

Semi-structured interviews | analysis



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An exploratory use of semi-structured interviews

Introduction

This essay reports my understandings of interview as a qualitative research method and the experience of an exploratory use of it. Considering the broad research area of my PhD study, learning and assessment, the key knowledge I am going to reveal will be learners' own perceptions of their learning. Some data could probably be excavated from the products of their learning, such as learning logs, workbooks, or teachers' feedbacks, that indicate their experiences and evaluations of their learn. If the data are insufficient, however, I have to carried out interviews to gather the data needed. As a result, I chose semi-structured interview as the method I would try out for this assignment.

The usability of semi-structured interviews

There are many types of interviews which are differentiated by how much the interviews are structured and how many participants are involved in one interview (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Punch, 2005) . Although interviews are basically “ asking questions and receiving answers” using the media of language, different types of interview are based on different assumptions (Punch, 2005, p. 169) . Mason (2002, pp. 63-66) points out that the choice of semi-structured interviews is probably an indicator to the following beliefs and reasons:

1. People's understandings, feelings, perceptions and other inner thoughts as well as the interactions with other people are parts of the social reality.

2. This reality could be revealed by representations and interpretations through language.
3. What has been revealed is situational knowledge which will be more likely to be reconstructed under its due context. In appropriate design, the desired context could be brought into the interview conversations.
4. Qualitative interviews do not aim to standardise but to achieve more in terms of “ depth, nuance, complexity, and roundedness” of what is to be understood.
5. Interviewing is a “ process of data generation” and the interviewer plays an “ active and reflexive” role in it.
6. Interviewees should have more controls and freedoms throughout the interview interactions.

Taking Mason’s view, if a research shares part or all of the above descriptions, it would find appropriate to employ semi-structured interviews as a data generation method. The exploratory inquiry I have carried out is exactly one of these cases.

Conducting the interview

After listening to me talking about my teaching experiences in and viewpoint on Taiwanese schools, a British fellow student, George (name changed) said he believes that there should be different types of schools. This response kindled my curiosity because he was the third British people who concluded our conversation in such idea that quickly transcends the dichotomy of good or bad. This rarely happened while I was involving in similar conversations in Taiwan. I wonder how his belief on education was formed. So I invited him to participant my interview, and he agreed.

The themes and the participants

I chose this theme and this participants to interview based on a pragmatic consideration. There are limited people conveniently available to be interviewed by me and there are also a few themes related to my research, but it will be a meaningful inquiry only if any of these people has something to say about any of those themes. When they are matched, the interview is more likely to be made enjoyable to the participant and, thus, will be more ethical, too (Mason, 2002)â. My invitations of interview had been refused twice until I luckily identified the current participant matched with the current theme.

Questions for the interview

I then made a plan of interviewing consisting with three parts. At the beginning, I would remind George of our previous conversation by recapitulating it. After confirming that he remembered it, too, I would raise my initial question: what did you mean exactly by “ I believe there should be different kinds of schools” in our previous conversation? I expected this question to bring back the context of our previous talk, and clarify his own interpretation of that expression.

Secondly, I would explain that the key question of this interview is “ how do you think this belief was form?” And I would ask further questions according to George’s responses explore more deeply until the answer satisfies me or noting a scent of George’s having nothing or not willing to go further on this topic.

Finally, I would invite him to comment on one the Summerhill School, as well as to estimate how many British share similar beliefs with him by his own

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perception. I expected his commenting on one of the most extreme cases of schooling in England and self-positioning among others could help me revealing more of his stance of educational philosophy.

Recording

I have also considered the technique used to record the interview. The choice of recording method was subject to both the availability of equipment and the purpose which the interview would be analysed for.

Considering that the interviewee would be reflecting on his comment on my previous talk from the aspects affected by my questions, the content of the interview conversation would probably not exist yet and I would be involved in the process of its generation. The value I hold prior to the interview would constrain my aspect to perceive the conversation and. Therefore, I need the spoken words and their sequences in the conversation to be recorded independently from my judgement.

I thought a voice recorder would do the job well. Voice recording, like other recording method, could only partially record the interview (Mason, 2002; Silverman, 2001) , nevertheless, the voice record could be replayed as many times as I need and it also keeps the original sequences of conversation which set each single sentence into the context (Silverman, 2001) . That would enable me to analyse the conversation with perspectives that I was hardly to have while interviewing.

Interviewing

The interview was taken place in the ground floor at 35 Berkeley Squire with coffee and snacks during lunch time and lasted about 30 minutes.

After some small talk, a common start of interviewing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) , I turned on the voice recorder, shifted the topic to the conversation we had had and asked him to explain more about what he meant by “ I believe there should be different types of schools?”

His answers are firstly that “ no child is the same some child[ren] will do better in one sort of schools” and secondly that “ if you got lots of schools, you got lots of experiments...assuming you can compare them then you can get some interesting findings.... In the UK we have lots of different schools within our education, and that difference will not be necessarily a bad thing, that could be a good thing.”

Then, when I asked about how his belief was formed? He give me a general, rational description of the advantages of having various types of school. This though provided a deeper explain of his thought but still not sufficed what I was seeking for, so I asked him in another way that “ in what age you began to see education in this way?”

Instead of answering my question, George wondered whether I wanted to put his thoughts in the very personal context. After my affirmation, he then continued to tell me that he has followed his own way since “ quite early age”. He chose to teach, which most graduate and also his family won't considered as a good job, in the UK and soon went to teach in a developing country.

How early do you mean by “ quite early age?” I asked.

“ Probably sort of I went to secondary school,” he said, “ it’s your education environment encourages sorts of ways of thinking....”

Are there any one else told you about this sort of ideas? I followed.

“ I was in a boarding school and we had what we call house master..... I have quite lot of contact with this person, he ...[told us] not to accept what the state or other people said [without questions]...[this has] the impact on me and other people...]” he answered.

Since he mentioned the boarding school, I then jump and ask him about his opinions on Summerhill school which was in the third part of my original plan.

Though he made it clear that “ I am not saying that Summerhill should be closed or any thing like that and I have not been to the Summerhill school so I can’t comment on it”, he maintained that “ I think children need to be systematically taught[if] children just be left too do what they want to do ... for children who have certain personality that could be generally quite good thing, for other children it could be absolutely disaster ... there is sort of children need quite lot of structure.”

I have sensed that George was making the judgement based on some tacit value which was slightly different from the articulated beliefs. This added more tense into our conversation and made it more meaningful to me. So I pointed this difference out and shared my experience of similar discussions in Taiwan.

Responding to my comment, George raised a new topic. Despite many developing countries, probably including Taiwan, blindly copy the western education into theirs, there must be some good in theirs that worth the western educations to learn. We talked about this topic for a while (that was very interesting, too) then I ask him the final question about his estimation of how many British share similar views with him.

Experience of this interview

My question has been answered satisfactorily by this interview in most extent, and there are several things I can learn from it. My experiences might be organised into the following two aspects.

Preparations

Carefully preparations in advance are helpful and essential. I found that to acquaint my self with the theme, including the plan of asking questions, the relevant cases such as the Summerhill school and my experiences in Taiwan, have indeed facilitated the management of the conversation to involve the participants as much as possible but still keep it focused. Voice recorder also need to be tested in advance. I found my voice recorder set in a wrong mode which ruined the first ten minutes of my recording and I had to interrupt to conversation and corrected it.

Interviewing as a conversation

Semi-structured interviews are not just data collection tools but data generation events. I assumed that my experiences in Taiwan and perhaps my attitude toward these experiences triggered our discussion on copying education from other countries. If I did not share these experiences, I would probably get different interview data.

Apart from the interviewer, the interviewee has his own intention in the interview conversation. George wanted to know what these questions for (thus he confirmed my research context before answering) and he also has assumptions about how I might interpret his words (thus he maintained his scepticism over the uncritical appreciation of western education).

In this point, I would agree what Bogdan and Biklen (2003) suggest on an effective and comfortable approach to do interviewing: explain to the interviewee all necessary information about myself and my inquiry like we might do to an expert. This will facilitate the understanding to the others of both participants, which is the centre part of interviews. and give the interviewee more control over how his view was understood, which could be seen clearly in my case.

Conclusions

From the exploratory interview and several interview related chapters (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Mason, 2002; Punch, 2005; Silverman, 2001) , I found semi-structured interviews as a qualitative research method is good at

a) revealing “ people’s knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, [and] experiences” (Mason, 2002, p. 63) , especially their situational aspects;

b) giving interviewees opportunities to actively participate in and have some control over the interviews.

However, when involving interviews, it is worth being cautious that

- a) the power (or other kinds of) relationship(s) between interviewer and interviewee have to be counted as part of the context which the interviews has been set in, otherwise, it might turn up with unexpected or even distorted result;
- b) one to one interviewing has some but limited ability to create a desirable context, particularly, in researches looking at people's interactions or how people respond in social context, where group interviewing might be a more powerful approach.
- c) interviewees might just say what they want to let us know rather than what we intent to know;
- d) the represent-ability of any reality might be constrain by the capability of language of both interviewers and interviewees and, when looking at those past things, affected by the accuracy of interviewees' memory. The complexity of the connection between language and reality is itself also an issue needs further inspections.
- e) method of interview has little validity over people's behaviour which might more appropriately be gathered by observations or document analyses.

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