

# Qualitative Interviewing For Language Teachers: Practice and Implications

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## **Abstract:**

Qualitative interviewing is an important research method in various fields, including education. In an educational context, while observing teachers and students provides access to their behavior, interviews can put the behavior in context and provide an understanding of teachers' and students' actions. This article reviews the literature on qualitative interviewing and suggests best practices based on real-life examples.

**Keywords:** *Qualitative interviewing, pre-interview, during-interview, post-interview.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Qualitative interviewing is an important research method in various fields, including education. In an educational context, while observing teachers and students provides access to their behavior, interviews can put the behavior in context and provide an understanding of teachers' and students' actions [1]. Language teachers use qualitative interviewing to achieve various academic purposes from both teachers' and students' perspectives, such as to know how well students learn by interviewing students, how teachers teach by interviewing teachers. This article reviews the literature on qualitative interviewing and best practices in this area. It also illustrates these practices with examples from my own use of qualitative interviewing in my work as a researcher of language teachers.

## II. QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING PROCEDURES

Researchers who use interviews must thoroughly understand the interviewing procedure. Lindlof and Taylor [2] summarized this procedure: identify the interviewees; determine the interview type; audiotape the questions and responses; take notes; locate a suitable place for the interview; obtain consent from the interviewee; have a plan; use probes; be courteous when the interview is over by thanking the participant, assuring him or her of the confidentiality of their responses.

### 2.1 Pre-interview activities

Pre-interview activities can help to ensure the interview is conducted successfully. First, it is essential for researchers to be clear on the purposes for conducting the interview. Interviewing is intended to draw out the individual, interpersonal, or cultural logics that people employ in their performances; explain events, processes, or objects that exist outside the interview context; reveal the participant's experience

and perspective; gather information about processes that cannot be observed by other means; inquire about occurrences in the past; verify, validate, or comment on information obtained from other sources; test hypotheses; and achieve efficiency in data collection [2].

Patton [3], on the other hand, argued that interviewing not for getting answers to questions, nor for testing hypotheses, nor for evaluating. Both of these claims are right because it depends on the background of the given research. If the research is meant to confirm the research results other people have obtained, it is meant to test hypotheses. Otherwise, it is not. In my research on college English teaching in EFL classrooms in China, I have needed to do both: I have interviewed to check my understanding of teachers' actions in the classroom, but I also have looked forward to hearing something new.

After determining the purpose of interviewing, researchers need to get access to interviewees through either formal or informal gatekeepers [1]. Seidman pointed out that the easier the access, the more complicated the interview. Therefore, easy access should be avoided (for example, using people you know). I do not fully agree with Seidman on this point, because sometimes it is too difficult to contact strangers. In my research, I have interviewed former colleagues whose living and teaching environment is familiar to me, which has helped me better understand their behaviors in the classroom.

To show respect for interviewees, personal interviews can help, as well as the interviewer becoming familiar with the setting in which the participants live or work. It is important to determine whether the participant is interested, assess the appropriateness of a participant, and determine the best times and places to interview participants [1]. Seidman also suggested letting interviewees fill in a consent form covering who is participating in the interview, for whom, and to what end; risks and vulnerability; the right to participate or not; rights of review and withdrawal; anonymity; dissemination of interview findings; and remuneration. In my research, I have viewed this method as humane: we cannot force teachers to do what they do not want to. Also, I have needed to make sure that they join in my research because they are interested.

After meeting the interviewees, the interviewer can use a participant information form throughout the study [1] to facilitate communication between the interviewer and the participants and record data about the participant. Researchers need to think about "when" and "where" questions. Interviewers should conduct interviews in a private place in which the needs of comfort and confidentiality can both be met, where outside pressures on the participants are low and they are not edgy about the next thing on their calendar [2]. Before conducting interviews, it is important to conduct a pilot of your study to revise any ineffective interview practices [1].

## 2.2 During an interview

After preparation, researchers will carry out the actual research. Choosing a proper type of interview can help to receive better answers to the research questions. Scholars have summarized the types of interviews as follows: ethnographic interviews, also known as the informal conversational interview [4] or

situational conversation [5]; informant interview; respondent interview; narrative interview; telephone interview [2]; focus group interview [6]; photo-elicitation interview [7]; individual interview, also known as one-on-one interview; e-mail interview [8]; life-history interviewing [9]; and in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing [1]. In my research, my task has been to ask teachers to explain the reasons for their behaviors in class, so informant interviews, individual interviews, and e-mail interviews have been the most suitable methods for getting as much information as possible.

Interviewing is a practice that requires an interviewer to ask questions in an effective, nonthreatening way; to be a conversationalist; to be a student; to be a traveler through cultures; and to be a user of information [2]. Researchers can learn interviewing skills: listen more, talk less; follow up on what the participant says; ask questions when confused; ask to hear more; ask real questions; avoid leading questions; ask open-ended questions; follow up, do not interrupt; ask participants to talk as if you were someone else; ask participants to tell a story; keep participants focused and ask for details; do not take the ebb and flow of interviewing personally; share experiences; ask participants to reconstruct; avoid reinforcing participants' responses; explore laughter; follow your hunches; use an interview guide; tolerate silence [1]. Researchers apply these techniques to gather information about processes that cannot be observed by other means. Experiential knowledge is usually elicited in the forms of stories, accounts, and explanations [2]. For my research, these skills have been significant because they have worked together to help enliven the interview atmosphere and keep the interviews running smoothly.

Problems may arise during an interview without the above skills, such as when the interviewer does not ask the questions in order; subverts the process; brings expectations to the interview about how the individuals will answer; dresses inappropriately; or is disrespectful by not using names the interviewee wants to be called. Technical aspects also can influence the effect of the interview [2]. Besides, race, ethnicity, gender, social forces, status, education, wealth, class, and linguistic and age differences are factors affecting interviewing [1].

To avoid the above problems, the researcher must establish rapport with the interviewee. Rapport can be built by interviewer self-disclosure, demeanor, personal appearance, and listening [2]. The interviewer's goal is to transform his or her relationship with the participant into an "I-Thou" relationship that verges on a "We" relationship [1]. In my research, rapport has not been a big problem because colleagues have been my interviewees; we get along well with one another, and they are clear on my purpose for the interviews.

The quality of the questions the interviewer asks can also affect the interview because good questions can help participants feel that they understand the question and can provide meaningful answers. Interviewers should be clear and unambiguous, not confuse the participants, and show respect for them. In contrast, bad questions are unclear, include multiple questions, are wordy, are negatively worded, include jargon, elicit overlapping responses, contain unbalanced response options, encourage a mismatch between the question and the answer, or include technical terms that are not applicable to participants [8].

In terms of the types of questions used in interviews, Lindlof and Taylor [2] categorized interview questions as nondirective or directive questions. Creswell [8] listed many question types, including background questions, individual attitude questions, behavior questions, sensitive questions, open-ended questions, close-ended questions, and semi-close-ended questions.

### 2.3 Post-interview

After collecting the data, the interviewer's task is to manage the data. Transcribing interviews is tedious, so some advocate hiring professional transcribers. However, Lindlof and Taylor [2] argued that a gain in efficiency is balanced by the loss of intimate understanding that can only be created by hearing-and typing-voices. Another thing that can puzzle researchers is how to find something interesting in their data. Kanter [10] suggested that researchers should be alert to conflict. They should respond to hopes expressed and whether these hopes are fulfilled. They should be alert to language that indicates beginnings, middles, and ends of processes. They should be sensitive to frustrations and resolutions, to indications of isolation, and to the rarer expressions of collegiality and community. They should also be sensitive to issues of class, ethnicity, and gender, and the way hierarchy and power affect people.

## III. IMPLICATIONS

### 3.1 Advantages of qualitative interviewing

Seidman [1] said that interviewing can provide access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provide a way to understand the meaning of that behavior. Lindlof and Taylor [2] summarized that interviewing can provide information when researchers cannot directly observe participants, and it permits participants to describe personal information. Creswell [8] added that one-to-one interviews are effective for posing sensitive questions and enabling interviewees to ask questions or offer feedback that go beyond the initial questions. Interviews lead to a high response rate since researchers control the interviews, and sample participants feel responsible to finish the interview.

### 3.2 Disadvantages of qualitative interviewing

Seidman [1] said that interviewing takes a great deal of time and money. Lindlof and Taylor [2] summarized that qualitative interviewing can be deceptive and provide the perspective the interviewee wants the researcher to hear; the presence of the researcher may affect how the interviewee responds. Creswell [8] added that a one-on-one interview does not protect the anonymity of the participant. Researchers might prejudice participant answers as well, and not all interviewees feel good disclosing information about themselves. Additionally, many interviewees might be dominant in the interview, which leads to answers which do not reflect the consensus of the group, and people usually don't like telephone contacts owing to their prior personal experiences with calls asking for information.

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

Academic research has both merits and faults due to objective and subjective factors. Qualitative interviewing is an important research method in various fields, including education. In an educational context, while observing teachers and students provides access to their behavior, interviews can put the behavior in context and provide an understanding of teachers' and students' actions. This article reviews the literature on qualitative interviewing and suggests best practices based on real-life examples. In my research, I have used other types of research methodologies, such as classroom observation and questionnaires, alongside interviewing to ensure the validity and reliability of the research results. This method of checking interview data may not work in all cases, but I have tried to make it cover the average cases.

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