

**SURVIVING MY PHD JOURNEY:  
CONDUCTING A QUALITATIVE  
RESEARCH**

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**Abstract:**

Our selections of subjects and research have significantly impacted our Ph.D. journey. As a result, each Ph.D. student has a distinct postgraduate experience. Although our supervisors can guide us through the process, it is ultimately our responsibility to complete the work and interpret the data. Nonetheless, there are a few issues that almost every student will endure. Since the progress in a Ph.D. is largely dependent on you, you must develop the ability to set priorities and defend your decisions. For example, the viva is both a common and unique experience. Commonly, all Ph.D. students should go through it, and, personally, every researcher should justify their decisions based on their research objectives and data. As a result, this paper will walk you through the process of conducting a qualitative research study. Furthermore, it aims to provide an overview of the use qualitative research methods specifically semi-structured interview in social science.

**Key Words:** Qualitative research, qualitative methods, semi-structured interview,

PhD process, viva process.

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## **I. Aim of this Paper**

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of qualitative research and research methods, including semi-structured interviews on how they can be used, analysed, and reported. This article is intended for new qualitative researchers in the social sciences who want to broaden their knowledge about qualitative research. The main point of this paper is that I aim to show that, when performed appropriately, qualitative research can answer specific research questions that quantitative designs cannot adequately answer.

### **1. Introduction**

Qualitative research has a long history in the study of human social behaviour and cultures. According to Moser and Korstjens (2017), qualitative research analyses and provides more in-depth understandings of real-world issues. Its overarching goal is to develop concepts that help in the comprehension of social phenomena in natural settings, allowing researchers to gain a better understanding of individuals' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours (Bryman, 2016).

In the social sciences, qualitative research includes a useful set of methodological methods for collecting, analysing, and interpreting data. Rather than collecting numerical data and introducing treatments, as in quantitative research, qualitative research assists in the generation of hypotheses as well as the further investigation and comprehension of

quantitative data. Therefore, instead of how many or how much, it answers the how's and whys. More specifically, qualitative research asks open-ended questions with non-numerical answers, such as 'how' and 'why'. Qualitative research can explain human behaviour processes and patterns. Experiences, attitudes, and behaviours can be difficult to quantify. Therefore, participants can explain how, why, and what they were experiencing at a certain time using a qualitative methodology. Considering this, qualitative methods are intended to reveal what is happening through the description and interpretation of phenomena. They make no attempt to determine how frequently an event occurs.

According to Cleland (2017), qualitative researchers use a variety of methods, including interviews, focus groups, and observation. For example, unstructured interviews might include open-ended questions on a subject, and the interviewer can adjust based on the respondents' answers. Every participant in a structured interview receives the same set of questions. It is suited for sensitive subjects or subjects that demand a thorough investigation. Focus groups are frequently conducted with eight to ten target members when group dynamics and consensus viewpoints on a subject are required.

The research presented in this paper is part of my PhD thesis. The study was framed within an interpretive approach using an exploratory design that involved classroom observations, teachers' interviews, and students' focus groups to answer the research questions regarding listening and speaking skills and the teachers' and students' perspectives on the listening and speaking teaching process in ELT Algerian secondary school. By observing the teaching-learning context, I had the chance to experience and examine the status of speaking and listening skills in Algerian secondary schools. Additionally, the teachers' interviews and focus groups allowed to understand the teachers' and students' thoughts, interpretations, and

perspectives of listening and speaking skills. However, the focus of this article will be solely on the second data collection research method used in my thesis, which is the semi-structured interview. The purpose is to describe how a researcher may conduct interviews following qualitative research.

## **2. Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interview**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as a secondary data collecting method to assist a rich data gathering. This method is consistent with an interpretive stance as it permits the investigation of different voices and perspectives. According to Alsaawi (2014), semi-structured interviews are a commonly used research method among social research science. This method allows interviewers to be more spontaneous and have less control over the subjects raised by respondents. Therefore, respondents are free to express themselves and are encouraged to engage in conversation about the topic.

I chose this type of interview as it would allow me to cover various topics relating to my research. Unstructured interviews have the possibility of not generating topics more directly relevant to the research questions under discussion (Rabionet, 2011). Semi-structured interviews allow looking deep into the participants' perceptions to generate rich information and ideas in each conversation. The use of open face-to-face conversation with the participants was a meaningful method because it allowed more flexibility for the interviewer. The interview schedule was designed to explore the following theoretical constructs:

- Teachers' subject and pedagogical knowledge of teaching listening and speaking skills.
- Perceptions of teaching listening and speaking skills.

- Perceptions of integrating listening, speaking, reading, and writing.  
These theoretical constructs will inform the answer to the following

## 2.1 Participants

Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) state that sampling in qualitative research is usually based on a non-probability sampling technique. They mentioned that this technique is appropriate because qualitative research aims at describing a process in each phenomenon rather than generalizing research findings.

The circumstances of the research defined the sampling procedures used for this study's subjects. Due to many limitations- time, money, schools' access, and population size, it was not easy to use a random sampling technique (the probability sampling). Therefore, non-probability sampling was the appropriate sampling technique in this research. This research adopted a purposive sampling strategy as the primary strategy to select the study participants.

The choice of teachers was vital in this study. It is well known within the Algerian community that teachers within these classes are seen as better qualified teachers than those who teach other streams. They tend to have more teaching knowledge and professional techniques as far as teaching listening and speaking skills. Also, having five years of teaching experience suggests that these teachers are more skilled in EFL teaching, particularly in teaching oral skills. The more the experience, the better teachers are likely to apply the teaching strategies and methods of listening and speaking skills.

Accordingly, the sample included four female Algerian teachers from four different educational secondary schools in Algeria's Bechar area.

## 2.2 Interview Wording

It is argued that researchers may have first witnessed or experienced the phenomenon before developing the interview questions that they intend to ask (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). As a former foreign language student and English language teacher in Algerian secondary schools, this reference is particularly relevant to my situation. Knowledge of some facets of the phenomena aided me in developing some comprehensive interview subjects. Additionally, literature was an integral element in the formation of the questions. Literature is critical for researchers who “*use it in an informed, skeptical, or comparative manner*” (Morse, 2003, p.891).

The interview schedule was prepared before the actual discussions with the teachers. The preparation of the interview design drew on findings from the literature review to cover three main topics to ask. Thus, the interview schedule frame comprised 1) the opening of the interview, 2) the core in-depth questions and, 3) the closure of the interview.

The question aimed to investigate how teachers perceive the teaching of listening and speaking concerning their pedagogical knowledge. Newcome et al. (2015, p. 497) reminded that that “*closed-ended questions can be ideal gateways to open-ended probing*”. The content for questioning was based on open-ended questions, Probes, and Prompts to elicit relevant ideas related to teachers' insights on teaching listening and speaking skills.

The interview questions were unstructured, and as highlighted by Bryman (2016), structured format questions may hinder the depth and richness of the responses.

Additionally, pre-planned questions help the interviewers determine the interviewees' comprehension of the questions and allow them to elaborate and explain issues through open-ended questions. Using semi-structured interviews allowed me to prepare questions that were guided by the themes of my original research questions in a systematic manner. However, they were 'flexible' in that any issues or problems that teachers felt were important were also encouraged, and room for unexpected data was also accounted. This was helpful since some teachers were unfamiliar with some terms, and I had to explain this by describing or giving examples or using other usual terms. A copy of the interview guide was discussed and shared with my supervisor before initiating the interviews.

All the teachers in the interview were non-native speakers for whom Arabic was their native language. Newcomer et al. (2015, p. 497) state that *"even if the respondents do speak English, do not assume it's exactly the same language spoken by university-trained researchers"* Due to this, it was, therefore, necessary to sometimes repeat and explain questions when they were not able to comprehend them. Additionally, rigorous translations and multilingual interviewers are necessary (Newcomer et al., 2015). Teachers sometimes used Arabic to communicate themselves more clearly at times, enabling the conversation to be multilingual.

### **2.3 Conducting Teachers' Semi-Structured Interviews**

After the observation sessions, teachers were asked whether they would be willing to interview to communicate their perspectives and teaching experiences with listening and speaking skills. The interview

sessions were then scheduled with the four participants.

Choosing an appropriate place for an interview is difficult (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Therefore, teachers had the right to choose the time and place for the interviews. The researcher conducted all the interviews; however, the place of the interview varied depending on the teachers' preferences. Participants' semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held at various times and locations based on the teachers' preferences.

The interview process with the teachers was framed in three stages:

1. Greeting the teachers and introducing the research topic and objective was based on having the teachers' participation consent; also making sure they were aware of recording the conversation.
2. Interviewing the teachers: this involved the core in-depth questioning; also checking the voice recorder regularly without distracting the teachers.
3. Closing the interview: this consisted of gathering different ideas missed asking during the conversation; also asking the teachers if they had any questions and thanking them for their participation.

During this pre-interview session, a brief explanation of the research topic and its purpose was provided verbally. Newcomer et al. (2015) advised that confidentiality must be appropriately addressed at the interview's outset. Teachers were also given a consent form to sign, which covered the voluntary participation and withdrawal choice at any stage, and the assurance of confidentiality and privacy. I carefully informed them that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any point. Approval to record the interview was also obtained. I showed them the recorder which would be used and informed them that I would be making observational notes during the interview sessions.



Recording the interview data was through audio-recording. Audio-recording the interviews provided more details and helped in not losing any of the teachers' answers. It also allowed them to keep focus with the interviewees and have eye contact, which made them more comfortable speaking freely. The interview length was approximately 20-45 minutes long depending on the amount of probing and on the teachers' status at the time of the interview.

#### **2.4 Analysis of Interview Data**

The text of the transcribed interview was taken as the unit of analysis and was then analysed in six stages according to the model proposed by Braun and Clarke of thematic inductive approach analysis: (1) Getting familiar with the data, (2) Creating initial ideas and codes, (3) Identifying themes, (4) Reviewing the created themes, (5) Naming and defining the themes, (6) Writing report.

This approach was chosen because it complemented the research questions by carefully investigating the interviews' records. This helped check whether the gathered data are consistent with the formulated research questions by allowing the emergence of different themes directly for the exited data using an inductive analysis approach.

The rigor and trustworthiness of the data was ensured by being explicit about the theoretical frameworks that underpin it—providing a thick and detailed description of "*culture and context, selection and characteristics of participants, data collection and process of analysis*" (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p.110).

#### **2.5 The Outcome of the Coding**

The coding of the teachers' interviews followed an inductive process

of open coding, followed by axial coding. The development of the top-level themes, main themes, and sub-themes was achieved by repeatedly and consistently studying the interviews' transcripts using NVivo software. Three other top-level themes were created under which all the emerged themes and sub-themes were clustered. The final review of the coding is presented in this table.

<b>General themes</b>	<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
<b>Teaching English as a foreign language</b>	This theme simply involves the teachers' beliefs and thoughts on teaching English as a foreign language to foreign language learners.	Teaching as a profession Teaching in the past Teaching today Teachers' knowledge
<b>Skills of language learning</b>	This theme focuses on the teaching of language skills particularly listening and speaking skills within the Algerian context.	Listening and speaking teaching practices Teaching listening and speaking problems Skills integration
<b>Teaching-learning circumstances</b>	This theme refers to the environmental factors that effects the teaching of listening and speaking skills within the third-year English classes.	Social and cultural environment The classroom spaces. Third-year English programme

**Table 1.** *The Teachers' Interviews Analytical Result.*

### 3. Conclusion

Throughout the interview analysis, it was simple to obtain knowledge of the teachers' perspectives on teaching listening and speaking skills. The teachers believed that reading and writing were more important than listening and speaking.

The teachers acknowledged that the teaching curriculum had a consequence on their teaching methodology. The standards in the adopted

curriculum altered their perspective on the significance of listening and speaking skills. The teachers' teaching philosophy centred on improving reading and writing rather than listening and speaking. To achieve improved quality in the final exam, they planned, organized, and aimed their classes more toward reading and writing. Furthermore, because the oral assessment was not in the teaching-learning process, teachers formed judgments of the importance of listening and speaking skills over time.

Concerns were also raised concerning students' low motivation and a clear mismatch between what motivates students to learn and what the curriculum/program imposes on both teachers and students. The teaching programme's content was challenging for teachers who did not have the professional freedom to adjust it. The teaching program was supposed to help students improve their reading and writing skills, but it had a poor selection of teaching topics and an inefficient time division. The students were uninterested in the content, and the time allotted to each skill was insufficient. Curriculum dominance influenced both teachers' and students' willingness to practise their listening and speaking skills.

Working with foreign language students necessitates a higher degree of pedagogical knowledge, which is the primary resource for student learning progress. However, the Algerian teachers had limited pedagogical knowledge for teaching and assessing listening and speaking skills based on their teaching circumstances. The curriculum required teachers to overlook any pedagogical practices linked to oral competencies. They become unconcerned in teaching and assessing oral skills in the classroom. Due to their limited pedagogical competence, the teachers were unable to create an environment in which all students could acquire a reasonable academic level in listening and speaking skills.

The teachers also emphasized their awareness of the impact of the teaching environment, but they did not address how they would manage it. Teachers' perceptions of the instructional environment were consistent. Significantly, their experiences in unfavourable environments reflected they are seeking to avoid teaching listening and speaking skills. They were more aware that the environment has an impact on student achievement. It is worth noting that the school administration and the Algerian Ministry of Education place a premium on students' high written exam scores while turning a blind eye to assisting teachers in managing unmotivated teaching environments.

Teachers also developed an aversion to teaching as a profession and to their students. This negativity was caused by a variety of factors that the teachers encountered daily in the classroom. It was a challenging assignment for them to teach. This occupation necessitates both physical and psychological exertion, particularly when teaching oral skills to foreign language learners. The teachers' impression of teaching English as a foreign language was influenced by the fact that the students themselves had a lower learning level.

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