

The Development of Interview Techniques in Language Studies: Facilitating the Researchers' Views on Interactive Encounters

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Abstract

In a more complex and dynamic world, it is important to have knowledge of research methods in order to understand our internal and external environments. This paper aims to outline different ways of approaching research into language studies and mainly provides an introduction to one of them, the interview. As interviewing is one of the main data collection methods in qualitative research as well as one of the most powerful ways to understand other people, we explore its salient features and some issues surrounding its application. This paper begins by sketching out different research approaches and then describing the nature of the interview, its typology and types in terms of the degree of structure. Subsequent parts consider ethical and practical considerations in interpersonal interviews. The final section includes our reflections on actual interviews and touches on two additional interests.

Keywords: research methods, qualitative research, interview techniques in language studies

1. Introduction

Research is a process of obtaining information and understanding issues (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). There are many different approaches to conducting research projects in language studies and each methodological approach is probably situated within a quantitative or qualitative research approach. Surveys, tests, structured interviews, laboratory experiments, and non-participant observations are usually employed in quantitative methods and participant observation, unstructured interviews or life histories in qualitative methods (Bryman, 1988; Scalon, 2000). According to Oppenheim (1992), as there is no single approach to be necessarily superior, choosing a research method depends on the purpose and the type of question of research. Although the two approaches are categorized as different research methods, there is no reason to see quantitative and qualitative methods as mutually exclusive in terms of triangulation. In practice, a particular study may employ a combination of approaches depending on the research purposes and context. For example, it would be possible to combine interviews and a questionnaire in one research instrument thus benefiting from the advantages of both methods. Another possibility could be observation with a questionnaire, because an observation usually takes a great deal of patience and time sitting and waiting for data to be generated, whereas a questionnaire survey can give immediate rewards.

2. The Nature of the Interview

2.1 Interview as a Speech Event

An interview has been defined as a conversation between interviewer and interviewee with a purpose (Dexter, 1970; Moser & Kalton, 1971) or as "a guided conversation" (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, p. 2). In describing a "speech event" (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 69) or "conversational encounters" (ibid., p. 153), there is a basic concern with asking questions and receiving answers. It is not a normal conversation, however. There is much more to it in a qualitative research context (Dunne et al., 2005). What makes the interview different from a conversation is that it is designed for a specific purpose (Keats, 2000). For example, Cohen (1976) points out that an interview requires careful preparation, much patience, and considerable practice as it constitutes a type of fishing to enter the interviewee's world or understand their construction of reality, which cannot be observed

directly.

There is a wide range of approaches to the interview, but there is no single way of interviewing that is appropriate for all situations and probably no single way of wording questions that will always work. Although acknowledging that there is no recipe for effective interviewing and no rigid interview guide, Patton (1987) offers useful interview guidelines and Bell (1999) provides an interview checklist including issues of access, location, timing, communication, recording, and exit.

2.2 Interview Typology

There is a range of different interview typologies, which are frequently categorized in relation to their structures (Pole & Lampard, 2002). In Dunne et al.'s study (2005), the interview is categorized as possessing five continua: formal/informal; structured/unstructured; individual/group; one-off/sequential; public/private along the context, conditions, and approaches to the interview. In light of degree of formality, there are three basic approaches to the interview (see Cohen et al., 2000; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Nunan, 1992; Patton, 1980, 1987) or two headings: structured and unstructured interviews (Burgess, 1984; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995).

Whichever typology is used, however, the main dimensions of this variation are dependent upon the degree of structure in the interview and how deep the interview tries to go (Punch, 2005). Whether a researcher decides to take a highly structured or, a loosely structured approach to interviewing will depend on a number of technical factors e.g., research purposes, questions (see Pole & Lampard, 2002), and this will influence the practical aspects of the interview and how she or he manages the process. There is a continuum between the two extremes, 'structured' and 'unstructured', but many researchers deploy a combination of the two approaches during the same interview. In a sense, the extent to which a semi-structured interview is structured varies from case to case.

2.3 Two Types of Interview

In practice, interviews have a certain degree of structure (Gillham, 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), so the two most common interview types are to be overviewed in terms of their structure in this section.

2.3.1 Structured Interview

The structured interview is the most formal type and it is characterized by its high degree of control over the interview situation. The agenda is totally predetermined by the researcher with a list of set questions in a predetermined order. In this respect, the structured interview is close to the questionnaire in both form and the assumptions underlying its use. As Clarke (1999) points out, the primary purpose in selecting a research method is to gather data that will help to provide answers to the evaluation questions, so the structured interview may be of most value to the researcher when basic straightforward data is needed quickly for purposes of evaluation (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). It is also used to form a basis of generalization, that is, statements about a large number of cases. It is true to say that a large sample is likely to be more reliable than a small one, and Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) emphasize that a structured interview can greatly reduce the possibility of interviewer effect or bias. Consequently, the effort to sustain an objective approach to data collection is deemed valid and reliable. Because of its completely formalized approach, however, the interviewer is likely to behave to a large extent as 'an asking machine' and also it may be impractical to use large numbers because of constraints of time, energy, and cost.

2.3.2 Semi-Structured Interview

A semi-structured interview is a key technique as a much more flexible version of the structured interview in real-world research (Gillham, 2000). It is a short, preliminary, investigative study to explore in more depth by means of a variety of techniques, such as probing, establishing rapport, and so on. In a semi-structured interview, interviewers have a general idea of where the interview should go and what should come out of it, however interviewees are encouraged to set the agenda of the interview and given a degree of power over the course of the interview (Nunan, 1992), so the interview progress is determined largely by the individual interviewee. In this respect, the semi-structured interview approach allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to expand on the interviewee's responses. Researchers, in particular, who work within an interpretive research tradition are in favor of the semi-structured interview because of its flexibility (Nunan, 1992). The interactive nature of the interview is not only highly flexible but also somewhat unpredictable (Byrne, 2004), so semi-structured interviews could be a "high-preparation, high-risk, high-gain, and high-analysis operation" (Wengraf, 2001, p. 5).

2.4 Characteristics of Interview Participants

The interview represents an interaction among three elements: the interviewer, the interviewee, and the context

of the interview (Verma & Mallick, 1999). In this section, characteristics of interview participants (both the interviewer and the interviewee) will be described briefly.

2.4.1 Interviewer as a Research Instrument

There is a need for the interviewer to be self-aware about their position in the research from the outset, in designing research, collecting data, making interpretations, and doing the writing up (Dunne et al., 2005). Especially, qualitative interviewing is a skilled process in which interviewers need to develop their ability to listen carefully to what they are being told, and therefore, the quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent upon the interviewer (Patton, 1987). However, in a qualitative interview, the interviewers accumulate information as well as deepen understanding, so they should be responsive (Richards, 2003). Thompson (1988) also indicates that the successful interviewer must possess some essential qualities, such as an interest in and respect for people, the ability to show understanding, and, above all, a willingness to listen. In Fowler's (1993) five aspects of interviewer behavior, the interviewer should attempt to standardize how to present the research objectives and the task. The interviewer needs to know how the interview is flowing and what techniques are appropriate for the direction of the interview. Additionally, they also need to offer a number of paralinguistic clues e.g., dress code, intonation, degree of turn-taking, seating arrangements.

2.4.2 Interviewee as a Source of Data

As the purpose of most interviews is to obtain information of certain kinds, it is mainly the interviewees' role to provide answers and give accounts in their own voices by using their own language (Byrne, 2004). The most important determinant both of respondent rate and of the quality of the responses is their willingness to answer the questions. Interviewees may or may not have particular information or they may have it but be unable or unwilling to communicate it (Oppenheim, 1992) or they may not answer every question, all of which provide a degree of control over the interview or some protection from over-inquisitive researchers (King, 1996). It is more important that the interviewees see the study as being worthwhile and their cooperation as being important. It is true to say that interviewees have little direct influence upon the research agenda compared to the researcher. However, the total interview experience must be seen in terms of the interaction of the two: interviewer and interviewee.

3. Issues of Interviewing

In the previous sections of this paper, what constitutes an interview, what types of interviews there are, who is doing the interview, and who is being interviewed were described. In this section, three issues with the interview will be sketched out.

3.1 Ethical Issues

Ethical issues surrounding data collection through interviews is vital in designing and conducting research. Oppenheim (1992) emphasizes that the central ethical issue of interviewing is that no harm or damage should come to the respondents as a result of their participation in the research. Ethical issues normally arise when the ambitious researcher unwittingly puts pressure on people to become participants (Gray, 2004), or when she or he does not ensure that gatekeepers refrain from putting pressure on the participants. Thus, the respondents' right to anonymity and confidentiality and the right to refuse to answer certain questions should never be ignored.

Another key ethical issue is informed consent. The researcher should strive to obtain the permission of individuals through a verbal agreement or a written statement, but Gray (2004) points out that the key to ethical involvement is not just obtaining consent but informed consent. Depending on the research subject, it is also important to consider the extent to which interviewees are capable of giving informed consent. In the case of children, for example, permission is always obtained from care-givers such as parents, guardians, or teachers. However, special attention needs to be paid to getting comprehensible informed consent from the children themselves. Interviewing children needs, if anything, to be more stringent than with adults.

3.2 Unequal Relationship

As interviews take place for a specific purpose by the interviewer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), they are artificial situations to some extent (Burgess, 1984; Pole & Lampard, 2002), so the process of the interview can never be entirely natural. In this research setting, there is an inequality between interviewer and interviewee in terms of "the ownership of the knowledge" (Keats, 2000, p. 10). This means that respondents do not have the same rights, information or knowledge even in an unstructured relationship, so the interviewer has much more power than the interviewee in terms of position. As an unequal power dimension is inevitable in interviewing, it is worth noting that the unequal relationship of the two might affect the content of the interview. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the interviewer to concern herself or himself about bias in the interview responses originating

from their unequal relations.

3.3 Interviewer Effect

Another important factor in a qualitative field interview is the danger of the “interviewer effect” (Gray, 2004, p. 217) in that the researcher may begin to influence the course and direction of the interview. This means that the more involved the interviewer becomes with the situation, the greater the potential for this research effect will be. The interviewer effect can creep into the interview situation in many ways, so it is advisable that interviewers follow the same protocol to avoid or at least minimize such influence. For this reason, Gillham (2000) asserts that control in the sense of management may be fundamental to skilled interviewing, because an approach to it as unstructured could be erroneous (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Although interviewers are sensitive to their influence on the interview, it seems that the validity and reliability of the subsequent analysis of the interview are still open to question (Nunan, 1992; Verma & Mallick, 1999). In addition, the personal characteristics of the interviewer, e.g., race, class, ethnicity, and gender can influence interviews.

4. Practical Aspects of Interviewing

In order to facilitate the process of the interview smoothly, researchers need to equip themselves with a variety of techniques and strategies. This section is concerned with the practical aspects of the interview.

4.1 Piloting

In designing a qualitative interview, piloting is essential to making potential interviewers understand more fully the questions being asked. Oppenheim (1992) indicates that piloting can help interviewers not only with the wording of questions but also with procedural matters including the design of the introduction, the ordering of question sequences, the time constraints, and so on. As every research survey contains potential problems in the construction of the interview, it is crucial that interview questions are piloted with a small sample of subjects before being used. The interviewers can get an opportunity to find out whether the questions designed are ambiguous or confusing to the interviewee, and the experience helps build towards a well-rehearsed format. The researcher should not overestimate the amount of data they are likely to be able to collect (Wilkinson, 2000) and they should not be overly sure what direction the interview will take (Gillham, 2000). It seems, therefore, that there are no substitutes for well-organized pilot work at the initial stage of the interview.

4.2 Establishing Good Relationships

Probes and rapport are the main advantages which interviews have over any other investigative technique. Probes are usually used to deepen the response to a question and to give cues to the interviewee about the level of response (Patton, 1987). As such, probes should be offered in a natural style and voice, and used to follow-up initial responses. By probing such initial responses and by encouraging respondents to expand their answers the interviewer can obtain additional information (Clarke, 1999). However, probes can be “one of the most serious sources of interview bias” (Oppenheim, 1992, p. 90) by providing guidance to the interviewee and over-controlling the flow of the interview. Keats (2000) also addresses the problem of over-guiding, and hence introducing bias in a research situation. In addition, the probes might be too robotically standardized. As in Verma and Mallick’s (1999) study, a trained, experienced and skillful interviewer can probe responses to investigate an interviewee’s experiences and attitudes, so it is necessary for the interviewer to be trained and instructed most carefully in the flexible use of probes.

According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1995), qualitative researchers point towards the importance of the establishment of rapport, empathy and understanding between interviewer and interviewee. In this respect, interviewers need to make an effort to develop a rapport with their respondents, rather than create distance. From this perspective, it is worth noting that the interviewer must develop instant ways of engaging the interviewee’s interest and attention as well as of creating and sustaining rapport at just the right level. For example, ‘uh-huh’ or ‘I see’ constitutes a signal about how the interview is progressing. Asking questions is another important part of establishing rapport and being clear about asking contributes to the process of establishing and maintaining rapport during the interview (Patton, 1987). Nevertheless, this interview technique is defined by Oppenheim (1992, p. 89) as an “elusive quality” with potential pitfalls, and there can be too much or too little rapport and either would not be desirable, although interviewers try to keep the interviewee motivated in answering the questions truthfully.

4.3 Active Listening

The old adage, “The reason why we have two ears and only one mouth is that we may listen the more and talk the less” (Zeno of Citium around 300 BC) teaches us the importance of good listening skills. In this respect, interviewing should be not just about talking and asking questions but also very much about listening. Pole and

Lampard (2002) suggest that interviewers take the role of a “preferential listener” (p. 144), that is, they need to pay special attention to the techniques of listening actively in the interpersonal interview. Gray (2004) defines active listening as involving ‘attentive listening’ and King (1996) widens the scope of listening to ‘effective attending’. This technique can enhance the data collection process by showing that the interviewer is engaging with the interviewee. If such an interview technique is achieved, the interviewer will be equipped with the ability to judge when to probe, when to encourage the interviewee by contributing to an exchange of information, and when to close.

4.4 Time Management

Conducting the interviews involves a great many time-consuming processes from the design of the research, to the processes of data collection, to the analysis of data, and to the writing up (Dunne et al., 2005). Because of time constraints, a significant job of the interviewer is to keep control of the interview, minimizing long-winded responses, irrelevant remarks, or getting side-tracked, all of which can reduce the amount of time available for focusing on critical questions. The time-cost factor is often grossly underestimated, particularly by the novice researcher. Therefore interviewers should not underestimate the length of time it takes to collect data (Gillham, 2000; Wilkinson, 2000) and they should develop the skill to ask questions without interrupting the flow within the scheduled time (Bell, 1999). Additionally, time limits may seriously affect the interview in terms not only of the amount of data collected but also the quality and scope of the interview. As interviewers are “heavy consumers of resources” (Verma & Mallick, 1999, p. 117), if an interviewer rushes in with another question and does not give time to the respondents to reflect on what they have said, the interviewer will rarely get rich responses. It may be good practice to let the interviewee know how long it will take based on a number of pilot interviews.

4.5 Data Recording Methods

The researcher needs to think about how the interview material will be recorded and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis later. Regardless of the style of interviewing and interview questions, it will all come to naught if the interviewer fails to capture the actual words of the person being interviewed (Patton, 1990). The use of audio recording is available to capture detail and retain an accurate and complete record of the interview for analysis with the subtle features of tone, pitch, intonation, and other crucial aspects such as pauses, silences, and emphasis. Its use also permits the interviewers to be more attentive to the interviewee and to be free to interact with the interviewee. However, audio recording has a number of inherent difficulties. Some interviewees may not allow themselves to be audio-recorded. Audio transcription for the data analysis is laborious and extremely time-consuming. Other basic problems can originate from hindrances to the effective use of the audio-recorder including background noise, quiet spoken interaction, exhausted batteries, and so on. Even with such problems, audio recording offers the most comprehensive method of recording dialogue as a resource (Seale, 1998).

While audio-recording is the preferable choice for those involved in collecting linguistic data, taking notes is another option to reconstruct the interview. Particularly, when permission to audio recording is refused, note taking should not be underestimated for collecting detailed and quality data (Pole & Lampard, 2002). This method is very helpful in reminding interviewers of important things when they analyze the material at a later date. Although taking notes is another option open to the researcher, it also has its limitations. The interviewer who is trying to write down everything may have a difficult time responding appropriately to their respondents, or may not be able to give sufficient attention to what is being said. For this reason, it is necessary that interviewers develop their own form of shorthand. After the interview, it will often be necessary to rewrite or at least annotate the interview notes while the information is still fresh in the mind. Walker (1985) points out that audio recording and note taking represent quite different ways of going about doing research, but it is possible to use combinations of audio recording, note taking, and/or video recording in one research project.

4.6 The Process of Data Analysis

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) indicate that the analysis of data is the culmination of the research project. The primary data of interviews are quotations (Patton, 1987), so the analysis of an interview is linguistic in character (Silverman, 1993) including paralinguistic features such as facial expressions, eye movements and so on. For this reason, the process of data analysis needs to take into account some notion of how accurate the account is. On a technical level, there are some issues such as the possibility of interviewer bias or effects, and the accuracy of respondents’ reflections or their response tendencies, dishonesty, and so forth. Thus, it could be questionable how the researcher should interpret and analyze the responses received in the qualitative research interview. It is the interviewer’s job to search for credibility by ensuring that the findings can be trusted by carefully designing, planning, and training (Fielding, 1996; Gray, 2004).

4.7 Satisfactory Closure

In terms of the fundamental principle of the qualitative approach, interviewing is intended to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understanding in their own terms. Although the purpose of research is to collect data, not to change people or their opinions (Gray, 2004), a good interview lays open throughout feeling, knowledge, and experience between interviewer and interviewee (Patton, 1990). This participation, in itself, can be quite therapeutic. In practice, not every respondent has fascinating things to say, and interviews can be extremely tedious and repetitive. Thus, the interviewer should express her or his thanks to the respondents for cooperating in the interview, and such words of thanks will help make them feel that the interview process is worthwhile. Clearly, it is important that both leave with a positive sense of achievement. Byrne (2004) emphasizes that it is also the responsibility of interviewers to pay attention to satisfactory closure, including considering follow up contact with their interviewees e.g., sending out a letter which gives the results or progress of the research or giving a presentation.

5. Reflection on a Small-Scale Qualitative Research Project

This section is a reflective statement of our interview experiences with more focus on the process of the interview, rather than the display of the teachers' responses in the interviews.

5.1 Research Background

In our research to investigate students' English writing, it would be best to interview the students. Since there is little provision of English writing classes in formal primary and secondary school settings in South Korea, however, interviews were conducted with their teachers. The small scale research discussed in this paper was set out upon to investigate insider perspectives of the teaching of English writing with a group of Korean English teachers. Five primary teachers and five secondary teachers of English from both the public and private sector participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews from June 2006 to February 2007 as part of the research project. The interview was aiming to produce an account of what the teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward teaching English writing were. All the participants joined the interview voluntarily. Each interview lasted approximately one hour in Korean, and the data was tape recorded and notes were taken with their permission.

5.2 Why the Interview?

One of the basic reasons why the interview was used as a research method in this research project was to listen to the teachers' voices and expectations. It was believed that their insider perspectives would provide valuable sources of data. According to Stenhouse (1975), it is difficult to see how teaching can be improved or how curricular proposals can be evaluated without self-monitoring on the part of teachers. Although teachers have their own views, ideas, and opinions based on their own experiences and observations, it does not seem that teachers as practitioners have a vital role to play in implementing education changes in South Korea. Under the hierarchical education system, their voices tend to be ignored, misrepresented, or supposed. As the primary concern of the interviews was to listen to their voices directly and interpersonally, in-depth interviews with the teachers in the research offered the most direct way of finding out what they were thinking.

5.3 The Process of the Interviews

5.3.1 Comfortable Interview Climate

It is rare for teachers to be given opportunities to share their insider perspectives as interviewees, so the primary concern for our research was to try to build a good relationship with them. As Patton (1987) points out, researchers need to take responsibility for providing a framework within which interviewees can respond comfortably, accurately and honestly in interpersonal interviews. Keeping this in mind, the interviews with the teachers started off with easy 'lead-in' questions for them to develop self-confidence. The teachers were first asked for factual information such as their age, qualifications, and length of teaching experience. This portion was conducted in a more general conversational style rather than through specific directive questions. In practice, we realized the significance of asking questions at an appropriate time without being overly concerning with the order of the questions.

5.3.2 Familiarity with Questions

When the English teachers were invited to take part in the interviews, the topic of the interview, teaching English writing, was not very familiar to them. Therefore, the interviews were carried out in a semi-structured and conversational style to encourage active participation. The participants who volunteered to be interviewed were contacted by e-mail and were given extended information about the project and time to think about the questions in advance. They were informed in detail about the purpose of the interview, its duration, its recording methods,

how the data would be used, etc. As such in the actual interviews, most of the teachers provided their ideas and opinions to questions when they were asked.

5.3.3 Sensitive Leadership

There was a need for the conversation to progress through an initial ice-breaking question stage before moving on to more complex questions. When dealing with complex questions in particular, we repeated their statements back to them in the form of questions for further discussion. Although all our questions appeared clear to us, they proved not necessarily to be clear to some of the teachers. In addition, after the first interview, our voices were deemed too dominant. Therefore, we decided to reduce the proportion of our talking time in the remaining interviews.

5.3.4 Confidentiality

It was important to let the teachers know that the interview was entirely private and confidential, and their names would not be linked to anything they said. When conducting the interviews, audio recording, and note taking were used to collect spoken and written data so their purposes and reasons for use were thoroughly explained. For example, the teachers were made to understand that the audio recordings would be used to capture their utterances as well as other features, such as tone of voice, hesitation, etc. for more accurate interpretation of their responses. Blaxter et al. (1986) indicate that respondents are often concerned about whether their comments will be taken in note or not. Interestingly, the respondents were more concerned about the note taking than the audio recording. This was interpreted to mean that writing notes in front of them helped them feel that they were involved in real research efforts and that their responses were worthwhile. Taking notes, asking our questions and establishing a rapport with the interviewees were very demanding and proved to be a challenging task.

5.3.5 Unexpected Outcomes

In the interview, it was found that the teachers' attitudes towards the teaching of English writing were not positive, because of their lack of learning and teaching experience in English writing and specifically their awareness of the skill. Despite their overall negative attitudes, all of them commented that they valued having the time and opportunity to think about such an unfamiliar topic before being interviewed. They expressed that the interview opportunity was a very valuable turning-point to develop their future teaching practices. For example, one primary school teacher of English got involved in developing writing materials, and one secondary school teacher made a decision to explore more writing activities using a variety of channels after the interview. In principle, although interviewing is not intended to be an agent of change (Keats, 2000), the teachers' attitudes were affected by their positive interview experience and, as a result of participating in the interview, we found that their future behavior could be altered. It was a surprising for us to see them leave with this sense of achievement and satisfaction.

5.3.6 Reflective Interview Practice

Listening to the audio recordings of the interviews for our analysis and write up was an opportunity for us to evaluate performance. We kept in mind that interviewing effectively is "not just a gift but a skill" (Keats, 2000, p. 1), that is, interviewing is a skill which is learned through experience and practice. To a considerable degree, the period of review offered us a chance to reflect on our interview procedure. Video recording would have been invaluable for later research. Watching interviewers offers the potential for changes and the development of a more systematic approach to interviews.

5.4 *Special Interests*

5.4.1 Interest 1: Do Children Have an Authentic Voice?

In our study, all the interviews were undertaken with 10 English teachers in reference to their perceptions of the teaching of English writing. Instead of doing our interviews with students, with the teachers' cooperation, a self-administered questionnaire survey was used. The question as to whether our questionnaire was suitable for children is beyond the scope of this paper, but we will address the general theory in the process of interviewing children.

Traditionally, research has been carried out through the views of adults, rather than through children themselves as "social actors" (Christensen & James, 2000, p. xi). Although there has been a caution to work directly with children with regard to methodological, ethical, and other concerns, there has been an increasing interest in interviewing children in order to listen to their voices (O'Kane, 2000). In addition to the very considerable problems involved in including children, Solberg (1996) has argued for ignoring 'age' as a significant marker in the research interview, and emphasized empirical investigation to explore the significance of age and status

within different contexts and situations.

It should also be noted that there is often a very large gulf between care-givers' observations of their child's perceptions and their actual perceptions. Without asking children for their own views directly, the interviewing of adult care-givers, although useful to a point, may provide a distant account of the child's point of view. A variety of opposing methods can be used to overcome this issue such as asking the child to 'think aloud', coding their non-verbal behaviors, and even conducting a video analysis of interview interactions. Scott (2000) provides several surveys interviewing children in Britain. In terms of the cognitive ability of children, interviewers should take into account the wide range of their cognitive and social development such as age, gender, socio-economic background and ethnicity.

There is a heightened concern about data quality, because it is yet to be determined whether an adult interviewer can obtain reliable and valid accounts from children. Asking children seems to be one of the best ways to improve the quality of data, because the children themselves are the best people to provide information on their perspectives. It must be kept in mind that data quality has always been an issue, regardless of the age of the research participants. Children do have their own voice and can express their opinions and therefore the new demand for research needs to focus on "children as actors in their own right" (Scott, 2000, p. 98). In this respect, there is no reason to discredit children as interviewees for more qualitative data collection in our next research project.

5.4.2 Interest 2: What Are the Properties of a Focus Group Interview?

Recently the focus group interview and group interviews have grown in popularity (Pole & Lampard, 2002). Focus groups interviews bring a number of people together with an interviewer or a facilitator in order to discuss a particular issue or set of issues, rather than being a solitary one-to-one experience between an interviewer and an interviewee. Nachmias and Nachmias (1996) provide the pros and cons of interpersonal interviews regardless of whether they are individual or in group. The focus group and individual interviews produce distinct forms of data, and therefore focus groups bring together a number of different methods (Morgan & Spanish, 1984; Pole & Lampard, 2002).

For example, the focus group interview can combine the strengths of semi-structured interviews with the opportunity to observe human interaction in the form of group dynamics. In this case, observation of the group dynamics or interaction may yield important contextual data. Participants can get to hear each other's responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses. The interactions between participants can generate different data than that which would have emerged in an individual interview. Vygotskian views provide an image of the "collaborative child" (Wodhead & Faulkner, 2000, p. 27) with and alongside adults and other children.

Despite its strengths, on the other hand, the limitations of focus groups are seen by Krueger (1994) to include less control compared to structured one-to-one encounters. There is the possibility that some group members may dominate and hence discourage others from expressing their own views. In addition, data yielded are more difficult to record and to analyze, unless the session is video-taped and it is clear who is speaking. Therefore, the interviewer needs considerable group process skills to facilitate and conduct what a focus group interview requires, and it is important to know how to manage the interview so that it is not dominated by some group members.

Like all other data collection methods, focus group interviews have their strengths and weaknesses, so the decision as to whether to use a focus group should be made based on the substantive content of the research. In terms of the cognitive development, it seems that interview practice could be modified to be suitable for young interviewees. For instance, the same children could be boisterous and outspoken in group interviews, but shy and reserved in an individual interview. Therefore, in the next research project, we would like to attempt to carry out focus group interviews considering the students' cognitive development.

6. Conclusion

There are a number of approaches to research and all of them draw upon a variety of instruments. As Scott and Usher (1999) have pointed out, interviewing is an essential tool for research in educational enquiry. This paper has explored the interview instrument as a specific research method among a range of research instruments. We have overviewed several technical and ethical issues such as probing, active listening, accessibility, anonymity and confidentiality, recording, and data analysis with accompanying reflections on our research. This involved us in a process of critical reflection on in-depth and interpersonal interviews. This paper ends with two additional concerns, interviews with children and focus group interviews were also explored and emphasized for possible

future research.

As there is no single approach that is always superior to other research methods, which one to choose as a tool for research depends completely upon what the researcher needs to find out. Furthermore, as using interviewing in research could cross the boundaries of qualitative and quantitative methods, there is no reason why quantitative and qualitative methods should be seen as mutually exclusive. In this respect, it is worth exploring how quantitative and qualitative methods e.g., questionnaire, interview, documentary study, observation, etc. could be synthesized in a research project within a more flexible approach to data collection.

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