

6.4 Interviews

The second qualitative method of inquiry to be described in this chapter is conducting interviews. Interviewing is a frequent part of the social life surrounding most of us: we can hear interviews on the radio, watch people being interviewed on television, and we ourselves often participate in interviews of various types either as interviewers or interviewees. As Miller and Crabtree (1999) point out, the interview genre with its turn-taking conventions and expectations for participant roles, etiquettes, and even linguistic phrases is usually shared cultural knowledge. It is exactly because interviewing is a known communication routine that the method works so well as a versatile research instrument—in fact, although there is a range of qualitative research techniques available for researchers, the interview is the most often used method in qualitative inquiries. It is regularly applied in a variety of applied linguistic contexts for diverse purposes. (See for example, Block 2000; Richards 2003; Rubio 1997.)

There are different types of interviews: the highly structured version shares many similarities with quantitative written questionnaires and therefore it will be discussed here only very briefly. The typical qualitative interview is a one-to-one ‘professional conversation’ (Kvale 1996: 5) that has a structure and a purpose ‘to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena’ (pp. 5–6)—this section will concern primarily this interview type. In subsequent sections (Sections 6.5 and 6.6.2) we will also look at two specialized interviewing techniques: ‘focus group interviews’, which involve a group format, and ‘retrospective interviews’, which come under the umbrella term of ‘introspective methods’.

After reviewing the main interview types, this section will focus largely on the two practical aspects of conducting interview research: (a) how to prepare the ‘interview guide’ (i.e. the list of questions to use during the interview), and (b) how to conduct the actual interview. (For further discussions, see Kvale 1996; Patton 2002; Richards 2003.)

6.4.1 Main types of interviews

One-to-one interviews can be divided into different types according to the degree of structure in the process and whether there are single or multiple interview sessions. Let us start with the latter, less often mentioned aspect.

Single or multiple sessions

The typical qualitative interview is a one-off event lasting about 30–60 minutes. However, as Polkinghorne (2005) argues, one-shot interviews are rarely able to produce the full and rich descriptions necessary for worthwhile findings. Drawing on Seidman’s work he recommends that researchers administer a sequence of three interviews with the same participant to obtain

sufficient depth and breadth. The first interview breaks the ice and develops rapport, while also providing a quick sweep of the areas to be investigated later. The interval between the first and the second interviews allows the interviewer to prepare a more made-to-measure interview guide for the second session and it also offers the interviewee the chance to think more deeply about the experience. As a result, the second interview is more focused than the first. Finally, having analysed the transcripts of the first two sessions, in the third interview the researcher can ask any 'mop-up' or follow-up questions to fill in and to clarify the account.

It must be noted that the multiple session format outlined here is not the same as a longitudinal interview study (see Section 4.4) because the purpose of the three sessions is not to document temporal changes but to arrive at a full account. In a longitudinal interview study the multiple sessions would need to be organized differently, with the first one or two interviews creating the baseline knowledge and the subsequent, regularly occurring interviews focusing on how and why the particular phenomenon under study changes.

Structured interviews

The second main categorizing principle of interviews is the degree of structure in them, with one extreme being the 'structured interview'. In this format, the researcher follows a pre-prepared, elaborate 'interview schedule/guide', which contains a list of questions to be covered closely with every interviewee, and the elicited information shares many of the advantages (for example, comparability across participants) and disadvantages (for example, limited richness) of questionnaire data. Such tightly controlled interviews ensure that the interviewee focuses on the target topic area and that the interview covers a well-defined domain, which makes the answers comparable across different respondents. The other side of the coin is, however, that in a structured interview there is generally little room for variation or spontaneity in the responses because the interviewer is to record the responses according to a coding scheme. There is also very little flexibility in the way questions are asked because by adopting a standardized format it is hoped that nothing will be left to chance. This interview type is appropriate when the researcher is aware of what he/she does not know and can frame questions that will yield the needed answers. That is, structured interviews are used in situations where a written questionnaire would in theory be adequate except that for some reason the written format is not feasible (for example, because of the low level of literacy amongst the participants or the need for tighter control as in some market research surveys or opinion polls).

Unstructured interviews

The other extreme, the 'unstructured interview' (sometimes also referred to as the 'ethnographic interview'), allows maximum flexibility to follow the interviewee in unpredictable directions, with only minimal interference from the research agenda. The intention is to create a relaxed atmosphere in which the

respondent may reveal more than he/she would in formal contexts, with the interviewer assuming a listening role. No detailed interview guide is prepared in advance, although the researcher usually thinks of a few (1–6) opening questions (sometimes called ‘grand tour’ questions) to elicit the interviewee’s story. During the interview, the researcher may ask an occasional question for clarification and may give reinforcement feedback as any good communication partner would to keep the interview moving, but interruptions are kept to a minimum.

It is easy to see that for an unstructured interview to be successful it is indispensable that the interviewer establishes very good rapport with the interviewee. This kind of interview is most appropriate when a study focuses on the deep meaning of particular phenomena or when some personal historical account of how a particular phenomenon has developed is required. In-depth interviews can also be used where exploratory work is required before a more focused (for example, quantitative) study can be carried out.

Semi-structured interviews

In applied linguistic research most interviews conducted belong to the ‘semi-structured interview’ type, which offers a compromise between the two extremes: Although there is a set of pre-prepared guiding questions and prompts, the format is open-ended and the interviewee is encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner. In other words, the interviewer provides guidance and direction (hence the ‘-structured’ part in the name), but is also keen to follow up interesting developments and to let the interviewee elaborate on certain issues (hence the ‘semi-’ part). Because of the great popularity of this interview format, most of the following recommendations on question wording and interview conduct will be geared at semi-structured interviews in particular.

The semi-structured interview is suitable for cases when the researcher has a good enough overview of the phenomenon or domain in question and is able to develop broad questions about the topic in advance but does not want to use ready-made response categories that would limit the depth and breadth of the respondent’s story. This format therefore needs an ‘interview guide’ which has to be made and piloted in advance. Usually, the interviewer will ask the same questions of all of the participants, although not necessarily in the same order or wording, and would supplement the main questions with various probes.