

# Piloting a Multimodal Qualitative Approach to Explore EAP Writing Teacher Agency: Methodological Reflections from a Doctoral Study in Bangladesh

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## Abstract of the Article

This paper offers methodological reflections on a pilot study conducted as part of a doctoral project that explores how English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers in Bangladeshi universities construct their teacher agency in teaching academic writing. The pilot aimed to assess the feasibility and relevance of a multimodal qualitative research design incorporating classroom observations, interviews, student focus groups, and a reflective diary. Conducted over a three-week period with one teacher and three student participants, the pilot generated insights that led to refined data collection strategies, more clearly defined ethical procedures, and enhanced researcher reflexivity. Through critical reflection on these adaptations, this paper seeks to contribute to ongoing methodological discussions around piloting context-sensitive, ethically informed, and practically viable approaches in doctoral research. It is expected that the insights shared will be of value to postgraduate researchers planning qualitative fieldwork in comparable higher education contexts.

## Keywords

Pilot study,  
Multi-modal qualitative research,  
EAP instruction,  
Doctoral reflection,  
Methodological learning,  
Higher education,  
Bangladesh

## Introduction

Pilot studies play a pivotal role in qualitative research, offering an opportunity not only to trial methodological tools and procedures but also to engage in deeper reflection on the practical and ethical dimensions of the adopted research design (Cohen et al., 2018). While often perceived as a preliminary technical step, piloting can also function as a space for methodological experimentation, ethical reflexivity, and researcher development (Dörnyei, 2007). This paper presents reflections on a doctoral pilot study conducted to explore how university-level EAP teachers in Bangladesh construct their teacher agency in teaching academic writing.

Framed by an interpretivist epistemology, which emphasises understanding how individuals construct meaning within their social and institutional contexts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018), the broader study investigates how EAP teachers navigate and negotiate institutional, curricular, and student-oriented issues. These issues often generate tensions that require teachers to mediate between professional practices and localised contextual realities (Priestley et al., 2015). Within this framing, the pilot was guided by two interrelated objectives: (1) to evaluate the practical feasibility and contextual relevance of a multimodal qualitative research design, and (2) to reflect on the ethical, relational, and positional complexities of conducting fieldwork in the Bangladeshi higher education landscape. The methodological toolkit comprised classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, a student focus group, and a teacher's reflective diary. Conducted over a three-week period, the pilot engaged

one focal teacher and three undergraduate students, enabling the collection of diverse perspectives and facilitating a holistic exploration of teaching practices (Tao and Gao, 2021).

This paper foregrounds the methodological learning that emerged through the pilot (Cohen et al., 2018), with particular attention to the tensions, adaptations, and unexpected insights that shaped the researcher's understanding of qualitative fieldwork. Emphasis is placed on reflexivity and the evolving relational dynamics between the researcher, participants, and the research context (Mann, 2016). By offering this situated account, the paper aims to contribute to the growing discussions on doctoral research design and piloting, framing piloting as a generative process that can challenge assumptions and deepen methodological understanding.

## Procedure

## Research Context

The pilot study was conducted at a language institute within a public university in Bangladesh, where first-year undergraduate students are enrolled in a core EAP writing module. The module, facilitated by early-career lecturers, is designed to develop students' foundational academic writing skills. However, the delivery of instruction in this setting is often shaped by intersecting constraints such as high teaching loads, limited opportunities for pedagogical development, and top-down curriculum directives, alongside evolving expectations around student-centred learning and assessment (Rahman, 2022).

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Given this complex instructional landscape, the pilot aimed to explore how the planned data collection methods would function within such a context. It was intended to evaluate the viability and contextual appropriateness of four qualitative methods, classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, a student focus group, and a teacher's reflective diary, as planned for the larger doctoral study (Cohen et al., 2018). It is worth noting that the study was conducted after a period of student-led political unrest, which disrupted regular academic activities and influenced both participant recruitment and the classroom environment. Despite these challenges, the participating teacher and students demonstrated resilience and adaptability in their engagement with the research process. This adaptability underscores the situated and negotiated nature of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015), which is a core focus of the broader project.

### Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling strategies (Cohen et al., 2018). The teacher participant, a 26-year-old male with just over two years of experience in teaching academic writing, was known to the researcher through prior work in the study context. This familiarity enabled access and facilitated early interactions with him, while care was taken to ensure that their participation remained fully voluntary and ethically safeguarded. The two-year experience criterion aligned with the view that early-career instructors may be beginning to consolidate their pedagogical identities (Ruan et al., 2020).

Three undergraduate students from the teacher's current cohort, aged 18 to 19, were subsequently recruited via snowball sampling (Cohen et al., 2018) for a focus group discussion (FGD). Their participation was arranged through individual conversations outlining the study's aims, and their role. All participants received information sheets and signed consent forms, and permission was secured from the gatekeeper (e.g., Head of Department) and non-participant students (who were present during the observed session but not directly involved in the data collection) for the classroom observation (BERA, 2024).

### Data Collection Methods

The pilot followed a multimodal qualitative design to assess the practical and relational viability of four complementary methods. Each tool offered a distinct but interconnected perspective from both teachers and students on classroom practice.

#### a) Classroom Observation:

A 60-minute EAP writing session was recorded by the teacher and securely shared via the researcher's password-protected University of Leeds OneDrive account. While this arrangement supported ethical and logistical feasibility, it may have subtly influenced classroom interaction and was taken into account during initial interpretation. An observation guide was used to annotate the recording and inform early thematic mapping (Richards, 2003).

#### b) Teacher Interviews:

Three semi-structured interviews (50-60 minutes each) were conducted with the teacher participant via Microsoft Teams, spaced over two weeks to allow interim transcription and revision of the schedule. This iterative structure supported the refinement of prompts, rephrasing, removing redundancies, and

incorporating emerging insights (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

#### c) Student Focus Group Discussion (FGD):

A 90-minute online FGD was held with the three student participants, centred on their reflections on the observed class. Although initial participation varied, the informal tone and peer support encouraged more balanced engagement over time (Cohen et al., 2018). The session highlighted the role of facilitative strategies in managing online group dynamics.

#### d) Reflective Diary:

The teacher submitted an 800-word reflective diary, guided by prompts on teaching experiences, contextual constraints, and decision-making processes (Dörnyei, 2007). Delivered via WhatsApp, the diary demonstrated teacher's thoughtful engagement. Feedback from the participant led to refinements in prompts design for the main study, enhancing their clarity and accessibility.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the pilot study was granted by the University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 1576). The study was designed and conducted with careful attention to power dynamics, particularly within teacher-student relationships, and to the researcher's own positionality as a cultural insider yet institutionally external doctoral researcher (Hamid, 2024; Mann, 2016). These considerations informed not only recruitment and consent procedures but also ongoing interaction with participants and will continue to guide the main study. All data were stored securely and managed in accordance with institutional data protection protocols.

### Reflection

#### Reflection: Refining Data Collection Tools

The pilot played a formative role in enhancing the clarity, contextual appropriateness, and accessibility of the research instruments (Cohen et al., 2018). An early observation, based on my own reflections and the participant's verbal feedback, emerged from the teacher interviews, where some prompts appeared repetitive or syntactically complex. For example, the following double-barrelled question was revised after the first round of interview:

Original: "What challenges do you encounter when initially planning and designing an academic writing course at the beginning of a semester? What solutions do you employ to address these challenges? Elaborate."

Revised: Q1: "What challenges do you experience when teaching an academic writing course at the middle of a semester?"

Q2: "What strategies have you used to address these challenges? Please elaborate."

This restructuring helped elicit more focused responses and reduced the cognitive load on the participants. In subsequent interviews, I drew on insights from the classroom observation and student perspectives to adjust follow-up questions (Richards, 2003), aiming to capture how the teacher navigated both pedagogical intent and classroom realities (Tao and Gao, 2021).

The student FGD highlighted the need for more accessible and culturally grounded phrasing. One prompt referencing "innovative strategies" initially created confusion. When reworded

to, “Did your teacher try any new or creative ways to solve problems in the classroom? Why do you think so?”, participants responded more readily. This experience reinforced the importance of adapting language to participants’ familiarity and linguistic context (Mann, 2016), a principle that will inform revisions to the main study’s FGD guide.

Similarly, the teacher’s reflective diary revealed that some abstract phrasing, such as “prevalent cultural issues”, was difficult to interpret. Based on their feedback, I revised this to a more concrete prompt: “How did the local cultural issues (e.g., ideas, values, language, ways of thinking) influence your academic writing teaching in the classroom?” This adjustment appeared more conducive to eliciting reflective and context-sensitive responses (Dörnyei, 2007).

Since the data were collected online, technical accessibility also shaped how tools were implemented. Informal pre-sessions via WhatsApp were used to support participants in navigating Microsoft Teams and resolving connection issues. Most data collection took place in the evenings (Bangladesh time) to reduce disruptions and improve connectivity. While modest, these logistical adjustments helped create a more comfortable environment for participation and minimised potential technical barriers throughout the research process (Salmons, 2016).

#### **Reflection: Ethical and Contextual Issues**

The pilot took place in the aftermath of a nationwide student protest movement that had disrupted higher education across Bangladesh. This contributed to an emotionally unsettled research environment. Although participant engagement remained consistent, subtle hesitations, particularly during the FGD, suggested latent anxieties. In response, I refined the ethical procedures for the main study (BERA, 2024), introducing clearer reminders of voluntary participation, the option for one-to-one follow-ups, and greater scheduling flexibility to accommodate participants’ emotional and academic wellbeing.

These experiences also brought my own positionality into sharper focus. As a Bangladeshi early-career researcher undertaking doctoral study in the UK, I found that shared linguistic and cultural familiarity often supported rapport-building. At the same time, my overseas institutional affiliation may have introduced hierarchical dynamics or influenced how participants engaged (Hamid, 2024). These tensions were particularly evident during interviews, where my interpretations were shaped by both insider and outsider perspectives (Mann, 2016). To navigate this more systematically, I plan to maintain a structured reflexive journal throughout the main study to track my assumptions, decisions, and positional shifts.

#### **Reflection: Evaluating Tool Integration**

Beyond refining individual tools, the pilot also clarified how the different methods interacted and supported one another. For instance, classroom observation captured situated teaching moments, such as a student’s hesitation and the teacher’s response, which were later explored in interviews. Likewise, the reflective diary added retrospective insight into the teacher’s decision-making, offering a temporal perspective on how agency is negotiated across different moments of practice. This complementarity helped generate a more layered understanding of the research context. While triangulating (Miles et al., 2014) across sources introduced organisational challenges, it appeared to strengthen the emerging interpretations and sup-

ported a more holistic view of classroom dynamics.

Looking ahead to the main study, I plan to make adjustments to better manage the anticipated data volume. These include reducing the number of students per FGD and increasing the spacing between interview rounds. Such changes are intended to provide more time for transcription and iterative analysis, supporting greater thematic coherence across datasets (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

#### **Reflection      Lessons Learned**

The pilot also served as an important space for my development as an early-career qualitative researcher. One key learning point was related to managing the balance between conversational openness and analytical precision. Initially, I assumed rapport alone would yield rich data; however, I found that without well-calibrated prompts, discussions could drift or prove cognitively demanding. This led me to reframe several questions to sustain both flow and depth (Dörnyei, 2007).

I also became more attuned to how students navigate group interviews (Liamputtong, 2016), especially when they are unfamiliar with research tool. During the FGD, one participant initially hesitated to contribute. Framing the session as a ‘shared conversation’ and offering gentle encouragement appeared to support her engagement. In the main study, I will introduce structured pre-session orientations and informal icebreakers to help ease participants into the process.

On a practical level, I had underestimated the time and cognitive load involved in transcription, scheduling across time zones, and coding for thematic continuity. These logistical challenges, while not insurmountable, highlighted the need for more generous timelines and more structured analytic processes, such as the use of thematic summary reports (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Perhaps most significantly, the pilot deepened my appreciation for ongoing reflexivity. Working across national, institutional, and epistemic boundaries, I occupy a fluid position that shapes both data production and interpretation. The pilot highlighted the importance of continually reflecting on this insider-outsider dynamic (Mann, 2016), particularly doing research in under-resourced contexts where relational ethics, vulnerability, and positional authority are complex and nuanced (Hamid, 2024). To navigate these layers with greater care in the main study, I intend to incorporate systematic reflexive strategies, including journaling and peer debriefing. These approaches, as Mann (2016) suggests, are not only tools for transparency but also crucial for interrogating the researcher’s own positionality and influence on the research process.

#### **Conclusion**

This pilot study provided a useful opportunity to trial a multi-modal qualitative design for exploring EAP teacher agency in Bangladeshi higher education. While the methods, classroom observation, interviews, a focus group, and a reflective diary, proved relatively feasible, the process surfaced important areas for refinement. These included simplifying prompts, ensuring digital accessibility, and fostering rapport in online settings. The study also surfaced a range of relational and ethical complexities. Navigating issues of power, trust, and participant comfort required ongoing sensitivity, not only in how interactions were managed, but also in how I approached my own role in the research. As a Bangladeshi doctoral researcher based at a UK institution, I became increasingly aware of how my dual

positionality shaped the access, rapport, and interpretation (Hamid, 2024; Mann, 2016). These reflections prompted a more deliberate commitment to reflexivity and ethical responsiveness throughout the research process.

Rather than offering fixed conclusions, this reflection seeks to share situated learning that may support other doctoral researchers, particularly those working in under-resourced environments. Iterative revisions to data collection tools, such as rewording prompts, contextualising language, and pacing interviews, appeared important not only for enhancing data quality but also for supporting participants' emotional and cognitive engagement (Dörnyei, 2007).

Above all, the pilot underscored the value of reflexivity as an ongoing methodological and ethical stance (Mann, 2016). It served not only to refine tools and logistics but also to deepen awareness of the researcher's role in shaping the inquiry. These insights now underpin the design of the main study, which is guided by a more ethically responsive and contextually sensitive approach (Richards, 2003).

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