Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Second Language Acquisition Research

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Abstract

Second language researchers are interested in understanding the complex process of adult second language learners. They apply various theoretical frameworks and models to explore and understand the phenomenon of second- or third-language learning. In this paper, we aim to introduce and propose a relatively new qualitative approach to examine the phenomenon of second-language learning. By doing this, we offer a fresh perspective on second-language learning through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). We argue that IPA, as a qualitative research design, has the potential to uncover the complex phenomenon of second language learning among adults. The use of IPA in SLA research can be beneficial in underscoring the subjective experiences of adult learners. This paper aims to help new IPA users comprehend some fundamental principles.

Keywords: *Second language acquisition, interpretative phenomenological analysis, lived experience, phenomenology, hermeneutics, idiography, purposive sampling, semi-structured interview.*

1. Introduction

Learning a second language involves memory, attention, and problem-solving skills, which make it a cognitively complex process (Willig, 2013). This complexity is exacerbated by social and cultural integration within native language speaking communities, which is crucial for language acquisition (Lantolf & Beckett, 2009). Generally, researchers use both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore how cognitive functions, social contexts, emotional states, and linguistic attributes interact to shape the learning experience and determine success in second-language learning. Furthermore, to examine the role of the critical period in the acquisition of pragmatic competence (Manzoor & Malik 2012), and differences in linguistically related gestures, incorporating video stimulus through a mixed-methods approach (Hussain, 2014). These diverse research methodologies highlight SLA's multifaceted nature and the distinct language-learning experiences of individuals (Willig, 2013). One effective qualitative approach to understanding this phenomenon is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which focuses on learners' lived experiences (Smith et al., 2021).

Since the 1960s, SLA researchers have tried to understand the adult second language acquisition process and have proposed various theoretical frameworks, such as the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000), and interlanguage development (Selinker, 1972) . Though these theoretical frameworks provided valuable insights, they often prioritise the cognitive or social mechanisms underlying language acquisition over learners' subjective experiences. Through qualitative methods, the researchers aim to capture learners' personal experiences in the classroom and beyond. By doing this, they assume that adult learners bring conscious knowledge and self-reflection to the language learning process (Krashen, 1981).

It can be useful for qualitative researchers to examine adult learners' conscious experiences through a reflective approach that allows participants to reflect on their lived experiences. Keeping this in mind, we proposed that the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach could be a useful qualitative research approach for exploring how adult learners make sense of their second-language learning journey. IPA was originally developed in psychology to investigate experiences of illness (Smith, 1996). The remainder of this paper will offer a preliminary guide for those interested in using IPA in second-language acquisition research.

Initially rooted in psychology, IPA, as a phenomenological approach, has expanded to various disciplines, including mental health, education, sociology, and customer experiences (Rafi et al., 2024) , and longitudinal interpretative phenomenological analysis (Rehman et al., 2025). Recently, IPA has also been viewed as a valuable framework for research focused on the lived experiences of language users, learners, and educators.(Willis & Harvey, 2025). The methodology's focus on personal meaning-making and its in-depth, interpretative approach make it well-suited for examining the subjective experiences of language learners. For example, it has been used to explore how individuals cope with significant life changes, such as becoming a first-time mother (Smith & Nizza, 2022) or managing chronic illness (Tuffour, 2017), or how International students use creative ways to strategically cope with the challenges during their PhD journey (Elliot et al., 2016).

This paper argues that IPA's emphasis on individual meaning-making and experiential understanding can provide valuable insights into SLA research. By exploring adult learners' lived experiences, IPA allows researchers to delve into the personal and emotional dimensions of language acquisition experience, areas often overlooked by traditional SLA approaches. Additionally, IPA's methodological rigour, which emphasises detailed analysis of individual

cases, purposive sampling, and semi-structured interviews, serves as a valuable tool for exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena (Larkin et al., 2019), and the complex nature of second language learning is no exception. This paper introduces Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and outlines the basic rules for using IPA as a research design for beginners. However, we recommend, for advanced learning, to read "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, method and Research" and for a brief introduction, "Essentials of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis" by (Smith & Nizza, 2022) as well as additional resources such as joining IPA forms www.ipa.bbk.ac.uk and considering online IPA training workshops (www.doctorelenagr.com) and (Qual Academy).

2. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Jonathan Smith and his colleagues developed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach rooted in the hermeneutic tradition. As a blended approach, IPA aims to provide a detailed examination of lived experiences related to a phenomenon, drawing on participants' personal experiences and perceptions of various objects and events. Unlike other approaches, IPA emphasises the active role of the researcher in the interpretative process (Tuffour, 2017) by indulging in "double hermeneutics", in that the researcher is making sense of the participants' sense (Smith et al., 2009).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis explores how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. IPA examines these experiences without any preconceived assumptions or biases (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). It also aims to uncover meanings in the text through an interpretative process (Willig, 2013).

While IPA was initially limited to health, social sciences, and psychology, it has recently expanded to encompass a broader range of human and social sciences. IPA researchers engage closely with individuals with firsthand experience of the phenomenon under study and are strongly committed to in-depth analysis. This approach is grounded in three philosophical notions: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith & Nizza, 2022). A short introduction to these concepts is provided here.

2.1   Phenomenology

Phenomenology seeks to study human experiences as they occur in their natural context and how individuals make sense of these lived experiences(Smith et al., 2021; Van Manen, 2016).

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), as the pioneer of the phenomenological approach, aimed to understand how the experience of a specific phenomenon could be understood to determine its essential qualities. Additionally, phenomenology studies experiences from the perspectives of those who experienced these realities (Tuffour, 2017). The researcher seeks to describe the phenomenon by focusing on what was experienced and how it was experienced. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis aligns with Husserl's conceptualisation of phenomenology by exploring how a phenomenon manifests in experience, how we perceive and interpret it, and the meaning it holds in subjective experience.

2.2   Hermeneutics

IPA's second theoretical underpinning is the hermeneutic approach to interpreting the phenomenon. IPA considers the deep-rooted understanding of the 'lifeworld' of individuals who have lived the experience of a particular phenomenon. Participants' descriptions of the phenomenon and their perspectives on the social world and context are crucial for making sense of it. Along with the researchers' background knowledge of social life and culture, this is referred to as double hermeneutics.

2.3   Idiography

IPA has an idiographic commitment that is achieved through emphasising individual cases in full detail, within a specific context, before making comparisons (Smith & Nizza, 2022). In addition, researchers seek to identify patterns of convergence and divergence in individuals' experiential accounts. High-quality IPA studies give careful attention to identifying patterns of convergence in the descriptions of a phenomenon. This analytical process often seeks to connect general statements to specific examples, grounding them in detailed observations within the data or participants' narratives.

Within the experiential qualitative research paradigm, IPA stands out as a prominent research design for its philosophical assumptions and focus. Fundamentally, IPA seeks to explore the lived experiences of individuals, how they make sense of their life-worlds (Smith, 1996). To access these experiences, the researchers put aside their own assumptions and biases. Furthermore, IPA examines human experiences without imposing preconceived assumptions (Cohen, 1987) and aims to uncover meanings through an interpretative process (Willig, 2013). Another methodological notion that guides IPA is the principle of returning to "the things themselves", the lived experiences of individuals, a concept rooted in Husserl's (1970)

phenomenological philosophy. A comprehensive definition comes from Smith et al. (2021), who explain that IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience. Moreover, it aims to conduct this examination in a way that, as far as possible, allows that experience to be expressed in its own terms rather than according to predefined category systems. This makes IPA phenomenological and connects it to the core ideas unifying phenomenological philosophers. By prioritising participants' own accounts and interpretations, IPA ensures their experiences are authentically represented, staying true to the foundational principles of phenomenological philosophy.

3. Conducting IPA research

This section briefly describes the process involved in conducting IPA research.

3.1 Sampling in IPA

Sampling in IPA is typically purposive and small-scale, allowing in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. It focuses on selecting individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest, ensuring that the sample is homogeneous in relation to the research question. The goal is not to generalise findings to a larger population but to provide a rich, idiographic analysis of how individuals make sense of their experiences.

The sample sizes in IPA are generally small, ranging from 4 to 10 participants, enabling researchers to engage deeply with each participant's narrative. This small-scale approach allows for a thorough, interpretative analysis of similarities and differences across individual accounts (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014).

3.2 Data Collection for IPA Studies

Traditionally, IPA requires textual data generated through semi-structured interviews; however, IPA is commended for idiography, which requires rich data. The next section elaborates on common data collection methods used in IPA studies.

3.3 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are the primary data collection method in IPA research. These interviews allow participants to describe their lived experiences in their own words, providing rich, qualitative data for analysis. The open-ended nature of SSIs enables participants to reflect on their experiences, and interviewers can use prompt questions such as "How would you

explain that?" or "What does it mean to you?" to encourage deeper reflection. Interviews typically last between 60-90 minutes, allowing sufficient time for participants to express their thoughts and feelings. Apart from semi-structured interviews, some other qualitative data collection methods can also be used as supplementary data, such as focus groups, solicited diaries, and visual methods.

Solicited diaries are another valuable data collection tool in IPA research. They provide flexibility and can capture participants' experiences as they occur, offering a closer reflection of lived experiences than retrospective interviews (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Diaries are especially useful for capturing sensitive or personal information that participants may feel uncomfortable sharing in an interview setting (Alaszewski, 2006). For example, in second language acquisition research, participants might keep diaries reflecting on their daily language learning experiences over a set period before the interview (Stone, 2007). Non-textual data, such as images or photos, can also be incorporated into IPA studies. Larkin et al. (2021) encourage IPA researchers to use visual methods to enrich their analysis. Participants may be asked to provide images or photos that symbolise or represent their lived experiences, which can offer additional insights into their meaning-making processes.

3.4 Interview Questions in IPA

In IPA, interview questions are usually broad and open-ended, designed to explore participants' experiences without leading them toward specific responses. A common approach begins with descriptive questions about a particular experience before moving on to more complex, analytical questions (Larkin et al., 2019). For instance, ask participants, "How do they feel about studying a second language?" "What is their experience of learning a second language?" encourage them to reflect on their experiences in a natural, open manner. For full details, see (Smith et al., 2021).

The ordering of questions is important in IPA interviews. Starting with general or descriptive questions helps build rapport, while more complex questions can be introduced later once participants feel comfortable sharing deeper thoughts. Temporal or funnel structures can guide the interview process, beginning with broad topics and gradually narrowing to more specific issues (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

3.5 Interview Guide for IPA

Semi-structured interviews are a standard data collection method in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, as they allow researchers to enter participants' life-worlds. The questions used in semi-structured interviews are open-ended and non-directive (Willig, 2013). They should be focused and specific, encouraging participants to describe their experiences rather than merely agreeing or disagreeing with a statement.

The interview questions should be open and expansive, utilising terms such as "how" and "what" to elicit responses that go beyond simple yes/no answers. Care should be taken to avoid assumptions in the question wording and to prevent participants from being led toward a specific answer. The primary objective is to allow participants to share their personal experiences regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Focused or specific questions should stimulate participants to elaborate on their thoughts rather than validate a particular claim (Willig, 2013). Questions can be categorised into three levels: descriptive, narrative, and analytical (for more details, see Smith & Nizza, 2022).

3.6   Data analysis

The first step in data analysis is transcribing the interviews to obtain a textual version of the data. All interviews should be transcribed verbatim, meaning a word-for-word reproduction of the verbal data, ensuring that the written transcript accurately replicates the recording. Along with capturing spoken words, transcripts can include distinct vocalisations and nonverbal interactions that enrich data analysis, such as response tokens (e.g., involuntary vocalisations like coughing, sneezing, or laughing) and non-response tokens (e.g., gestures or thought checking). Recent research indicates that these vocalisations provide valuable insights into the data. Once interviews are transcribed and ready for analysis, the researchers can use qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo or QDA to organise the analysis. However, many IPA researchers prefer what can be called classical IPA analysis methods, in which researchers work on textual data in print form and manually generate themes, line by line, rather than using the qualitative data analysis tool mentioned above. The analysis in IPA begins with a close reading of the data and the interview transcription, in which the researcher immerses themselves in the transcripts to understand the participants' worlds. (Smith et al., 2021) suggest that this process consists of the following iterative stages:

i.   Initial Reading: The researcher reads the transcript multiple times to become familiar with the content and context.

ii.   Annotation: Notes regarding key phrases, emotions, and insights are made.

iii.   Emergent Themes: The researcher identifies themes from the annotations, capturing both participants' meanings and researchers' interpretations.

iv.   Pattern Recognition: Common themes are grouped, acknowledging differences as well.

v.   Interpretation: The researcher moves beyond mere description to explore participants' understanding of their experiences within a broader social and psychological context.

4. Thematic Analysis for IPA Data Analysis

Some researchers incorporate Thematic Analysis in their IPA research design. Thematic Analysis is a valuable qualitative data analysis tool for large data sets. This flexible method can be used in various studies and data sources. The six-step procedures of Thematic Analysis are employed to conduct a thorough analysis.

i.   Step one: Reading: To become familiar with the data (articles), the articles were read multiple times.

ii.   Step two: Annotating: Any noticeable points were highlighted/ annotated to produce codes.

iii.   Step three: Searching common themes: The produced codes were linked and developed into common themes,

iv.   Step four: Reviewing themes: Once the themes were identified, they were reviewed to ensure they made sense to answer the research question.

v.   Step five: Defining themes: Then, the developed themes were refined according to the idea they represent,

vi.   Step six: Reporting: The researcher reports the findings.

A visual representation of the thematic analysis. Figure 1

See for full details of doing Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

5. Writing Up Findings

Researchers should maintain a reflective approach throughout the analysis process to ensure rigour in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Being transparent about the researcher's positionality, practising reflexivity, and employing thick descriptions can help validate interpretations (Smith *et al,* 2009). Triangulation, such as peer debriefing or the incorporation of multiple data sources, can enhance the credibility of the analysis.

After the analysis, results are presented as Themes, now called experiential statements, personal experiential themes, and group experiential themes; for more details, see "Essentials of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis" (Smith & Nizza, 2021). When writing up IPA research, it is important to provide a balanced account that includes the participant's voice and the researcher's interpretative analysis. Quotations from participants should be used to illustrate key themes, along with detailed discussions explaining how these themes relate to the broader research questions. The final analysis should reflect the nuanced and complex ways participants make sense of their experiences.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is reiterated that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, as a qualitative experiential research design, is a comprehensive approach for examining lived experiences. Learning a new language is an experience in its own right, though contemporary researchers

have investigated various factors influencing the L2 learning process. In this paper, we proposed and described basic concepts and methods for conducting an IPA study to examine the language-learning experience. IPA can provide valuable insights into several critical aspects of language learning, such as how learners cope with language anxiety, which can hinder their performance and willingness to participate in language-related activities. Furthermore, it can illuminate how learners negotiate their identities as they acquire a new language, often requiring them to navigate cultural differences and their personal self-concept. Furthermore, IPA can help researchers understand how learners perceive and respond to moments of success and failure. By examining these experiences in detail, IPA deepens our understanding of the second-language learning paradigm, capturing learners' rich, nuanced personal experiences that traditional quantitative methods may overlook. This holistic understanding is essential for developing more effective language-teaching strategies that accommodate the emotional and psychological dimensions of learning a new language.

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