

# Challenges in Teaching Research Methods in Applied Linguistics to MA Students: A Case Study from Tripoli University

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## Abstract

Research methods are crucial in postgraduate studies, especially in applied linguistics, as they facilitate independent and rigorous academic inquiry. Teaching these methods effectively presents considerable challenges, particularly in contexts where English is not the native language. To address these issues, this paper explored the challenges professors faced in teaching research methods in applied linguistics to MA students. Quantitative and qualitative methods were adopted. Surveys were used to identify the key challenges that students face in research method courses at the English Department, Faculty of Languages, Tripoli University. Interviews were conducted with professors to gauge their perceptions towards teaching research methods. Results revealed that the majority of students struggle, when it comes to interpreting statistical analysis, no experience to criticize sources critically, inadequate research skills and limited access to academic resources. Interviews highlighted a lack of curriculum flexibility and insufficient institutional support as major barriers to effective instruction. Professors also emphasized the urgent need for access to updated resources and training in student-centered teaching strategies. These challenges hinder the teaching and learning process. The study concludes practical recommendations, such as curriculum reform, resource investment, and professional development for professors. By implementing these changes, Tripoli University can enhance the quality of research methods instructions, preparing students for both academic and professional success.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Research Methods, Applied Linguistics, MA Postgraduate students,

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## الملخص

تُعدّ مادة طرق البحث عنصراً أساسياً في الدراسات العليا، وخاصة في مجال اللغويات التطبيقية، إذ تُمكن الطلاب من إجراء أبحاث أكاديمية مستقلة وذات طابع علمي مستقل ومع ذلك، فإن تدريس هذه المناهج بفعالية يواجه تحديات كبيرة، لا سيما في السياقات التي لا تُعدّ فيها اللغة الإنجليزية هي اللغة الأم. لمعالجة هذه القضايا، استكشفت هذه الدراسة التحديات التي يواجهها الأساتذة في تدريس مناهج البحث في اللغويات التطبيقية لطلبة الماجستير. وقد تم اعتماد منهجية مختلطة، حيث استُخدمت الاستبيانات لتحديد أبرز التحديات التي يواجهها الطلاب في مساق طرق البحث بقسم اللغة

الإنجليزية، كلية اللغات، جامعة طرابلس. كما تم إجراء مقابلات مع الأساتذة للتعرف على وجهات نظرهم حول تدريس هذا المنهج. كشفت النتائج أن غالبية الطلاب يواجهون صعوبات عند التعامل مع التحليل الإحصائي، ويفتقرون إلى الخبرة في نقد المصادر بشكل نقدي، كما يعانون من مهارات بحثية غير كافية ومن محدودية في الوصول إلى المصادر الأكاديمية التي تُعيق هذه التحديات عملية التعليم والتعلم. وتختتم الدراسة بجملة من التوصيات العملية، مثل إصلاح المناهج، والاستثمار في المصادر، وتطوير قدرات الأساتذة. ومن خلال تنفيذ هذه التوصيات، يمكن لجامعة طرابلس تحسين جودة تدريس مناهج البحث، مما يُعِدُّ الطلاب بشكل أفضل للنجاح الأكاديمي والمهني.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحديات، طرق البحث، اللغويات التطبيقية، طلاب الدراسات العليا

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## Introduction

Research method courses play a crucial role in applied linguistics programmes preparing students with the appropriate tools to conduct systematic investigations into language phenomena. In addition it presents a particular challenge due to limited access to digital tools and the different degrees of preparation among students in the MA programmes. Addressing these issues is critical to ensure that students can acquire the necessary skills for academic success in the field of applied linguistics. Moreover, preparing students in applied linguistics to become researchers is challenging, as it requires fostering the development and acquisition of critical skills, conceptual and analytical tools along with practical knowledge, so they can engage with research literature and formulate their research agenda (Lorch, 2006).

## Objectives and Research Questions of the Study

This paper explores the challenges in teaching research methods to MA students in applied linguistics, from both the students' and professors' points of view and provides recommendations to improve teaching outcomes. To achieve these objectives, the following research questions are formed:

1. What are the primary challenges faced by professors in teaching research methods to MA students in the English Department at Tripoli University?
2. What strategies can be implemented to overcome these challenges and improve the effectiveness of research methods instructions?

Answering these questions would underlie the rationale and benefits of this study by providing a deeper understanding of the challenges faced within this educational setting.

**Statement of the Problem**

Theoretical knowledge and practical application are required to create a balance in teaching research methods in applied linguistics. However, in the English Department postgraduate studies, several factors prevent this balance. Approximately, most of the students enter the MA programmes without adequate foundational knowledge, making it difficult to understand advanced research concepts. In addition, professors face significant challenges due to the limited access to research tools, up-to-date teaching materials, and essential digital resources.

**Literature Review**

Research methods are the backbone of academic research, particularly for MA students in applied linguistics, as they shape the way students investigate complex language-related phenomena. Brown (2006) emphasizes the importance of aligning research methods instruction with students' prior knowledge and experiences. He argues that abstract theoretical concepts can be difficult to grasp without a solid foundation in basic research principles. Similarly, Kumar (2011) points to the lack of access to relevant research literature and technological resources as a significant obstacle in many developing countries. According to Paltridge and Phakiti (2021, p.5), "developing research competence is fundamental to becoming an effective applied linguist." They also argue that without a solid grounding in methodology, students may struggle to design, interpret, or critically evaluate studies in second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, or discourse analysis. Methodological training not only guides students in selecting appropriate tools for their research questions but also nurtures an academic mindset that is capable of systematic investigation and reflection.

Moreover, engaging deeply with research methods empowers MA students to participate meaningfully in academic discourse and evidence-based practice. As Richards (2022, p. 138) emphasized, "students who are confident in methodological approaches are better equipped to generate new knowledge and contribute to pedagogical improvements in language learning environments." This is especially important in applied linguistics, where real-world application is integral. Understanding both quantitative and qualitative methodologies allows students to work with empirical data, evaluate educational interventions, and even influence policy-making in multilingual or ESL contexts. Traditional lecture-based approaches may not be effective in engaging students with research methods. Active learning strategies, such as problem-based learning and collaborative projects, have been

shown to be more effective in promoting deeper understanding and critical thinking (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). However, implementing these strategies can be challenging in contexts where class sizes are large, and resources are limited.

In addition, research methods in applied linguistics often require balancing theoretical reliability with practical application. However, MA students at the English Department, frequently view research methods as overly abstract, a perception that reduces their motivation and engagement. Hedge (2020) pointed out that many postgraduate programmes fail to contextualize research skills within students' professional goals, leading to a gap between theoretical understanding and practical implementation. This concern is particularly relevant in applied linguistics, where research frequently addresses urgent societal issues, such as language acquisition (Dornyei, 2020). According to Swales and Feak (2017, p.45) "the mastery of academic English is crucial for postgraduate success, yet many ESL students navigate the conventions of their discipline." This struggle is compounded when research method courses require students to interpret complex statistical analysis and synthesize information from advanced academic texts (Byrne, 2019). Another significant issue related is students' limited ability to critique sources. Zhang (2018, p. 880) noted that, non-native speakers often "lack confidence in questioning established research, fearing inaccuracies or cultural misunderstandings." Confronting these problems necessitates both linguistic assistance and direct teaching in critical thinking and academic discourse. As Atwell et al. (2021) asserted that institutions struggle to provide the necessary infrastructure for postgraduate education, including access to academic databases and up-to-date software. This lack of resources leaves students and professors dependent on outdated materials, which limits the scope and quality of their research. Many studies have explored the challenges faced by professors while teaching research methods in applied linguistics such as:

Alsied and Ibrahim (2018) explored the major challenges in research writing. Their study revealed that Libyan EFL learners have difficulty in developing a research project and reporting the findings. It also revealed that the professors had negative attitudes towards their students' research due to the following reasons: lack of motivation, insufficient background knowledge about research, lack of library resources, inadequate number of courses related to research and the unavailability of internet at the university.

Dafri (2021), investigated the challenges encountered by master's level EFL students at Guelma University in the dissertation writing process. The study indicated that nearly 90% of participants had considerable

difficulties, underscoring the necessity for enhanced advice and resources to assist students in their research pursuits.

Nejaghanbar, et al. (2022) discovered in their study that students faced eight areas of challenges which included: shortage of time, information literacy, content knowledge, critical literacy, writers' language style and generic features of texts, teachers' high expectations and vague instructions, and insufficient statistical literacy.

### **The Importance of Research Methods in Applied Linguistics**

Research methodologies are vital in applied linguistics to prepare MA students with the necessary tools to perform thorough and significant research. Manchyn (2015) underscored that an in-depth comprehension of various research approaches empowers students to critically analyze data and provide significant contributions to the field. This expertise enables them to construct rigorous studies, analyze language phenomena efficiently, and implement their findings in practical contexts, thus connecting theoretical knowledge with real-world application.

Moreover, proficiency in research methodologies enables students to navigate complex domains, such as language learning, multilingualism, and discourse analysis. Li and Prior (2022) emphasized that a robust methodological framework allows academics to investigate complex language patterns and enhance educational practices. This ability is essential for formulating effective language teaching strategies and policies that address the needs of varied student demographics. Utilizing advanced research methodologies encourages critical thinking and analytical abilities in MA students. Lorch (2006) asserted that familiarity with many study methodologies and data-gathering techniques fosters students' independence as researchers, enabling them to contribute original insights to the discipline. This autonomy elevates students' academic credentials and prepare them for professional positions that prioritize evidence-based decision-making. Finally, research methods courses also serve a developmental purpose in fostering independence and critical thinking among MA students. According to Li and Prior (2022, p.100), "exposure to diverse research paradigms enables students to question assumptions, develop their own perspectives, and position themselves within academic debates." This intellectual autonomy is crucial not only for thesis writing but also for future roles in academia, education, or government sectors. By equipping students with methodological tools and ethical awareness, professors help shape future researchers who can investigate language issues with depth, rigor, and responsibility.

## **Challenges Faced by Professors in Teaching Research Methods**

Professors often find it challenging to teach research methods to MA students in applied linguistics, especially in contexts where English is not the first language. Many professors find themselves dealing with several problems that affect the quality of teaching and learning. These challenges are not only related to students' performance, but also to the environment, the curriculum, and sometimes to the professors themselves.

One main challenge is students' lack of background knowledge. Many MA students join the program without having enough understanding of basic research concepts making it difficult for professors to teach advanced topics. Though most of them are not ready for the level of critical thinking and analysis that research demands, students expect to quickly acquire research techniques (Nguyen & Pham, 2022).

Another difficulty is the language barrier. In many non-English speaking countries, professors teach research methods in English, but students do not always have the required academic language skills. As a result, professors spend extra time explaining concepts and correcting misunderstandings this often slows down the class. Zhao and Liu (2020, p.240) noted that "language difficulties, especially in reading and writing, negatively affect students' engagement with research literature and assignments."

Professors also face curriculum-related challenges, as some research methods courses are outdated or not suitable for the needs of new applied linguistics students. In some universities, professors have to follow a rigid syllabus that does not allow flexibility or adaptation. Hassan (2020, p.35) pointed out that "professors feel limited by the lack of autonomy in modifying course content to match students' needs and the fast-changing research environment."

Additionally, resource limitations create problems for effective teaching. Many professors do not have access to recent academic journals, software tools for data analysis, or even proper internet connections in some classrooms. This makes it harder to provide students with a practical, hands-on research experience. In the absence of current tools, professors are unable to illustrate practical applications of research methodologies, resulting in less student engagement (Al-Jarf, 2021).

Furthermore, student motivation and attitudes can also be a problem. Some professors report that students do not see the value of learning research methods and view the course as something they just need to pass. This makes it difficult for professors to create an interactive and dynamic learning environment. According to Smith (2023, p.19), "low

motivation among students forces professors to simplify lessons too much, which affects the academic standard of the course”.

Finally, many lecturers feel that they are not sufficiently trained in pedagogical strategies for teaching research methods. While they may be experts in applied linguistics, they might not have formal training in teaching research design or statistics, especially to students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. As highlighted by Rusdi (2024, p.17), “professors need continuous professional development to keep up with new research techniques and to respond to students’ learning styles more effectively.”

### **Methodology**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative data from student questionnaires with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with professors. The combination of these methods provides a comprehensive view of both student experiences and professors’ strategies in teaching research methods in applied linguistics. Creswell and Creswell (2018) argued that mixed-methods allow for a comprehensive understanding by integrating statistical trends with in-depth insights.

### **Participants**

The study involved 50 MA students from the English Department at Tripoli University and five professors who have experience in teaching research methods for more than five years. Only five professors were interviewed for this study due to the limited number of faculty members actively involved in teaching research methods within the English Department at Tripoli University. The professors were selected based on their extensive experience each with over five years of teaching the subject and their direct involvement in supervising postgraduate research. In qualitative research, depth of insight is often prioritized over sample size, and interviewing a smaller, specialized group allows for a more detailed understanding of the pedagogical challenges and institutional context.

### **Instruments**

Both questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data for this study. A questionnaire was designed to identify levels of anxiety and confidence related to research methods, resources availability, and course content. The questionnaire contained 10 items, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five professors specializing in applied linguistics research methods to gauge the perceptions of the

challenges they face when teaching research methods. Different strategies are often combined to support each other, e.g. exploring the results of a questionnaire survey with in-depth interviews to explore key results to provide a full picture of the topic under investigation (Saunders et al 2012; Menacere, 2016).

### **Results and Discussion**

The findings of the questionnaire reveal that 65% of the students had feeling of anxiety when engaging with research methodology concepts, which aligns with existing literature (Swales & Feak, 2012). Only 35% of the students felt confident in their ability to critically evaluate research articles, while 30% felt that they were confident in formulating researchable questions which aligns with Creswell and Creswell's (2018) who report that foundational skills require clear structure development.

Activities that are related to critical reading can improve students' ability to synthesize sources and evaluate research reliability, as suggested by Swales and Feak (2012). About 85% of the responses indicated that they struggle when it comes to interpreting complex statistical analysis which is in line with (Byrnes, 2019). The results also demonstrated that approximately 64% of the responses designate that they have no experience or the ability to criticize sources critically, which is consistent with past findings (Zhang, 2018).

Additionally, 90% of the responses indicated that the university lacks to provide the necessary infrastructure for postgraduate education, including access to academic databases, which is consistent with the literature (Atwell et al., 2021). 85% of the student participants agreed that constructive feedback from their professors significantly improved their performance, while 75% felt comfortable seeking help from other professionals which helped them improve their understanding of research methods.

85% of the students claimed that they are unprepared for the course and 80% expressed dissatisfaction with the availability of research tools, these findings are consistent with earlier research (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) suggesting a need for incorporating progress monitoring digital tools in research methods instruction.

Table 1. Student Responses to Questionnaire on Research Methods Challenges

Survey Item	Percentage (%)
Felt anxious about research methods	65%
Felt confident evaluating research articles	35%
Felt confident formulating research questions	30%
Struggled with statistical analysis	85%
Unable to critically evaluate sources	64%
Reported lack of university research infrastructure	90%
Felt supported by professor feedback	85%
Sought help from professionals	75%
Felt unprepared for the course	85%
Dissatisfied with research tool availability	80%

Table 1 presents a summary of student responses gathered through the questionnaire.

The second data collection tool, semi-structured interviews, was conducted to gain a better understanding and provide fresh insights into the challenges professors face when teaching research methods in applied linguistics. The findings reveal that professors in the interview emphasized the need for a supporting learning environment. Strategies such as normalizing challenges and fostering a growth mindset can reduce these anxieties, as recommended by (Dornyei, 2007). Professors also indicated that technology plays a significant role in research methods. Statistical software such as SPSS can bridge theoretical concepts with practical applications, which need to be supported by the institution, which is consistent with the past findings (Byrne, 2019). Professor (A) noted, "Students often memorize methodological terminology without fully understanding how to apply it in their research." This disconnect is partially due to limited opportunities for students to practice using research tools like SPSS or NVivo, leading to shallow comprehension. Professor (B) added, "Even basic tasks like designing a questionnaire or coding qualitative data are unfamiliar to most students." These reflections emphasize the need for a curriculum that emphasizes applied learning experiences.

In addition, institutional barriers were consistently mentioned through interviews. Professors expressed frustration over the lack of updated teaching materials and inconsistent access to online databases and journals. As for Professor (C) argues that, "We sometimes rely on outdated PDFs because the university's subscriptions are not functioning." These constraints not only hinder the quality of

instruction but also demotivate both professors and students. Addressing these issues through resource investment and structured professional development could significantly enhance the research training environment.

The additional visions, which were provided by the professors, further highlight the importance of constructive feedback that balances encouragement and invaluable advice. In addition, the professors indicated that there is a need for curriculum-level change, such as pre-course workshops on foundational concepts, which is consistent with the literature (Dornyei, 2007, Rusdi, 2024).

Table 2. Themes from Professors’ Interviews on Challenges in Teaching Research Methods

Theme	Summary of Professors’ Responses	Sample Quotation
Lack of Practical Application	Professors noted a gap between theoretical concepts and hands-on implementation of research methods.	“Students memorize definitions but can’t design a basic questionnaire or use SPSS.”
Resource Limitations	Faculty reported limited access to updated journals, databases, and statistical software.	“We rely on outdated PDFs because the university’s subscriptions are not working.”
Student Preparedness	Professors stated that students enter MA programs without sufficient background in research.	“Most students lack even the basics of academic inquiry and expect quick mastery.”
Language and Comprehension Barriers	Students struggled with academic English and interpreting complex texts.	“They get lost in long research articles they understand the words but not the meaning.”
Curriculum Rigidity	Professors felt constrained by inflexible syllabi that couldn’t be tailored to student needs.	“We can’t change anything even when we know the content isn’t working for our students.”
Need for Institutional Support	Professors expressed the need for administrative support, including training and better infrastructure.	“There is no encouragement or support from the department to update how we teach.”
Importance of Feedback and Mentoring	Constructive feedback and mentoring were seen as critical for student development.	“What they need most is clear, supportive guidance not just grades on papers.”

## Ethics

This study was conducted with full respect for ethical research practices. All participants, both students and professors, were informed of the study's purpose and gave their voluntary consent prior to participation. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing responses in both the survey data and interview transcripts. Additionally, participants were assured that their involvement would not affect their academic standing or professional evaluations. Ethical approval was obtained from the English Department at Tripoli University. This ensured that all procedures followed institutional and academic research standards, upholding the integrity and transparency of the research process.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Teaching research methods in applied linguistics for MA students is a demanding task for both students and professors. However, this study highlights significant challenges in teaching research methods to postgraduate students at Tripoli University. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach, including curriculum reform, resource investment, and professional development for professors. By implementing these changes, Tripoli University can enhance the quality of research methods instructions, preparing students for both academic and professional success.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions for Professors

1. Can you describe your experience teaching research methods to MA students in the English Department?
2. What are the main challenges you face when teaching research methods in applied linguistics?
3. How do you perceive students' preparedness when they enter the research methods course?
4. To what extent do language barriers affect students' understanding of research concepts?
5. What kind of resources or tools are currently available to you and your students for teaching and conducting research?
6. How do you integrate practical applications, such as statistical tools or data analysis software, into your teaching?
7. What kind of institutional or administrative support do you receive in delivering the course?
8. Do you feel that the current curriculum allows flexibility to adapt to your students' needs? Why or why not?
9. What strategies do you use to motivate students or address their learning difficulties in research methods?
10. In your opinion, what improvements could be made to enhance the effectiveness of teaching research methods at Tripoli University?

