

Designing your own descriptive research

Earlier in the chapter, you took part in a survey of teaching/learning beliefs. You may, however, still have questions about what surveys are and how you should go about writing good survey items? Those are the issues we will address in this section.

What are surveys?

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SURVEYS are any procedures used to gather and describe the characteristics, attitudes, views, opinions, and so forth of students, teachers, administrators, or any other people who are important to a study. Surveys typically take the form of interviews or questionnaires or both. Naturally, the difference between interviews and questionnaires is that **INTERVIEWS** are done orally in a face-to-face format, on the telephone, or even in groups (as in an interview with a group of students who are not happy with a particular part of a language program), while **QUESTIONNAIRES** are administered in writing to individuals (as in a mailed questionnaire) or members of a group (as in a questionnaire passed out and completed in class).

Interviews are typically made up of fairly open-ended questions, but can be carefully planned in what is called an **INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**. This may involve a list of questions or prompts (sometimes with follow-up questions and prompts) for the interviewer to use when conducting the interview. Questionnaires may also include **OPEN-RESPONSE ITEMS** in the form of fill-in and short-answer questions, but generally speaking, questionnaires are predominantly made up of more **CLOSED-RESPONSE ITEMS** such as Likert scales, multiple-choice, yes-no, and ranking. (For more information on the variety of survey item types, see Brown 2001.)

Interviews are most useful for discovering what the issues are in a particular survey project or even for finding out which questions should be asked. They are, however, very time-consuming. If large-scale information is needed from a great many people, questionnaires are typically a more efficient way of gathering that information. It is not unusual for questionnaire designers to first conduct interviews to help them (a) understand the issues involved, (b) work out the questions to ask, and (c) formulate the items to be included on the questionnaire.

Writing good surveys

Writing good items is the first step in doing survey research. To do this, you need to be very clear about what you want to survey. You may first want to make a clear written statement of what it is you are setting out to accomplish

in your survey and keep that in mind when you are actually writing items. Once you have written the survey, whether it be in the form of an interview schedule or questionnaire, you will also need to get feedback from colleagues on the quality of the items and/or to pilot the survey instrument with participants similar to the ones you will eventually be surveying. You may even want to interview those colleagues or participants after they have gone through the survey instrument to find out what was going on in their minds as they interacted with it.

During the item writing and item revision processes, you may find it useful for you (and your colleagues) to refer to Table 5.5, which gives some suggestions about how to write good survey items. Notice that Table 5.5 is presented in a negative way, that is, it gives a list of things that should be avoided in writing good survey items. The list starts with some self-explanatory things to avoid: (1) overly long items, (2) unclear or ambiguous items, (3) negative items, and (4) incomplete items.

How to write good survey items —
Table 5.5 Things to avoid in writing good survey items

AVOID:

- 1 Overly long items
 - 2 Unclear or ambiguous items
 - 3 Negative items
 - 4 Incomplete items
 - 5 Overlapping choices in items
 - ⑥ Items across two pages
 - ⑦ Double barreled items = items that address more than one issue simultaneously
 - 8 Loaded word items = items that automatically prompt the respondent to answer in one specific way
 - 9 Absolute word items
 - 10 Leading items *Tag-questions*
 - 11 Prestige items *informants lie in order to get prestige*
 - 12 Embarrassing items
 - 13 Biased items *tendentious, prejudiced questions*
 - 14 Items at the wrong level of language
 - 15 Items that respondents are incompetent to answer
 - 16 Assuming that everyone has an answer to all items
 - 17 Making respondents answer items that don't apply
 - 18 Irrelevant items
 - 19 Writing superfluous information into items
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(Adapted from Brown 1997b)

Other things to avoid may need a little explanation. Overlapping choices (5), for instance, are those which occur when the alternatives the respondents see are not independent of one other; that is, they are not mutually exclusive. For example: *another*

The best location for the new foreign languages building would be:

- 3 overlapping options }
 1 In Los Angeles County
 2 In the city of Burbank
 3 In Burbank High School
 4 Other: (specify) _____

In the example, the options are overlapping in the sense that Burbank High School is located in the city of Burbank and in Los Angeles County so the options are not independent. Thus answering such an item can be very confusing.

Items should also be presented so they appear on a single page (6) so respondents will not overlook any part of the item.

Double-barreled items (7) are items that simultaneously address more than one issue. For example:

double-barreled items } The State of Hawaii should spend more on education (especially bilingual education) and less on prisons. (3 items)

Agree _____ Disagree _____ Don't know _____

In this example, the question actually contains three questions that could be asked separately: questions about (a) spending on education, (b) money for prisons, and (c) funds for bilingual education.

Loaded words (8) are words or phrases that prompt the respondent to automatically answer in a positive or negative way, usually because they are weighted in an emotionally loaded way. For example:

emotional loaded } Naturally, Hawaiian is the language to study if you live in Hawaii.

Agree _____ Disagree _____ Don't know _____

In the example, the word 'naturally' is emotionally loaded.

Words that express an absolute (9) can be particularly problematic—words such as 'all', 'every', 'always', 'never', etc. For example, the question 'All Americans are rich' provokes a negative response because most people recognize that absolute statements including words like 'all' are false.

Leading questions (10) are questions that openly push respondents to answer in a particular way. For example: 'You don't believe in the old-fashioned notion of grammar-translation, do you?'

Prestige questions (11) can also be problematic. For example, when asked point-blank, many respondents may maintain that their speaking ability in a language is better than it actually is or that they read more pages per day than they actually do because it is perceived that those are the prestigious ways to answer.

Embarrassing questions (12) are questions that some groups of respondent might find embarrassing. For example, some respondents might find questions containing sexually explicit words to be objectionable.

Biased questions (13) are questions that indicate bias or prejudice against a particular group of people. Such biases may be based on age, ethnic background, gender, national origin, race, religion, or any other characteristics about which people may be sensitive.

Other types of questions that should be avoided are questions at the wrong level of language (14) and questions that participants are incompetent to answer (15). In addition, it is best to avoid (16) assuming that everyone has an answer to all questions, (17) making participants answer questions that don't apply to them, (18) using irrelevant questions, and (19) giving superfluous information in questions.

Exercise 5.17

Have a look at the questions that follow in light of the guidelines provided in the previous section (including Table 5.5). List any problems that you see in questions 1 through 5.

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
ex. All teachers should use the same teaching method.	4	3	2	1
1 Grammar is obviously a worthwhile component for any curriculum. <i>loaded words</i>	4	3	2	1
2 Pennsylvania Dutch teachers are often boring. <i>embarrassing</i>	4	3	2	1
3 Funding for education (especially language teaching) is more important than funding for the military. <i>double barred</i>	4	3	2	1
4 The one grammarian who has not influenced language teachers is not Chomsky. <i>leading negative</i>	4	3	2	1
5 The space race was clearly won by the Russians. <i>loaded word</i>	4	3	2	1