

Survey-Based Research

In outlining the use of surveys in educational and social science research, Krathwohl (1998) notes that “while highly sophisticated interviewing and/or instrumentation is often involved, basically surveys involve getting reactions to questions or other stimuli from a representative sample of a target group, to which the researcher expects to generalize” (p. 352). In fact, a variety of data elicitation methods can be used to conduct survey-based research with second language learners, including open-ended questionnaires, closed-item questionnaires, interviews, or any combination of these. Thus, the data elicited may be categorized as either qualitative or quantitative. This chapter discusses questionnaires and interviews, briefly describing them as instruments before going on to discuss them in terms of the naturalistic data, prompted production, and prompted responses they can elicit. A range of different topics addressed through survey-based research is also discussed.

Questionnaires are one of the most common methods of collecting data on attitudes and opinions from large groups of participants. There are a number of different types of questionnaires, and they have been used to investigate a wide variety of questions in second language research. Questionnaires are generally written instruments that present all participants with the same series of questions or statements, which the participants then react to either through providing written answers, making Likert-style judgments, or selecting options from a series of statements. In addition to directly targeting learners’ linguistic knowledge, some questionnaires allow researchers to gather information that learners are able to report about themselves, such as their beliefs and motivations about learning or their reactions to classroom instruction and activities—information that is typically not available from production data alone.

Interviews are another survey-based method of eliciting L2 data, commonly used to obtain information about language learners and their language

use. As with questionnaires, there are many different types of interviews, ranging from highly structured encounters to those that resemble casual conversations. Data collected via interviews, whether structured or unstructured, have been exploited in a great deal of research, often providing contexts in which target linguistic structures may be elicited to answer particular research questions.

Generally speaking, questionnaires and interviews can be employed to collect three types of data about language learners: factual, behavioral, and attitudinal.¹ Factual questions may include information about age, gender, socioeconomic status, language learning history, and a variety of other types of background information that can help researchers to interpret research results more accurately. Most studies in SLA include a background questionnaire of this type for learners (often known as a biodata questionnaire), and researchers sometimes follow up on this source of information by using interviews to expand on particular topics or to clarify details (e.g., about the sorts of instruction learners have experienced previously). Behavioral questions, in turn, are utilized to collect data related to learners' lifestyles, habits, and actions (e.g., their strategies for learning vocabulary). Finally, attitudinal questions are used to elicit data on learners' attitudes, beliefs, opinions, interests, and values. For example, researchers may ask about learners' attitudes toward classroom instruction or toward the language they are learning.

Specialized types of questionnaires have also been developed to address specific research areas or questions. For example, as discussed in chapter 6, discourse completion tasks have been used to investigate interlanguage pragmatics. In order to complete them, learners are asked to provide written responses that convey what they would say in a variety of situations requiring L2 pragmatic knowledge. The sections that follow discuss the types of data that can be gathered through survey-based research in naturalistic settings, from prompted production items, and from prompted responses.

7.1. NATURALISTIC DATA

As discussed in previous chapters, naturalistic data in second language research are defined as observations and recordings of learners' speech (or body language) in naturalistic settings. Situations for naturalistic data collection may involve spontaneous interactions between learners and their peers, fami-

¹Dörnyei (2003) describes these three types of information in his comprehensive text on questionnaires, which includes a classification of different types and provides examples of how questionnaires are utilized in research.

lies, friends, and others outside the classroom, but they may take place inside authentic classrooms as well. Observations are sometimes carried out as a means of triangulating data collected through surveys, and vice versa. This process is illustrated in Box 7.1, which describes a study that used interviews and questionnaires to triangulate data gained through observations.

Box 7.1: A Study Using Participant Observation, Unstructured Interviews, and Questionnaires

Jasso-Aguilar, R. (1999). Sources, methods and triangulation in needs analysis: A critical perspective in a case study of Waikiki hotel maids. *English for Specific Purposes*, 18, 27–46.

This study describes the process of conducting a needs analysis for English lessons for hotel maids. The author utilized participant observation, unstructured interviews, and questionnaires to triangulate diverse sources of data related to the maids' English-language needs on the job.

Five participant observations were conducted in which the researcher observed the tasks and situations that the hotel maids routinely faced while carrying out their duties. The main data collection methods during these observations were tape-recording and note-taking. In order to experience the workers' language needs for herself, the researcher also chose to be trained as a new housekeeper at the onset of the observation process. In the unstructured interviews that Jasso-Aguilar conducted and tape-recorded, she asked questions about any issues that tended to arise in relation to the maids' low English proficiency and also talked with the participants about their families and lives outside the workplace. Additionally, housekeepers and their co-workers filled out questionnaires that asked about their English proficiency, whether they spoke English at work, and what they would like to learn in an English class, for example. The following is an excerpt from one of the unstructured interviews:

- Researcher: Do you think that ... to do your work, you need to speak English very well?
- Josy: No (without hesitation) ... you mean the housekeepers?
- Researcher: Yes, for example, for your job ... how much do you use English?
- Josy: Ah ... (she keeps working while she seems to be thinking).
- Researcher: That you have to use ... English.
- Josy: You have to (repeating my words) ... Ah! (seems to suddenly remember) because talk ... the guest yeah? But ... they don't understand too English yeah? They say "yes yes yes" ... you know the Chinese, like that ...
- Researcher: And does that sometimes create problems?
- Josy: Yeah problem ... because they don't understand the ... (p. 40)

Through her triangulation of data collection methods, Jasso-Aguilar discovered that different sources revealed different perceptions about the need for English. Whereas participant observation was crucial for gaining insights, the questionnaires used in this study turned out to be less useful in terms of providing information on the housekeepers' actual tasks and language needs. In addition, in comparing her findings with the predictions of a hotel task force (also in the process of performing a needs analysis to design an English course for the hotel maids), Jasso-Aguilar found that some of the task force's intuitions about hypothetical situations and language needs could not be confirmed.

7.2. PROMPTED PRODUCTION (OPEN-ENDED ITEMS)

Just as types of questionnaires may differ, so too do the items that appear on them. At least two types of questionnaire items can be identified: open-ended and closed-ended. Open-ended questions allow respondents to answer in any manner they see fit, letting them express their thoughts and ideas in their own manner, and thus potentially resulting in less predictable and more insightful data. An example of an open-ended question might be: "Describe ways that you have found to be successful in learning a second language." Box 7.2 describes a survey-based study that employed a questionnaire with open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions and some of the overall characteristics of both types of questionnaires are discussed in the next section.

Box 7.2: A Study Using Interviews and a Questionnaire Containing Open-Ended Items

Graham, S. J. (2004). Giving up on modern foreign languages? Students' perceptions of learning French. *The Modern Language Journal*, 88, 171–191.

In a study designed to investigate English students' attitudes toward French, as well as their perceptions about the reasons for students' levels of achievement in French, Graham used questionnaires containing both open-ended and closed-ended items, followed by interviews in which the students elaborated on their responses.

Learners of French ($N = 1,188$) in three academic year groups from 10 educational institutions in the south of England participated in the study. The students ranged in age from 16 to 19, and a slightly different questionnaire was developed for each year group in consideration of the British examinations that they had taken or were about to take. In the questionnaire, the participants were asked to respond in one of the following three ways, depending on each individual question: (a) by circling a number on a 6-point scale (closed-ended), (b) by circling an appropriate response to a Yes/No/Not Sure item (closed-ended), or

(c) by providing explanations or reasons in their own words (open-ended). Data from the interviews were used to triangulate the findings indicated in the analysis of the questionnaire data. The following are some examples of the open-ended items employed (pp. 190–191):

Items common to Year 11, 12, and 13 questionnaires

2. Please complete the following statements.

(a) When I do well in French, it's usually because _____

(b) When I don't do so well in French, it's usually because _____

Items from the Year 11 questionnaire

9a. Do you hope to study French at AS- or A-level? Yes/No/Not Sure (ring one)

9b. Please explain your reasons.

Item from the Year 12 questionnaire

14. Why did you choose to study French at AS-level?

In addition to item 9b, there were other open-ended questions that required the participants to provide reasons for their choices of answers on particular closed-ended items. For instance, one Year 11 female student circled the number 4 on a 6-point scale regarding her level of achievement in French and explained her choice as follows: "I know even tho [sic] I am achieving [sic] high grades that I have v. poor ability in writing/speaking/understanding French" (p. 179). She then elaborated on this in her interview.

In brief, Graham was able to find through these survey-based methods that there were relationships between students' attributions of success and their levels of achievement. For instance, students who saw their success as being due to effort, ability, and learning strategies tended to achieve at higher levels, whereas students who did not succeed in their French studies tended to overlook the possible role of learning strategies, instead attributing their lack of achievement to low ability and task difficulty.

7.3. PROMPTED RESPONSES (CLOSED-ENDED ITEMS)

In a closed-ended item on a questionnaire, it is the researcher who determines the possible range of responses. Closed-item questions lead to answers that can be easily quantified and analyzed. They typically involve greater uniformity of measurement and therefore greater reliability in terms of the data obtained. An example of a closed-item question might be: "How many hours a week did you study to pass this test? Circle one: 2 or less, 3, 4, 5, or 6 or more." An example of a questionnaire with closed-ended items comes from a study by Takahashi (2005), as summarized in Box 7.3.

Box 7.3: A Study Using Questionnaires With Closed-Ended Items

Takahashi, S. (2005). Pragmalinguistic awareness: Is it related to motivation and proficiency? *Applied Linguistics*, 26, 90–120.

In a study designed to explore Japanese EFL students' awareness of L2 pragmalinguistic features, Takahashi made use of awareness retrospection questionnaires as well as a motivation questionnaire. Through these survey-based methods, Takahashi was able to investigate the relationships between learners' awareness of target features (biclausal request forms, which had been provided as implicit input) and two other variables of interest: motivation and proficiency.

The data collection process, involving 80 Japanese EFL students, included a motivation questionnaire, a proficiency test (the listening- and reading-comprehension sections of the General Tests of English Language Proficiency), three treatment sessions, and two awareness retrospection questionnaires, one completed immediately after the second treatment session and the other immediately after the third treatment session. The following is the 7-point scale that was used to operationalize awareness on the awareness retrospection questionnaires (p. 98):

- 3 = I did not detect it at all (and thus was not interested in it at all).
- 2 = I did detect it but was hardly interested in it.
- 1 = I did detect it but was not so interested in it.
- 0 = I did detect it but cannot say whether I was interested in it or not.
- +1 = I did detect it and was a little interested in it.
- +2 = I did detect it and was interested in it.
- +3 = I did detect it and was very interested in it.

Takahashi found that learners noticed the targeted pragmalinguistic features to differing extents, suggesting the influence of individual differences. She also noted that, although the learners' awareness was not correlated with proficiency, it was correlated with their degree of intrinsic motivation.

The questions asked on a questionnaire obviously depend on the research questions being addressed in the study. For example, in qualitative research that is relatively unstructured at the outset, it may be more appropriate to ask open-ended questions and allow the participants' responses to guide hypothesis formation. Once hypotheses are formulated, researchers can then ask closed-ended questions to focus on concepts and themes that have emerged as important. As shown in the example study in Box 7.2, questionnaires need not be solely closed- or open-ended, but can blend different question types depending on the purposes of the research and on what has

previously been learned about the research phenomenon. For a more in-depth discussion of these considerations, as well as a practical guide to the use of questionnaires in second language research, Dörnyei's (2003) text provides many helpful recommendations, as well as a list of published questionnaires that illustrate the impressive range of research that has been carried out using this approach.