

An Analytical Assessment of Questionnaire and Interview Techniques as Research Methodologies in English Language Teaching (ELT)

Li Xiao

Department of Social Sciences, Shandong Medical College, Linyi 276000, China

Abstract: Questionnaires and interviews are frequently used in research. This paper discusses the question design, implementation methods, and the advantages and disadvantages of the questionnaires and interviews. Although the two approaches have many differences, they can be combined to achieve more insights in our research work. The design and application of both questionnaires and interviews involve many factors that deserve our great attention and effort. Both questionnaire surveys and interview methods have their unique characteristics and advantages. In research work, they can be combined to gain more insights.

Key words: Questionnaires interviews research method

One key element in conducting useful research in ELT is collecting reliable data and information. The most common means of collecting data are questionnaire and interview.

Questionnaire and interview are the two broad categories of surveys. A questionnaire is a written list of questions that are answered by a number of people so that information can be collected from the answers (from *Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* 6th edition). An interview is a direct face to face attempt to obtain reliable and valid measure in the form of verbal responses from one or more respondents. It is a conversation in which the roles of the interviewer and the respondent change continually. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between a questionnaire and an interview. For instance, both research methods use questions to collect information. When using a questionnaire to do a research, each respondent is handed a questionnaire and asked to complete it while in the room. Each respondent completes a questionnaire. In the interview, the interviewer facilitates the session; the respondents answer the questions orally.

I. Designing questionnaire and interview schedule

Generally, conducting a questionnaire or an interview has the same process, which can be illustrated in this chart:

Research purpose → designing research questions → pilot test → conduct the survey → analyze the data

1. Specifying the purpose of the survey

According to the research purpose, the researcher uses questionnaire or interview to collect information. There are mainly five kinds of information the researchers are to collect:

- a. Information about the respondents' behavior/experience.
- b. Information about the respondents' attitudes or opinions.
- c. Information about the respondents' feeling.
- d. The respondents' knowledge/ability.
- e. Background information about the respondents. (Wen, 2004)

2. Designing questions

Both questionnaires and interviews involve asking questions. Then, devising a questionnaire or interview schedule is not simply a matter of jotting down a list of questions—it is a complex process, which involves the researcher in the expenditure of a great deal of time. Nevertheless, all the questions should be relevant to the research purpose.

As for questionnaire, we take the questionnaire “Learning English Vocabulary” and “European Language Proficiency Survey” as examples.

In a questionnaire, there can be two kinds of questions: open-ended questions (unstructured questions) and closed-ended questions (structured questions).

The sequences of questions are very important. Here are some suggestions about the sequences of questions:

a. The background questions should be placed in the front. Background questions are used to obtain demographic characteristics of the group being studied, such as age, sex, grade, level of assignment, and so forth. This information is used when the researcher categorizes the results by various subdivisions such as age or grade. Therefore, these questions should be consistent with the data analysis plan.

b. Easy questions should be asked first. All the questions should be arranged from easy to difficult. Putting the questions to which the respondents are familiar first will make them feel easy and relaxed, and they'll be willing to answer these questions. This suggestion is also useful in an interview schedule.

c. General questions should be put before specific questions. And this suggestion is feasible both in a questionnaire and an interview.

d. In a questionnaire, if there are both open-ended questions and closed-ended questions, the latter should be put at the end of the questionnaire. In the questionnaire “Learning English Vocabulary”, four open-ended questions were followed by 24 closed questions.

Even though the interview is a more complex situation than that of a respondent sitting down to answer a questionnaire, the wording of the questions in a questionnaire and interview covers many of the same points. Firstly, the questions should be as unambiguous in their wording as it is possible to make them. To avoid ambiguity, we should keep the language simple, analyze the respondents and write on their level. And the questions should be kept short, because long questions tend to become ambiguous and confusing. Secondly, limit each question to one idea or concept. A question consisting of more than one idea may confuse the respondent and lead to a meaningless answer. And lastly, do not ask leading questions. A properly worded question gives no clue as to which answer you may believe to be the correct one.

Although questionnaire and interview are conducted in the form of questions, there exist some differences between the questionnaire questions and the interview questions. Firstly, the language of the questionnaire must be the relatively formal written language, whereas the language of the interview schedule must be the spoken language, because the questions are to be read aloud. And secondly, in an interview, more “open” questions can be used and more exploration of issues can be carried out. Thirdly, questions are gradually specified in the process of the interview, while questions are specified before data collection. This kind of difference mainly results from the different functions of the two research approaches: the function of an interview is to get qualitative data, while a questionnaire is to get quantitative data.

As for interview, according to the interviewers’ degree of freedom in the interview, interviews can be classified into three types: structured interview, semi-structured interview and unstructured interview (Wen, 2004).

An unstructured interview simply means a face to face interview using an interview schedule with the topics listed but with few specific questions and no fixed questions. These interviews aim to be carried out “in-depth”. But it is expensive and only feasible with small groups.

Semi-structured interviews use a combination of interviewer experience and pre-interview planning. The interviewer has worked out the questions in advance but can change their order or wording. The interviewer may use probe questions or follow-up questions to get interviewees to expand in their answers. This requests the interviewers to have the excellent interview skill: using probe questions but not pull too far, returning to the subject decisively but also not to appear stiffly.

A structured interview has scripted questions and guidelines for consistently evaluating responses. This means that all the respondents are asked the same questions, in the same order, and in exactly the same way. The interviewer cannot use follow up questions or change the order of the questions. The shortcoming is that it is not flexible and too mechanical.

We can see that both research methods collect information which was not present before the research began. The data is generated during the research process. Both questionnaire and interview rely upon the ability of the respondent to recall past events accurately, and to report upon present states of mind clearly and accurately. Similarly, both of them rely upon the respondent’s willingness to report facts, events, opinions and attitudes honestly.

3. Conducting pilot survey

Before conducting a research, a pilot test (pre-test) should be done on the questions of both questionnaires and interviews. This is the most important step in preparing the questionnaire and interviews. A small sample group should be selected, who would not be included in the main research program, and they should be representative of the group the researcher plan to survey. This kind of test can reveal unanticipated problems with question wording, instructions to questions, etc. And it can help see if the interviewees understand the questions and give useful answers. For example: in 1994, the questionnaire “European Language Proficiency Survey”, which was used by the researchers to investigate into aspects of language learning in further and higher education, was a revised form of “C-Test questionnaire”. “A pre-pilot test of over 400 learners of French in the February 1993 was followed by a pilot study in October 1993.” (James A. Coleman, 1995) Through the pre-pilot test and the pilot test, the revised questionnaire became computer readable and more rational.

4. Data collection and analysis

As to data collection, less structured procedure can be applied in an interview. It is flexible and dynamic. Structured procedure for data collection is preferred in a questionnaire. Still, we should keep in the matter of respondents’ true feeling or ideas when answering the question items. In their paper, *How Do You Know If the Informant Is Telling the Truth?*, Dean and Whyte discuss in depth the issue of whether respondents are telling their true opinions or feeling when interviewed. They point out that the interviewer is not looking for the true attitude or sentiment. An interviewer should realize that the respondents can and do hold conflicting sentiments according to the situations in which they find themselves, and that the researcher must consider how the situation may influence the expression of sentiments and the reporting of events.

Data analysis of an interview can be statistical or non-statistical. But statistical analysis must be made after data collection in the procedure of a questionnaire. The findings of an interview tend to be ungeneralizable, while the findings of a questionnaire are generalizable.

II. Advantages and disadvantages of questionnaire and interview

Like other research methods, both questionnaire and interview have advantages and disadvantages.

Here are the advantages of questionnaires: the responses are gathered in a standardized way, so questionnaires are more objective, certainly more so than interviews; Questionnaires are very cost-effective when compared to face to face interviews. This is especially true for studies involving large sample sizes and large geographic areas. Written questionnaires become even more cost-effective as the number of research questions increases; Questionnaires provide a greater degree of anonymity.

Also, there are some disadvantages of the questionnaire: Questionnaires are standardized so it is not possible to explain any points in the questions that participants might misinterpret; The respondents may not be willing to answer the questions, which may cause non-returns. So, the response rates of questionnaires are quite low. The respondents should be told why the information is being collected and how the results will be beneficial. The third disadvantage of using a questionnaire is inability to check on the validity of the answer. We have no way of knowing the true answers to these questions without observing the respondents' reactions □ Lastly, questionnaires are not as flexible as interviews. The latter permit the exploration of unanticipated issues whereas questionnaires usually only provide information directly related to the specific questions included in them.

Compared with questionnaires, interviews have their advantages. Firstly, interviews represent an effective method for collecting in-depth information behind a participant's experiences. The interviewer can explain and clarify questions, and pursue in-depth information around a topic by asking additional questions. However, questionnaires are fixed; the questions are placed down on the paper and cannot be changed. Secondly Interviews can be used with young children and illiterates whereas questionnaires can only be use with educated people who can read. And thirdly, interviews can help the researcher develop a personal empathy with the participants for the programs.

The limitations of interviews are: Samples for interviews are generally smaller than in the case with questionnaires; Interviews are more time consuming than a questionnaire, and scheduling may be difficult; The interviewer should be experienced and skillful, because the interviewees' responses may be unwillingly biased and they may not truthfully answer questions they find embarrassing and sensitive, which will influence the effect of the data.

III. Combining questionnaire and interview in surveys

Although the two approaches have many differences, they can be combined to achieve more insights in our research work. As we have known, questionnaire is often used to get quantitative data, and the data can be analyzed statistically, so some research items can be identified or some generalization can be reached. But the statistical findings may reveal the relationship between the hypothesis and certain research items, but do not answer the question of "why the individual respondents choose this answer rather than the other?" This needs further survey, which can be followed by interviewing some of the respondents. The in-depth interview will reveal the reason true feelings of the interviewees. Findings of the two approaches can be compared and can be used to support each other.

IV. Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can see that the design and application of both questionnaires and interviews involve many factors that deserve our great attention and effort. There is no easy way to get an effective research approach, such as a questionnaire or an interview. The most important thing concerning the design and application of a questionnaire or an interview is to keep in mind the fact that the respondents are people like us, who may have varying attitudes toward a certain research item in different situations, and that we are never too careful to perfect our research methods.

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About THE AUTHOR:

Xiao Li: 1976-), female, Han nationality, born in Linyi, Shandong Province, is an associate professor with a master's degree. She works in Shandong Medical College, majoring in foreign linguistic and applied linguistics.