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Navigating participant apprehension: A case of investigating the teaching of Literature in English (LiE) in Ghana

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Abstract

In this article, I present how I navigated unexpected apprehension that I faced while communicating with teacher participants during my PhD data collection (via interviews, observations and document study). I mediated the apprehension by strategies such as disclosing my teacher identity, expressing an interest in their practice and assuring them of support. The outcome of the strategies ranged from understanding to acceptance of my research, as well as collaborating with me to collect the data. This article calls for more research into the apprehension of research participants, as there appears to be little research in this field.

Keywords

Apprehension; participant apprehension, apprehension strategies, Literature in English (LiE)

Introduction

Collecting data in research can be challenging, as individuals may find it difficult to divulge sensitive information about their profession. This article addresses how I navigated participants' apprehension and suspicion during data collection from literature teachers in senior high schools in Ghana, that sought to investigate their lived experiences in teaching literature in the Mampong Municipal. Apprehension is defined in this study as a state of anxiety, uneasiness and uncertainty that may prevent a participant from sharing information. Strategies are also defined as ways used by the researcher to mitigate the participants' apprehension. It is important to note that the research identified participants' apprehension during data collection, which had received little attention. This paper, therefore, proposes ways of dealing with participants' apprehension to facilitate data collection during research.



Literature review

Apprehension is conceptualised as a situation-specific anxiety about the future, especially dealing with something unpleasant or difficult (Li, 2021). Several attempts have been made (e.g., Conley & Glasman, 2008; Kyriacou, 2010; Merc, 2011) to explore the sources and effect of teachers' apprehension. In a study on English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' apprehension in China, Li (2021) linked teachers' apprehension with fear and anxiety about communication, which stemmed from a sense of being humiliated and threatened, often causing them to refrain from participating in research. While early research focused on communication apprehension (CA) in terms of public speaking (Lomas, 1937), subsequent research focused on the use of the CA construct in understanding communication experiences in various contexts (Chen, 1994; Daly, 2006; Kearney & McCroskey, 1980; McCroskey & Beatty, 1984; Toale & McCroskey, 2001) and emphasise apprehension becoming a pertinent issue in an interactive field of research.

A scale validating sources of EFL teachers' apprehension (STAS), including 121 items as antecedents to teachers' apprehension and anxiety, designed by Ghanizadeh et al. (2020) revealed that the amount of apprehension experienced by a teacher is strongly correlated with teachers' identity and self-esteem. Some of the items of the abovementioned scale are as follows:

The feeling of being observed, the feeling of being evaluated, how will I be evaluated, will I be required to turn in my lesson plans, not being up to date in teaching subjects; what critic teacher will expect of me; not being up to expectations from the new teaching plan; do I really know my subject matter, what will my supervising teacher be like, negative interactions between teacher and supervisor, and where do I stand. (pp. 497–499)

These items inform that apprehension may not only restrain participants from performing successfully, but equally have the potential of preventing interaction between a researcher and participants, especially when participants are doubtful of the researcher and the outcome of the research. In this study, given teachers' context of unexpected appraisal, an unexpected visit by a researcher may cause apprehension, leading to non-cooperation and non-participation. Particularly in the Ghanaian senior high school context, where some literature teachers may not keep up-to-date lesson notes and students' assessment records are likely to intensify their apprehension, and for that matter may avoid participation in research when their sense of self-worth is threatened (Sinclair et al., 1974). Thus, it is expected that the researcher will be able to reassure participants of the purpose of the research to encourage communication and participation. I anticipated that teachers would be apprehensive upon learning that I was investigating their literature instruction for the first time.

The Ghanaian socio-cultural context

Ghanaian senior high school (SHS) teachers, like any other professionals, may show apprehension in their practice, though apprehensive behaviour varies depending on context (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). Thus, literature teachers in Ghana can become apprehensive when a researcher visits their schools to recruit them for a study. In my personal experience, my visit to participants' schools during data collection created an atmosphere of apprehension. Participants became apprehensive when I mentioned that I would observe them teach and that would also inspect their lesson notes. At that moment teachers consistently questioned my identity and the intent of my study, which they claimed to know to dispel their suspicion and apprehension, and more importantly avoid being unknowingly evaluated. In their apprehensive state, some teachers were hesitant to participate in my study.

To avoid the adverse effect from evaluation, many teachers keep their distance until they are certain of a visitor's identity before accepting their invitation to participate in their research. Also, in the

Ghanaian context, PhD candidates are glorified as superheroes when it comes to knowledge acquisition. Hence, communication apprehension is bound to occur when someone with a lesser in degree accepts an invitation to partake in study involving a PhD researcher, because more respect will be given to the latter by the former for knowing much in the subject they teach. In my case, my status as a PhD student may have posed a problem for teachers with a bachelor's degree who perceived me to be more knowledgeable. Therefore, the teachers might find it difficult to accept an invitation to participate in research involving interviews and class observation. Further, my position as a PhD student from an overseas university could have been an added factor. I would be seen as highly knowledgeable due to my international exposure. This is the nature of context I encountered while collecting data for my research.

Navigating apprehension: Meeting participants

To alleviate teachers' apprehension during my data collection, I adopted a strategy of disclosing my teacher identity, expressing an interest in teachers' practice and assuring them of my study findings to facilitate their practice. In Ghana, a person conducting educational research must obtain permission from the appropriate institutions, such as the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service, as well as show a letter of support from the researcher's university as proof. On my first day of visiting at my participants' schools, I had these documents with me, knowing full well they would serve as a proof of background even though I had officially been introduced to teachers by the head teacher.

When I first met my participants, four teachers expressed interest while the others were sceptical, although I had previously sent a letter to their schools outlining my research and inviting them to participate. In our meetings, I could sense doubts, suspicion and uneasiness, and I realised I had an apprehension challenge to deal with. The next section presents how I overcame teachers' apprehensions while keeping their school setting and context in mind.

Participant A (PA)

When I met PA from a mixed school, PA expressed apprehension in a personal conversation:

Hello, Mr. Baah [researcher], our HoD had previously shared your research and invitation letter with us. I am interested in your research but concerned about your person. Can you tell me why you chose our school for your studies? Is there a worrying trend in our literature subject performance? I've a feeling that you've been assigned to secretly evaluate us? Did you say in your letter that you will see our lesson note and watch us teach?

I fumbled with a yes and no answer. Regaining my composure, I took the opportunity to discuss my career as a teacher who had taught at both the secondary and tertiary level. I talked about my passion for teaching literature which began in 2004, after discovering my talent for writing poetry and stories at teacher training college. I discussed trends in the literature curriculum that I had noticed over the years, such as the repetition of literary texts, over reliance on non-African literary texts made of British and American authors, and the non-involvement of teachers and students in text selection for learning. I emphasised that authors we read in the 1990s were still part of the current curriculum, and the literature syllabus not being revised in years, being an additional motivation for the research. Thus, the purpose of my research is not to evaluate teachers, but to learn more from their experiences in order to support their practice. The teacher agreed and signed the informed consent document for participation.

Participant B (PB)

Participant B in my second school similarly showed apprehension in taking part in the study. Their concern was about my identity and what I intended to do with the data collected. PB queried in a conversation: “How can I trust you with an information I find sensitive and yet needful to share?” I assured PB that the research is guided by informed consent, withdraw, right to or not answer questions, and an obligation to protect the participant’s identity. “Oh, you mention withdraw. So, I can withdraw if I have doubts or worries at some point?” she asked. I clarified by saying yes but not after data had been analysed, reassuring PB of the research flexibility. I then showed PB a poetry collection for senior high schools titled *Poetry Ink* (Ofosu & Adjei, 2012), which I co-edited with a friend some years ago, to demonstrate my support for literature teaching as a former teacher. I also shared my experience as a West African Examination Council (WAEC) examiner and experience of helping in the design of literature curriculum at private universities where I taught. PB was seemingly impressed by my interest and commitment to teaching of literature and agreed to participate in my research. Afterwards, PB freely shared information, by talking about her joys and challenges of teaching literature. She then invited me to join her poetry lesson class after noticing my interest in poetry, and I agreed.

Participant C (PC)

PC, like other participants, was anxious about my research to investigate their experiences in teaching literature. PC made this query after meeting participants in their school to invite them for the study. “Please, I read your research is to investigate teaching of literature. Please tell me what is wrong with our teaching of literature, and more importantly, what makes you the suitable person to evaluate our practice?” I responded that I was very interested in African literature and showed PC some of the literary works that had been published in online journals and magazines. I mentioned founding organisations and a journal, such as the Poetry Foundation Ghana, the Africa Haiku Network, and the Mamba journal, which all continue to support African literature. To demonstrate my dedication to this course, I shared my literary ties with African literary scholars such as Wole Soyinka and Ama Ata Aidoo, both of whom had reviewed my poetry and praised my achievements. Following these revelations, my participant agreed to participate in my research.

Participant D (PD)

PD showed apprehension like the others. He confessed in a conversation: “I’d like to participate, but your PhD status makes me nervous. It makes me feel you know too much to expose my shortcomings, when you interview me and watch me teach in class.” I reoriented PD to consider a PhD student as a seeker of knowledge to support a field of study. For that reason, PD could see me as someone who is interested in learning about their experiences in literature teaching and then creating knowledge as I had done with other participants who had expressed apprehension. As a former literature teacher and current PhD student, I shared my observations in literature in the Ghanaian context and other contexts with PD, assuring him that having the opportunity to learn from his experiences, I would be able to make suggestions and recommendations to improve literature teaching in Ghana and elsewhere. I added that I intended to assist literature teachers in creating a journal in which they could share their practical experiences in the classroom, and that the research could serve as a starting point. Considering my ideas as worthy, PD agreed to participate in my research.

In closing

In my discussion on researcher/participant apprehension, the participants' stories revealed their anxiety, suspicion and doubt, which are linked to the causes of apprehension (Ghanizadeh et al., 2020; Li, 2021). Thus, to facilitate interaction and collaboration between researcher and participant, a researcher should devise strategies to overcome participant apprehension. In this study, I demonstrated an interest in the participants' field, shared contributions made to the field, shared a connection with authorities in the field, and assured participants of adding knowledge to support the field. These strategies, while not exhaustive, may help other researchers overcome participant apprehension in their research. A review of the literature on participant apprehension in this study revealed little research in this area, so I recommend that scholars and researchers consider this area in their future research.

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