

NHỮNG THÁCH THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN KHI THỰC HIỆN NGHIÊN CỨU ĐỊNH TÍNH SỬ DỤNG PHƯƠNG PHÁP PHỎNG VẤN BÁN CẤU TRÚC

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Nghiên cứu này nhằm điều tra những khó khăn mà sinh viên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh, Trường Đại học Hà Nội gặp phải trong thiết kế nghiên cứu định tính sử dụng phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc là công cụ nghiên cứu chính. Mười sinh viên còn thiếu kinh nghiệm trong nghiên cứu đã tham gia vào các cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc. Để phân tích dữ liệu, phương pháp phân tích chủ đề đã được áp dụng. Kết quả cho thấy hầu hết sinh viên gặp khó khăn ở những giai đoạn khác nhau trong quá trình thiết kế nghiên cứu, bao gồm: lựa chọn và lấy mẫu người tham gia, phát triển công cụ nghiên cứu, thu thập và phân tích dữ liệu. Trước những thách thức này, các giải pháp tương ứng đã được đề xuất nhằm giúp sinh viên cải thiện kỹ năng nghiên cứu của mình và hỗ trợ giảng viên trong quá trình giảng dạy Học phần Phương pháp nghiên cứu sơ cấp (theo Chuẩn tiếng Việt).

Từ khóa: nghiên cứu định tính, phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc, sinh viên làm nghiên cứu, quá trình thiết kế nghiên cứu.

This study aims to explore the challenges faced by English-majored students at Hanoi University in designing qualitative research projects that employ semi-structured interview as the primary research instrument. Semi-structured interviews were implemented with 10 student participants who have had limited experience in conducting research interviews. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data. The findings reveal that most students encountered difficulties in various stages of the research design process, including participation selection and sampling, research instrument development, data collection and data analysis. In response to these challenges, respective solutions were proposed to help students improve their research skills and to support teachers in the teaching of the Primary Research Methods module.

Keywords: qualitative research, semi-structured interview, student researchers, research design process.

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AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENT RESEARCHERS IN SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW-BASED QUALITATIVE STUDIES

1. Introduction

In the context of higher education institutions, research output is one of the most essential criteria to evaluate the academic ranking of a university (Mantula et al., 2024). Accordingly, it is necessary for universities to enhance the research competence among educators and students to conduct quality research.

In academic settings, qualitative research, as one of the research approaches, is gaining broader acceptance as it can tackle queries that quantitative research can hardly address (Kassa et al., 2024). The approach is utilized to explore social phenomena as it delves into the experiences, thoughts, and opinions of people in their natural context. Among various qualitative methods, interview is a direct way to obtain information from participants, and semi-structured interview emerges as the most common type of interview in qualitative research (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In this approach, interviewers prepare a set of questions to center the conversation; however, changes in words, and modification of order are free to happen during the process in addition to probing questions (Shohel et al., 2015). The flexibility of semi-structured interview provides the comfort of a natural conversation, in which interviewees are

encouraged to share their private thoughts and allow researchers to discover new concepts and explore personal topics (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Despite their merits, semi-structured interviews can be challenging for student researchers as it requires experience in communicating and ability to deal with unexpected real-life situations (Shohel et al., 2015)

While some existing studies provide guidance on the common challenges qualitative researchers encounter (King et al., 2019, Mantula et al., 2024), they offer limited comprehensive insights into the difficulties at distinct stages of the research process, such as identifying participants and designing interview questions. In the Vietnamese context, empirical qualitative studies exploring authentic experiences of students with semi-structured interview-based qualitative research remain scarce. Therefore, this study aims to explore in depth the perceived challenges faced by student researchers in the collection and analysis stages of interview-based qualitative data. Strategies were also proposed to help newbie researchers to overcome such challenges.

To fulfill the aforementioned research aims, a research question was proposed: What challenges do student researchers encounter while conducting qualitative semi-structured interview-based studies?

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Significance of Scientific Research*

Higher education institutions are responsible for preparing future professionals by providing education and conducting research that responds to societal needs, with research output plays a key role in university rankings for academic performance (Mantula et al., 2024). As a result, it is crucial for universities to engage in research to not only provide students with latest knowledge and developments but also to improve university rankings. For students, scientific research can foster their critical thinking, analytical skills and expand relevant knowledge in their fields (Adebisi, 2022, as cited in Mantula et al., 2024). These are the reasons why Circular number 22/2011/TT-BGDDT of the Ministry of Education and Training (2011, as cited in Dang & Bui, 2022) emphasizes that scientific research is one of the core missions of universities.

2.2. *Key Notions of Qualitative Research*

According to Kassa et al. (2024), qualitative research interprets the “inside out” perceptions of participants towards a specific issue. By doing so, it strives to enhance understanding of social realities and seek scientific approaches to address social problems. Furthermore, qualitative research has been proposed to explain the in-depth perspectives of those who are

involved and the underlying reasons which trigger such behaviors by focusing on their experience, perceptions, and manners (DeJaeghere et al., 2020).

2.2.1. *Qualitative Data Collection*

The methods in qualitative research can take various flexible forms, including interviews, document analysis, observation, and questionnaires with open-ended questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data collecting process requires intense involvement of researchers, as a result, it could generate rich and extensive descriptions. Out of the aforementioned data collection instruments, semi-structured methods seem to be widely employed as it flexibly allows prompts and follow-up questions during the interview besides a prepared set of questions to clarify participants’ responses and thus, possibly gain elaborated information (Taherdoost, 2022).

2.2.2. *Qualitative Data Analysis*

As mentioned before, qualitative data are mostly found in the form of words and pictures. Despite being rich in description, the information can be much more complex to process compared to numerical and statistical quantitative data. One of the approaches to deal with interview-based qualitative data is thematic analysis which aims to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The two authors proposed six-phased procedures for data analysis, which include “(1) Familiarization with the

data with the data, (2) Coding, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the report” (p. 16).

2.3. Challenges in Conducting Qualitative Research Using Semi-Structured Interviews

The interview process can be demanding even for high-skilled researchers operating in diverse cultural contexts (Kvale, 1996, as cited in Shohel et al., 2015). Therefore, during the data collection and analysis phases, researchers might encounter a range of challenges and unforeseen complications arising from the complexity of real-world situations.

2.3.1. Participant Selection and Sampling

Challenges in Identifying Participants

To obtain quality data with comprehensive and insightful responses, it is necessary for researchers to select appropriate informants for their studies. In the early stage, researchers need to identify their research intention to determine who should be their interviewees. In other words, the sampling process should be carried out with a clear purpose (Taherdoost, 2022). According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), the criteria of suitable interviewees are people who are accessible, open to be interviewed, and have real-life experience and knowledge about the topic. Moreover, if the experiences have never been described,

they will become powerful information (Mantula et al., 2024).

Challenges in Identifying Sample Size

The question of “How many interviewees are required?” is frequently raised among qualitative researchers (Guest et al., 2006, as cited in DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). While in quantitative research, the size of samples is needed to be large for calculation and statistical power, broad population statistics are not the focus of qualitative research (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). As suggested by Ahmed (2025), the sample size should be determined by factors such as the research objectives, homogeneity of the sample, theoretical framework, the quality of interviews, and analytic strategy. More simply, in their study about the number of interviews, Guest et al. (2006, as cited in DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019) concluded that it was considered to be enough when there is no new thematic information collected from interviewees. This view is supported by Shohel et al. (2015) who wrote that the number of interviews in their research was not predetermined; instead, each interview was closely monitored, and subsequent interviews were conducted until there was no emergence of new insights. The fear of not collecting enough data was mentioned in the research by Shohel et al. (2015), which was subsequently followed by their realization that their data was unnecessarily repetitive.

2.3.2. Developing Data Collection Instrument

Challenges in Designing Interview Questions

Designing effective and logical interview questions is one of the most essential factors for the success of an interview as a well-prepared interview guide contributes to the quality of collected data. In a study investigating semi-structured interviews, DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) argued that all questions in an interview should be open-ended, neutral, straightforward, and free from biased language. Moreover, the questions need to be written in simple and familiar language, and free from specialized jargon. A novice researcher involved in the research by Peredaryenko and Krauss (2013) demonstrated his confusion in a situation where his interviewees could not elaborate their thoughts due to the restrictive nature of his interview guide. Based on the newbie researcher's explanation, the problem originated from the fact that the questions were overly complex and beyond the knowledge of the informants. Thus, interview protocol should take the knowledge of both interviewers and interviewees into careful consideration.

Additionally, according to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), four types of guiding questions are given in detail, including *general questions* to initiate the interview, *core questions* –

questions focusing on the purpose of the research, *planned follow-up questions* – probes to get detailed answer for the core questions, and *unplanned follow-up questions* – spontaneous ones arising from interviewees' responses. Similarly, Taherdoost (2022) also found three main types of interview questions, which are main questions, planned follow-up questions, and follow-up questions. Preparing questions for a semi-structured interview can be particularly challenging for inexperienced researchers. One of the main difficulties lies in knowing when and where to ask follow-up or prompt questions to encourage participants to provide deeper, more detailed insights.

2.3.3. Data Collection

Challenges with Establishing Rapport with Participants

Apart from having critical questions and interviewing skills, interviewers also need to build empathy and rapport with interviewees. Partington (2001) maintained that the quality of the interview can be affected if interviewers have no information about the background of their respondents; as a result, it can lead to mistrust or misunderstanding. Partington (2001) also suggested that it is essential to build trust so that a person can open and disclose their information.

Besides, rapport can be enhanced during the interview process by the attentive behaviours and attitude of interviewers. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), the sympathy between interviewers

and their informants is strengthened quickly if the interviewers pay attention and respect to the responses of the interviewees.

Challenges with Setting Suitable Interview Timing

Time arrangement is also an important element of any interview session. It is suggested that the interview schedule should be at interviewees' convenience (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). As a result, it is inevitable for interviewers to encounter time-extended situations which require rearranging or rescheduling. In the research conducted by Shohel et al. (2015), participants shared their inconvenient experiences with time arrangements due to the uninformed absence of their interviewees. One informant claimed that following her arrival to an appointed interview, the long waiting time caused her to be suspicious and had to recheck her email to reassure herself of the interview location and time. In the end, the interviewee did not show up and rescheduling was required.

Challenges with Insufficient Interviewing Skills

According to Partington (2001), different from structured interviews, semi-structured inquiry sessions allow researchers to add questions where needed; therefore, interviewers are required to listen carefully to create follow-up questions. This demands a great deal of skill from interviewers, therefore making it

a significant difficulty for inexperienced researchers (Shohel et al., 2015; Taherdoost, 2022). To tackle the issue, Taherdoost (2022) maintained that interviewers should be very focused while interviewing in order not to miss any insight and to remember to return to some questions when needed.

Challenges with Moderating the Interview

During an interview session, the role of interviewers is not only to listen and question, but also to moderate the interview to avoid any arising problems. In their analysis of interviewers' characteristics, Shohel et al. (2015) identified a recurring problem where interviewers often dominate the conversation during interviews. Thus, it is suggested that interviewers speak less, ideally taking 10% or less of the conversation. Besides, short answer is also a problem for interviewers. There was a case in the research of Shohel et al. (2015) that an informant kept giving excessively short answers, forcing the interviewer to resort to additional questions after all planned follow up questions had been used up. This problem can lead to a waste of time and an unintentional influence to the interviewee's responses.

However, Shohel et al. (2015) were much more concerned that interviewee might dominate the interview if the interviewer fails to manage the session. Data collected from Shohel et al.'s (2015)

research gave examples for this issue. The first case was when an interviewee had too many questions, thus making the interviewer felt incompetent in their role. The second one occurred when a participant's responses went side-tracked. Despite being aware of the importance of compassionate listening, the interviewer recognized that some stories lacked relevance or contribution to the topic. The lack of skill to stop off-topic responses, in this instance, can potentially lead to an unnecessarily longer interview. To resolve the problem verbally, researchers are suggested to improve their probing and prompting skill to intervene where necessary (King et al., 2019).

2.3.4. Data Analysis

Challenges with Processing Data

The first issue comes from the large amount of collected information, which exists in various forms such as recordings, pictures, notes, and words (DeJaeghere et al., 2020). Such data can be challenging to manage and process, so it urges researchers to condense large volumes of data into meaningful segments (Mantula et al., 2024). A multitude of scientific suggestions are offered to address this problem including using memos, arranging and classifying data, and familiarizing with information before any further steps (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). However, it is undeniable that high volumes of information consume much time and require exhaustive review

(Mantula et al., 2024).

To tackle this difficulty, a range of software programs have been developed to help qualitative researchers in managing data. This solution has been mentioned in various studies as a technological key to save researchers from excessive workload. For example, DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) mentioned that computer-aided programs can be utilized to assist in organizing and managing interview data. Mantula et al. (2024) also indicated some helpful software such as MAXQDA, NVIVO, and ATLAS.ti. However, the benefits of such computer programs are mainly in storing and separating data, rather than coding or analyzing (Mantula et al., 2024). In the same vein, findings from research conducted by Kassa et al. (2024) revealed that there is no software available to handle the time-consuming task of data coding.

Challenges with Thematic Analysis

Regarding thematic analysis, generating codes and themes appears to be a major obstacle for junior researchers. Braun and Clarke (2006) identified that there are at least three problems in this stage, including numerous themes, overlapped themes, and a confusion between codes and themes. This view is complemented by Finlay (2021) who examined several qualitative papers and found studies with an overwhelming number of themes that are heavily overlapped and poorly labeled. The root of this trouble may come from the

entangled concepts (Finlay, 2021) or the negligence over the data familiarization step, which should be done before coding and theming (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.5. Synthesis of Previous Empirical Studies

Shohel et al. (2015) highlighted the challenges they faced during her initial experience with qualitative interviews, which were (1) losing track of the conversation, (2) steering responses, and (3) lack of clarity. However, the challenges are confined to solely the interview process, with no consideration of the data analysis phase. More relevantly, Kalman (2019) conducted a study which explores the perspective of novice researchers on qualitative research through in-depth interviews with nine graduate students, who had completed their master degrees. The study accumulated detailed information on difficulties of student researchers during data collection and analysis. Nevertheless, the study participants, aged 27 to 41, were teachers or academic staff at the time of the research, which may not comprehensively reflect all obstacles due to the notably limited research experience that student researchers have. Addressing this limitation, two Vietnamese researchers, Dang and Bui (2022), examined the challenges of 220 undergraduate students in doing research, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City Open University using surveys and quantitative analysis approach. The research identifies major challenges

including literature resources deficiency, insufficiency of research knowledge, and difficulties in data collection and analysis. Yet, the root causes of these challenges remain unclear due to the lack of elaboration from the undergraduate participants.

Despite the importance of scientific research, especially qualitative approach, there remains a paucity of comprehensive evidence about the difficulties Vietnamese undergraduate students encounter during stages of the research process using semi-structured interview. As a result, the specific objective of this study is to investigate challenges of student researchers in collecting and analysing qualitative data from interviews.

3. Methods

3.1. Design of the Study

A qualitative exploratory research approach was adopted for this study where the phenomena under investigation were relatively uncharted (Creswell, 2008). As little has been written about the challenges students faced in the steps in the process of planning and implementing semi-structured interview qualitative research design, especially in the Vietnamese context, qualitative research is suitable for the exploration of such an underexamined area. Besides, quantitative research is claimed to contain predetermined structures (Kassa et al., 2024), making the discovery of an array of innovative notions less likely. In contrast, open-ended inquiry,

which is characteristic of qualitative design is considered appropriate to uncover students' nuanced reflected challenges that are shaped by both personal and methodological factors. All in all, the qualitative research approach was suited to draw a complete picture of a new and multi-dimensional notion, which is students reflection of the challenges they encountered during the research process.

3.2. Research Setting & Participants

To ensure that the participants had prior experience with semi-structured interview, the study purposively sampled English Department students at Hanoi University who had completed the Primary Research Methods module. Their end-of-term summative assessment involves the submission of a 2000-word primary research report which allowed them to select their own research methods.

Inclusion decisions were made on the basis that they used semi-structured interviews as the research instrument for their final coursework. Thus, an initial Google Form survey was emailed to 200 students who attended the module, with a view to determine the type of instrument used in their final research assignment. Once having identified the groups of students who utilized interviews, invitation emails were sent to ask for the consent of suitable individuals to participate in the present research. A total of 10 students agreed to join the interviews.

The participants were English-major third-year students at Hanoi University

who are approximately 20 years old. The demographic information obtained from the interviews indicates that nine participants had undertaken interview-based research once, while one had done so twice, which indicates their limited experience with the targeted research. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all of the participants were assigned numerical pseudonyms (e.g. Student 1 and Student 2).

3.3. Data Collection & Analysis

3.3.1. Data Collection Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as research method since it allows more room for interviewers to lead on to further explanations and ask follow-up questions based on interviewees' replies (Taherdoost, 2022). Thus, semi-structured interview was justifiably selected to garner profound explanation from the participants.

Informed by the existing publications about the common challenges that novice researchers encounter in certain steps in the qualitative research process (Creswell, 2008), a set of interview questions were generated. There were nine content questions aiming at different stages in the research questions, namely participant selection and sampling; developing research instruments; data collection and data analysis. Pilot interviews were executed with three participants, who were later included in the main interviews, after which several modifications were made to enhance the clarity of the questions. The

changes include rephrasing ambiguous wording and removing leading questions, all of which were peer reviewed and accepted by both researchers.

3.3.2. Data Collection Procedure

Invitation messages were sent to the participants via Teams, a platform used as a virtual classroom for all enrolled students at Hanoi University. In the invitation, all of the participants were ensured of the anonymity of their responses. Ten participants replied and suitable time slots for the interviews were arranged.

Considering the informants' background as English-major students, an English interview protocol, which introduces interview questions and the study purposes, was sent out to the informants 2 days in advance so they could have a thorough overview of the questions. 10 interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams, each of which lasted around 30 minutes. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed, after which transcripts were confirmed with the participants to guarantee the accuracy of their original statements.

3.3.3. Data Analysis

The data gathered from the interviews were transcribed from the audio-recorded dialogues, which was subsequently analyzed based on the framework of inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In their description, the two theories posited that inductive analysis

involves the careful selection of keywords from raw data to inform an array of codes, which are subsequently grouped into meaningful themes.

In the present study, each transcript was doubled coded (Creswell, 2008). The coding process is as follows:

1. Raw code development: Highlighted segments in the transcripts were labelled with codes.
2. Revised code development: Codes were reviewed to reduce overlap or redundancy of codes.
3. Development of themes: Patterns among codes were identified and reduced into themes.

Each interview transcript was coded by both researchers, which means that codes and themes were revised twice to ensure their reliability and validity. Final categories were utilized once inter-coder agreement was obtained.

4. Findings and Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to discover the problems encountered by English-major student researchers at Hanoi University regarding the research design process of studies employing semi-structured interview as the research instrument. To be specific, it sought to uncover and discuss challenges related to participant selection and sampling; development of interview questions; interview-based data collection and data analysis.

4.1. Participant Selection and Sampling

4.1.1. Challenges with Determining Sample Size

The recurring concern for all of the student researchers was that they had to balance between statistical significance and constraints of existing resources. Student 2 gave a clear picture of the problems she encountered, not only in terms of limited time but also financial research budget: “In my research, I initially aimed to survey 20 students to ensure that the data would be statistically significant and generalizable but ultimately decided to reduce to 8 participants.”

Student 7 consented to this idea, stating that:

The key problem is that we need to ensure a large enough sample size to obtain generalizable results for our qualitative data analysis while we also need to keep the sample size manageable and practical to collect data within the scope and resources available.

This finding contributes novelty to the current literature as studies which explicitly underscore students’ tendency to aim for large sample size in qualitative research remain minimal. This outcome also represents a misconception among the participants considering that semi-structured interviews are usually conducted to elicit an in-depth understanding of an issue, rather than to maximize generalizability (Shohel et al.,

2010). Therefore, students’ attempt to increase the sample size does not add value to an interview-based qualitative study.

When asked about an ideal sample size, none of them were able to clearly define the required population, which correlates with previous study findings (Ahmed, 2025; Kalman, 2019). Illustrating this uncertainty, Student 3 admitted, “I often followed the sample sizes used in previous studies without fully understanding why they chose those numbers.” Such persistent issue for student researchers can be attributed to the absence of universally accepted guidelines to determine qualitative sample size, in contrast to quantitative research, which rely on established statistical formulas (Kalman, 2019).

4.1.2. Challenges with Identifying Participants

Findings from the interviews demonstrated that gaining suitable participants’ acceptance to join interviews was another issue that most of the novice researchers have to handle. Evidently, Student 1 claimed that “I found that identifying individuals who fit the criteria for the study while ensuring they were willing and available to participate was the most difficult”. On the same wavelength, Student 6 stated that “I find it concerning for me to persuade participants to willingly attend the interview, even though I offered gifts and extra study materials.” This challenge agrees with findings of previous studies, which also documented challenges with acquiring respondents’ acceptance to

participate in interviews (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Mutidu & Iyamu, 2012). This issue could be attributed to researchers' limited familiarity with potential participants, both personally and culturally (Mutudi & Iyamu, 2012). This indicates the need to employ snowball sampling, a technique in which existing subjects recruit potential candidates from among their acquaintances (Fox, 2000).

Despite the offer of incentives, failures in recruitment still occurred, as echoed by Student 6. This may be due to a mismatch between the type or amount of remuneration and participants' preferences. Archibald and Munce (2015) classified incentives as material, financial, moral, or natural, highlighting the need for novice researchers to consider these distinctions carefully. In their study, it is recommended that the compensation should be made approximate to the participants' inconvenience when partaking in the study. Thus, efforts to providing the right type and amount of remuneration should be paid.

4.2. Developing Research Instruments

4.2.1. Challenges with Developing Interview Questions

The most concerning challenge revolved around defining the appropriate scope of the questions as this issue was mentioned by four students. Students 1, 3, 9 and 10 held the view that interview questions should strike a balance - being general enough to encourage diverse ideas

from the interviewees, yet focused enough to stay in line with the research objectives. To illustrate, student 1 echoed that: "One difficulty was ensuring the questions were open-ended enough to encourage responses while still being focused and relevant to the research objectives."

Even though this concern has not been empirically presented in current studies in the field, it has been recognized as a daunting problem in some guidance publications. Particularly, King et al.'s (2022) and Taherdoost's (2002) interview handbooks emphasize that overly comprehensive guide might not allow adequate room for respondents to express their views whereas minimalistic guide may not cover all target issues. To resolve this problem, both Doody and Nunan (2013) and Taherdoost (2002) reached a consensus that the scope of the interview questions should be steered by the research objectives. The reference to the research aims helps researchers determine the general questions, which subsequently can be expanded by subsets of detailed questions. To elicit a satisfying amount of information, the guide might need to cover various question types (King et al., 2019): *opinion/value questions* exploring perspectives, *feeling questions* addressing emotions, *knowledge questions* seeking factual information, and *sensory questions* about participants' sensory experiences.

The second most common issue appeared to be determining the appropriate number of interview questions. This was

iterated by three students, with Student 1 depicting an excessive number of questions as "overwhelming for the participants". The challenge inexperienced researchers face with interview question quantity is a novel finding, not previously identified in studies like King et al. (2019) or Shohel et al. (2015), which focus on offering guidance about interview design. Recommendations on the number of interview questions vary, evidently Shohel et al. (2015) recommended four to five primary questions whereas DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) suggested five to ten. As previously mentioned, research objectives navigate the interview protocol, therefore the number of interview questions significantly relies on the quantity of research concerns.

Participants also noted with caution about the qualities of interview questions. Firstly, ensuring comprehensibility of questions proved to be perplexing. In details, open-ended questions ought to be lexically and grammatically suitable for students' language proficiency level. Evidently, Student 6 highlighted that they (the research group) "did not want to confuse the subjects with a bunch of jargon or multiple-clause questions", therefore academic wording is claimed to be a hurdle to deal with. The same difficulty was explored in the research by Peredaryenko and Krauss (2013), in which their student researchers also struggled with designing questions that match the participants' educational level. The current literature

offers an abundance of advice on interview question wording, yet few recommendations are tailored to participants' language proficiency. This gap prompts further research regarding conducting interviews in English with non-native speakers. Regarding the solutions, it is recommended that specialized jargons should be avoided (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Taherhoost, 2002). When specialized terms need to be included, clear definitions should be provided (Doody & Nunan, 2013). To make the interview questions more participant-friendly, DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) recommended using neutral and unbiased language, avoiding terms related to age, health status, sexual orientation, religion, race and social class.

Secondly, student 10 emphasized the second barrier, that is the probability of creating leading questions. Secondly, student 10 emphasized the second barrier - formulating "leading questions", highlighted as a common mistake specifically addressed in the lesson called *Designing research instruments* within the Primary Research Methods course syllabus. This problem was indicated in a multitude of guidance literature for novice researchers (e.g. Doody & Nunan, 2013; King et al., 2019). They share a common perception that leading questions that manipulate the informants' responses into an expected direction can reduce the credibility of the findings. To avoid this issue, King et al. (2019) advised against

using closed yes/no questions that may lead participants to confirm the researcher's assumptions.

4.3. Data Collection

4.3.1. Challenges with Setting Suitable Times for Interviews

The data unveiled that the students struggled to arrange interview times due to conflicts with the interviewees' schedules. They all shared a common reason, that was due to busy study timetables. This led to "delays in the interview process" and the need to "extend the timeline for data collection" (Student 6).

A similar issue was reported in the study by Shohel et al. (2015), where participants failed to attend scheduled interviews due to forgetfulness. Thus, the first recommendation is to send reminders and to confirm their arrival before the actual meeting. Moreover, to avoid delays or having to "extend the deadline", information about times and locations convenient for both researchers and participants must be made transparent (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Student 6 offered a solution to resolve this problem, which is conducting enquiries online. Despite several limitations in the quality of communication, online interviews have been identified as a convenient instrument for both interviewers and interviewees as both can decide the interview time and location (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst (2017).

4.3.2. Challenges with Building Rapport with Participants

Half of the respondents presented that they did not encounter problems related to establishing a friendly atmosphere, particularly because the students recruited their friends as interviewees. Two other respondents attributed the dynamic interview atmosphere to the implementation of ice-breakers in Vietnamese - their mother tongue. Unlike prior literature that emphasizes rapport-building techniques such as not dominating the interview or asking culturally-appropriate questions (King et al., 2019), the current study revealed a new insight, which is using peer recruitment and mother tongue ice breakers. These two solutions are claimed to hold value to increase rapport. First, employing friends with similar age, education and background as participants is purported to foster a more relaxed atmosphere between the interviewee and interviewer (Yang & Yu, 2008). Second, ice breakers in English classes have been claimed to increase rapport by reducing initial distance between the two interlocutors (Watt & Cameron, 1995). It appears that this advantage of ice breakers also extent to interview contexts, where interpersonal communication similarly occurs.

On the other hand, while exchanging conversations, Student 6 discovered that eliciting responses was challenging because "the process is mainly carried out online, which makes it less interactive in a

way”. The student also attributed this problem to technical problems, thus leading to some delays in replies. The possible reduced interaction in remote interview methods have indeed been mentioned in qualitative literature. Particularly, Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst (2017) argued that online synchronous interviews might cause a misunderstanding in verbal and non-verbal cues. To clarify, body language may be less observable and the quality of camera and internet speed might delay instant feedback, hence possibly distorting responses. Strategies have been proposed to mitigate these challenges, including ensuring technical preparedness, attending to non-verbal cues, using acknowledging language like *yep*, *aha* to ensure accurate understanding and providing opportunities for follow-up question and elaboration (Yang & Yu, 2008). However, for inexperienced interviewers, in-person interviews are preferred to build trust and rapport, as virtual settings may create disconnection due to lack of shared environment (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2017).

4.3.3. *Challenges while Conducting Interview*

During the interview process, a myriad of hurdles was elaborated. The first corresponds with the insufficient skills to deal with off-topic answers. Student 2 and 9 recognized responses that “did not directly address the research questions”, “which made it challenging to extract

relevant data” for their studies. In the same vein, Student 9 admitted that they lacked the probing skill to realign their research participants to the right direction. The insufficient skill to deal with off-topic responses has been mentioned by Shohel et al. (2010) as daunting. Specifically, the endlessly long stories told by their participants’ interviewee lack pertinence to the topic, thus causing a waste of time and energy. The inability to interrupt and redirect is a common trait of novice researchers, as seen in Student 1’s choice to stay silent and “carefully revisit the interview scripts.” When recognizing a sidetracked response, a researcher should tactfully steer the interview to avoid irrelevant information while keeping a positive atmosphere. Fox (2000) offered an example of such moderation “Yes, that’s very interesting. Could I ask you about something you asked a moment ago to get back to your main line of questioning?” (p.20). Dealing with sidetracked answers is complicated, however can be improved through “practice and patience” (Shohel et al., 2015, p.112).

Secondly, guaranteeing the satisfactory quality of answers was also another obstacle. Student 4 mentioned that sometimes responses were shorter than they expected. Student 3 also gave an illustration of the “superficial and vague responses” she received: “When I asked “How do you feel about X?” and received generic answers like “It’s okay” without any elaboration.” This issue aligns with the

findings found in the literature. Specifically, Haleem, an interviewer in Shohet et al. (2015) also faced this adversity, making her resort to back-up questions to prompt more information. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) also noted that some unresponsive interviewees need extra elicitation. To resolve the problem verbally, researchers must improve the probing and prompting skill (King et al., 2019). This means that planned and unplanned follow-up questions as well as interventions that seek to clarify preliminary answers have to be employed. The act of preparing probes align with Student 8's suggestion, that is to prepare a concise list of interview questions. This holds merits but might be not comprehensive enough. Aside from preparation for verbal probes, non-verbal cues can also be utilized. For instance, allowing silence is an applicable tactic as it enables interviewees to think more carefully about the response. Body language such as nods and smiles can also hint respondents of interviewers' attentive listening and the expectation for further details (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Challenge with Processing Data

Out of the ten examined respondents, half found the amount of data including transcript, audio recordings and notes overwhelming at first. Student 3 described this experience as feeling "like drowning in a sea of text." The reported considerable amount of data was mentioned as an

agonizing issue for novice researchers (DeJaeghere et al., 2020; Mantula et al., 2024). To tackle these issues, some self-implemented strategies were adopted by the student researchers. In particular, after transcription using AI (Students 7, 8, and 9), Google Spreadsheet was utilized for organizing responses, as stated by Students 9, 5, 4. Then, visual aids such as online mindmaps such as Obsidian were utilized to connect the identified keywords (Students 1 and 9). The students' solutions are also in line with some suggestions by more experienced researchers who suggest software like NVivo and MAXQDA and emphasize visual tools such as mind maps and matrices for data clarity (Mantula et al., 2024). Besides, the arrangement of data needs frequent peer revision to "troubleshoot any problems" and therefore, help researchers refine data relationships (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p.233). In the case of the student researchers, their closet connections for discussion were understandably friends and research supervisors.

To eliminate unnecessary data, Students 5 and 8 decided to refer to the research questions. The strategy was also recognized by Braun and Clarke (2006) who explicitly discussed the importance of grounding data reduction decisions in research questions.

4.2. Challenges with Thematic Analysis

Among a list of challenges, devising codes and themes on the framework of

thematic analysis proved to be the most prevalent as nearly all students encountered certain difficulties in the thematic analysis of data. Some keywords were utilized by the participants to describe this challenge. For instance, Student 1 reported that identifying categories “took a lot of time and careful thinking” while Student 2 proposed that “it was a struggle to decide the best category for certain pieces of information”. Other examples are:

- “identifying meaningful codes can be tricky” (Student 3);
- “coming up with a name for unpredicted results can be trickier” (Student 8);

Finlay (2021) identified this problem in his article, regarding some themes he encountered as “poorly expressed” and “full of indigestible jargon that little sense can be made of it” (p.110). Naming themes is troublesome, often resulting in superficial or overly complicated regurgitation (Finlay, 2021). This might step from the temptation to skip data familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, naming themes might be laborious as thematic analysis is naturally nuanced and hard to standardize (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, themes can be “scientifically descriptive,” using structured coding to reduce researcher bias, or “artfully interpretative,” allowing for the researcher’s flexible interpretation (p.4).

To address the issues, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested highly-applicable solutions. Firstly, the researcher should recognize the diversity of thematic analysis and choose the aligned approach with the research objectives. Secondly, data familiarization is strongly advised to facilitating deep understanding of the information. Another practical technique is using the “remove the data” test. After codes have been established, transcripts should be put aside to test whether the researchers can be reminded of the data. If not, the researchers need to revise the codes. Lastly, reviewing themes is pivotal, which involves some reflective questions offered by Finlay (2021):

1. What kind of thematic analysis method is called for given my overarching methodology? Does my analysis do the job?
2. Does my thematic analysis hang together, cohering around the central ideas of the research and data?
3. Are my themes informative, relevant, and rich?
4. Have the thematic descriptions been written so as to be sufficiently resonant, memorable, interesting and/or evocative? (p.110)

Overlap in themes seemed to be a persistent issue for Students 2, 3. Student 2 stated, “I still occasionally struggled to differentiate overlapping ideas or decide the best category for certain pieces of information.” Student 3 noted, “Identifying

meaningful codes can be tricky, especially when data contains overlapping ideas.”

Braun and Clarke (2006) highlighted this in thematic analysis, including too many or overlapping themes and confusion between codes and themes. Finlay (2021) noted a study with 63 overlapping themes, attributing this to blurred boundaries in social and psychological concepts. To avoid theme overlaps, some solutions were self-employed by the participants. Technology-wise, ChatGPT – an AI-integrated software was applied to “identify key points and themes more quickly” (Student 7). Mantula et al. (2024) also supported the use of computer programs to highlight key phrases in the transcripts and organize them with footnotes and endnotes in word processing programs, aiding in group codes and identifying patterns that inform theme development.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Findings

The current study was implemented to explore the challenges encountered by ten English-major student researchers at Hanoi University when using semi-structured interview as a research instrument. The result indicates that adversities occur in numerous phases of the research design, namely participation selection and sampling; developing research instruments; data collection process and data analysis. Specifically, in the phase of participant selection and sampling,

researchers often encounter difficulties in determining an appropriate sample size and in identifying and recruiting suitable participants. The development of research instruments also presents obstacles, particularly in designing interview questions. During data collection, further challenges may arise, such as arranging convenient interview schedules, establishing rapport with participants, and managing issues that occur during the interview process. Finally, the data analysis stage poses challenges in managing large data sets and conducting rigorous thematic analysis.

5.2. Limitations of the Study

Despite offering insights, this study has several limitations that may affect the comprehensiveness of its findings. The qualitative data generated was expressed by a relatively small number of participants ($n = 10$), so the results might not be generalized to other student researchers. Furthermore, using semi-structured interview as the only data collection instrument presents a limitation in the breadth of the gathered evidence. While semi-structured interviews allow for in-depth exploration of perspectives, they might not offer a comprehensive understanding of the topic due to the nature of self-reported data.

5.3. Future Research

To address the aforementioned limitations, future studies should take into consideration the following suggestions. First, a mixed methods approach (e.g.,

surveys and interviews) on a larger sample to provide a more holistic picture of the challenges should be adopted. Second, as the participants in this study highlighted technological tools (e.g ChatGPT, online video interviews) as helpful in mitigating certain challenges, their impacts on qualitative research can be a point of future investigation.

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