

Visual Episodic Narrative Interview: a Multiple-Method Longitudinal Approach for Studying the International Growth Process of SMEs

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Abstract

The international growth process of entrepreneurially behaving small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is still a relatively unknown topic for the research community; despite in practice in small and open economies, it has become a more and more general and influential phenomenon. The existing theories of internationalisation, growth and entrepreneurship can provide a rough descriptive framework for the phenomenon, whereas the more graphic explanatory issues behind the phenomenon are still to be discovered in more detail. The aim of this research paper is to describe and test a methodological approach designed to fill this knowledge gap, the lack of identifying explanatory factors behind international growth, in the international business (IB) field. The contribution of this paper is a research approach, the visual episodic narrative interview, where case study, longitudinal research, multiple-methods and narratives are combined. The approach is developed for discovering explanatory issues behind relatively unknown phenomena, such as international growth of SMEs, and the contribution is mainly directed to researchers and the academia.

Keywords: International growth, methods, SMEs, visual material, process

Introduction

Thus far studies on internationalisation and growth processes have been abundant. The context of these studies has been moving from multinational enterprise (MNE) and multinational corporation (MNC) focus and the economics discipline towards small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with entrepreneurial characteristics and the behaviour-oriented research discipline (McMahon, 1999; Fillis, 2007; McGaughey, 2007).

Currently, SMEs are increasingly interested in internationalisation and see growth as a promising avenue for expansion (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994; Coviello & McAuley, 1999; Lu & Beamish, 2001; Li, Li & Dalgic, 2004, 94; McGaughey, 2007, 3). However, research on SME international growth is still in its infancy (e.g. Scott & Bruce, 1987; Leonidou & Katsikeas, 1996; McMahon, 1999; Cantwell, 2000/2001; Forsgren, 2002; Park & Bae, 2002; Kuemmerle, 2005; Johanson & Vahlne, 2006). In the same vein, entrepreneurship research, and particularly the international entrepreneurship (IE) stream, has been increasingly focusing on the developments of SMEs (e.g. Shaw, 1999; McDougall & Oviatt, 2000; Oviatt & McDougall, 2005) and their exporting activities (McDougall & Oviatt, 2000; Boso, 2008). However, internationalisation and growth have mainly been studied separately (Kuemmerle, 2005), and the research has mainly been relatively descriptive, despite a few exceptions (see McGaughey, 2007). Similarly, from the explanatory perspective, Fillis (2007) states that studies concentrating on SME internationalisation are still dominated by purely quantitative approaches. Resulting from this, a model or approach of international growth has not yet been developed. Moreover, the abundance of possible issues and factors affecting and explaining the international growth process have not been grasped extensively or structurally (see Gummesson, 2006). Additionally, the “how” and “why” questions explaining the internationalisation and growth of firms have not been answered in several existing studies, despite their importance has been acknowledged in many. (Coviello & McAuley, 1999.) As regards to research methods, the accumulation of methodological literature dealing with SMEs, and particularly qualitative SME research, has so far been scarce as well (Shaw, 1999). The theoretical frame, tentatively developed for this study, is interdisciplinary as it aims at

covering the phenomenon descriptively and explanatorily, and is achieved through complementarity between the different models and theories (see McGaughey, 2007, 12-13). The stage models of growth and internationalisation are descriptive and the entrepreneurial orientation (see e.g. Lumpkin and Dess, 1996, 152) is used as explanatory. The basic structure of the framework, with all the factors and issues related to them in earlier studies and literature, is depicted in figure 1. The context of this research is Finnish industrial SMEs that have been growing internationally during the time period of 1997-2006.

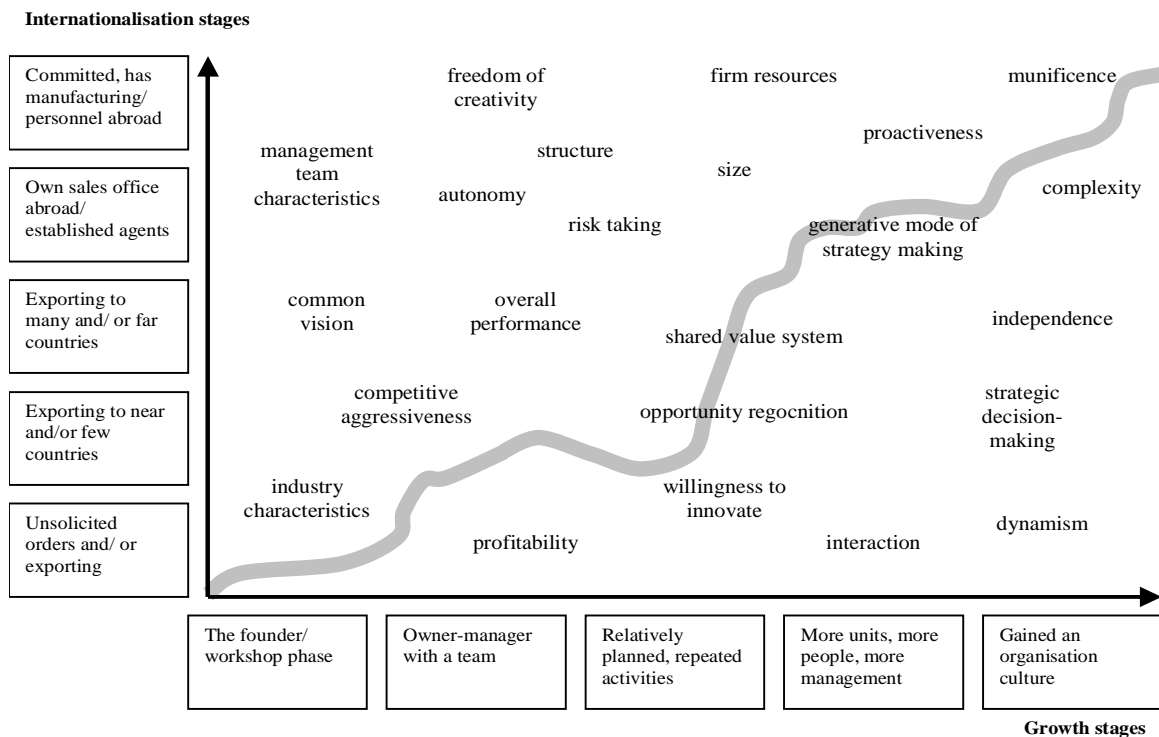


Figure 1 The tentative theoretical frame in illustration with an exemplary international growth curve¹ (adapted from: Hanks, Watson, Jansen & Chandler, 1993; Leonidou & Katsikeas, 1996; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996).

¹ Note that the framework is tentative, and does not imply that the results of the study would comply directly with the above illustration. The different issues and factors in the illustration work more as pieces in a puzzle, of which only the suitable are used in respective SME cases.

From the methodological perspective, several authors have lately been studying and discussing about different methods and research approaches and their theorizing and usability in the IB field (e.g. Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2004) and in entrepreneurship (e.g. Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004; McGaughey, 2007; Neergaard & Ulhøi, 2007). Their emphasis has been on qualitative and mixed and multiple-method approaches. The context of the studies has also changed, which comes to light from the statement by Flick (1998, 2) that “locally, temporally and situationally limited narratives are now required.” This increased focus on qualitative and more unconventional methods substantiates a change in the field. Some even called the new movement or linguistic turn in social sciences, as in the beginning of the 1990s’ Holliday (1992) stated that the emphasis in social sciences has mainly been on quantitative methods. This change has enabled the answering of the “how” and “why” questions more efficiently and also brought novel and more versatile approaches to the field (Boje, 2001; Ekanem, 2007; Fillis, 2007). These novel approaches are needed, since the behaviour of markets and thereof firms have changed and keep on changing, e.g. due to constant technological development, new market agreements and policies, changing customer needs and tastes, and globalisation (e.g. Johanson & Vahlne, 1990; Young, 1990), and the existing research approaches do no longer adequately meet with the requirements of the business reality (e.g. Mishler, 1986, 76; Flick, 1998; Fillis, 2007). According to Flick (1998), qualitative methods ought to be selected based on the research topic and to be embedded in the research process. This research rides this new wave by presenting the development and testing of a research approach called the *visual episodic narrative interview*. This methodological approach is designed to collect data about the international growth process of

entrepreneurially behaving SMEs in a more profound manner, and thereof provide a richer understanding about the proceeding of the process. This developed approach goes hand in hand with the suggestion of using a multimethod inquiry by Brewer and Hunter (2006, 33): “Do something different.”

In the following sections the choice of methods and the research context are discussed, the development of the approach is elaborated and the approach is presented, the analysis of the collected data is gone through briefly, and finally conclusions and implications of the research are presented.

Choice of Method and Research Context

The choice of method depends on the studied phenomenon. In line with the research by Ekanem (2007), *a gap was discovered between theory and practice* in terms of the studied topic, namely the international growth process of SMEs. Consequently, in general, there were no readily available singular methods or approaches that could have directly served the purpose of the study. Thus, the approach presented in this paper was designed to address the gap. Another issue affecting the choice of method were the situational and contextual factors in relation to the research project. The researcher had access to a follow-up survey originally conducted by the TSE Entre at Turku School of Economics². The survey concentrated on SME³ growth, and included a few questions focusing on international growth. The first round of the survey was conducted in 2004

² For a thorough reporting of the first round of the survey, see: Heinonen, Jarna (2005). *The Nature and Elements of Growth. Finnish SMEs in Focus*. Small Business Institute, Turku School of Economics: Turku.

³ In the study, an SME is a company of 1-250 employees (Commission recommendation 2003/361/EC, 2005).

with 498 respondents and the follow-up in 2007 with 276 respondents, resulting in a response rate of 55%. Of these SMEs, altogether 13 firms had materialised international growth during the research period, the international growth here corresponding the fulfilment of the following three prerequisites: the share of international operations from annual turnover had to be at least 25 % and 500.000,00 euros, and the share of international operations from annual turnover had to have grown from year 2003 to year 2006.⁴. Of these 13 SMEs, five agreed to participate anonymously in a case study⁵, and in a further analysis it turned out that all of these five represented traditional industry SMEs. As a result, the small number of cases also set requirements to the method.

In the designed research approach, the case study, multiple-methods, the use visual materials, secondary and primary data, and episodic narratives are combined. This combination is in line with writings of Gummesson (2005), where he advocates the benefits of multiple-method approach, and Yin (2003), who advocates the broad use of case studies in exploratory and theory-testing research. The case study is also preferred as it allows the follow-up of the international growth process of individual SMEs over time, and enables the collection of rich data to answer the “how” and “why” questions. Moreover, case studies go hand-in-hand with the narrative approach, as they both capture stories (Mishler, 1986, 112; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1995). Despite

⁴ With this definition it was possible to identify those SMEs, where the international growth had not been the result of a statistical abnormality or some coincidental momentary factor not really mirroring the actual international growth process of the firm. The definition also acknowledged the possible effect of size on the used measures, and as such, both percentage shares and balance sheet figures were used to calculate the growth of the international operations from the total annual turnover.

⁵ Three main issues limited the number of SMEs to participate in the case study: one of them was acquired after the second survey in 2007 and ceased to exist as an independent entity, three of the companies were not reached via email or telephone despite several attempts, and of four companies there were not enough balance sheet information available to be able to prepare the visual material for the narrative interview.

the approach employs both quantitative and qualitative methods, a mixed-method approach (e.g. Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003a) was not considered to be appropriate, but rather a multiple-method⁶ approach (Brannen, 1992; Brewer & Hunter, 2006), as quantitative methods have mainly been used for case selection and background search, whereas qualitative methods were used to collect the case content data. This follows the suggestion by Morse (2003), where in multiple-method approach quantitative and qualitative methods form independent parts of the study while still solving together the overall research problem, whereas in mixed-method approach the qualitative and quantitative methods are used in an intertwined and inseparable fashion to solve the research problem.

The use of visual materials has thus far been quite marginal in social sciences, and particularly in business studies. Additionally, pictures and illustrations have mainly been used as research material that has been subjected to content analysis, or then in marketing studies following the semiotics research stream. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008.) Flick (1998), on the other hand, states that visual media has recently been noted also as a usable method. In this study, visual materials have been used to aid data collection in doing the narrative interviews, and as illustrations of the international growth process of the case SMEs. This strongly reflects the approach introduced by Harper (1994), namely the “photo elicitation interview”.

The approach also applies both secondary and primary data according to the suggestions of Jick (1979, p. 604) for data triangulation, as the aim in the study is to “...*enrich our*

⁶ Multiple-method approach is synonymous to multimethod approach in this study.

understanding by allowing for new or deeper dimensions to emerge.” Similarly, Carson and Carson (1998) and Flick (1998) state that by combining and supplementing data from primary and secondary sources facts about the research topic can be collated. Finally, the episodic narrative approach is used according to the ideas of Flick (1998) (see also Riessman, 1993), as the phenomenon in question is theoretically relatively unstructured, and therefore deducing interview questions or themes from theory is considered to be challenging and possibly deceptive. By giving the interviewees the possibility to freely tell a story about the development of their company⁷, they could perhaps give a richer, deeper and more revealing description, coupled with explanatory issues and background, about the studied phenomenon. Additionally, when visual materials are used to guide and evoke discussion and storytelling, the episodic narrative approach is the most suitable as it enables the interviewee to concentrate on the specific situations and episodes forming the core of the research (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993; Cunliffe, Luhman & Boje, 2004), to freely reflect on the visual material, and the interviewer to probe, if necessary. Finally, regarding the trustworthiness of the interviewee narrated stories, the interviewees are usually more committed to narratives than to interview questions, and when information is provided in the form of stories, the consistency of the data is better than in interviews consisting of separate questions (Riessman, 1993; Flick, 1998).

The research context is formed of Finnish industrial SMEs that have materialised international growth during the period of 1997-2006. This context was selected, as SMEs are generally considered to be more apt to growth and internationalisation, particularly in

⁷ As the focus is on an organisation, a narrative approach is more suitable in data collection than compared to biographies, which are more personal and dealing often more about the life histories of the informants (see e.g. Gummesson, 1991; Vidal, 2003).

a small and open economy (SMOPEC) (Luostarinen & Gabrielsson, 2004; McGaughey, 2007), such as Finland, and as industrial SMEs have demonstrated organic growth in a different manner than IT and biotech SMEs that have mostly been either born-globals (Gabrielsson & Kirpalani, 2004; Hashai & Almor, 2004) or rapidly internationalising firms (Oviatt & McDougall, 2005). The focus on organic growth stems from the feature that organic growth is seen as a process where the SME grows through developing and expanding its own internal operations, and not e.g. through acquisitions, strategic alliances, or joint ventures. Therefore it enables the observation of the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the SME resource and skill base and the process of internationalisation. (Irvin, Pedro & Gennaro, 2003; Hess, 2007; Pasanen, 2007.) As the focus has not been on the speed of the process or the age of the firm, but rather on the development and background factors of the international growth process, industrial ‘traditional’ SMEs were selected, as they are more often older and established and demonstrate incremental development due to the more established and less dynamic branch characteristics (cf. Penrose, 1959; Storey, 1994; Wheeler, Jones & Young, 1995; Agndal, 2006; Pasanen, 2007). As in many narrative organisation studies, time is incorporated and acknowledged in this study through the process perspective to the research topic and the methodological choices implicitly (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Cunliffe et al. 2004, 261). According to Polkinghorne (1995), narrative studies require a bounded system, a bounded temporal period, which guides and limits what data is to be gathered. The reasoning behind the selection of the time frame is that by year 1997 many issues that influence SME internationalisation, particularly in Finland, had either started to take effect, or had seized to affect SMEs. The economic depression that had burdened the Finnish economy in the

late 1980s' and early 1990s' and driven many SMEs to bankruptcy and dimmed the future perspectives of many others had started to lose its sharpest edge. On the other hand, at the same time, the development of information technology (IT) and the global information and transportation networks had started to be at the reach of also the smaller players in the field, and the European Union, of which Finland became a member of in 1995, had opened the competition and eased access to larger, international markets. From this perspective, it seems reasonable to study SME international growth at this time period.

Developing the Approach

Studying SMEs poses several challenges to research. Firstly, in small enterprises the number of unique and coincidental factors is high. Secondly, empirical studies have had quite different approaches and are mainly based on only one explanatory factor (Coviello & McAuley, 1999). Thirdly, studies focusing on SMEs are also very time and context bound, which leads to a pool of very heterogeneous research. And fourthly, researchers have stumbled on difficulties in obtaining detailed information on SMEs' foreign investments and firm performance, and therefore not many studies concentrate on the performance implications of SME internationalisation (e.g. Lu & Beamish, 2001). In this developed approach an attempt is made to overcome these pitfalls. The approach is designed to take into account the unique features of each case SMEs' international growth process and the abundance of possible issues influencing it (see Flick, 1998, 25-26). As it is not completely self-evident, particularly from the theoretical perspective, what is looked for, it is important not to overlook any information and to strive for depth

and breadth in the diversified data (see Brewer & Hunter, 2006; Fillis, 2007). This is done in a similar, consistent manner in each case. The approach is longitudinal, as it follows the international growth process of the SMEs for the same time period of ten years, and as such, the time frame of the study should not influence the results strongly. The narrative approach, then again, is applied as it is able to provide rich data about the international growth process from the interviewees' viewpoint by concentrating on their interpretations about the process (Mishler, 1986; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993; Riessman, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1995; Kaunismaa & Laitinen, 1998; Elliott, 2005). Narratives are also suitable in studies, where the theoretical framework is not fully set, as it does not force theory to the stories through exact research questions. Additionally, the attempt has been made through these methodological choices to minimize the possible interviewer influence on the research data and results. (E.g. Mishler, 1986; Elliott, 2005.) However, the approach is evaluated on a sample of Finnish industrial SMEs, which poses limitations to the study. Regarding the difficulty of obtaining detailed information about the foreign operations of the SMEs, the longitudinal, narrative and multiple-method nature of the approach is applied to provide the research with a rich, detailed, and profound dataset (see e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993; Shaw, 1999).

From the philosophical viewpoint, the developed approach shares features with ethnography, but is not pure in the sense described e.g. by Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) (see also Flick, 1998), since the studied object, international growth, is identified to be the topic of interest, despite the deepest essence of the topic is not yet fully uncovered or captured. On the other hand, the approach is not grounded theory either, as

it applies existing models, theories, and approaches and multiple-methods, despite trying to tackle a relatively unknown research topic (e.g. Ekanem, 2007; McGaughey, 2007). The research falls more on the realist perspective, as it aims to be more holistic and relevant in its methodological and theoretical choices and trusts on triangulation, than the extremes of grounded theory and pure positivism with their underlying possible pitfalls (Boje, 2001; Stiles, 2003). Realism is also reflected in the manner the data is treated, i.e. the international growth processes are described as richly, abundantly and colourfully as the data enables (Stern, 1973). Additionally, with realist triangulation, including the use of multiple research methods, data sources, and theories, it is possible to assess the reliability of qualitative analysis. This is acknowledged in this study, as several methods and data sources are applied to assess the consistency on the findings, and as prolonged engagement with the process is achieved with the longitudinal approach (Brannen, 1992; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003b), despite not taking a positivist approach of verifying the different data against one another, but merely collecting the pieces of the puzzle from numerous different places. This is in line with Elliott (2005), who suggests that despite not using the terms ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’ in qualitative enquiry, one must confront the question of accuracy also in the narrative accounts. The study can also be considered as critical, as it applies narratives and developed a research approach to complement existing dominant thinking (Fillis, 2007). The philosophical underpinnings behind visual media in research is often hermeneutics or symbolic interactionism (Flick, 1998), but here the curve illustrations are merely instrumental. Considering the deductive and inductive nature of the study, it is not purely deductive, as it aims at gaining a deeper insight about the topic, without pushing uncertain theoretical frameworks or the

researcher's preliminary beliefs (see Flick, 1998). It is also not purely inductive, as it is very challenging to conduct a study without some idea of what is to be looked for (see Shaw, 1999). The study is neither abductive, as the constant interaction between data and theory is not emphasised in the build-up of the study (e.g. Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Visual Episodic Narrative Interview

As in any research, it is of foremost importance to identify the most suitable and knowledgeable respondents regarding the research topic. For the purposes of this study, five case firms were identified from a follow-up survey, which indicated that they all had materialised international growth for the research period of 2004-2007. To be able to detect a tangible *description* of the actual materialised international growth process, the balance sheets of those five SMEs for the years 1997-2006 were collected and with the figures indicating the share of international activities, such as exporting and sales, from the total annual turnover⁸, the curves depicting the international growth process were drawn. These curves formed the visual material to be used in the interviews. Simultaneously, other publicly available secondary data was collected from company web pages, newspapers and trade journals, and the publications of different research centres and institutes. This was done to secure that studied firms had remained as the same legal entities for the studied 10-year period, allowing the observation of a development process of the same research units. An example of an international growth

⁸ The only measure extractable from the follow-up survey and the balance sheets, able in depicting the international growth of a firm, was the share of international activities from the total annual turnover. The term "activities" was originally used, as all international operations, both inward and outward, were considered to be of interest when studying international growth. However, the focus later on shifted to outward operations, as the balance sheet figures depicted the share of exporting and foreign sales of the companies.

curve of a case SME, illustrating the development of its share of international operations during the studied period, is depicted in figure 2.

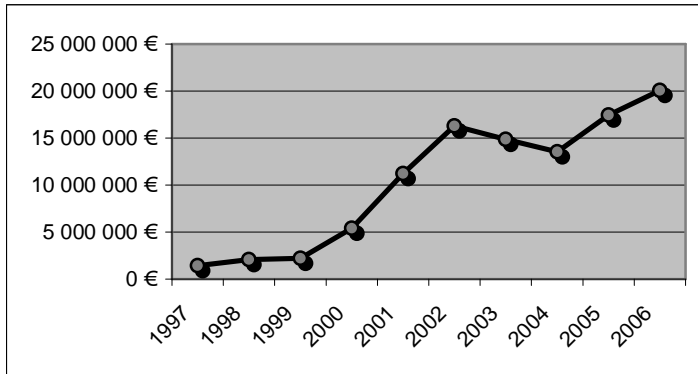


Figure 2 Example of the visual material used in the interviews: the international growth curve of a case SME

The interviewees to this research were selected based on three issues: they were entrepreneurs, owner, or managers of the SME, they had personally responded to the follow-up survey(s), and they had experience about the SME, the industry, and the international activities of the company. When the interviews were arranged, with each SME separately, the interviewees were informed about the particular nature of the interview, but the curves were not revealed to them until in the interview. However, before beginning the interview, it was ascertained that the interviewees agreed with that the curve truly resembled the development of their company.⁹ In the interview, again, the interviewer presented the approach to the interviewees. The aim of the narrative interview was to gain information about the possible *explanatory* factors behind the ups and downs in the curve. The interviewees were to use the curve as an interview guide and

⁹ This was done irrespective of the fact that the balance sheet information, which the firms are obliged to provide by law, was received from an objective governmental body.

context and build their story around it, as the curve both depicted the development of the process and provided a timeline (see e.g. Bruner, 1986; Mishler, 1986; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993; Riessman, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1995, and Kaunismaa & Laitinen, 1998, for the discussion of a plot/thematic thread in narratives). The interview was begun with a request for a brief general description about the company and about the interviewee as a warm-up, which simultaneously served the episodic narrative interview with usable information. Often the interviewees started to discuss about the curve already at this stage. After this, the interviewees were encouraged to tell about the curve, if they had not yet done so at this stage. When the interviewees gave an indication, usually a long silence, that they had finished their story episode, the interviewer turned to the prepared four theory-driven episodic probe questions that dealt with the main forms and shapes of the curve and that were then asked one by one, giving the interviewee their time to narrate more, to obtain further clarification about the process and the events. These four probes are listed in table 1, together with their theoretical underpinnings and their explanatory factors. The probes were kept on a very general level to avoid the push of theoretical concepts and models and to focus on the interviewees' interpretations of the international growth process (e.g. Mishler, 1986; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993; Elliott, 2005). At other times the interviewer stayed silent and indicated agreement with the interviewee with merely nodding.

Table 1 Probes used in the episodic narrative interview¹⁰

Probe 1	What are the most influential factors behind the international growth development of your company from your opinion?	Explanatory factors: internal external decelerating effects accelerating effects	Theory background: entrepreneurial orientation external environment/strategy growth internationalisation
Probe 2	What are the most influential events or turning points and their timing on the curve from your opinion?	Explanatory factors: internal external decelerating effects accelerating effects temporal positioning	Theory background: growth stages models internationalisation stages models the process view management/entrepreneurial behaviour
Probe 3	What issues can you recognise of being behind the upturns of the curve?	Explanatory factors: accelerating effects internal external	Theory background: opportunities innovativeness/entrepreneurial behaviour
Probe 4	What issues can you recognise of being behind the downturns of the curve?	Explanatory factors: decelerating effects internal external	Theory background: challenges/risks external environment timing

The connection between the probes and the curve is presented in figure 3 below.

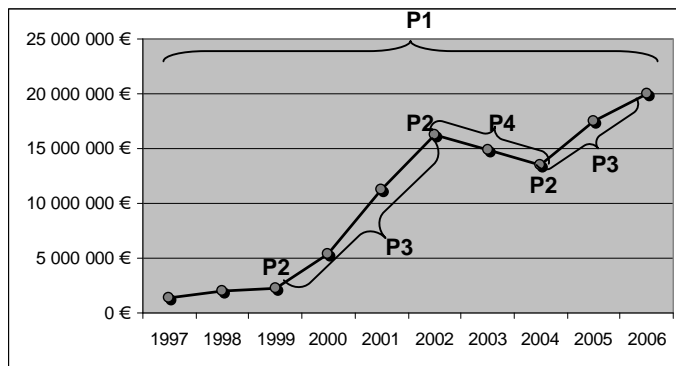


Figure 3 An exemplary curve with the probes

After all the probes were asked and the interviewees again indicated with silence that they had said what they felt was all, the interview was ended with a request for a general characterization about the international growth development of the SME. The interviews lasted from one to two-and-a-half hours, they were digitally recorded, and notes were

¹⁰ The probes are derived from the theoretical framework as a whole and from the growth curves.

taken during the interviews. The recordings were transcribed within a week after the interview and the transcripts were printed out and filed, each SME in a separate folder, together with the interview notes and secondary data collected from public sources.

Analysing the Collected Data

The analysis of the research material was conducted in three waves. The first wave was to analyse the follow-up survey material to find the targeted case SMEs. This analysis was basically through running descriptive statistical tests in the survey data. During this analysis wave, the working definition of international growth was developed to its current state, and the workable quantitative measure for international growth was found from the survey data. The second wave dealt with the secondary material collected about the case SMEs from public sources. This material was basically checked to bring background information about the SMEs, to backup their suitability to the study, and to develop the visual material. The third wave was the content analysis of the episodic narrative interviews, which is described in further detail in this section.

The analysis of the data was conducted according to the guidelines of qualitative content analysis (Flick, 1998) and resembling the stages involved in historical investigation (Gottschalk, 1956). Qualitative content analysis was selected as the analysis method, since it is usable in analysing visual material and interview transcripts in case-oriented studies, since it is relatively clear and easy approach, and since the analysis categories and themes are derived from existing theories, but are flexible and modifiable during the research (Flick, 1998; Shaw, 1999; Boje, 2001; McGaughey, 2007). As the theoretical

frame was considered to be relatively rough and preliminary, the theory and curve-driven, so-called *metathemes* used in the analysis as codes were very general and the same as the interview probes (see table 1). The researcher went through the interview transcripts three times and underlined with four different colour markers the four different metathemes. After these general themes were identified from the transcripts, more fine-grained, emergent themes were allowed to emerge for coding (see Mishler, 1986, 3-4, on the discussion on coding manuals; Boje, 2001; McGaughey, 2007), but within the boundaries of the theoretical frame, namely the internationalisation, growth, and entrepreneurial orientation models and strategy literature regarding the external environment. This approach was taken to avoid too much theory influence on the analysis themes and to enable receptivity and open mind to emergent themes. Following the thoughts of Czarniawska-Joerges (1993) and Polkinghorne (1995), the narratives consist of the interviewees' interpretations of the process, whereas the analysis consists of the researcher's explanations of the process. At the same time the collected, case-specific, secondary data was used to compare and complement the narrative data, where suitable, to authenticate and strengthen the case evidence (Gottschalk, 1956; Cunliffe et al., 2004; Brewer & Hunter, 2006). The two levels of analysis themes are grouped in table 2.

Table 2 Metathemes used in the interview and emergent themes from the analysis

Metathemes (interview)	Emergent themes (analysis)
Influential factors	Firm resources
	Management team and employee characteristics
	Size
	Activeness
	Flexibility
	Risk-taking
	Creativity and innovativeness
	Persistence and extrovert attitude
	Learning and experiencing
	Co-operation with an agent
	Knowledge and information about the markets
	Freedom of creativity and open communication
	Low hierarchy
	Country culture and specific country characteristics
Influential events	Changes in industry characteristics
	Rationalising operations
	Generative mode of strategy making leading to new strategy
	Finding a new partner or agent in foreign markets
	Establishing new foreign office
	Gaining information about market and competition
	Changes in domestic and foreign legislation
	Changes in global economic trends
	New customer needs creating demand
	Opening-up of new markets and introducing new customers
	Making a discovery or invention or innovation within the firm
Upturns (accelerating factors)	Firm resources
	Management team and employee characteristics
	Finding of new customers or segments
	Trust in own skills and ideas
	Long-term relationship with an agent
	Risk-taking
	Willingness to experiment
	Opportunity recognition
	Opening-up of new market areas
	Making a discovery or invention or innovation
	Competitive aggressiveness
Downturns (decelerating factors)	Change in industry characteristics
	Size
	Risk-taking
	Limited firm resources
	Changes in economic trends
	Fierce and/or changed competition
	Ending of a long-term relationship with an agent
	Bad timing
	Loss of focus and concentration on irrelevant issues
	Management team and employee characteristics

After this thematisation analysis, a list of themes derived directly from the theoretical frame was created (see table 3) to reflect the empirical findings with the selected theories.

The list included all the themes that are commonly used in existing studies and literature dealing with internationalisation and growth of entrepreneurially behaving SME¹¹s.

Table 3 Theory-driven themes from the theoretical framework

Theories and models	Derived themes
Internationalisation (Leonidou & Katsikeas, 1996)	Management behaviour and attitude
	Information collecting
	Foreign demand
	Planning
	Opportunity seeking
	Experiencing and learning
	Resource commitment
	Co-operation with agents and partners
	Market situation in domestic and foreign markets
Growth (Hanks, Watson, Jansen & Chandler, 1993)	Diversity, complexity
	Leadership characteristics and management style
	Planning and control
	Decision making
	Structure
	Environmental scanning
	Communication and information sharing
	Resource availability
	Culture and organisation
	Activeness
Entrepreneurship; entrepreneurial orientation (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996)	Ability to take initiative
	Management team characteristics
	Common vision and shared value system
	Firm resources
	Generative mode of strategy making
	Proactiveness and dynamism
	Opportunity recognition and competitiveness
	Independence and autonomy
	Risk taking
	Innovativeness and creativity

Subsequently the themes that emerged from the empirical data and the theory-driven themes were compared. When comparing these two tables, differences as well as similarities can be identified. The results of the comparison are grouped in table 4.

¹¹ The author has taken the freedom of including here a list of theory-drive themes, which occur in the mainstream internationalisation, growth, entrepreneurial orientation literature, but the list is not to be taken as a definite set of themes. The aim is more to illustrate the two lists, one from empirical data and other from the theoretical frame.

Table 4 Comparison of emergent and theory derived themes

Different emergent themes (analysis)	Different theory-driven themes	Probes with theory background
1. Size	1. Planning	Probe 1: - entrepreneurial orientation - external environment/ strategy - growth - internationalisation
2. Flexibility	2. Decision making	
3. Persistence and extrovert attitude	3. Ability to take initiative	
4. Country culture and specific country characteristics		
5. Changes in industry characteristics	(1.) Planning and control	Probe 2: - growth stages models - internationalisation stages models - the process view - management/ entrepreneurial behaviour
6. Rationalising operations		
7. Establishing new foreign office		
8. Changes in domestic and foreign legislation		
9. Changes in global economic trends		
10. Opening-up of new markets and introducing new customers		
11. Finding of new customers or segments	4. Common vision and shared value system	Probe 3: - opportunities - innovativeness/ entrepreneurial behaviour
12. Trust in own skills and ideas	5. Proactiveness and dynamism	
13. Willingness to experiment	6. Independence and autonomy	
(10.) Opening-up of new market areas		
(5.) Change in industry characteristics	7. Diversity, complexity	Probe 4: - challenges/risks - external environment - timing
(1.) Size		
(9.) Changes in economic trends		
14. Fierce and/or changed competition		
15. Bad timing		
16. Loss of focus and concentration on irrelevant issues		

It can be seen from table 4 that there are altogether 16 new themes that emerged from the data during the analysis and that differ from the theoretical themes. On the other hand, there were seven themes that did not come up in the analysis, but which can be identified from the theories¹². These differences and their implications are discussed in more detail in the following section.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to present a methodological approach, the visual episodic narrative interview, its use in the field, and the benefits it has when studying relatively unknown and theoretically challenging topics. The main benefit in the approach is the

¹² Note that some of the themes are presented in the tables more than once, since they were either identified in relation to different interview probes or to different theories. Therefore only their first appearance in the table is numbered.

fact that the researcher is able to minimize his or her influence on the studied topic in two ways. Firstly, the interview is not constructed around a set of questions or pre-designed themes deduced from theory. In this way the researcher does not provide the interviewee with given detailed topics to answer or limit the respondents freedom of expression, as the interviewee can decide, which themes and issues will be covered and to which depth and breadth. As a result, no particular theories, or issues within certain theories and models, are forced to the interviewee or he or she is not limited by them. This gives the researcher more valuable information, as the study is not chained by the earlier, possibly tentative choices of theory the researcher has made in the beginning of the research process, and as room is given to emergent issues, both inside and outside the formulated theoretical frame. Secondly, the researcher does not influence the data gathering or the data, as a narrative approach is used, and the interviewees are enabled to tell their story about the research topic. This is particularly relevant in longitudinal studies, where the researcher is often amidst the research topic, in business studies usually an organisation, for an extended time, and thereof objectivity can be in danger.

Another key methodological issue is the richness and quality of the data. With the suggested and tested approach, several types and depths of data can be obtained. In the interview itself, the narrative is stimulated with both visual material and episodic questions. With this dual approach, the curve illustration keeps the story structured, and the probes seek for possible further clarification, whereas the main input, the narrative, is solely produced by the interviewee. The approach also triangulates data sources, as both secondary and primary data is collected, and as both numerical and textual data is

employed. This triangulation of data and sources also neatly addresses the possible problem of memory in narratives, which are generally retrospective accounts of the past (e.g. Polkinghorne, 1995; Boje, 2001). As the narrative is guided with visual material based on factual figures¹³, and the time frame of the study is 10 years and in the recent past, the approach can be considered to be well protected for possible memory biases. In addition, the curve used in the interviews, together with the episodic questions, can structure and organise the large amount of narrative data and ease the interviewee in narrating. However, narratives do also possess some severe problems (see Mishler, 1986, 75-87), which the researcher is often unable to control or solve. One of the main problems is the interviewees' competences to narrate a story. Another problem area is culture, where the problems related to language and the traditions of story-telling can turn out to be an obstacle for creating narratives. Thirdly, narratives are subjective and context-related, which always affects how much they can reflect the reality. (Bruner, 1986; Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 1993; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Flick, 1998; Shaw, 1999; Elliott, 2005.)

Regarding the laboriousness and time-consumption of the study and comparing them to the benefits of the approach, it is safe to say that developing this research approach was worth it. The most time-consuming part of the study was the survey and selection of the cases, as the longitudinal nature of the follow-up naturally took its time. Additionally, regarding the marginal nature of the phenomenon, as only 13 firms out of almost 500 met the requirements, and as five of them eventually agreed to participate the study, a bit of

¹³ Companies the size of SMEs are obliged, by the Finnish law, to annually hand in their balance sheets and income statements for statistics and other governmental use. Additionally, the documents need to be checked and validated by authorized bookkeepers.

luck can be considered to have influenced the study. On the other hand, giving room to possible changes during the research process and keeping an open mind enabled the manoeuvring of the research process to meet the needs of the changing circumstances. For example, formulating the working definition during the survey analysis took almost six months and finally found its shape after numerous trials and errors. The interviews and the content analysis of the transcripts went very smoothly, but this was also partially due to the fact that the research project, to that point, had been going on for three years as a whole, and the pool of possible theories, research methods, and approaches was already extensive. Regarding the content analysis, one shortcoming in the analysis is the thematisation, since it can take off the sharpest edge off the rich and profound narrative data, and thus make too general summarisations and conclusions about the data (Flick, 1998, Boje, 2001). All in all, the benefit of rich and good quality data with emergent findings easily overrode the trouble the research project caused.

Turning from the methodological to more content-related issues, the found differences in the themes used and emerged in the analysis and the themes drawn directly from theory and earlier research are of key interest. In a typical deductive study the former themes would have been used as the basis for the data collection. In that case, however, if there would have been problems in the theoretical frame, for example through faulty preliminary expectations about the research results and thus faulty choices of theory, then the research could have been compromised in two ways. The one could have been the case that the problems in the theoretical frame could have been overlooked, and thus the results of the study could have been misleading or false. The other could have been the

case that the problems could have emerged already at the data collection stage, and thus the data collection could have been the target of revision and redo. Another less mortal but still central issue is the possible narrowness of scope, when theory is let to guide too strongly a study of new or yet unknown topic. In these occasions, the idea of emergent findings and *letting the data speak* are overlooked, despite they could provide the field of research with fresh results and thinking. As could have been observed from the theme tables, the emergent themes and the theoretical themes had similarities and differences, in other words, in the issues that were found to explain the shape of the case SME international growth process path. Altogether 16 new themes emerged in the analysis and seven theoretical themes did not come up in the analysis. The differences can be mainly explained by the fact that the SMEs have unique features that are not directly generalisable to the larger SME population, whereas theories are known generalisations of the reality. The similarities, then again, are caused partially by the general umbrella-nature of the theories, and partially by the fact that the models and theories are built on studies concentrating on larger samples of similar companies. As a result, some of the themes were included in the theories and the others were emergent and most likely evidence additions to the pool of explanatory factors originating from other disciplines.¹⁴

From the interviewees' and research topics' viewpoint, the suggested approach also honours the informants. In a narrative approach, it is the interviewee that sets the limits, which topics are to be discussed and to what depth and breadth. Of course, in structured and open-ended interviews, the interviewees can refuse to answer or appeal to secrecy,

¹⁴ A more detailed comparison between the theme lists is not presented here, as the main focus of the paper is in methods, in presenting the developed approach and the results of testing it in practice.

but in narratives the story can still be whole, despite some issues are left out. Additionally, the interviewees can choose, if and how they wish to address some uncomfortable or personal issues, with their own wording and expressions, and not according to the given questions or themes provided by the researcher.

The nature of the research undertaking, then again, also sets limitations to the generalizability of the research results. As the aim was to obtain better understanding and more profound information about the international growth process, the sheer exploratory nature and method-orientation of the study do affect the generalizability of the reached results to a wider population of SMEs. Already the selection of the case firms, focusing on traditional industrial SMEs (see e.g. Agndal, 2006), as well as the formulation of the working definition and measurement, limit the transferring of the results to other contexts and other fields of research. Then again, the flexibility of the research process makes the approach perhaps more usable to other studies as well. (See Shaw, 1999.)

Conclusions and implications

In conclusion, the pros and cons of the developed approach, as well as its usability and promise have been discussed in length. From the perspective of this research process, the approach reclaimed its promise and turned out to be very usable, and perhaps better than many other alternative methods, as it brought up new themes outside the used theories, and limited some unused theoretical themes out. However, the generalizability and usability of this approach is possible also in other contexts, but with advance ground work. This is basically due to the characteristics of the approach, as when doing

narratives of a certain organisational process, one needs to be relatively certain that the chosen cases and informants can contribute to the topic of the research. Nevertheless, by presenting a multidisciplinary research approach combining theories, models, and methods, and by reporting the conducted research process and the results in detail, an attempt is made to answer the calls made in earlier research (Mishler, 1986, 112-113, on transparency; Shaw, 1999, 59; McGaughey, 2007, 14). By bringing forward this methodological experiment, the attempt is made to encourage other researchers to apply the method, present their own methodological inventions and ideas, and at least, to have an open mind towards new research methods and approaches in the fields of IB, entrepreneurship, and SME research. However, more contributions are still required to fill the content and method-related gaps in qualitative international and entrepreneurial SME research.

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