

Unscripted: Lessons from a "Failed" Interview

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Abstract:

This reflection describes a significant change from structured interviewing to open conversation in scientific research. By analyzing a "failed" interview, I show how embracing vulnerability and silence can be more effective than sticking to a script. The story highlights my personal experiences as a key factor in building rapport and working together to create valuable data.

Beginning: When Theory Far Apart from Reality

Back in the period between September and December of 2025, my first semi-structured interview had been conducted. As to investigate the influence of self-determination and acceptance on behavioral intention, and to explore students' motivational and experiential perceptions of mobile game-based vocabulary applications (MGBVLAs), I had been selected participants based on their prior experience with MGBVLAs and willingness to share their thoughts, then recruited eight interviewees from 20-21 years old, balancing male and female gender, and pre-intermediate and intermediate level of English proficiency. At the moment I came to the Google Meet room with a well-prepared interview protocol, a ready attitude as I had practiced

many times, and confidence of a person who "learns by heart" the Qualitative Inquiry Theory, I was convinced that strict alignment to the established procedure would suffice, and that "meaningful data" would naturally unfold according to the script. However, qualitative research is seldom as predictable as it appears on paper.

Challenging: When The Script Invalid

At first, everything went more smoothly than I expected, however, after 15 minutes, I realized I was only receiving brief, "packaged", and overly polite responses such as yes/no answer with no more explanations or further information to be analyzed - the reality dealt me a harsh wake-up call. The rapportation I was looking for completely vanished. In my own panic, I tried to rescue the interview by asking more complicated

questions, hoping to get more useful information for my research, yet participants' reaction went in reverse with all I expected - they were silent. The climax of this tension was a ten second silence following a question on professional ethics - this happened maybe caused by they were overwhelmed with the complexity of the questions or simply they are "newbie" in this field just like me - a void that laid bare my own displacement within the very conversation I was supposed to lead.

Solution: Accept The "Vulnerability" in Research

In that embarrassing moment, I decided to lower the script, took a deep breath and admitted with the interviewee: "I'm sorry, maybe the last questions are a little too complicated. To be honest, I saw it myself that I had framed this question quite academically." Fortunately, that sincere and accepting vulnerability broke the ice - a necessary approach for reaching the depths of human experience (Behar, 1996). Therefore, I stopped acting like a mere "questioner" and started to actually take time to listen to their responses. I went with the flow, accepted the silence, and let them have space for deep reflection rather than rushing to fill the void with hollow, scripted questions. For example, when participants initially discussed app usability, the conversation often shifted toward their emotional experiences (e.g., enjoyment or frustration), prompting follow-up questions to explore these aspects in greater depth.



The Values: Beyond The Textbooks

Via this experience, I realized the reality interview procedure goes beyond collecting meaningful data, it is a social interaction (Talmy, 2010). In the end, I have learnt three core lessons: (1) Rapport is a flow, not a step. Rapport is more than a checked box at the outset; it is a continuous flow of empathy. (2) The power of silence is more important than its look. Rather than a discomfort feeling in the interview process, it works as an interactional tool during the semi-structured interviews, allowing participants time to reflect, explain further on their responses, and express thoughts more freely, while also providing the researcher with insights into moments of hesitation, uncertainty, or deeper cognitive processing. Silence moment is not an error, but when the depth of information formed. (3) Connection over collection. It is better to be a thoughtful listener before being a data collector.

Reflection: Growth in The Unscripted

Looking back, the "losing control" moment initially became the biggest lesson in my research procedures - objectivity does not equate to coldness. Furthermore, the personal reflection acknowledges to me that

attitude and emotion of myself are parts of research tools. We do not only gather data; we co-construct meaning alongside our participants. True understanding often emerges in those spontaneous, unscripted instances.



References

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