which was developed by Collier (1957) who maintained that pictures produced more thorough interview data and helped interviewees when feeling tired due to the repetitiveness of traditional interviews. In addition, the use of photographs was believed to diminish the pressure from the interview; the photographs allow the participant to avoid eye contact by focusing on the pictures (Banks, 2018; Collier & Collier, 1986). Photo and graphic elicitation methods (e.g., drawings and diagrams) have become increasingly popular in the social sciences. These approaches have been found to enable inclusive research (Fullana et al., 2014), represent hidden aspects of the participants' self-identities (Croghan et al., 2008) and are suitable for studies in which participants are encouraged to express their feelings and emotions (Bagnoli, 2009; Harper, 2002).

Although the interview prompts are not photographs or images, these physical cards stimulate a reaction from the participant who has to rationalise their ideas after reading the information in the cards or completing the tasks. As is the case of the photo elicitation technique, interview prompts allow for a break amidst the interview questions and eye contact with the interviewer is interrupted when the prompt becomes the focus. The interviewees' ideas are elicited by reflecting while completing the task and therefore, direct cues from the interviewer are not needed because the focus is on the activity and not on the interviewer (Kitzinger, 1994; Rowley et al., 2012). Instead of continuously answering questions from the interviewer, these tasks ease the conversation and make collecting data creatively possible.

Allusions to the use of cards in research is limited excluding the scarce references about show cards or show sheets which have been used in survey research (Lavrakas, 2008). In qualitative research, the use of cards in one-to-one interviews has not been assessed (Rowley et al., 2012), but it has been discussed within the context of focus groups. In the field of sociology, Kitzinger (1994) has used cards in studies with various aims and they can be used for a variety of purposes. She explains that the cards may include statements about descriptions of events or people, opinions or pictures and they can be categorised or sorted in terms of degree of agreement or importance. The process in which participants arrange the cards and expound their reasoning is more important than the final display and, in her studies, 'the material existence of the cards seemed to embolden some people' (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 107). In the present study, interviewees would make decisions regarding the order or the position of the cards and they would justify their reasoning. By using interview prompts, participants engage in reflection while focusing on the cards and tasks in which they were encouraged to rank or to agree or disagree with various statements.

Additionally, the cards included activities which teachers often use in the language classroom and therefore are meaningful and relatable tasks (e.g., filling in the gaps, completing sentences). Teachers were challenged to contemplate their thoughts and decisions by using a reflective tool. Interviewees were encouraged to think and expand on their ideas in a more intellectually demanding way. The interview questions were fundamental for the investigation but by completing tasks and actively participating in the interview, participants seemed to be more motivated. Teachers were able to talk about topics in a more dynamic and active way. This method enables data collection while engaging participating teachers in the interview process and it shows that classroom activities can be used to gather research data. Nevertheless, this practical technique could also be used with participants who are not teachers and in disciplines which do not focus on the educational context. This simple method is exceptionally flexible and can be tailored to diverse fields and topics by combining the prompts with the interview questions.

Challenges as opportunities: the researcher engaging in reflection

Although an investigation has been carefully designed, ‘unexpected circumstances (and discoveries) can emerge’ (Hedgcock & Lee, 2017), which will require amendments to research plans to support the data collection process while taking into account these unpredicted events (p. 61). There are ways ‘to salvage the project from failure’ (Rose & McKinley, 2017, p. 3), and scientists can still attend to the original research goals even though this entails implementing new data collection methods and approaches which may affect future stages of the process (Hedgcock & Lee, 2017). Researchers may face obstacles and will struggle to find straightforward solutions because ‘the “messy area” itself is unsettling [and] worrying’; however, the fact that this process is also ‘exciting and challenging’ should be recognised (Cook, 2009, p. 289). This experience may be disturbing but also intriguing for the researcher who will need to engage in reflection to tackle the issue.

Adjustments in the research project are often required when addressing unexpected challenges. Importantly, this messy turn calls for researcher’s reflection (Cook, 2009). Changes are enabled by the researcher who engages in a reflective process to consider the unpredicted issues. Engaging in reflection has often been considered to be beneficial, for example, by writing research journals throughout an investigation to record the research process (Borg, 2001). Reflection and reflexivity will guide investigators to make decisions which cannot be found in any literature guidelines due to the uniqueness of each research project and these decisions will empower the completion of the process along with the researcher’s development (Rabbidge, 2017; Watt, 2007).

The dilemma presented in this article invited a thoughtful process which involved making important decisions that would change the course of the project. The preliminary results provoked a reconsideration of the initial methodology design, of the contribution of the questionnaire and of the concepts to be examined. The questionnaire was designed to identify and understand the (de) motivation of EFL teachers, but the questions may have not allowed teachers to share their deeper thoughts on the struggle they were experiencing in their professional careers. Thus, this complex construct may have not been as thoroughly understood by using a questionnaire which might have limited participants’ responses and the development of their ideas. This led to considering if a questionnaire was appropriate since this instrument may only superficially convey what teachers thought about their (de)motivation. Instead, a qualitative tool welcomed participants opinions and views of their (de)motivation by emboldening teachers to describe motivators, demotivators and possible fluctuations.

It is true that quantitative data may support the identification of specific groups for further study (in this case, demotivated teachers) but it is often difficult to reach those groups via a survey (Brannen, 2005). The lack of variance in the piloting results also showed that few demotivated teachers had taken part, and this would have skewed the results of the main study. Demotivated teachers did not engage with the questionnaire and did not participate actively. The impossibility to reach demotivated teachers led to some reflection; demotivated teachers who are struggling may not

be willing to participate in a survey which will take some of their free time. Those teachers who are more dissatisfied with their jobs could be unwilling to take the time and participate in studies regarding their motivation or any other issue (Pennington & Ho, 1995).

Questionnaire results were extremely unexpected. I have never read a publication with a similar methodological dilemma and I reflected on the research process and other academics' research. The materials novice researchers turn to for guidance offer unrealistic research models 'bereft of the complexities, ambiguities, anticipated difficulties, personal struggles and conflicts which doing research involves' and as a result, investigators accredit these issues to their lack of 'preparation, knowledge, or experience' (Walford, 1991, p. 2). The misrepresentation of research in published articles and textbooks discouraged me. I wondered if authors reconsidered their approaches, made mistakes, and encountered any problems when researching. The presentation of research as perfect investigations did not resemble the issues that I was facing which made the research process and the struggle more taxing and unsettling. Later, I found that other scholars were also unable to find any literature which represented the mess they were facing in their empirical studies (Cook, 2009; Watt, 2007). Therefore, this article encourages researchers, novice or experienced, to embrace the challenges and publish them so they are not overlooked and disregarded despite their possible usefulness to other scientists.

Conclusions and implications

This article draws on a larger investigation (Gadella Kamstra, 2020) which was initially designed to follow a mixed-methods approach but unexpected statistical results from the preliminary questionnaire led to a methodological transformation. The challenges faced and the way these were addressed is the focus of this paper. The creation and use of a research instrument, the interview prompts, has also been presented along with its advantages. This tool provides a fresh perspective which empowers participants to take part in research in a different way.

The design of the interview prompts enabled a more engaging data collection method. The use of cards with statements and tasks encouraged participants to consider important topics for the study while completing familiar but challenging activities. Interview prompts proved to be a method which can be successfully incorporated in interviews and it is a tool which can be used to explore any topic in diverse disciplinary contexts by adapting the cards and making them relevant to the research. Academics often urge new researchers to use creative methods in the social sciences (Kara, 2015), which may be useful for those projects or research questions which are too complex to be limited by traditional methodologies. The methodological approach used in this project granted more vivid and richer data and thus, the methodological turn was a beneficial step for the investigation. A quantitative questionnaire could have shown different interesting results, but it would have limited participants' reasoning and oversimplified complex topics which required further discussion and reflection from the participant.

Publications often present a neat final product and the dilemmas that occurred throughout the research process remain unsaid. 'An applied linguistics' which does not recognise and assess the research problems could become an 'uninteresting and irresponsible discipline' (Prior, 2017, p. 180). Challenges need to be overcome to complete an investigation successfully, they cannot simply be ignored or worse, unstated, to secure publication in certain journals. These obstacles should be normalised and regarded as opportunities which will favour the research. Researchers should be wary of the possible unexpected issues they may find during their research and therefore, should develop their research plans allowing flexibility for unanticipated events (Hedgcock & Lee, 2017).

The obstacles confronted during the research process invited the researcher's reflection on the initially intended methodology, the aim of the study, the data collection approach and the research described by academics. This thoughtful process improved the understanding of the project itself and assisted in finding a better approach and the way to move forward. The dreaded dilemma

encouraged a positive reflective process which enabled the development of a creative research instrument. The interview prompts demonstrate that challenges faced by researchers may become an opportunity to try new approaches and to produce worthwhile research. Research issues can be solved, and positive outcomes can emerge from unforeseen circumstances. Investigators should embrace dilemmas and should not perceive them as discouraging threats but as chances to find noteworthy resolutions. This article openly reveals the challenges, and solutions, experienced in this investigation and it better informs research practices in related areas by encouraging investigators to share their research obstacles.

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