

## Strategies and Challenges in Research Topic Selection in Algerian EFL Pre-Service Teacher Training Schools

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### Abstract

### ملخص

Among the challenges English as a Foreign Language (EFL) graduating pre-service teachers (PSTs) face in the realm of conducting research is the selection of a research topic. Those graduating PSTs seemingly struggle to select a topic that would be compatible with their own interests and research requirements. The choice of a research topic is mostly driven by many criteria, including trends, ease, time considerations, mastery of research tools, in addition to context relevance. This research is an attempt to explore the nature of research topics in EFL teacher training contexts. It aims at identifying the obstacles pre-service trainees face while selecting a research topic, and questioning the reasons and the motivations behind selecting their research topics. Using a descriptive survey, a random sampling questionnaire is administered to 100 graduating students from ENS contexts in Oran, Algiers, Constantine, and Sétif. Tips are provided to help future PST researchers overcome the identified challenges.

**Keywords :** EFL, Research topic, selection, teacher training

من بين التحديات التي تواجه أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) المقبلين على التخرج في المدارس العليا للأساتذة اختيار موضوع البحث. يبدو أن هؤلاء المتربصون يواجهون صعوبات في اختيار موضوع يتوافق مع اهتماماتهم الخاصة ومتطلبات البحث. يعتمد اختيار موضوع البحث في الغالب على العديد من المعايير، بما في ذلك التوجهات العلمية، سهولة الموضوع، اعتبارات الوقت، وإتقان أدوات البحث، بالإضافة إلى ملاءمة السياق. هذا البحث عبارة عن محاولة لمعرفة طبيعة مواضيع البحث للمتربصين المقبلين على التخرج من المدارس العليا للأساتذة في تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تحديد العوائق التي يواجهونها عند اختيار موضوع البحث، وتحديد أسباب ودوافع اختيار مواضيعهم البحثية. باستخدام المنهج الوصفي، تم إجراء استبيان أخذ عينات عشوائي على 100 طالب مقبل على التخرج من المدارس العليا في كل من وهران، الجزائر العاصمة، قسنطينة وسطيف. اقترحت بعض النصائح و التوصيات التي من شأنها مساعدة المتربصين الباحثين في المستقبل على التغلب على التحديات المحددة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، موضوع البحث، الاختيار، تدريب المتربصين

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The first and perhaps the most significant stage in the research writing process is selecting a topic. The rest of the actions are generally determined by this phase, including the thesis statement, sources, and how to compose the research. For students who are starting research, it is critical to select a topic that is both pertinent and intriguing. In pre-service teacher education contexts, the choice of a research topic is generally motivated by the nature of the profession, where most interest is to identify and find solutions to classroom problems. In the Algerian context, most, if not all English as a Foreign Language (EFL) graduating pre-service teachers (PSTs), opt for TEFL/ pedagogical topics finding themselves in a controversial situation; between their interests and their domain. The stated problem has led to the articulation of the following objectives:

1. to explore the nature of research topics in EFL teacher training contexts,
2. to identify the obstacles pre-service trainees face while selecting a research topic, and
3. to question the reasons and the motivations behind selecting their research topics.

In order to achieve these objectives, the research is grounded around one research question: What challenges do EFL graduating pre-service teachers (PSTs) encounter while selecting a topic?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Topic Selection**

One of the most difficult aspects of research in the early stages is being able to identify a topic; many studies fail because the researcher is unable to do so. If the researcher cannot accomplish this, the topic is either

too wide, poorly thought out, or esoteric (Dawson, 2007). Students frequently prefer to investigate large, all-inclusive themes. Such large topics necessitate more time and effort than the majority of undergraduate students can devote. Yet, excessively limited topics should be avoided because they are difficult to generalize (Evans, 2007). When it comes to choosing a topic, students usually have two options: apply for a topic that has been promoted by supervisors or choose one on their own. Both methods have their benefits and drawbacks. Choosing a previously given topic has the advantage of being more likely to be approved by the scientific bodies of the institution (Bopp et al. 2000). However, their own thoughts may not always be taken into account in this situation. According to Adhikari (2020), the researcher's interest and passion are the most important factors in deciding on a topic. To satisfy the supervisor and the institution, research interests are usually limited to core or related fields. Salkind (2018) identified two reasons that make deciding which area to work on critical. First, research takes a lot of time and effort. Second, deciding on a topic is only the beginning of the research process. If this goes well, the other phases, which are neither more nor less crucial, will almost certainly go smoothly as well.

## **2.2. The Nature of Research in EFL Pre-Service Teacher Training**

Teacher education programs worldwide are rethinking their curricula to prepare pre-service teachers for new roles to be performed in their workplace. The new trends in education require that teachers should no more keep to their traditional central status in the classroom. They rather need to develop additional major skills including inquiry, problem-solving, and reflective practice in order to be able to face the everyday classroom challenges and effecting changes.

One way for teachers to adapt to the dynamic contextual, cultural, and educational changes is to adopt research as a way to find practical solutions to issues and problems in their professional lives (Corey 1953; Stringer 2007). The kind of research undertaken by teachers is known as teacher research and is done individually or in collaboration by teachers in order to understand teaching and learning in context (Meier and Henderson 2007; Zeichner 1999). The PST researchers begin their inquiry by asking questions related to the learners, the classroom, and the other stakeholders in the teaching/ learning process. In doing so, the PST researchers may learn about themselves and their own teaching practice. Their reflections and questions enable them to relate particular issues to teaching/ learning theories through analysis of available data. Their research is an attempt to link theory with practice (Bulloughs & Gitlin 2001) to improve classroom practice.

Researchers in the field of teacher education programs refer most commonly to teacher research as ‘action research’ (Cochran- Smith & Lytle 1993) and is broadly defined as “a reflective process of progressive problem solving”. However, according to Meier and Hunderson (2007), not all teacher research is action research, despite frequently sharing the goal of some type of action to improve practice.

Many researchers have investigated the justifications for the choice of a research topic by pre/in-service teachers. According to De Tezano (1998, cited in Quintero et al, 2002), the choice of a topic begins with the teachers’ perceptions. For Nunan 1992; Seliger & Shohamy 1989), the research topic may find ground in personal interest, daily experience with teaching and learning, and/or knowledge from readings in the field. In addition, the topic may be related to classroom instruction and can result

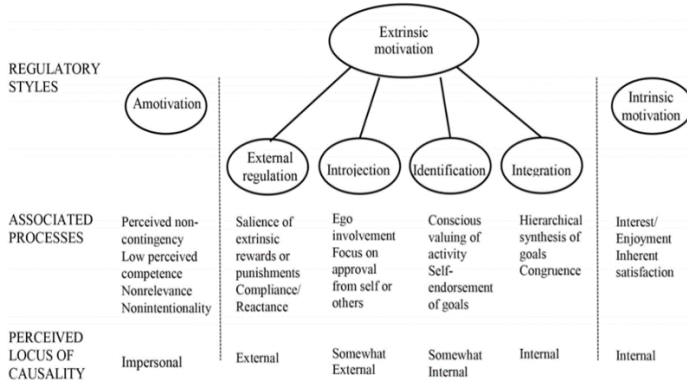
from an unclear situation for teachers (Dadds,1985, as cited in Altrichter, Posch,and Somekh, 1993), or a problem in teaching and learning (Johnson, 2005). Paradoxically, Fletcher (2005) recommends that teacher researchers should start from more general issues at school in order to improve it. In the same line of thought, Sagor (1992) and Johnson (2005) argue that one of the prerequisites for teacher researchers is their strong desire to work on their teaching and learning context. Because research is a way for teachers to understand classroom phenomena and solve their related problems, it is necessary to train pre-service teachers on how to undertake research. Most importantly, the way for pre-service teachers to observe and witness classroom issues is through traineeship because “field training plays a key role in narrowing the gap between theory and practice in the preparation of teachers” (Shudaifat, 2020: 55).

### **2.3. Topic Choice Motivation, Tips and Challenges**

Choosing a particular topic for research does not rely only on one component. The student who prepares a dissertation is exposed to a variety of aspects which intersect. The most salient ones are motivation, strategies and challenges. Unlike research which is usually associated with motivation, the latter is hardly advocated in relation to topic choice (Mosyjowski, 2017). As shown in Figure1, the motivation behind selecting a particular research topic is either intrinsic or extrinsic (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Mosyjowski, 2017). Students who are intrinsically motivated choose their topic on the basis of their personal interest in the activity being enjoyable and fun. Extrinsic motivation, however, “... reflects an individual’s decision to engage in a task because it leads to an outcome separable from the task itself, ...” (Mosyjowski, 2017, p. 1285).

**Figure1: Types of Motivation**

(taken from Ryan and Deci, 2000; Mosykowski, 2017)



According to the above authors, dissertation-related researches which are extrinsically motivated consider one of the five following subtypes. **Amotivation** is a total lack of intent to move. Here, there is no tendency to select any research topic. **External regulation** is a state whereby the student is controlled because s/he feels expected to respond to an external requirement or demand. S/he chooses a particular topic, for example, because other individuals (e.g. supervisor, research partner(s), school administration) or other factors (e.g. future guaranteed job) want him/ her to do it. **Introjected motivation** is the cause behind taking action to keep away from others’ criticism and elevate the feeling of self-esteem and/ or self-worth. Selecting a topic, in that case, could be the choice of the supervisor, partner, classmates, or administrative staff to get positive feedback or simply a good impression. **Identified motivation** rises when the goal is personal and the significance/value of the act is also personal. The student might link his topic selection to the nature of his/ her future job; to display one's performance abilities (I’Anson and Smith, 2004); to

personal readings in the belief that the present topic research can improve his/ her life. The last external motivation sub-type is **integration** whereby the student is able to perceive the importance of the topic itself and connect it to his/ her own needs. This still does not mean that the topic rouses the student's personal interest as in the case of intrinsic motivation. For instance, the topic seems important because it is original or follows the research methodology course delivered by the school.

On the other hand, Kothari (2004) suggests a number of strategies that might help the student to select his/ her research topic and face its challenges. The most important is to avoid topics repeatedly tackled in the literature and those being too vague or narrow. Handling new aspects of such topics is not easy to figure out. Another important fact is to select a subject feasible for research and its related tools within the student's capacities and qualifications. Being overambitious about controversial challenging topics could only lead the candidate to revise his/ her topic choice maybe at the mid-course step. Also, the importance and availability of the required literature as well as the applicability of its techniques in the current context are highly recommended. Other parameters like time, budget, background favorability, and participant cooperation need to be rethought.

The role of the supervisor in the research topic selection is paramount. Even though s/he is not responsible for the dissertation quality, his mission is to advise and orient his/ her candidates starting from choosing a topic. His/ Her role is also psychological as s/he is expected to provide the candidates with a comfortable atmosphere while interacting with them.

Therefore, the choice of the supervisor according to Single (2010) relates to the choice of the topic and associated questions, like

- Is the supervisor interested in the topic?
- Does he hold expertise in it?
- Does the supervisor have access to funding to support the candidate?

The author offers a matrix (Figure2) that might create a balance between the supervisee's duties and the supervisor's responsibilities towards topic choice. The matrix is composed of four options, classified from the most to non-advisable (see fig 2).

He refers to Quadrant I Option as the Mentoring Model. The supervisor plays the role of the mentor due to his/ her high involvement, investment and availability when choosing a topic. The candidate shows the same degree of motivation and engagement in his/ her selected subject. The candidate shows the same degree of motivation and engagement in his/ her selected subject.

**Figure2:** Choosing a Topic and Supervisor Matrix (taken from Single,2010)

	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>High</i> Level of Student Involvement	Quadrant I Mentoring Model	Quadrant II Coaching Model
<i>Low</i>	Quadrant III Apprenticeship Model	Quadrant IV Unadvisable Option



This option is the most advisable. In Quadrant II or the Coaching Model, interest in the chosen topic tips the balance to the involvement of the candidate more than that of the supervisor. As a coacher, choosing a topic for the supervisor means helping the candidate with the field methodology and administrative requirements rather than updating knowledge and contributions related to the topic. The candidate chooses his/ her topic and supervisor in this circumstance if s/he has already an important mastery of his/ her research content and procedure. Quadrant III is the Apprenticeship Model, and is recommended for the candidate in case his/ her intention behind the subject selection is "... development or enhancement of research, analytical and writing skills, and socialization in the field..." (Single, 2010, p. 30). The last option is Quadrant IV. It is non-desirable as the topic choice falls on an uninteresting topic for him and his/ her supervisor. The consequence is little engagement on the part of both of them.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Research Context**

The study investigates the challenges faced by Algerian PSTs while starting research. The selected population is PSTs from four institutions, representative of the total number of the teacher training colleges in the country. Their geographical distribution (East, North, and west) is expected to provide a reliable account on how PSTs in Algeria select their research topics.

It might be noted that the context is different from the university on many grounds. If the dissertation at the university is written in partial fulfillment of a Master's degree, in teacher training institutions, it is an extended essay part of a sum of annual credits (the training report, the training copybook, assignments, presentations...). A whole semester is

devoted to research at the university, yet in PST training institutions, research is part of the annual duties. Besides, at the university, research methodology is taught during the whole cycle (from license 1 to Master 2), while it is taught in the fourth year under the name of “writing a scientific report in Education” of the teacher training curriculum. Another salient difference is that at the university, the nature of topics depends on the Master's domain. Whereas at PST training institutions, students are given more comprehensive topics such as literature, civilization, culture, linguistics, didactics.... (In some contexts blended domains: civilization and education, etc.). We believe this is the justification for our motivation to work on this topic.

One of the most crucial aspects of determining the desired circumstance is sampling. Sampling is asking a subset of the prospective population rather than the entire population, to obtain a sample that is representative of the entire population (Richards, 2001). According to Cohen et al. (2008), a probability sample will be advantageous if the researcher wishes to be able to make generalizations because it seeks the representativeness of the larger population. All participants in the research population have a specific chance of being chosen in probability samples. If the researcher wants to explain, predict, or generalize to the entire research population, this sort of sample should be used (Dawson, 2007).

### **3.2. Sample of the Study**

To conduct this research, a probability sample was chosen. The participants (100) are fifth-year pre-service teachers from four different ENS (Constantine, Oran, Sétif, and Algiers). The respondents willingly accepted to participate in the study, noting that the researchers could not

reach students from other teacher training institutions in Algeria for a more representative sample.

### 3.3. Research Tool

An online mixed questionnaire was randomly submitted to 100 pre-service teachers. The questionnaire is composed of 14 questions organized around 4 sections as described below:

**Section One:** General information, (Q01-Q03) meant to identify the participants' institutions, the domain chosen for research, and whether the research was conducted individually, in pairs, or in groups.

**Section Two:** selecting a topic, (Q04 - Q 09) sought to gather information about the time of topic selection (during the year PSTs had to conduct research or earlier), whether or not the PSTs had received instruction on topic selection, the importance of teaching topic selection in the methodology course, decision making on the topic (who has taken it?), criteria for topic selection, and motivation for topic selection.

**Section Three:** (Q10 -Q13) reported the challenges the PSTs faced when selecting their research topics, the number of topics they had to choose, and how they could make a decision about their final topic.

**Section Four: (Q14)** aimed to collect recommendations and suggestions from PSTs on the topic under research.

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. General Information

The respondents are 5th-year PSTs who belong to 4 Teacher training institutions, namely Constantine (26%), Algiers (46%), Oran (14%), and Setif (13%) who have graduated in the academic year 2021/2022. The research domains of their dissertations are mostly around TEFL (61. 80%) which is quite natural due to the specificity of their profile. Few PSTs opted

for linguistics as a domain for research (27%), which is probably justified by the fact that pure linguistics is a complex area of study for foreign language learners. In addition, applied linguistics is closely related to didactics and therefore, even if PSTS tackled this area, they placed it under the category of TEFL. The rest of the respondents mentioned that they selected either course design (03.90%), Literature (03.90%), or textbook evaluation (01.30%). This might be justified by the particular interest they have in the above-mentioned areas.

Most of the PSTs selected their topics in the 5th year (67%). Yet, (32%) selected their topics in the 4th year. This might be justified by the fact that this category undertook a project in the Research Methodology course. One PST, however, mentioned that the choice was made earlier, which might reveal that this respondent in particular has a special interest in the domain of research he/she chose.

#### **4.2. Selecting a Topic**

Among the respondents, 46% took lectures/tutorials on selecting a topic while 54% did not. Most of the students from Constantine responded positively while those from Oran did not. It is surprising to obtain such results, knowing that the teacher training institutions in Algeria share a common curriculum.

Most of the respondents agreed that topic selection needs to be part of the research methodology course, a fact which confirms that it is a challenge to select a topic. When asked about who decided on the topic selection, 41.90% of them said that the choice was made by themselves. However, interestingly, 31.1% (sum of supervisors and administration) were responsible for the choice of topics. This issue might negatively affect the motivation for research. On the other hand, 27% mentioned that the decision

for the selected topic was made in collaboration with their research partners, which seems quite logical for pair or group research to make joint decisions.

Concerning the most important criteria in selecting a research topic, the availability of sources was mentioned by 82.90% then, context relevance, and time considerations. Less important were: trends, mastery of research tools, ease and difficulty, and the supervisor. Accordingly, the PSTs were aware of priorities and showed that they were rather autonomous in doing research and did not rely entirely on their supervisors.

When selecting a topic, the respondents' interest in the domain predominated, and this was followed by the nature of the job and then the originality of the topic. This denotes the respondents' high rationality and awareness of the importance of these criteria in choosing a topic.

### **4.3. Challenges**

As for the challenges encountered when selecting a research topic, the top responses were respectively: narrowing the topic down (65.80%), lack of guidance (30.30%), and formulating an appealing title (28.90%). Narrowing the topic down and selecting a topic are two different sides of the same coin. It was also surprising that 30.30% said that there was a lack of guidance on the part of the supervisor. That might be due to the supervisor's flexibility to allow the supervisees to select their topics.

Besides, it was interesting to know if the students had difficulty choosing their topics. Therefore, PSTs were asked whether or not they had to discuss more than one topic with their supervisor, and if yes, how many topics they had to discuss. 51% of the PSTs did it more than once. They majorly took a month to decide on it.

### **4.4. PSTs Further Comments and/or Suggestions**

The statements below are selected opinions from the participants regarding the topic under study (4/37 of the respondents who provided answers to this section). The four comments were chosen because they discuss the difficulties PSTs face and potential roadblocks to their dissertation writing.

#1: *“In my opinion one year is not sufficient to decide on a topic, look for a supervisor and start doing the dissertation. Things should have started in the fourth year, it was preferable not to leave choosing the topic and supervisor till the last minute, and this is what we are struggling with these days”.*

#2: *“I advise students to think of a topic from their fourth year, and opt for the best supervisor based on competence and not emotions”.*

#3: *“When choosing the topic, I first took into consideration the difference in marks between us, the students. The students with the highest marks will get to choose any topic they please. The second thing I considered was whether I like the thing I'm researching or not”.*

#4: *“Concerning the topics, I believe that students should be given more freedom to choose the topic they want to work on. In ENS, topics are decided on by the administration, furthermore, they are too limited and related to the same category of study which is "TEFL" or "linguistics" (most of the students don't like to work on such topics as they are too complicated and boring)”.*

The analysis of PSTs responses raised three main obstacles for teacher-trainers and supervisors to consider. They are namely, interest, freedom of topic selection, and time constraints.

### **Interest**

According to the respondents, interest is a key criterion in selecting a research topic. This confirms what has been mentioned earlier in (2.3), where it was stated that interest is related to intrinsic motivation; and when doing research on an interesting topic, PSTs find the activity enjoyable and fun.

### **Freedom of Topic Selection**

The PSTs opted for autonomy with regard to their choice of topic and supervisor. They emphasized their need to be given the freedom of making their own selection. Here in fact, the supervisor's role is coaching the students' topic choice methodologically which goes along with Single's (2010) Quadrant II (see 2.3). However, the supervisor needs to raise more the supervisee's awareness about considering the topic originality and avoiding those over-researched topics.

### **Time Constraints**

Anyone who has ever worked on a project has had to deal with limitations when it comes to execution. The term "time constraint" describes a number of elements that place time restrictions on projects' undertakings. This includes managing workload, setting deadlines, and allocating resources. Timelines and deadlines are the most difficult things to handle because time is a scarce resource. Time was an issue for PSTs who believed that a year is insufficient to write a quality dissertation because they have to finish a dissertation in full in addition to other workloads.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The goal of this study was to uncover the hurdles and challenges that Algerian PSTs experience when choosing research topics. The findings revealed that topic selection should be prioritized in the research methodology syllabus, which itself should be taught from the first year.

PSTs should begin thinking about their topics earlier. The participants' comments (37) have led to conclude that it is imperative that the topic the student selects is one that he/she is interested in, and that raises his/ her curiosity. The PSTs believe that it is of paramount importance that the student chooses a topic earlier in the training cycle. They referred to the year before graduation (4<sup>th</sup> year in the teacher training curriculum). In addition, topic selection should be included as a crucial part of the research methodology syllabus since the whole research is determined by the first step.

On the light of the PSTs comments, it is recommended that teacher training curricula are revised to allot more importance to research methodology and include topic selection within this course. In addition, PSTs should be allowed opportunity to observe classrooms and identify challenges in school environment through action research. Furthermore, it would be adequate to converge the interests of both the supervisor and supervisees to encourage future collaboration. It is advised to look for contemporary educational issues tackled at the international level and teach the Research Methodology Module in the form of projects in preparation for the final year's dissertation writing. Last, but not least, enhancing collaboration between the different national teacher training institutions and encouraging pre-service teachers to get in contact and share their preoccupations and interests with their colleagues from other teacher training institutions would raise issues of common interests and allow discussion of common issues.

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