100
Activities for Teaching Research Methods

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Listening to Interviewees

TUTOR NOTES

Purpose: This activity is a fun way to highlight the importance of listening well when interviewing participants for a research project. It requires pairs of students to role-play an interview, while being observed by their peers.

Type: Role-play as a small-group activity (in class), followed by a tutor-led discussion.

Level: Beginner and intermediate.

Duration: Up to 20 minutes for the role-play, followed by a tutor-led discussion of up to 40 minutes.

Equipment/materials: None required.

Prerequisite activities: None.

Learning outcome: By the end of this activity students will be able to recognize non-listening clues and know how to listen well within an interview setting.

The activity

Divide your students into groups of at least four (the actual number depends on class size, although it is recommended that no one group is larger than eight students). Ask two students in each group to volunteer to undertake the role-play, one as the interviewer and one as the interviewee. The rest of the students are to observe, and listen to, the role-play.

Give the interviewers the student handout and ask them to follow the instructions. These instruct the interviewers to ask 10 questions, but not listen to the answers. Once all the questions have been asked the role-play is completed.

Ask students to discuss the following questions (this can be within their group or as a whole class, if it is not too big). Remember that the observers and the interviewee do not know that the interviewer was asked not to listen.

- Did the observers notice anything unusual in this interview situation? If so, what did they notice?
- Did the interviewees notice anything unusual in this interview situation? If so, what did they notice?
- Can the observers and the interviewee guess what the interviewer was asked to do?

Once these questions have been discussed, ask the interviewer to reveal their role as a 'non-listener'. Whether this has been observed will depend on how well the role has been played and the observation skills of those observing. Also, adopting a non-listening role can be very difficult for some people: if it has not been observed ask the interviewers whether they encountered any difficulties with adopting this role and, if so, the nature of the difficulty.

Ask students to draw up a list of all the non-listening clues that they observed. Once this list has been completed, discuss how students can improve their own listening skills when interviewing people for their research.

Key issues

Good listening skills are essential if students intend to interview participants for their research project. This can be in a one-to-one setting for a structured, unstructured or semi-structured interview, or during a focus group, for example.

The following clues suggest that an interviewer is not listening to what the interviewee is saying (they also indicate bad research practice):

- no eye contact;
- fidgeting, fiddling and/or doodling;
- not acknowledging what has been said with nods and smiles, for example;
- interrupting what is being said;
- speaking at the same time as the interviewee;
- finishing the sentence for the interviewee;
- turning away or becoming distracted when the inter-viewee is in mid-sentence;
- responding to external stimuli, such as noises outside the room;
- checking phones, laptops or tablets;
- saying something that has no relevance to what the interviewee has said;
- asking a question that has already been answered.

The following points will help students to improve their listening skills in an interview situation:

- Venue. This should be accessible (both mentally and physically for interviewees), comfortable and free from noisy distractions and interruptions. All phones should be switched off.
- Seating. Interviewer and interviewee should sit close enough so that they can hear each other, but the inter-viewer should take care not to invade the interviewee's space. Sitting opposite each other can be a little threatening and side-by-side can cause discomfort; at an angle is best.
- Eye-contact, smiling and nodding. These are all impor-tant for helping to establish rapport and indicate that the interviewer is listening. This encourages the interviewee to say more (see Activity 41: Establishing rapport).
- Concentration. It is important to concentrate on what is being said and not get distracted when the interviewee is speaking. For example, students should not fiddle with a pen, play with their laptop, look out the window or respond to outside stimuli, such as text messages or sounds outside the room. If students show that they are listening properly it will encourage the interviewee to give more information. Also, students should ensure that they are not distracted by any audio devices that they are using as this will influence their ability to listen properly (see Activity 44: Recording techniques).
- Active listening. When the interviewee is speaking, stu-dents should take note of the words they are using and the ideas they are expressing. It is important to distin-guish between opinions, prejudice and fact. Students should listen carefully, ask for clarification and probe for more information. They can only do this if they remain alert and listen to everything that is being said. Students should ensure that they continue listening until the inter-viewee has finished speaking. They should not jump to conclusions about what an interviewee is going to say.
- Questioning. Open questions that start with words such as 'what', 'why' and 'how' are important as interviewees cannot answer these with a simple 'yes' or 'no' and will have to elaborate on what they are saying.
- Repetition. A useful technique is to repeat the last few words that someone has said, turning them into a ques-tion. This demonstrates that the interviewer is listening to everything that is being said and it encourages the interviewee to say more.
- Summarizing and concluding. Another useful technique is to summarize what the interviewee has said as a way of finding out whether everything has been heard correctly and understood. It can also encourage the interviewee to give more information and clarify his or her position. This is a useful technique when concluding an interview.

➜ **Useful terms**

'Active listening' involves one person listening carefully to the words of another and understanding, evaluating and inter-preting what they hear. To listen actively, students need to be able to concentrate on what the speaker is saying and free their mind from distractions. Even if they do not agree with what is being said, they need to continue to listen rather than become distracted with the development of their own thoughts and arguments. This is of particular importance when interviewing participants for a research project.

➜ **Related activities**

Activity 37: Conducting interviews

Activity 38: Constructing questions

Activity 39: Producing an interview schedule

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➜ **Preparatory reading**

Chapter 7 in Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) provides some useful advice about conducting interviews.
   Chapters 6 and 7 in Seidman (2013) provide some insightful information about listening well and talking less, establishing rapport and exploring laughter.

➜ **Further reading**

Brinkmann, S. and Kvale, S. (2015) *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Gillham, B. (2005) *Research Interviewing: The Range of Techniques*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
Seidman, I. (2013) *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 4th edition. New York: Teachers College Press.

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