Collecting data by in-depth interviewing

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Abstract

Interviews have been used extensively for data collection across all the disciplines of the social sciences & in educational research. There are many types of interviews, as suggested in the literature. However, this paper does not attempt to look at every single type of interview. Instead, it focuses on one particular type – in-depth interviewing. In the presentation, the presenter will briefly explain her interpretation of in-depth interviewing & report on how she used this research method to collect data for her study.

Introduction

In the 1980s, there was a considerable growth in using interviewing as a method for educational research and now it is generally agreed that interviewing is a key method of data collection. There are many kinds of interviews. Hitchcock (1989:79) lists nine types: structured interview, survey interview, counselling interview, diary interview, life history interview, ethnographic interview, informal/unstructured interview, and conversations. Cohen & Manion (1994:273), however, prefers to group interviews into four kinds, including the structured interview, the unstructured interview, the non-directive interview, and the focused interview.

In-depth interviewing

In-depth interviewing, also known as unstructured interviewing, is a type of interview which researchers use to elicit information in order to achieve a holistic understanding of the interviewee’s point of view or situation; it can also be used to explore interesting areas for further investigation. This type of interview involves asking informants open-ended questions,
and probing wherever necessary to obtain data deemed useful by the researcher. As in-depth interviewing often involves qualitative data, it is also called qualitative interviewing. Patton (1987:113) suggests three basic approaches to conducting qualitative interviewing:

**(i) The informal conversational interview**

This type of interview resembles a chat, during which the informants may sometimes forget that they are being interviewed. Most of the questions asked will flow from the immediate context. Informal conversational interviews are useful for exploring interesting topic/s for investigation and are typical of ‘ongoing’ participant observation fieldwork.

**(ii) The general interview guide approach (commonly called guided interview)**

When employing this approach for interviewing, a basic checklist is prepared to make sure that all relevant topics are covered. The interviewer is still free to explore, probe and ask questions deemed interesting to the researcher. This type of interview approach is useful for eliciting information about specific topics. For this reason, Wenden (1982) formulated a checklist as a basis to interview her informants in a piece of research leading towards her PhD studies. She (1982:39) considers that the general interview guide approach is useful as it ‘allows for in-depth probing while permitting the interviewer to keep the interview within the parameters traced out by the aim of the study.’

**(iii) The standardised open-ended interview**

Researchers using this approach prepare a set of open-ended questions which are carefully worded and arranged for the purpose of minimising variation in the questions posed to the interviewees. In view of this, this method is often preferred for collecting interviewing data when two or more researchers are involved in the data collecting process. Although this method provides less flexibility for questions than the other two mentioned previously, probing is still possible, depending on the nature of the interview and the skills of the interviewers (Patton 1987:112).

**The study**

**Informants**

The participants in this investigation were 20 Hong Kong Chinese students: 10 boys and 10 girls, aged 12 to 18 enrolled at an independent school in the UK. They shared similar family and educational backgrounds and their level of English ranged from elementary to intermediate. They all started to learn English as a second language at about 5 or 6 years of age in Hong Kong. Although Hong Kong is a leading international trade and financial centre, English is not used as a mainstream language of communication there. "The Report of the Working Group set up to Review Language Improvement Measures" (Hong Kong Education Department 1989:4) notes that:
the use of English in Hong Kong…… does not fulfil an integrative social function and is only used for social communication when non-speakers of Chinese are involved.

In addition, Lai (1994:101) points out that:

The use of English is instrumental and is generally confined to official, formal contexts of business, government, and education where non-speakers of Chinese are involved. Hong Kong students’ exposure to and opportunities for the use of English inside school are limited, in spite of the fact that about 90% of Hong Kong secondary school students are enrolled in the "Anglo-Chinese" schools where English is to be used as the medium of instruction in all subjects except Chinese and Chinese History. It is a widely known fact that a mixed code of instruction and code-switching are prevalent in almost all subjects (Education Commission, 1990; Johnson & Lee, 1987). Ip & Chan (1985) reported that the use of spoken Cantonese for instructional purposes, in both English and non-English lessons, has been on the increase in recent years.

Generally speaking, when the Hong Kong students first arrived at the school, they all had difficulty in communicating with people in English, though in different degrees.

Research method

It was decided to use in-depth interviewing as the main method to collect data for the study since an interpretative approach (qualitative in nature) was adopted for the investigation. The central concern of the interpretative research is understanding human experiences at a holistic level. Because of the nature of this type of research, investigations are often connected with methods such as in-depth interviewing, participant observation and the collection of relevant documents. Maykut & Morehouse (1994:46) state that:

The data of qualitative inquiry is most often people’s words and actions, and thus requires methods that allow the researcher to capture language and behavior. The most useful ways of gathering these forms of data are participant observation, in-depth interviews, group interviews, and the collection of relevant documents. Observation and interview data is collected by the researcher in the form of field notes and audio-taped interviews, which are later transcribed for use in data analysis. There is also some qualitative research being done with photographs and video-taped observations as primary sources of data (see, for example, Erikson and Wilson 1982, Wagner 1979).

As this paper is about in-depth interviewing, other methods used will not be discussed here (For the details of other methods used, please refer to Berry 1998b). To enhance my skills in conducting interviewing, I referred to relevant literature as a first step and subsequently tried to gain some ‘hands on’ experience by interviewing several of the students in the target group.

Interviewing techniques informed by the literature

One essential element of all interviews is the verbal interaction between the interviewer/s and the interviewee/s. Hitchcock (1989:79) stresses that ‘central to the interview is the issue of asking questions and this is often achieved in qualitative research through conversational encounters.’
Consequently, it is important for the researchers to familiarise themselves with questioning techniques before conducting interviews.

(A) Questioning techniques

Individuals vary in their ability to articulate their thoughts and ideas. With good questioning techniques, researchers will be more able to facilitate the subjects’ accounts and to obtain quality data from them. Current literature suggests some questioning techniques, summarised in the following ten points:

1. **Ask clear questions**

Cicourel (1964) reflects that ‘many of the meanings which are clear to one will be relatively opaque to the other, even when the intention is genuine communication.’ Accordingly, it is important to use words that make sense to the interviewees, words that are sensitive to the respondent’s context and world view. To enhance their comprehensibility to the interviewees, questions should be easy to understand, short, and devoid of jargon (Kvale 1996:130).

2. **Ask single questions**

Patton (1987:124) points out that interviewers often put several questions together and ask them all as one. He suggests that researchers should ask one thing at a time. This will eliminate any unnecessary burden of interpretation on the interviewees.

3. **Ask truly open-ended questions** (Patton 1987:122-3)

Truly open-ended questions do not pre-determine the answers and allow room for the informants to respond in their own terms. For example, "What do you think about your English?" "How do you feel about the method of English teaching in your home country?" "What is your opinion of English lessons in the UK?"

4. **Ask experience/behaviour questions before opinion/feeling questions**

(Patton 1987:115)

It is useful to ask questions about experience or behaviour before asking questions about opinions or feelings as this helps establish a context for the informants to express the latter. For example, asking "What happened?" before "How do you feel now?"

5. **Sequence the questions** (Cohen & Manion 1994:277)

This refers to using a special kind of questioning technique called ‘Funnelling’, which means asking from general to specific, from broad to narrow. Cohen & Manion quote an example from the study by Sears, Maccoby and Levin:
All babies cry, of course. Some mothers feel that if you pick up a baby every time it cries, you will spoil it. Others think you should never let a baby cry for very long. How do you feel about this? What did you do about it? How about the middle of the night?


6. **Probe & follow-up questions** (Patton 1987:125-126)

The purpose of probing is to deepen the response to a question, to increase the richness of the data being obtained, and to give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired. This can be done through direct questioning of what has just been said, for example, "Could you say something more about that?"; "Can you give a more detailed description of what happened?; "Do you have further examples of this?" Alternatively, a mere nod, or "mm," or just a pause can indicate to the subject to go on with the description. Repeating significant words of an answer can lead to further elaboration (Kvale 1996:133).

7. **Interpret questions** (Kvale 1996:149)

Throughout the interview, the researchers should clarify and extend the meanings of the interviewee’s statements to avoid misinterpretations on their part. Kvale (1996:135) suggests that researchers may use questions like ‘Is it correct that you feel that…….?”; "Does the expression….. cover what you have just expressed?” to allow the interviewees to confirm or disconfirm what has been interpreted by the researchers.

8. **Avoid sensitive questions**

It is advisable to avoid deep questions which may irritate the informants, possibly resulting in an interruption of the interview. Cicourel (1964) agrees that ‘the respondent may well feel uneasy and adopt avoidance tactics if the questioning is too deep.’

9. **Encourage a free rein but maintain control**

The researchers should be prepared to let the interviewees ‘travel’ wherever they like, but a rough checklist of ideas or areas the former want to explore is useful. Palmer (1928:171) suggests that proficient interviewers should be always in control of a conversation which they guide and bend to the service of their research interest.

10. **Establish rapport**

This can be achieved by, for example, respecting the informants’ opinions, supporting their feelings, or recognising their responses. This can also be shown by the researchers’ tone of voice, expressions or even gestures. In addition, Kvale (1996:128) suggests that ‘a good contact is established by attentive listening, with the interviewer showing interest, understanding, and respect for what the subjects say.’ He (1996:148) continues, ‘[a good interview] allows subjects to finish what they are saying, lets them proceed at their own rate of thinking and speaking.’
(B) Other techniques informed by the literature

In addition to questioning techniques, there are other factors which may have an impact on to interview. Cohen & Manion (1994:286) cites Tuckman’s (1972) guidelines for interviewing procedures, as follows:

At the meeting, the interviewer should brief the respondent as to the nature or purpose of the interview (being as candid as possible without biasing responses) and attempt to make the respondent feel at ease. He should explain the manner in which he will be recording responses, and if he plans to tape record, he should get the respondent’s assent. At all times, an interviewer must remember that he is a data collection instrument and try not to let his own biases, opinions, or curiosity affect his behaviour.

Tuckman (1972)

Interviewing the sample group

The in-depth interviews with the sample group were conducted in three different phases.

First phase

The informal conversational interview was used for the first phase. This phase involved individual casual chats with five Hong Kong overseas students. From the conversations with these students, I had the impression that they struggled to cope with their second language when they first arrived, and their ways of coping differed tremendously.

Second phase

With this in mind, I furthered the investigation by conducting a second phase interview. The interviews had a dual purpose: to explore topics for investigation, and to use them as pilot studies. Five more one-to-one interviews with the students in the sample group were carried out, using a mixed interview method – a combination of the informal conversational interview and the general interview guide approach. The interview method was regarded as a mixed one because it only had a very vague checklist and a further exploration of research focus was still needed. The results of this stage of interviewing brought the focus down to language learning strategies, with special attention being paid to learners’ school learning environment and their language problems (For the details of how the focus was narrowed down, please refer to Berry 1998a).

It was found that in-depth interviewing was a very good method in eliciting data from the informants, and that the interviewing techniques suggested by the current literature were found to be very helpful. Additionally, I made several useful discoveries from this ‘hands on’ experience. First, it was helpful to start the interview with a topic the informants felt more comfortable with. Something related to their life in the new school environment was found to be a good starting point for conversations. Second, finding the optimal time for interviewing was important. Interviewing students after a long school day tended to be inappropriate. One student’s interview
had to be cut short because fatigue was noticeable in his after-school interview. While arranging appointments with the students, things such as their school activities, everyday routines, and lessons time-table should be taken into consideration. Third, it was found that these students sometimes gave contradictory information in the interviews. When this happened, reconfirmation of their comments would be needed. Fourth, on some occasions, the interviews were interrupted. To avoid disturbances during the interviews, it would be useful to put a note on the door, stating ‘Interview in progress’.

**Third phase**

This phase was carried out in two different stages, using the general interview guide approach (commonly called guided interview). During these interviews, questions were directed at uncovering information related to the specific focusses derived from the second phase. There were two other purposes in the second stage interviews. The first was to check the reliability of the data collected from the informants in the first interviews. Before the second interviews, the informants were asked to read the transcriptions of their first interview to see if there were any misinterpretations on the part of the researcher. For those students who were less able in English or who found reading English transcriptions daunting, I verbally reported the transcriptions to them in their first language. A few misinterpretations were found and duly corrected. The second purpose of the second interviews was to supplement the first interviews.

From this phase of interview, I identified 9 useful probing techniques for in-depth interviewing, listed and demonstrated in examples, as follows:

- **Contradicting**
  
  This entails deliberately giving an opinion opposite the informant’s one, attempting to arouse his/her further comments.

- **Linking**
  
  Linking up informant's comment with the information which the researcher wants to know.

- **Faking puzzling**
  
  Pretending to be confused, indicating elaboration is needed.

- **Challenging**
  
  Demanding more information to prove the validity of the informant's previous claims.

- **Encouraging**
  
  Giving compliments to encourage the informants to carry on.

- **Showing understanding + allowing time for elaboration**
Making the informant know that his/her comments are understood and treasured + allowing him/her time for further comments.

**Acknowledging**

Repeating the informant’s answer to show attention.

**Direct question**

Asking question to get more information.

**Procuring details**

Asking further questions to see if more information can be obtained.

R - researcher

I - informant

**Example 1:**

R: Why did you decide to further you studies in the UK?

I: The school I attended in Hong Kong was not very good. Also, it is rather difficult to enter a good secondary school there.

R: Which school did you go to when you were in Hong Kong?

I: T S Government Primary School.

R: *[Contradicting]* Isn't it a good school?

I: No. The English standard is low. Chinese is the best subject there.

R: *[Linking]* How was English taught there?

I: It was very different from here (UK). Here, I am asked to write essays. In T S Government Primary School, students were asked to buy their own course books and the teachers taught us chapter by chapter.
R: [Fake puzzling] Is there anything wrong with that?

I: Teaching was slow and our teachers sometimes taught things repeatedly.

Example 2:

I: When I saw some words I didn't understand on the board. I copied them.

R: What did you do afterwards?

I: When I returned to the house, I checked their meaning one by one in the electronic dictionary. Then I studied them.

R: Did this use up a lot of your time?

I: Yes, indeed! I did use a lot of time doing this when I first arrived.

R: [Challenging] I understand that students at your Prep School only have one hour prep time. I bet that after doing all your prep, you didn't have much time for doing this. How did you find time for doing your checking?

I: I did it in my prep time. Students like us (international students who newly arrive) had easier prep. For example, my history teacher let us know the exact paragraphs in the book for the answers. All we needed to do was to write the answers in our own words.

Example 3:

I: ...... I wrote the meaning down.

R: [Procuring details] After writing the meaning down, what else did you do?

I: I read the whole page again to see if I understood it.

R: [Procuring details] Did you do anything else?

I: Not normally......

Example 4:

R: Can I ask what percentage you got in your exams?
I: Maths 81%, English 88%.

R: [Encouraging] Very good.

(Understanding that it is rather unusual for an overseas student to get such high marks in an English exam.)

I: I did not have the same exams as the English students. I did the exam paper set by the EFL Centre.

R: [Showing understanding + allowing time for elaboration] I see.

I: The composition exam was the same as the English students. There were two papers all together. One paper was essay writing and the other was fill in the blanks, etc.

R: [Direct question] How was English tested for the local students?

I: Similar to ours. The papers were set by the teachers.

R: [Acknowledging] Um. Set by the teachers. What were the questions like?

I: Similar to ours. Students were asked to fill in the missing words in the sentences. The sentences were very difficult, somewhat like poems.

Example 5:

I: Yes, I did [I remembered the English which the English boys used].

R: [Encouraging] You were very good! Do you know why you could remember so well?

I: Because I didn't try to remember other things. I remembered more English.

R: [Asking for elaboration] What do you mean?

I: For example, I tried not to remember the unimportant things. Just like.....

Conclusion

To conclude, in-depth interviewing is now widely used in educational research and is generally regarded as a powerful tool in extracting data, in particular qualitative in nature. In-depth interviewing has the distinct features of being an open situation, allowing new research direction to emerge through using techniques such as probing. Researchers who would like to use this
method for data collection are advised to first familiarise themselves with the techniques informed by the literature, followed by having a ‘hands-on’ experience of these techniques. Finally, there are many factors which inevitably differ from one interview to another. To ensure success, researchers should be sensitive to individual situations and allow flexibility in different interviewing circumstances.

INTERVIEWING REFERENCES


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