Solidifying instruments of preliminary visit in Malaysia

Mohamad N.[1,a*] & Khalifah Z.[2,b]
[1]Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan, Johor, Malaysia
[2]Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 UTM Skudai, Johor, Malaysia
[a]haniza_nor@yahoo.com, [b]zkzeezai@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Similar to quantitative research approach, qualitative research approach in social science demands careful planning prior to data collection activities. However, the latter is commonly criticized for its elusiveness from objectivity. This paper shares the experience of the authors in carrying out a qualitative-research in a rural community in Borneo. In essence, the researchers used semi-structured interviews to understand the critical success factors of a community-based tourism program at the study site. The salient point to share from the experience is that researcher's preparation and understanding of the case before, during and after preliminary visit is important in preparing good research instruments is a process that gives qualitative research an invaluable 'richness and depth'.

Keywords: Methodology, Qualitative Approach, Research Instrument, Case Study

1.0 Introduction

Developing research instruments for qualitative research using a case study can be challenging. Literature has outlined and explained in great length ways to conduct a case study. However, each research undertaking brings about new findings on what works and does not. This paper shares an experience of conducting qualitative research in a rural community particularly in designing research instruments such as interview, which can help other researchers to prepare for qualitative research endeavor.

2.0 Designing Research Instruments

Designing research instruments usually takes place during the second phase of a research that is after desktop study. Prior to preliminary site visit, some research instruments were designed as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Research Instruments Needed for Community Research

Instrument	Description
Case Study Protocol	A guide for data collection; describes the procedure and general rules of conducting the case study and brief description of the expected data to be collected from the field.
Interview Template	A list of relevant questions for respondents
Summary Forms	A contact summary form, observation summary form and document summary form to record contact information, the observation and document analysis made during site visits
Interviewee List	An indefinite list of specified criteria of respondents including contact details.

Analysis Plan	A table of thematic coding based on literature review.
Access Application	A letter applying for access to site and respondents from local authority
Voice Recorder and camera	Important auxiliary tools

2.1 Preliminary Site Visit

Once the research instruments have been identified, preliminary visit was done for five reasons: 1) to establish rapport with the local community and get familiar with the study site and its issues, 2) to test research instruments – interview and direct observation, 3) to identify key respondents and finalise sampling method, 3) identify lessons learnt from the preliminary visit, and 4) to improve the research instruments. Each purpose of the visit is explained in the following sections.

i. Establish rapport and site familiarization

One of the purposes of the preliminary visit was to enable the researcher to be acquaintance with the local people and the site because it was the first time the researcher had been to the area. Prior to the visit, the researcher obtained some valuable information regarding the issues in the area through conference papers and discussions with the supervisors. This knowledge was crucial because at it enabled the researcher to follow interview sessions more easily and probe for explanation when necessary. During the preliminary visit, the researcher obtained a lot of information about the study site and the local community; the land-people relationship, the community development project initiative and the socio-cultural values of its people from Community-based Tourism leader. The community leader made a PowerPoint presentation that was instrumental in providing the historical background of the community development project and its development, and corroborating with the researcher's existing knowledge. At the end of the presentation, some community members were formally introduced themselves to the researcher. This gave the researcher an opportunity to identify the gatekeeper by face and a few key persons in the community development project. Then, the researcher was given the opportunity to introduce herself, which was used to convey the purpose of the visit, the nature of her research and the cooperation she needed from the local people. This first visit was very significant in developing an amicable friendship, which had helped the researcher tremendously in carrying out her study.

ii. Test research instrument

a. Interview

The preliminary visit was also used to test the research instruments to be used in the data collection stage. This study used multiple source of evidence as the methods as a strategy to collect data such as interviews (e.g.: in-depth interview, casual conversations and informal discussions), and direct observations (Hamel, et al., 1993; Robson, 2002; and Yin, 2009). The purpose of the site visit was also to test the validity of the instrument and gather some information that could be used to improve these research instruments.

i. Type of Interview

Interview was the main research instrument in this study. It is one of the most common data collection methods used in qualitative research. Interview enables a researcher to ask questions that deal with subjective issues such as a respondent's experience (Seidman, 1998) and gain understanding introspective information such as underlying reasons and motivations for people's attitudes, preferences or behaviour (Mitchell and Eagles, 2001). Interviews can be conducted at places of convenience to the respondents; at work, at home, in the street or in a shopping center, or some other agreed location. Interviews can be informal, semi-structured or standardized open-ended interviews (Patton, 1990) depending on circumstantial factors and nature of the answers elicited from the respondents. This study used semi-structured interview and the following sections provide some elaboration.

Semi-structured interview requires a researcher to outline set of issues to be asked prior the interview. However, these issues may not necessarily be asked in any particular order and only serve as a checklist during the interview to ensure all the relevant topics to be covered (Patton, 1990). The interview focuses on asking questions pertinent to the research questions yet enable the respondent to express him or herself at length. Semi-structured interview is commonly used in case study as a data collection method because it allows greater internal validity (David and Sutton, 2004). It does not only allow direct one-to-one and face-to-face interactions between interviewer (the researcher) and the interviewee (respondents) but also allows the former to seek clarification when an answer is vague (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).

Semi-structured interview (in-depth interviews, casual conversations and informal discussions) was used to interview the local community at the study site for three reasons.

First, Semi-structured interview provided the natural flexibility of a conversation. It created a natural conversational flow where the interview and interviewee could go back and forth on certain information that was important to the study. Therefore, a researcher does not have to rigidly follow the prepared question and he/she has some flexibility to further explore emergent themes and ideas. However, the questions drawn for the interviews were still bound to the framework and themes developed prior to the data collection to ensure that the interview will not go astray.

Second, semi-structured interview was appropriate for the setting. Most of the interviews were conducted at the community project office base which was usually busy with activities; tourists checking in/out, guides giving briefings, tourist groups having lunch or tea, small kids and toddlers running around, or management meetings. Naturally, it was difficult to conduct a formal interview in such a setting. As it turned out, the respondents seemed to be very comfortable with a casual approach, which was an advantage because it created a friendly atmosphere and encouraged robust exchange of information. Questions were asked in a casual manner to avoid rigidity during the sessions. The interview sessions lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour, depending upon the availability of the interviewee and the rigor of the discussion.

Third, semi-structured interview was used because the researcher planned to conduct all the interview sessions by herself and visit the site a few times. Therefore, semi-structured interview would serve as an appropriate instrument for her to explore and understand the issues at the site. The researcher strongly believed first-hand information and interactions with the respondents were invaluable in understanding the data during data analysis stage.

ii. Interview Questions

The interview questions were directed towards the respective research objective and arranged according to the flow of the research objectives. Interviews were pushed into a direction which encouraged respondents to discuss relevant issues or what they perceived as being so.

Most of the interview sessions were taped with the consent of the interviewees. They understood it when the researcher expressed the importance of recording the sessions to avoid loss of invaluable information. Although the interviews may seemed to be unstructured to the respondents, in the sense that the respondents were asked open-ended questions and they answered the questions freely, there was some thematic organization. The research allowed the interview to flow naturally but was vigilantly keeping track of significant information that the researcher was looking for. She also used a table of themes identified from literature review and arranged according to the research question as a guide especially pertaining to specific themes. When the respondents did not talk about or mention certain theme/data/information that was important, the researcher would probe the respondents.

iii. Determining Key Respondents

The researcher used purposive sampling method to determine the respondents. Purposive approach is highly appropriate because it identifies potential respondents based on criterion selection of who could provide the most information for the study (Kemper et al., 2003). The targeted respondents for this study were persons who could provide specific information based on their role and level of involvement in the community development project programme.

The respondents were chosen based on their involvement in the community development since its planning stage. They represented different age groups and held various posts within the community development project organisation. The number of respondents was deemed adequate in providing information that addressed the research questions. The number of respondents was not predetermined because the researcher planned to interview the local community until she was satisfied that the information had reached its saturation point. The task of identifying the respondents was relatively easy because the gatekeeper had been involved in the community development project programme since its inception and knew who would be the suitable respondents. She suggested some names that fit into categories of respondents stipulated by this study and this list of respondents gradually expanded.

iv. Arrangement for Interview Appointments

Most of the time, the researcher made appointments with the key informants from the community development project management team to interview them at a predetermined place and time since some of them had full time jobs elsewhere or worked in the reforestation and conservation community project sites scattered in the forest reserve away from the main office. Most of the times, the interview venue was the community development project office base because it was convenient to the key informants; they could easily come for an interview when they were free and then attend to community development project operational activities when the needed. On a few occurrences, interviews had to stop for a while to enable the key informants to attend to matters that needed their urgent attention.

During the preliminary visit and the subsequent visit, the researcher made it a point to remember the local community by name. The researcher elicited the names of potential respondents and his/her role in community development project from the information gatekeeper and gradually learnt who's who. Sometimes, the gatekeeper helped to identify a few of these respondents before the researcher approached them. The researchers felt that being tactful is essential to avoid being perceived as too imposing and indifferent towards the local people. Addressing the respondents by name was the researcher's gesture to show that they were noticed by and important to the researcher.

v. Constraints and Strengths

During the preliminary visit, the challenge emerged in the attempt to interview a few men, women and youths who were involved in the community development project programme. These young groups of respondents (between 17 to 25 years old) were visibly shy and uncomfortable to be interviewed. A few of them tried to avoid from being interviewed by evading the researcher. The researcher raised her concern regarding the reluctance of a few women to be interviewed to the community project manager. He was aware of the situation and admitted that most of the employees had never been interviewed before and they were apprehensive about participating in an interview. However, to the researcher's relief, he informed that the employees were reminded to give their full cooperation with the researcher. He advised them to start learning how to answer interview questions because sooner or later they would be the subject of research interests.

To overcome this constraint, the researcher looked for opportunities to approach anyone of them who seemed to be free and picked up a casual with them. As an ice-breaking strategy, the researcher chose to dwell on topics revolving around family, parents, children, and work which most of these young men and women seemed to be comfortable talking about. The researcher did not carry out recorded interview with this group during the preliminary visit; she focused on strengthening rapport with them through casual conversations. Based on this experience, young respondents were interviewed only on the subsequent fieldwork. It must be highlighted that despite being shy, the respondents were very cooperative during the interviews. However, there were a few outstandingly confident young women who presented themselves professionally and expressed themselves well during casual conversations. Nonetheless, interesting points and observations were jotted down in a notebook after the conversations were over and when the researcher was alone.

vi. Lessons Learnt from Interviews during Preliminary Visit

The researcher learnt a few lessons from the activities carried out during the preliminary visit. These lessons will help to improve the actual data collection activities at a later stage. The lessons learnt are as mentioned below:

- Assess the timeline and financial allocation for a research. Interview is a time consuming process and this can inevitably increase the cost for a research. It is even more crucial when the researcher has to travel back and forth for a few times for data collection.
- Sharpen the interviewing skills as an interviewer. Research questions based on good conceptual framework and theoretical framework help to create robust interview questions. Interviewer’s good grasp of the subject matter and required data / information enable him/her to follow disorganize responses by doing mental thematic categorization of the responses and going back to missing themes when appropriate.
- Be patient in order to get a dynamic interview. One interviewee may need more than one session/sitting depending on the interviewee’s availability. Although an interview has been scheduled, it may still have to be rescheduled. Insisting or demanding that an interview be continued may jeopardize the rapport. Nonetheless, creating an interview setting that is relaxed and non-intimidating through small talks is highly recommended.
- Come to term with any uncontrollable procedural imperfection. Sometimes, interviews may not adhere to the ideal procedures due to local community’s uniqueness (e.g. introvert personality, interview setting) which is not in line with the ‘ideal procedures’ of an interview. A researcher must exercise flexibility when dealing with these imperfections without compromising the quality of interview.
- Consider research timeline and financial ability when undertaking a case study. Data collection that uses in-depth interview as the main research instrument demands patience. It is time consuming and may require several visits to the site, which inevitably affects the overall cost for data collection process. If money is an issue, it is wise to consider an alternative site closer to home.
- Be sensitive to local community’s socio-cultural uniqueness that may inhibit responses during an interview. Rapport must be established to facilitate interviews at a later stage. Moreover, an ice-breaking session should precede an interview because it would make a respondent feel at ease thus encourage a dynamic interview session.
- Exercise probing to encourage shy or reserved respondents to talk so that they could provide more information. In some instances during the preliminary visit, some respondents provided limited answers because they were not used to being interviewed but probing gave them some guidance on which other aspects they could talk about.
- Prepare a list of open-ended questions which encapsulate the issues pertinent to the research questions preferably categorized based on the research questions. Open-ended questions enable the respondents to express their thought and feelings. However, since the interview is not a linear conversation, the interviewer must be aware which issues are being addressed by the interviewee.

- The ideal interview procedures and etiquette seldom mention ways to deal with less ideal interview setting. Shyness and modesty are characteristics not totally unexpected and had to be considered for data collection activities. The researcher has had a few female students and colleague coming from this part of the region that was polite, timid, shy and soft spoken. However, only when the researcher was at the study site that it struck her that such mannerism represents the values of the communities.

2.2 Improvements Made to Research Instruments

Upon returning from the preliminary site visit, the researcher made necessary amendments to the research instruments. Inputs gathered from the preliminary visits were used to beef up the research instruments or to omit some activities or forms deemed irrelevant.

3.0 Conclusion

Qualitative research demands meticulous preparation for data collection. This preparation starts from desktop research and preliminary visit. It is easy to get carried away or overwhelmed by data.

Acknowledgement
This research was financially supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant NO. 00000000) and the Fundamental Research Funds for Central University (Grant NO.TD2010-2).

References

Hamel, J., Dufour, S. and Fortin, D. (1993), Case Study Methods. Newbury Park, California: Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Irving Seidman. (1998), Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences, Second Edition. New York: Teachers College Press.

Matthew David, Carole D Sutton (2004), Social Research: The Basics. Sage Publications

Michael Quinn Patton (1990), Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods, 3rd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Mitchell, R. E., and Eagles, P. F. J. (2001), "An Integrative Approach in Tourism: Lessons from the Andes of Peru", Journal of Sustainable Tourism. 9(1): 4-28.

Robson, C. (2002), Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers, 2nd Edition. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Tashakkori, A. & Teddlie, C. (1996), Mixed Methodology: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches. (Eds.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Yin, R. K. (2009), Case Study Research: Design and Methods. 4th Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.