Challenges Faced While Conducting Research on Higher Education Students in Iran

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Abstract- This study aims to present the challenges that the author as a PhD student experienced in planning and collection of data for her dissertation. The thesis utilized a quantitative research method to assess Iranian Students' readiness for using mobile technology in English language learning at an Open Learning University in Iran. The instruments consisted of web surveys (27 questions). The challenges that the author encountered during data collection are organized into three categories: the researcher, participants and supervisory team. Researcher related challenges were financial, lack of basic computer knowledge, and distance. The participants' challenges were associated with low response rates, and low quality of answers. Supervisory team-related challenges included the lack of support and experience. Moreover, the study puts forward some solutions to address the challenges in order to facilitate doctoral students' journey towards collecting data.

Index Terms- Data Collection, challenges, Open Learning University, Solutions, web surveys

I. INTRODUCTION

Data collection is considered as a critical step in conducting dissertation research for PhD students because it can significantly influence the results and quality of the research. However, during data collection, doctoral students and early career researchers may face some unexpected challenges that affect the research process. Therefore, the causes of these challenges should be identified and addressed to equip future doctoral students with some skills and experiences in order to minimize the issues during data collection and improve the quality of research products.

Based on the methods used for the data collection, researchers might encounter several unanticipated challenges to obtain information from participants of the study (Rimando et al., 2015). While many research studies attempted to explore different types of data collection (Kothari, 2004; Walliman, 2017), there is limited research to address the experiences and challenges the researchers encounter during data collection and the strategies they use to deal with these obstacles.

The present study used quantitative method and data was collected through online questionnaires to assess undergraduate students' readiness for integrating mobile technology in instruction in an Open Learning University in Iran. While engaging in data collection, the author faced some challenging obstacles in administrating the questionnaires. The study aims to share the researcher experience during collecting data and provide new insights for future PhD students to be cautious in conducting their research, identify and solve existing problems while collecting data through online questionnaires in the field of their study.

II. METHODS

A phenomenological approach was used in this study to describe the challenges the doctoral student of the university of Malaya, Malaysia, encountered during conducting her dissertation research in 2018. A phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that explores an individual's experiences in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena in a given context (Cigdemoglu, Arslan, & Akay, 2011).In this respect, phenomenological research is suitable for this study to describe the researcher's own experiences gained during conducting research in order to understand and deal with the issues encountered while collecting data.

Firstly, the author summarized the study, giving some information related to the methods used for data collection. Secondly, she summarized the challenges faced during her data collection process. Furthermore, the study addressed the solutions implemented to resolve the data collection challenges for doctoral students and early career scholars.

III. STUDY CONTEXT

This study was conducted at an open university which is the only specialized distance education or online learning university in Iran. The distance education system of the university offers students a chance to study most or all of a course without needing to attend class.

In other words, the main purpose of this system is to provide education for all anywhere anytime (AbuSaidi, 2016). The study conducted an online questionnaire to determine Iranian English as a foreign Language (EFL) undergraduate students' readiness for integrating Mobile Learning as a support into an existing English course. The aim of the questionnaire was 1) to gain a better understanding of Iranian undergraduate students' mobile technology skills and usage, 2) to find the common mobile applications, and 3) to identify their attitude towards the Mobile Learning in learning English. The questionnaire was modified from the MReadiness Questionnaire (Baharom, 2013) to fit for the context of the present study.

The survey questionnaire administered in this study was divided into three parts: 1) learners' background information and their perceived level of English, 2) learners' mobile technology usage, and 3) learners' acceptance and use of mobile learning. In the questionnaire, the first section was required to investigate the background information of the participants, including age, gender, field of study, and English level. The second was about the kind of mobile devices the students had access to, mobile communication applications they used to communicate, and the characteristics of their mobile phones. The researcher needed to identify the EFL undergraduate learners' familiarity and ability to use their own mobile phones. The final section of the questionnaire, ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree, explored EFL learners' attitudes towards the use of their mobile devices as a learning support.

It involved 200 participants at the selected University in Iran. The students were enrolled in fields of study, including Business Science, humanities, Social Science, and Engineering. All the students of this university needed to pass general and specialized English courses to be able to graduate for a Bachelor degree. General and specialized English courses are taught as an obligatory undergraduate subject to Iranian undergraduate students in the University.

IV.   CHALLENGES

A. Researcher

The main challenges related to the researcher were financial, lack of basic computer knowledge, and distance. As I was living in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, it was difficult and expensive for me to travel from Malaysia to Iran. So, distance was really a challenge for me. Financial constraint was another element that affected my work. I had to spend a large amount of money to travel and implement my research. The expenses of conducting the research were one of the top concerns I encountered during my collecting data. Financial worries made me to give up right from the beginning several times. I did not have any idea how to carry on my research without sufficient capital and what took me so long in finishing my research. I even was hesitant to start or even continue. All these factors played an important role in choosing this kind of method for collecting my data (using Online Questionnaires). But creating online questionnaire was another story. It was my first time to create an online questionnaire. It was challenging to work with something that I was not so familiar with. For a few weeks, I was just struggling challenges how to work with online templates and how to prevent the same user from responding more than once. I believe in Ragma's (2017) saying: while doing a task that you do not know really well, you are likely to be stressed and challenged. Due to the lack of skills and knowledge in computer, I felt stressed and anxious that conducting research had taken a bit longer. I was typing the items many times, but I easily lost the data and I did not know how to recover it. The Quote "If you get tired, learn to rest not to quit" reminded me to stop worrying and keep working.

B. Participants

The biggest challenge was participants' low response and low quality of the responses. Firstly, I shared the questionnaire link in the Telegram group of the university but unexpectedly no one answered and I decided to create a group with just my students in the target university and asked them to share the link of the Telegram group with other students to answer the questionnaire. For three months, I was sending the notification every day. The responses were very low. It was really time-consuming because I was waiting for more than 3 months in the hope to get higher responses. At the end, I decided to travel my country to conduct face to face questionnaires and distribute them among students.

After data collection, I found some unanswered questions on the questionnaires and also noticed that the open-ended questions had been answered irrelevantly. I was not sure whether the participants have understood the questions, or whether they have taken the time to provide accurate data.

C. Supervisory Team

The supervisory team plays a key role supporting the success of PhD students doing research (Griffiths, Blakey, & Vardy, 2016). However, my supervisor always says to me "your research thesis is like your baby. So, it is your baby not my baby and you should take care of it." Or whenever I asked her a question, she asked me to browse the Internet or search on google in order to find my answers. The other problem was our different field of interest. She was not knowledgeable enough in the field of my research topic and it doubled my workload. I had to ask the experts' advice and guidance in the field of Applied linguistics but they did not have time to help and get involved in my research.

V. STRATEGIES

The study offers strategies and suggestions to government, administrators, researchers and supervisors to help future doctoral students and early career researchers in order to implement and finish their research.

1. Researchers require to think ahead about designing an instrument (questionnaire), about what data she/he needs to obtain and how to collect the information (Neville, 2007).

2. Researchers need to attend practical workshops, conferences, seminars and educational programs to gain experience, knowledge and skills that they cannot gain it from classes. It is an opportunity for novice researchers to be assisted by experts.

6. Novice researchers or PhD students should attend communities of practice (CoP) (Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, & Hubbard, 2018), regularly participating in a small group with other researchers, doctoral students and supervisors to exchange ideas, share experiences, strategies, challenges and successes, and receive their feedback about their research.

3. Researchers should have a strong intrinsic motivation and maintain fresh enthusiasm. The desire and inner drive of the researchers to finish what was started motivate them to stop worrying and move on in spite of the challenges ahead of them (Ragma & Almojuela, 2017). Regarding the reasons students pursue their PhD degree, many studies found that doctoral students who pursued the degree in terms of internal reasons report higher satisfaction, and academic success during the process and the outcome of their doctorate degree (Leonard, Becker, & Coate, 2005; Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, & Hubbard, 2018).

4. Concerning the expenses of collecting data, doctorate students should be provided with financial support opportunities such as government loans, scholarships, grants, as well as employment opportunities within the university like research or teaching assistantships (Sverdlik, et al., 2018; Tan, 2007).

5. The researchers should choose a supervisor with the same topics of interest and with adequate knowledge, enhanced theoretical and conceptual framework in the field of their research.

6. PhD students and their supervisors should be aware of their own responsibilities, commitment and expectations as part of a research team. For example, supervisors are accountable for providing relevant and adequate advice, support, knowledge, feedback and guidance, and students should be responsible to manage time for collecting data by careful planning a timetable, having meetings and discussions on conducting their research each time they meet with their supervisor.

7. An open and supportive relationship with supervisor would be essential for student's success and progress. Having a face to face meeting with supervisor at least once a month would enable the researcher to carry out an excellent research.

8. Supervisors require additional training programs regarding how to supervise their students, research methodology and conducting research.

9. It would be helpful that supervisors provide students with a situation to present a paper at conferences, workshops, seminars and meetings.

10. There should be a system to evaluate students and supervisors in terms of research progress.

11. A student-supervisor relationship is essential in any stage of the doctoral process. They are supposed to collaborate on research process. As Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, and Hubbard (2018) state, a match between students and their supervisors can facilitate student progress and satisfaction.

12. The educational system of university of Malaya needs some changes in many aspects. Each faculty or department can provide a series of seminars in which research students are invited to share their experiences and challenges during data collection with peers within a friendly and safe environment. The university can offer them great social and academic opportunities to join the free conference and workshop and instead involve them in activities such as running or helping in the conference. In addition, it would be very helpful for PhD students that the university increases its research budget and help them to collect their data.

13. Regarding increasing response rate, it would be useful if PhD students distribute traditional paper-and-pencil (p&p) questionnaires and avoid online survey to ensure all questionnaires have been return.

14. Researchers or PhD students should establish a friendly relationship with their participants because it is difficult to convince them to answer the questionnaire (Bocar, 2009).

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has covered some of the issues the author as a doctorate student in the university of Malaya encountered during the process of data collection. The study also aims to provide possible solutions to address the data collection challenges identified. The most notable challenges in collecting data were attributed to the researcher, participants and supervisory team. The study provides numerous suggestions for dissertation advisors, future doctoral candidates, early career researchers, committee members of doctorate students and administrators to deal with the mentioned problems and improve the quality of quantitative research. Financial and research support from the research supervisor, experts in the field of research topic and dissertation committee members play an important role in facilitating the expertise in the supervision process and conducting data collection. Sharing the data collection experiences give valuable insights and solutions to novice doctoral students and anyone engaging in conducting a research. It is important for doctoral students and early career researchers to be aware of unanticipated challenges they may encounter with data collection while carrying on their research work.

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