Questions about Questionnaires :
Potential, Problems, and Principles for Language Teachers

Keith Maurice
Araya Maurice

Questionnaires....probably generate more worthless data than any other technique in evaluation. Greater attention to a few fundamentals of questionnaire writing would improve immensely the quality of data being generated by many local evaluations (Patton, 1982 : 140).

Introduction

The questionnaire seems unquestionably the most popular research instrument among language teachers and researchers in Thailand today, so much so that some researchers appear to be "questionnaire crazy." Whatever the problem to be studied, the methodological 'solution' often offered is to send out a questionnaire. However, some of what we need to know is difficult to find out through the use of an instrument designed for large numbers of people, especially when the instrument is often chosen not because it will lead to greater insights but because it is easy to administer and to analyze. This paper briefly reviews the literature on the types and applications of questionnaires in language teaching; it then looks at some of the common problems found in questionnaire use, design, and interpretation; finally, a few basic principles to follow are given.

Potential

What are questionnaires good for ? Knowles (1980 : 100) cites four clear advantages :
1. They can reach many people in a short time
2. They are relatively inexpensive to use

Mr. Maurice is the graduate program coordinator of the Master's degree program in Applied Linguistics in English for Specific Purposes at Mahidol University.

Dr. Araya is an assistant professor at the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute.

3. They allow people to respond without fear or embarrassment

4. Data can be summarized and reported easily.

He also cautions, however, that drawbacks include the lack of provision for unanticipated responses, the difficulty of questionnaire construction, and the limited effectiveness in arriving at causes of problems and chances for solutions.

Mackay and Bosquet (1981 : 9) mention that questionnaires often seem to involve less work for the researcher but they can be troublesome because questions are sometimes misunderstood and there is generally no way to check on those matters. In addition, the return rate of completed forms tends to be low.

The reasons for having a questionnaire determine what kind of questions will be contained in it. For example, some researchers know exactly what they want to find out and strive for questions that can give them results with clearly statistical applications. However, for others, the answers needed are not so predictable or pat. When hard decisions have to be made on complicated issues of importance, statistical significance may sometimes be replaced by practical significance.

Questionnaires *can* be vital tools for many kinds of research projects and there are clear advantages to using them. To make them truly valuable, however, the researcher has to match the tool to be used with the research being attempted and to think deeply of the possible pitfalls that plague any attempt to increase knowledge of our field. What follows, then, are a few of the weaknesses that can be easily observed in language teaching.

Problems

The main problems with this instrument in TEFL in Thailand seem to be in the area of misuse, overuse, frivolous questions, leading questions, faulty analysis, fuzzy interpretation, and forms that demand too much from the respondents. The key points relate to why and how to ask, how to look at the data, and what to make of it once it is analyzed. Failure to think about these matters deeply cause many questionnaires to be questionable in value.

Misuse. Various studies on 'needs analysis' have been done in the last several years in Thailand using questionnaires. A typical approach is to distribute the forms to actual or potential users to check their uses of and attitudes toward the learning of English. While this can serve a worthwhile purpose, the information received is only one part of a larger picture, a point that some researchers fail to see, e.g. by assuming that *attitudes* from one of the groups involved (students, teachers, professionals, etc.) constitute an accurate assessment of the *needs* of the learners. To get at the reality of language needs, however, there are other questions that should be answered, e.g. if learners need to read, what exactly do they read

and are they evaluated on it (and if so, how). There seems to be little hard data on what exactly learners need in their academic endeavors. Finding out this information may involve more subtle and sophisticated research design than that of simply sending students and professionals questionaires which ask about wants rather than needs.

An analysis of language needs of Cambodian refugees in the U.S. (Rajatanavin, 1985) used participant observation and structured interviews exclusively, with no questionnaires, and found very troubling patterns of interaction, patterns that probably would have gone undiscovered via a more superficial questionnaire. In this case, it was the larger research question that led to the selection of a particular research instrument, a process that seems so sound and yet so underused.

Overuse. Sometimes, questionnaires are reasonable instruments to use, but the process of inquiry has been contaminated by the fact that those being questioned have responded so many times already to other questionnaires that their responses may be less than thoughtful. This is often hard for the researcher to gauge and many times it cannot be avoided, but in cases where students and teachers are subjected to questionnaires again and again, it seems reasonable to hold off from all but the most important types of research.

Frivolous questions. A mountain of such questions exists, not only in Thailand, but all over the world. Sloppiness in thinking of and designing questions where decisions may come from the results is unacceptable and dangerous. As Sudman and Bradburn (1982 : 1) note :

> *The importance of the exact wording of the questions seems obvious and hardly worth dwelling on. The fact that seemingly small changes in wording can cause large differences in responses has been well known to survey practitioners since the early days of surveys. Yet, typically, the formulation of the questionnaire is thought to be the easiest part of the design of surveys--so that, all too often, little effort is expended on it.*

Because of that tendency not to spend energy on the questions, many studies end up being exercises in mediocrity and meaningless number counting.

A question recently written for students illustrates the point : "Would you like to study with foreign teachers? (Yes/no)." The question is clear in the sense that it can be answered easily, but was largely irrelevant to the overall goals of the particular study for which it was designed. First of all, what can be gained by asking that question? If 50% prefer Thai teacher and 50% prefer foreign teachers, it

is doubtful, for financial and other policy concerns, that substantially more foreign teachers would be hired. If 100% prefer Thai teachers, it is unlikely that foreign teachers would be brushed aside entirely. The problem is that the question is superficial and superficial answers do not help us very much in making reasonable decisions. The second problem is that the question overgeneralizes a complicated matter. If students have never had a foreign teacher, they would base their responses on imaginary considerations. If they have had one or two, then they might base their response on their familiarity with one teacher rather than with a whole category. Thus, a student with a bad foreign teacher would probably respond negatively while one with a good foreign teacher might respond positively. A third problem relates to the emotional and provocative implications of the question. Some Thai teachers seem to resent foreigners at work while some foreign teachers seem to distrust their Thai counterparts. A simple yes/no answer does nothing to help students, teachers, or administrators, but could be used by naive or narrow-minded people as "evidence" of one thing or another. A simple yes/no question can cause havoc.

Leading questions. These are questions which push the respondent to answer in one direction. The assumptions or intentions of the question maker, then, consciously or unconsciously distort whatever answer might be given. Fictitious examples, specifically dealing with non-threatening techniques of asking threatening questions, are slyly given by Barton (1958:67):

The Numbered Card :

"Would you please read off the number on this card which corresponds to what became of your wife?"

1. Natural death
2. I killed her
3. Other (What ?)

The Everybody Approach :

"As you know, many people have been killing their wives these days. Do you happen to have killed yours ?"

The "Other People" Approach :

(a) "Do you know any people who have murdered their wives ?"
(b) "How about yourself ?"

Though these examples may seem whimsical, the same approaches of leading people along, or of implying what something is or should be and checking others' views on it, have been used by various questionnaire makers, resulting in data which does not mean very much or else carries the wrong meaning. One TEFL example is "What do you need more help with--grammar, vocabulary, or translation ?"

The question assumes that all relevant problems can be listed within these three categories, an assumption that may tell more of the researcher's own biases than the real needs of the learners. Researchers, then, can and sometimes do lead respondents to answers that fit their own preconceptions rather than probing for more useful responses.

Faulty Analysis. A recent M. A. thesis on needs analysis put responses into five categories (very great need, great need, moderate need, little need, and no need). When all the data was collected, the researcher decided to emphasize whatever category had the most responses per question. Thus, in one case, 29 % of the respondents cited 'very great', and that number exceeded any other category, so the 29 % was explained in the text and summary as "most people mention this as a very great need", While it seems O. K. to emphasize the category with the highest number of respondents, it is a completely distorted analysis in that 29 % becomes "most people" and 71 % are left out of the analytical picture entirely. What is called for in such circumstances is the use of a different system to analyze the data. Adjacent categories could be combined and then percentages compared, the mean or median could be taken, and so on. The data in this case was useful, but the analysis was useless.

Fuzzy Interpretation. In some studies, this stems from the same flaw as fuzzy analysis. In others, the researcher is specifically trying to answer one question and does so successfully. But then the data superficially seem to point to other matters as well. An example of the latter can be found in Fennell's (1986) study on how much the professional periodicals are being read in Thailand. His focus was on the reading that is being done and, given that focus, the research was very precise and insightful. A later analysis, however, (Maurice, 1986) suggests that a couple of the implications drawn from the first study about the readers were not supported by the data. The reason the data did not support the implied statements is that the statements were not on the reading, but rather on the readers, and that leap should not have been made. For example, one troubling answer on Fennell's questionnaire dealt with why people did not read more journals. A fair number of people stated that they did not read more because of "unavailable journals" despite the fact that very few of the journals listed on the questionnaire and available in their libraries were read by many of them. This lead to a natural questioning of the respondents' awareness of what was available and an assumption that they were not aware of all of the available journals. However, upon further inspection, the people who stated that unavailable journals kept them from reading more were, by and large, those who did a lot of reading. A more reasonable assumption, then, could be made that the journals they wanted to read were actually NOT available. Interpretation of data can get very subtle and it is where even the best researchers fall astray sometimes, but it is something that all of us need to keep in mind.

Forms which demand too much from the respondents. This is a complicated matter, but it can generally be stated that the more work there is for respondents to do on a questionnaire, the fewer responses one will get back. As such, the conventional wisdom is to make questionnaires as simple and as short as they can be. The materials evaluation form for teachers to fill out at the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute is one example of a long, long form (21 pages). How many people can realistically be expected to fill out such a long form in a thoughtful way? Probably not very many. The purpose of the questionnaire is valid, to get detailed information about the materials from the users so that the materials can be improved, but the approach requires so much from the respondents that only a limited number of useful responses can be expected.

A similar approach, though with 'only' a 4-page form, was recently used at Mahidol in doing a needs analysis. The respondents, university teachers, filled in detailed information about the English readings and assignments they actually give their students to do. 2000 questionnaires were distributed and 350 were sent back, for a 17.5 % return rate. The low return rate was anticipated along with the possibility of conducting interviews with cooperative respondents in order to complete the study. Success is by no means guaranteed by the plan of using two research tools, but at least there exists an awareness of the larger research question and the problems of using only a questionnaire.

The problems mentioned above are, by no means, limited to Thailand, but they can easily be seen here. Questionnaire design and research implementation is hardly ever an easy task. When it seems too easy, it is probably worthless. Truth is higher than the mountaintops--to get to it we must climb long and arduously and then look beyond the steps we take toward the larger picture. Shortcuts usually cut us short and leave us stranded. Given all these problems, the reader and potential researcher might be tempted to turn away in despair. But questionnaires can be useful and they do have a place in the instrument kit of language teachers and researchers.

Basic Principles (A primer on what to do and how to avoid mistakes)

"The underlying theme is that you first have to know what you want to find out and then design the items to give you the information you need. Good measurement depends on clear conceptualization...." (Patton, 1982 : 159). In other words, we need to know where we want to go before we begin or we will lose our way. This is at the core of any research, yet it remains a huge stumbling block for many teachers, and graduate students, who want to carry out research of this kind. Patton (1982 : 144) mentions six key points that every questionnaire maker should keep in mind :

What....?	What do we want to find out ?
Why....?	Why do we want to find that out ?
When....?	When do we need the information ?
How....?	How can we get the information we need ?
Where....?	Where should we gather information ?
Who....?	Who is the information for and from whom should we collect the information we need ?

Sudman and Bradburn (1982 : 13 & 14) offer the following suggestions for beginners :

1. Restrain the impulse to write specific questions until you have thought through your research questions.

2. Write down your research questions and keep them handy when you are working on the questionnaire.

3. Every time you ask a question, ask yourself 'Why do I want to know this?' Answer it in terms of the way it will help you to answer your research question. 'It would be interesting to know' is not an acceptable answer.

Taken together, these two sources give the essence of what is need to make effective questionaires. Reality is an ever-changing globe and questionnaires can only help to map out the rough details on what is on the globe. Nevertheless, the proper process can aid considerably in the making of a quality product. Henerson, Morris, and Fitz-Gibbon (1978 : 57) suggest eight steps to follow in the process of questionnaire design, including "Critique the questions ; try them out and revise them". It seems so simple, but people often find it too easy to skip the critique step. Without critical thinking by the researchers, and perhaps colleagues, *before* the questionnaire is sent out, the probability of generating useless data soars. Critiquing our own work is a difficult task and accepting criticism from others is often a painful experience, but with more open attitudes toward and active searching of friendly advice and analysis comes better and more useful results. That is true not only in the design of the questions but also in the later stages of any study as well.

Final Remarks

This paper serves only as a primer for those who have never designed questionnaires and those who have had problems in doing them. There are many, many more detailed guidelines to be followed in terms of how to ask certain types of questions, what kind of response categories to use, and so on. Even with the best questionnaire and the best researchers using it, research projects can fail. With practice, persistence, and the proper perspective, however, the possibilities for success increase quite a bit. In the final analysis, good research comes from good thinking and useful questionnaires come from thoughtful researchers,

References

Barton, A. J. 1958. Asking the embarrassing question. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 22(1) : 67-68.

Fennell, Bill. 1986. The power of the periodical press ? *Studies in Language and Language Teaching* 2(1) : 3-18.

Henerson, Marlene E., Lynn Lyons Morris, and Carol Taylor Fitz-Gibbon. 1978. *How to measure attitudes.* Beverly Hills : Sage Publications.

Knowles, Malcolm. 1980. *The modern practice of adult education.* New York : Cambridge Publishers.

Mackay, Ronald and Maryse Bosquet. 1981. LSP curriculum development from policy to practice. In *Languages for specific purposes : program design and implementation.* Ronald Mackay and Joe Don Palmer (Eds.). Rowley, Massachusetts : Newbury House.

Maurice, Keith. 1986. Professional reading patterns : a study of Thai University EFL teachers. Unpublished manuscript.

Patton, Michael Quinn. 1982. *Practical evaluation.* Beverly Hills : Sage Publications.

Rajatanavin, Araya. 1985. *Language needs identification of Cambodian refugees in an urban area in the U.S.* Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation. Tallahassee, Florida : Florida State University.

Sudman, Seymour and Norman M. Bradburn. 1982. *Asking questions : a practical guide to questionnaire design.* San Francisco : Jossey-Bass.