Challenges of Topic Selection for Dissertation at the Undergraduate Level in Bangladesh

Mohammad Ehsanul Islam Khan[1] & Mohammad Ekramul Islam Khan[2] & Afsana Siddika Anonna[3] & Samia Islam[4]

[1] Manarat International University (MIU), Dhaka, Bangladesh
[2] Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University, Tangail, Bangladesh
[3] Govt. Titumir College (affiliated with University of Dhaka), Dhaka, Bangladesh
[4] Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh
[1,2,3,4] Hello-Teen Society (S-13170), Dhaka, Bangladesh
Correspondence: Afsana Siddika Anonna, Govt. Titumir College (Affiliated with University of Dhaka), Dhaka, Bangladesh
Email: anonna.helloteen@gmail.com

Abstract

This research study dealt with the students' challenges in selecting the topic of their undergraduate thesis. The study focused on the perceptions of the undergraduate students' and their selection of a suitable research topic. The researchers have used the semi-structured questions for taking interviews in order to collect the data. Through the interview items, the study concentrated on the related inquiries. There were five participants who carry different CGPA grades. The research went on from one category to another and the data have been collected through the face-to-face interviews. The students' interview provided the researchers with an explanation of their level of confidence in relation to their conviction in choosing their thesis topics. The study revealed the conceptualizations regarding the challenges of the students for selecting a good research topic. The researchers expected that this research study would explore the strategies of the students which support the beginners to choose a thesis topic. The researchers conducted interviews at a university campus to attain the understanding of struggling points of the undergraduate students while choosing their thesis topic for dissertation course.

Keywords: Thesis Topic, Challenges, Topic Selection, Undergraduate Thesis

Introduction

Writing a thesis has become an important part of a student's life (Yousuf, 2018). Thus, choosing a good research topic becomes very crucial for them. Therefore, the undergraduate students need to be trained to choose a thesis topic. However, Research shows that undergraduates face various challenges while choosing a feasible research topic.

Xia (2013) stated that selection of a topic can be the most difficult problem from a student perspective. The findings of this research will help understand us how the students can be supported better. Research on the challenges Bangladeshi undergraduate students face while choosing a thesis topic is still very limited. Pemberton (2012) has also suggested some factors that the students follow while they choose a thesis topic according to their self-interest.

The selection of a thesis topic is not a quick and easy process. Research papers contain high value as it contributes in highlighting systematic academic knowledge of the body to the fields that have scopes of development. Organized research with creativity and innovation may result in solving the deficit system that is the motive of any young explorers. Hence, choosing effective research topics is the prime challenge for any undergraduate student. The topic acts as a precursor in guiding the arrangements of later analysis. It provides a definite angle of what a researcher determines to produce. However, every student at their primary level faces hardship while deciding an effective topic for their research paper. Our education in Bangladesh lacks in providing proper guidelines for students' system at the undergraduate level. So, by addressing the gap, this dissertation study investigated the challenges undergraduate students face in their thesis topic selection process and how they try to overcome those. The researchers first identified what kind of challenges the undergraduate students are facing, and how these issues are affecting them.

Selecting a good thesis topic has taken an important place in our education. But it is difficult for the undergraduate students when they try to choose one and it becomes particularly difficult "the researcher has limited flexibility in modifying the topics" (Adhikari, 2020). According to Kozma (1997), research topic is a brief outline that refers to the content of research, therefore, it should get more importance when we train our students to conduct a research and write their thesis. But unfortunately, students often do not get enough support in this regard and undergraduate students suffer due to this.

Based on our observation in several universities in Bangladesh, the researchers believe that the topic selection process of an undergraduate students has not been up to the mark. Moreover, the students and teachers are not aware of the process of topic selection. So, the researchers planned to conduct this study to find out more and to identify how the students can be supported better. The researchers also wanted to find out why the undergraduate students are often not able to choose a research topic for their thesis. The researchers believed that this research study would create awareness and be beneficial for the undergrads in topic selection process.

The study explores how the students deal with the challenges and how they can overcome the situation. In the field of research, the students will be the future researchers of our country. They need to study more and conduct better thesis while pursuing their higher-level studies. But the problem is, the undergraduate students are unable to choose a good topic as their research study. Most of the related studies of this research were from

the Asian countries but there has not been enough in our country. So, this particular field needs to be studied more by the researcher urgently and needs to address some proper recommendations for the study. So, based on the related literature studies, this dissertation study exposes what are the challenges that undergraduate students face in choosing a thesis topic.

In this study, the researchers aimed at finding out the challenges the undergraduate students face while choosing their research topics, why they face those challenges and to identify how they face those challenges so that the students can be guided better. The researchers believed that the findings would better equip the students to be better prepared while choosing the right topic for their thesis. It also equipped the teachers as well as the institutions to better support their students. So, the study was based on these three research questions: (a) what kind of challenges do the undergrad students face while choosing a research topic for their thesis? (b) why do the students face these challenges? and (c) what can be the solutions?

Literature Review

According to Noortyani (2016), due to the insufficient knowledge and having the confusion in their mind, they become unable to express their ideas. Students find difficulties in arranging their ideas and thoughts properly, rather they also suffer from the level of confidence. In her research, she finds out that the respondents admitted their struggling point in determining a research topic. The study also focuses on the student's obstacle like lack of guidance while they were facing incapability to choose a thesis topic. This study of Noortyani was conducted in Indonesia among 25 participants. The author used questionnaire for conducting her research. The major finding was about writing experience while conducting a research study, which the students lack most. In order to produce a good quality of research, students do not have the adequate knowledge and ability.

Selection of a good research topic is not so easy for the undergraduate students. Some undergraduate students express their ideas and topics, but they also suffer from indecisions. Lubis and Huda (2018) showed us the long-term process of selecting the research topic. Pointing out the specific problem, their study shows us that this (topic selection) particular part of the research has not been paid much attention. They also expose that students' decision-making process has become longitudinal, and the struggling moment comes through the appearance of different kinds of challenges. In their inquiry, they have depicted us that the struggle may come also after choosing the research topic when the students and the academic parties' disagreement occurs. So, it can also depend on the academic parties or the opinions of the instructor. This research study was about selection of a research topic and it followed the longitudinal narrative inquiry method. It

was conducted in Indonesia, having ten graduate participants from various departments. The major findings of this research study were self-reflection of past perceived knowledge including friends and teachers' suggestions which has affected those students for facing challenges while choosing a thesis topic.

In choosing a research topic, students do not pay attention and interest as Keshavarz and Shekari (2020) finds out that a students' interaction and interest, including aspiration of career can affect the selection of a research topic. According to their study, the influence occurs in the selection process of a thesis topic when the students lack information resources, conceptual frameworks and proper understandings. Moreover, the unawareness of the students in the field of thesis also occurs, and for this reason they do not look for the non-repetitive topic. They state the awareness in their whole study that a genuine researchable topic will become useful when the topic will be non-repetitive. This research followed a mixed exploratory method. The major findings of this research are topic nature, research operability and information resources.

The study by Adhikari (2020), tells us about the "friends (feasible, relevant, interesting, ethical, narrow, discipline, supervisor) strategies" for selecting a research topic. A researcher should pay attention to interest and passion for selecting a good topic. Relating to the study, this research also focuses on the students' struggle. The struggle occurs when the students do not show any interest in choosing their dissertation topic. In the study of Adhikari (2020), shows a "SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat) analysis". To conduct research by choosing a good topic, students or the researchers may deal with above-mentioned points. The major ideas that the research shows us that how to narrow down a topic and topics that are appropriated to the discipline. The author also shows the essence of a topic selection for the research study through the strategy of 'friends'.

Using the survey method, Saah and Osei (2010) points out that the study does not engage the reader when a researcher fails to accomplish a better topic or title. The importance of choosing a good topic completely depends on the researcher. The struggle of the students becomes more serious according to Saah and Osei (2010) when they do not apply brainstorming and consider current issues. Their research study finds out and suggests that the students need to structure their topic with brevity, clarity and in a tentative way.

The study by Grünke and Leonard-Zabel (2015), shows that the learners do not plan about their writing. So, the researchers suggest that the learners should think about the purpose of their writing, gather the ideas and sequence their ideas and thoughts for assigning a topic. Those students who face challenges most while selecting their research topic, do not follow these suggestions offered by Grünke and Leonard-Zabel (2015). The study also discusses the characteristics of students who struggle in case of writing. The major findings in their research are short, incomplete and poorly organizing while choosing

a thesis topic.

Choosing an authentic and solid topic is also an important part in the research section. The challenges may also occur when the students fail to select an authentic topic. Bakkaloglu's (2017) study focuses on the importance of choosing an authentic research topic. Like Saah and Osei (2010), he also makes suggestions about the significance of brainstorming. He suggests, the problem may appear when the students do not jot down the ideas and revisit them to give a structural shape of the topic.

Facing difficulties and challenges in selecting a topic for dissertation is becoming a common and serious issue. Students often choose the topic without maintaining its structure. The topic not only needs to be chosen, but also it needs the structural refining maintenance according to Lipson (2005). In a particular chapter of the book "How to Write a BA Thesis", Lipson discusses refining the selected research topic. The author also focuses on the importance of selecting a well-defined topic. In this study, the researchers will be relating undergraduate students' challenges about the refining of selected and well-defined topics.

Academic concerns and struggles are the issues that students face most. In the study of 68 participants, Setiawan (2008), shows the problems of the students regarding academic related issues. Academic related issues are the lack of academic performance, lack of concentration and motivation. From the perspectives of this article, the study of the students' challenges in choosing a thesis topic, may also find the correlation that the learners are having the lack of academic related problems.

Methods

Sampling

The qualitative method has been supportive for completing the study. Through this method, the researchers achieved deep understanding to the challenges. Moreover, the researchers also keenly observed the students' perceptions while interviewing. It is very important as Kothari (2004) says, "observation becomes a scientific tool and the method of data collection for the researcher," (p. 96).

Furthermore, the researchers have decided to explore this study on the following issue as qualitative method allows me to gain in-depth knowledge of the data within a range of perspectives. It will also help the researchers to find out the key findings and meanings of a particular context. Later, the process of taking semi-structured interviews of the selected undergraduate students, has been completed. There are five participants in this study, and they all are from the English Department of two universities in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

The researchers have chosen the universities because they have the access to collect the data from there. While choosing the interview participants, the researchers

approached all the students who are already done with their Research Methodology course. The researchers also approached those students who were doing Research Methodology course. There were 3 male students (all of them have already completed their Research Methodology course), and 2 female students (from the Research Methodology course). Their background information is described here briefly:

Alpha	He has come from a Bangla medium background. Currently pursuing BA in English at a university. He has gained the experience of Research Methodology course.
Beta	He has also come from the Bangla medium background. Pursuing BA in English in the same university. He has also got the experience of doing Research Methodology course.
Gamma	He has come from an English medium background and is currently pursuing BA in English. Like Alpha and Beta, this participant also has got the experience of doing Research Methodology course.
Delta	This participant is female. She has also come from an English medium background. Currently, doing the Research Methodology course.
Epsilon	This participant is also female. She is the last participant of this study and has come from the English medium background too. This participant is also pursuing BA in English in the same university and currently doing her Research Methodology course.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The data for the research study were collected mainly from the primary resources. This study has specifically tried to focus on the students who are currently doing their Research Methodology course (because most of the students choose their thesis topic while doing this course), and the participants have already selected their thesis topics for their dissertation. Each of the participants took part in an individual semi structured interview, each of the interviews took an hour long. The researchers think that taking interviews is one of the best sources of data collection and we can observe all the things related to the participants' data. So, the researchers took face to face interviews not only to collect the data but also to observe all the participants' things. The interviews were conducted through speaking English. The data collection took four weeks to complete.

After interviewing the participants, the researchers transcribed the interviews. Then the researchers read the transcriptions to come up with preliminary codes. Then the researchers refined the preliminary codes to develop the final codes. Next, the researchers re-read the transcripts and coded them using the preliminary codes and came up with more specific final codes to determine the emerging themes of this study which helped the researchers to discuss the findings. The following is an example of coding process of the transcribed data:

Raw Data	Preliminary Code	Code
"Yes, of course. Because I noticed that our teacher was continuously rejecting everyone's topic. I was not getting that point. I got rejected too. I was like, I was in a not fixable situation while choosing my thesis topic. I was neither searching for opinions nor setting up my mind for the topic selection."	Constant Rejection Lack of proper opinions Mindset Gap	Dilemma

The researchers reanalyzed all the data and found out some supportive and related findings according to the research questions. To validate the findings, the researchers shared it with the interviewees for checking. Apart from this data analysis process, the researchers used thematic analysis as it is a well-known process of analyzing data. After getting the codes, the researchers found out the themes that had been uttered most by the interviewees. Later, the researchers applied a cross-case analysis process to explore the similar and dissimilar cases of the student participants so that the findings of the study become more valid.

Results and Findings

Alpha faced challenges in choosing a thesis topic. He was even hesitating in answering the questions. He said, "I was feeling hesitations and I had some personal issues too. So, I had that fear in my mind that my teacher might reject my chosen topic. Which is why, I took help from my friends and somehow, I managed to choose a thesis topic for myself." Choosing a thesis topic within a short period of time was hectic for the participant. Alpha's chosen topic got rejected many times because his teacher said the topics were not appropriate or researchable. He selected broad topics and he was unable to narrow those down. The participant was hesitating to ask questions to his course teacher. He also mentioned that he had challenges with reading texts, he did not like reading research article much which was extremely important for choosing a topic. He also mentioned that he did not do much brainstorming.

Despite having a good CGPA, Beta also faced difficulties. The participant was suffering from indecisions problem and he did not make enough effort. The participant was more focused on reading the secondary materials, but still was not finding a good one. He mentioned that he lacked guidance.

Our participant (Delta) was unable to find a less researched topic. Later, she found a suitable topic which got approved by her course teacher. her final topic was quite specific and the course teacher helped her to narrow down the topic.

Epsilon, who was doing the Research Methodology course discussed her difficulty in finding enough relevant secondary sources. She says,

I felt stressed, because, I was running out of time. Everybody was choosing

their topic. And, I changed my topic before the deadline because I thought my previous topic was not good enough. So, I again had to read 20 to 25 articles. And I was unable find out these sources at first. So, it was stressful for me.

The reason behind this issue was that she did not know how to search for resources over the internet, she did not know exactly where to search for the articles and she did not get proper support in this regard. She felt stressed while doing the Research Methodology course, because she changed her topic before the deadline.

Another participant Gamma was looking for a 'research gap' to narrow down his chosen topic. To validate the topic with the secondary articles, it was also quite stressful for him. Gamma's topic also got rejected because of his inability of narrowing down the topic. Findings also show that his lack of knowledge on the thesis writing steps led him to feel stressed and lost.

Like Alpha, Beta and Gamma also faced rejections at first, despite having a good range of CGPA. However, it was not the case for Delta and Epsilon. Their chosen topic had been selected at first by their course instructor. They both (Delta and Epsilon) expressed that their topic was not so good enough, but their course teacher helped them to find out a research gap from the topic and shaped the topic into a good and doable one. In the case of Epsilon, she tried to change the topic as she was not too passionate about it. Later, she changed her topic and again searched for the secondary resources and theoretical framework. However, other participants' cases were not similar to Epsilon's case. Other interviewees said that they stuck with their first chosen topic.

All of the participants have agreed that they faced challenges while they were narrowing down their topic. It was quite difficult for the participants. Moreover, everyone has faced challenges while searching for a less researched thesis topic. They tried to find a unique one but not all of them got that chance, except Gamma. At one point, Alpha has faced challenges while reading through the 10 to 15 secondary articles for his topic. He felt stressed and he was in a dilemma. This was also faced by the two of the participants Delta and Epsilon. The other two participants were completely different in their statement. They said that they had read as many articles as they could read in that short period of time. Because they expressed their thought that reading the secondary resources can only help them to select a good topic according to their topic identification idea.

Discussion

One of the findings of this study is that the students are often afraid of asking questions to their teachers and they hesitate to ask questions and request support. They fear that the teachers might scold them for not finding good topics or for not knowing how to choose a good topic. They lack encouragements from their teachers which make them

having difficulty and confusion. Sometimes they do not get proper feedback from their teachers.

Another important finding of this research study is that the students do not know how to search for resource like article and research materials from the internet and other sources. Fadhly et al. (2018) also suggested that lack of resources is one of the factors that affect selection of a thesis topic. Due to lack of experience in this field and having confusion regarding this process, they do not know how to search for resources.

The findings also show that the participants do not do brainstorming based on the related studies they find out from the internet sources and they do not know how to effectively choose a topic following the brainstorming step. Students also do not know how to make the connection between their existing knowledge and the knowledge they are trying to gain through their research to help them in the topic selection process. Lubis and Huda (2019) pondered that the students face challenges in the topic selection process because they are unable to input their knowledge gained from various courses.

Moreover, there are some other students who are incapable of using theoretical framework into their research.

The students also reported that they find it challenging to identify a research gap and to come up with a less researched topic for their studies. They want to find a less worked and unique topic, but there are very few students who are able to find a topic with a uniqueness in it.

The findings also suggest that the students had difficulties with their writing, they did not know about the thesis writing process and its format and layout.

One of the major challenges all the participants faced was "narrowing down a broad topic." All the participants stated that they could not narrow down their topics. This caused them to face challenges while choosing a thesis topic. Adhikari (2020) also discussed in his research study that his participants were unable to narrow down a broad thesis topic causing the researchers face difficulties.

They are unsure about their writing steps of using related studies in the thesis, research methodology section, and how to imply theoretical framework into a thesis paper. That is why, they found the circumstances which are problematic for them to understand and implement the steps in the thesis. And, all of these steps rely on the selection of a good and doable research topic.

Recommendations

Based on the finding of our study, the researchers would like to make the following recommendations for supporting the students to be better equipped to choose the right topic for their thesis.

a. **Fear of Meeting Teachers and Asking Questions:** To overcome this problem, first the students should try to talk with their course teachers. If they (students) are incapable of doing it, they should talk to the respected teachers. Specifically, the student should talk to those teachers who are actually looking forward to helping the students and who also have a friendly approach towards him. If they still become afraid, they should try a formal approach through the medium of communication like email. The students are often afraid of talking in front of the whole class. In that case, they can talk to the teachers after the class or in the teachers' consultation hours. After they have found advisors for themselves, they should meet their advisors several time to confirm their topic.

b. **Knowledge Gap Regarding the Nature of the Topic:** This particular issue actually varies from student to student. Because, there are different CGPA holders whose knowledge level is actually different from each other. The statement does not discriminate between different CGPA holders, rather it just exposes the fact between the distinction of the students while they use their cognitive process for choosing a thesis topic. To overcome the problem, one should apply their critical and analytical thought process while choosing a research topic. The students who face this problem, need to brainstorm more and more about the topic selection process. Those students also need to learn the tactics of topic selection. By jotting down all of the brainstorming ideas, can help them to choose a topic more conveniently. So, the researchers highly recommend those students to apply the above-mentioned suggestions to those undergraduate students who are facing a problem due to the thesis topic selection process. In this way, they will be able to think more critically, analyze a topic more effectively and can find out a thesis topic easily.

c. **Lack in Information Resources:** This problem can be overcome easily through the help of using proper internet sources. There are many students who do not know how to choose a topic and how to conduct it down in an organized way. They become tensed and overthink too much and cannot pay attention to the topic selection process. However, for those students the researchers will suggest that they need to know how to use the internet sources properly. There are many valid sources, accessed by the many worldwide reputed universities. These sites will be really very helpful for them. According to Ted (2006), he also suggests to look for the professional journals for research. So, students can also find their own university's online library access provided by the authority. These can be beneficial too. Also, they should follow each and every instruction given by their supervisor. So, by applying these steps, a student can avoid this deficiency.

d. **Self-Reflection on their Existing Knowledge:** There are many students who are not confident enough to apply their past gathered knowledge while choosing a thesis topic. They do not feel strong from inside about their thesis topic. Some of them also try to change their first chosen thesis topic, and this little bit of changes can waste many precious times. To overcome this lacking, the students should stick with their first chosen topic guided by the past perceived knowledge. If they can manage to do better research on the first chosen one topic, then they surely will not be facing this problem. As Flowerday et al., (2004) and I'Anson and Smith, (2004) says that selecting a specific topic is being triggered by self-interest to self-reflection. So, they should pay attention to their past perceived knowledge for selecting a good thesis topic according students' self-interest. Moreover, students also need to stay confident about their past perceived knowledge so that in future they can easily conduct it. So, these steps should be taken for those students who are facing this problem.

e. **Other Necessary Support:** There are some other necessary steps that can be taken for the betterment of the students while choosing a research topic. The university authorities can arrange workshops for their students on topic selection. Seminars, webinars, advising consultations would become helpful for the students. In this case, the departmental clubs can play a significant role as well. In the research of Noortyani (2016), suggests that training on the early period before conducting a research study, could help the students for topic selection. So, in that sense the university authorities can design the basic English language course by adding an extra topic for discussion on "how to select research topics" and teach the students the step-by-step process of topic selection. Adding this in the research methods course is a must.

Limitations of the Study

The major limitation of the study is that the researchers conducted this study among only five student participants due to accessibility issues and time constraint. The researchers recognize that conducting the research among a larger group of people would yield better results. Another limitation of the study is that it was conducted among the students of just two universities. Including multiple private and public university students in the study would present a better picture for us. Lastly, this study was conducted among students only, conducting this research among the teachers as well would have helped find out more about the challenges the students are facing in choosing their thesis topics and what causes the challenges.

Conclusion

The current study has discussed some of the general problems encountered by the undergraduate students in choosing a thesis topic. The findings of the study shows that the undergraduate students are concerned regarding the challenges they face while choosing topics for their theses. The result of the data shows that all of the student participants are fully responsive to this problem. Later, some of them also believed that their lacking created an obstacle to produce a good thesis topic for their dissertation. It is true that sometimes the course instructors are not always co-operative. Some students also ignore this type of problem, thinking about it as a minor case. So, students need to step forward sometimes to brush up on their weaknesses. From the student participants' perspectives, stress is one of the reasons why they face challenges in choosing a thesis topic. It is surely not easy to handle and for this reason they need consultations. However, the findings of the data analysis suggest that the students often get afraid of asking questions and taking advice from their teachers.

The current study is centered on the challenges of undergraduate students while choosing a thesis topic. Similar research can be conducted among the graduate students as well in the future. Also, future research can be conducted among the students of both private and public university where comparison can also be made between what kind of challenges the students face and why. Lastly, similar research can be done among both the teachers and students to find out the perspectives of both of the parties to help support our students, teachers and educational institutions better.

Though many universities offer Research Methodology courses, students do not get enough time for choosing a thesis topic, hence they face problems. So, the additional standardized measures should be taken as per this paper suggests. The researchers believe that the education system of Bangladesh is now progressing day by day, but still the importance of conducting good research is being ignored. Due to this, the students are lagging behind in the case of conducting a thesis topic. For conducting meaningful research and writing a good thesis, one needs to choose a good and doable research topic validated by the research method course teacher or their advisor. The researchers believe that these findings will help both the undergraduate students in choosing the right topic for their thesis; as well as the teachers, advisors and the university authorities to take proper steps to support the students the best possible way.

Acknowledgment

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APPENDIX

Interview questions for the study (Semi-Structured)

1. Have you faced any challenges while choosing a topic for your undergrad thesis? What kind of challenges did you face?
2. How did you select your research topic?
3. Did you feel any stress while choosing a thesis topic? What did you do to avoid the stress?
4. Are you passionate about your research topic?
5. Which sources did you use for getting help in deciding your topic?
6. What kind of support did you get from your supervisor and other teachers while deciding your research topic?
7. Were your topic/topics rejected at first? On what grounds were they rejected?
8. Are you/were you satisfied with your final topic of thesis?