

Positioning Students of English Communication as “Knowers” in Research Interviews

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Abstract

This article analyses the cues in research interviews, adopting the perspective of positioning theory. Interviews were carried out with 8 students during 2020 and 21, for the purpose of researching EFL students' willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1998). In this study the interviews are reviewed to explore the patterns of communication between the interviewer and the students in the light of positioning theory. The originators of positioning theory, Van Lagenhove and Harre (1999), identify the following components in any interaction: position, speech and other acts, and storyline. The most systematic coding of interaction data to date appears in studies of physics and maths classrooms in the USA, where the impact of female gender/minority group identity has been found to impede access to science. Coding the teacher's cues as “structural”, “contextual” or “social” reveals that students are empowered by the use of contextual cues, which build on the students' responses to questions, and social cues, which create friendly feeling (Hazari, Lock, Cass and Beattie, 2015). When the interview transcripts were analyzed according to these cues, the facilitating purpose of “researcher talk”, which appeared to dominate the interviews, emerged clearly. This research study shows how positioning theory can help us to understand the dynamics of interaction between a teacher-researcher and students outside class. Similar techniques have been used on classroom observation data. The author suggests that positioning analysis yields insights which are also helpful for understanding interactions in the classroom and the development of learner autonomy. The article concludes with suggestions as to how teachers can leverage this knowledge to understand

classroom interaction as well as 1:1 interactions between teacher/researchers and students.

Keywords: Positioning, interaction, roles, WTC, research interviews, autonomy.

Introduction

This article examines a series of interviews carried out by the author in 2020 and 2021. The initial purpose of the interviews was to research willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1998) and students' experience of communication in online classes during the Covid-19 Pandemic from April 2020 to November 2021. When analyzing the research interviews, she noticed a high proportion of teacher/researcher talking time in some interviews and thus became concerned with the positioning of students during research interviews. To what extent could the students express their real opinions to a teacher-turned-researcher? The problem of "social desirability bias" is summarized thus by Dornyei (2007):

Participants are often presented with cues to the anticipated results of a study and as a result they may begin to exhibit the performance they believe is expected of them. (Dornyei, 2007, p. 54.)

This could be particularly problematic when the researcher is also the teacher. Dornyei suggests that the problem of social desirability bias can be mitigated by developing rapport and "not presenting ourselves in a perfect light." (ibid, p. 141). In this paper it will be argued that by taking up a non-neutral position during the interviews, the researcher made space for the interviewees to negotiate meaning, question and disagree.

Theoretical Background: Positioning Theory

In their work on Positioning Theory, Von Langenhove and Harré remind us that the act of interviewing does not occur in a neutral context:

The conversational act of interviewing or asking a person to tick an answer on an item on a questionnaire, also necessarily has to be understood in terms of the triad "position, speech act, storyline." (Von Langenhove and Harré, 1999, p. 28.)

Von Langenhove and Harré suggest that “the story of the research” should be an integral part of research. They identify the following components in any interaction: position, speech and other acts, and storyline. “Position” means the roles which are taken up by speakers while “storyline” refers to the evolution of possible positions, seen as contingent on the mutual understanding and agreement of the participants in an interaction to play the roles expected. Initially, positioning theory was used for sociological studies such as feminist studies and in the study of political conflicts, but in the last ten years, educators and applied linguists have started to examine teachers’ and learners’ interactions in terms of positioning theory.

Kayi-Aydar (2019) offers a helpful primer on applying positioning theory as a tool of analysis in English language learning classroom discourse and reflective narrative. She looks at observation data showing examples of storylines which develop and change during classroom interactions, revealing how agency is conferred or challenged. For example, a student interrupted the teacher to query their knowledge of a pronunciation point. This challenge to the teacher’s authority was met with the teacher’s surprise and laughter, followed by the teacher’s assertion of her authority as a native speaker. The teacher then provided a grammatical explanation. According to positioning theory it is claimed that the teacher invoked their superiority as a native speaker to position the student’s enquiry as non-legitimate, but then by answering the question with a grammar explanation, the teacher re-positioned the enquiry as legitimate. In another example, a teacher endorsed the professional identities of participants in a music class by often referring to their future role as educators. In another study, Kayi-Aydar (2014) used positioning theory to analyze observation data and elucidate the changes in classroom interactions over a whole semester. The whole class came to be influenced by the teacher’s negative attitude towards a talkative student, in such a way that one student was shunned by others as a “know-all”. It can be seen from these examples that positioning impacts students’ chances to participate in class and by implication, positioning also controls the opportunities to exercise learner autonomy. We will return to this theme in the discussion section. Until now, research has focused on teachers’ and learners’ narrative accounts and observations in the classroom. However, the current study focuses on research interviews. It is hoped that this analysis could yield insights into the dynamics of the teacher and student relationship and the mechanics of how the relationship can be

developed on a more equal basis, and the roles are re-cast as researcher (teacher) and “knower” (student) (Berry, 1981 in Muntigi, 2009). In such a relationship, the student’s unique knowledge would become the focus of the interaction. Since the analytical system proposed by Berry is rather complicated, these terms are used loosely here, simply to connect this discussion with earlier analyses of how power is mediated during interactions.

Methodological Considerations

In this article we will attempt to use positioning as a tool for understanding research interviews. It is hoped that the utility of positioning theory for the analysis of teacher talk will already be evident from the examples above. However in terms of methodology for examining positioning, it seems that there is not one single coding system which is standardized in all studies. Positioning studies such as those cited in Kayi-Aydar above, often consist of a chunk of observation data followed by an analysis of themes, which is written as a narrative summary. Alternatively, the data is presented as a transcript laid out in parallel columns with additional columns on the right for labels and analytical comments. There has been some debate about the level of abstraction to apply when doing the analysis. Koborov (2001) praises positioning theory but at the same time, discovers inconsistency in the way that it has been used by proponents of conversation analysis and also critical discourse analysis. According to Koborov, positioning theory could help to reconcile the gap between these two disciplines, but there are not yet many extant studies which actually do so. Kayi-Aydar writes that attempts at systematic categorization are rare within the literature on language learning but occur in a study by Hazari, Lock, Cass and Beattie (2015). The study in question investigates positioning and identity development in the context of female students in science classrooms in USA high schools. Although the context differs greatly from students learning foreign languages, the concern relating to role, identity and agency is similar.

Hazari et al. (2015) write that female students and ethnic minority students are reticent to communicate in the physics class because they perceive the subject as “more appropriate for males” and not related to them personally. They surveyed over 3,000 students and followed up by observing four teachers at work, analyzing the observations in terms of positioning. The codes which they used were as follows:

Physical cues – physical proximity or hierarchical stance with respect to students

Structural cues – taking on different roles, opportunities for students to take on different roles.

Contextual cues – meaningfully incorporating students' thoughts and contexts

Social cues – obscuring social boundaries between teacher and student

They claimed that “These cues, related to teacher positioning in class, had strong implications for student engagement and physics identity development.” Their conclusion seems to have relevance for teacher-learner relations which could apply to language learning situations just as much as to science learning situations:

A hierarchical relational structure increases the social distance perceived by students between themselves and the teacher who they associate closely with the content, and increases the personal risk associated with engagement. (p.12).

However, it is important to note that Hazari, Lock, Cass and Beattie's (2015) categories are designed for use in a context such as the classroom, where there is an expectation that the teacher will be controlling the interaction, at least initially. Looking at researcher-student interactions gives us an opportunity to problematize the methodology itself. Positioning analysis always entails interpretative decisions about how to relate the micro-level of interaction – the grammar, gestures and words – to the macro-level of societal story. The identification of roles and storylines is subjective, depending on the purpose and ideology of the researcher. Depperman (2013, 2015) and others are critical of the notion of storylines for this reason:

Conversation analysts reject the invocation of societal discourses as an analyst's resource in order to make sense of local acts of positioning. [...] Still, the question remains how local, “micro” acts of positioning in narration relate to larger “macro”, more enduring structures of identities, which matter for the participants beyond the interactional episode recorded. (Depperman, 2013, 11 in Kayi-Aydar and Miller, 2021)

Koborov (2001) believes that positioning analysis can bridge the tension between conversation analysis (which uses categories generated from the data) and critical discourse analysis (which uses categories drawn from the macro storylines). Kayi-Aydar and Miller (2021) call on researchers to “demonstrate the link” between the micro-level and the macro level of analysis. By attempting to use the framework in Hazari, Lock, Cass and Beattie, it is hoped that the current study can contribute to the development of methodologies for conducting positioning analysis in a way which is both grounded and context-sensitive. Saldana (2021, 90-98) offers various models of coding which show principled ways to combine more than one set of codes to account for the same set of data. This was helpful when facing the task of disentangling the social interaction, linguistic aspects and interview content.

Context of the current study

The author works at a small university in rural Japan. From April to June 2020, due to pandemic restrictions, all classes were online. Thereafter, a proportion of classes continued online in order to encourage social distancing. In the fall of 2020, students who had hoped to study overseas in English speaking countries, were forced to stay in Japan and take online classes from professors in their target countries as well as face-to-face classes on campus. This pattern was repeated in 2021. The experience of learning through video-conferencing, raised many questions. The author and her colleague decided to do a survey comparing willingness to communicate online and off line. When students were once again able to visit the campus, students were invited to come and talk about the issues covered in the survey. The areas covered in the interview guide were as follows:

- How was your experience of online learning?
- Does being online or face-to-face make a difference to whether you feel willing to communicate?
- Do you have preferences in terms of classroom management, such as group size?

Participants

The participants in the study were a convenience sample. Sixty-two second year students had been invited to fill out a survey about willingness to communicate and at the time of the survey they were invited to come to chat about the subject further. Then, students who regularly visited the author's office were asked if they would agree to be interviewed. Six interviews were audio recorded by the author, and two by her colleague (which are not included in the study). Some students opted to be interviewed in pairs, thus eight students altogether were interviewed by the author. Six were female and two were male. All except one were Japanese. Data from an interview with one Korean female student was included. The justification for this was that her language-learning experience provided a helpful perspective on the group dynamics of the class. Having studied and socialized with the others for 18 months, she had developed exceptional rapport with the Japanese students. The students were studying in a mixed ability class which had levels from CEFR A2 to B2 grouped together for "study abroad on campus". Most of the interviewees were in the upper ability range in their class. However, efforts were made to include some students of lower levels. Doing the interview in pairs facilitated the participation of those who were less confident. During the interview, the students were told they could use Japanese if they wanted, and in two of the interviews, the interviewer explained some of the questions in Japanese. Transcriptions were initially done using AI and then edited manually.

Method of analysis

Interview data were first analyzed in terms of roles played by the teacher-researcher and student-informant, aiming investigate when and why students' responses followed the storyline suggested by the teacher and when they deviated – in short, whether students had space to tell the story that they wanted to tell. The components of positioning are understood to be roles, speech acts and storylines. In line with the purpose of uncovering the power dynamics of the research interview, the first step was to identify and label the various positions and cues. Although the work of positioning theory is acknowledged to be interpretative, we could posit a principle that the system of analysis should be as simple as possible, replying in the first instance on pure linguistic analysis to provide indicators of social cues. The use of the pronoun "I" or "we" is one example of this. Using a phrase like "as a teacher" or "as a researcher" would be another example where there is a very clear positioning statement. It will be

assumed that a level of interpretation is also acceptable, for example, statements such as “I am interested in your experience” might be claimed to be more related to the “researcher-role” than “teacher role”, while statements such as “You should be more confident” might be claimed to be more related to the “teacher role”.

In the interview data under consideration in the current study, the proportion of interviewer to student speaking time was unexpectedly high. Analyzed by word count, we find that the interviewer dominated two of the conversations with about 66% of the words being spoken by the interviewer in the interviews with S 2 and 3 and S 8, as seen in the table below (Table 1).. In the interviews with more fluent students, the proportions were reversed. The interview in which both interviewer and respondent spoke over 1000 words was the one with the Korean student. We can generally find rough correlation between the speech rate of the interviewees and the proportion of talking time taken up by the interviewer. In interviews with students whose speech rate was slower, the interviewer described classroom scenarios in detail, before asking students to comment, while in the interviews with more fluent students, they were able to interpret the questions and articulate their opinions easily.

Table 1

Interviewee number	Number of words spoken by interviewer	Number of words spoken by interviewees	Speech rate (words per minute).
S 2 and 3	1165	598	45
S 4	1562	1387	74
S 5	644	1189	55
S 6 and 7	462	1130	53
S 8 TC	1928	591	38
S 9	913	1321	94

The second step in the analysis was that transcripts of the interviews were coded with labels referring to the roles played by the teacher-researcher and interviewees. The various roles which emerged can be seen in the table below. The third column shows the analysis in terms of the categories used by Hazari, Cass and Beattie: structural, contextual or social cues.

Role label/position/language function	Example of words	Cue
Researcher	I am interested in...	STRUCTURAL

		Positions student as object of interest As a person who knows about their experience
Interpreter	You are smiling You made a gesture as if You mean Some of those people are not your old friends. But you've got a positive sharing.	CONTEXTUAL Builds on the meaning which was introduced by the respondent Makes the interpretation explicit (so that it can be challenged)
Narrator/ scene setter	If somebody said to you "You're the group leader, would it help?"	STRUCTURAL Identifies the scene she wants to ask about, tell story Positions the student as responder
Teacher's personal opinion	When your classmates made a LINE group, I thought	SOCIAL Evoking scenario with an explicit statement – aiming to cue students to be agentive - agree or disagree Was this successful?
Personal	I liked seeing inside people's homes	SOCIAL Creates intimacy by being honest.

To provide a check on the way of coding, an experienced qualitative researcher was asked to read two of the interview transcripts and identify each kind of cue, and also to look for places where the coding scheme did not account for the data. She was also asked which kind of cues were most frequent and whether there were places where students ever resisted structural cues from the interviewer. Her analysis coincided with that of the author on the following points. Most of the cues were found to be contextual. There were points at which the respondents took the initiative by asking questions or changing the topic deliberately. These were defined as structural cues. Finally, at times the researcher attempted to step out of the authoritative role. These moments will be further discussed below.

Attempting to divide the transcripts into "structural", "contextual" and "social" cues becomes problematic when looking at the respondent's utterances, because by definition in an interview, we would expect that the cues come from the researcher. Most of the utterances are "contextual" in the sense that they are building on the question or scenario introduced by the researcher and following her lead. However,

there were a few examples of times when the students rejected the interviewer’s cues and introduced a different storyline from the expected one. The expected story was that online learning had been difficult but had provided a sense of community to students during lockdown. However, that was only mentioned by one student (S2), and others found ways to express various other storylines, focusing on their own determination (S 4) or their difficulties (S 6 and others). These will be further analyzed in the section below. A further level of analysis seemed to be needed to account for the way in which students positioned themselves in relation to their classmates in their narratives. All of the students tended to use the first person and to refer to their classmates as “they” or “some people”. It was probable that this was due to a concern with maintaining face as a good student. “We” was used only occasionally, in the context of describing the conditions of the course in a general way rather than that of describing any decisions or behavior.

Student as individual	Some people.... I	CONTEXTUAL
Student as member of group	We... They....	CONTEXTUAL
Student as storyteller (S4)	Last semester our Korean class has seven people on this event...so I can I could communicate with teacher and friend during class on zoom, so but other class I couldn't communicate enough with teacher and friends because I don't know much about classmates and teachers so but Korean class member is I know all classmate so I can I could talk relax relax	STRUCTURAL Assumes agency by introducing storyline.
Student as questioner (S 6)	In online class on news somebody said why the facility fee is the same?	STRUCTURAL Assumes agency by asking question

Self-positioning by the teacher-researcher: Structural Cues

In most of the interviews, there was a point at which the teacher-researcher made a declaration of her identity as a researcher rather than as a teacher. Here is one example:

Because my aim is like research, I’m not talking about what we actually do, so you don’t have to solve the problem. In my life, I’m very curious about why

people use one language, even like me if I am talking to my Japanese friend sometimes I use Japanese and sometimes I use English. So I am just very interested. It's not like "We have to fix it!". It's like we are studying the scientific phenomenon "Why do people choose one language?"

These could be described as structural cues in that they are intended to share the power equally with the interviewee. Although the researcher/teacher was familiar with the students and the research protocol had been explained in the students' first language at the time when consent forms were signed, some students seemed uncertain about the purpose of the interview. In one interview, a student (S3) whispered to her partner "*Kowa*" ("scary") as the teacher got up to close the office door. Students were aware that the college was constantly reviewing the situation of covid and the efficiency of online learning, and most of them did not want to go back to online learning. Perhaps some were worried that this research project was a covert move by the institution to justify a return to online classes or an increase in the proportion of online classes. Another anxiety might be that they were being evaluated during the interview (in spite of the reassurance to the contrary on the interview briefing and consent form). Thus it was important for the researcher to dissociate herself from her identity as a representative of the institution and gain credibility as a pure researcher. Some of the teacher-researcher's talking time was used for sharing her personal feelings openly (social cues, in the schema of Hazari et al. 2015).

A student in interview 2 lacked confidence, explicitly stating "My level is low". The following section of the transcript shows her effort to produce the researcher's preferred answer.

I: In a situation with a partner who is not your close friend, is it better to stay with the same partner or change, in a 90 minute class?

S2: I think same partner is better cos if I change partner I talk my idea again.

I: Ah, isn't that OK? I think that is better? Isn't that good? Or is it boring?

S2: (laughs) Ah! Change.

I: I don't know. This is *kenkyu* (research). I'm not saying "You should do like that."

S2: Same partner. Difficult topic. Exchange my idea is hard and tired.

In this case, the interviewer's statement self-positioning as a researcher and not as an authority, allowed the student to reiterate their original opinion with more explanation. Two students took this interview together. One of them was extremely shy. However, when asked "Are you confident?" she said "Yes." It seemed that she felt confident in a situation which she had prepared for. She tended to give the opposite answer to her classmate.

Social Cues

As mentioned, the teacher-researcher tried to deliberately affect the positioning by telling stories about the classroom and sharing her own feelings. This happened particularly in the interviews with students whose communication was slower and whose active vocabulary was more limited.

I: Did it make you relaxed? Being at home? I talked to a few people and some people go "Well it was stressful because I had to look at the screen." So do you think it was both, like sometimes stressful and sometimes relaxing?

S8: I... I don't like long screen time.

I: So are you tired? More than coming face-to-face?

S8: Yeah.

I: It was a strange time wasn't it. If you were in a big group could you answer a question or like if the teacher tells you, you answer the question, did you find it more challenging on zoom compared to face-to-face?

S8: I think same when I ask from teacher.

I: Ah it's the same in face-to-face! How about volunteering?

S8: This and face-to-face class.... I could do more online.

I: Tell me more.

S8: Because in online class if I mistake there are no people in the same room no more I see. So if I mistake I deter.

I: If you make a mistake in the class not so sad because?

S8: My friend is near. Yeah.

I: and your friend speak or just...

S8: Speak.

I: What do they say?

S8: *Daijoubu* (=OK, in Japanese. Gestures patting on the shoulder.)

During the course of this interview, over two thirds of the speaking time was dominated by the researcher. Listening to the interview, we can see that an attempt was made to develop rapport. The student's speech rate was 38 words per minute, not including pauses of several seconds between utterances. Initially slowing down to match the student, after realizing that their level of comprehension was quite high, the researcher introduced a number of stories, as if treating the student as a fellow-researcher. "One of my friends is researching using Japanese in the English class. Apparently some teachers were using Japanese in the online class to be friendly. And I never thought of that at all!"

The atmosphere which developed and seemed conducive to sharing confidences. The student commented that when she was doing teletandem learning, listening to her interlocutor had helped her to "open her mind", and it seemed as if this process was also happening in the interview.

S8: First I couldn't say many things but he speak, he spoke to me many times, so I could, I could open my mind.

I: Good word.

S8: I have never spoke to other countries people... who are students...so it was a good time for me to speak, to use English.

I: Did you feel nervous before?

S8: No.

When we examine the transcript in detail, we can see that the teacher's extended turns were aimed at sketching scenarios with the aim of evoking a shared understanding as a basis for the student to give an opinion. However, the efficacy of this strategy was limited and it should have been used more sparingly to allow more time for respondents to speak.

“Lately sometimes they do job interviews on zoom. Do you think you can evaluate somebody on zoom or do you think it’s not a proper evaluation? I have no idea. I’m just curious about it.” (Interview Mar).

Self-positioning by interviewees: (Resisting) Structural Cues

It was evident that several of the interviewees had thought about what they wanted to say before the interview. This could be observed from the fact that near the start of the interview they took long turns and launched into quite elaborate narratives. The following is an extract from a paired interview with two male students:

S_6: I lost my motivation. I couldn’t improve my motivation.

I: I think it was in the newspaper... in every country.

S_6: I envy the virus. Face to face class I always feel comfortable. My friends in Tokyo still have the online class. Some people quit the college.

I: Did you think about it [quitting]?

S_6: I will enter nursing school.

The two students were close friends and had talked about what they wanted to say. Later in the interview there was an apparent non-sequitur as they introduced their own storylines:

I: If you were going to say what could teachers do to make it easier to communicate in either online or face to face class, what do you think?

S_6: In online class on news somebody said why the facility fee is the same? During the online class we can’t use the facility...

I: From the teacher’s point of view?

S_7: Actually yes. I want a professor to make opportunity to speak English. I mean the chance to speak English for every student because it is common that one student has a good high score on TOEIC but don’t have a high speaking ability or writing ability. They don’t have a chance for outputting their English. So I think it is better if professor make a chance to communicate with each student in English.

S_6 and 7 rejected the teacher's implied storyline that the zoom classes had been a panacea which alleviated their loneliness during lockdown. Instead they tried to introduce a new storyline, referring to the negative consequences for students, many of whom dropped out of college, as had been widely reported in the news. The teacher-researcher glossed over this, by asking students to focus on "the teacher's point of view". This was a missed opportunity to learn more about the students' experience. On the other hand, S_7 had a clear request, which was also a useful finding for the teacher-researcher. Interestingly, this student had been a frequent visitor to the teacher's office but he framed his advice in general rather than personal terms, reflecting a sense of formality and a kind of authority as a confident informant.

Protecting "face" for self and teacher: Social Cues and impersonal language

Some of the questions asked about classroom management issues which related directly to the author's class. However, students generally referred to the classes of other teachers when talking about their experience in class. Although they had taken the author's class, they referred to "the teacher" and frequently made it clear that they were talking about other teachers, when referring to both positive and negative experiences. On the other hand, the shared experience of online classes was evoked powerfully in a few words. One of the students (S_2) had been in lockdown alone because she was from a different city so at the start of the interview she mentioned that the classes made her less lonely, and she smiled and looked at the interviewer at this time. This student was usually the first to join the class, and at times had joined up to 10 minutes before the others and stayed online til the very end. So when asked "Does it help if the teacher is friendly?" she replied "Teacher's smile" and this seemed to allude to this experience. In the case of another student (S_5), who had a bad experience, she avoided referring to the author as follows:

S5: I hate doing [that class]. Yeah. Some students can speak fluently... there are three international students. So sometimes I can't understand what they say. I feel I feel disappointed. To me. My English level skill. But I think I have to study. It is a motivator.

I: Yeah. ...But it was an interesting class, but the difference in level was very different.

Where a question pertained specifically to the author's classroom management during the previous semester this exchange occurred:

I: Do you think there's a benefit of having a little bit bossy teacher?

S_9 I like I like that.

I: Yeah. You got to do this, do this. (Or) Would you like to do this or what do you want to do?

S_9 I think, what, what do you want to? The teacher says, Why do you want to?

I: I ask a student, too many times?

S9: Yeah, is not good. Half and half is good.

The question was framed as a general question but actually the experience of the class had been that this teacher often negotiated aspects of tasks, and was looking for feedback on whether the student thought they negotiated too much.

Positioning in terms of level (“second order positioning”)

They were acutely aware of their level of English skills relative to their classmates. One of the interview questions asked specifically about students' preferences in terms of their partner's level and number of partners. This can be seen as inviting reflection on the students' “second order positioning” in other words, their self-positioning in their inner narrative about their class. The answers were extremely varied:

I: Do you want to have a partner who is the same level?

S_6: Like mix group in 3. Mediate. Medium and top.

I: Why?

S_6: If I am medium people, I could hear higher person's idea and I could tell lower people and the people tried to communicate on their ability so actually I could catch that. I experienced it, yeah...

For others, being with friends or being with people who were willing to talk was more important than level.

S_9: I don't care if they mistake! If someone makes a mistake, I don't blame. I help.

The following exchange happened in an interview with a pair of students who were lacking in confidence and had lower grammar test scores than their classmates. F2 was extremely shy.

T: How about if the person is lower level?

S2: I think I am lower level.

T: I don't think so . I think that's confidence. Imagine you got your sister's daughter and they are starting to learn English. Can you teach them?

S2: Yes, if I have...I can speak the lower level.

T (to the other student): Can you help them?

S3: I can teach.

Even though she responded less frequently than her colleague, she answered without hesitation. Thus at least for some students, the interview became an opportunity for re-imagining the roles open to them.

Contextual cues

The majority of the interviewer's utterances in the interviews were intended as contextual cues, that is to say, building on students' utterances in order to clarify understanding and elicit further information. This process worked smoothly with the students whose level of fluency was high but required a lot of input in the case of lower level interviewees. Indeed it might have been preferable to use L1 but in the context of our college, there might be loss of face for students in using L1 when talking with a teacher. The transcripts of S 2 and 3 and S 8 contain several examples of lengthy descriptions by the researcher punctuated with single word answers from the students.

Self-positioning by students in their own accounts

Students tended to position themselves as different from others, especially if there was some kind of problem in the class. One person designated some classmates as “don’t speak conversation people”:

S_9 I think I really focus on atmosphere. It’s difficult to explain but I think for me zoom is more difficult if people are lower or don’t-speak-conversation people, it’s difficult than class.

This student was aware that she was different from most others:

S_9 Yeah. I volunteer. I want everyone to know me. So I like the personal question in front of people, I think said they don't want to, they don't want to answer the private probing question in front of it.

Misunderstandings

The question “Did you have any good experiences in online classes?” was answered in the following way by several students “It was good because I did not have to waste time travelling to the campus.” The question was intended to elicit a narrative about the utility of online classes but students had nothing to say.

These students did not hesitate to reject the storylines which were suggested by the author. For example, when talking about the loneliness of the lockdown experience, the author cherished an idea that the online class was a means of alleviating loneliness and boredom but this idea was rejected by students.

T: When we were faraway cos of lockdown was it useful to chat just about ‘how are you?’

S2: No. (*Laughs*).

T: What did you speak about?

S2: (*In Japanese*) *Shukudai nan da ke?* (What was the home work?)

S3: (*Laughs*).

In the case of higher level students, if they were doubtful about the author’s suggestion they would often just say “Mmm” and laugh.

Discussion

This research study shows how positioning theory can help us to understand the dynamics of 1:1 interactions outside class. Generally, in our sample, high levels of language skills are associated with more narrative agency in the interview. However, preparation by students before the interview also resulted in more narrative agency. The analysis using positioning theory supports introspection by the practitioner as they attempt to improve their skills as an effective researcher. The system of coding is still fluid and context-based. It is hoped that future studies could work on a larger data set to develop a way of exploiting positioning analysis in a more grounded way. It is hoped that future studies will be able to use positioning analysis to support clearer understandings of how learner autonomy develops in 1:1 interactions such as those between teacher-researchers and students as well as advisors and students. The work in Kayi-Aydar (2019) paves the way for helping teachers to understand themselves by using positioning analysis of observation data. Furthermore, student data from 1:1 situations yields insights into strategies which could be used to enrich interactions in the classroom.

Since students and teachers often bring very different expectations to the learning situation, it is helpful to create frameworks for explicit negotiation of these expectations right from the start of a course or class. Problems often occur in contexts where autonomous learning behavior is demanded before students have developed confidence in making choices for themselves (Benson, 2011, Al Busaidi & Borg, 2012, Khairallah, Fleonova & Nicolas, 2020). If the cline of autonomy development is too steep, then the teacher may need to accept the students' storyline of "obedient students and knowledgeable teacher" and work on providing opportunities for peers to scaffold each other rather than tasks which burden students with decisions about their role. In terms of learner autonomy, the expectation that students will exercise autonomy needs to be introduced gradually. In the interview data, we find examples of students changing their answer to fit what they think of as the teacher's desired answer, and the same students remarking that they are "scared" when the teacher closes the door. This shows the extent of students' vulnerability, even in a private situation with a teacher they have chosen to visit. Another interviewee, who was one of the most autonomous learners in her reaction to online learning, reported that she was unable to speak when faced with a

group of over 20 fellow students online. All of the respondents said that being nominated to answer by the teacher reduced the stress rather than being expected to volunteer. It seems that for students in a group, speaking out is interpreted as a claim to be knowledgeable or worthy of attention. The possible social consequences which weigh deeply with students. As one respondent said

I was worried if they think “Why he mention suddenly,” so I was really worried about some complaint from other students. I used to hesitate to say something. (S 7).

All students agreed that an interlocutor who did not talk would make them fall silent, in the context of online communication. In the experience of the current author, it is possible to mitigate this to a certain extent by providing formulaic responses which can be used by students who do not understand well or have nothing to say. Generally, in the first few classes, the teacher can offer some classroom English which can be used mechanically to talk about the content and procedure of the lesson, such as “It’s your turn” or “You are right.” The teacher can also contrive a situation in which to demonstrate the importance of articulating “I don’t know” as a way to allow the negotiation of meaning to proceed. Giving students short scripts for pair work and small group work can stimulate them to use English in a way that does not require any investment of personality. In this way, students are gradually equipped with language which shows them how to position themselves or each other. Humour which subverts the expected power dynamic can be encouraged. For example, deliberate long pauses or deliberate wrong answers, (from students) can contribute to the social atmosphere of the classroom. On the other hand, mockery of students who are inept speakers needs to be strictly clamped down on. In this way, the teacher sets the parameters of a classroom which is a safe place to experiment with language and communication. It does not need to be expected that the language will be completely meaningful and that form and meaning will be aligned all the time. But at some point students need a chance to “de-brief” or reflect, and the teacher needs a chance to gain feedback which takes account of the perspectives of each member of the class.

One of the important findings of the interviews is the diversity between students, even those of similar level. According to the findings of these interviews, both at the

surface level and the structural level, the teacher-researcher's assumptions about what students are feeling and thinking were often wrong. Students were willing to give their point of view, if it was asked for. To allow students to take a more agentive role, teachers or teacher researchers must commit to getting frequent feedback and implementing changes based on the feedback or at least showing the students that their ideas were considered.

In this connection it is worth noting the contribution which can be made by researchers whose background is in advising for language learning. Oga-Baldwin (2022) connects self-determination with the quality of connection between students and learning advisors (Oga-Baldwin, 2022, p. 159). Insights from language advising are extremely valuable for researchers or teachers who want to get closer to what students really think and how they develop over time.

Conclusion

This article has described how positioning theory was used to analyze the interaction in research interviews, for the benefit of raising awareness about the balance of power and equality in the interview exchange. When teachers become researchers, they may need to work hard to establish an equal relationship with their informants, especially if the informants are also their students. It is inferred that the veracity of interview responses is also impacted by this balance. Positioning theory offers a practical tool for teachers who want to analyze power dynamics in their own classroom, in journal data or, as here, in research interviews. This is useful for understanding more about how to build student autonomy. In terms of the methodology for doing positioning analysis, coding is often done using ad hoc narrative analysis, which entails a lot of subjectivity in how the researcher makes connections between the small personal narrative elements to the larger societal narrative. It was suggested in this article that researchers should work to find a parsimonious way of coding, as shown by Hazari, Lock, Cass and Beattie (2015). Hazari et al.'s codes – structural, contextual, social and physical cues – were relatively easy to apply to the interview data to support the analysis of the interviews. It is hoped that future research could involve the application of these of similar codes for the benefit of helping teachers, researchers and trainee teachers to understand

and work towards creating discourse structures which allow students to take the initiative in responding.

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