

VALIDATING A LONG QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

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Abstract: This paper describes the process of validating a long qualitative interview whose aim was to discover the views and teaching practices of teachers of an important first-year university course. The course was important because it prepared the students for the academic requirements of studying at the university. An in-depth qualitative interview with the course teachers was deemed to be the most effective tool for the purpose, given the practical constraints of the research setting. The study describes the design and validation of the interview schedule, based initially on McCracken's four-step model (1988) for producing an open-ended interview schedule. A 10-point plan for the validation of the interview was devised and carried out. This involved analysis of literature and documents, self-reflection, semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, preparation of a provisional schedule, expert feedback on this, and finally the piloting of the schedule. The pilot interview, which lasted for an hour and 20 minutes, showed that the questions were capable of eliciting rich data on the thinking and practice of the interviewee. It was also effective in highlighting several ways in which the schedule could be improved both through the interviewee feedback and the experience of actually doing the interview. By describing this process in detail, it is intended that the study will serve the purpose of demonstrating how to go about validating such a research instrument for novice researchers.

Keywords: academic skills, qualitative research, interview schedule, validation, piloting

1 Rationale

In qualitative research, particularly ethnographic research, in-depth interviews play an important part. While the number of qualitative studies published in journals has steadily grown over the last couple of decades, and while many useful books on research methodology now deal with how to do qualitative interviews, validation studies describing the process of developing and validating a long qualitative interview are still exceedingly rare. This article attempts to fill that gap by explaining in detail the steps involved in creating and piloting an interview schedule for such an interview intended to be used as part of a research study on the teaching of academic skills at university level. I will first give a brief account of the research background and the reasons for using a long interview as a research instrument, before going through the validation process step by step.

As a teacher of the Academic Skills Course (ASC) for first-year students in the Department of English Applied Linguistics (DEAL) at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest for the past seven years, I have become increasingly interested in the experience of first year students as they come to terms with a totally new academic environment. In particular my interest has become focused on the students' struggle to master academic writing, which forms the main content of the course. As a result of research conducted with my own class in the autumn of 2003 which involved asking the students to give brief feedback at the end of each lesson, as well as one to one conferences on their progress during the course, it became clear that:

- the majority of students had very little idea of what academic writing was before they began the course
- many students had difficulties with elements of the course
- the students' response to the course was largely dependent on their understanding of how it could help them with their writing for other courses

Since this course has such a pivotal role in acclimatising the students to university requirements and is likely to influence their future progress both within the Department of English Applied Linguistics and in other departments, these findings led me to consider the critical importance of the teacher's role in delivering the course and suggested the need to find out more about how teachers approached the teaching of the course. More specifically, I was interested in finding out whether different teachers were teaching the course in the same way or not and whether their views of what the course should do were similar.

Ideally the best way to verify what teachers are doing would be to conduct a series of lesson observations supplemented by interviews about the lessons. However, for practical reasons (principally lack of time and difficulty of gaining access at convenient times) this was not feasible. Therefore, the only other option was to get the information directly from the teachers themselves. To provide the necessary depth and richness of data for such an investigation, a long qualitative interview seemed to be the best instrument. Of course, a questionnaire can also be used to gather information about behaviour and attitudes, but as Dörnyei (2003) points out:

The problem with questionnaires from a qualitative perspective is that [...] they inherently involve a somewhat superficial and relatively brief engagement with the topic on the part of the respondent. Therefore, no matter how creatively we formulate the items, they are unlikely to yield the kind of rich and sensitive description of events and participant perspectives that qualitative interpretations are grounded in. [...] So, if we are after long and detailed personal accounts, other research methods such as personal interview are likely to be more suitable for our purpose. (p.14)

Thus, I decided to develop and validate a long qualitative interview schedule designed to discover how teachers of Academic Skills (AS) are teaching their courses.

The rest of this paper will describe the process by which the interview schedule was designed and validated and discuss the results of the piloting of the instrument. As a conclusion, the implications of the study for other researchers will be considered. Firstly though, I will outline some key concepts involved in the study.

2 The process approach versus the product approach to academic writing

The ASC is primarily based on Anglo-Saxon writing conventions and in the first semester encourages the students to use a process approach to writing (this is made explicit in the Course Contents and Requirements document). However, it is also partly genre-based (in the first semester the short argumentative essay and the comparison and contrast essay are taught, and in the spring semester longer empirical and theoretical research essays are the main focus), and so both process and product approaches to academic writing need to be considered.

The older product approach is so-named because it focuses on the end product of writing – the text itself. Typically it encourages students to imitate the features of model texts and in later forms to practice using language functions typical of academic writing such as description, narrative, definition, exemplification and so on (Jordan, 1997). The organisation of compositions, paragraph structure, cohesion, and style are also given prominence in textbooks using this approach (Jordan, 1997; Reid, 1993).

The process approach developed as a response to the perceived limitations of the product approach (Jordan, 1997; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). This approach grew out of a reassessment of the nature of writing and how it is learnt and taught which was strongly influenced by research on cognitive psychology (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). In the process approach the focus was shifted from the product to the composition processes which writers use to achieve the product, and thus there is a favouring of meaning over form (Jordan, 1997). There is close general agreement about what the key elements of the process approach are, although there are some differences in the wording and emphasis (Jordan, 1997; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Reid, 1993). The following points are widely agreed upon:

- learner centredness – motivates learners to take more responsibility for their own learning
- writing is seen as a process of discovery
- meaning is given precedence over form
- writing should be meaningful to the writer
- importance of feedback – peer, group, conferencing, written by teacher
- stages of writing – prewriting, planning, multiple drafting, editing, proofreading
- writing is recursive not linear.

Because the ASC is an amalgam of these two approaches, the interview schedule needed to address the teacher's handling of both the rhetorical and genre-based elements as well as the process approach elements such as the stages of writing and the importance of feedback.

3 The long qualitative interview

What constitutes a qualitative interview is open to a wide range of interpretations, depending on which source is consulted. For instance, Fontana and Frey (2000) make a broad distinction between structured interviews, which they associate with survey research and characterise as a form in which “all respondents receive the same set of questions asked in the same order or sequence by an interviewer who has been trained to treat all interview situations in a like manner” (p.649), and the traditional qualitative unstructured interview which is an “open-ended, ethnographic (in-depth) interview” (p.652). On the other hand, Wallace (1998) has three broad categories of interview consisting of structured, unstructured and semi-structured. This latter category is a compromise between the other two and often makes use of a prepared interview schedule and prompts. It combines “a certain degree of control with a certain amount of freedom to develop the interview” (p.147). Cohen and Manion (2000) make the point that the various types of interview can be seen as occupying a

continuum depending on the degree of openness and structure and depending on their purpose. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) apply this idea to the in-depth qualitative interview:

For the purposes of qualitative research, the shape that an interview may take has been described in various ways. Common to most descriptions is a continuum of interview formats ranging from a structured format to a relatively unstructured format. The structure of the interview has to do primarily with the extent to which the questions to be asked of the interviewee are developed prior to the interview. (p.81)

They identify three main formats, the unstructured interview, the interview guide and the interview schedule, and point out that while each format requires different skills from the interviewer, they all share “a critical commonality: The questions are open-ended and designed to reveal what is important to understand about the phenomenon under study” (ibid., p.81).

For the purposes of the present study, it was felt that since the information sought was complex but involved a topic about which much was already known to the interviewer, an in-depth semi-structured format using an interview schedule prepared in advance would be the best approach. This would allow clear differences and similarities to emerge between respondents but would also be flexible enough to allow further probing, through the use of appropriate prompts, of interesting points or areas where information was difficult to elicit.

4 Research Questions

In common with many qualitative studies, the research questions developed as the research proceeded. The initial research question was: *What do teachers of academic writing think they are teaching and why are they teaching it?* The question was framed in this way since I could not be sure merely from interviewing teachers that what they said they were teaching in their classes was in fact what they were actually doing. However, it soon became clear in the early stages of the validation process (see 5.3) that this bifurcated question was insufficiently focused and needed to be refined into three separate questions. These were the following:

How do teachers at the Department of English Applied Linguistics teach academic writing?

What are their beliefs about academic writing?

What are their beliefs about the course?

Of course the first question still could not be reliably answered merely by means of an interview but a well-designed schedule could be expected to discover quite a lot about how teachers approach the teaching of the course. To obtain a more reliable picture of how teachers actually teach the course, observation would also be necessary.

The importance of teacher beliefs and their relationship with classroom practice has been the focus of an enormous amount of research. In the case of this course, every teacher will inevitably interpret the syllabus in their own way and make different decisions on how to implement it in the classroom. These decisions will be influenced by the teacher’s beliefs about teaching and by their personal view and experience of what academic discourse is and what students need to know about it, although the literature also points out the possibility of mismatches between beliefs and practices (see Elbaz, 1991; Pajares, 1992; Freeman &

Johnson, 1998; and Borg, 2003 for the importance of the teachers' experience and beliefs on their practice, as well as the complex relationship between them).

5 Research Method

The research method was based on McCracken's (1988) four-step model for designing and implementing a long qualitative interview. McCracken clearly differentiates the long interview from the unstructured ethnographic interview:

It departs from the unstructured "ethnographic" interview insofar as it adopts a deliberately more efficient and less obtrusive format. It is a sharply focused, rapid, highly intensive interview process that seeks to diminish the indeterminacy and redundancy that attends more unstructured research processes. The long interview calls for special kinds of preparation and structure, including the use of an open-ended questionnaire, so that the investigator can maximise the value of the time spent with the respondent. (p.7)

In effect, this is a description of a scheduled open-ended format similar to that described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994) under the term interview schedule.

The four stages of McCracken's model are as follows:

- (1) review of analytic categories and interview design
 - (2) review of cultural categories and interview design
 - (3) interview procedure and the discovery of cultural categories
 - (4) interview analysis and the discovery of analytical categories
- (McCracken, 1988, p.29)

Only the first three stages are relevant to the validation study as the last stage relates to analysing the data gathered following the completion of the interview. The first two stages are both concerned with the identification of categories that need to be included in the interview schedule but also have an important role in manufacturing distance or, as Holliday (2002) puts it "making the familiar strange" (p.13). This is necessary to avoid or neutralise the effect of the researcher's own assumptions about the phenomenon under investigation. These assumptions are particularly dangerous when the researcher is familiar with the research setting as in the present case. Stage 1 involves a detailed literature review both to establish "an inventory of the categories and relationships that the interview must investigate" (McCracken, 1988, p.32) and also to alert the researcher to the preconceptions already existing in the literature. The second stage is meant to harness the researcher's own familiarity with the culture being studied in order to add to the categories for question formulation as well as to enable a clearer realisation of how the researcher understands the culture in order for him to be able to attain a critical distance from it.

Using these two steps as a starting point, a 10-point plan for the validation process was designed. This process is summarized in Table 1, which also shows where the individual steps are detailed in this article:

Steps of the validation process	Described in section
1) Review of the literature	5.1
2) Review of documents and course descriptions	5.1 Appendix A
3) Self-reflection and self-interview	5.2
4) Asking teachers to define academic writing and explain the purpose of teaching it (using a brief survey)	5.3 Appendix B
5) Semi-structured interview with a highly experienced teacher about the development and purpose of the course	5.4 Appendix C
6) Semi-structured interviews with two teachers about how they teach the course	5.5 Appendix D
7) Informal interviews with students to get their views on the course	5.6
8) Preparation of provisional interview schedule	5.7 Appendix E
9) Asking for feedback on the schedule from other Academic Skills teachers	5.8
10) Piloting the interview schedule	6

Table 1. The 10-step validation process

While the first three points correspond closely to the first two steps in McCracken's model, points 4–7 go somewhat beyond it. This was because I felt that reading the literature on the teaching of academic skills would not be sufficient to uncover the complexity of the specific research setting – I needed to know more about the theoretical basis and the development of the course at the university and to do this I had to interview the only teacher who was present when the course was implemented. Similarly, I felt that a thorough review of cultural categories should include all the participants within the culture, not just myself, as well as looking at the artefacts of the culture (documents and course descriptions). Another advantage of this extended approach is that it utilises the emergent nature of qualitative research in that each stage incorporates and builds on the previous ones. This will become clear as the process is described in more detail.

It should be noted that some of the steps were not completed in the manner or the order originally intended due to practical and time constraints. These divergences from the original plan will be described below at the appropriate points.

5.1 Review of literature and documents describing the course

A close reading of the literature on the teaching of academic writing identified the main approaches used in the Anglo-Saxon academic culture (the USA and the UK), and by comparing these with the Course Contents and Requirements document and the official course descriptions it became clear that the course contained elements of both the product and the process approach. For instance, the course description for semester 1 mentions “the process of evaluating their own and their peers' work and rewriting their drafts” (see

Appendix A) which is typical of the process approach. The descriptions for both semester 1 and 2 also mention writing paragraphs, different types of essay and learning the structure of theoretical and empirical research papers. A focus on the rhetorical organisation and structure of academic writing is more typical of the product approach.¹ This meant that the schedule would need to include a category that looked at how the teacher handled the course content and what elements they gave more or less attention to.

However, rather than constructing a schedule with questions about every element of the course contents (such a schedule would need to ask about the teaching of invention techniques, writing for different audiences, style and register, paragraph structure, cohesion and coherence, titles, thesis statements, drafting and redrafting, revision techniques, summarising and paraphrasing, plagiarism and referencing, research skills, as well as the four main written genres covered in the two semesters), I decided it would be better to ask teachers what elements of the course they attached most importance to and if there were any elements they considered to be of less importance. It was hoped that this would expose any differences in emphasis between teachers in handling the contents of the course. Also, by asking questions about what teachers thought about the purpose of the course, it might be possible to see how learner centred a particular teacher's approach was, although this would probably need to be explored through looking at the answers to other questions as well.

One other result of the review of literature and course documents, was the realisation of the difficulty of clearly defining what academic writing is and how it should be taught, owing to the underlying theoretical complexity of the area. This suggested the need to ask ASC teachers about their understanding of the key term.

5.2 Self-reflection and self-interview

As already mentioned, this stage equates to McCracken's review of cultural categories. He states that "[t]he object of this step is to give the investigator a more detailed and systematic appreciation of his or her personal experience with the topic of interest" (p.32). Of course self-reflection goes on at all stages of the research process, often unconsciously, but it was important to utilise my own knowledge and experience of teaching the course at an early stage to help me see additional areas that the interview should address. It was also important to be aware of my own assumptions and prejudices regarding the course in order to be able to maintain sufficient distance from them when preparing and conducting interviews. For this purpose I carried out a 'self-interview' by writing down my thoughts about the course and how I attempted to teach it.²

I began by asking myself two questions: "What am I trying to do in my course?" and "How do I go about teaching the course?". I then sat down and wrote continuously until I felt I had no more to say, or rather until my thoughts dried up. This resulted in six pages of

¹ Jordan (1997) and Hedge (2000) also point out that work on genre analysis begun by Swales (1990) has had an increasing influence on EAP courses which aim to familiarise students with the features of academic genres they will meet and be expected to produce in their studies. This focus on genre is a more recent development of the product approach.

² For a researcher less embedded in the research context, this step may simply involve giving the researcher "a more detailed and systematic appreciation of his or her personal experience with the topic of interest" (McCracken, 1988, p.32) by engaging in a period of sustained self-examination in which the researcher "must inventory and examine the associations, incidents and assumptions that surround the topic in his or her mind" (ibid., p.32).

somewhat rambling prose which I then proceeded to evaluate. Much of it consisted of generalisations and repetitions but it was possible to extract several points of interest. In my case the evaluation followed the writing straightaway, but some time could be allowed to elapse if preferred, and indeed the writing and evaluation could be repeated with the same or a different focus.

Firstly, in addition to seeing the purpose of the course as being “to enable students to function in their academic studies in the university” (Self-interview, p.1), which mirrored the official course description, I saw a wider purpose: “I am trying to make students more responsible for their own progress and development in the academic environment and able to function for themselves independently of me or other teachers as much as possible” (Self-interview, pp.1-2). Another aim took an even wider view:

I also encourage the students to look at the possible benefits to themselves of learning to write in a new more structured way and to organise their thoughts systematically. By this I mean that I want them to think about how these skills can help them in their future life whatever that may be (most of them will not be academics). (Self-interview, pp.3-4)

Another point related to the style of teaching. It is clear that while I am not always successful in doing so, I attempt to teach in a Socratic way by getting the students to engage in discussion and provide answers for themselves rather than rely on me to give them all the answers:

In lessons I try to involve the students in discussion of the purpose and use of techniques as much as possible and try to get them to provide the answers rather than just feeding them with my ideas and views. I have to admit that I am not always successful in doing this – sometimes I do tend to talk too much and to deliver mini-lectures but I am conscious of this tendency and as much as possible try to avoid it. (Self-interview, p.3)

The latter part of the above quote also connects with a third important point, which is the difficulties experienced by the teacher both with his own teaching and with the conditions imposed upon him by the teaching context. One last quote illustrates this perfectly:

I am constantly aware of the time constraints of the course – 1 1/2 hours a week is not sufficient to go into the depth and do the things I would like to do. Also I do not always have enough time to prepare lessons the way I would like to. I find getting lessons started often wastes a lot of time, especially if I’m waiting for another class to leave or for late students to get settled.

Sometimes I have to make a compromise between exploring topics or points which have been raised in the depth I would like to and trying to cover the material I need to each week. I am aware that I am very bad at timing lessons and getting things finished on time. (Self-interview, p.5)

These points indicated that the interview would need to probe the teacher’s ideas of what the course should do for the students, what sort of interaction took place within the class and what difficulties the teacher experienced with the handling of the course. They also made my own concerns and viewpoint much clearer to me.

5.3 Asking teachers to define academic writing and explain the purpose of teaching it

To discover more about how other teachers viewed the course I decided to ask them directly what they thought academic writing was and why we taught it to our students. I hoped that this might uncover additional categories which had not yet suggested themselves

and I also wanted other perspectives on this central question in case I had overlooked something.

I composed a short letter requesting an answer to the question (see Appendix B) and placed a copy in the pigeonholes of all the teachers who were teaching or who had recently taught Academic Skills as well as sending the letter by e-mail. I received 6 replies from 12 letters.

Most of the definitions of academic writing were very similar to definitions in the literature although they varied in detail. However, one of the replies deliberately raised problems to do with defining and teaching academic writing:

Academic writing is a compound phrase. It is made up of two parts: academic and writing. The former refers to a community, while the latter covers a range of written genres. If we match the two components, we can say that academic writing could be defined as a set of written genres as endorsed by the academic community.

A more refined definition of 'academic writing' would raise a number of question marks, like: which academic community? (international, national, or at more local levels?); who are the members of this community (scholars/researchers belonging to one particular discipline or to a wider spectrum of disciplines – say the humanities, or science?). What type of communication (if any!) goes on between students and members of the community? Are students themselves part of it? In my understanding and experience the teaching of academic writing inevitably involves the use of model/sample texts. The extent to which a given writing tutor presents those sample texts as real exemplars to be 'imitated' (conventions regarding the format, organisation, style, special vocabulary, technical properties (e.g. illustrations, figures, etc.), tenets and patterns of logic) will determine the degree to which an existing scholarly community addressed in the text will be seen as a reference community. If teaching is done in an 'interactive' way (e.g. students are engaged in the peer editing; papers written by students get published, etc.), students themselves will become part of the academic community. (Reply 3)

This indicates a sophisticated critical viewpoint that goes beyond a straightforward definition of academic writing. It suggests that there can be significant underlying differences concerning teachers' beliefs about academic writing which may affect how they present the course to the students. It also implies more of a product approach, or perhaps a genre-based approach, than a process approach and so further underlines the need for the interview to explore the teacher's handling of the content.

Several of the answers to the second part of the question also mentioned the idea of enabling students to enter an academic community and function within it. Other reasons given for teaching the course were that "Hungarian students do not get training in academic writing in their mother tongue either, so they definitely need training in EFL academic writing" (Reply 1) and that "as most of our students are non-native speakers of English, these courses should also provide them with opportunities to develop their general writing skills, reading comprehension, vocabulary and awareness of styles and registers" (Reply 3). Mention was also made of the need to teach a course that was suited to the special context of the university: "Our 'adaptation' is necessary to fit this special Hungarian-English context (e.g., the special expectations of our literature or linguist colleagues)" (Reply 1). These observations suggested that the interview would need to look at the teacher's understanding of how students were experiencing the course and the problems they might have. It seemed that it might also be a good idea to ask about the effect of the context on the teaching of the course.

There was one answer which gave a very different view of the reason for teaching academic skills:

We live in a technological/computer age of mass communication, uncontrolled advertising and "spin". It is therefore imperative, particularly in a democracy, that the 'educated' individual be able to analyse data. Socrates' dictum that "the unexamined life is not worth living" is even more relevant today. Education, especially at the higher level, must be problem-oriented and promote critical thinking. In teaching the essential elements of academic writing to our students we realize this goal. (Reply 5)

This reply further indicated the need to explore the teacher's beliefs concerning the topic and, along with Reply 3, it led me to refine the research question into three separate questions (as described in section 4) to take account of the significance of these beliefs. However, I still wanted the main focus of the interview schedule to be on what teachers actually did in their lessons because I felt that simply asking them directly about what they thought might not be as revealing or productive as asking them to explain how they taught the course and probing the reasons behind their approach. In other words, asking point-blank about beliefs might produce very different answers to examining beliefs indirectly through a discussion of teaching practice and experience. It was also possible that specific discussion of beliefs would arise naturally through discussion of particular aspects of teaching practice.

At this stage in the procedure I had identified the following areas that needed to be addressed in the interview:

- the teacher's handling of the elements of the course and the importance attached to them
- the teacher's beliefs about what the course should do for the students
- the teacher's interaction with the students within the class
- the difficulties experienced by the teacher in handling the course
- the teacher's understanding of the problems students may have
- the special context of the course

However, as yet specific questions had not been constructed, or at least they only existed as a collection of half-formed ideas which were yet to be committed to paper.

5.4 Semi-structured interview about the development and purpose of the course

As an additional means of examining the theoretical basis of the course as well as its intended purpose, I decided to interview a highly experienced colleague who has been teaching the course since its inception. For this purpose a simple interview guide was constructed consisting of seven questions (see Appendix C). Some of the questions (namely 5, 6, and 7) were also intended to explore the question categories already identified in the hope that specific questions and prompts for these areas might become apparent. The questions were sent on request to the teacher after the aim of the interview was explained, which proved to be very helpful since very little probing was necessary to elicit information (although several supplementary questions were asked during the interview). However, question 4 proved to be somewhat problematic and had to be explained during the interview – this provided valuable experience in how *not* to frame a question clearly. The question had to be reformulated so that it asked more simply about the view the course takes of what academic writing is.

The interview proved to be extremely productive and lasted for 50 minutes. Apart from making clear the original aims of the course and how it had developed, a number of key

points were raised which suggested further question categories and, in some cases, specific questions.

Firstly, in addition to confirming that the course had elements of both the product and process approaches to writing with the emphasis on the latter in the first semester, the interviewee placed great importance on the role of feedback. She made it clear that this had been a central part of the course from the beginning:

T³: ... I remember we, especially A___ gave us a lot of readings on how to do this because none of us had experience. Some of us had gone through writing courses abroad – not all of us. And so we also had to learn how to pursue this process approach to writing, how to give feedback. We actually had workshops talking about these with B___ and the kinds of feedback that can be given and-

I: Did that include pupil to pupil feedback and teacher feedback as well?

T: Yes, peer response as well as teacher feedback, yes. And comments. And so it wasn't, or, as I perceived it, it was never the grades that really mattered or the final product but the way we actually got there.

(Course Development Interview, p.4)

This led me to reconsider my decision not to ask about how teachers deal with specific components of the course. It seemed to me that since feedback played such an integral part in the process approach, I needed to ask about it directly. However, the final decision to have a separate question about the use of feedback was not made until after the trial teacher interviews (described in the next section), where again the subject came up.

Another point which formed the basis of a question occurred near the end of the interview. When discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the course, the interviewee revealed an interesting technique that she used:

I remember that it was an extremely good feeling for me that I could feel tangible development ... and I always kept my students' first essays and **it was always a trick on my part to give that essay back to them at the end of the year** and they were always so surprised and really it showed them the value of the course and our work together.

(Course Development Interview, p.10 (my highlighting))

I was particularly struck by the use of the word 'trick', and it occurred to me that a question asking about the special tricks teachers used could be very revealing. Question 5 in the teacher interviews resulted from this (see Appendix D).

A third question (Question 6 in the teacher interviews) was suggested by comments made at the beginning and end of the interview concerning the attitude of the students to the course. Again I was particularly struck by the use of one word, resistance, and this was used in the construction of the question. The first comment related to students feelings when the course was first begun more than 10 years ago:

So this is how I got into it too, with the study package, with students who didn't quite understand what we really wanted of this course. I could feel a lot of tension then, so **a little bit of resistance like tension on the part of the students**. They weren't used to the idea of people telling them how to write. They weren't so unhappy about the language input, they were more concerned about the rhetorical input we were trying to give.

(Course Development Interview, p.1 (my highlighting))

³ In the interview extracts all names have been anonymized. T and I stand for Teacher and Interviewer, respectively.

The interviewee indicated at the end of the interview that one of the weaknesses of the course was that she could still sense a negative feeling on the part of the students:

I can still feel that students are not so terribly happy about this course. I have had several different courses at this university, all of them taught by myself, so, the one variable was constant and that was me, and none of my courses have been, so, little happy or (laughs) – I don't know how to put it. All of my courses were more enthusiastic, more, more, I don't know – less problematic (laughs). And I had to explain much fewer things at the other courses and had to go into considerably fewer discussions about the aims and essence and usefulness of the course than this one. I don't know how this could be overcome. (Course Development Interview, p.11)

It seemed worthwhile to ask other teachers about this perceived resistance and dissatisfaction both to see if they had noticed it and, if so, to find out how they dealt with it.

During the interview I realised that I had neglected to include a question on the special context of the course, and so I added one at a convenient point. The answer was very interesting because it looked at a number of different aspects:

- I: OK. Maybe I think we can have extra question about the Hungarian context, it might be better to ask here. So, does the fact that this course is being taught in a Hungarian University influence the contents of the course in any way? Because it's a Hungarian academic context.
- T: Yes. In the case of my course for example it does in, especially in areas, one area relates to the academic thing – that I also need to, I don't just include the general resources that are published in academic writing, in Anglo-Saxon academic writing literature, but I also try and include things that I know are relevant here. And the expectations of the teachers that I know, that's one area, so we also need to cater for those needs. And the other relates to the topics that I have already mentioned to you: that we have to find topics that they can write about and that they are happy to write about – um – because for them /?/ like euthanasia and abortion and hanging, what you would expect to be a genuinely interesting topic comes out as something dead boring (laughs). And they don't want to speak about it so – in that respect it is. And maybe there's a third aspect, that it's not ESL writing but EFL writing. For often Hungarian teachers, not even native speaker English teachers. So, maybe this is a third very important aspect that we have to build upon – or we have very little to build upon in the students' mother tongue. And then this very little that we can build upon is not much use because we have to cater for the EFL context. It seems to me sometimes it's very unnatural (laughs) that I teach it, another Hungarian native speaker. And I think this is a very exciting research topic (laughs). Hungarian native speakers teaching EFL academic writing for the Hungarian EFL context – there's so many tricks in this.
(Course Development Interview, pp.8-9)

This answer showed the complex levels of the teacher's thinking about what to include in the course – a blend of standard academic writing literature, locally relevant material and topics which the students find interesting. Added to this there is the problem of dealing with the specific EFL context. The richness of this answer convinced me that it was important to have a separate question asking teachers how the context affected their teaching of the course. Question 9 in the teacher interviews addressed this point.

One further question (Question 10 in the teacher interviews) was suggested by the interviewees' discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the course as well as some other parts of the interview where possible improvements were discussed. The interviewee was particularly concerned with the need for communication with other departments in order to determine “the everyday needs of our students in terms of what is expected of them in the seminars” (Course Development Interview, p.10). A question inquiring about what changes or improvements teachers would like to make would perhaps show how widespread this concern was but more importantly it might reveal some very interesting differences in the perceptions of individual teachers.

The interview was also very helpful in exploring some of the previously identified question categories, particularly the problems the students experienced and the reasons for them, such as their secondary schooling, and also the interaction of the teacher with the students. The need to fully explain the purpose of the course to the students was stressed by the interviewee:

I always feel the need to explain to my students why we are doing this course in the first semester and then, I remember I always take in, took in, Kaplan's article about the semiotic doodles article – you know the cultural thought patterns and this culture, language, mind or thought triangle – and we start thinking about how this really works and how it works in different cultures, and the students really well respond to this and find it very interesting and then it's easy to make a next step raising their awareness to the fact that this is a special community in which we are working here and this has very special participants and very special media through which we communicate and if we want our communication to be successful then we have to work along particular guidelines or rules so to say. (Course Development Interview, p.6)

This was interesting because it revealed so much about the interviewee's thinking regarding the course and its purpose, and it connected with many points which had emerged in previous stages of the validation procedure to do with the Anglo-Saxon basis of academic writing conventions and the special requirements of academic communities. In particular it showed the efforts made to shape the students' view in a positive way, and it suggested that a question dealing with the students' understanding of the course and how the teacher explains the purpose of the course to them could be very rewarding.

5.5 Trial teacher interviews

By this stage I already had a good idea of several of the questions that I wanted to ask and of the main question categories that I wanted to include in my schedule. However, I wanted to test the questions before finalising the schedule to see how well they worked (i.e., whether the respondents understood them clearly and whether they would elicit useful data). Moreover, I thought that there could still be some categories or aspects which remained unconsidered as yet and that by doing some shorter 'test' interviews I might be able to discover these. Therefore, I prepared a basic schedule of ten questions (Appendix D) and asked two teachers, a native speaker of English and a Hungarian, to assist me. The choice of native speaker and Hungarian interviewees was deliberate, as they might be expected to show certain differences in viewpoint due to their different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. (Of course, I was well aware that this was only one of many potentially significant differences between teachers, such as gender, age and experience.)

Perhaps the most significant result of this stage was the difference in the richness of data that the two interviews yielded. This is partly signalled by the duration of the interviews: the first took just under 45 minutes and the second was over after 21 minutes. However, longer answers in themselves are not necessarily more useful; what matters is whether the interview produces answers which are relevant to the research focus. In this respect the longer interview was clearly better because it went into much greater depth on the key issues. One example, from the responses to Question 2 asking about the purpose of the course, clearly illustrates this difference in depth:

I see it as an introduction to what it's like to be a student in a university and how to cope with all the problems of being in a university. So it's an academic, it's called academic skills, but basically the way I think it's mostly taught is as an academic writing course. Now for me academic skills goes way beyond just

academic writing and these things are to do with time management, in particular, in the first few weeks when you're at university, how to cope with suddenly you've got lots and lots of courses that there are various expectations for and you're expected to behave in a very different way from how you've behaved at secondary school and most students come straight from secondary school. I mean there are some people who have a year doing something or they fail an entrance exam and they work as an au pair for a bit doing that, and in some ways they're, I mean they're, they've been out, those that have been out they've been out of any kind of academic environment for a year or two years. (Teacher Interview 1, p.1)

Here the teacher stresses the importance he attaches to the course in helping students make the transition to a very different way of studying and learning from what they have been used to at school. For him the course is about a lot more than just writing. In the same answer he goes on to reflect more specifically on how the writing students have to do at university is fundamentally different from the kind of writing they have done before in English:

So in a sense I think that I try to take the best of what there was on that course in the Czech Republic [where this teacher had worked earlier in his career] which was to do with understanding, defining what it is to be a student in a university, how you manage your time and, and then, yes, writing. Like how you, how the writing that you're expected to do might differ from any kind of writing you've done in an English class. Because not many of the students have actually ever written very much in English or anything of any length at all, because most writing is not, that they do at secondary school, is not about learning how to write, it's about learning how to learn English so the writing that they do is how to learn, you know vocabulary or how to, how to learn grammar. But the writing is in a sense a channel activity, like an activity in order to learn English and not to teach. English teachers in secondary schools are not teaching people how to write in English. Mostly – there might be one or two exceptions but for the most part the writing is not anything like what they are expected to do for linguistics, literature, or any other courses that they do, phonetics, yeah. (Teacher Interview 1, p.1)

By comparison, the answer the second teacher gave to this question, while relevant, was much more perfunctory:

Well I think it's to prepare the students to write essays in other seminars and other classes, literature, linguistics, and also to sort of gather their thoughts and put them on paper in an English way. (Teacher Interview 2, p.1)

There could be several reasons for this difference: the first teacher had much more experience and therefore had had a greater chance to reflect on his teaching. There could also be differences in the personality of the interviewees and the circumstances of the interview which might explain the relative garrulousness of each teacher (for instance, the first interview was done alfresco over a coffee in the university café – at the interviewee's request). However, another possible reason was that in the case of the second interviewee the questions had proved insufficient to elicit the richness of response that was sought and the interviewer had not been able to effectively probe for deeper insights. This indicated to me that I needed to have a greater range of questions and that I needed to have planned prompts or probes for some questions and not just rely on floating prompts (see McCracken, 1988, pp.34-37; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, pp.95-96).

The interviews did yield some other important insights. Both teachers mentioned the importance of previous teaching experience and I realised the need to ask about this and not just about the length of time spent teaching the Academic Skills Course. The first interviewee also talked at length about his own learning experiences with regard to academic writing:

If I was doing this in Britain, in first year university, then the students would be much more sophisticated. They'd of – because of the system in Britain where people do three subjects for A-level and actually have

to do quite a lot of academic writing, and are brought up on – I mean I don't know about you but we had debates at the age of 11 and 12, on a whole range of things from euthanasia to capital punishment, to researching space, going to the moon and then we had to write it up afterwards, about the for and against. And from the age of 11 at school I was doing this. You know, I went to a, I suppose quite a posh grammar school where these were things that were considered important. (Teacher Interview 1, p.9)

Even though this was part of a discussion of the special Hungarian context of the course, the teacher's own experience of learning to write academic English seemed to represent a separate category of major importance which had been completely missed.

One other new category was suggested by the two interviews, and this was classroom atmosphere. Both teachers made references to the relationships within the class both between students and between themselves and the students. The first teacher also spoke at some length about his efforts "to build up a good social atmosphere in the group" (Teacher Interview 1, p. 9) in order to encourage trust and make criticism easier. This convinced me that classroom atmosphere and attempts to build a strong group identity were important to the success of the course and teachers should be asked how they approached this area.

5.6 Informal interviews with students

In order to get the students' views of the course and how it was taught, I had intended to hold some informal interviews with individual students or groups of students (both my own and other teachers'). Unfortunately, for various reasons I was unable to arrange such interviews before the end of the semester. As a fallback I decided to send some questions by e-mail to my second year students, most of whom had attended other teachers' academic skills classes in the first year. The questions were as follows:

- (1) How well do you think the first year academic skills course succeeded in meeting your needs?
- (2) Did you experience any difficulties during the course? (These could be either with the content of the course or the teaching)
- (3) Do you have any suggestions for how the course could be improved?

By the time of the actual piloting I had only received four replies and, while they all said the course had been useful, they were not sufficiently detailed to suggest any new ideas for categories or questions.

While the focus of the interview is on teachers, I still think it is important to get the insights of students as this may suggest aspects of the teaching of the course otherwise unseen. The lack of a detailed student viewpoint is thus an unfortunate omission which must be addressed in the future.

5.7 Preparation of the provisional interview schedule

Following a review of all the collected data, the full set of questions was drawn up for the version of the instrument to be piloted. This involved adding new questions to those used in the trial teacher interviews, modifying some of the old questions and adding planned probes to several questions. This version of the schedule can be found in Appendix E. The optional probes are in square brackets beneath the main questions. (They are optional because their use may prove unnecessary.) Nearly all the probes were suggested by comments or ideas in the data.

A decision also had to be made on how to sequence the questions. As can be seen from Appendix E, the interview opens with two relatively straightforward questions about the teacher's background and then the next four sections look at how the teacher deals with the actual teaching of the course. The last two sections ask the teachers to evaluate the course and, finally, to examine their own learning experience and its affect on their teaching. It seemed logical to finish by looking at how the teachers had learnt to write academic English because then what they said about the effect of their own learning experience on their teaching could be compared with what they had said earlier in the interview.

It should be noted that a further section (section H) was added just before piloting as a way of getting immediate feedback from the interviewee on the effectiveness of the interview. This was also necessary because no prior feedback on the schedule had been obtained although this had been the original intention.

5.8 Feedback from other teachers on the schedule

Due to time constraints and workload, feedback from other teachers concerning the schedule could not be obtained before the pilot interview was done. However, one experienced colleague did look at the schedule after it had been piloted and gave some brief notes by e-mail. Only three substantive changes were suggested. Firstly clearer, more precisely worded prompts were given for question B2: "What do you say to provide rationale for the course? On what (theoretical and/or pedagogical) basis do you explain the purpose of the course if need be?". However, essentially these are rewordings of the main question in more technical language, rather than probes which suggest alternative ways of approaching the question or ask for further elaboration.

The second point relates to the use of the word 'elements' in C1: "What do you mean by 'elements'? The given course contents (e.g. argumentative essay, presentation, etc.) or the methodological aspects (e.g. reworking drafts, peer reading, analysis of sample papers, etc.)?". Clearly, this is a valid criticism and the question needs to be reworded or expanded.

The final point related to C2 and suggested that before asking about the use of feedback, it made sense to ask the teacher what types of feedback they used: "Before this question it might be a good idea to ask what kinds of feedback techniques does he use in the course (e.g. peer, teacher + language-,content-structure-related, any other?)". This too seemed a logical improvement to make.

6 Findings from the pilot interview

The pilot interview itself was done with the provisional schedule and lasted for an hour and twenty minutes. The interviewee was an experienced Hungarian teacher of academic skills and was thus well suited to give helpful feedback. All of the questions were clear according to him except one of the probes for question B2 (When and how much/how often do you talk about it?). This needed to be explained in different words and at some length to clarify exactly what was being asked. He felt that the sequence was logical and that the brief explanations given at the beginning of each section were helpful. He suggested that a question on evaluation and assessment should be added and he also said that there were not really any

grand tour questions, although because I was interviewing people who worked in the same context and did the same things as me – in other words, people who were as familiar with the research setting as I was – this was not a problem.

After completing the pilot interview my own feeling was that in addition to the suggested question on evaluation and marking, there were still some other questions that might be worth including about how teachers handle the course. One such would be about the relative weighting teachers give to the theoretical and empirical essay in the second semester, as there was some disagreement about whether these tasks were worth doing (I was surprised that the interviewee's views on the importance of the two was the exact opposite of my own). I also felt that better probes could be provided and more probes were needed for difficult, more complex areas.

I was also unhappy with the balance between very specific questions and general questions in the schedule – the interviewee's comment about the lack of grand tour questions was disturbing because I did not agree that familiarity with the setting was sufficient justification for doing without these. On reflection I think it would probably be sensible to start each section with a very general question about that topic and then follow it up with more specific questions. For example, for section C (How you teach the course) I could begin by asking how the interviewee would characterise himself as a teacher. Of course, since I am seeking specific information the general questions on their own are not enough but their strength is that they may throw up unforeseen points.

7 Conclusion

The question of validity for interview-based research is not fixed and unchanging. It depends largely on the kind of interview being used (Cohen & Manion, 2000). For the long qualitative interview which is designed to capture the complexity of a phenomenon or setting and not to establish its generalisability to other settings, internal validity in the form of the authenticity of the data and the soundness of the research design are most important. I have tried to demonstrate the step by step process of the schedule validation and show the reasoning behind it, as well as giving samples of the data from which question categories were drawn.

As far as the actual pilot interview goes, the questions were effective in eliciting interesting insights into the thinking and practice of the interviewee. However, it must be remembered that since with a qualitative interview the human element in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee is central to its success, then quantitative notions of reliability cannot meaningfully be applied. In other circumstances with other interviewees the questions still might not yield the desired richness of data. All that can be done is to try and cover the research topic as fully as possible and anticipate difficulties by preparing good probes and by getting more experience through further interviews. Inevitably, there is always likely to be some room for improvement, however small. In the present case, in retrospect it would make sense to have a separate question about the teacher's choice of teaching materials, as this may give insights on the preferred teaching approach.

The interview also needs to be triangulated in some way. Classroom observation could be used to do this but as previously mentioned there are serious difficulties involved. Another possibility would be to ask interviewees to explain and discuss their personal course

descriptions. This could be done immediately after the interview or at a later date and might provide a way of corroborating what was said in the interview.

It is hoped that describing the validation process of a long interview schedule in detail will help other researchers who wish to use such an instrument. Of course, the particular 10-step process described here may not be appropriate in every point for the specific research context of another researcher, but by highlighting the complexity of the process and the problems that may arise, the researcher can be better prepared to deal with this demanding area of qualitative research. Moreover, while the researcher may need to be flexible in adapting the process to suit his or her unique research context, the basic stages based on McCracken's approach should not vary substantially, and if followed, a rigorous and effective research instrument can be developed.

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APPENDIX A

Official course descriptions from the English and American Studies website

Academic Skills (Semester 1)

Description: The course aims to help students acquire and develop the necessary skills to cope with academic work in English. Students will learn and practice to write paragraphs, different types of essays and summaries. They will also become familiar with referencing their written work. Students will develop their writing through the process of evaluating their own and their peers' work and re-writing their drafts.

Academic Skills (Semester 2)

Description: The course aims to develop further skills necessary to cope with academic work in English. Students will learn about the structure of theoretical and empirical research papers, will conduct an empirical mini-research, will write an empirical research paper, a theoretical research paper, and an in-class argumentative essay. Students will also give a formal presentation on the results of the mini-research (the preparation of a handout is compulsory, but other visual aids such as posters, OHTs or a PowerPoint presentation can also be prepared).

APPENDIX B

Letter asking teachers for a definition of academic writing.

Dear Colleague,

I am doing some research on academic writing as part of my PhD and I would be extremely grateful if you could answer the following question in one or two paragraphs:

What is academic writing and why do we teach it to our students?

You can write your answer on this paper and leave it in my pigeon hole or you can send it to me by e-mail (.....@.....hu). All responses will be treated in strictest confidence and no respondents will be named in the research report.

It would be very helpful if you could give me your answer before the mid-term break (April 2nd).

Thank you in advance for your time and effort,

APPENDIX C

Guide for interview about the Academic Skills Course

1. How did the academic skills course come into existence and for what purpose?
2. How has the course developed or changed since its inception?
3. What is the theoretical basis of the course as regards academic writing?
4. Is the course based on a specific view of what academic discourse is which is typical of a particular content domain?

If so, can you describe it?

5. What is the course intended to do for the students?
6. What are the elements or skills that the course is intended to teach?
7. What would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of the course?

APPENDIX D

Schedule for Teacher Interviews

1. How long have you been teaching the Academic Skills course?
2. What do you think is the main purpose of the course?
3. a) What elements in the course do you give most prominence when you teach the course?
(In both semester 1 and Semester 2)
e.g. drafting/redrafting; peer evaluation; teacher feedback

b) What elements, if any, do you consider of less importance?
4. In your experience what are the students' biggest problems in coping with the requirements of the course?
5. Are there any special 'tricks' or techniques that you use in teaching the course?
(to make it more interesting or easier to understand)

6. Have you encountered any resistance or dissatisfaction from the students concerning the course?
If so, how do you deal with it?
7. Do you think the students understand the purpose of the course?
(How do you explain it to them?)
8. How successful do you think the course is in meeting the needs of the students?
9. How does the Hungarian context affect your teaching of the course?
10. If you could improve or change anything about the course what would it be?

APPENDIX E

Interview Schedule for Piloting

In order to get some additional insight into the experience of 1st year students and their problems in adapting to an academic environment, I'm interested in finding out more about what teachers of 1st Year Academic Skills are doing in their courses, as well as what their beliefs are about the teaching of academic skills. I want to talk to you because you are an experienced teacher of this course.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A. Background Questions

- A1. How long have you been teaching the course?
- A2. Did you have any previous experience of teaching academic writing or academic skills before teaching this course?
[If so, has it influenced your teaching of the course at all?]

B. What the course is for

- B1. What do you think the main purpose of the course is?
[What should the course do for the students?]
- B2. How do you explain the purpose of the course to the students?
[Do you think they understand the purpose?]
[Do you discuss it with them?]
[When and how much/how often do you talk about it?]

C. How you teach the course

C1. What elements in the course (in both semesters) do you give most prominence to and why?

C2. What use do you make of different kinds of feedback?

[e.g. teacher feedback, group feedback, peer response]

C3. Are there any elements that you give less prominence to or that you consider to be of less importance?

[Ask why if necessary]

C4. Are there any special tricks or techniques that you use in teaching the course (to make it more interesting or easier to understand) ?

[For example: special materials, activities, topics relating the course to the students' own experience]

C5. At the end of the course what do you want your students to understand about academic writing and academic study?

D. Dealing with problems

D1. In your experience what are the students' biggest problems in coping with the requirements of the course?

D2. Have you any idea why students might experience difficulties (if they do) ?

D3. What do you do if students don't understand something?

D4. Have you ever encountered any resistance or dissatisfaction from the students to do with the course and if so how do you deal with it?

[For example: not wanting to do something, questioning the value of something or claiming that they already know how to do something]

D5. Do you as a teacher find the course difficult or problematic in any way?

[Ask for details and examples and how he/she deals with problems]

[Possible problems: lack of time, more/less emphasis on certain aspects, need to include new elements]

D6. This course is based on Anglo-Saxon ideas of academic writing but it is taught in a Hungarian university to non-native students – almost all having Hungarian as their first language. How does the context of the course affect your teaching of it?

[You could talk about language and cultural aspects here]

E. Classroom dynamics and student confidence

E1. Classroom atmosphere is widely acknowledged as a very important element in teaching. How do you handle the social aspects of the course and how important do you think this is in the success of the course?

[Ask about fostering trust between students and between st's and teacher]
[What do you do to foster a strong group identity?]
[How would you describe the relationships within the class?]

E2. These are first year students at the beginning of their university career and most of them have come from a very different academic environment in secondary school. How far do you think we are responsible as teachers for fostering the students' confidence and how does this affect how you teach the course?

[for example: giving feedback, marking work, handling criticism, the role of discussion in lessons]

F. Feelings about the effectiveness of the course

F1. How successful do you feel the course is in helping the students to cope with their work at the university?

[Ask for examples; what students say about their other classes]
[Does the course help them to write for other teachers?]

F2. If you could improve or change anything about the course what would it be?

G. Your own learning experience

G1. How did you yourself learn to write in English for academic purposes?

[Did you get any teaching at secondary school?]
[Did you attend an academic skills class of some sort?]
[What were the strengths and weaknesses of your own learning experience?]

G2. How do you think your own experience of learning academic skills has affected your views of what academic writing is and how it should be taught?

[Has it had any effect on the way you teach the course? Ask for examples]

H. Interview evaluation

H1. Have I missed anything out – is there anything else you think I should ask?

H2. Are all the questions clear?

H3. Does the sequencing of the questions seem logical?

H4. Do you have any suggestions for the improvement of the interviewing technique?

H5. Would you like to make any other comments?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME AND COOPERATION