INVITED RESEARCH ISSUES

Member-Checking through Diagrammatic Elicitation: Constructing Meaning with Participants

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Member checking is one of the key instruments ensuring the quality of qualitative research which is commonly associated with participants' approval of data accuracy. Considering multiple drawbacks of the traditional member-checking methods, this article presents an alternative technique—diagrammatic elicitation. I illustrate how this approach was implemented in a study of six Armenian EFL teachers' self-development and motivation. The data were collected in three phases over a period of 6 months using semi-structured interviews, journal writing, and unstructured classroom observations followed by post-observation interviews. I argue that diagrammatic elicitation makes member checking more participatory empowering participants and engaging them in the research process resulting in constructing the meaning with the researcher. Furthermore, it stimulates deeper reflections uncovering hidden aspects of participants' experiences leading to a more in-depth understanding of the researched phenomenon which contribute to the quality of research.

doi: 10.1002/tesq.3210

Member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, has frequently been identified as one of the key tools enhancing the rigor of qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000;

Doyle, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995). Although it is usually considered as a "should do" activity (Carlson, 2010, p. 1102) implying that member checking is optional, it is still one of the most extensively employed tools verifying the truthfulness of interview transcripts and/ or researchers' interpretations and, therefore, associated with the trust-worthiness and credibility of qualitative research (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Byrne, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important to note that truthfulness does not imply finding universal truth but rather refers to understanding participants' perspective regarding the researched phenomenon and confirming that the meaning was not "missed" (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 2002, p. 615).

This article touches upon traditional member-checking methods and offers an alternative technique, diagrammatic elicitation, which broadens the concept of member checking and transforms it into a reflective procedure (Umoquit, Tso, Varga-Atkins, O'Brien, & Wheeldon, 2013). I illustrate how this technique was implemented in a study of English language teacher self-development and motivation and argue that it allows researchers to go beyond validating the accuracy of interview data and enables them to cooperate with participants and construct meaning jointly.

MEMBER-CHECKING APPROACHES

Although some researchers point out the benefits of using member checking as a continuous process throughout the data analysis (Doyle, 2007; Harvey, 2015), it is often a one-time event performed by the end of the data collection aiming to confirm the accuracy of data or interpretations (Carlson, 2010). Frequently, it is regarded as a simple technical step and involves returning interview transcripts (or their modified version) to participants and asking them to verify the truthfulness of the content (Carlson, 2010; Creswell, 2012; Madill & Sullivan, 2017; Merriam, 2009). The assumption is that participants will check and then approve or remove their own words. Although this method seems quite straightforward, participants might feel uncomfortable reading a written representation of their spoken interaction (Forbat & Henderson, 2005; Hallett, 2013) or might change their mind and ask to delete sections which researchers perceive as meaningful and significant (Bradshaw, 2001). Another drawback of this approach is linked to participant engagement. Due to the data volume, lack of time or a desire to please researchers, they might confirm the accuracy of their transcripts without even reading them (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

An alternative method of participant validation is member-checking interviews which involve arranging an interview with participants in which they are asked to verify, confirm, or modify transcripts (Birt et al., 2016; Madill & Sullivan, 2017). Similar to the abovementioned method, member-checking interviews aim to ensure the accuracy of participants' accounts impacting on the validity of interview data. Nevertheless, this approach does not necessarily increase the trustworthiness of the overall study, especially its analysis and interpretations (Birt et al., 2016). To tackle this issue, Creswell (2014) suggests that validation of researchers' interpretations (e.g., themes and subthemes) is perhaps a more effective way to perform member checking. This approach is commonly employed to confirm that researchers are aware of their bias and participants' viewpoints are presented accurately (Buchbinder, 2010; Harvey, 2015).

Whether validating transcripts, analyses or interpretations, the traditional member-checking methods primarily focus on accuracy (Glesne, 2006; Richards, 2003; Simpson & Quigley, 2016) implying that, if participants verify the truthfulness of their data and/or researchers' interpretations, the research can be deemed valid. Nevertheless, associating member checking with data accuracy contradicts the fundamental principles of the qualitative approach—subjectivity and its relational nature (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kubanyiova, 2013). Both researchers and participants make judgments and interpretations based on their own experiences; researchers cannot simply describe their participants' experiences (Denzin, 2017). It is, therefore, important to acknowledge the subjectivity of not only qualitative research but also member checking and recognize that findings represent researchers', not participants', interpretations and participants should not be expected to "prove" or "disprove" them (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 285).

Some might argue that if confirming the data accuracy is not the primary aim of member-checking, then what is its purpose? One possibility is to use member checking as a reflective tool. Researchers can share their research findings with participants and give them an opportunity to reflect, collaborate, give feedback, critique, and ask questions. Tracy (2010) labels this approach as member reflections. It neither assumes a "single true reality" nor aims to confirm that "the researcher got it right" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). Instead, it involves discussing research findings with participants; they reflect on their past experiences, participation in the study and ideas expressed in their initial interviews (Hanks, 2019; Simpson & Quigley, 2016). Member reflections, therefore, broaden the concept of member checking making it more participatory which offers opportunities for richer data and reflexive collaboration balancing the power relationships between

researchers and participants as well as making research a "negotiated process where both the researcher and participants are involved in meaning making" (Doyle, 2007, p. 889).

Having introduced what member reflections entail, it is important to mention that similar to the abovementioned methods, they typically involve sharing a textual representation of research findings with participants. Another alternative is presenting findings in the form of a diagram which is known as graphic or diagrammatic elicitation (Umoquit et al., 2013) which is introduced in the next section.

DIAGRAMMATIC ELICITATION

Before considering what diagrammatic elicitation involves and its use as a member-checking tool, I will discuss what diagrams embody. Diagrams are a type of graphic representations which contain textual and visual elements as well as denote structure and relationships (Buckley & Waring, 2013). They can effectively provide succinct visual summaries and allow researchers to visually demonstrate the relationships between different components, enabling "the visual presentation of the otherwise invisible" and eliciting ideas which have been tacit (Richards, 2002, p. 91).

Diagrams can be used at different stages of research and act as an instrument to communicate complex ideas and concepts, demonstrate the relationships between them, function as an alternative tool of communication with interviewees as well as provoke a discussion during interviews becoming a source of data themselves (Buckley & Waring, 2013). Although diagrams are considered "effective instruments of thought" (Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006, p. 351), they are commonly utilized as an analytic tool during data analyses (Dey, 1993; Mahoney & Vanderpoel, 2015). Yet, diagrams allow researchers to present their interpretations and ideas in a more comprehensible and coherent way which may engage participants who could offer insights into researchers' understanding of their experiences and viewpoints (Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006). Considering these benefits, diagrams have been employed as a data collection tool to discuss sensitive topics, obtain knowledge from experts, initiate discussion around certain frameworks and theories. Such a technique is commonly referred to as graphic or diagrammatic elicitation (Umoquit et al., 2013).

Diagrammatic elicitation involves encouraging interviewees to comment on diagrams which usually provokes active participant engagement and generates more in-depth data (Umoquit et al., 2013), allowing participants to not only check interpretations but also

co-construct them. I argue that this approach can be used as a member reflection tool which makes research more participatory leading to mutual learning and more collaboration between the researcher and participants and, as a result, contributing the quality of research (Thomas, 2017).

Diagrammatic elicitation can be exploited in multiple ways and, depending on how it is used, can provoke diverse responses. Frequently, interviewees are asked to produce a diagram related to the researched phenomenon and elaborate on it. In this case, both the diagram and its explanation are considered a valuable source of data (Bravington & King, 2019; Haidet et al., 2008). Alternatively, researchers can create diagrams themselves and ask participants to comment on their conceptualization of the researched area (Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006). It is true that some people might not have strong diagrammatic literacy and might feel uncomfortable interpreting visual representations (Crilly, Clarkson, & Blackwell, 2006). The nature of this approach, however, allows researchers to address such concerns in the process of elicitation. For example, they can elaborate on how diagrams were designed and what they represent. When doing this it is important to bear in mind that visual modes are context- and culture-specific and might prompt different interpretations depending on participants' prior experiences (Bowen & Evans, 2019).

Although Umoquit et al. (2013) state that diagrams have been used widely to generate data, they consider diagrammatic elicitation only as a data collection tool and do not explore the possibility of using it for member checking. I could locate only Crilly, Clarkson, and Blackwell (2006) in which this technique was utilized for member-checking purposes. They explored industrial designers' perspectives of the relationships between factors influencing product appearance. The researchers designed a diagram comprising a series of images depicting their understanding of the field and asked the participants to comment on them. Crilly, Clarkson, and Blackwell (2006) argue that diagrammatic elicitation helped them identify misunderstandings and misinterpretations, gain insights into their conceptualization of the domain, refine their understanding of the concepts, and produce a more accurate diagram for later stages of the study.

Having discussed what diagrammatic elicitation represents, below I illustrate how it was used as a member-checking tool in a qualitative study on teacher self-evolution and motivation. I briefly introduce the study and then elaborate on the adopted diagrammatic elicitation procedure.

DIAGRAMMATIC ELICITATION IN ACTION

The Study

The study qualitatively explored English language teachers' motivation by examining the participants' possible teacher selves and considering factors influencing their teacher self-development (Sahakyan, 2018). It was conducted at three universities in Armenia, a country which experienced drastic political, economic, and societal transformations after the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991. The universities differed in their status in the Armenian higher education landscape, one of them being a top tier university with state-of-the-art facilities. The second was slightly behind in ranking and the third was considered mediocre with minimally equipped classrooms (e.g., only one classroom had a projector in the Department of Languages). Through the purposive sampling method (Patton, 1990), I recruited six English language teachers of different ages with diverse teaching experiences and socio-cultural backgrounds which enabled me to explore teachers' behaviors, experiences and beliefs from diverse angles and capture a wide array of perspectives on teacher motivation and development. To protect the participants' identity, their names were replaced with pseudonyms.

Data Collection

The data were collected in three phases over a period of 6 months using semi-structured interviews, journal writing, and unstructured classroom observations followed by post-observation interviews. In each phase, I spent approximately a month on the research site conducting in total 20 in-depth interviews, 28 classroom observations followed by post-observation interviews (Sahakyan, Lamb & Chambers, 2018). Throughout the study, the participants were also asked to reflect on what motivated and demotivated them at the end of every week in the journal (62 journal entries in total).

To demonstrate how the diagrammatic elicitation procedure was implemented in the study, I will use illustrative extracts from one of the participants', Nelly's (pseudonym), diagrammatic elicitation interview. At the time of the data collection, she was teaching various English courses at two universities and had 10 years of teaching experience.

Phase I and II: Generating initial data. In the first phase of the data collection, I conducted interviews with the participants to obtain information about their backgrounds, past experiences, beliefs,

concerns as well as what generally motivated and demotivated them. I likewise asked the participants to start reflecting on their experiences in their reflective journals at the end of every week they taught over the period of the study. Following the first phase, the interviews were transcribed and coded using a thematic analysis approach to establish themes and relations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To foster trustworthiness and attain rigor in the data analysis, both manual and electronic analytical tools (NVivo v10) were used (Davis & Meyer, 2009). An interview guide for the second phase was produced based on the data analysis. I sought to gain more insights into the teachers' beliefs and experiences to better understand their self-development and motivation. In addition to interviews, I observed the participants' lessons which were followed by the post-observation interviews.

Phase III: Member checking through diagrammatic elicitation. Acknowledging that diagrams allow the researcher to visually indicate the relationships between various elements and can trigger an in-depth discussion (Buckley & Waring, 2013), in the last phase of the data collection I opted for a diagrammatic elicitation technique for member checking. I analyzed all the data collected in the first two phases of the study and drew diagrams for each participant representing key themes and radially arranged sub-themes to capture their teacher self-development (see sample diagrams in Figures 1 and 2).
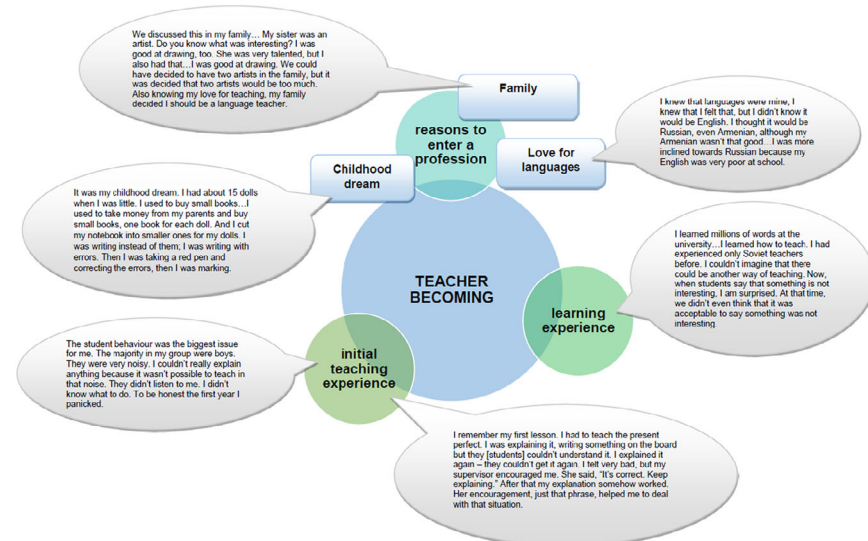

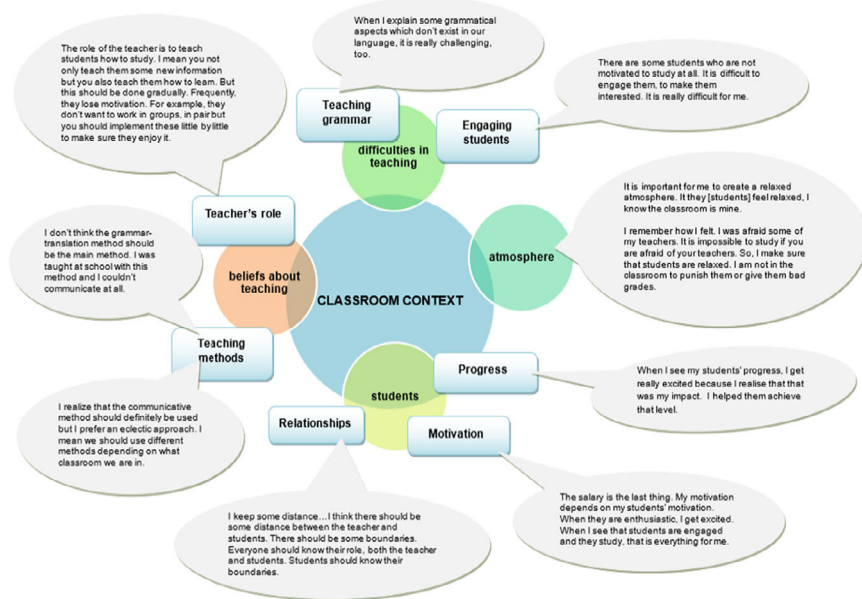**FIGURE 1. Sample diagram 1. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]**

FIGURE 2. Sample diagram 2. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Each sub-theme was supported with concrete illustrative examples from the interview data which could trigger more in-depth reflections. To communicate the relationships between different entities of the diagrams, I used diverse sizes and shapes; circles represented themes and sub-themes, rectangles—codes whereas speech bubbles contained interview extracts. For example, in Figure 2 "the classroom context" represents the theme whereas "difficulties in teaching," "atmosphere," "students," and "beliefs about teaching" represent sub-themes. "Progress," "motivation," and "relationships" are codes related to the sub-theme "students." The way the diagram is designed visually demonstrates the relationships between its components. I wanted the teachers to reflect not only on the themes representing my grasp of their teacher self-formation but also on my perception of the relationships between their diverse experiences and the impact these had on their development and motivation; I was also interested in how they would interpret and decode the diagrams.

It is important to note that building rapport and trust with participants and addressing power imbalance were of key importance at this stage. Being from the same culture, I situated myself as an insider which helped me reduce my power and establish rapport more rapidly (Kanuha, 2000). For example, being aware of communication norms

in that environment, I used diverse conversational styles with different participants. With younger teachers, I employed a more informal language which was welcomed while with the older participant I used only a formal style which was the norm. Another aspect which helped me manage the power imbalance and create an atmosphere of trust and openness was my experience as an English teacher. The participants perceived me as "a fellow teacher" (Richards, 2003, p. 125) who was familiar with the environment and could understand challenges they faced. To acknowledge the pitfalls of being an insider and maintain authenticity, objectivity, and reflexivity of the study (Kanuha, 2000), I tried to separate my own experiences and views from those of the participants minimizing the negative consequences of insider research.

In the final phase of the data collection, I presented the diagrams to the participants, explained how they were generated and then encouraged them to read and comment on the themes, sub-themes, and their interview extracts as well as to signpost any misinterpretations. As indicated, the aim of this procedure was not to merely verify information but to engage the participants in co-construction of meaning. I intended to gather their feedback on my interpretation of the data and to trigger more in-depth reflections on their experiences. I hoped the diagrams would stimulate comments on both what was presented and what was overlooked (Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006). For each participant, I also developed a set of questions some of which emerged from the previously collected data, while others were the questions related to the diagram and my interpretation of their experiences.

Prior to the interview, I informed the participants that the interview would be based on the diagrams representing my interpretation of their data. Then, I met with them individually, explained what the diagrams represented and how I came up with particular themes. Subsequently, I invited the participants to decode their diagrams and share their thoughts on my interpretation of their data. All the participants were intrigued and their initial reaction to the diagrams was—"Is this me?" To begin with, they were just reading the themes and quotes and confirming my understanding of their statements. Subsequently, they became more engaged and started enquiring why I selected a particular extract or what I meant by a particular theme. Gradually, both the participants and I became immersed in the process of making sense of their experiences; we were reading the diagrams jointly, asking and answering questions, digging deeper, and uncovering multiple aspects of their teacher development. The following extract demonstrates how the diagram triggered more in-depth reflections on the "initial teaching experience" sub-theme (see figure 1):

Nelly [reads the diagram]:   *"The student behaviour was the biggest issue for me…".*

Researcher: *So, at that time you were more worried about [student] behavior rather than teaching, right?*

Nelly: *Yes, I was really worried about the discipline…that was a really big issue for me.*

Researcher: *Do you remember your first time entering the classroom, when you had no idea about who your students were? What were you worried about?*

Nelly: *I was very nervous, I didn't know them. When you are young there is no big difference between you and your students […] So, they don't take you seriously because there is a perception that the teacher should be older and experienced […] In my first year I was given year 3 and 4 students. I faced a lot of challenges because of that […] I had to work day and night to prepare for the lessons. I borrowed books and cassettes from the library trying to make lessons interesting […] I don't feel embarrassed for those lessons…but there have been cases when I thought, "It was so embarrassing." I've such memories, too. I remember I even taught something wrong to my students. I still remember that…Now, when I look back, I feel embarrassed for those lessons…I remember those lessons and feel really bad because I didn't give much to my students…*

Researcher: I see.

Nelly: *And when the activities were not interesting, they would make a racket. That noise is engraved in my mind.*

Interviewer: *Has that experience had any impact on your further teaching?*

Nelly: *Definitely. Every failure…I can say that I did not despair, I worked even more to get rid of my flaws, to make sure that next semester, next year I wouldn't have similar experiences. I've always learned something from those deficient lessons. I have discovered a lot but there are still many things which need to be discovered… Definitely, now I listen to my students, their ideas, their opinions, what they*

prefer doing. Considering all those weaknesses, now I know what my lesson should and shouldn't involve. Of course, in 5 years I will look back ... and might understand things I am trying to understand now.

In this extract, Nelly starts reading a quote from the diagram related to her initial teaching experience. Once she finishes reading, I make a comment aiming to confirm that controlling students' behavior was challenging for her. I then use Nelly's answer to probe further and invite her to elaborate on the worries and fears she had at the beginning of her career. Nelly starts expanding on her challenges as a novice teacher and suddenly she opens up exposing her more vulnerable experiences which she labels as "failures." Revealing such sensitive experiences to others implies one's desire to seek meaning (Rice & Pasupathi, 2010) which leads to gaining insights into their past and current experiences (Birch & Miller, 2000). This enabled both Nelly and myself to move beyond the surface level and access the hidden layers of her experiences. Trying to understand how such experiences shaped her teacher self, I ask her to share how they influenced her further teaching. This extract sheds light not only on a specific issue she faced with a specific group of students but also revealed how strongly Nelly was attached to her students and how crucial it was for her to build good relationships with them. Although the importance of students transpired in the previous phases of the data collection, only during the diagrammatic elicitation stage, they emerged as the most salient factor affecting her teacher self-construction.

Furthermore, when elaborating on students' progress (figure 2), it became apparent that students had such significance not only because of altruistic reasons:

Nelly: *It's very interesting when students who already graduated, you don't teach them ... recently I met such a student ... she stopped me and said, "You had a big impact on me. You don't know that your influence ... " I got really excited. It means when I taught her, she gained something important from me. I don't know whether she will become a teacher or something else but I got really happy ...*

Since people generally need validation of their self by others and look for positive feedback in order to retain positive self-perceptions (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), Nelly's desire to be valued and appreciated by students was affecting her perception of self-worth and self-efficacy. These concepts are considered crucial because they are connected to self-esteem, one of the most fundamental representations of one's self-evaluation and well-being (Judge & Bono, 2001). This finding emerged only during the diagrammatic elicitation interview.

To sum up, diagrammatic elicitation triggered more reflexive collaboration between Nelly and myself, enabling her to actively engage in the meaning making process and provoking more reflections on the key aspects of her experiences. It revealed the facets of Nelly's teacher self which had not been obvious before offering more insights into her teacher self-development and factors influencing it. Importantly, this process gave Nelly an opportunity to actively engage in meaning construction and focus on aspects that were crucial for her and allowed me to notice what was important and meaningful to the participant.

CONCLUSION

This article considers the limitations of traditional member-checking methods and argues that a diagrammatic elicitation technique can enrich member checking allowing researchers to transcend its traditional foci—clarifying misunderstandings and seeking accuracy of researchers' interpretations. It gives an opportunity to use member checking as a reflective tool enabling participant to elaborate on their experiences, collaborate with researchers and give feedback on their interpretations.

The reported study suggests that the key contribution of this technique is enabling participants to engage in research more actively and construct the meaning with the researcher making research a negotiated process. In this study, diagrammatic elicitation enabled the teachers to consider the researcher's interpretations and reflect on their ideas expressed in the previous stages of data collection as well as experiences which were missing from the data. This allowed me to delve deeper and uncover diverse facets of the participants' teacher selves.

One notable drawback of the diagrammatic elicitation may be the time required to design diagrams and conduct elicitation interviews. However, considering that the aim of qualitative research is to obtain in-depth insights into complex phenomena and issues rooted in particular socio-cultural contexts (Hammersley, Gomm, & Foster, 2000), the potential benefits outweigh this limitation. Another drawback is linked to participants' diagrammatic literacy. As mentioned, some people might struggle to understand diagrams or might misinterpret them due to cultural and/or contextual differences (Bowen & Evans, 2019). This issue can be addressed during the elicitation process making sure participants feel comfortable asking questions to clarify their interpretations. Finally, if research explores sensitive issues (e.g., racism, gender, political views), there is a danger of causing emotional distress.

To avoid this, it is essential to conduct research with sensitivity and follow ethical guidelines (Corbin & Morse, 2003).

To conclude, diagrammatic elicitation has a great potential as a member-checking tool and can contribute to the quality of qualitative research. To explore its benefits and applications more thoroughly, further studies are required.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

I received a School of Education Scholarship (University of Leeds) for my doctoral study which informs this article.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest.

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