

Using Thinking-Aloud In Piloting Research Instruments

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Abstract:

This article briefly introduces the use of 'thinking-aloud' technique in designing research instruments. The author first provides some basic information on the technique. Then, she briefly describes how she employed the technique in the initial pilot test of her questionnaire.



Introduction

In my PhD research project, I had to pilot my questionnaire survey two times, and the first time was extremely important for me, as it provided very useful feedback for the improvement of my instrument. Most of the feedback was generated using a technique called **thinking-aloud**. In this article, I will first provide an overview of this technique. Then, I'll briefly describe how I used it in the initial pilot test of my questionnaire.

An Overview of the Technique

According to Eccles and Aarsal (2017), thinking-aloud involves 'participants think[ing] out aloud while performing a given task, or recall[ing] thoughts immediately following completion of that task' (p.514). In other words, participants are encouraged to say literally everything that comes to their head while they are completing the task. This may include things that they are looking at, their thoughts, their actions as well as feelings.

The think-aloud method was proposed by Ericsson and Simon (1993) within mainstream psychology. Eccles and Arsal (2017) recommend that it be considered a qualitative research method that can be employed by researchers of all ontological and epistemological positions in order to study thinking. However, I was advised by my supervisor to use this technique to better understand my participants' reactions while completing my questionnaire.

A Brief Demonstration of Use

I arranged a meeting with six colleagues to conduct the initial pilot test. The agenda included discussions on items whose wording they do not like, items whose meanings are not clear, items that are unnecessary, things they think should be added, and their general comments on the presentation, the need for translation or glossary and the length of time needed to complete the questionnaire.

At the beginning of our meeting, I summarized the goals of and stages in my research project and explained the role of the survey. I then informed them of what they were expected to do and what I would do with the outcomes of the meeting. I also explained the way in which I would like them to work, being a think-aloud session. They were asked to talk aloud while completing the questionnaire. I also had a copy of the questionnaire and wrote down what they said next to the related questions. It was a bit quiet at first, but after a few minutes, they started to speak out not only what they thought about certain questions but also their comments on how relevant the issues were to their current teaching. They sometimes

stopped and asked me for clarification. The think-aloud session took a total of 52 minutes and was followed by a fruitful discussion on both the content of every single section and the overall presentation of the questionnaire.

In brief, the participants need to be informed of what they should do. A warm-up exercise, in which examples of how you think aloud are given, can be used to get them familiar with the method. Audio and video recordings can also be used to help with note-taking of comments and feedback.

References

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