Developing Interview Guide in Qualitative Research: Problems and Solutions from a Needs Analysis Doctoral Study

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Article information

Article history:
Received: 24 Mar 2024
Accepted: 21 Apr 2025
Available online: 25 Apr 2025

Keywords:
Pilot study
Interview guide
Problems-solutions
Needs analysis
Doctoral study

Abstract

This study underscores the critical role of pilot studies in qualitative needs analysis research, particularly in informing the design of effective interview guides for complex and diverse research settings. Using the three-stage interview guide development framework proposed by Naz et al. (2022), the pilot study engaged a heterogeneous group of stakeholders in business English education—including students, teachers, alumni, and employers—through both face-to-face and online interviews. The study aimed to identify potential methodological and logistical challenges that could hinder the main investigation. The findings highlighted key issues such as interviewer bias, insufficient depth of information, and the logistical difficulties of coordinating with participants across different geographical locations. In response, several strategies were adopted to enhance the quality and reliability of the main study. These include minimizing bias, clarifying interview objectives, adopting flexible and inclusive communication approaches, and leveraging technological tools to facilitate participation. By addressing these challenges, the study contributes valuable insights into the iterative process of developing robust interview protocols and emphasizes the importance of pilot studies in refining qualitative data collection methods in multilingual and multi-stakeholder research environments.

INTRODUCTION

Establishing the validity of research instruments is essential for producing reliable results. Aung et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of selecting or developing instruments that are appropriate to the specific context of a study, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness. While validity and reliability are traditionally associated with quantitative research, their application in qualitative studies remains debated. Qualitative research, by its nature, deals with subjective and descriptive data, making the direct application of these concepts more complex. Hays and McKibben (2021) note that some qualitative researchers reject generalizability due to its incompatibility with the constructivist paradigm. However, as Maxwell (2021) argues, concerns around validity and reliability have become increasingly central to qualitative research, often replacing generalizability as core evaluative criteria.

Qualitative interviews are widely used to explore complex phenomena in depth. However, novice researchers may struggle with the intricacies of conducting such interviews effectively. To address this, piloting interviews is a critical step that allows researchers to refine their tools and procedures before engaging in the main study. Among the various interview types—structured, unstructured, semi-structured, and focus group—the semi-structured format is particularly prevalent in qualitative research due to its balance of consistency and flexibility (Ahlin, 2019; Naz et al., 2022). These interviews seek participants' insights on specific experiences or phenomena, guided by open-ended questions while allowing room for follow-up queries and elaboration.

This study explores methodological challenges encountered during a pilot phase designed to inform the development of a robust interview guide. The broader research focuses on conducting a needs analysis for a Business English Presentation (BEP) course designed for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Thailand. The study is grounded in established models of needs analysis by Hutchinson and Waters (1992), Long (2005), and Prince (1984). Needs analysis, as defined by Brown (2016), involves systematically gathering information to define and justify curriculum content. This process integrates both objective data (e.g., tests, observations) and subjective perspectives (e.g., interviews, questionnaires) to capture learners' needs comprehensively (Pranoto & Suprayogi, 2020).

To ensure the accuracy and credibility of the main study, a pilot was conducted to evaluate the clarity and applicability of the interview guide, which served as the primary data collection instrument. Participants for the pilot study were selected based on their similarity to the target population, though they did not overlap with the main study's sample. This strategic selection helped uncover potential issues in interview content and delivery. The guide also aimed to clarify conceptual misunderstandings and highlight critical distinctions relevant to the BEP course context.

This paper therefore presents the procedural and logistical challenges identified during the pilot interviews, including issues related to interviewer bias, inadequate information depth, participant diversity, and geographical constraints. In addressing these challenges, the study proposes strategic solutions that enhance the reliability and ethical soundness of qualitative data collection. Ultimately, this work contributes to the growing body of literature on qualitative instrument development, particularly within the context of multilingual, multicultural, and multi-stakeholder research environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Semi-structured interviews in qualitative research

Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research due to their flexibility and capacity to generate rich, in-depth data. Unlike structured interviews, which follow a fixed set of questions, semi-structured interviews combine standardized prompts with the flexibility to explore emerging themes through follow-up questions (Belina, 2022; Varoy et al., 2023). This approach allows researchers to adapt the conversation based on participants' responses while still maintaining a clear focus aligned with the study's objectives.

The effective use of semi-structured interviews requires careful planning. Researchers must consider the types of information they aim to gather and anticipate variations in participants' backgrounds and experiences. The interview guide serves as a crucial tool in this process. It helps ensure that questions are relevant, comprehensive, and logically ordered. As Ruslin et al. (2022) emphasize, a well-designed guide includes main questions, probing questions, and follow-ups that support meaningful and detailed responses.

To avoid gathering irrelevant or superficial data, researchers must frame questions carefully. Korstjens and Moser (2017) and Roberts (2020) recommend using open-ended questions that directly relate to the study's research questions and objectives. However, overly subjective or vague questions can lead to biased responses or misinterpretations. Thus, researchers must strive for a balance between openness and clarity. The phrasing, sequence, and structure of questions should promote reflective, authentic responses while minimizing the risk of leading participants.

The quality of interview questions often reflects the researcher's familiarity with the subject matter. Novice researchers may formulate overly general questions if they lack in-depth knowledge of the topic (Roberts, 2020). This underscores the importance of preliminary research and theoretical grounding when designing interview guides. As Braun et al. (2019) note, the guide should not only shape the questions but also reflect the overall structure and scope of the interview.

Developing strong interviewing skills and crafting effective interview questions take time and experience. For early-career researchers, conducting a pilot study can be particularly valuable. Pilots allow researchers to assess the clarity and relevance of their questions, identify potential misunderstandings, and refine their approach based on participant feedback (Gani et al., 2020; Yeong et al., 2018). If pilot interviews are not feasible, researchers can simulate interviews with peers or supervisors to gain insights into potential challenges (Naz et al., 2022). Reviewing recorded simulations helps evaluate the effectiveness of the interview flow, identify areas for improvement, and enhance ethical and professional conduct.

Collaborating with experienced mentors or experts provides additional support and guidance in the development and implementation of interview protocols. This collaboration helps researchers reflect on their questioning strategies, reduce personal biases, and improve overall interview quality (Magaldi & Berler, 2020; Roberts, 2020). Through these processes, researchers cultivate reflexivity and become more attuned to the dynamics of qualitative interviewing. In all, conducting semi-structured interviews requires thoughtful preparation, cultural sensitivity, and continuous self-assessment. Tools such as interview guides, pilot studies, and expert feedback are essential for ensuring clarity, objectivity, and relevance. By developing these competencies, novice researchers can conduct interviews that generate meaningful insights and contribute to robust and trustworthy qualitative research.

Comprehensive needs analysis framework for language education

Needs analysis is a systematic process used to identify gaps between current and desired conditions, guiding decision-making in educational and professional contexts. In language education, it plays a vital role in curriculum development by uncovering learners' specific linguistic, academic, and occupational needs (Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018; Kaharuddin et al., 2019). This process informs decisions about course content, teaching methods, and resource allocation to ensure the curriculum aligns with learners' goals and contextual demands.

Brown (2016) and Sönmez (2019) highlight that needs analysis encompasses three main dimensions: (a) situational versus language needs, (b) objective versus subjective needs, and (c) linguistic content versus learning processes. Situational needs relate to human and contextual factors, while language needs focus on the communicative skills required for specific tasks. Objective needs are based on observable evidence, such as test results or performance data, whereas subjective needs are informed by learners' preferences, perceptions, and expectations. Linguistic content needs refer to specific language forms, while learning needs pertain to the strategies and conditions necessary for acquiring those forms.

Prince (1984) proposed a three-step approach to job-specific needs analysis: (1) goal analysis—identifying the organization's objectives for language training; (2) job analysis—describing tasks associated with a specific role; and (3) language analysis—focusing on discourse practices, procedures, and vocabulary relevant to those tasks. This model emphasizes the importance of gathering authentic workplace information to shape curriculum content effectively.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) expanded the framework by categorizing needs into target and learning needs. Target needs include: (i) Necessities: what learners must know to function effectively in a target situation; (ii) Lacks: the gap between current knowledge and the required competencies; and (iii) Wants: what learners themselves identify as important or desirable to learn. Learning needs, by contrast, focus on how learners can best acquire the necessary skills and knowledge. These needs consider factors such as motivation, learning styles, and preferred instructional methods.

Long (2005) advanced the methodology of needs analysis in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) by advocating for triangulated data collection from multiple stakeholders, including learners, teachers, and employers. He emphasized the importance of grounding ESP curricula in real-world tasks, enabling learners to develop practical competencies aligned with their professional contexts. Serafini et al. (2015) further emphasized the need for methodological rigor in conducting and reporting needs analysis. Despite its importance, needs analysis remains underutilized or inconsistently applied in some ESP contexts. Clear reporting, use of mixed methods, and alignment with stakeholder expectations are essential to improve the validity and reliability of findings and to better support learners' goals.

The main study adopted a multi-perspective needs analysis framework to explore the requirements of a Business English Presentation (BEP) course for EFL learners in Thailand. While drawing on established models by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Long (2005), and

Prince (1984), the study places particular emphasis on pilot interviews as a method for refining data collection tools. These interviews help reveal stakeholder expectations, identify gaps in learners' preparation, and gather insights for curriculum improvement.

Needs analysis in this context is not limited to linguistic requirements; it also considers learners' social identities, values, and professional aspirations. As Lasekan et al. (2023) and Long (2005) argue, needs should be understood both as objective indicators of required skills and as subjective expressions of learners' goals within specific discourse communities. Ultimately, needs analysis should be seen as an ongoing, dynamic process that informs both short-term instructional decisions and long-term educational planning, motivating learners and supporting their development as competent communicators in academic and workplace settings.

Piloting instruments in needs assessment

Piloting instruments is a crucial step in needs assessment, especially in qualitative research involving diverse stakeholders. It allows researchers to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness of data collection tools such as interview guides, surveys, and focus group protocols before implementing them in the main study. By identifying potential weaknesses in design or execution, pilot testing enhances the validity and reliability of the overall research process (Ali & Anwar, 2021; Panyasai & Ambele, 2022).

Instruments used in needs assessments may include questionnaires, interviews, observations, and document analyses. Each tool offers distinct advantages depending on the research context and objectives. For qualitative data collection, semi-structured interviews are particularly valuable as they enable deeper exploration of participants' needs and experiences. However, effective implementation of these tools requires prior testing to ensure they are well-structured, contextually relevant, and linguistically accessible to participants.

Piloting helps researchers refine their instruments by assessing question clarity, response patterns, and the flow of the interview. It also reveals whether any items may be perceived as vague, irrelevant, or culturally insensitive. For example, a preliminary pilot may uncover terms or expressions that are confusing or inappropriate for certain participant groups. Addressing such issues in advance improves data quality and promotes participant engagement.

Additionally, piloting enables researchers to adapt their instruments to the specific cultural and linguistic context of the target population. This is particularly important in multilingual or cross-cultural settings where misinterpretations may arise due to language differences or divergent cultural norms. By working closely with participants during the pilot phase, researchers can gather feedback and make necessary adjustments to improve clarity and cultural responsiveness (Ali & Anwar, 2021).

Technological tools have also become integral to piloting, particularly in remote or geographically dispersed settings. Conducting virtual interviews or focus groups via platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet allows researchers to overcome logistical barriers. However, these methods come with challenges such as connectivity issues and reduced rapport. Careful planning—including technical checks, flexible scheduling, and clear communication—can mitigate these issues and ensure smooth implementation (Panyasai, 2023).

Moreover, piloting fosters trust between researchers and participants by demonstrating a commitment to respectful and inclusive research practices. When participants feel that their language, perspectives, and experiences are valued, they are more likely to provide rich and honest responses. Looking ahead, scholars have called for clearer guidelines on piloting practices, including how to integrate digital tools effectively and how to report pilot findings transparently (Pomeranz & Stedman, 2020). Strengthening piloting procedures not only improves research quality but also contributes to ethical and respectful engagement with diverse populations. In sum, piloting instruments is an indispensable step in conducting rigorous and culturally sensitive needs assessments. It enhances the accuracy, relevance, and ethical soundness of data collection tools, ultimately supporting more meaningful and impactful research outcomes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: PILOT STUDY

This pilot study was conducted to evaluate the interview process and identify potential challenges that could affect the quality and effectiveness of data collection in the main study. Specifically, it aimed to assess the functionality of the interview guide and refine procedures based on participant feedback. The interview guide was intentionally designed to be flexible, allowing researchers to pose additional questions as needed to explore emerging themes and clarify responses. This adaptability enhanced the depth and relevance of the data collected. As a small-scale, preliminary investigation, the pilot study served to test the feasibility of the research design, ensuring that the instruments and methods were appropriate for use in a larger qualitative needs analysis project.

Participants in pilot study

The participants in the main study included 91 Business English students across all three academic years: 34 sophomores, 21 juniors, and 36 seniors. Additionally, the study involved 5 Business English teachers, as well as 6 alumni and 6 employees.

To assess the suitability of the interview guide for the main study, a pilot test was conducted with participants who shared similar characteristics to those in the main study. This included three Business English students and three Business English teachers from other universities in Thailand, along with two alumni and two employers with experience in the business field both in Thailand and overseas. All pilot participants met the inclusion criteria of the main study. The students had completed Business English presentation courses, while the teachers had at least four years of experience teaching English presentation courses. The alumni had taken Business English presentation courses and had a minimum of two years of work experience in related fields. Similarly, the employers had experience relevant to employee recruitment and were able to provide practical insights into new employee selection.

Once participants confirmed their willingness to take part, the researchers arranged interview appointments based on their availability.

Developing interview guide

Before conducting the interview, the researchers divided the interview guide into four sets based on four group of participants: Business English students, Business English Presentation teachers, alumni, and employers. This pilot study also included three different stages of developing the interview guide which the researchers adopted and adapted from Naz et al. (2022) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Three different stages of developing interview guide

Internal testing

The initial stage involved an internal review of the preliminary interview guide by the research team. The primary goal was to identify and eliminate unclear, biased, or leading questions. To gain firsthand insight into the interview experience, the researchers occasionally took on the role of participants and were interviewed by two experienced English teachers. This reflective exercise offered practical perspectives on the flow, tone, and sensitivity of the interview process, particularly in areas involving ethically sensitive topics. It also served as a viable alternative in situations where external piloting was not feasible. This method allowed for the early identification of potential issues, enabling refinements that improved question clarity, reduced bias, and ensured the interview guide could effectively generate detailed and meaningful responses.

Expert assessment

In the second phase, five external experts in English Language Teaching (ELT) were invited to evaluate the revised interview guide. Their feedback was instrumental in aligning the guide with the study's objectives and ensuring thematic consistency. The experts offered recommendations on the structure, phrasing, and sequencing of the questions to enhance objectivity and clarity. They also advised on framing the questions within a coherent framework to improve the guide's overall reliability and applicability.

Together, these two phases contributed to the development of a well-structured, reliable, and ethically sound interview guide. The iterative process ensured that the instrument was both methodologically rigorous and contextually appropriate, thereby strengthening the validity of the data collection process in the main study.

Interview piloting process

The interview piloting process involved field-testing the interview guide with participants who shared similar characteristics to those in the main study. To ensure the effectiveness and clarity of the guide, semi-structured interviews—both individual and focus group—were conducted to gather qualitative data. These interviews were carried out both in person and online, focusing on the perspectives and needs of different stakeholders regarding the Business English Presentation course and related skills. Focus group interviews are used to collect data from students because they encourage discussion, debate, and elaboration on shared experiences, leading to more in-depth data. This group setting can make students more comfortable and is more time-efficient and cost-effective. On the other hand, for individual interviews, Business English (BE) teachers, alumni, and employers were asked to participate to understand individual experiences and perspectives, facilitating more in-depth and focused discussions. Additionally, individual interviews avoid the influence of group dynamics on responses, ensuring the authenticity of the information gathered.

The interview question guide was prepared and categorized into three main types: grand tour questions, main questions, and follow-up questions. Grand tour questions aimed to elicit background information and general experiences, such as "*Why do you choose to study in the Business English major?*" or "*Could you tell me about the course objectives?*" depending on the group interviewed. Main questions focused on eliciting detailed information related to the Business English Presentation (BEP) course, for instance: "*What do you expect to learn in the BEP course?*", "*What are your teaching strategies?*", or *"Does your knowledge of BEP in the university help you in your job?*" Finally, follow-up questions encouraged participants to expand on or clarify their responses, such as "*What other expectations do you have in order to help you in BE presentations?*" or "*What other aspects should be included in a BEP course?*"

Overall, the interview procedure comprised three main phases: the pre-interview, interview, and post-interview phases. In the *pre-interview* phase, the researchers developed and categorized the interview guide, contacted participants to obtain verbal consent, and provided them with both a consent form and an official interview invitation. The *interview* phase itself was divided into four stages (see Figure 2). In the *post-interview* phase, the researchers transcribed the interviews and proceeded with coding and theming the data for subsequent analysis.

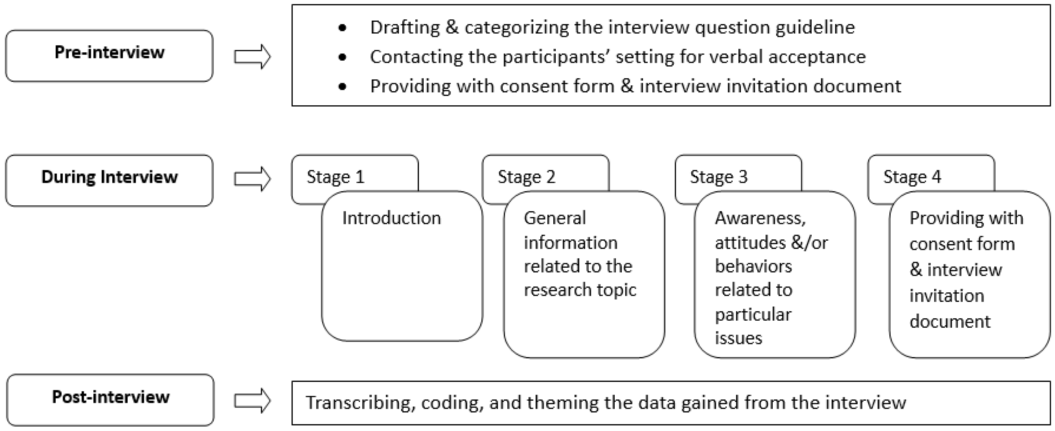

Figure 2 Interview procedure

The four stages of the interview phase are outlined below:

Stage 1: Introduction

The interviewers, who were also the researchers, introduced themselves and briefly explained the purpose of the study, the use of audio recording, and the assurance of participant anonymity. Participants were also given the opportunity to seek clarification regarding any unclear questions. This stage included initial greetings and general questions to help participants feel comfortable and establish rapport.

Stage 2: General information related to the research topic

The researchers provided background information and contextualized the research topic, which focused on investigating the needs of a Business English Presentation (BEP) course for English as a Foreign Language learners in Thailand. They also explained how participants' insights could contribute to practical and pedagogically relevant outcomes. This stage included a brief discussion about participants' insights on presentation skills within their professional environments.

Stage 3: Awareness to key issues

At this stage, the researchers introduced the main interview questions aimed at exploring participants' perceived needs regarding the Business English Presentation course. These questions were guided by a structured interview framework, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Examples of interview question guide

Purpose	
To identify participants' needs on the Business English Presentation course	
Examples of interview question guide	**Participant**
- How do you expect to learn how to give an effective business presentation in English? If yes, how? If not, why? - Do you expect to learn how to use verbal, non-verbal, and visual modes in helping you in your BE presentations? If yes, what do you expect to learn how to use verbal, non-verbal, and visual modes in helping you in BE presentations? If not, why?	BE students
- Does your course involve aspects of verbal, nonverbal, and visual communication in teaching student how to present in BE situations? If yes, why? - From your experiences in teaching BEP course, what do you think about the students' performance? Can they use English language appropriately? What seems to be the students' lack of presentation skills?	BEP teachers
- Does your knowledge of BEP in the university help you on your job? *If yes, how?* - What aspects of what you learned in the BEP course help you on your job? *If not, how?* - If what you learned in the BEP course does not help on your job, what then have you learned from your job that was not included in the BEP course? How? - What knowledge should be included in the BEP course?	Alumni
- Is knowledge of BEP required when you want somebody to work in your company? / What essential knowledge or skills would you require from future employees? - What BEP skills or knowledge can you see in your employee?	Employers

Stage 4: Insights toward targeted objectives and constructive suggestions for improvement

In this final stage, the researchers aimed to elicit participants' insights of the targeted objectives of the Business English Presentation (BEP) course and actively encouraged constructive suggestions for improvement. Follow-up questions were used to prompt deeper reflection and gather practical insights. These included prompts such as: "*What other expectations would assist you in Business English presentations?*", "*What additional aspects should a BEP course cover?*", and "*What further skills do prospective employees need?*". The researchers carefully guided the discussion to ensure that responses remained aligned with the study's objectives and contributed actionable input. Upon completion of this stage, the recorded interviews were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed in accordance with the research questions.

Throughout the pilot study, the researchers remained focused on the core purpose of the pilot interview—to identify and address procedural challenges encountered during data collection. Careful attention was given to the thorough implementation of each interview stage to ensure that the data gathered would adequately respond to the research objectives. Furthermore, this pilot interview procedure closely simulated the actual data collection setting and yielded important insights for refinement and future application. It also served to assess whether the interview questions were clear, relevant, and effective in eliciting a wide range of perspectives and experiences.

Data analysis

The data obtained from the interview piloting process were analyzed qualitatively. This involved reviewing the interview transcripts to identify recurring issues related to question clarity, logical flow, timing, and participants' comprehension. The researchers coded the data manually by highlighting segments that reflected problems or areas for improvement and then grouped them into themes such as unclear wording, redundant questions, or participant hesitation. This analysis provided insight into both the challenges encountered and the techniques that supported effective interviewing. The findings from this analysis informed necessary revisions to the interview guide before the main study. A detailed discussion of these findings, along with proposed solutions and improvements is presented hereafter.

FINDINGS

Challenges encountered during the pilot study

The pilot study revealed several critical challenges that informed subsequent revisions to the research design and procedures. These challenges, categorized into four main areas, are discussed below with specific examples to illustrate their impact on data quality and research validity.

(a) Interviewer bias

One of the primary concerns identified during the pilot was interviewer bias. This issue was observed when experts noted that certain interview questions reflected the researcher's assumptions, which could inadvertently influence participant responses. For instance, a question such as, "Don't you think learning how to use gestures is important in presentations?" implicitly suggested a desirable answer. One participant reported feeling pressured to agree, stating, "I wasn't sure if I could disagree because the question already sounded like I should agree." This observation highlighted the risk of framing questions in a leading manner, which can compromise the authenticity and reliability of responses.

(b) Information inadequacy

Another challenge was the limited depth and clarity in some participant responses. In several instances, participants offered vague or surface-level answers, suggesting that certain questions lacked specificity or failed to encourage reflective responses. For example, a question like, "What do you think about the course?" often elicited brief replies such as, "It was okay," without elaboration. This indicated that the interview guide required refinement to provoke more insightful and detailed input. The complexity of the research topic compounded this challenge, as participants needed more guidance to explore nuanced aspects of Business English Presentation instruction and learning.

(c) Participant diversity

Engaging a heterogeneous group of stakeholders—including students, teachers, alumni, and employers—was essential to the study's aim of inclusivity and broader applicability. However, this diversity introduced complications during the interviews. Each group differed in familiarity with BEP practices, communication styles, and perspectives. For example, while students frequently emphasized classroom experiences, employers often focused on real-world application and professional communication standards. This variance made it difficult to use a one-size-fits-all interview guide. Questions had to be adapted subtly to suit each group while maintaining thematic consistency, which required careful calibration during the pilot phase.

(d) Geographical distance

Lastly, geographical dispersion of participants posed logistical challenges for scheduling and conducting interviews. Several participants were located in different regions of the country or abroad, making in-person interviews unfeasible in some cases. One employer, for example, was based in Singapore and could only participate through an online platform. Connectivity issues during a few sessions, including one interview disrupted by poor internet, further complicated the process. These difficulties emphasized the need for flexible, technology-supported solutions in managing geographically distributed samples.

Solutions and procedural improvements implemented

Following the pilot study, the research team implemented a range of targeted solutions to address the issues identified. These adaptations significantly enhanced the methodological rigor and overall effectiveness of the interview process in preparation for the main study.

(i) Minimizing interviewer bias

To mitigate interviewer bias, the research team undertook a comprehensive review and revision of the interview guide. Leading questions, such as "Don't you think…", were rephrased to encourage open-ended and neutral responses. For instance, the earlier example was revised to: "How do you view the use of gestures in business presentations?" This change enabled participants to express their opinions freely without feeling guided toward a particular response.

The revision process followed a two-stage approach as outlined by Naz et al. (2022). In the internal testing stage, the researchers themselves scrutinized the guide for unclear, biased, or directive elements. In the subsequent expert assessment phase, external ELT specialists reviewed the guide and provided constructive feedback. One expert remarked that "several questions appear to assume participants' opinions and could lead their responses rather than explore them." Another suggested reordering items to begin with broader themes and gradually narrow focus, facilitating a more natural flow of conversation. These revisions enhanced the clarity, neutrality, and logical structure of the interview guide, aligning it more closely with recommended qualitative interviewing practices (Yoon & Uliassi, 2024).

(ii) Improving information adequacy

To elicit richer and more detailed responses, the research team established clear thematic goals for each interview and adhered to a semi-structured format. Drawing on Guetterman's (2020) guidance, this approach balanced structure with flexibility, allowing deeper exploration of relevant issues while ensuring coverage of core themes.

For example, when multiple participants emphasized the need for more practice-oriented tasks in the BEP course, this recurring feedback signaled data saturation. The team also incorporated probing techniques to pursue unexpected but relevant themes. When one employer highlighted the importance of cross-cultural communication skills, follow-up questions were used to explore its implications for curriculum design. This dual strategy—focusing on data saturation and targeted probing—greatly improved the depth and quality of information collected.

(iii) Managing participant diversity

Recognizing the importance of tailoring communication strategies for diverse participant groups, the research team engaged in training on intercultural communication and empathetic interviewing. For Thai-speaking participants, interviews were conducted in the local language using informal, participant-friendly speech to foster rapport and comfort (Wu et al., 2023). Additionally, the questions were subtly adapted to each group's context without altering the core content. For example, employers were asked about workplace communication demands, while students were asked about classroom experiences related to those demands. This approach not only respected participants' backgrounds but also enriched the data with varied, context-sensitive insights.

(iv) Addressing geographical constraints

To accommodate participants across multiple regions and countries, the research team employed a hybrid approach combining face-to-face and online interviews. Virtual platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet were used effectively for remote participants. Scheduling was adjusted to accommodate time zone differences, and participants received interview materials in advance. Technical preparations, including pre-session internet checks, helped avoid disruptions. In one case where connectivity issues required rescheduling, the experience underscored the value of contingency planning and the importance of flexibility in research logistics.

Lessons learned and guidelines for future research

The pilot phase of this study provided a critical opportunity for methodological reflection and refinement. Several lessons emerged that offer practical guidelines for future research employing semi-structured interviews, particularly in multilingual and multicultural educational contexts. Rather than focusing solely on procedural adjustments, this section synthesizes those insights into actionable recommendations supported by recent scholarship.

Structure interview guides logically and neutrally

A primary lesson from the pilot was the importance of logically sequencing interview questions—from broad to specific—to build rapport and encourage more nuanced responses (Levitt et al., 2017). Equally crucial was the revision of leading or suggestive questions to ensure neutrality. Questions such as "Don't you think gestures are important in presentations?" were revised to neutral prompts like "How do you view the use of gestures in business presentations?" to avoid steering participant responses (Naz et al., 2022). Ensuring neutral phrasing promotes open dialogue and enhances the validity of qualitative data (Buys et al., 2022; Tracy, 2024).

Allocate sufficient time and prepare for flexibility

Time allocation emerged as another key consideration. Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes, and sufficient time was essential for participants to elaborate on complex issues. Future researchers should plan interviews with generous timeframes while remaining adaptable to individual schedules and unforeseen delays (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Lungu, 2022). Moreover, allowing flexibility supports ethical interviewing practices by accommodating participant needs, especially in multilingual or online contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Prioritize inclusivity through contextual and cultural sensitivity

Managing participant diversity required adaptive strategies to foster inclusivity. For example, using informal Thai expressions helped participants feel more comfortable, leading to richer responses. Training in cultural sensitivity and awareness was instrumental in supporting these adaptations (Au, 2019). Researchers are encouraged to develop intercultural competence and adjust their communication styles according to the sociolinguistic context (Bearman, 2019; Semlali et al., 2022). This is especially important in needs analysis research that engages stakeholders from varied educational and professional backgrounds.

Use technology strategically, with contingency plans

The transition to online interviews via platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet enhanced accessibility across geographic regions but introduced technical challenges. To mitigate these, the research team conducted pre-session technology checks, provided interview materials in advance, and developed backup plans (e.g., rescheduling protocols) in case of connectivity issues (de Villiers et al., 2022; Khan & MacEachen, 2022). These strategies are essential for maintaining consistency and data quality in remote interview contexts, particularly in cross-regional studies.

Foster reflexivity and continuous improvement

Finally, the pilot underscored the value of reflexivity—an ongoing critical awareness of the researcher's role and influence throughout the data collection process (Dodgson, 2019; Türkmen, 2023). Expert reviews of the interview guide (Naz et al., 2022) offered essential feedback that helped reduce personal bias and align the research tools with the study's objectives. This reflective stance supports the continuous refinement of methodology and is especially relevant in evolving qualitative research contexts where new challenges may arise mid-study (Levitt et al., 2017).

Taken together, these guidelines not only address practical concerns related to semi-structured interviewing but also affirm the need for flexible, ethically attuned, and reflexive approaches. They are particularly salient for qualitative studies involving linguistically and culturally diverse participant groups, such as those found in EFL and ESP education.

CONCLUSION

The pilot study served as a foundational step in refining the methodological framework of the larger research project. It exposed four central challenges: interviewer bias, inadequate information gathering, participant diversity, and geographical constraints. Addressing these issues led to meaningful methodological improvements that enhanced the reliability and relevance of the data collected.

Most importantly, the pilot underscored the value of a flexible and reflective approach to qualitative research. Revising the interview guide to ensure neutrality and coherence, adapting communication styles to participant contexts, and integrating technological tools effectively all contributed to a more inclusive and responsive research process. These refinements not only strengthened the quality of the pilot interviews but also provided a replicable model for future studies that aim to explore stakeholder perspectives in linguistically and culturally diverse environments.

Ultimately, the pilot demonstrated that thoughtful design, rigorous testing, and adaptive strategies are essential to the success of needs analysis studies, particularly those involving multiple stakeholder groups and complex, context-sensitive themes such as business communication in EFL settings.

LIMITATIONS & IMPLICATIONS

While the pilot study yielded rich insights and methodological enhancements, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the limited scale of the pilot—both in terms of sample size and temporal scope—may have constrained the depth and diversity of the data. Some complexities relevant to larger-scale studies or different stakeholder subgroups may have gone unobserved. Second, the iterative refinement of interview procedures, while necessary, introduced slight inconsistencies in the approach between early and later interviews, potentially influencing the comparability of data.

Despite these limitations, the pilot holds significant implications for future research. It illustrates the value of conducting pilot studies not merely as logistical tests, but as integral components of qualitative inquiry that support epistemological rigor and ethical engagement. Future studies may benefit from conducting multiple iterative pilot rounds, especially when working across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

Moreover, the findings emphasize the importance of interviewer training—not only in question design and bias reduction but also in cultural responsiveness and ethical listening. For novice researchers in particular, structured mentorship and exposure to real-world interview challenges could greatly enhance data collection competence.

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