

The Hillary Place Papers

Special Issue: The Importance of Pilot Studies for Doctoral Research



An open access, peer reviewed journal for new education researchers.

HPP is edited, managed and produced by research students from the University of Leeds.

Volume 9(2) Winter 2025

The Hillary Place Papers

Vol 9(2) Autumn 2025

The Journal of the School of Education at the University of Leeds

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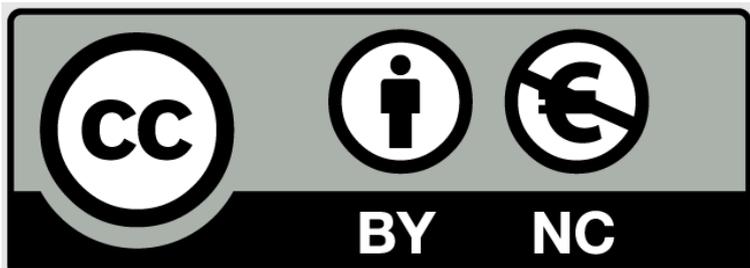
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Editorial: Understanding the Value of Pilot Studies in Educational Research

Huahui Zhao and Diana McCray, School of Education, University of Leeds

Abstract

Pilot studies play a crucial role in strengthening doctoral research, yet limited detailed discussion has been carried out on how to effectively design, conduct and reflect on them. This gap potentially leads to incorrect understanding or misunderstanding of their purposes and undermines their value to enhance research quality. This special issue brings together reflections on pilot studies from seven doctoral students in education, offering rich insights into their practical, methodological, and personal benefits and challenges. Complemented by perspectives from experienced researchers at the School of Education, these contributions highlight that research is not solely about results but also about the process. Importantly, this process begins well before the main study commences, with pilot studies serving as a foundational step in shaping rigorous and reflective doctoral research.

Keywords

Pilot studies, Design, Conduct, Reflection Benefits and Challenges, Doctoral Research

Introduction

Pilot studies are an essential yet often underappreciated process of robust doctoral research. They assist novice doctoral researchers to reveal potential challenges before the main study and address them via shaping research questions and refining methodology. Designing effective pilot studies and utilising them to refine research design also cultivates postgraduate research students' knowledge of methodological rigour and critical thinking as researchers.

Despite their importance, there is limited detailed discussion in the literature about how to design and conduct effective pilot studies. The limited elaborated discussions about the procedure of effective pilot studies in the existing literature has led to misconceptions about what pilot studies are, for what purposes, and how to carry them out and use their results to improve main studies.

This special issue brings together reflections from seven doctoral students in education, each of whom conducted a pilot study as part of their research journey. Their stories offer insight into the practical, methodological, and personal benefits and challenges that pilot studies can bring about, revealing the importance of pilot studies and the necessity of training new researchers in undertaking pilot studies. The contributions in this issue remind us that research is not only about results but also about the process, and that the process begins long before main studies are underway.

What is a pilot study?

A pilot study can be understood as a rehearsal for the main study, much like rehearsals for an opera. It should take various forms, either be a smaller version of the main study or a trial of a specific component (e.g., a particular research instrument) (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). Depending on the study's goals, pilot studies may be conducted with family members, friends, peer researchers and individuals with similar backgrounds to the intended sample.

It can be conducted at different stages of the research design process, serving distinctive purposes. At the outset, a pilot study can assist in selecting appropriate research methods. In the middle stages, it helps to refine the questions to be asked in

each research instrument. Towards the end, it provides insights into how long each procedure might last and how data should be analysed (Yin, 2015).

Why does an effective pilot study matter?

Effective pilot studies can reveal potential problems in research design before significant time and resources are invested. These include but are not limited to the clarity and relevance of research questions (e.g., too broad or whether relevant), the access to participants (Kim, 2011), the appropriateness of data collection methods (e.g., interviews or observations), the practicality of the research process (e.g., the sample size), the potential for generating meaningful data to answer the research questions, and the potential ethical concerns (e.g., what bothers participants).

Effective pilot studies also help build relationships and trust with participants, particularly in contexts involving sensitive personal data or tackling nuanced issues (e.g., implications of emerging technologies for academic integrity). For new researchers, pilot studies serve as a practice to develop their research skills and confidence in managing the research process and handling challenges that arise. Pilot studies in qualitative research are particularly valuable due to the complexity and variability of real-world settings. Schools, classrooms, teachers, and learners are all situated within unique social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

These values are substantiated in the papers included in this special issue. Nevertheless, few pilot studies are published, often due to their small scale, less rigorous design and processes than those of main studies, and findings that may not be generalisable. Furthermore, the prevailing publication culture tends to favour fully developed studies, as these are more likely to produce convincing and reliable results. This emphasis contributes to the underrepresentation of pilot studies in the research literature.

How can you enhance the value of pilot studies?

The effectiveness of pilot studies depends largely on the extent of reflexivity invested in interpreting the pilot process and data of reality in your research. Reflexivity is the process of critically

examining your ontology (i.e., the nature of reality), epistemology (i.e., the methods to discover the nature and what counts as valid evidence), and axiology (i.e., what you believe is important, right, or meaningful). Papers 1 and 7 in this issue discussed the importance of reflexivity on insider-outsider perspectives as a researcher in a local educational context to navigate complex ethical values.

There are varied approaches to enhancing reflexivity, including engaging in dialogue with supervisors (see Paper 7), fellow researchers (see Papers 1, 3 and 7) and, pilot participants (see Papers 1, 2, 3 and 4) to discuss the pilot process and arising values and challenges.

A reflexive journal, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), has been widely recommended to assist reflexivity by recording information about various aspects of research conducts, including reasons for methodological decisions (based on pilot studies in this case). Examples of this approach are illustrated in Papers 1 and 2.

Reflections in this special issue

This special issue gathers seven first-hand reflective accounts of pilot studies conducted across diverse educational contexts. These papers collectively demonstrate how pilot studies serve not only to refine research tools and procedures but also to build researcher reflexivity, adaptability, and methodological rigour.

- Paper 1 (Md Nabinur Rahman) reports a pilot study that explored how EAP writing teachers in Bangladesh exercise professional agency. The pilot tested multiple qualitative methods and highlighted the importance of adapting tools to local contexts and managing insider–outsider dynamics. The lessons learned from this pilot has directly shaped a more adaptable and context-aware design for the main study.
- Paper 2 (Sharifa Chowdhury) introduces a pilot study, focusing on academic literacies in a Bangladeshi STEM university. The pilot confirmed the value of gathering perspective from both students and tutors while revealing practical challenges in data access and participant engagement, leading to methodological refinements and enhanced researcher reflexivity in navigating fieldwork in a resource-limited context.
- Paper 3 (Nurdamia Shafee) reflects on piloting interviews and think-aloud protocols with Malaysian ESL teachers using automated writing tools. The study led to improved question design and highlighted the importance of ethical and contextual sensitivity. It also revealed how piloting developed the author’s adaptability and interview skills.
- Paper 4 (Xuechun Huang) reports on a pilot on vocabulary learning in China, testing instruments and procedures across strands. The study addressed measurement challenges and logistical constraints, strengthening the main study’s design.
- Paper 5 (Dalia Cohen) presents a pilot study, using corpus data to analyse authorial voice in academic writing. It tested the code framework based on existing studies, leading to a refined coding process and selection of related tools. It demonstrated the value of piloting analytical tools before scaling up.

- Paper 6 (Noof Alkahtani) introduces a pilot which investigated Saudi teachers’ expectations of girls’ use of educational technology. The pilot revealed the limitations of interviews and logical issues, leading to revisions in both the interview format and observation strategies. These changes enhanced contextual relevance and ensured stronger alignment with the research aims.
- Paper 7 (Zachary Chai) outlines a pilot on Malaysian primary teachers’ use of mobile assisted language learning. It surfaced issues with interview clarity and group dynamics, prompting procedural adjustments and deeper ethical awareness in an under-explored primary school context.

Messages to PGRs and supervisors

As part of this special issue, we invited our reviewers who are also supervisors in the School of Education to share their perspectives on the value, challenges, and effective use of pilot studies in doctoral research. Presented here in their own words, their reflections reinforce the importance of pilot studies discussed above, offer practical strategies, and highlight institutional support.

They emphasise the key role of pilot studies in refining research instruments and supporting researcher development. They ensure the quality and clarity of data collection tools, especially in perception-based research:

My research area is in digital education, specifically teachers’ digital practice and change. Much of the research in my area looks at perceptions and experiences. Pilot studies are critical in this area, to ensure data collection tools are capturing the ‘right’ perceptions and able to gather rich experiences with digital technologies. Interviews and focus group data collection that captures only superficial or misunderstood data will not be of benefit to the field. Pilot studies provide a way to test our data collection tools to make sure they are understood, and that our procedures are clear, so participants are able to fully engage in the research.

Professor Sarah Howard, Professor of Digital Education

Pilot studies enhance research rigour and quality:

Piloting is an essential stage of quality research. It allows researchers to test and refine their methods, clarify ethical considerations, and deepen their understanding of specific contexts, which in turn enhances the rigour of the main study. Sharing reflections from pilot work is good research practice because it makes a meaningful contribution to the wider research community.

Dr Yen Dang, Associate Professor in Language Education

They support both methodological refinement and researcher self-awareness:

This special issue on pilot studies has long been required and will be a valuable contribution not only for doctoral students but also for all the students who carry out research at the school. Students sometimes overlook pilot studies, and they do not really see the value of them. This special issue of HPP brings pilot studies to the forefront, as they play a pivotal role in research, not only from a methodological perspective but also to learn about oneself as a researcher.

Dr Loreto Aliaga-Salas, Lecturer in TESOL;

To make pilot studies impactful, doctoral students need to set up clear goals and evaluation criteria for meaning pilot studies:

To be truly useful, pilot studies should have clear criteria aligned with their aims. This enables us, as researchers, to be clear about why the pilot is needed, how it will inform the main study, and reflect on its overall success.

Professor Louise Tracey, Professor of Early Years Education

They also need to understand different forms of pilot studies to use it appropriately in the research process:

Pilot studies are obviously very important but I think it's worth distinguishing between 'trailing' and 'piloting'. As I understand it a pilot mirrors the exact process of the main study but on a smaller scale. It can produce findings of its own, which can actually be utilized in the main study sometimes. By contrast, trailing involves use of the research instruments, for example giving a questionnaire to individual participants and having them think aloud while responding to each item. Thus, trailing is often necessary even before conducting a pilot study.

Dr Martin Lamb, Senior Lecturer in Language Education

On the other hand, doctoral training in fostering critical researchers is essential for effective pilot studies and improve their research practice:

Pilot studies are useful for many types of research, including doctoral research. However, since pilot studies often serve as an initial step for many doctoral students, they are sometimes unsure how to reflect meaningfully on their experiences. Many doctoral studies lack critical reflection on the pilot phase, which can hinder the ability to learn effectively from the process and apply those lessons to the main data collection. To improve this, I would suggest that doctoral students receive training in critical reflection particularly in how to become critical researchers who can examine their own assumptions and perspectives as part of the research process.

Dr Syafiq Mat Noor, Lecturer in Climate Change Education

At the same time, institutions need recognise the structural challenges and practice time for piloting within the timeframe of doctoral studies:

For those engaged in empirical research, it is rare to embark on a project without some form of piloting; many funders now expect preliminary data collection before awarding a grant and institutions often offer 'pump priming' or 'seed funding' to engage in some initial data collection. Yet, in practice, our postgraduate researchers can struggle to find the time or space for piloting. In my experience, this is partly because the ideal window for piloting tends to coincide with the 'transfer' (or 'upgrade') process, typically towards the end of the first year for full-time PGRs. To maintain momentum, there is often an implicit expectation that researchers will move straight into full data collection once ethical approval is secured and the transfer is complete. While piloting is critically important for building researcher confidence and strengthening methodological design, there remains a challenge: how do we create and protect the space for a meaningful, reflexive pilot in a 3 year doctorate?

Dr Peter Hart, Lecturer in Inclusion, Childhood and Youth

Taken together, these messages affirm that pilot studies are

not merely preliminary exercises but essential opportunities for high quality research. They help refine methods, build researchers' confidence and develop critical researchers. To maximise their value, pilot studies must be intentionally, well-considered, and integrated into doctoral training and timelines. It needs the community of practice to promote pilot studies as a strategic and developmental stage in the research journey of emerging critical researchers.

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

Md Nabinur Rahman, School of Education, University of Leeds

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).

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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Refining Qualitative Methods for ESL Academic Literacy Research: Reflections from a Pilot Study in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper critically reflects on a pilot study within a doctoral research project investigating English as a Second Language (ESL) undergraduate students' construction of academic literacy practices at a Bangladeshi Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) based university. The study assessed the feasibility of a qualitative, multi-case methodology involving reflective diaries, interviews, and document analysis with one student and one tutor. Drawing on the conceptual framing of academic literacies, insights into the student's engagement with ESL writing tasks, tutor expectations, and institutional constraints were revealed. The pilot identified methodological challenges, such as data completeness and recruitment barriers, alongside benefits like triangulated perspectives and iterative tool refinement. These reflections inform the refinement of data collection strategies and research focus for the main study, offering valuable implications for other researchers.

Keywords

Pilot study reflection, Qualitative research, Academic literacies, ESL students, Higher education in Bangladesh

Introduction

The construction of academic literacies by ESL students within disciplinary contexts has garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly in non-Anglophone higher education institutions where English serves as the medium of instruction (Li, 2022). This pilot study at a Bangladeshi agricultural university, part of a larger doctoral project, applies Green's (2020) academic literacies framework to explore how ESL undergraduate students negotiate assignment-based writing, tracing their disciplinary practices, knowledge development, and the cognitive practical shifts that shape their academic writing.

Pilot studies are essential in qualitative doctoral research for testing instruments, refining sampling, and uncovering ethical or logistical issues prior to full implementation (Yin, 2016; Lees et al., 2022). On a personal note, the pilot provided a valuable opportunity for critical self-reflection, revealing early insights into my evolving researcher identity and positionality (see below). In this multi-case study of ESL writing, the pilot trialled reflective diaries, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis under sociocultural constraints.

I piloted reflective diaries and interviews, triangulated with assignment documents, because reflective diaries effectively reveal students' academic writing practices and development (Green, 2013; Kuteeva and Negretti, 2016; Hawitt et al., 2022) and integrating student and tutor perspectives uncovers potential misalignments in task expectations (Carless and Boud, 2018). This dual-purpose pilot assessed both the methodological coherence of the study and its ability to capture disciplinary literacy complexities in the target context. Moreover, the pilot study offered a means to critically appraise the study's research questions, examining their clarity, scope, and alignment with

the project's broader aims:

1. What academic practices do the target students engage in while producing disciplinary writing at the target university?
2. What knowledge do they construct regarding the academic practices while producing disciplinary writings at the target university?
3. What experiences during the process of writing appear to affect cognitive or practical changes in their construction of the academic literacy?

The following sections outline the pilot design, reflect on key methodological and contextual insights, and discuss how these will inform the main study. More broadly, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions around designing context-sensitive, reflexive qualitative research in under-researched higher education contexts.

Participants

The pilot study was conducted at a public university in Bangladesh where English functions as the primary language of instruction. Participants were purposively sampled to reflect the broader population of the main doctoral study, namely, undergraduate ESL students navigating assignment-based writing in STEM disciplines. Purposive sampling is commonly recommended for qualitative case study designs aiming to explore participants' specific experiences in depth (Palinkas et al., 2015).

With this aim, two third-year female students (aged around 20) from the Faculty of Animal Science and Veterinary Medicine of the target university were initially recruited (based on their availability), following ethical approval and informed consent procedures. While only one participant was originally required,

a second was included as a contingency against potential attrition, a strategy supported in pilot research literature to avoid data loss (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001). This decision proved useful, as one participant was unable to complete the study due to the absence of a suitable assignment in the target semester. As a result, the analysis centres on a single participant who completed the required reflective diary and participated in an interview.

To triangulate student perspectives, a tutor involved in designing and assessing the assignment was also recruited. The tutor, an L2 English speaker with seven years of teaching experience at the target university, contributed valuable contextual insights into pedagogical expectations and curricular structures. His inclusion was also consistent with case study strategies that seek to capture multiple stakeholder perspectives (Yin, 2016).

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Leeds Ethics Committee (Research Ethics Application Reference: 1373) before the data collection proceeded. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the process, and data were stored securely in accordance with institutional guidelines.

Data Collection

The pilot adopted a three-fold qualitative design- reflective diary, two semi-structured interviews, and document analysis- to capture literacy practices at individual, instructional, and institutional levels (Jwa, 2022).

The primary data source was a reflective diary maintained over six weeks, a method widely used to explore how students internalise academic writing practices across time and disciplines (Kuteeva and Negretti, 2016; Webster and Green, 2021; Hawitt et al., 2022). The student submitted entries via WhatsApp, using a provided template (see Appendix A) with prompts that encouraged detailed, real-time reflections on her assignment-related activities, purposes, and processes. The entries were written in English, as preferred by the participant, and were later compiled into a three-page Microsoft Word document, capturing her step-by-step engagement with the assignment.

To explore the student's experiences in greater depth, a semi-structured interview was conducted in English via Microsoft Teams. The student chose English to practise her speaking skills and, despite minor grammatical errors, was fluent and comprehensible throughout. The 71-minute interview was transcribed verbatim, and the prompts (available on request) were shared in advance to support thoughtful reflection, an approach aligned with best practices in qualitative interviewing to enhance participant agency and comfort (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015).

A follow-up interview with the module tutor was conducted 1.5 months later using a similar format (available on request). Although his concurrent higher level study abroad led to delays and some difficulty in recalling specific instructional details (e.g. feedback provision), the interview yielded valuable insights into pedagogical expectations and institutional context. This illustrates a known limitation of retrospective data collection, where memory constraints may impact reliability (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

A range of supplementary documents was collected to enhance contextual understanding. These included the student's draft and final assignments, relevant class handouts, PowerPoint slides, and a tutor recommended textbook. The aim was to

assess whether document analysis would provide additional insight into academic literacy construction, particularly in relation to the alignment (or misalignment) between institutional expectations and student interpretations. Document-based triangulation is recognised for enhancing trustworthiness and interpretive depth in qualitative case studies (Flowerdew, 2002).

Notably, several logistical issues emerged during data collection. For example, reaching the tutor, who was studying abroad, required multiple attempts, and access to official documents such as course syllabi was inconsistent. These challenges provided early insights into the practicalities of conducting research in contexts where institutional records are decentralised and often informally managed.

Reflection

Pilot studies are not only pragmatic trial runs but also reflective spaces where researchers engage critically with the research process, surface unanticipated issues, and refine conceptual and methodological assumptions (Maxwell, 2013). This section outlines key benefits and challenges of the pilot, and how these informed design adjustments, contingency planning, and strengthened my reflexivity as a researcher.

Benefits of the Pilot Study

A key strength of the pilot was its ability to reveal the complex, situated nature of academic literacy practices in a STEM-based ESL context. Triangulating data from both a student and a tutor enhanced trustworthiness, as recommended in qualitative case study research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Remarkably, both participants described similar academic practices, such as using supplementary resources, and identified parallel forms of knowledge development: contextual (e.g., understanding assignment requirements), declarative (subject knowledge), and procedural (task approach). Both also emphasised the role of experiential learning in fostering cognitive and practical shifts in writing. This convergence increased confidence in the viability of the multi-perspectival approach proposed for the main study.

The reflective diary, despite its brevity, emerged as a rich source of insight into the student's cognitive and affective engagement with the assignment. Prior studies have suggested that diaries, particularly when used longitudinally, can reveal evolving academic identities and shifts in student self-regulation (Cohen et al., 2018). In this case, the diary not only traced the student's problem-solving process but also captured moments of uncertainty, technological struggle, and collaborative learning, all of which may have gone unreported in a single interview.

Moreover, the semi-structured interview format proved effective in eliciting detailed reflections, particularly when prompts were shared in advance. The conversational tone and rapport built at the outset seemed to encourage disclosure, aligning with Kvale and Brinkmann's (2015) suggestion that empathetic interviewing can support deeper narrative emergence. The use of tutor interview also appeared promising, though adjustments to timing and framing will be necessary (see below).

Finally, the inclusion of multiple types of artefacts such as assignments, class materials, tutor-supplied resources reinforced the feasibility of conducting document-based triangulation in this context, a technique that has been recommended in academic literacies research (Wingate, 2018).

Challenges and Limitations

However, the pilot revealed important methodological and contextual limitations. The short duration and uneven student participation underscored the risks of relying on a small sample, particularly in unstable institutional settings. Although participant withdrawal was anticipated, it raised concerns about data sufficiency. To address this, the main study will incorporate over-recruitment to mitigate attrition, as recommended in qualitative research design (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Second, the delayed tutor interview introduced a potential recall bias, as the tutor had to reflect retrospectively on an assignment he had set months earlier. While the discussion was rich, some details, especially those relating to instruction and student queries, were vague or generalised. This delay underscored the need to conduct faculty interviews as close to the assignment submission as possible, in line with recommendations from process tracing and retrospective interviewing studies (Yin, 2016).

Finally, technological and institutional access barriers surfaced during the pilot. For example, obtaining official course outlines proved difficult due to administrative decentralisation, and coordinating interviews across time zones required flexibility. These practical concerns are recognised as the hidden labour of doctoral fieldwork, particularly when institutional gatekeeping or geographical dispersal is involved (Lynn and Amundsen, 2011).

Refinement of Research Design and Contingency Planning

Drawing on insights from the pilot, several refinements have been made to the main study. For example, participant over-recruitment and regular check-ins will be implemented to mitigate dropout and support diary continuity. Tutor interviews will be scheduled immediately after assignment submission to improve recall accuracy, and curriculum shifts following recent political reforms in Bangladesh will be addressed through curriculum mapping and document analysis.

The pilot also highlighted the need for methodological flexibility. While written diaries were initially planned, the student's use of WhatsApp showed the value of allowing multimodal formats, such as audio notes or text messages, which support inclusive and responsive research practices (Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2013).

Finally, the pilot reinforced the value of reflexivity in analysing data with overlapping themes (Braun and Clarke, 2019). For example, one diary entry captured both resourcefulness and uncertainty in evaluating online materials, illustrating the complex interplay of growth and challenge in academic literacy development.

To ensure continuity despite disruptions, a contingency plan has been developed. Alternate student participants could be identified at recruitment to replace any who withdraw. If diaries are incomplete or delayed, participants could be encouraged to submit retrospective reflections or audio entries in their preferred language via familiar platforms such as WhatsApp. In cases where tutor interviews are not feasible, course coordinators could serve as alternative informants. If institutional documents remain inaccessible, student-shared materials (e.g. handouts, assignment briefs) could be used to reconstruct curricular context. These strategies are intended to maintain methodological coherence under unpredictable conditions.

Researcher's Learning and Reflexivity

Alongside methodological adjustments, this pilot study deepened my reflexivity as a researcher, particularly in navigating interviews, data interpretation, and fieldwork challenges. I learned to balance structured questioning with responsive listening during interviews and became more attuned to the interpretive nature of data analysis. Unexpected challenges, such as participant attrition and unanticipated data formats, required adaptability and reflexive thinking. The pilot also highlighted the often-overlooked relational and emotional dimensions of fieldwork, as I navigated recruitment, institutional access, and shifting timelines. These experiences shaped my understanding of research as a negotiated, uncertain process, reinforcing the importance of adopting flexibility, ethical sensitivity, and contextual awareness as a researcher in exploring academic literacies.

Conclusion

While often viewed as preparatory, pilot studies can function as pivotal moments in doctoral research, enabling reflection, recalibration, and methodological refinement. This small-scale pilot revealed important contextual and methodological considerations in exploring academic literacies within a STEM-based ESL context in the Global South.

A key insight was the value of triangulated, multi-perspectival data. Engaging both student and tutor perspectives surfaced productive alignments and tensions, suggesting that such triangulation may yield richer, context-sensitive understandings of disciplinary writing practices (Li, 2022). The student's use of WhatsApp for diary entries, though limited in volume, highlighted the potential of low-barrier, flexible tools for capturing affective, in-the-moment reflections, especially in settings where extended formal writing may be challenging (Lillis, 2008). Its encrypted nature also supported data security.

The pilot also illuminated the practical and relational complexities of fieldwork in under-resourced or institutionally fluid contexts. Challenges such as delayed interviews, limited access to documents, and institutional instability underscored the need for adaptable strategies and researcher sensitivity (Lynn and Amundsen, 2011), echoing broader calls to recognise the non-linearity of qualitative research (Ravitch and Carl, 2021). Several methodological adjustments emerged from these experiences: over-recruiting to address attrition, rescheduling tutor interviews for better recall, integrating curriculum mapping, and allowing student-preferred digital platforms for reflection. These are not merely procedural refinements but reflect a deeper commitment to context-responsive and ethically grounded design (Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2013).

Crucially, the pilot supported my growth as a researcher, highlighting the emotional dimensions of fieldwork and prompting greater reflexivity around positionality and meaning-making. For researchers working in multilingual, non-Western, or unstable institutional contexts, this study underscores the generative potential of uncertainty. Rather than signalling failure, disruptions such as participant dropout or access barriers may reveal the very conditions under which academic literacies are formed, negotiated, or resisted (Canagarajah, 2002).

Ultimately, this pilot affirmed the feasibility and relevance of the proposed methodological framework and research questions, while reinforcing the value of pilot studies as sites for critical learning and methodological development within doctoral research.

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Appendix A

Template for Writing the Reflective Diary (for student participants)

Please read the following points carefully before you start maintaining your reflective diary. Please feel free to contact me (***) on my mobile phone number: *** or via email- *** if any of the following points is unclear to you or you have any query at any time.

The following points will help you to understand what you are expected to reflect and take notes on in the reflective diary which you are maintaining against your targeted disciplinary assignment. Please note that the following points are just guidelines not an exhaustive list. Please take notes on anything that you will be doing in writing the assignment even though you think this is not important or optional. Please take notes on the very days you have done something related to writing your assignment and mention dates in the diary so that I can see the time flow of the activities you are doing related to the assignment writing. The more accurate and detail your reflection will be on the writing process of your assignment in the diary, the richer data I will get for my study. So, the points (and beyond) that you need to reflect on while taking notes in the reflective diary are-

- What is the writing task about (topic) for which you will be keeping the diary?
- What are the task requirements/instructions?
- What is the purpose of the assignment?

- When do you have to submit the assignment?
- Description of the writing process (take notes on any activity that you are doing to complete the assignment, please consider the following questions as example of activities)
- With whom are you interacting to understand and accomplish the task, and what is the purpose behind the interactions?
- From where and how are you collecting required information to write the assignments?
- Why and how are you using the information in the assignments?
- Are you making any draft of the assignment- written draft or mental plan?
- What supports (i.e., from your faculty, tutor, or any other body) are you getting to accomplish the assignment?
- What problems are you experiencing in doing the assignment?
- What are you doing to resolve the problems?
- What helped you to better understand the nature and requirements of the assignment?
- What are you doing to finalise your writing for submission?
- What are you learning by doing the assignment?

Insights at the Crossroads: Reflecting on the Challenges, Opportunities, and Lessons Learnt from my Pilot Study

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Abstract

This article discusses the importance of a pilot study in undertaking qualitative research, in line with reflexive approach. The pilot work was conducted in preparation for a thesis examining the integration and impact of Write&Improve system on Malaysian ESL secondary school teachers' writing assessment literacy and their pedagogical practices within a technology-enhanced writing instruction context. This reflection highlights the benefits of pilot studies by detailing the practical and methodological challenges faced during the pilot phase and the subsequent adjustments made for the main study. Doing the pilot study proved to be valuable in three ways. These include: (1) facilitating essential adjustments that resulted in a satisfactory procedure for the main study, (2) deepening the researcher's understanding of practical and contextual challenges, thereby enhancing methodological rigour and maintaining ethical standards, and (3) fostering reflective practice that contributes to researcher's professional growth as a postgraduate researcher.

Keywords

Pilot
Reflection
Reflexivity
Insights
Challenges
Learning
Lessons

Introduction

Assessments, which are essential to education (Walsh, 2017), encompass summative and formative approaches. In classroom-based formative assessments especially, assessing students' works and providing timely feedback to their progress are critical in the teaching and learning processes. Like other language skills, writing assessments present a considerable challenge to teachers due to the substantial time and effort required from both teachers and students (Dikli, 2010; cited in Nunes et al., 2021). Technology-based interventions, notably Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) system, address such barriers by providing quick, detailed feedback. Despite AWE's rising popularity and potential, it remains unclear how AWE aids Malaysian ESL secondary teachers' writing assessment practices. Employing a multiple case-study approach, this project seeks to

- i. narrow the knowledge gap regarding teachers' writing assessment practices in AWE-supported writing classrooms, and
- ii. shed light on the practical implications of utilizing AWE tools within Malaysian ESL secondary school context.

Pilot studies are instrumental in identifying and resolving ethical (Shakir and Rahman, 2022) and methodological issues (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2002) that could jeopardize the main study and violate participants' rights. They are key to refining various aspects of a final study, including its design, fieldwork procedures, data collection instruments, and analysis plans (Yin, 2011). Majid et al. (2017) further emphasize that pilot studies, particularly in qualitative research, ensure the clarity, appropriateness, and feasibility of interview protocols, data collection tools, and analytical procedures within specific contexts. To

ensure the quality and rigour of this project, conducting a pilot study was therefore essential. The overall purpose was to assess the feasibility of the interview questions and fieldwork procedures prior to the actual fieldwork. It also prepared me for the unanticipated issues before entering the field.

I chose to pilot semi-structured and stimulated-recall interviews because these approaches are particularly sensitive to context, interpersonal dynamics, and language nuances (Sampson, 2004). Interviews necessitate a clear and effective questioning technique that enables participants to express their beliefs and experiences comprehensively. The pilot provided insightful feedback regarding the clarity and depth of the questions, which informed necessary adjustments to obtain rich data (Kim, 2011).

Reflection on this piloting hold significant academic and practical value. Academically, this process enhances methodological rigour by meticulously refining research instruments and procedures before the full-scale implementation. This ensures the validity and reliability of the data (Malmqvist et al., 2019). Practically, piloting helps identify contextual challenges informing adjustments to data collection instruments and fieldwork procedures to better suit the school settings and the cultural dimensions of Malaysian classrooms. Such reflective practice contributes to researcher preparedness, thereby improving the quality and applicability of findings. This reflection enriches broader methodological discussions by illustrating how research unfolds in dynamic, often unpredictable contexts. It is hoped that by sharing these insights, my reflective narrative contributes to the collective knowledge that aids other postgraduate researchers in navigating the complexities of real-world inquiry.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: CONTACT DETAILS HERE

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Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration encompasses ethical approval. This study was approved by the University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 1229). Research also involves research sites and obtaining permission for data collection (Creswell, 2013). It also requires careful consideration of the sensitivity of findings and the researcher's credibility in the event of unfavourable disclosures of information. Therefore, approvals were sought and obtained from the relevant gatekeepers: the Ministry of Economy, the state and district education departments, and the school principal.

Patton (2002) emphasizes that all individuals involved in a study should voluntarily consented to participate, free from coercion or undue pressure. To ensure that this ethical consideration was fulfilled, each pilot study participant was given a consent form alongside the Participant Information Sheet (PIS). I briefed them beforehand that this piloting was to be done on a voluntary basis, and they were permitted to withdraw from the study after the process had started. I also highlighted that the withdrawal would not be possible once the data had been analysed. The teachers were also asked to confirm their consent at the beginning of the interviews.

To develop trust and safeguard participants' privacy, all names and identifying information were pseudonymised in the interview transcriptions, students' essays and AWE system-generated data. This is important as measuring the dangers of a specific context to individuals is often challenging or infeasible (Patton, 2002). To ensure the confidentiality of the individuals, teacher participants were assigned numerical identifiers (e.g., Teacher 1, 2, and 3) while schools and students were designated using alphabets (e.g., School A and B, Student A, B, and C).

Sampling and Piloting Procedures

Sampling is essential in case study research (Priya, 2021). This pilot study employed a criterion-based sampling strategy, which involves selecting participants who meet specific criteria for quality assurance (Creswell, 2007). The first piloting involved two doctoral students from the School of Education. Since their research focuses on technology-enhanced learning, they were selected for their capacity to provide insightful feedback on the semi-structured interview questions. The purpose was to evaluate comprehensibility, identify overlaps, and suggest improvements. The questions were categorized into five themes: participant background, understanding of teachers' writing assessment literacy (WAL) and Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK), contextual factors, support and resources, and overall reflection on the Write&Improve system.

Initially, the questions were aligned with specific research questions, resulting in overlaps. To enhance clarity, some questions were rephrased, redundant items were eliminated (e.g., school location and type), and new questions were added to better address the research questions. The initial interview guide included numerous questions that could overwhelm the research participants. To alleviate discomfort, some questions were eliminated from the semi-structured interview and were posed in stimulated-recall interview instead. The revised semi-structured interview guide was distributed to the two PGRs for feedback.

Another pilot study was conducted with three teacher participants, aimed to assess the comprehensibility and feasibility of the semi-structured and stimulated-recall interview (SRI) as

well as Think Aloud protocol (TAP). Using criterion-based and convenience sampling strategy, they were chosen on the basis of; first, a belief that three teachers would suffice to highlight any possible flaws in the research design and instruments, and second, that these teachers share similar characteristics with the target participants (Teijlingen and Hundley, 2002). They were English teachers who integrated AWE tools into their writing classrooms. These teachers were also professionally known to me through our involvement in intra and inter-states workshops and meetings for English teachers. They were approached by e-mail and Whatsapp application explaining what the pilot study entailed and the significance of their contribution to this research.

The semi-structured interview guide comprised 50 prompts, administered in a single session. While the number of prompts could appear extensive, they served as potential prompts relevant to the research questions. In the interviews, I posed the prompts flexibly to elicit examples, decisions and contextual constraints. This meant I did not administer the prompts verbatim or in full to every participant. They were used only when the participants' responses were insufficient to address the research objectives comprehensively. This maintains the conversational quality of a semi-structured interview while ensuring consistent coverage of key domains of the research.

Prior to conducting the TAP and SRI, I gathered teaching artefacts used as the stimuli for SRI. I arranged for an online meeting to discuss how the artefacts could be collected in a way that was convenient to the teachers. I obtained access as a collaborator on the AWE system, teachers' timetable, photos of the classroom layout and resources, teachers' and school background information via Microsoft form, and screen recording of teachers' TAP as well as extracted the system-generated data on students' submission frequency and scores for each writing task in Microsoft Excel format.

The SRI was piloted two days after the semi-structured interview and TAP took place. The initial plan involved requesting the teachers to video or screen record at least three usages of the AWE system. After consultation with one teacher, it was determined that this was impractical due to time constraints resulting from teachers' heavy workload and the significant time required to screen record multiple usages. Considering these constraints, I redesigned the video-based SRI procedure. The teachers were asked to record their TAP session documenting their interactions with the system while verbally explaining the typical activities upon logging in. They were given instructions on how to conduct the TAP session. In the TAP guide, I requested them to reflect on their decision-making processes whenever they use the AWE system. Among the prompts used were:

- i. Can you walk me through how you use the AWE system when you log into the system?
- ii. Explain what you normally do when you use the system?

The recording was then used during the SRI session where prompts were used to probe deeper into the teachers' actions and decisions when using the system. The prompts included, but not limited to, the following:

- i. What were your thoughts when using the system with this student?
- ii. What were you thinking when you decided to do this?

- iii. Why did you decide to provide additional feedback and your own score? Why? / Why did you decide not to provide additional feedback and your own score for this student?

Apart from the TAP recording, students' essays, system-generated data on students' submission frequency and scores, teachers' timetable, photos of classroom layout and resources therein, and the background information obtained were utilized during the SRI. They were used to assist teachers' reflection on their assessment practices and whether their practices had changed from the first to the current use. They were also used to probe deeper into how contextual factors (re)shape the way teachers use the system. I invited the teachers to think about the factors that enable or hinder the integration of AWE tools into their classrooms. I paused them when necessary and used the stimulus to facilitate the discussion. The pilot study spanned three weeks with each interview and SRI session lasting between 1 and 2 hours. All the interview protocols and prompts were revised based on the findings from the pilot study and feedback from the participants.

Reflection - Methodological Issues and Research Design

Janghorban et al. (2013) argue that a qualitative researcher can improve their research skills and engage more effectively in qualitative inquiry through reflecting on the insights gained from a pilot study, thereby increasing the credibility of their work. The pilot study was useful in providing insights into the methodological issues and informed the final research design with fresh empirical evidence. Methodologically, it offered information regarding relevant interview questions. While my initial choice of semi-structured interview prompts appeared robust, the pilot revealed that some questions were overly structured and could be misleading, limiting participants' authentic expression of their experiences and thoughts. Upon reflection, I acknowledged the need to balance structure with flexibility to encourage richer, more genuine responses. Drawing on the guidance from Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), I refined my interview guides, both the semi-structured and stimulated-recall interviews to facilitate greater conversational flow while still maintaining consistency with my research questions. This process involved changes such as rewording, rephrasing, sequencing, deletion and addition in the interview questions as well as dividing the interview into several sessions due to the number of questions involved (all questions are available from the author on request through email).

For the stimulated-recall interview, questions which were irrelevant to the stimulus (i.e., questions about general practices or information) were moved from the SRI guide to the semi-structured interview as further potential prompts. Questions and stimulus that held little value to address the research questions were removed. For example, I eliminated photos of classroom layout and the resources since they held little value as the contextual factor that contributed to teacher's actions and decision making when using the system. This decision was made based on the findings and after contacting potential teacher participants to ask whether they use the system inside or outside their classrooms. As they use the system more frequently outside the classrooms, having the classroom photo and asking questions on how classroom layout and the resources influence the use of W&I in the class were not meaningful.

Practical Challenges in Data Collection

The piloting also helped identify and resolve practical challenges in the data collection process and allowed for the refinement of the fieldwork procedure. For instance, the initial plan included screenshots of teachers' reflection as part of their daily routine. However, it became evident that the teachers did not use the system during class contact hours. This meant no reflections were included in their lesson plans. Recognizing this, I had to adjust the data collection instruments. Importantly, I aimed to avoid introducing additional method that could increase the burden on the already time-constrained participants. The instruments were redesigned to accommodate the situation while still capturing reflective insights. This includes integrating prompts for reflection during interviews and revising the Think-Aloud protocol to encourage deeper reflection from the teachers. This aligns with established practices in qualitative research, highlighting the importance of adapting to participants' contexts to maintain ethical engagement and ensure data quality (Creswell and Poth, 2018). These changes were grounded in a reflexive approach which acknowledges the dynamic relationship between the researcher and participants (Berger, 2015).

Data Analysis and Refinement of Interview Guide

While the pilot's main purpose was to test the procedures and the interview guides, I conducted a rapid, light-touch analysis of the interviews to ensure alignment with the study objectives. Teachers reported using the AWE tools sparingly due to contextual constraints around device access, time, Wi-Fi connectivity, limited funding, student-related factors and limitations inherent to the AWE system. They framed support as institutional and informal, self-initiated troubleshooting rather than formal training, and expressed positive but cautious attitudes toward AWE integration, highlighting fit with lesson goals, curriculum and assessment requirements, and students' willingness. This broadly matched my expectations about practices and contextual factors, but I had expected more references to how teachers' technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) impacted the way AWE tools were utilized. This prompted me to strengthen questions on how each type of knowledge influences teachers' assessment practices when using AWE tools.

Environmental Factor and Contingency Plan

During the pilot study, I encountered an unanticipated challenge, i.e., flooding in the area where the data collection was planned. Despite being infrequent, the disruption underscored the necessity of fieldwork contingency planning. This experience taught me that researchers should remain flexible and responsive to environmental and contextual factors that are beyond their control. I revised my timeline and identified alternative arrangements to ensure the continuity of the study. For others facing similar challenges, it is crucial to incorporate flexibility into research designs and timelines, and to anticipate even low-probability disruptions as part of ethical and effective fieldwork planning (Marshall and Rossman, 2016).

Reflecting critically on the pilot experience, I observed a notable change in my self-perception as a researcher. Although I was initially confident in theoretical knowledge, the practical application exposed weaknesses in my communication and adaptability skills. This realization has proven to be highly valuable in skill-building in areas such as interviewing and active listening- skills I now appreciate as integral to effective qualitative research.

Conclusion

The pilot study informed the actual fieldwork in three significant ways. First, the piloting of the interviews led to necessary adjustments which ultimately established a satisfactory procedure for the main data collection. Second, the lessons learnt from the process developed my understanding of practical and contextual challenges which enhances methodological rigour and maintains ethical engagement. Third, the reflective practice contributed to my personal upskilling as a postgraduate researcher and prepared me in conducting the actual fieldwork.

To fellow postgraduate researchers, it is important to recognise pilot studies as a reflective practice. A practice that serves not only as a personal learning tool, but also as a vital scholarly activity that strengthens methodological rigour and significantly contributes to the research community. By acknowledging and adapting to challenges, such as unforeseen environmental disruptions, participant constraints, or methodological issues, we enhance the credibility and transparency of our work and add to a more realistic understanding of fieldwork. As Finlay (2002) posits, reflexivity situates the researcher as an active participant rather than a detached observer, whose decisions significantly influence the research process- an essential consideration in qualitative studies.

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Piloting a Doctoral Project on Vocabulary Learning: Procedure and Reflection

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Abstract of the Article

Although pilot studies are important in vocabulary research, there is limited practical guidance on how to carry one out. It becomes more difficult when the pilot must be conducted outside the classroom in an unfamiliar location, involves face-to-face meetings with participants, and when the researcher has limited prior knowledge of the target group. This article addresses this gap by offering a researcher's perspective on the practical implementation of a pilot study on vocabulary learning, including methodological decisions, emergent challenges, and subsequent adaptations to the main study. This article first introduces the background and aims of the pilot study. Then, it describes the procedure of the pilot study, followed by reflections on its benefits and challenges. Finally, it highlights the significance of pilot studies for similar doctoral projects.

Keywords

Vocabulary learning,
English as a foreign
language,
Four Strands,
Pilot study.

Introduction

Despite the large number of words that English as a foreign language (EFL) learners need to know for adequate communication, EFL learners' vocabulary growth rate is slow (Webb and Chang, 2012). To help them overcome these challenges, a major strand of vocabulary research is to explore the use of meaning-focused input (MFI) sources for EFL learners to learn vocabulary incidentally (e.g., Teng, 2024). Studies in this line found that learning can happen from exposure to these sources. However, the gains from MFI are small (Webb et al., 2023). To optimise vocabulary learning, several frameworks such as the Involvement Load Hypothesis (Hulstijn and Laufer, 2001) and the Technique Feature Analysis (Nation and Webb, 2011) have been proposed and studied. Generally speaking, these frameworks hypothesised that activities which were more motivating and cognitively demanding would lead to better vocabulary learning outcomes.

While these frameworks allowed researchers to evaluate vocabulary learning activities (e.g., flashcards, sentence writing), they did not provide guidance on how language lessons or courses should be organised as a whole. Nation's Four Strands Principle (2007) instead offers another potential way of learning from MFI from the perspective of course organisation. That is, combining MFI with the other three strands: meaning-focused output (MFO), language-focused learning (LFL), and fluency development (FD). However, previous studies have not examined the effects of one, two, three, and four strands on vocabulary learning. The aim of this doctoral research project is to compare learning gains of 10 target words between the following conditions: MFI only, MFI+LFL, MFI+LFL+MFO, and MFI+LFL+MFO+FD. This article reports on the procedure and reflection of conducting a pilot study.

Nation (2007) has not set a rule for the sequence of the Four Strands. However, according to the three-stage Skill Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 2020), the first stage of L2 learning is establishing declarative knowledge. This stage is relevant to MFI and

LFL, and having MFI before LFL may encourage learners to infer words from contexts on first exposure. The second stage is procedural knowledge. This stage is relevant to MFO, where learners try to use the words. The third stage is automatization. After proceduralization, much more efforts are needed before the knowledge can be accessed quickly, reliably, and easily, which is related to FD. Therefore, the sequence of the Four Strands in this study was MFI first, then LFL, followed by MFO and FD.

This project focuses on form-meaning links. The form-meaning link means that when learners encounter the words, they can think of the meaning, or vice versa. It is the most important as it creates the foundation for further development of other aspects of vocabulary knowledge (Schmitt, 2010a). I use the terms 'recognition' and 'recall' in describing vocabulary knowledge following Schmitt (2010b) because they also refer to test formats. Recognition means that learners can select the target words from several choices, while recall means that learners can provide the answers themselves.

Recent research shows that learning at recognition levels always takes place before recall levels (González-Fernández and Schmitt, 2020). This confirms Laufer and Goldstein (2004) that the following aspects of form-meaning links have different levels of learning difficulty (from easy to difficult): meaning recognition (choosing the correct meaning of the word from several options), form recognition (choosing the correct spelling of the word from several options), meaning recall (providing the meaning of the word), and form recall (providing the spelling of the word).

However, not all target words and test measures are appropriate for a particular study. If learners have fairly good knowledge of the target words, then a ceiling effect may occur as there is limited room for improvement in learning gains (Teng, 2016). The same may happen for test measures that are too easy for the participants. By contrast, if a test measure is too difficult, there can be a floor effect, where participants all score very low (Perez, 2020).

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For this particular study, piloting was even more essential because I did not have my own classes, nor could I recruit participants from my workplace. Instead, I had to recruit participants widely from my professional network. In other words, without testing the participants directly, it would be difficult to gain a sufficient understanding of their prior knowledge of the 10 specific words. The first aim of the pilot study was to find out whether participants knew the target words already. Second, the pilot study aimed to evaluate which test formats are likely to best capture the learning gains: Chinese-to-English translation (form recall), checklist (form recognition), English-to-Chinese translation (meaning recall) or multiple-choice questions (meaning recognition).

Participants

The pilot study was conducted with 13 participants in a university in eastern China. They were recruited from opportunity sampling via English language teachers at that university. A recruitment poster was circulated in the group chats of their English language class, and students who were willing to participate contacted me. Ten of them were first-year undergraduates, and three of them were postgraduates. They were studying different majors, including artificial intelligence, software engineering, electronic science and technology, mechanical engineering, environmental science, electronic information, applied statistics, and French. They have learned English for 12.7 years on average. None of them had stayed in English-speaking countries for more than three months.

Intervention

The MF, LFL, MFO, and FD strands were operationalised as the following activity respectively: (1) reading while listening to a story of about 1,000 words, (2) seeing the flashcards of 10 target words, (3) writing to describe pictures that using the target words, (4) reading while listening to the story again. Participants were randomly assigned to an MFI only ($n = 3$), MFI+LFL ($n = 2$), MFI+LFL+MFO ($n = 2$), MFI+LFL+MFO+FD ($n = 4$), or a control group ($n = 2$). Randomising people into small groups, although unlikely to have much statistical power, can test the randomisation procedures, pilot the test link for each group (see the next paragraph), and all related materials. It can also estimate the time needed for each group to complete all activities. The pilot participants were similar to the main study participants in that they were also undergraduate students with about 12 years of experience learning English. Participants in both the pilot and main studies began learning English at primary school, as it became a compulsory subject at that level of education in China.

Data Collection

Data were collected from Qualtrics, a survey platform. The pilot study lasted for three weeks. Each week, participants received a Qualtrics link for the group they were assigned to, which included all the learning and testing activities. Weeks 1 and 3 were completed online with individual meetings with the participants. Week 2 was carried out in a face-to-face meeting with individual participants. The reason was that Week 2 was the week for intervention and was the most important session for the whole study. Meeting participants face-to-face helped me observe how participants engaged with the learning and testing activities.

In Week 1, the participants first completed an Updated Vocabulary Levels Test (uVLT) (Webb et al., 2017) and then the pre-test.

The uVLT measures knowledge of the most frequent 5,000 word families in English. Word families include base words and their inflected and derived forms. The purpose of uVLT was to inform the selection of target words. Target words usually need to come from a frequency band beyond the participants' current vocabulary levels. In Week 2, the participants completed their respective treatments and took the immediate post-test. After that, they provided feedback through a short, informal interview. In Week 3, the participants took the delayed post-test. The pre-test, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test had the same test items, but to minimise the test effect, the test items were reordered randomly.

Measures of Learning Outcomes

Form recall was measured through translation. Participants saw some Chinese sentences and their English translation. In the English sentences, one word was missing. Participants needed to fill in the blank. Participants saw one test item per page. In the pilot study, the initial letter of each target word was provided for the learners, but not the number of letters (e.g., a _____). This is to avoid participants giving synonyms as answers. However, it turned out that some participants still provided synonyms with the same initial letter (e.g., apparel instead of attire, brigand instead of bandit). Therefore, in the main study, participants saw both the initial letter and the number of letters of the answers (e.g., a _ _ _ _ _).

The parts to measure form recognition and meaning recall contained 34 items, with 10 target words, 21 distractors, and three words participants should be familiar with. The distractors were pseudowords. Participants saw a word and were provided with the pronunciation of the word. They needed to choose between "I know this word" and "I don't know this word". Participants saw one test item per page. Then, on the next page, they were asked to provide anything they knew about the meaning of the word if they had chosen "I know this word". They were told to leave the box blank and move to the next page if they had chosen "I don't know this word". Distractors were revised if they looked too similar to the participants' known words or if they often tempted the participants to guess the meaning based on the form. For example, the distractor 'rootee' was chosen as many as nine times across the three weeks, and participants who chose it consistently suggested that it meant 'related to root'. Therefore, this distractor was changed to 'kootee'.

A multiple-choice test measured participants' meaning recognition of the words. Participants were asked to choose only one option from six. The six options were a key, four distractors and one "I don't know" option. However, it was found that the multiple-choice test was too easy for the participants; they could score very high in the pre-test, so the amount of learning gains that could be captured from pre- to post-tests was much smaller compared to other measures. In addition, I asked one of their teachers which test formats would be appropriate to measure the learning gains of my target words for these groups of learners. She told me that form recall could be difficult, and meaning recall seemed the most appropriate. Such conversations with teachers also deepened my understanding of participants.

Ethics

This study was approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee for Business, Environment, and Social Sciences at the University of Leeds (Approval Number: 1689). All participants read an information sheet about the study and then signed a

written consent form before voluntarily taking part in the study. Their data were anonymous. Their names were replaced by a number (e.g., ID = 1). Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study before the second week.

Reflection

The pilot study, which was a rehearsal of the whole data collection procedure, first made me aware of the difficulty of recruiting participants. Due to busy schedules, many teachers said that it was not feasible to use regular class hours for their classes to take part in the pilot study. However, they were happy to circulate the recruitment poster in their classes to enable students to take part outside the classroom. In the main study, to increase the sample size, I communicated with the teachers to find the most convenient time, which allowed me to recruit several classes to complete the study during normal class hours. Moreover, the pilot study allowed me to estimate the time that participants needed to complete each week. I could therefore communicate with the gatekeepers and teachers precisely how much time I needed in the class for the main study. I was also able to remind participants in the main study to speed up if I found they spent too much time in some parts of the test.

One challenge was that the pilot study itself was intensive. I had to arrange individual meetings with each of the 13 participants every week for three consecutive weeks, starting as early as possible to avoid clashing with their exam weeks. As I was not a member of the university, I could not book a meeting room. Instead, I met them either online (Weeks 1 and 3) or in a public café on campus (Week 2). I needed to access the campus as a visitor and, most importantly, decide where to meet my participants. I first identified all the cafés on campus through the campus map I found online. I searched online for posts where people had shared which cafés were quiet, had sockets, and were open to the public. I then scheduled the meeting time with the participants according to an ideal café's opening hours and shared the address with them. Another challenge was that the sample size was small, so that each participant's in-depth responses were crucial. Initially, I was concerned about the amount of information I could gather. However, all participants were highly engaged and provided valuable insights. The participants also generously offered feedback for the learning materials, which greatly improved the quality of the study.

The pilot study contributed to confirming and refining the research methods. The pilot study first aimed to find out to what extent the target participants knew the target words at the form recall, form recognition, meaning recall, and meaning recognition levels. The results showed no word was known to over 80% of the participants at any level. Therefore, all target words were kept in the main study.

The pilot study also aimed to identify which test formats would best capture the learning gains. The results indicated that three test measures (i.e., form recall, form recognition, and meaning recall) could potentially distinguish between the experimental groups and the control group, with the experimental groups having much higher learning gains. Therefore, these measures were kept in the main study. The meaning recognition test was removed in the main study for two reasons. First, having too many test measures would take a long time and lead to test fatigue. Second, it showed a ceiling effect, as participants could perform near the maximum score at pre-test, leaving little space to demonstrate measurable improvement.

However, all the revisions would not have been possible if I had not planned the time to adjust between the pilot and main studies. The time needed for such adjustments may vary depending on the nature of the project. I had about two months to examine the results of the pilot study, reflect on the entire process, and make changes accordingly.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the procedure and reflection of a pilot study on vocabulary learning. The pilot study helped examine the feasibility of the intervention, confirm target words and materials, estimate the time needed for each week, and evaluate instruments. The insights obtained from the pilot study were critically incorporated into the main study.

This article highlights that requesting class hours from teachers for both pilot and main studies can be very challenging; instead, recruiting individual students to complete the pilot study outside the classroom may be more acceptable. Conducting pilot studies in unfamiliar sites is indeed difficult but feasible with careful planning. This article encourages the vocabulary research community to explore alternative, practical approaches to conduct pilot studies in order to increase the pool of participants and overcome the challenge of restricted classroom access.

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Developing a Framework to Analyse Master's Students' Projection of Authority through Written Argument at a UK University: Insights from a Pilot Study

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Abstract of the Article

This article will discuss a pilot study used to develop a novel framework to analyse master's students' projection of authority in argumentative academic writing. The projection of authority will be presented as a vital component of student success, as it allows the student to make a meaningful contribution to the disciplinary discourse community. If students fail to project authority in their writing, they run the risk of producing written work which is characterised by description rather than evaluation. The pilot analysis of five student essays from the BAWE corpus resulted in the creation of a triadic framework for the analysis of textual authority focusing on the following aspects: 1) The way students construct written argument 2) The way students negotiate the argument in the context of a disciplinary conversation 3) The way students position themselves in relation to the argument and how they project an authorial self

Keywords

Academic writing,
Textual authority,
Argument,
Authorial self,
Voice

Introduction

All students in the higher education setting need to become skilled in academic writing if they are to be successful in the academy. However, academic writing is often an area that students struggle with. Successful student academic writing requires students in the academy to move beyond 'knowledge telling' to 'knowledge transformation' (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1987). Academic writing at all university levels, from undergraduate student writing to published research articles invariably requires the writer to project authority through their text, so that the writer portrays themselves as someone who has "something to say" (Clark and Ivancic, 1997) and who has something meaningful to contribute to the disciplinary conversation in which they are operating. In attempting to project authority, a central tool academic writers draw upon is the construction of a written argument (Lea and Street, 1998, Wingate, 2012).

However, successful argumentation in academia is complex in that it requires more than simply a logically sound argument: as academic writing is inherently dialogic, the writer must locate the argument they are advancing within the discourse community of the relevant discipline, often through the synthesis of published sources (Martin and White, 2005; Tang, 2011), while also portraying how they position themselves as writers in relation to the argument at hand. Through the construction of argumentation in academia, writers aim to project textual authority through the way they appraise other sources while also asserting their own voice through the argumentation.

The manifestation of authority in student written assignments can therefore be regarded as having three interrelated aspects

which will form the basis of this research:

1. The way students construct written argument
2. The way students negotiate the argument in the context of a disciplinary conversation
3. The way students position themselves in relation to the argument and how they project an authorial self

This pilot study has informed the design of my PhD project and resulted in the development of an analytical framework which will be used in the data analysis. The main project will take a qualitative, longitudinal approach that seeks to investigate how and the extent to which individual students project authority in their written assignments for their master's degree, and the reasons behind their rhetorical choices. Students will be asked to submit their master's written assignments to the researcher at the end of each semester, which will be qualitatively analysed for the three aspects of textual authority as described above.

Importance and Aims of the Pilot Study

The pilot study was instrumental in developing a novel triadic framework for the textual analysis. As this project aims to analyse the projection of textual authority in student writing, it was essential to use the pilot to develop a robust coding system that can be used in the main project. The pilot allowed for the development of a coding system and for this to then be trialled for effectiveness before deployment in the main study. Furthermore, coding and analysis of the texts need to have taken place before any other aspects of the methodology in the main project take place, such as text-based interviews, as interviews will be based on the textual analysis, and so piloting the coding

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for textual analysis was an important first step.

Pilot Study Procedure

In the pilot study, examples of student essays from the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus were analysed. Five student essays at master's level were chosen for analysis, across the following subjects: three in sociology, two in business and one in literature. These disciplines were chosen as they dealt with topics which were accessible to a non-specialist reader, such as the global food system, unemployment and racism, making the textual analysis process smoother.

These were read thoroughly and analysed for aspects of textual authority. The aim was to reach saturation point and produce a list of codes for the framework that can be used in the main study.

In the first round of the pilot, the main focus of analysis was on the first two aspects of textual authority as mentioned above:

1. The way students construct written arguments (initial codes based on Toulmin's (1958) argument structure)
2. The way students negotiate the argument within a disciplinary conversation (initial codes based on Tang's (2011) engagement strategies)

This is because at this stage in the research process, the original plan was to focus only on the first two aspects for analysis of textual authority. However, through the process of coding the texts for the first two aspects, it became apparent that there were other rhetorical features present in student texts that did not fit into the first two categories but seemed to also contribute to the projection of authority, such as first-person pronouns, stance markers, boosters and hedges (Hyland, 2005). At first these were coded separately in a category titled 'other', however this ultimately led to the development of the third aspect of the framework: in relation to the ways students position themselves in relation to the argument and project an authorial self.

This was based on Clark and Ivanic's (1997) contention that a piece of writing is always inevitably imbued with the writer's individual voice.

Refining the Codes

Subsequently, a second round of coding for the pilot took place, using each of the three aspects of the framework in turn, to ensure that each of the three frameworks were given equal prominence in the analysis without one dominating over another. The second round of coding also resulted in some adaptations to the original frameworks, and some additional codes:

Analysing the way students construct written argument

Toulmin's original scheme for analysing the patterns of arguments, which is rooted in the formal logic tradition (1958), was initially used in its original form as follows (examples added by the author):

- Claim (the main argument) Example: The death penalty should be abolished.
- Data (the evidence to support the argument) Example: Innocent people are sometimes executed due to mistakes
- Warrants (the link between the claim and the data) Example: It is ethically wrong to kill the innocent
- Backing (support for the warrant) Example: Killing the innocent is considered wrong in the moral codes of most

cultures.

- Qualifiers (conditions under which the claim is true, or where the claim's truth may be limited) Example: The death penalty may have some benefits
- Rebuttals (situations in which the claim is not true). Example: The vast majority of those executed are in fact guilty.

However, the pilot study demonstrated that the basic Toulmin elements alone were not sufficient when analysing the authority projection in academic, university level essays, as the essays tended to include multiple claims, developments of claims and rebuttals, and instances of the writer restating their main claims at different points in the text or making links back to certain claims. This is typical of university level writing, which often deals with multiple ideas at once with the writing perhaps going in different directions, in contrast to lower-level writing such as secondary school assignments which tend to be more linear in structure. Therefore, in addition to coding main claims, sub claims were also coded, as student academic writing is more complex than the legal arguments which Toulmin's structure is originally based on and tends to include multiple claims which are developed and linked together.

A further feature of argument building in academic writing noticed in the pilot is the way in which across the disciplines, students wrote about the background to their topic in order to contextualise their argument, before introducing the main claims. This tendency was a common feature across all the student essays, and is a distinctive feature of academic writing. For this reason, an extra code of 'contextualisation' has been added, as the contextualisation plays an important role in foregrounding the students' argument and demonstrating its relevance.

While Toulmin's original structure also includes 'rebuttals' as a feature, the pilot revealed that this framework will need to expand the rebuttals element to make this more appropriate for the genre of academic writing. Toulmin's argument structure was originally developed in reference to legal argumentation, and so when Toulmin refers to rebuttal he means conditions under which the warrant would no longer connect the data with the claim. However, the way in which writers in the academic genre must position themselves as part of a wider conversation with the discourse community, makes Toulmin's notion of rebuttals too limited and not fit for purpose in this context. Therefore, it will be more appropriate for this study to refer to counterarguments, concessions and refutations (examples and code tables are available from the author on request).

Analysing the way students negotiate the argument in the context of a disciplinary conversation

When students put forward their claims, and at sites of dialogue with other sources, Tang's (2011) framing of expansive and contractive engagement strategies was used in the pilot to analyse how the writer is positioning themselves within the discourse community through the construction of the argument. Dialogically expansive strategies 'expand' dialogic opportunities by acknowledging other stances in the literature which may be different from students' own viewpoints, and through this, students embrace a diversity of viewpoints. Dialogically contractive strategies still involve acknowledging other viewpoints, however this is done in a dismissive way which does not acknowledge them as viable, thereby 'contracting' dialogic opportunity. This aspect is concerned with the way the argument will be per-

ceived by the discourse community.

A key aspect of Tang's (2011) engagement strategies that were tested in the pilot was the way writers engage with other sources in their work, as follows:

- Acknowledge: Writers attribute the ideas being put forward to a named person or persons in a neutral manner
- Distance: Writers attribute the ideas being put forward to a named person or persons in a distancing manner, using non-factive reporting verbs.
- Endorse: Writers align themselves with and endorse a named, possibly more authoritative, source.

However, the pilot revealed three further strategies student writers tend to use when engaging with other sources, which were used frequently and also have the potential to expand or contract the dialogue: 1) integral citation 2) non-integral citation 3) direct quote. While these strategies do not feature in Tang's original framework of dialogic engagement strategies, their inclusion is relevant to this analytical framework as they were identified as a key feature across the pilot texts. It seems that students do not always employ strategies such as 'endorse' or 'distance' when engaging with other sources, but they often simply write the idea (perhaps with an attempt at paraphrasing) followed by a citation, or quote directly from the text. These strategies also have the potential to expand or contract the dialogue depending on how they are used, and were therefore added to the final set of codes.

Analysing way students position themselves in relation to the argument and how they project an authorial self

Clark and Ivanic's (1997) concept of the authorial self was used to analyse the way the writers portray themselves as "someone who has something to say" (p.152) and how they see themselves in relation to both the argument they have constructed and the discourse community in which they are positioning themselves. The codes for this aspect were mainly based on Hyland's (2005) framework which separates stance into the following elements: hedges, boosters, attitude markers and self-mentions. The following elements were noted in the pilot (*italics indicates additional features identified in the pilot but not present in Hyland (2005)*):

- First person pronoun use
- Hedging language
- Boosters
- Epistemic phrases
- Solipsistic voice
- Passive phrase
- Signposting language
- Conjunctions

While the elements above are not specifically mentioned by Clark and Ivanic (1997) as aspects of authorial voice, the pilot revealed that in the context of academic writing they help to portray how the writer sees themselves in relation to the argument they are putting forward. For example, first person pronoun use presents an assertive authorial voice who is confident in their propositions and is willing to risk loss of personal credibility in the event of being proved wrong. The use of boosters has a similar effect, in that they portray the writer as

being strong in their convictions. Conjunctions which are used to emphasise the link between data and claim were also identified as a way in which a writer can assert their presence in a text, as they can serve to highlight the writer's conviction in the strength of the data they are putting forward in relation to the claim. Furthermore, signposting, in which the writer guides the reader through the structure of the text, also helps to convey the writer's authorial presence as it asserts the writer's ownership of the text, and portrays the writer as its 'architect' (Tang and John, 1999).

However, other linguistic features may have the opposite effect and undermine the writer's authorial voice. For example, hedging language and passive phrases on one hand can serve to expand the potential for dialogue when viewed through the lens of Tang, however they can also portray the writer as unassertive or uncertain in their own convictions, particularly if overused. Furthermore, the use of solipsistic voice, in which the writer refers to evidence for their argument in their own words without referencing or acknowledging the source, poses a risk to the integrity of the writer's authorial voice, as it blurs the distinction between the writer's voice and that of the source writer's.

Reflection on the Pilot Study

The pilot was extremely beneficial to the development of my research methods and in refining the coding system which is central to my research. It helped to identify a third aspect to the analytical framework, resulting in the triadic framework, as it was only when I started to look for linguistic features of authority during the pilot, that it became apparent that authorial voice also played a prominent role in the projection of authority. In addition, by trialling the original frameworks from Toulmin (1958) and Tang (2011) in the context of master's level academic writing during the framework, it was clear that adaptations were needed to make them more applicable to the type of academic writing focused on in this study, which has resulted in some novel adaptations to these frameworks.

However, the pilot also presented some challenges. At first it was challenging to develop an efficient and clear system for coding the texts across the different frameworks, and in the first round I attempted to code for multiple aspects of authority simultaneously. However, this proved to be inefficient and did not allow me to capture all the necessary codes. I therefore went back and repeated this round of coding, this time dealing with each aspect of authority separately and in turn. In addition, for the first attempt at coding, colour coding in Microsoft Word was used, however I switched to the UAM corpus tool software in the second round, which made the annotating process more effective.

Conclusion

This pilot study played an important role in the development and refinement of the codes which will be a central aspect of my analytical framework. The pilot allowed me to test whether the three theoretical concepts that underpin my research can be successfully applied to the analysis of the projection of textual authority in student written texts, and the results demonstrated that modifications to the theoretical frameworks were needed to make them applicable to my context. The results of the pilot study have allowed me to justify these modifications in my methodology, which enhances the novel contribution of my research. The pilot study has demonstrated that when devel-

oping a coding system for text based qualitative research, it is invaluable to spend time testing out the codes during a pilot so that saturation point can be reached and a robust coding system for the project can be created. This will equip the researcher with confidence when proceeding with the data collection and analysis stages of the project.

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Qualitative Pilot Study of Teachers' Expectations for Young Students' Use of Educational Technology

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Abstract of the Article

My PhD project explores female Saudi teachers' expectations regarding classroom use of educational technology by female students aged 6 to 8. This pilot study was conducted to examine the validity and suitability of data collection tools proposed for the main project and to identify issues, limitations, and possible adjustments. A qualitative approach included a narrative interview and two semi-structured interviews with a total of three female teachers plus two classroom observations of a total of 45 young female students, all from two schools. Piloting provided useful feedback about the proposed instruments, enabling refinements for the main study: discontinuing narrative interviews that proved unsuitable, transferring some observation elements to interviews, and adjusting interview questions. Other benefits included exploring specific research environments; improving logistics and coordination; and reflecting critically about enhancing interview-management frameworks, contingency strategies, and interviewing and rapport-building skills, all of which will prove invaluable for the overall research design.

Keywords

Pilot study,
Qualitative,
Teachers,
Students,
Education technology,
Expectations

Introduction

Researchers have closely considered the importance of teachers' expectations and their impact on positive student behavioural and academic outcomes: either encouraging (e.g., Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968; Rubie-Davies et al., 2015) or inhibiting (e.g., Aydin and Ok, 2022; Zichichi, 2018). Teachers' expectations are also related to and can influence instructional classroom practices (Rubie-Davies, 2007; Bouderbane, 2020). How teacher expectations impact student achievement in general has been addressed for numerous curricular domains: reading, writing, languages, and mathematics (e.g., Rubie-Davies et al., 2014; Griffiths et al., 2023). Despite younger children being most vulnerable effects of teachers' expectations (Sun, 2021), most previous studies involved high-school students (e.g., Szumski and Karwowski, 2019; Bouderbane, 2020), leaving a significant gap regarding teachers' expectations of younger students. Also unexamined in the literature is the relationship between teachers' expectations and students' use of educational technology in the classroom, particularly in primary schools. A goal of this project was, therefore, to explore, through interviews and classroom observations, the expectations of female teachers regarding the use of educational technology by students aged 6 to 8 years.

Data Collection Instruments

To achieve this goal, the initial qualitative research design for the main study includes four data collection tools: narrative and semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, student tasks, and follow-up interviews. However, the last two were not piloted because their design was contingent on data collected from the interviews and classroom observations.

Narrative interviews are a qualitative technique for eliciting

respondents' perspectives and personal experiences through articulated thoughts, viewpoints, and stories using their own language and ideas. For this project, narrative interviews were anticipated to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of participants' expectations and beliefs (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000) and offer insights into subjective aspects of their own expectations, providing details of the contextual factors and narratives that shape and influence teachers' expectations about educational technology.

Semi-structured interviews were based on a prepared interview guide, which provided a structured framework while facilitating the formulation of follow-up questions arising from participants' responses. Open-ended interview questions were aligned with research objectives, with further questions to ensure consistency between data collection and study goals. The guide was checked by both research supervisors and the Leeds Ethics Committee. The semi-structured interview questions used in the pilot study are available from the author.

Because discrepancies between self-reported and actual actions and intentions are a common source of controversy related to interview answers (Robson and McCartan, 2016), classroom observations in teachers' natural settings were essential for confirming the consistency of teachers' expectations and the validity of the relationship between their self-perceived expectations and their actual observed teaching practices and behaviours (Hoffman and Seidel, 2015). Classroom observation also facilitates identification of students' abilities, technological skills, and levels of engagement with technology during classroom activities related to the study context. However, the possibility of teachers altering their behaviour during observation sessions to match more closely with what they had reported in the interviews must also be recognised. Time constraints prevented ex-

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amination of this issue in this pilot study, and the observations are used solely for verification purposes rather than for in-depth analysis. This issue will, however, be taken into consideration for incorporation into the broader research.

Significance and Objectives of the Pilot Study

For this project, piloting the data collection instruments was deemed essential. Considered an important research process, pilot studies in general offer advantages that also constituted the goals of this particular study:

- To acquire feedback and information about the practicality of the proposed methodology: verification of the suitability, effectiveness, clarity, and relevance of the research tools for the target participants, thus establishing their applicability for collecting the data for answering the primary research questions: the expectations of female teachers in primary private schools situated in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
- To assess the validity and suitability of the designed tools and to inform their modification to improve their quality and clarity prior to the commencement of the main study (Ismail et al., 2018).
- To uncover potential weaknesses in tools and methodologies and unanticipated logistical or procedural challenges (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001).

For this pilot study, the goal was to analyse interviews and classroom observations for validity, based on whether participants' responses aligned with the research objectives and on whether observations captured relevant classroom behaviours related to teacher expectations and student use of educational technology, and for suitability, based on interview participants' feedback, clarity of questions, and their appropriateness to the study context and on the relevance and feasibility of observations in a real classroom context.

Procedures and Participants

For implementing both the main and the pilot studies, 15 private primary schools in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, were initially approached via email. Only two schools in northern Riyadh responded and agreed to participate, so they were selected to participate in both phases. After their confirmation, the principals of these two schools were contacted to provide letters of agreement. Meetings were then held with the principals to explain the pilot study objectives, data collection tools, and the number of teachers and students required. Once the principals confirmed the details, they scheduled meetings with the participating teachers to clarify the research purpose, outline their roles, and address any questions or concerns. In total, three teachers from the two schools participated in the pilot study, which lasted approximately two weeks.

Given the study's focus on the use of educational technology in their schools, recruitment of these participants was based on a purposive sampling procedure targeted at enhancing the accuracy and consistency of data and conclusions (Denscombe, 2007; Thomas, 2022). Table 1 summarises the participating teachers' specialities, ages, and amount of experience both with teaching and with educational technology in the classroom.

The interview tool was tested through three interviews. A 30-minute narrative interview was held with one teacher who participated only in the narrative phase. Due to time constraints, this teacher could not be involved in the later

semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with the other two teachers, one from each of the schools.

Partici-pants	Subjects taught	Experi-ence using educational technology	Teaching experience	Age
Teacher 1 AA	English language	4 years	6 years	28
Teacher 2 SR	Sciences	3 years	3 years	25
Teacher 3 LS	Science and IT	2 years	2 years	33

Table 1: Information about teacher participants

Following the interview sessions, the validity of the adapted semi-structured observation protocol was tested (Brighton et al., 2007) with respect to both the same two teachers and their students. The classroom observations took place in the classrooms of these two teachers, involving a total of 45 female students aged 6 to 8. Due to time limitations and logistical difficulties, each teacher was observed in a single 45-minute session in her classroom. During the observations, the most important points were recorded as brief handwritten phrases on paper, such as the teacher's instructional practices and teacher-student interactions. After permission had been obtained from the participants, observations were also audio-recorded using a digital recorder.

Ethical Considerations

The first step in the piloting process was to obtain approval for the study from the University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number 1040) and the Saudi Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia. This pilot study complied with ethical integrity principles designed to protect participants' rights and confidentiality. Prior to the study implementation, an information sheet explaining the study goals was distributed to the teacher participants, and informed consent forms were also provided for their signatures. Participants were advised that their involvement was voluntary: they could withdraw at any time without consequences. Participants were further assured that their data and information would remain private, that their identities would be kept anonymous, and that the data and information would be stored securely on the University of Leeds OneDrive site.

To protect student's rights in the classroom, parental consent was obtained before classroom observations. Since the Saudi schools' privacy policy prevented me from communicating directly with parents, the participating teachers distributed the information sheets and parental consent forms to the parents.

Reflections - Pilot Study Benefits

The pilot study proved vital to my main research project:

- I acquired valuable feedback about both the benefits and challenges related to my proposed data collection tools and research method.
- Exploring and understanding the specific environments and contexts of the two schools was highly useful, as it allowed me to gain insight into how students and teachers use and interact with educational technology, given that each school employs different technological resources.

The broader research project will involve evaluating students' success in completing assigned tasks, helping to examine the alignment between teachers' expectations and students' actual performance. Understanding school-specific differences in the use of educational technology was crucial for guiding the selection and design of these student tasks, ensuring their consistency and relevance for each school.

- Deficiencies were identified, which enabled subsequent refinement and verification of the validity and suitability of the selected data collection tools, particularly the interview type, the interview guide, and the observation protocol.

Instruments (Interviews)

Because the research involved exploring teachers' thoughts and attitudes, the initial proposed tool for collecting information about participants' expectations was planned to be narrative interviews. However, the piloting of the one teacher's narrative interview revealed the unsuitability of this methodological tool for obtaining specific information in this context, since the teacher felt uncomfortable and challenged during the interview, stating that she did not know what to say and felt lost with no specific questions to answer. Furthermore, the discussion frequently strayed off topic and was difficult to steer toward areas pertinent to the study, which hindered the elicitation of information relevant to the core research focus.

Piloting revealed the semi-structured interviews to be more effective and suitable for obtaining the desired information and also more flexible because they facilitated the formulation of follow-up questions in response to participant answers and encouraged free expression of their experiences and opinions. After piloting both interview types, I decided on semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool for the main study.

The semi-structured interview guide had already been checked, and the questions were believed to be clear. However, the piloting revealed that the interview questions needed restructuring, with some added, others deleted, and some rephrased to facilitate participants' understanding of them.

Instruments (Observations)

The classroom observation protocol was piloted to ensure its validity and suitability for documenting and capturing classroom practices and teacher-student interactions during the use of educational technology. I found it an effective tool for capturing the required information. However, some aspects of the classroom procedures were difficult to assess from direct observation, particularly if accurately recording them required more information and a deeper understanding of the nature of the teachers' lesson plans, such as details about how teachers determine the content and process for using technology in a particular lesson. It was clear that observation lacked suitability in regard to those elements. I therefore transferred questions about these areas from the observation protocol to the semi-structured interviews for more detailed discussion with the teachers.

Logistical Challenges

The pilot study also highlighted the difficulty of coordinating interviews or classroom observations with teachers due to their

limited availability during school days or their lack of preparation. Absence of a suitable, quiet space for teacher interviews in the schools created barriers to establishing comfortable participant-interviewer relationships. For example, the flow of one interview was interrupted because we had to keep changing locations. Piloting is clearly enormously useful for addressing unforeseen roadblocks to the development and execution of context-relevant data instruments so as to enhance their validity and suitability for achieving the overarching research goal.

Development as a Researcher

Along with improved instrument use, piloting helped me grow in my role as a researcher. I learned the importance of a clear framework for directing an interview, particularly when respondents are new to narrative interviews, and of thoughtfully designed, diverse contingency plans for keeping interviews within allotted times. During interviews, I noticed that participants interpreted some questions differently: when teachers were asked about expectations regarding students' use of educational technology, one participant focused on the advantages of using technology, while another described her own expectations of technology use in classrooms. Having previously prepared possible follow-up questions would prove vital for clarifying key questions and keeping participants on track. I was prompted to hone my interview-management skills and strategies for dealing with unexpected misinterpretations of interview questions before conducting main study interviews.

I also realised the imperative need for more thorough preparation, as with investigating observation parameters, ensuring early and flexible scheduling of participants and interviews, and prior arrangements with principals and teachers to ensure appropriate timing and quiet, consistent, suitable interview venues.

Conclusion

The goal of the pilot study was to test three qualitative data collection tools to ensure their validity and suitability for collecting the required study data. Piloting identified benefits, such as direct experience in the research environment, and issues requiring changes for the main project, such as discontinuation of narrative interviews, shifting of elements from observations to semi-structured interviews, and revised interview questions. For enhanced interview success, I discovered the value of well-planned interview-management frameworks, detailed contingency strategies, prior investigation of logistics, and development of researcher-participant rapport. Critical consideration of these factors will help me evolve as a researcher in preparation for the main study. The key takeaway for postgraduate researchers is that pilot tests are essential. After evaluation in an actual research setting, even seemingly well-designed instruments often require modification to improve validity and suitability for a specific context and target population.

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A Pilot Study on Methods and Researcher Practice in Exploring Teachers' Cognition and Practices of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

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Abstract of the Article

This paper reports on a pilot study conducted as part of a larger doctoral research project that explores Malaysian ESL primary school teachers' cognition and practices toward Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). The pilot study was designed to test and improve three research methods: semi-structured, video-stimulated recall and focus group interviews. Two in-service teachers with experience using MALL were selected for the pilot. The pilot study helped in identifying issues such as unclear wording in the interview questions, leading questions and challenges in using video-stimulated recall interview method. It also revealed the importance of building trust with participants and being aware of how the researcher's background might influence the data. Revisions were made to interview prompts and practical lessons were learned. The pilot study also involved a process of critical reflection on the researcher's assumptions, practices and ethical responsibilities.

Keywords

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL),
Teacher cognition,
Pilot study

Introduction

As an ESL primary school teacher, I have developed a passion for integrating technology, particularly mobile devices, in my teaching. This interest first emerged in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic when most teaching had to be conducted remotely. Many of my pupils lived on the outskirts of town where limited household income meant they could not afford devices such as laptops or computers. As a result, mobile phones became the main tool for teaching and learning. This experience opened my eyes to the potential of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) approach, especially in under-resourced settings.

MALL refers to the use of handheld devices to support language teaching and it offers flexible and context-sensitive opportunities for learners and teachers alike (Kukulka-Hulme, 2013; Pérez-Paredes et al., 2018). As mobile technologies continue to transform educational landscapes in both the classroom and online, it is important to explore how language teachers conceptualise and implement MALL (Parsons et al., 2024). Their approaches in using MALL vary widely depending on their context and preferences including teaching style, pupils' needs and the tools that are available (Okumuş Dağdeler, 2023).

Research Rationale and Theoretical Framing

While many studies on MALL have emerged in recent years, much of this research has concentrated on higher education settings, especially concerning university students and adult learners (Morgana and Kukulka-Hulme, 2022). In contrast, there is limited research exploring MALL within primary school settings, especially in the Malaysian context (Mustaffa and Sailin, 2022).

Existing literature tends to prioritise learners' outcomes or technological implementation with less attention given to the voices and experiences of teachers themselves (Morgana and Kukulka-Hulme, 2022). As educators play a central role in the integration of MALL, it is crucial to understand their beliefs, knowledge and classroom practices (Borg, 2006).

For this reason, my doctoral study is grounded in the concept of language teacher cognition as explained by Borg (2006) and complemented by the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (Mishra and Koehler, 2006). Borg (2006, p. 81) defines teacher cognition as "what teachers know, believe and think" about all aspects of their work. The model explains that teacher cognition is shaped by four interrelated, including schooling and pre-service experiences, in-service professional coursework, classroom teaching and contextual factors.

My study is grounded in the language teacher cognition framework to explore both the origins and the ongoing shaping of teachers' cognition towards MALL. While Borg's model explains how cognition forms and interacts with practice, the TPACK framework allows me to analyse what types of knowledge underpin that cognition when teachers use MALL. TPACK breaks down teacher knowledge into three domains: Technological Knowledge (TK), Pedagogical Knowledge (PK) and Content Knowledge (CK) and the intersections between them. By integrating the two frameworks, my study examines both the beliefs and experiences that shape teachers' beliefs about MALL

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and the knowledge structures they draw on when implementing it. This dual framing helps me connect what teachers say they believe and know with what they do in the classroom.

Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of my study is to explore Malaysian primary school English teachers' cognition and teaching practices of MALL and to examine how schooling, pre-service and in-service training and contextual factors influence their use of MALL in English language teaching.

Thus, the research questions of the study are:

1. What are Malaysian primary school English teachers' cognition toward MALL?
2. How do schooling, pre-service training and in-service training influence their cognition toward MALL?
3. How do contextual factors influence their cognition toward MALL?
4. In what ways do they practise MALL to teach the English language?
5. What is the relationship between their cognition and their teaching practice using MALL?

Why Pilot Study: Testing Data Collection Protocols

Pilot studies play a vital role in qualitative research where they serve as a preparatory phase to enhance the quality and feasibility of the main study (van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2002). They are particularly important for testing the instruments, procedures and overall research design to ensure they are clear, appropriate and effective for addressing research questions (Given, 2016).

In the context of my research, the pilot study aimed to trial the interview questions developed for the three data collection methods used in my study. Although these instruments were carefully constructed based on established literature and theoretical frameworks, piloting them was necessary to ensure their clarity, coherence and suitability for the research context (Given, 2016; Malmqvist et al., 2019). Testing the instruments in advance allowed me to identify issues such as leading questions, unclear words or phrases or overlaps between interview questions.

Testing Participant Logistics

The pilot study also provided a valuable opportunity to anticipate and address potential logistical and practical issues. Since all the participants in my main study would be involved in all three research methods, and they have existing professional commitments with their schools, piloting offered insights into time management, scheduling feasibility and participant engagement (Given, 2016; Malmqvist et al., 2019). For example, it allowed me to assess the realistic pacing of interviews and stimulated-recall sessions within school-based constraints.

Testing Researcher Communication

The pilot study also offered a valuable opportunity to rehearse how to explain the study to my participants in a respectful and culturally appropriate manner. This step was especially important given that, in qualitative research, rapport-building and informed participation are essential to ethical practice. Having said that, it is crucial for qualitative researchers to reflect carefully on their role in both data collection and interpretation since this shapes what participants choose to reveal, how

informed their consent truly is and how well their privacy and well-being are safeguarded (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Pilot Study Procedure: Recruitment of Participants

The recruitment process for the pilot study followed a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. In my study, convenience sampling means selecting participants who were easily accessible to me (Dornyei, 2007), while purposive sampling involved choosing participants based on specific criteria relevant to my study (Creswell and Poth, 2018). I selected teachers who had practical experience integrating mobile devices such as smartphones or tablets into their lessons and they used MALL for varied purposes, including teaching activities, collaborative tasks or assessment. For the pilot, I contacted two teachers whom I had previously met through professional development courses and training sessions that I conducted as part of my role as a district English language trainer. This existing professional relationship ensured smoother communication and scheduling, particularly because the pilot was conducted remotely.

Research Design and Methods

My study adopts a qualitative research design which is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm to understand teachers' cognition and practices towards MALL within their natural teaching environments. It employs a multiple case study approach involving six in-service Malaysian primary school English teachers, each representing an individual case situated in a distinct school context. The pilot tested the feasibility and relevance of the data collection methods within individual bounded cases, specifically individual teachers situated in distinct school settings (Yin, 2018). Three qualitative research methods were tested during the pilot study.

Semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview was used to explore teachers' beliefs and knowledge about MALL. It also examined the factors that shape their understanding such as schooling experiences, pre-service and in-service training and prior experiences (Borg, 2019). This method allowed participants to reflect on their views in an open and flexible format.

Video-stimulated recall interview

The video-stimulated recall interview focused on teachers' actual classroom practices. Participants watched recordings of their lessons and were asked to comment on their teaching decisions and use of mobile devices. This method helped to reveal the links between their cognition and their observed classroom practices.

Focus group

The focus group explored contextual factors that influence teachers' cognition and use of MALL. Group discussion encouraged participants to reflect on shared challenges and opportunities related to technology use including school policies, leadership support, infrastructure and peer collaboration. The interactive nature of the group helps uncover insights not always accessible in individual interviews (Breen, 2006).

Pilot Study Procedure

Most research methods literature recommends conducting a pilot study as an essential step prior to full data collection (Cohen et al., 2007; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). It serves to test the instruments, refine procedures and ensure that the study design

is workable in the actual research context (van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2002; Given, 2016). First, I contacted two in-service Malaysian English language primary school teachers via email. After receiving their agreement to participate, I conducted an online briefing session to explain the objectives of the pilot, the procedures involved, and what would be expected of them. We then scheduled the sessions based on their availability.

The pilot study tested all research methods planned for the main study. For the semi-structured interviews, I conducted two separate sessions with each participant, using the draft interview guide. I noted the flow of the conversation, how well the prompts elicited detailed responses and any moments where clarification was needed. For the focus group, I held one joint online session where both participants responded to the same set of prompts. I observed the group dynamics, the level of interaction and whether the questions encouraged independent contributions. For the video-stimulated recall interviews, each teacher recorded one lesson featuring MALL, selected short clips and then discussed these with me. I assessed whether the prompts connected effectively to the video content and whether participants could explain their decision-making clearly.

I evaluated the pilot through three sources. First, I analysed the recordings and transcripts to assess the clarity and relevance of each question, the level of detail in responses and the suitability of the sequence of activities. Second, I gathered direct feedback from participants on the clarity of instructions, the relevance of the prompts and their overall experience of each method. Third, I kept a research diary to record decisions, observations and reflections after each session. The diary helped me track methodological issues; participant reactions and it supported my reflexivity by making me aware of how my background and assumptions could influence the process.

Ethical Consideration

I obtained formal approval (Approval Number: 1828) from the University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee before engaging with participants to ensure full ethical compliance. All participants received a Participant Information Sheet and an Informed Consent Form which outlined the purpose of the study, their rights and the voluntary nature of their involvement. All interviews were recorded with consent, stored securely on password-protected devices and anonymised using pseudonyms such as “T-1” and “T-2”. For the video-stimulated recall interviews, teachers recorded their own lessons and ensured that no identifiable images of pupils were captured. Throughout the pilot, I remained mindful of my positionality as a former ESL teacher and district trainer. This was to adopt a neutral stance to avoid influencing responses or creating unintended pressure to participate.

Reflection: Improving Questioning and Interaction

The pilot study helped me refine my research tools and reflect on my role as a researcher. At first, I assumed that using interview questions based on the teacher cognition framework and the TPACK framework would be enough to generate meaningful responses. I realised that how I asked the questions, the words I used, and the way I interacted with participants affected the quality of the data. In some interviews, I noticed that I unintentionally led participants by phrasing questions in a way that suggested preferred answers. For example, I sometimes prompted with “How did your teachers during your schooling time impact

your MALL practice” which may have made them feel they had to agree. To build a more open and equal relationship, I will avoid evaluative responses and use more neutral prompts such as “Can you tell me more?” as well as emphasise at the start that I value honest and varied perspectives.

Strengthening Video-Stimulated Recall Interviews

The video-stimulated recall interviews (SRI) also revealed challenges. Although I expected the video clips to support reflection, my participants struggled to recall or explain their teaching decisions. The requirement to conduct the interviews within 48 hours of the lesson recordings added pressure, and the method was unfamiliar to them. I had not provided enough guidance or examples of how to engage with the videos. In the main study, I will prepare participants by explaining the purpose of SRI, demonstrating how to respond to video prompts and providing written guidance before the session. I will also adjust the 48-hour requirement if necessary to allow for more flexibility without losing recall accuracy.

Addressing Focus Group Dynamics

The focus group highlighted the impact of group dynamics. With only two participants, one teacher often agreed with the other and did not share alternative views. I will address this by including more participants in the main study focus groups to encourage a wider range of perspectives. I will also use direct follow-up questions, such as “Do you see this differently?” to prompt independent contributions. Although I told participants they could speak in their mother tongue, some still chose English. In the main study, I will reinforce this option at the start and repeat it throughout the session to encourage comfort and authenticity.

Refining Instruments Based on Feedback

Participant feedback also informed specific refinements to the instruments. Some participants asked for clarification or expressed confusion about the wording of questions. In other cases, their answers did not align with my intended focus which suggests the prompts were unclear or misinterpreted. For example, I revised “How do you mix your knowledge of teaching content and technology to create effective lessons?” to “Can you share how you use technology in your teaching while ensuring your pupils understand the lesson content effectively?” to make the purpose clearer. Appendix 1 links each issue identified in the pilot to the specific refinement made, making the connection between reflection and method refinement explicit.

Conclusion

This pilot study played an essential role in preparing for the main phase of my EdD research. It allowed me to test and refine the research instruments and procedures before beginning fieldwork. The feedback and observations gathered highlighted specific areas for improvement, including the wording of interview questions, the sequencing of interview sessions and the level of support needed by participants. These refinements go beyond minor adjustments and directly improve the clarity and depth of the data I will collect. As a result, the main study will be better equipped to answer the research questions in full and produce findings that make a stronger contribution to the understanding of teachers’ cognition and practices of MALL in the Malaysian primary school context.

The pilot also deepened my awareness of the relational and

ethical dimensions of this research. It reminded me of the importance of creating safe and respectful spaces for participants to share their experiences openly and honestly. It showed me how my background and role as a former trainer can influence participants' responses. This prompted me to adopt more neutral questioning techniques, clearer communication of language options and stronger facilitation strategies to ensure balanced contributions in focus groups. These changes will not only enhance data quality but also strengthen the trustworthiness and credibility of the study.

For fellow postgraduate researchers (PGRs), I emphasise that piloting is not merely a rehearsal but a critical stage in shaping the overall success of a study. Its value lies in more than refining tools as it improves the validity, richness and interpretive power of your data. Take time to listen carefully to participants, question your assumptions and remain open to changing your approach when necessary. Use the pilot to examine both the practical and relational aspects of your research process. A well-planned pilot can transform the main study and ensures that the research instruments, procedures, and researcher mindset are all ready to generate meaningful and impactful findings.

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Appendix 1: Examples of revised interview prompts

Original Prompt Revised Prompt

Semi-structured Interview

Original Prompt: How do you mix your knowledge of teaching content and technology to create effective lessons?

Revised Prompt: Can you share how you use technology in your teaching while ensuring you're your pupils understand the lesson content effectively?

Original Prompt: Could you describe how was your past learning experiences when you were a student?

Revised Prompt: Can you describe your past learning experiences as a student?

Stimulated-recall Interview

Original Prompt: Looking back at this part of the lesson, was there anything that didn't go as expected?

Revised Prompt: Did you face any challenge with MALL in your lesson?

Focus Groups

Original Prompt: What helps the use of MALL in your teaching and learning?

Revised Prompt: What factors support or encourage you to use MALL in your teaching and learning?

Original Prompt: What makes it harder to use MALL in your teaching?

Revised Prompt: What challenges or difficulties do you face when using MALL in your teaching?

