

# Active Listening in Qualitative Research Interviews

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## **Abstract**

*Interviewing is widely used, particularly in qualitative research. However, conducting interviews can be a challenge, especially for novice researchers. A particular problem is eliciting extended meaningful and relevant responses from interviewees in semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Active listening is a technique which may help the interviewer in increasing the length and depth of interviewees' responses. It involves strategies such as restating the speaker's message, responding empathically, and using prompts or repetitions to extract further information from the interviewee. In this paper I investigate my own semi-structured interviews in which I had intended to use these active listening techniques. I explore the extent to which these active listening techniques were indeed used, and then whether active listening strategies increased the length and relevance of the responses elicited from the interviewees. The analysis shows that active listening techniques were useful in eliciting useful data for my research, but that they were used only partially during these interviews.*

## **Introduction**

Research into teacher beliefs has been useful in building an understanding of teachers' thinking, decision making, their classroom practice and how they learn and grow as professionals (Borg, 2006). These insights are of particular importance in teacher training environments with pre-service language teachers (Peacock, 2001). However, because of the private nature of beliefs and the fact that they are not directly observable, researching teacher beliefs poses the challenge of finding data collection strategies that can successfully elicit these phenomena.

Although a number of strategies for collecting data on beliefs are available to researchers, including self-report and observations, verbal reports in the form of semi-structured interviews are a widely used means of getting teachers to talk about their beliefs (Borg, 2006 and see Jones and Fong, 2007 as an example). Since beliefs are so personal and varied in their nature, it is difficult for a researcher to predict the sort of responses that may be elicited. The value of semi-structured interviews lies in the flexibility to respond to the interviewee's specific responses, thus deepening understanding and enriching the data (Richards, 2003).

Because the interviewer in a semi-structured interview is looking for opportunities to build on and explore the interviewee's responses as they come up, careful preparation of the questions to be asked may be counter-productive. Rather, the interviewer needs to respond thoughtfully to the interviewee's responses and encourage further exploration of the themes as they arise.

For the researcher, successfully seizing opportunities that arise unexpectedly in the unfolding interview, and encouraging the interviewee to expand, explore and reflect can be a demanding undertaking. One crucial skill in achieving the goals of a semi-structured interview is that of listening. However, sustained listening is not easy, particularly when the interviewer may be distracted by the need to focus on issues like body language or consider the next move, while at the same time interpreting the relevance of the interviewee's responses (Richards, 2003). For these reasons, active listening may be a useful way of approaching in-depth semi-structured interviews.

## **Active listening**

Active listening can be best described as "involved listening with a purpose" (Pearson et al., 2006). As a technique, it surfaces in a number of different fields: communication studies, teaching methodology, student management, ESP and counselling (Ang, 2004; Dudley-Evans

and St. John, 1998; Edge, 2005; Guillaume, 2000; Larrivee, 1999). In general, active listening aims to deepen the interviewer's understanding of the speakers' preoccupations and interests by creating empathy and making the speaker feel well listened to.

In order to achieve these goals, active listening makes use of various strategies. Body language, gesture and backchannelling devices are obviously an important aspect of showing the speaker that the listener is attending well (Dudley-Evans & St. Johns, 1998). Arguably even more important, though, the phrasing and intention of the interviewer's prompts to the speaker serve to facilitate the kind of reflection, insights and connections that help to make active listening successful (Guillaume, 2000).

Given the variety of fields in which active listening is used, there are a multitude of ways of categorizing active listening techniques. However, the following two broad strategies can be identified from the literature on active listening.

Firstly, there are strategies which create opportunities for open responses from the speaker (Pearson et al., 2006; Edge, 2005; Rost, 2002; Dudley-Evans & St. Johns, 1998; Richards, 2003, Larrivee, 1999). Here, the interviewer encourages extended responses by showing an interest in the topics being discussed and asks questions that encourage the speaker to reveal more. Active listening functions here include:

Opening, which invites a lengthy initial response to a topic that provides a useful springboard for further questions.

- 'How do you typically deal with ...?'

Probing using open-ended questions to extend the interviewer's response on a topic and create further avenues for exploration.

- 'Why do you think ...?'

Paraphrasing the essence of the interviewee's message to provide the speaker with a 'mirror' in which to examine the message, expand on it, correct it and reflect on its implication. In using paraphrasing, the interviewer demonstrates, without interpretation, what message has been heard, giving the speaker an objective insight into the message, potentially enabling the drawing of new connections. Paraphrasing is the cornerstone of active listening's endeavour to create an 'understanding response' and is thus a key to the successful use of the technique.

- 'Why do you think ...?'

Evaluating the meaning behind a message and encouraging the speaker to visit it from a new direction.

- 'It's sounds like ...'

These four strategies serve to encourage long, open-ended responses from the interviewees. The second set of strategies in active listening focus on negotiating the meaning of specific aspects of the speaker's message through closed questions directed at topics as they emerge (Wajnryb, 1992; Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Edge, 2005).

Clarifying understanding or interpretation of the interviewee's message may be done by posing closed questions relating directly to an aspect of the interviewee's message to verify the accuracy of the interpretation being made.

- 'I'm not sure I understand. Do you mean that you...?'

Repeating key words or phrases from the message to encourage the speaker to add, explain or clarify.

Together, these six functions of active listening provide the interviewer with a framework for pursuing a deeper understanding of the speaker.

## Context

The data for this paper comes from an interest in the beliefs teacher trainers have about giving feedback on teaching practice. We noticed that trainers approached teaching practice very differently and wondered how their beliefs about supervision and the purpose of feedback affected their practice. Seven themes were identified as being relevant to the study on trainers beliefs on feedback on teaching practice (see for example Bailey, 2006; Basturkmen et al., 2004; Borg, 2006; Brown, 2004). These themes were summarised under broad categories labels such as 'macro-events', 'micro-events', 'trainer's role', 'the trainee' and so on.

The data was collected from four teacher trainers at the Chichester College TESOL training programme in Bangkok, Thailand, a commercial TESOL training centre offering intensive four-week TESOL/TEFL courses for native English speakers planning on working as English teachers in Thailand. The trainers, who will be referred to as M, S, P and J, are all male, and are involved in supervising teaching practice with trainee teachers on a weekly basis. Each trainer was interviewed individually using semi-structured interviews for around half an hour. The interviews were conducted by the first author. Permission was sought from all participants for their views to be part of the research study.

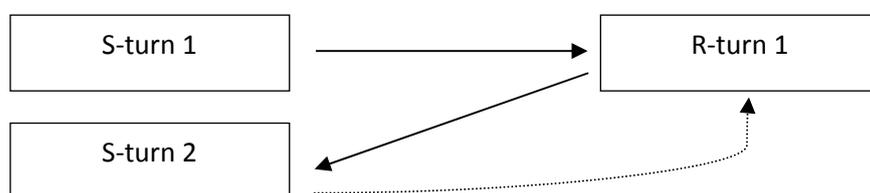
In order to elicit data that would provide insights into teacher trainers' beliefs about teaching, training and teaching practice, it was important that techniques were used that elicited open-ended responses from the trainers. This meant that the interviews needed to encourage long, detailed responses on each of the core themes. To this end, we set out to use active listening in these interviews. Two pilot interviews were conducted, providing an opportunity to practice the active listening skills outlined above.

The aim of this paper is to investigate these interviews with a view to finding out the extent to which active listening was used by the interviewer, what problems arose with the use of active listening in the interviews and the effects of active listening on the responses from the interviewees.

## Analysis

Once the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed, interviewer turns needed to be classified according to the functions of active listening. For ease and consistency, Stevick's (1989) terms were adapted for the elements of the active listening interview, and in this paper we refer to interviewer turns as S-turns (the stimuli), and the interviewee's responses as R-turns.

The first step in analysing the data was to classify each S-turn according to the interviewer's intention using the functions of active listening. To do so, each S-turn needed to be linked with the content of the R-turns preceding it to determine what function of active listening was used. This may be visualised as follows:



We may conceptualise openings as S-turns with no relationship to a previous R-turn. Obviously, S-turns which occurred at the beginning of the interviews were openings:

- I: So the research basically is about the evening teaching practice and the feedback that you give to the students after the lesson has finished. Can you describe what typically happens in a feedback session? (Interview with M)

These opening S-turns are a necessary beginning to the interview and offer the speaker an opportunity to express their initial ideas on the topic, and provided a useful platform for further exploration of these ideas (Richards, 2003).

*Openings* also arose during interviews where one theme was exhausted and a new one opened.

I: Okay, let's talk about the trainee. What do you think the trainee ideally would get from a typical session with you? (Interview with S)

These opening questions were planned around the themes identified as relevant to the research on trainer beliefs as discussed above.

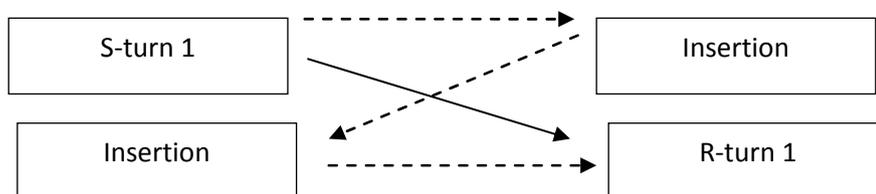
In some cases, the openings did not lead immediately to an R-turn. Because some openings constituted a relatively sudden shift in topic, the interviewees sometimes responded to an opening with a request for clarification:

I: Alright, on a completely different note, how would you describe a good teacher, not from a feedback session but from the teaching session?

M: From the teaching session? A good teacher what, here here?

I: Er, no in general

Such insertion sequences may be visualised as follows:



While opening S-turns are valuable for starting the interview and initiating discussions on new topics, in order to achieve the goals of active listening, S-turns need to be linked to responses made earlier by the speaker in such a way as to show the speaker they are being well listened to and to feed input back to the speaker for further consideration. Opening S-turns alone would not achieve this goal (see Borg, 2005, pages 208-9).

Where an S-turn followed up on a topic that had been brought up in an earlier R-turn, it was labelled a probe:

S: {trainer has been talking about his habit of leaving the room during feedback to allow trainees to give one another peer feedback} ...I just want them to think about it themselves

I: How do you know that it's working, or whether it has worked?

S-turns which intended to summarise the speaker's message and reflect it back for them to consider in greater depth were labelled a paraphrase. Paraphrase S-turns included much of the same content as the previous R-turn.

I: Alright, earlier you mentioned you pick out three bad things and maybe three good things and mention them [in the feedback] not necessarily in that order. (interview with S)

Paraphrasing is a core technique in active listening, as it is a way to allow the speaker to hear an interpretation of what they have been saying, and comment, add to or correct this feedback.

Evaluations were S-turns that called the speaker to revisit a topic from a previous R-turn, taking a new perspective or using a different evaluation criterion.

M: {Trainer has been discussing his view of what good feedback is}

I: I'm interested in the concept of good feedback. Can you define what bad feedback is?

Openings, probes, paraphrases and evaluations constitute ‘open’ S-turns since their goal is to elicit from the interviewee long responses around the topic in question. The two remaining S-turns, however, aim for shorter, more focused responses and are useful for co-constructing meaning on specific issues that emerge within the interview.

S-turns that focused on specific sub-topics that emerged in previous R-turns were clarifications. These were often closed questions when an area of confusion or contradiction emerged in the speaker’s message.

J: some can be very stubborn, they don’t think there’s an area that should be looked at further

I: You mean they fight against the feedback that you’re giving them?

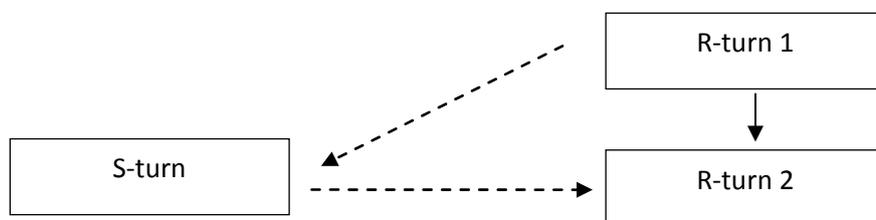
S-turns where a phrase or keyword from the speaker’s message was echoed were labelled a repeat. Such echoing serves to highlight to the speaker that there is a potential for miscommunication and usually acts as a cue for the speaker to define, explain or expand on the concept in some way.

M: {Speaker is discussing the characteristics of a good trainee} ...somebody who will um listen to the feedback, take it on board, interact with the observer as well, ask additional questions, and be self-critical basically.

I: Be self-critical?

Using this analysis it became possible to see how the S-turns related to the speakers' R-turns and thus to determine the extent to which the active listening functions were used in the interviews. However, because this analysis only gave an indication of the interviewer's intentions with regard to the functions of active listening, we also needed to determine the way in which these S-turns were interpreted by the interviewees.

Therefore, a second analysis was conducted to show how the interviewer’s S-turns affected the flow of the interviewees’ discourse. This analysis focused on the flow of topics from each interviewee’s R-turn to the next to provide an insight into the interviewee’s interpretation of what was expected of them during the interviews. The analysis may be visualised as follows:



Active listening categories as interpretations of intentions were operationalised as follows:

- an R-turn that opens a new topic was categorised as an opening
- an R-turn that provides new content on the previous topic follows a probe
- an R-turn that explores a sub-topic in greater detail follows a paraphrase
- an R-turn that continues a topic but from a new perspective follows an evaluation
- an R-turn that rephrases the same content follows a clarify
- an R-turn that repeats the same content is a repeat

The following excerpt from the interview with S may serve to demonstrate the two ways in which the data was analysed and also highlights some of the issues that will be discussed in

the following section of the paper. In the transcript that follows, the interviewer's S-turns are in italics. Transcription conventions are in the Appendix.

<i>Turn</i>	<i>Interview content</i>	<i>Intended function</i>	<i>Interpreted function</i>
S-turn 13	<i>It sounds like you ask a lot of questions in order to prompt them..</i>	Paraphrase	
R-turn 13	I try to just ask questions		Clarify
S-turn 14	<i>Just ask questions. why</i>	Probe	
R-turn 14	I want <b>them</b> to think about it.. I already know what I'm doing it's not. if I go and say to them. 'right. so. er.. I do it this way so do it my way'.. that's not as beneficial as [2.6] I think that. <b>knowing</b> why you do something.. helps you do it [1.9] er. I know: that cooking: onions. slower. makes them sweeter. so I cook them slowly. I don't.. cook sweet onions [2.1]		Probe
S-turn 15	<i>Okay so you don't just do it that way because your mother told you to do it.</i>	Paraphrase	
R-turn 15	Yes.		Repeat
S-turn 16	<i>Um so what do you see:. what would you say is your role as a trainer in in the supervision session</i>	Open	
R-turn 16	[2.1] Er:. two. one is: of course. give them some practical stuff.. 'look we've got four weeks I'm going to give you as much help as I can.. here's stuff that. I've learned: I've experienced. here's something I noticed did you notice it. here's something that can help you it's really simple' so. lots of those.. practical things that I'm sure they <b>can</b> learn over time.. er.. the other side of it would be.. ge- getting them to:. s-.. start thinking that way themselves.. think about what you're doing: realise. what's work and what isn't.. reflect I suppose.. reflect on your teaching again more [4.7]		Open
S-turn 17	<i>Okay. let's talk about the trainee.. erm.. what do you think the trainee. ideally.. would get from. a. typical session with you.</i>	Open	
R-turn 17	Um they get some [3.9] ideally /mm/ that makes it harder. <b>ideally</b> [2.8]		Insertion
S-turn 18	<i>Or typically.. let's go with typically</i>	Insertion	
R-turn 18	Okay.. er:. typically I. I: hope that a trainee. gets.. first. er:. experience.. first and foremost. you ca- you've been to class:. you've taught a class:. you. you can now look at. 'ooh what did I plan for that class and what worked and what didn't'. it's the experience first and foremost.. er. second. er. some ideas on. where to go from there.. 'I've XX. now what do I do'..		Open
S-turn 19	<i>You mean like for the next session</i>	Clarify	
R-turn 19	Yeah for my next.. my next session and. but for <b>planning</b> my next class as well and. or making my materials or:.. all of that stuff}		Clarify

The excerpt starts in the thirteenth turn of the interview with a paraphrasing of the interviewee's previous R-turn, in which he speaks about the importance of questioning in the feedback session. This paraphrase is likely to have been intended to encourage the speaker to elaborate on this topic. However, the speaker interprets S-turn 13 not as a paraphrase, but as a clarification and duly rephrases the previous R-turn without additional content.

Turn 14 shows no mismatch between S-turn and R-turn, and here the probe is successful at eliciting a cooking metaphor from the speaker that offers a useful insight into his beliefs about the role of the trainer in teaching practice. In turn 15 the interviewer tries again to paraphrase, expanding slightly on the metaphor offered by the speaker with the hope that the speaker will expand on it further. In R-turn 15, however, this attempt at paraphrase is misinterpreted by the speaker as a simple repetition, and disappointingly elicits only a confirmatory response.

Abandoning the quest to explore this topic further, the interviewer moves on to a new topic in S-turn 16 with an opening, which elicits a satisfyingly long opening response on the new topic. The interviewer, obviously feeling that topic is adequately covered, decides to open yet another topic in S-turn 17. Here, though, the speaker responds by expressing difficulty with the question, necessitating the interviewer to refocus the question in S-turn 18, creating an insertion sequence before the speaker's response to the opening question in R-turn 18.

We shall now present a summary of the four interviews with respect to the effects of active listening.

### Effects of active listening

There were a total of 182 S-turns in the four interviews. Table 1 reports the proportion of functions of S-turns in the interviews analysed both for intention and interpretation.

**Table 1** Results for analysis of intention and interpretation of interviewer S-turns

	Intention		Interpretation	
	n	Proportion	n	Proportion
Open	35	19.2%	33	18.1%
Insert	9	4.9%	10	5.5%
Probe	69	37.9%	60	33.0%
Paraphrase	33	18.1%	29	15.9%
Evaluate	8	4.4%	5	2.8%
Clarify	27	14.8%	36	19.7%
Repeat	1	0.5%	9	5.0%
<i>Total</i>	<i>182</i>	<i>100.0%</i>	<i>182</i>	<i>100.0%</i>

We wished to find out the extent to which active listening techniques were used in these interviews. The results show that less than 20% of S-turns were openings, indicating that on the whole the interviewer was reacting to interviewee's responses, and thus indeed utilizing active listening strategies, with probing being the most common active listening function used.

A closer look at the Table 1 highlights mismatches between the intention and interpretation of the S-turns, perhaps most evident with the repeating function. These mismatches warranted closer investigation to determine which functions were subject to mismatch. This is summarised in Table 2.



**Table 4** Results of point biserial correlations.

<i>Correlation between response length and:</i>	<i>r<sub>pb</sub></i>	<i>P</i>
where intention and interpretation functions match	+0.14	0.055179 (two tailed)
where functions were intended as open	+0.01	0.4523085 (one tailed)
where functions were interpreted as open	+0.47	<.0001 (one tailed)

The results show that response length correlated only with the interviewee's interpretations of the S-turns. In other words, the way the interviewee interpreted the S-turns correlated only with the length of the R-turn but not with the interviewer's intention or whether there was any consistency between intention and interpretation. Since the way in which interpretative functions were identified in the analysis was based partly on length of the R-turns, the strength of this finding is subject to some caution. However, this result does seem to indicate that the interviewee's interpretation of the S-turns were a significant contributor to the success of the implementation of active listening.

We will now take a look at the implications of these findings for the interviewer using active listening techniques.

### **Active listening in action**

Although active listening effectively elicited the long responses we were hoping for with the aim of having the interviewees express their beliefs, its implementation was flawed and not without its difficulties for this interviewer. Most notably, as the results of the correlation show, the interviewees' interpretation of S-turns may have been more important to the success of active listening than the interviewer's intention in using the technique. This is perhaps most clearly evident in the relatively problematic implementation of the paraphrase function. We will look at this in more detail now.

In the following example, an S-turn intended as a clarification is interpreted by the interviewee as a paraphrase:

I: Is it normally the case that they do have their ideas?

J: Yeah and sometimes they're ve- students can be stubborn ... (36 words)

And in this excerpt, an S-turns that was intended as a paraphrase has been interpreted by the interviewee as a repeat:

I: Alright, so basically you let them give their overall feelings first, then you go through the positive things. If there are joint things, together, then separately, and then stuff that they need to think about afterwards.

M: Yeah.

In active listening, paraphrasing serves a number of useful purposes: to show the interviewee your understanding of their message, for the interviewee to hear and respond to an interpretation of their message and for them to correct or supplement their message with additional information (Edge, 2005; Gamble and Gamble, 2005). Clearly, the paraphrases in these interviews were only serving the first of these purposes.

This example from Edge (2005, p. 61) demonstrates how a paraphrase can be phrased to achieve these aims:

Let me see. You're saying that it's because you're serious that they don't participate in any great detail.

In the excerpt above from the interview with S, turns 13 and 15 demonstrated the interviewer's failure to elicit a paraphrase R-turn. Each of the following S-turns from the interviews, also intended as paraphrases, were misinterpreted by the interviewees and elicited R-turns that did not provide the insights that could be expected from this function:

Alright, so you've got a few minutes at the beginning of the [feedback session] where they're alone talking to each other (interview with S).

So in that sense your role then is not simply just as a passive observer but you're actively involved with getting the students involved (interview with M).

Okay, alright good. You ask questions to try to elicit things from them in the beginning. (interview with J).

Okay, so you don't just do it that way because your mother told you to do it. (interview with S).

Johnson (2000) speaks of two issues which are fundamental in active listening: the intention of the interviewer's prompt, and the phrasing of it. The problem here seems not to lie with the intention of creating a paraphrase of the previous R-turn, but with the signalling of that intention in its phrasing. Comparing these examples of paraphrases with Edge's example, these paraphrase start with signal words 'okay', 'right', 'so' and 'good'. In classroom discourse such words are used to signal the boundary of an exchange, and are referred to by Coulthard (1977) as framing moves. Such frames often indicate to the listener that one transaction has ended and another is beginning, and in classroom discourse these frames may indicate a summary of the transaction. We may, for example, see a frame in a teacher's lesson such as the following one adapted from Coulthard (p 102):

Teacher: Right, so what we've just done, what we've just done is...

The paraphrase S-turns in these interviews are not only framed in such a way as to provide few clues to the listener as to their purpose, but they are reminiscent of classroom language which indicates the 'closing down' of a topic. The listener, in the light of these misplaced framing moves, comes to the conclusion the interviewer is simply restating the previous message as a repeat, or asking for a clarification of the message, thus making the paraphrase ineffective.

The clarity of the signal is important, then, for a successful paraphrase. Edge (2005) suggests signalling paraphrases as follows:

- If I've understood you properly, then...
- Let me see if I understand you. You're saying that ...
- Just let me check that I'm with you. So you mean that...

In the absence of such signals, the intentions of the interviewer was not made clear to the interviewee, who is then tasked with deciding how best to respond to the ambiguous prompt. In this way, the interviewee's interpretation becomes prioritized over the interviewer's intention, as we have seen in the results of the biserial correlation above.

In contrast to these relative failures with paraphrasing, the success of the opening-insert sequences are worth some attention. Opening S-turns that were followed by an insertion sequence in which the interviewee clarified their understanding of the question were more successful at leading to extended responses. Openings without insertion sequences averaged R-turn lengths of 106 words. Where openings were followed by an insertion sequence elicited R-turn of 199 words in length on average. The following two opening S-turns from the same interview with R highlight this point. In the first example, the S-turns is the opening of the interview:

I: In your feedback session that you do with the students after teaching in the evening, how does it typically run?

P: Um first think I ask them normally is... (55 words)

The following example is taken from the latter part of the same interview:

I: Alright all the things that we have been speaking about are things that you do in the session with the students. Can you think of anything that influences your decisions about what to do with the students in the feedback?

P: [5.1] As in. I'm not quite sure

I: In terms of, is there something that you think you are doing because you have to do it. Is there something that you are doing because it seems necessary, or because you've been told to maybe?

R: Um [5.4] I think that the TESOL system perhaps ... (190 words)

These insertion sequences, then, provided an opportunity for the speaker to clarify their own understanding, and build a meaningful response based on this shared understanding. Such co-construction of meaning leads to a deeper understanding of the interviewee, which is ultimately the goal of active listening (Randall & Thornton, 2001). Co-construction of meaning is therefore a valuable part of semi-structured interviews and underscores the value of the clarifying and repeating functions in active listening, but does not necessarily need to be limited to only these two focusing functions, and its value in the opening function is clear from our data. Perhaps a goal for our own interviewing would be to create opportunities for such co-construction of meaning in the paraphrase function.

## Conclusion

Semi-structured interviews are useful means of exploring cognitively orientated topics such as that of beliefs in our own research where a wide variety of responses are possible from the interviewee. We have argued here that active listening provides the interviewer with a useful guide for maximising the strengths of such interviews. Active listening includes functions which encourage open responses, but also focusing functions useful for creating co-construction of meaning during the interview.

The utilizing of the active listening technique, as our data suggests, is open to possible difficulties. We found in our interviews difficulties with the implementing of the paraphrase function, which is a core function of active listening's goal of achieving an understanding response to the interviewee.

To ensure the success of the active listening technique we have seen the importance of creating clear signals to ensure the interviewer's intentions are prioritized during the interview. A second insight gained from this study is the usefulness of encouraging opportunities to create a shared understanding through co-construction of meaning throughout the interview.

Despite the possible problems in implementing active listening, active listening can be a useful technique for researchers whose goal is to elicit in-depth responses from semi-structured interviews.

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#### Appendix Transcription conventions

.	short pause (less than 0.5 second)
..	longer pause (0.6 – 1.5 seconds)
[1.7]	pause longer than 1.5 seconds
/eif/	phonemic transcription of utterance
<b>bold</b>	stressed syllable / word
sc-	false start / abrupt cut off
:	prolonged sound (filled pause)
(sigh)	paralinguistic feature
'word'	change of persona
XX	inaudible

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