

Conducting interviews in action research

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Interviews are a popular tool for collecting data in action research. Principally, interviews provide opportunities for research participants to explain their viewpoint in their own words and this can lead to new insights and new directions for you to consider as an action researcher. Interviews will enable you to go into greater depth than is possible with some other data collection tools such as questionnaires and can allow for points to be explored and clarified in real time. Before embarking on interviews, it is important for you to think about some of the potential disadvantages. Interviews are time consuming both to conduct and analyse. Analysis is not always straightforward, and it can be difficult to generalise from the data collected. However, when conducted well, there is no doubt that interviews provide rich, qualitative data.

Things to think about before conducting interviews:

- What type of interview is suitable for your action research purpose?
- What type of interview questions will you ask?
- What kind of analysis will you undertake?

For a useful practical guide to using interviews in action research, see Feldman, A., Altrichter, H. Posch, P. & Somekh, B. (2018) *Teachers Investigate Their Work: An Introduction to Action Research across the Professions*. 3rd edition. London: Routledge.

1. Types of interview

- Structured interviews

This is where you have a prepared interview schedule with a list of questions which is followed exactly with all participants. These are used in situations where a written questionnaire would be suitable but for some reason is not feasible (telephone interviews often follow this format).

- Semi-structured interviews

Most interviews in educational action research are likely to fall into this category. As the researcher, you will have a set of questions with an open format so that the interviewees can provide more details and you can probe to clarify responses. It is usually recommended that the questions are piloted with this type of interview.

- Open-ended/unstructured interviews

The aim is to have an informal and relaxed atmosphere so that participants can tell their own story. You will usually have several opening questions on the research topic to get the conversation started. This type of interview is useful if you wish to explore a topic in depth.

2. Types of questions in interviews

- Initial questions

Researchers will often start an interview with factual questions that are easy to answer and can help to break the ice and get the interview under way.

- Content questions (see Patton, 2002)

The researcher asks the interviewees questions about attitudes, opinions, experiences, knowledge etc. which relate to the research topic.

- Probes

These questions are used when the researcher wants to follow up on a response and investigate it in more detail.

- Final question

Interviews are often concluded with the researcher asking interviewees if they have anything further that they would like to say.

(From Dörnyei, Z. (2007) *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 134-138)

3. Conducting and recording interviews

Participants need to know why they are being interviewed and this information should be provided in advance. It is a good idea for you to remind them of this at the start of each interview and to give assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. You will also want to establish a rapport with participants at the beginning.

You will need a recording of each interview. It is possible to take notes while interviewing but it is difficult because there will be problems in keeping up with what participants say and because it will slow the interview down. Usually researchers like to have an audio recording of the interview but must obtain the permission of participants for this. Additionally, it is a good idea to write a brief summary of the interview to capture their own perspectives on the interview as a whole.

More information on conducting interviews in educational research

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2011) *Research Methods in Education*. 7th edition. London: Routledge

Drever, E. (1995) *Using Semi-Structured Interviews in Small-Scale Research: A Teacher's Guide*. Edinburgh: Scottish Council for Research in Education.

Patton, M.Q. (2002) *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. London: Sage Publications.

Powney, J. & Watts, M. (1987) *Interviewing in Educational Research*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Richards, K. (2003) *Qualitative Inquiry in TESOL*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.