Describe and Evaluate the cognitive interview as a way of improving the accuracy of EWT. (12 marks)

The cognitive interview is a special questioning technique that was developed by Fisher and Geiselman, in order to enhance or increase the level of accuracy of eyewitness recall—both in quality and quantity, during police questioning. When studying the standard police interview, Fisher and Geiselman found that the questions were brief, direct and closed. They also found that sequencing did not match the witness’ own image of the event and that questioners often interrupted and did not allow witnesses to expand on their answers.

The cognitive interview involves a variety of retrieval strategies and is therefore a particular method of interviewing eyewitnesses to help them retrieve more accurate memories. It is based on the two principles of organisation and context dependency. The cognitive interview uses four main techniques: report everything, reinstate the context, reverse the order and change the perspective. Witnesses are encouraged to include every single detail, even if it may seem irrelevant as they may trigger other important memories. The witness should imagine the environment of the crime scene in their mind, such as the weather or what they see or smell, this helps retrieve memories as it is connected to context dependent forgetting. Furthermore, events should be recalled in a different chronological order to prevent witnesses from reporting their expectations rather than the real events, and also prevents dishonesty as it is harder to lie if you are told to reverse the story. Lastly, witnesses should recall the crime from other peoples perspectives or from another area of the crime scene, this is done to disrupt the schema and expectations on recall.

Moreover, later on Fisher developed additional elements of the cognitive interview such as knowing when to establish eye contact and when to not. The enhanced cognitive interview also included reducing eyewitness anxiety, minimising distractions, getting the witness to speak slowly and asking open ended questions. These extra elements were added in order to focus more closely on the social dynamics of the interaction.

A strength of the cognitive interview is that it may be particularly useful when interviewing older witnesses, because it stresses the importance of reporting any detail regardless of if it is perceived to be insignificant. Negative stereotypes about older peoples memories can make such witnesses overly cautious about reporting information, however the cognitive interview overcomes these difficulties. This can be supported by Mello and Fisher’s study that compared the memory of people of a mean age of 72 to people of an age of 22 who saw a simulated crime using either a cognitive or standard interview. They found that the cognitive interview produced a lot more information than the standard interview, however the main advantage of the cognitive was greater for the older people than younger people.

Another strength of the cognitive interview is that there is sufficient evidence to support that it is an effective technique. Studies such as Kohnken’s meta-analysis that combined data from 50 different studies, indicate that there are real practical benefits to the police of using the enhanced cognitive interview. In this meta-analysis he found that the cognitive interview consistently provided more correct information than the standard police interview. This research shows that this will give the police a greater chance at catching criminals by using the cognitive interview, and this benefits society as a whole.

A weakness of the cognitive interview is that it requires a lot of time. Kebbel and Wagstaff found that police officers said that the cognitive interview requires a lot more time than is available to them, and so instead they prefer to use strategies aimed to limit an eyewitness’s report to the minimum amount of information that the officer feels is necessary. It also requires a lot of time in training to be able to conduct a cognitive interview; this is very time consuming and may not be cost effective. If proper training is not given there is no advantage of using the cognitive interview.

Another weakness is that the cognitive interview is less effective at enhancing recall when the passage of time between the event and recall increases. Therefore, to achieve the most benefit in the cognitive interview, the eyewitness should be interviewed as soon as possible after the event. The longer the period between the event and recall, the less accurate their eyewitness testimony will be.