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Challenges of Conducting Qualitative Inquiry in the Iranian ELT Higher Education Context: Ph.D. Students' and Faculty Members' Voices

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the challenges of conducting qualitative research (QLR) from Iranian ELT (English Language Teaching) Ph.D. students' and ELT faculty members' viewpoints in the Iranian higher education context. The participants of the study consisted of 100 Ph.D. students majoring in ELT and 50 ELT faculty members. The study followed a mixed-methods approach with the exploratory design. The instruments utilized for collecting the data were a semi-structured interview and a researcher-made questionnaire. To analyze the qualitative data, a grounded theory approach was employed (Charmaz, 2006), and to analyze quantitative data, both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized. The results of the study indicated that from the ELT Ph.D. students' perspectives, the Iranian educational system, professors, and lack of time, respectively, are factors affecting the possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR. While from the ELT faculty members' points of view, lack of time is the only reason for weaknesses in undertaking QLR. The results also demonstrated that from the viewpoint of ELT Ph.D. students, data interpretation, data analysis, data collection, data

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coding, and determining the validity of research, respectively, are the most challenging parts of conducting QLR.

Moreover, from the perspective of ELT faculty members, data analysis, data collection, data interpretation, and data coding, respectively, are the most challenging parts of undertaking QLR. The implications of the present study for the universities in the context under investigation are discussed. At the end of the paper, some suggestions for further research are presented.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Ph.D. Students' Perspectives, Faculty Members' Perspectives, Qualitative Research Challenges, Iranian ELT Context

Roshan and Deeptee (2009) state that qualitative research (QLR) methods' implementations are increasing due to their potentiality to investigate several areas of human behaviors and emotions that cannot be studied through quantitative research methods. QLR is significant as a worldview not only from the research point of view but as an intrinsic part of the human services careers since it focuses on the multidimensional intricacy characterizing human experience and the socio-cultural context in which humans perform. According to Richards (2003), experiments can depict many things and present valuable information and views, but they are not poised to study the convolutions of the immensely complex social world. Even in a more narrowly defined context, there are situations in which a QLR recommends the best source of information that cannot be achieved through quantitative studies. Among various issues and concerns, philosophical, epistemological, and ideological concerns are the primary focus of many qualitative researchers (Hammersley, 2009; Smith & Hodkinson, 2009). QLR is a different paradigm that denotes a distinctly diverse world-view and a diverse source of truth (Hoshmand, 1989). Besides, undertaking a QLR above all else is a person-centered enterprise and can be specifically appropriate to the work in the field of language teaching. Today, the significant status of QLR in Applied Linguistics (AL) is evident for many ELT (English Language Teaching) researchers.

Doctoral students and researchers, especially in the field of human sciences, are often required to conduct QLR and to document their research in a written format (Wang, 2013). Learning research-oriented writing can be considered an experience in itself (Prior, 1995; Riazi, 1997); furthermore, adding QLR makes a particularly challenging time of learning, reflection, and practice for the postgraduate students (Meloy, 1994 as cited in Wang, 2013). Students might already have had experience regarding writing journals, reflections, literature reviews, and even quantitative research reports, but writing QLR is often a new genre for them (Wang, 2013). Although planning and undertaking QLR is indeed a challenging task, teaching others how to plan and conduct QLR is an even more challenging task.

Studying the related literature further shows that lecturers-researchers who teach qualitative inquiry depict a variety of challenges students encounter in the process of learning the topic, during which they are required to alter their research paradigm and state of mind from a positivist perception to a qualitative one (e.g., Booker, 2009; Brandao, 2009; Kelly & Kaczynski, 2007). Considering the complicated essence of QLR, feeling confusion and fear at the first qualitative inquiry may seem reasonable. Conducting QLR seems terrifying for novice researchers, especially considering the paradigm shift toward a complex and emergent design. However, based on the principles in the related literature, each research has its characteristics, and finally, the individual researcher has to determine what the best approach is undertaking research (Watt, 2007). Through reviewing the related literature, it can be inferred that no matter what students may learn from course work or the QLR literature, they cannot appreciate the gravity of such issues until they begin working with actual participants (Watt, 2007).

Context of the Study

The present study was conducted in the Iranian higher education context. The higher education research inclination is growing in Iran (Arani et al., 2018, as cited in Atai et al., 2018). The third-generation universities in Iran are continually improving their research institutions, knowledge-based organizations, incubators, and science and technology parks. They are investing in fundable research projects in response to the current international academic competition (Atai et al., 2018). At the time of conducting this study, the participants were ELT Ph.D. students and ELT faculty members of universities of higher education. The dominant epistemology in the Iranian higher education is a positivistic one (Zokaei, 2008; Atai et al., 2018). As a consequence, most of the postgraduate students and faculty members prefer to conduct quantitative research studies. So it seems that conducting QLR studies can be demanding in this context.

Review of the Related Literature

Several studies are investigating the experience of learning QLR deal with the experience of learners in a specific field of study. Despite the significant focus of the learners' learning experience, the literature seems to provide some uniform results. The findings indicate that learners considered learning QLR to be an inner experience. Students appear to experience enthusiasm when they obtain actual research experience (Hein, 2004), apprehension and uncertainty when acquiring how to undertake data analysis (Li & Searle, 2007; Raddon et al., 2009; Richards, 2011), pride and modesty when recording individual stories from respondents (Hunt et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2007, as cited in Cooper et al., 2012).

Furthermore, it seems that learners regard experiential learning as an integral part of acquiring QLR (Barrett, 2007; Schell et al., 2009, as cited in Cooper et al., 2012). According to Cooper et al. (2012), all participants in their study expressed that during QLR learning, they experienced a

variety of negative and positive emotions. When they encountered new methodologies and terminology, many students experienced confusion and anxiety. While the unfamiliarity of the students with the main principles within QLR leads to confusion, the lengthy processes of data collection and data analysis in QLR caused the feeling of being overwhelmed or frustrated.

Along similar lines, Wang (2013) conducted a study on the challenges of learning to write QLR. The results of his research indicated that the participants felt uneasy in the interpretation of data, and they worried that their perspective in the data interpretation phase could result in subjective interpretation. The major challenge for the participants of the study as novice researchers was identifying the role of themselves in data interpretation. The flaw of his research was the number of participants as he studied four Ph.D. students from different fields of study. In another study, Li and Searle (2007) investigated learners' experiences of acquiring to undertake QLR data analysis. Their results showed that the main challenges regarding data analysis consisted of the time to start coding data, researcher and actor patterns differentiations, and over interpretations. They just studied data analysis challenges and did not take into account the other challenges of conducting QLR. The review of the related literature indicated that data collection challenges of QLR studies were as follows, the participants were not interested in taking part in the course of data collection, the researchers were novice for administering interview, and they felt isolated from other colleagues and peers during data collection process (Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Dearnley, 2005; Hoskins & White, 2013). In this regard, Rimando et al. (2015) found that inexperienced investigators including Ph.D. students may face unexpected challenges during the stage of data collection for their dissertation for several reasons such as the language of data collection tools, the length of data collection, researcher exhaustion, and sensitive information. The shortcoming of their studies was just focusing on QLR data collection

challenges, while the other challenges of conducting QLR were not considered.

Khankeh et al. (2015) undertook a study investigating the challenges of conducting QLR. The results showed that novice researchers did not have any explicit recognition of the inquiry process in terms of data collection procedures, data analysis, and even a proper sampling plan, which should be realized according to methodological rules. Some significant challenges included insufficient methodological knowledge, the contradiction between the research question and methodology, and lack of attention to the principles of qualitative methods. In their study, the primary concern of novice researchers was to identify the reason and proper design to do the research and the suitable method to answer the question. Their study was a conceptual paper that depicted the challenges of undertaking an interpretive QLR based on professional experience as a qualitative researcher and available literature, and it did not have any participants.

Investigating the related literature shows that a few investigations have been conducted on the challenges and possible sources of weaknesses in undertaking QLR. As far as the researchers reviewed the related literature, there is no study investigating QLR challenges in the Iranian ELT higher education context. Therefore, to fill this gap in the literature, this study was an attempt to investigate the challenges and the possible sources of weaknesses in conducting QLR encountered by Iranian ELT Ph.D. students and faculty members and compare their views.

The present study aimed at investigating the following research questions,

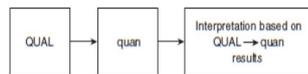
1. What are the reasons for possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR as perceived by Iranian Ph.D. ELT students and ELT faculty members?
2. What are the most challenging parts of conducting QLR faced by Iranian Ph.D. ELT students and ELT faculty members?

Method

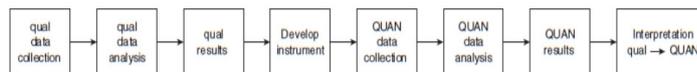
Design of the Study

This study followed a mixed-methods approach, which is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. A mixed-methods research design “involves the collection, analysis, and integration of quantitative and qualitative data in a single or multiphase study” (Hanson, Creswell, Plano Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005, p. 224). People’s perspectives are intricate, and sometimes they are multidimensional, and they could be influenced by many factors (Triandis, Adamopoulos, & Brinberg, 1984). Croninger and Valli (2009) contend that because of their intricacy, it is best to implement a combination of overlapping and related methodological approaches to explore the view and conception of people. The kind of mixed-methods research used in this study is exploratory design. The goal of the two-phase Exploratory Design (see Fig. 1) is that the findings of the qualitative method could help improve the quantitative method (Greene et al., 1989). Since this design starts qualitatively, it is appropriate for investigating a phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2003).

(a) Exploratory Design



(b) Exploratory Design: Instrument Development Model



(c) Exploratory Design: Taxonomy Development Model



Fig 1.

The Exploratory Design by Creswell et al., 2003

This design begins with qualitative data and then builds to a second, quantitative phase (see Fig. 1). Researchers are implementing this design built on the findings of the qualitative phase by designing an instrument, recognizing variables, or stating propositions for assessment based on an emergent theory or framework. These developments link the initial qualitative phase to the subsequent quantitative part of the research. Since the design starts qualitatively, considerable attention is often paid to the qualitative data. They first investigate the topic qualitatively and identify themes from their qualitative data. They then design an instrument based on these findings and subsequently implement this designed instrument in the second, quantitative phase of the research.

Participants

The method used to select the focal participants was purposeful sampling (Ary et al., 2019; Creswell, 1998). The criteria that the researchers set for selecting participants were as follows, 1. They should be ELT faculty members and ELT Ph.D. students at one of the top-tier Iranian higher education universities. 2. They have had practical experiences in conducting QLR studies. 3. The faculty members should include assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors in the field of ELT due to having varied lengths of research experience. Based on the criteria, 100 Ph.D. students and 50 faculty members were selected for the study. They were both male and female. The age of the Ph.D. students ranged between 27-40 years old, and the age of faculty members ranged between 36-60 years old. Their native language included Persian, Turkish, and Kurdish.

Instrumentation

To meet the criteria of the present research based on the research questions, two instruments were used as follows;

Semi-structured Interviews

The primary data source of this study was in-depth individual interviews with the participants. The semi-structured interview was applied to highlight the heart of experiences, issues, and concerns of participants. To do so, 20 ELT faculty members and 30 ELT Ph.D. students were selected for the in-depth semi-structured interview to gain their standpoints regarding the challenges they faced in qualitative studies. Each participant was interviewed in one session. The language of the interview was English. The researchers formulated the questions of the interview. To validate the semi-structured interview questions, it was reviewed by three experts in the field. Five Ph.D. students and three faculty members were interviewed in a pilot phase to improve the interview questions. Then formal interviews were carried out with the participants.

Questionnaire

To collect the quantitative data, a researcher-made questionnaire that consisted of 12 Likert-scale questions was used to gain the viewpoints of the participants regarding the challenges of conducting QLR. The 12 items of the questionnaire were extracted from the results of the in-depth semi-structured interviews. It began with demographic questions related to years of research experience, degree, gender, and affiliation of the participants. The instrument was professionally examined in its contents, format, and language by two experienced researchers in the field. The reliability and validity of the questionnaire were measured, and they were acceptable. The result of reliability and validity are as follows:

Measurement Model

Content Validity and Evaluating Adequacy of the Sample Size

The content validity and adequacy of the sample size are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Evaluating the Content Validity and Adequacy of the Sample Size

Questionnaire	Total Variance Explained	KMO	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	df	Sig
The reasons for weaknesses	56.145	0.729	41.088	10	0.001
The most challenging	65.086	0.738	84.484	28	0.001

Table 1 indicates that the KMO coefficient value is more than 0.7 for all four main variables in the questionnaire, which is significant at $P < 0.01$. The KMO¹ coefficient calculates the correlation of the variables and calculates the correlation variable between the variables in the sample. The KMO coefficient greater than 0.7 reflects the fact that factor analysis is practical, and that sample size is adequate (Hinton et al., 2004). Bartlett's test of Sphericity shows the relationships between variables if they exist. A significance level of less than 0.05 indicates that confirmatory data analysis can be implemented on data appropriately (Hinton et al., 2004).

The Measurement Model Validity Test (Construct Validity)

The model validity test is examined based on the convergent and divergent validity of the model. Convergent validity is concerning the average variance extracted (AVE) test and the test of comparing reliability coefficient and average variance extracted. The divergent validity is concerning the Fornell-Larcker test. Regarding the convergent validity, one of the tests is the average variance extracted (AVE) test, or the communality reliability coefficient, as presented in Table 2:

¹ Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy

Table 2.

Evaluating the Convergent Validity in the Research Measurement Model

Variable	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
The reasons for the weaknesses	0.668
The most challenging	0.589

Considering Table 2, the average variance extracted or the communality reliability coefficient of the variables was more than 0.5. Therefore, the convergent validity of the measurement model is confirmed. It indicates that the questions of each aspect have the necessary convergence with one another. In other words, the questions measuring each variable are correlated to each other. Regarding divergent validity, the Fornell-Larcker test is examined. According to Hensler et al. (2009), this validity examines the critical nonlinearity of the questions for each variable. Table 3 shows the divergent validity of the Fornell-Larcker test.

Table 3.

Evaluating the Divergent Validity in the Research Measurement Model

	The reasons for the weaknesses	The most challenging
The most challenging	0/908	0/981
The reasons for the weaknesses	0/893	0/927

According to Table 3, the values on the primary diameter, which are the root of the average variance extracted, are higher than the numbers of each row. So there is a divergent validity between the variables. In other words, there is a divergence or nonlinearity between questions of each variable to questions of another variable.

Reliability Test

In this section, the reliability of the research model is examined based on Cronbach's alpha test, the composite reliability test, and Spearman test. In Table 4, the reliability of the research measurement model is examined. Table 4.

Evaluating the Reliability of the Research Measurement Model

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability (CR)
The most challenging	0.883	0.884	0.909
The reasons for the weaknesses	0.874	0.879	0.909

According to Table 4, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all research variables are more than 0.7. Thus, the correlation between the questions of the variables outside the research measurement model is confirmed, and the variables outside the measurement model are of internal consistency. Spearman correlation examines the correlation between the questions of each variable. Since all coefficients are higher than 0.7, according to Hensler et al. (2009), the Likert spectrum of lower than seven-points is sequential; consequently, this test is examined nonparametric. Therefore, it can examine the correlation between questions of the variables for the five-point Likert scale. As the composite reliability for all variables is higher than 0.7, there is a correlation between the questions of each variable within the research measurement model. Since the generalizability of each question from one model to another is addressed in the communality reliability, the communality reliability of the research variables is confirmed because these values are all more significant than 0.5.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The qualitative part. The primary data source of this study was in-depth individual interviews with the participants. Interview sessions were

conducted within two months, from January to February 2018. They were held either face to face or via phone, depending on the availability and willingness of the participants. Each interview typically took 30 to 45 minutes. Before conducting the interview sessions, the participants, especially faculty members, were informed about the purpose and the time of the interview due to their time pressure and willingness to take part in the study. In the case of their consent, the exact time and place of the interview session were arranged. The researcher asked the pre-determined questions of the semi-structured interview to elicit the required data from the participants. With the permission of the participants, all the interviews were audio-recorded to preserve the spoken words and were then transcribed (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The participants were assured about the confidentiality of the data. The process of transcription is often thought of as purely a technical task involving the transformation of the spoken word into data. The challenges associated with transcription have not been given a great deal of empirical attention. While some researchers opt to have their transcription performed by another person, the researchers in the current study preferred to undertake their own transcribing, believing that this was an essential first step in the data analysis.

To ensure confidentiality, the researchers did not implement the actual names that might be linked to the participant's identity in the transcripts, and they transcribed interviews in a private place.

To analyze the qualitative data, the recorded interviews were transcribed, and then a grounded theory approach was employed (Charmaz, 2006). Based on this approach to grounded theory, the steps of data analysis include initial and focused coding and axial coding. According to a grounded theory approach, to facilitate the development of the primary concepts, the researchers started data analysis with 'initial coding' (Charmaz, 2006). This analysis uncovered several significant themes in the collected data, allowing investigation of various concepts

and categories within the data. Upon the completion of the initial coding stage, focused coding of codes and concepts is employed to investigate emerging core categories. Focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) included investigating the codes and assessing relationships between codes. In the axial coding phase, these codes were categorized (Charmaz, 2006) to show the different dimensions in the research process. In this stage, the relationships between categories and subcategories are investigated to establish a more precise and complete explanation about the phenomenon under study. Inter-rater reliability was conducted to decrease the subjectivity of the data codification. In this regard, an experienced researcher in the field was asked to check the processes of data codification, and he confirmed the data codification processes.

The quantitative part. The process of distributing and collecting questionnaires was carried out in two weeks. The participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, and to ensure confidentiality, it was administered anonymously. Distributing and collecting data were done both via e-mail and face-to-face meetings. Before the distribution of the questionnaire, the researcher sought the consent of participants for participating in the study.

After gathering the quantitative data (responses to the questionnaire), the data were analyzed by SPSS v. 23.0. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized in the present study.

Results

The Qualitative Part

The results of qualitative data consist of two parts. The first part deals with the results of Ph.D. students' interviews, and the second part reports the results of faculty members' interviews.

The Results of Ph.D. Students' Interviews

Upon analyzing Ph.D. students' interviews, the following categories were extracted.

Validity and Reliability of QLR

Most of the Ph.D. students believed that mixed-methods research is a more reliable and more valid approach conducting a research study since, in this approach, the issue under investigation is scrutinized; moreover, it prevents the drawbacks of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Also, the researcher has more freedom of action to investigate the issue from many angles. Zahra one of the participants stated,

I prefer to conduct Mixed-methods research. Because it has both qualitative and quantitative features, and it contains both of them. Moreover, it can be more comprehensive, and our results can be more reliable and valid. Each of the methods is not sufficient alone.

Hermeneutic and Fuzzy Nature of QLR

The inherent vagueness of QLR, regarding its fluid and interpretive essence, could also make this method to research unpersuasive to a researcher who takes a well-integrated prior theory (Reisetter et al., 2003). As Reza points out,

The reason behind this fact has its roots in the uncertain and seemingly ambiguous nature of qualitative research. Unlike its quantitative counterpart, this type of research neither follows crystal clear steps nor leads to straightforward results. In Iranian students' views, conducting research is frightening in itself, let alone handling this tentative nature of data collection and analysis. I think this fact discourages many students to either gain knowledge or perform research in this regard.

So Reza believed that the fuzzy nature of QLR hinders the students from conducting QLR or from gaining the knowledge on QLR methods and principles. The students' prior presuppositions of research, the professional setting that upholds a quantitative sense of research, and ontological and epistemological assumptions of their existing research

theories can make the views of QLR challenging to adopt (Reisetter et al., 2003).

Another significant issue regarding conducting QLR is the writing proficiency of the learners. Due to the fluid and ambiguous nature of QLR, most of the graduate students cannot keep up with the demanding writing style of QLR methods as they were used to the fixed diction of quantitative inquiry. QLR writing is necessarily an argumentative genre. Neda one of the female participants who had good background knowledge in writing qualitative papers noted,

Writing proficiency plays a significant role in writing qualitative papers, mainly in the interpretation section. Because the researcher has to know how to write to justify the findings, how to use hedging and boosters to prevent subjectivity, and how to use words to show his/her impartiality.

In her opinion, justifying the findings requires a good command of writing proficiency due to the interpretive and hermeneutic nature of QLR.

Research Hierarchal System

Postgraduate students are made to publish articles in a short time by their professors. It is rooted in this fact that faculty members and professors work under a 'system of measure' of their productivity. So the research is undertaken through a hierarchal system in Iranian academic settings. Regarding this issue, Ali pointed out,

Both the educational system and university professors are blameful for lack of students' qualitative inquiry knowledge. The research is conducted through a hierarchal system. The education system requires the university professors to deliver several published research papers each year, the university professors do not do research by themselves but want the MA and Ph.D. students to do and publish research for them in a limited time. The quality of the study is not essential to them. They just want to publish many

research papers in a short time. In this case, quantitative research is more preferable than a qualitative one and suits the education system, the university professors, and the MA and Ph.D. students.

He believed that the educational system and also professors are the main reasons for the lack of graduate students' QLR knowledge or their avoidance of conducting QLR. The focus of education in Iran is on quantitative studies as we see there are SPSS courses at MA and Ph.D. levels but no course for QLR methods.

Qualitative Data Analysis & Interpretation as the Most Challenging Parts of QRL

Most participants stated that the most difficult and challenging part of QLR is the interpretation of the collected data and themes. Interpretation requires an in-depth analysis of the data to get sensible results. Zahra who conducted some case studies in QLR believed,

Interpretation is the most challenging part of undertaking QLR. We have to interpret the data based on the collected data to get the desired theories. We are supposed to produce theories in QLR. We don't have any determined idea before conducting research.

She believed that producing appropriate theories requires a sound interpretation of the data since, in QLR, there is no predetermined theory.

The Results of Faculty Members' Interviews

The following categories were extracted from faculty members' interviews.

Mixed-method Research (MMR) as the more Reliable and Valid Research

Most of the faculty members expressed that they prefer to conduct their research studies in a mixed-method approach. The rationale behind

MMR is that the implementation of quantitative and qualitative methods in combination presents a better realization of research issues than either method per se (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). As Alireza one of the participants stated,

I prefer mixed-method since it lets me carry out in-depth studies. Any topic may be studied from different perspectives, and each aspect of the issue may be more suitable to be explored through a specific research method or technique.

A Good Command of Writing Proficiency

In the literature of qualitative human science approaches, the role, meaning, and importance of writing are rarely challenging. The assumption that needs to be examined is that QLR could not be segregated from the practice of writing (van Manen, 2006). In particular, postgraduate studies focus on the students' research, and the reports of their research studies should be in written forms accessible to other members of their fields. According to Mina, a female participant,

The role of writing proficiency is quite vital, given that qualitative research is full of descriptions, interpretations, and personal opinions in comparison with quantitative research where numbers and statistics speak.

She believed that undertaking QLR requires good writing proficiency due to its hermeneutic nature.

Collecting the Proper Data for Initiating QLR

Some of the participants believed that finding the proper participants for conducting QLR studies is a demanding task. Reza noted,

In doing QLR, data gathering is very challenging. Of course, the data can be collected easily, but forcing the participants to act in such a way under the research model is a bit hard.

He believed that data elicitation is very important, and a qualitative researcher should direct the participants in such a way that he/she can elicit the desired data for the study.

Conducting QLR as a Time-Consuming Process

Some of the participants believed that the main challenge in undertaking QLR is time. The researcher should devote much time to performing a QLR study, especially in the case of ethnography studies. Ali pointed out,

Undertaking QLR requires a longer time, and in the academic context, the time of research is crucial for faculty members and postgraduate students. The shorter the time of the study, the better the opportunity to publish more papers will be. QLR studies require more time due to their data collection and data analysis processes.

According to Bilak (2010), it should be time-consuming since, as Russel and Gregory (2003) contend, “much of the art of qualitative interpretation involves exploring why and how different information sources yield slightly different results” (p. 36).

Educational System as the Main Reason of QLR Underdevelopment

Some of the faculty members believed that the Iranian educational system is faulty for QLR underdevelopment. As Hamid asserted,

This point that you say who should be blamed, the educational system, and the courses that the students passed look at QLR a little, and the reason is apparent because quantitative research got prominence and dominance. If you look at dissertations, 95% of them are quantitative than qualitative.

He noted that due to the dominance of the quantitative approach in Iran’s educational system, QLR is not considered by postgraduate students

and also faculty members. And most of the theses and dissertations in MA and Ph.D. levels are undertaken in a quantitative approach due to the predominant positivistic background in the Iranian academic setting.

Adding QLR Courses to Syllabus

Some of the participants stated that the QLR course could be added as a separate course to the syllabus of MA and Ph.D. courses. Along similar lines, Reza asserted that “for MA or Ph.D., we have two courses or two credits courses, one for qualitative and one for quantitative.” Ahmad mentioned,

It seems we cannot consider a separate course for QLR unless we have required explanations and justifications, and don't forget the nature of ELT is applied, and most of our works is in quantitative research. Consequently, it is unlikely the policymakers and stakeholders agree to offer a separate course.

He believed that due to the nature of ELT that is applied, most of the research studies are undertaken in the quantitative approach. As a result, considering the QLR course in ELT majors, there should be some plausible reasons to persuade policymakers to add this course to the ELT syllabus.

Interpretation and Analysis of Data as the Main Challenges for Conducting QLR

Most participants believed that data analysis and interpretation are the most challenging part of conducting QLR. The qualitative data analysis itself, naturally, becomes complicated because most of QLR questions are "How" or "What" questions and demand complex processes, investigation, and discovery. QLR data analysis is cumbersome and agitating, and the epistemic essence of QLR leads to a subjective perspective in education (Shakouri, 2014). As Ali noted, “I guess data analysis is more challenging.

What should be done with all the words, sentences, files, pictures, etc.? All depends on data analysis”.

The Results of the Quantitative Part

Normality of the Data

First, before reviewing the research questions, it is necessary to evaluate the normality of the research data by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Therefore, Table 5 examines the normality of the research variables.

Table 5.

Evaluating Normality of the Data

Variable	Group	Z	df	Sig
The reasons for the weaknesses	Ph.D. students	0.14	100	0.001
	faculty members	0.144	50	0.011
The most challenging	Ph.D. students	0.12	100	0.001
	faculty members	0.166	50	0.001

According to Table 5, it can be concluded that the significance levels of all variables are less than 0.05. Therefore, these variables do not follow a normal distribution in both groups of Ph.D. students and faculty members. In other words, the distribution of the data mentioned above is not normal. Abnormality of data from the research variables does not justify the use of parametric tests to investigate the research questions. Thus, nonparametric tests should be used to investigate the research questions.

Investigating the Research Questions

First Research Question

The first research question of the study is as follows, What are the reasons for possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR as perceived by Iranian Ph.D. ELT students and ELT faculty members?

The first research question is divided into three sections. In the first section, the reasons for possible weaknesses in conducting QLR are examined only among Ph.D. students. In the second section, the reasons for potential weaknesses in undertaking QLR are examined only among faculty members. In the third section, the viewpoints of ELT Ph.D. students and ELT faculty members regarding the reasons for possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR are compared.

Section 1: The Reasons for Possible Weaknesses in Undertaking QLR by Ph.D. Students

The Chi-square test is used to examine the comparison of the observed number of data and the expected number of data based on the range of questions. Therefore, Table 6 examines the reasons for weaknesses in undertaking qualitative research by Ph.D. students.

Table 6.

The Reasons for Weaknesses in Undertaking QLR by Ph.D. Students

Question	Residual					Chi-Square	df	Sig.
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree			
Q1	-13	5	20	6	-18	47.7	4	0.001
Q2	0	0	-29.3	2.7	26.7	47.36	2	0.001
Q3	-19	-17	-15	25	26	108.8	4	0.001
Q4	3	20	12	-16	-19	58.5	4	0.001
Q5	-19	-10	1	26	2	57.1	4	0.001

According to Table 6, the highest positive residual values obtained from the difference in the observed number of data and the expected number of data for questions 1 (the Iranian educational system), 2 (professors), and 3 (lack of time) are related to options Agree and Strongly Agree. While for questions 4 (educational elements) and 5 (students), they are related to options Undecided and Disagree. Also, since the significance

levels for all questions are less than 0.05, there is a significant difference between the observed number of data and the expected number of data. Therefore, from the viewpoint of ELT Ph.D. students, the educational system, faculty members, and lack of time, respectively, are factors affecting the possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR.

Section 2: The Reasons for Possible Weaknesses in Undertaking QLR by Faculty Members

The Chi-square test is applied to investigate the comparison of the observed number of data and the expected number of data based on the range of questions. Thus, Table 7 examines the reasons for possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR by faculty members.

Table 7.

The Reasons for Weaknesses in Undertaking QLR by Faculty Members

Question	Residual					Chi-Square	df	Sig.
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree			
Q1	-7.5	0.5	9.5	-2.5	0	12.24	3	0.007
Q2	0	0	0	-1	1	0.08	1	0.777
Q3	-7	0	3	4	0	7.4	4	0.116
Q4	-2	8	6	-3	-9	19.4	4	0.001
Q5	0	-10.5	-0.5	8.5	2.5	15.12	3	0.002

Based on Table 7, the highest positive residual values obtained from the difference in the observed number of data and the expected number of data for questions 1 (the Iranian educational system), 2 (professors), and 3 (lack of time) are related to options Agree and Strongly Agree. While for questions 4 (educational elements) and 5 (students), they are related to options Undecided and Disagree. Also, since the significance level for question 3 (lack of time) is less than 0.05, there is a significant difference between the observed number of data and the expected number of data for

question 3 (lack of time). As a result, from the viewpoint of ELT faculty members, lack of time is the only factor affecting the possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR.

Section 3: Comparison of Viewpoints of Both Groups Regarding the Reasons for Weaknesses in Undertaking QLR

Mann–Whitney test is used to examine this section. Table 8 compares, by the Mann–Whitney test, the viewpoints of the Ph.D. students and faculty members regarding the reasons for possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR.

Table 8.

Comparison of the Viewpoints of both Groups Regarding the Reasons for Weaknesses in Undertaking QLR

Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Sig.
Ph.D. students	100	80.42	8042			
faculty members	50	65.66	3283	2008	-1.989	0.047

Table 8 indicates that the significance level obtained from the Z statistic under the Mann-Whitney test is less than 0.05. Therefore, there is a significant difference between the viewpoints of Ph.D. students and faculty members in terms of the reasons for possible weaknesses in conducting QLR, and the level of the reasons for possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR among Ph.D. is much higher than among faculty members.

Second Research Question

The second research question of the study is as follows,

What are the most challenging parts of conducting QLR faced by Iranian Ph.D. ELT students and ELT faculty members?

The second research question is divided into three sections. In the first section, the most challenging parts of conducting QLR are investigated only among Ph.D. students. In the second section, the most challenging parts of undertaking QLR are examined only among faculty members. In the third section, the viewpoints of ELT Ph.D. students and ELT faculty members regarding the most challenging parts of conducting QLR are compared.

Section 1: The Most Challenging Parts of Conducting QLR Faced by Ph.D. Students

The Chi-square test is applied to investigate the comparison of the observed number of data and the expected number of data based on the range of questions. Accordingly, Table 9 examines the most challenging parts of conducting QLR faced by Ph.D. students.

Table 9.

The Most Challenging Parts of Conducting QLR Faced by Ph.D. Students

Question	Residual					Chi-Square	Df	Sig.
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree			
Q6	-10	11	6	7	-14	25.1	4	0.001
Q7	-13	-2	-8	19	4	30.7	4	0.001
Q8	-19	-3	10	20	-8	46.7	4	0.001
Q9	0	-23	-3	14	12	35.12	3	0.001
Q10	0	-22	-7	9	20	40.56	3	0.001
Q11	-5	21	7	-5	-18	43.2	4	0.001
Q12	-19	5	4	15	-5	32.6	4	0.001

According to Table 9, the highest positive residual values obtained from the difference in the observed number of data and the expected number of data for questions 6 (data collection), 7 (data coding), 8 (data

analysis), 9 (data interpretation), and 12 (determining the validity of qualitative research) are related to options Agree and Strongly Agree. While for questions 10 (equality of all parts of QLR) and 11 (determining the reliability of QLR), they are related to option Strongly Disagree. Therefore, it can be concluded that from the viewpoint of ELT Ph.D. students, data interpretation, data analysis, data collection, data coding, and determining the validity of QLR, respectively, are the most challenging parts of conducting QLR.

Section 2: The Most Challenging Parts of Conducting QLR Faced by Faculty Members

The Chi-square test is utilized to examine the comparison of the observed number of data and the expected number of data based on the range of questions. As a consequence, Table 10 examines the most challenging parts of conducting QLR faced by faculty members.

Table 10.

The Most Challenging Parts of Conducting QLR Faced by Faculty Members

Question	Residual					Chi-Square	Df	Sig.
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree			
Q6	-7	6	8	1	-8	21.4	4	0.001
Q7	-9	-2	-6	11	6	27.8	4	0.001
Q8	0	-2.5	0.5	8.5	-6.5	9.68	3	0.021
Q9	0	-11.5	-5.5	7.5	9.5	24.72	3	0.001
Q10	0	0	-10.7	5.3	5.3	10.24	2	0.006
Q11	-6	10	9	-4	-9	31.4	4	0.001
Q12	0	0.5	4.5	3.5	-8.5	8.4	3	0.038

Regarding Table 10, the highest positive residual values obtained from the difference in the observed number of data and the expected

number of data for questions 6 (data collection), 7 (data coding), 8 (data analysis), and 9 (data interpretation) are related to options Agree and Strongly Agree. While for questions 10 (equality of all parts of QLR), 11 (determining the reliability of QLR), and 12 (determining the validity of QLR), they are related to options Undecided and Disagree. Thus, from the viewpoint of ELT faculty members, data analysis, data collection, data interpretation, and data coding, respectively, are the most challenging parts of conducting QLR.

Section 3: Comparison of Viewpoints of Both Groups Regarding the Most Challenging Parts of Conducting QLR

Mann–Whitney test is applied to examine this section. Table 11 compares, by the Mann–Whitney test, the viewpoints of the Ph.D. students and faculty members regarding the most challenging parts of conducting QLR.

Table 11.

Comparison of the Viewpoints of Both Groups Regarding the Most Challenging Parts of Conducting QLR

Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Sig.
Ph.D. students	100	72.20	7219.5			
faculty members	50	82.11	4105.5	2169.5	-1.33	0.183

Table 11 indicates that the significance level obtained from the Z statistic under the Mann-Whitney test is higher than 0.05. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the viewpoints of Ph.D. students and faculty members in terms of the most challenging parts of conducting QLR.

Discussion

To address the first research question, the reasons of possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR by Iranian ELT Ph.D. students and ELT faculty members are investigated, and the results showed that from the Ph.D. students' points of view, Iranian educational system, professors and lack of time, respectively, are primary reasons influencing the potential weaknesses in conducting QLR studies. Still, from the faculty members' perspectives, lack of time is the only factor affecting the possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR. So there is a significant difference between the viewpoints of Ph.D. students and faculty members regarding the possible weaknesses of conducting QLR.

The present findings are in line with Rahimi et al. (2019), in which the results of their study indicated that ELT master and doctoral students stated the provision of enough time for conducting sound research. They noted that a reasonable amount of time was needed to undertake a proper research study. The participants of their study mentioned that they were under the pressure of time and stress to conduct and publish their research papers. The findings are also in harmony with Atai et al., (2018), in which they noted that doing QLR studies is demanding and time-consuming.

One of the factors that participants mentioned in interview sessions about conducting QLR is the lack of time. According to Bowen (2006), the major drawback associated with QLR is that this process is time-consuming. Therefore, the time of conducting QLR studies posed another challenge in the Iranian higher education context. As some of the Ph.D. students mentioned in interview sessions, the graduate students in the Iranian higher education system must conduct their research, especially their term papers, in a short time, and professors force them to publish their research papers just in a semester. This is rooted in this fact that faculty members and professors work under a 'system of measure' of their productivity.

Consequently, the postgraduate students cannot conduct a QLR in a short time since QLR requires more time. Therefore, most of the students prefer to do quantitative research for their term papers. This issue can be the main reason for ignoring QLR methods for applying in their research studies among Iranian postgraduate students. Hamid, one of the ELT Ph.D. students in this regard, pointed out that "conducting qualitative inquiry is very time consuming, especially if postgraduate students have to write several papers during just a semester."

Another factor that is mentioned by Ph.D. students for the reasons for QLR weaknesses among Iranian graduate students is the educational system. According to Sallee and Flood (2012), policymakers and stakeholders mostly apply quantitative research when research is called upon. The Iranian educational system preference is a positivistic approach to conduct research studies in higher education institutions, and inevitably, this trend affects all parts of the higher education, including research preferences among professors, postgraduate students, and researchers. Some of the participants believed that the Iranian educational system could make opportunities for researchers and higher education institutions to undertake QLR and gives high credibility to the results of QLR studies.

Another reason for a decrease in QLR that is noted by Ph.D. students is professors. Some of the participants noted that most of their professors did not have enough knowledge of QLR methods to teach its basics in research classes. As Reza said, "Professors do not seem to know enough of this type of research to tap on that." According to Atai et al. (2018), professors and Ph.D. students may not have the required interest or expertise in conducting QLR studies. Therefore, they prefer to undertake quantitative studies.

Moreover, many faculty members are trained primarily in the positivist tradition and are more familiar with studies that are conducted in a positivist paradigm (Locke, Spirduso & Siverman, 2000). Since different frameworks are very persistent to change (Champagne, Gunstone, &

Klopfer, 1985), students' first encounter with QLR may be incompatible with their previous presuppositions about the essence of research. It entails a dramatic paradigm shift (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) to a view that investigates the personal experiences and meaning constructions of individuals as fruitful research topics (Elliot et al., 1999).

Regarding the second research question, the results showed that from the Ph.D. students' points of view, data interpretation, data analysis, data collection, data coding, and determining the validity of research, respectively, are the most challenging parts of conducting QLR. Furthermore, the results indicated that from the faculty members' perspectives, data analysis, data collection, data interpretation, and data coding, respectively, are the most challenging parts of undertaking QLR. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the viewpoints of Ph.D. students and faculty members in terms of the most challenging parts of conducting QLR.

Most of the participants stated that the most challenging part of QLR is the interpretation of the collected data and themes. Interpretation requires an in-depth analysis of the collected data to get plausible results. Based on Denzin (1994), "In the social sciences, there is only interpretation. Nothing speaks for itself" (p. 500). Wang (2013) states that it was a recurring characteristic of the students' writing products that the interpretation part was either missing or insufficiently presented. To persuade readers of their arguments, students must learn to provide explicit arguments, well-rooted claims, persuasive examples, and in-depth interpretations of the data (Wang, 2013). QLR writing is necessarily an interpretive task (Denzin, 1994).

Some of the participants believed that data analysis was the most challenging part of undertaking QLR. Since most of QLR questions are "How" or "What" questions and demand complex processes, investigation, and discovery, naturally, the qualitative data analysis itself becomes complicated. According to Shakouri (2014), QLR data analysis

is intricate and flustering. Qualitative data analysis is less technical, less prescribed, and less linear but more iterative than the quantitative one. Qualitative data analysis is often undertaken during the data collection phase, with emerging interpretations led by a theoretical framework. Data analysis for QLR requires more time compared to quantitative methods because of the loads of information the researcher might gather during the research process.

Based on the data collection method, researchers may face challenges with gaining information from participants in a study (Rimando et al., 2015). Some of the participants of the study stated that finding the appropriate participants for conducting QLR studies can be a difficult task. Collecting rich data is another matter that was mentioned by Maryam, one of the faculty members, “finding the participants that can gather rich data from them is another challenge.” Another point that was stated by some participants is the length of the data collection process. In this regard, Rimando et al. (2015) noted that the data collection process could be influenced by the length of the data collection instruments or by how long a participant is engaged in the process of data collection.

Most of the participants mentioned that the reliability and validity of the mixed-method approach are higher than the other approaches since it applies both quantitative and qualitative features. So they preferred to conduct mixed methods studies.

According to Atai et al., (2018, p. 45), “The doctoral students acknowledged that they do not have adequate knowledge and expertise in collecting and analyzing qualitative data.” Their findings are in agreement with the findings of the present study. The results also are in line with Wang (2013), in which his results indicated that the subjects of the study felt uneasy in the interpretation of data, and they worried that their perspective in the data interpretation phase could result in subjective interpretation. Moreover, the results are in line with Cooper, Fleisher, and Cotton (2012) in which they found the unfamiliarity of novice researchers

with the significant notions within QLR leads to confusion, the lengthy phase of data collection and data analysis in QLR caused frustration or the feeling of being overwhelmed.

Regarding data collection challenges, the results are in agreement with those of Rimando et al. (2015), who explored the data collection challenges in dissertation research faced by Ph.D. students at a southeastern United States urban university. The results of their study showed that inexperienced investigators, including Ph.D. students, might face unexpected challenges during the stage of data collection in their dissertation. The findings of the study are similar to Khankeh et al. (2015), in which they found that novice researchers did not have any explicit recognition of the inquiry process in terms of data collection and data analysis procedures, and even an appropriate sampling framework.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study demonstrated that researchers involved in QLR in the Iranian higher education context do experience several challenges during the research process. These challenges are mostly rooted in the dominance of positivism in the Iranian higher education context that has often led researchers to avoid conducting qualitative studies; furthermore, in this context, the results of qualitative studies are not as plausible as quantitative ones. Therefore, findings of quantitative research studies are more welcomed and regarded as more valid and reliable due to the positivistic research conceptions of Iranian researchers and academia. As a consequence, QLR methods are not often addressed in higher education settings, and also they are not regarded as viable research.

The findings of the present study could contribute to our knowledge of the challenges of conducting QLR facing Iranian researchers in general and Iranian ELT researchers in particular. This study has some pedagogical implications for ELT researchers, postgraduate students, and

mentors in the Iranian higher education context. The first implication of this study is the unfamiliarity of the ELT postgraduate students and even some professors with QLR principles and methods. As it was discussed before, the dominant paradigm in the Iranian higher education setting is a quantitative and positivistic approach. Consequently, most of the students and professors are grown quantitatively in this context, and they cannot perceive and practice QLR methods quickly, and it can be the main reason for their fear of conducting QLR. Amini Farsani (2017, as cited in Atai et al., 2018) also explored the current situation of AL research in Iran. He investigated the AL faculty members' research conceptions. The results showed that the faculty members regarded experimental designs and mixed-method as viable research, and they stated that proper research should be 'rigorous and methodological,' 'systematic and organized,' 'well-written,' and 'publishable.' According to Atai et al. (2018), the priority of ELT Ph.D. students is mixed-method research for both solving problems and publishing papers. As ELT mentors and students are dealing with human beings in their studies, mixed and qualitative methods can be very fruitful to obviate the problems (Atai et al., 2018).

Rahimi et al. (2019, p. 20) stated that,

ELT Masters students, doctoral students, and instructors would mostly follow quantitative research studies since it is easier to conduct and relatively straightforward to report the findings. As they reported, they did not usually work on qualitative or mixed-method research studies, which need a longer time, more creative ideas, and higher academic writing skills.

Thus, first of all, the basics and principles of QLR should be introduced at the postgraduate level, especially in MA and Ph.D. research courses, and the students are required to conduct at least one QLR study in their course of their studies in higher education.

Another implication of the present study is a research paper published in the Iranian higher education setting. Most of the participants believed that the editors of Iranian ELT journals mostly prefer to publish quantitative or mixed-methods studies, and hence QLR studies are not welcomed for publication in such journals. Based on Atai et al. (2018), “in choosing between pure quantitative or pure qualitative study, the former finds better ways to publication,” and the participants of their study believed that “positivistic epistemology still dominates the prestigious journals and many international journals still respect and welcome quantitative methods” (p. 42). Mirhosseini (2017) noted that there is no qualitative-only journal in the field of language education. Reviewing QLR papers is lengthier due to the complexity of qualitative studies or the reviewers’ comments in this area (Atai et al., 2018). Therefore, Iranian ELT journals should look at QLR studies more seriously and try to expand their QLR reviewers' group to facilitate the acceptance and publication of qualitative inquiries. Furthermore, some qualitative ELT journals can be established to meet the needs of Iranian ELT qualitative inquiries.

The third implication of the study is the writing proficiency of ELT postgraduate students and researchers. Most of the participants stated that QLR studies require a good command of academic writing proficiency, and writing courses at the postgraduate level is not enough to meet the demands of undertaking QLR. Therefore, one of the possible reasons that Iranian postgraduate students avoid conducting QLR is the infirmity of academic writing proficiency. To compensate for this issue, an advanced academic writing course could be added to the ELT Ph.D. syllabus to boost Iranian academic writing skills and to meet the needs of QLR writing.

This study, like other studies, faced some limitations. The first limitation was investigating QLR challenges in the Iranian ELT higher education context. Further research can be conducted to investigate the challenges of undertaking QLR in other fields of study and different higher education contexts. The second limitation was the participants of the

present study who were selected from ELT Ph.D. students and ELT faculty members. For further research, the viewpoints of MA students regarding QLR challenges can be investigated. Future research could be done to investigate the stakeholders' and policymakers' perspectives on QLR challenges and possible solutions. Another limitation was the instruments for collecting data. Other instruments, such as focus groups and observation, can be implemented for future studies to get more comprehensive and in-depth findings.

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Appendices

Appendix A

The semi-structured interview questions

1. Do you prefer to conduct qualitative research (QLR)? Why or why not?
2. How many QLR researches have you conducted?
3. What types of challenges, if any, do you have in conducting QLR?
4. What are your solutions to obviate the challenges?
5. What types of challenges, if any, do the postgraduate students have in conducting QLR?
6. What solutions do you recommend to decrease the students' challenges?
7. In your opinion, what part (parts) of QLR is more challenging?
8. What is the role of the Iranian educational system in QLR underdevelopment in the Iranian ELT higher education context?
9. What is the role of professors in the QLR underdevelopment in the Iranian ELT higher education context?
10. What is the role of policymakers and stakeholders in QLR underdevelopment in the Iranian ELT higher education context?
11. What is the role of postgraduate students in QLR underdevelopment in the Iranian ELT higher education context?
12. What is the role of textbooks and materials in QLR underdevelopment in the Iranian ELT higher education context?

Appendix B

1. The Iranian educational system could be the major reason for the possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR.
Strongly disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly agree
2. Professors could be the major reason for the possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR.
Strongly disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly agree
3. Lack of time could be the major reason for the possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR.
Strongly disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly agree

4. The possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR can be the result of different educational factors, such as professors and educational materials.

Strongly disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly agree

4. Postgraduate students could be the major reason for the possible weaknesses in undertaking QLR.

Strongly disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly agree

6. Data collection could be the most challenging part of conducting QLR.

Strongly disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly agree

7. Data coding could be the most challenging part of conducting QLR.

Strongly disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly agree

8. Data analysis could be the most challenging part of conducting QLR.

Strongly disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly agree

9. Data interpretation could be the most challenging part of conducting QLR.

Strongly disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly agree

10. All parts of QLR are equally challenging.

Strongly disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly agree

11. The most challenging part of conducting QLR could be specifying reliability of QLR.

Strongly disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly agree

12. The most challenging part of conducting QLR could be specifying validity of QLR.

Strongly disagree Disagree Undecided Agree Strongly agree