

## Issues and Challenges in Qualitative Inquiry: Novice Researchers' Experiences

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### Abstract

This paper sets to explore the experiences of novice qualitative researchers at one higher learning institution. It focuses on three main phases underwent by these novice qualitative researchers, namely the prior preparation phase, the on-going phase, and finally their personal reflection phase in conducting qualitative inquiry. Through the interviews conducted with the participants of the study, it is hoped that issues, problems and challenges in conducting qualitative inquiry would be highlighted. In addition, some suggestions and advice for future qualitative researchers will be provided.

*Keywords:* Qualitative inquiry; issues and challenges; novice researchers' experiences; personal reflection

### Abstrak

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka pengalaman yang dilalui oleh pengkaji yang baharu (*novice*) yang ingin menjalankan kajian kualitatif. Artikel ini memberi tumpuan kepada tiga fasa utama yang telah dilalui oleh pengkaji kualitatif *novice* ini, iaitu fasa sebelum, fasa sewaktu dan fasa refleksi peribadi dalam menjalankan kajian kualitatif. Melalui sesi temubual dengan responden kajian ini, diharapkan isu-isu, masalah dan cabaran dalam menjalankan kajian kualitatif dapat ditonjolkan. Disamping itu, beberapa cadangan serta panduan juga dikemukakan untuk pengkaji yang ingin mencuba kajian kualitatif.

*Kata kunci:* Kajian kualitatif; isu dan cabaran; pengalaman pengkaji novice; refleksi peribadi

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study intends to explore the experiences undergone by the postgraduate students who were undertaking the qualitative research approach for the first time. The main objective of the study is to determine the experiences of these novice qualitative researchers during the three main phases of conducting their research, namely the prior preparation phase, the on-going phase, and finally their personal reflection phase in conducting a qualitative inquiry.

The study responds to our growing concern that many postgraduate students lack the skills of collecting and analyzing data and consequently interpreting them in a qualitative manner, which may provide a more comprehensive overview of their findings than a quantitative approach would. As such, some postgraduate students were interviewed and we report their reflections in relation to their experiences in undertaking research qualitatively. Our focus was on their experiences during the three main stages of conducting their studies, i.e. the preparation they undertook prior to conducting the research, the experiences they went through while conducting the research, and finally their expressions of personal reflections of the positive and negative sides of their experiences while conducting the qualitative research.

We came up with seven (7) interview questions, i.e.:

1. How did you perceive qualitative research (QR) before embarking on it?
2. What do you think is the purpose of QR?
3. What skills do you think are needed to conduct QR?
4. What courses have contributed to your understanding of QR?
5. How have your supervisor helped you in your preparation to conduct QR? Besides him/her, who else have helped you – peers, colleagues etc.?
6. What do you gain from conducting a QR study? Reflect on your own experiences.
7. What issues, problems and challenges do you encounter when conducting a QR inquiry? Reflect on your own experiences.

All in all, seven (7) postgraduate students were interviewed to gather the necessary data for this study. They were three (3) Ph.D. students and four (4) Masters (M.Ed.) students who participated in the study. They were selected based on purposive sampling, whereby we

identified and interviewed them based on their current involvement in collecting and analyzing data for their qualitative research. In addition, they were easy to be contacted and were much willing to be interviewed. In other words, they gave us their consent to participate in the study. Four (4) of them are males while the other three (3) are females. Henceforth, these students will be referred to as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6 and P7 respectively. The table below shows a summary of the participants' background:

**Table 1** Summary of participants' background

P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7
Female	Male	Male	Male	Female	Female	Male
Ph.D.	Ph.D.	Ph.D.	M.Ed.	M.Ed.	M.Ed.	M.Ed.
Islamic Studies	Physical Educ.	Special Educ.	ELT	ELT	ELT	Hist.
Writing stage	Writing stage	Collecting data	Completed	Completed	Analyzing data	Analyzing data

## ■2.0 HOW THE RESPONDENTS PERCEIVED QUALITATIVE RESEARCH (QR) BEFORE EMBARKING ON IT.

The respondents were interviewed individually and their responses were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed. P6 student expressed her comfort at conducting qualitative research, although it was for the first time. In fact, she stated her preference for it over quantitative research since it was “easier to write out the findings compared to deciphering and interpreting numbers as in quantitative research”. However, she expressed her wish that she had been given more guidance by the lecturers concerned, which would “make things easier for the students to carry out their research on their own”.

P7 student also expressed his positive views on conducting qualitative researches. Generally, he likes and feels very comfortable conducting qualitative research although he was doing it for the first time. He feels that it “is very interesting because qualitative research is not tied up with very delicate or complicated discipline as is the case with quantitative research”. The researcher is free to probe and arrive at answers to questions without any limits at all.

P6 and P7 students were working on their Masters thesis project, which was a requirement for them to complete the Masters in Education programme. Actually, both of them started off with collecting and analyzing data quantitatively to answer their research questions. However, there were some issues which indicated that they were not well versed with the statistics they set out to use in analyzing their data, and this led them to wrongly analyzing and misinterpreting the data gathered. Hence, the supervisor advised them to change the approach to be used from quantitative to qualitative. Realizing the fact that these two students were novice qualitative researchers, the supervisor provided some assistance in the form of coaching and tutoring to equip the students with all the knowledge and skills required in conducting qualitative researches. The students were also advised to read up and gain more knowledge on qualitative research. After some time, these two students who were the participants of our study were interviewed by one of the researchers. At this point of time, all new or novice qualitative researchers face a lot of issues and problems while undertaking it. The problems may occur in different forms and at various stages of the research. P4 and P5 students have just completed their Masters programme. Both of them conducted qualitative studies for their thesis projects. Unlike P6 and P7 students, they both started using the qualitative method from the beginning of the study based on their own interest in the field. According to P4 student:

“As much as research is concerned for me, I opt for a qualitative study. This is mainly because I feel that I can write all my heart out in data analysis as well as data collection. I am comfortable with a qualitative study because my friends and supervisor could see my strength in writing. I did not want to do a quantitative study just because it was easier to be analysed. I took the trouble to sit for days in front of my data, analyse them back and forth (not mentioning the amount of headaches I used to have) and in the end the contentment that I get from doing it was what made me happy”.

Meanwhile, P5 student has this to say:

“After studying Research Method, I'm hooked with qualitative research as I felt the enthusiasm of carrying out my research in QR would be more lively and real, as I can get contact with my participants closely and digging deeper information I need for my research”.

The three Ph.D. students are at different stages of their studies. Two of them are writing –up their work while the other is collecting his data. P1 student noted that she is comfortable with the activity:

“I was comfortable with qualitative research because I did not limit/block my eyes on certain views, I had to open my eyes widely and carefully to grasp every event, even a participant's gesture sending a message whether s/he wanted to participate in the research or not”.

P2 and P3 students share the same opinion too:

“Very comfortable. At first I was in doubt about conducting Qualitative Research, but after going through it, I became more interested”.

*(Cukup selesa. Pada awalnya, saya ragu-ragu dengan QR, tetapi setelah saya mendalaminya ternyata ada minat tersendiri.)*

### ■3.0 WHAT THE RESPONDENTS THINK IS THE PURPOSE OF QR.

P6 student thinks that a qualitative research is a good platform for researchers to gain insights into real issues being studied. Its “free nature allows them to probe and get to the bottom of things, i.e. in terms of acquiring information and knowledge of things or issues which are normally difficult to access, particularly via quantitative approach”.

P7 student, on the other hand, thinks that QR gives researchers the room to conduct a very detailed and in-depth study of an area or topics of interest. He said this was in view of the fact that “conducting interviews and observing the participants allows the researchers to probe as deep as necessary to get the feedback from the participants. The face-to face nature of the sessions makes it easier for the researchers to pose all the relevant questions in order to get all the relevant information”.

P4 student added the following opinion:

“I feel that the purpose of a qualitative study is to dig into the issue more than what any other studies are bound to do. A qualitative study allows the researcher to go to any extent in getting the data (reflections, interviews, observations, journal entries and etc) which makes the study rich with data. The benefit of the study is that it gives us a perspective and allows us to ask a lot of question which makes us critical about the issue. The only problem with a qualitative study is that we do not know where it ends. So much for its data richness, we may go overboard with the data and at times, we may end up having nothing related to the topic of the research”.

In comparison, P5 and P1 students noted similar perspectives:

“The benefit of doing research in QR is we can carry out our research in depth. Its limitations are time constraint and limited number of participants to be involved in QR, so generalization could not be made”. (P5)

“Qualitative research is relevant in the case of a research that focuses on a comprehensive and deep understanding in its natural setting. In the preparation, the researcher should not limit/block his/her eyes on certain phenomena s/he will see, but s/he should provide him/herself to anticipate unpredictable situations”. (P1)

### ■4.0 WHAT SKILLS DO THE RESPONDENTS THINK ARE NEEDED TO CONDUCT QR?

According to P6 student, one of the skills that is important in conducting a QR is “the ability to ask relevant questions so that the objectives of the study are achieved, while at the same time all the research questions are answered clearly and appropriately”. In fact, P7 student also agreed with the above statement, and added that “the researchers should be alert all the time and realize whether all the information obtained would suffice in order to make the conclusions of the study”.

Patience and probing skills seem to be the most important skills according to P4 student. He noted that:

“In conducting a qualitative research, I feel that I needed patience the most. This is because I may have a lot in mind and at times, the participants would not give what I want. That’s actually the beauty of qualitative study. We will never always get what we want, instead, we will get what we never expected and with that, we will work out our themes for the data analysis. Besides that, I realize that I need sourcing and probing skills. If I don’t ask critical questions, I may not get critical answers from my participants. For example, if I wanted my participants to give me information about their writing skills, I need to ask questions like, “What do you enjoy most when you write?” than asking typical questions like, “What do you like to write?””.

P5 student gave a more general answer: “Communication and Research skills are most needed”. While P1, P2 and P3 students seem to agree on these skills, P3 student added that qualitative researchers should acquire the skill in developing the instrument, particularly for the interview protocol.

### ■5.0 WHAT ARE THE COURSES THAT HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE RESPONDENTS’ UNDERSTANDING OF QR?

Respondent P6 is a student majoring in English Language Teaching (ELT). As such, it was not compulsory for her to enroll into the Qualitative Research class. So, according to her, she was never directly exposed to or taught any QR skills. She added that her “contact with QR was through several articles provided by the lecturers of some courses such as Second Language Learning (SLA) and Culture and Context in ELT”. These articles were based on studies conducted which employed the qualitative method of data collection.

Similarly, P7 student also related an almost identical experience of learning about QR by reading up journal articles which employed the qualitative approach of data collection. He did this despite taking up the Qualitative Research course which was compulsory for him, since “the QR course which was offered for one semester only did not provide all the necessary skills I need to conduct a QR study entirely on my own”.

Meanwhile, all the M.Ed. students seem to agree that both the Research Methodology and Qualitative Research classes have helped them in understanding the nature of QR. As noted by P4 student:

“During my lectures, we had to take some important courses like Research Method and Qualitative Research. These courses were the stepping stone for me to understand qualitative study much better. I thanked Allah for signing up for a mix-mode because if I were to do a fully research based M.Ed, I would be lost even more. Discussion with friends, ideas from lecturers, googling from the Internet and browsing books from the library makes my understanding of qualitative even clearer”.

The Ph.D. students, on the other hand, did not have the opportunity to attend the classes. So they had to read on their own independently.

## ■6.0 HOW HAVE THE SUPERVISORS HELPED THE RESPONDENTS IN THEIR PREPARATION TO CONDUCT QR. BESIDES HIM/HER, WHO ELSE HAVE HELPED—PEERS, COLLEAGUES, ETC.

P1 and P4 students shared their stories with the respective supervisors.

“My supervisors helped in reviewing the issue I would investigate in terms of whether there was a gap/problem or not. They also guided me in terms of what I should know regarding literature review and method of research. In particular, the supervisors reviewed the instrument I would use regarding whether the instruments covered the questions I would discover”. (P1)

“The lecturers never failed to guide us to complete our assignments satisfactorily. I enjoyed meeting them personally during consultation periods with my friends because we get additional information on how to conduct research studies. I can still remember some lecturers who shared their experiences doing M.Ed overseas and that motivated my friends and I to complete our M.Ed even more. My supervisor helped me tremendously by giving me copies of her own students’ theses for my reference and writing style. Her commitment to check my work online (because I was in rural area and it was difficult to post my work and meet her personally) made me do my work even better and always look at my assignments in a critical angle. Some of her comments remain etched in my memoir of doing the M.Ed. Her comments like “*The beauty of doing a qualitative study lies in its rich information data. So if you start writing in point forms, it will leave nothing to the readers. You should explain in detail why you think those suggestions and recommendations are important. Clarify your thoughts and offer rationale/justifications*” and “*6 pages for your final chapter will spoil the whole study!*” made me realize that she accepts no nonsense!” (P4).

P6 and P7 students were in agreement that their supervisors had done everything they were able to in order to assist the students. P6 related that her supervisor would “spend as much time as is necessary to explain on the mechanics of QR, how to collect all the necessary data, and also how to best interpret and analyze all the data collected”. P7 further added that “my supervisor would spend as much time as I needed to understand the steps and mechanics of QR”. Apart from the supervisors, they felt very lucky since their peers also contributed a lot in helping the thesis writing according to other participants in this study.

## ■7.0 WHAT ARE RESPONDENTS HAVE GAINED FROM CONDUCTING A QR STUDY

### (Reflection of his/her own experiences)

Much has been learned from the QR conducted by each student. In collecting data for example, P1 noted that she had to make certain impromptu decisions:

“In data collection, sometimes I had to change the scenario prepared. For example, I planned to do a written interview by giving a list of questions to the participants. In fact, the participants except for the *ustadz*s, preferred to answer the questions orally and during face-to-face interviews. Probably, writing the answers took a quite long time for the participants”.

In addition to this point, she also related her experience in making important decisions based on an emergent case:

“Another unpredictable situation was that after giving a written interview, I planned to observe what the *ustadz*s did in class to see whether what they said in written interview was similar with what they did in class. After observing the class, I planned to interview the *ustadz*s again to elaborate some unclear issues/phenomena I found in observation. In reality, sometimes I interviewed the *ustadz*(s) first to elaborate what they stated in written interview, then did observation, then interviewed them again. Or I did observation first, then read their answers in written interview, then interviewed them. I did this because the *ustadz*s came and went in their own time that I could not determine. They also taught in their own schedule determined by the pp. So, I had to adjust my scenario. As the consequence, I had to memorize who gave an answer of written interview, what they said, who I observed in class, what they did in class, what issue(s) I should elaborate with who, etc. In short, I had to be smart in adjusting myself to the situation”.

This experience is also shared by P5 student:

“I gained a lot of unexpected experience and my QR went more throughout and deeper when there are more information I got from my participants about the research I was carrying out. For instance, the element of parental involvement was never came across in my mind but through the interview and interaction with the participants, this unexpected element was brought out and that caused me to go back to my literature review and do review on the parental involvement for my research”.

Another story is shared by P4 student. He noted that he understood the meaning of hardwork after going through the process of conducting QR.

“In doing my qualitative study, I learnt the meaning of hard work. Without hard work, the thesis would not have been materialized. A lot of reading is needed to understand on what we are doing. A lot of questioning is needed to clarify on where we stand. A lot of arguments is needed to challenge our work. A lot of patience is needed to keep us going”.

In addition, P4 student also mentioned another added value in his own perspective:

“Doing a qualitative research opened my eyes to do more qualitative research. I know it is challenging and it requires more of my time and energy (and even money) but I love doing it. I realize that doing a qualitative research makes me closer to my participants and that is an added value where they share more with me. It is me who has to decide on what I want to report and what to keep as my part of learning in conducting a qualitative study”.

Meanwhile, student P6 also indicated that “she had fallen in love with qualitative despite being so scared and feeling very apprehensive about it in the initial stage”. She added that “conducting it was a mind-opening experience because you discover new things as you go along, and you discover new things all the while”. P7 student also expressed his feelings along the same line as P6. In fact, he added that “all the experience in conducting a qualitative research will not only provide the data required, but increases your understanding and level of confidence in conducting more qualitative studies in future”.

### ■8.0 ISSUES, PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED WHILE CONDUCTING A QR INQUIRY. (REFLECT ON YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES).

Several issues and challenges are faced by the participants of the study. P5 student raises the issue of how to know when to stop during the data collection and data analysis:

“I found out doing QR is quite similar to doing action research where it is in spiral way of keep reflecting and going back to the literature review for deeper encounter about the research topic. So I sometimes get worry of when I can stop my research, it is like never ending story for the research, the more we study, the deeper we can go into the research, which makes me feel interesting and thrill but also worry when I could finish my research”.

Making a “back-up” for one’s data is of utmost importance to P4 student. He related his story of how his laptop got stolen and his predicament when it happened. It’s a rather long story but worth it to be shared to other students as an important lesson:

“One incident that I will never let go off my memory is the moment when my laptop bag was stolen at a public toilet in Kota Kinabalu. I lost everything including my new laptop, hard disks drives, bank passbooks and my passport. I could retrieve my passport and passbooks but there was nothing I could do to get my laptop and hard disks back. I cried for days because all my important data and document were in the disks. I lost everything totally. I could not do anything without that. To my surprise (and in Allah’s grace), my supervisor told me that I did email her all my individual chapters. She checked her email and by luck, everything was there. She emailed me back and I got to continue from where I have stopped (oh yes, she gave me a gift too – a new 320GB hard disk drive and reminded me not to give it to any strangers!). Besides that, I did print bits and pieces of data and documents (hard copy) and it was scattered on my teacher’s table back in school. I rushed back into the staffroom to collect everything and thanked Allah for showing me some mercy. I learnt that never leave anything un-backed up! Starting from that moment, I would back up all my documents and data into my thumb-drives and will email it to my own email address. I think emailing it to our own email address is one of the easiest, safest and economical ways to back up our data and documents”.

To P2 and P3 participants, learning how to search and read the relevant literature review online is the main challenge to them. They are both not quite proficient in the English language and since the bulk of the literature review is in English, they find it very cumbersome to read, understand and write in the language. In addition, they noted that writing narratives can be a daunting task for novice researchers as well.

P6 and P7 underwent somewhat similar experiences to each other, although their challenges were different from the rest of the respondents of this study. P6 student expressed her lamentation over the fact that she “wasted a lot of time waiting for my students turn up for the scheduled interview sessions”. This was because “there would always be one or two students who could not turn up during the pre-arranged times, so much so I had to slot in other sessions much to my inconvenience”. P7 student was in total agreement with the issue raised by P6, and added that his case “was worse because even some teachers who were my respondents did not turn up for the interviews scheduled earlier”. This posed a serious problem to him since as the school counselor, he was very busy and was always on the move and away from school. Thus, “fixing new interview sessions with students and teachers was a very challenging and tedious task, especially when time was very limited”.

### ■9.0 CONCLUSION

The three main phases of conducting QR, namely the prior preparation phase, the on-going phase, and the personal reflection phase in conducting a qualitative inquiry are dealt with in this paper. The prior preparation phase covers the first three interview questions:

- How did you perceive qualitative research (QR) before embarking on it?
- What do you think is the purpose of QR?
- What skills do you think are needed to conduct QR?

Participants generally have positive perceptions towards QR before embarking on it. The purpose as they viewed QR is to conduct an in-depth study. Research and Communication skills are the two most important skills needed to conduct QR.

The second phase, i.e. the on-going phase, covers the questions:

- What courses have contributed to your understanding of QR?

- How have your supervisor helped you in your preparation to conduct QR? Besides him/her, who else have helped you – peers, colleagues etc.?
- What do you gain from conducting a QR study? Reflect on your own experiences.

Both the Research Methodology and Qualitative Research courses have helped the students in understanding the nature of QR. Apart from the supervisors, peers and colleagues have helped the students in their QR preparation. The element of emergent design and being hardworking count much in the learning process of QR.

Finally, the personal reflection phase in conducting a qualitative inquiry looks at the issues, problems and challenges that students encounter when conducting a QR inquiry. Participants are to reflect on their own experiences. Stories from their experiences are shared as a learning process in the QR journey.

## ■10.0 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE QUALITATIVE RESEARCHERS

This part of the paper sets to provide some suggestions to be observed by future qualitative researchers for their convenience. They are:

- Future qualitative researchers should make sure that they are fully equipped to conduct a qualitative study. This would assist in making sure the research goes on smoothly and not too time-consuming. Among some of the steps they could take up is to enrol into suitable qualitative research courses so that they get are familiar with the appropriate stages to be taken up. Another suggested step is for the novice qualitative researchers to read up as much as possible, particularly articles about studies conducted using qualitative approach of data collection and analyses.
- The second suggestion is for future qualitative researchers to discuss with as many friends/peers as possible, especially those who are well-versed with QR. This would enable them to iron out issues or predict possible problems they may encounter.
- Another suggestion for future or novice researchers is of course to seek the advice and assistance from their respective lecturers and supervisors. These lecturers and supervisors are the best people to be consulted for advice and tips in conducting QR. However, it should be noted that the novice researchers should not rely entirely on them for advice and guidance.
- Last but not least, the novice QR researchers should make sure they acquire a high level of patience and perseverance in pursuing the QR. This would hopefully provide them with the drive and motivation to pursue their research even when they face certain difficulties or issues which may be discouraging to them.

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