



## Finding Research Topic and Its Effect on Research Learners' Motivation: An Action Research

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### *Author's contribution*

*The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports the findings from an action research on effect of teaching how to find research topic to the undergraduate students' interest and motivation in learning research. The action research employing mixed methods approach was conducted on 95 first year Bachelor of Bhutan and Himalayan Studies (BHS) students taking research methods course at the College of Language and Culture Studies, Royal University of Bhutan. Baseline data were collected using self-developed questionnaire (N=95), focus group interview (N=6) and four experts' rating on students' research topics. Intervention strategies to find research topic were adapted from Bui [1] and Lester and Lester Jr.'s [2] framework and implemented to enable students to speculate, frame and evaluate their research topic. After three weeks of intervention, a post-intervention data were collected employing same procedures and tools as the pre-survey data were collected. Further, to validate the findings, researcher added field notes from the observation during implementing the intervention. Findings showed that intervention strategies have made an impact on students' ability to find research topic, which in turn indicated that students interest and motivation towards research learning augmented. Recommendations to fortify students' research learning experience and need for future research are also provided.

*Keywords: Undergraduate research; research education; research topic.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Research is an essential discipline that undergraduate students experience early in life. Rowlett, Blockus and Susan [3] rightly remarked that research is "...high-impact educational practice that has the ability to capture students' interest and create enthusiasm for and engagement in an area of study" (p.5). Indeed, research supports students' innovation, creativity, analytical and critical competence development [4], which is important for students to overcome real life issues in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Accordingly, most of the universities in the world, today, have incorporated research as a core element of the academic programs. However, undergraduate research in various parts of the world suffers from the plight of mediocrity [5,6].

Research by nature is a difficult discipline, especially for the undergraduate students who would have little or no research experience. For this, Nind, Homes, Innga, Lewthwaite and Sutton [7] contended that unlike the post graduate students who learn research methods experientially, for undergraduate students, research methods training is imperative. However, the literature indicates that the research teaching across the world currently lacks vigor and pedagogical innovation to motivate the learners [8,6]. Owing to which, students experience frustration and distress in learning research [9].

In this regard, research teaching needs to be redesigned and focused on developing and sustaining interest in students towards learning research. Most research method courses overlook the need of teaching the basic aspects of undertaking research. One of the key challenges students confront in learning research is to choose and narrow down a research topic [10]. And research tutors tend to take it for granted that finding topic is left untaught in research methods courses. On the other hand, studies have claimed that students who do not receive instruction on such fundamental elements and process of research fail to establish relevancy between the study and themselves, thus deterring their interest in learning research [4,11]. To this, scholars like [12,1] and [2] offered frameworks for selecting research topic with emphasis on using personal experience to generate research idea. They suggest that finding research topic within personal experience will give a sense of personal significance to study the topic, thereby developing and sustaining their interest.

Teaching to find research topic, therefore, would not only help the students find research topic, but also develop interest and motivation in learning research [7].

The need for research education to develop students' understanding and problem solving ability is recognized in all universities today [13, 14] including the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) [15]. Research is part of all the programs offered in the colleges under RUB today. In the College of Language and Culture Studies (CLCS), research is taught in both the Bachelor's Degree programs the college offers: in first year to B.A. in Bhutanese and Himalayan Studies (BHS) and in third year to B.A. in Language and Literature Studies (BLL). The students have to undertake a research project as a part of the courses where students are allowed to choose their own topics. In this case, the anecdotal experience depicts that students confront a challenge in finding research ideas. It was also observed that most of the students tend to study research merely to fulfill the course requirement and do not display learning spirit and motivation. Hence, exploring for means to enhance the students' research skills and interests in learning research is required.

The difficulty in finding research topics is a common feature the studies found in undergraduate research education. Studies from different countries [e.g.,8,5,6] have corroborated that finding research idea or identifying a research topic is a major problem among the students. This has negative impact on students' esteem and confidence to undertake research work. Students feel their failure from the start breaking their confidence. To this, Harb [4] recommended the scholars or research tutors to redesign the teaching approach in a positive, active, social, and efficient learning environment. However, in Bhutan, while there are studies investigating the general state of research development in RUB [e.g.,16,17] there is lack of literature to show how research can be best taught to Bhutanese students. Therefore, this action research explored ways to improve research learning experience for the students by focusing on enhancing their skill to find good research topic using personal experience as suggested by [12,1] and [2].

### 1.1 Undergraduate Research Course

There is a plethora of literature supporting undergraduate research education, considering the significant contribution research has on

innovation and economic development of a nation [13]. The studies from across the world [e.g., 3 (USA), 5 (Singapore), 6 (Ethiopia), 8 (Libya), 18 (Indonesia)] however revealed that the undergraduate research students find research course difficult and uninteresting. For example, [4] and [19] revealed that the students bear negative attitude towards learning research. Students perceived research as boring, difficult to understand and irrelevant to their daily life indicating the inadequate understanding about research. Likewise, Nind et al. [7] observed that students find research learning stressful and difficult, and many students either choose not to study research where there is option, or they undertake it only to fulfill the course requirement when there is no choice. Literature, therefore, suggests the research tutors a need to provide pedagogical intervention to enable the students undertake research with confidence and interest.

Students' interest and motivation is affected by their competency. Bocar [20] and Qasen and Zayid [9] maintained that students lose their interest and motivation when they lack knowledge and skill to perform required task. For example, their study found that students' poor language competence and inadequate knowledge and skill in conducting research affect students' motivation to learn research. Demonstrating this phenomenon, Howard and Brady's [21] study noted that while the undergraduate research learners express disinterest in learning research, the postgraduate students who have better understanding about research crave to learn it. This suggests that proper research training could augment learners' motivation towards learning research. But researchers like [6,7,22] and [23] observed that many tutors teaching research overlook the undergraduates' unpreparedness to learn research methods as the research students at higher level of degree learn, thereby failing to offer sufficient attention to each process of research. Consequently, as [9] claimed, students seem to be battled emotionally when their knowledge and skill is inadequate to perform what they are assigned.

Among the difficulties that aggravate the students' predicament in learning research, the most common challenge studies from various contexts reported was students' inability to find and narrow down research topic [6,8,10]. It was found that while it is a key challenge students confront, tutors teaching research mostly leave it untaught in research method courses. Suggesting the needs to address it, there are

studies [6,2] which supported group research to develop collaborative learning which might help solving the problem of finding topic through peer assistance. However, they found that group or collaborative work for the students at early stage of learning affects the learning opportunities of those who have fallen behind in learning, because the member who have the competency to perform the task complete it, often in isolation. Likewise, there is also an opinion that providing a topic by tutors might relieve the students of the pressure in searching research topic [2]. However, the mismatch between the topic tutor provided and students' interest could render the study irrelevant to the students' life that it might fail to generate interest in students to undertake it. On the other hand, if tutors explore ways to teach students find research topics on their own rather than providing the topic, it could motivate the students in taking up a project that gives personal significance so that their interest sustains till the end of it [1].

Generally, it is acknowledged that research demands high level analytical skill and linguistic competency [5] which students in CLCS seem to lack. Yangdon [24] studied the level of critical thinking (CT) among the students of CLCS and found that the students' critical thinking ability is 46% against standard average 54% which is lower than the standard CT. Besides, the school education system in Bhutan also lacks support in shaping knowledge and skill in research. Studies in the context of Bhutanese education [e.g.,14,25] pointed against the prevalence of traditional mode of teaching and learning where memorizing information is considered intelligence and regurgitated information the knowledge. Even the teaching and learning at the colleges in Bhutan at present has not fully realized the potential of active, student-centered approach [14]. Likewise, students are also deprived of affluent research culture, since, according to [16] and [17], the research culture in RUB still remains underdeveloped. Further, students in CLCS learn research methods in the first year where they would lack numerous academic skills required at higher education. From these contextual limitations, it could be construed that undergraduate research tutors have vital roles to play in the success of research courses.

## 1.2 Finding Research Topic

Alter and Dennis [12], Bui [1], and Lester and Lester Jr. [2] offered a framework for finding research topics from within so that it relates to personal significance. So, exploring for ways to

teach students find research topics on their own rather than providing the topic could fulfill the purpose of developing and sustaining interest and motivation in research [1].

Alter and Dennis [12] offered a framework for selecting research topic where they offer multiple of factors for research ideas and topic. They believed that research topics could be found by means of looking into the factors such as: selecting ideas to pursue, study framework issue, simply complex theories, study anomalies and create new value. They also added that the sources for research topics are: resources and current practice, personal experience, fundamental issue and previous research. Further, [2] emphasized on the significance of personal experience in finding research topic. They believed that finding research topic can be facilitated by relating personal experience to scholarly problems and academic disciplines, and speculating about a subject by listing issues, asking questions, engaging in free writing and using other idea-generating techniques. Similarly, [1] asserted that the “first place to find research topic is within” (p. 23) and that research topic should be something that has personal significance. These authors suggested issue related to immediate surroundings and the previous studies as a good source of research topic.

While guideline on how to find research topics are available, there are common perspectives among the researchers that students confront confusion and low confidence in choosing research topics [3]. This tends to hinder their progress in research learning. And, studies also recorded that most of the research tutors do not teach how to find research topic because it is not perceived as a part of research methods [8]. Withstanding this view, there is a need for the research tutors to work towards enhancing student's knowledge and skill in research so that they find better relation between their research, learning and their future. This suggests that research teaching needs to be contextually determined and pedagogical intervention could help students learn research better. This study, therefore, examined the effect of using personal experience on students' ability to find research topic and its effect on students' interest and motivation to learn research.

### 1.3 Research Questions

This action research aimed to answer following research questions:

#### 1.3.1 Overarching research question

1. Does personal experience help students find research topic?

#### 1.3.2 Sub questions

1. What is the students' perception on the level of difficulty in finding research topic?
2. What ways do students employ in order to find research topic?
3. Were there significant differences in the students' ability to find research topic between pre and post intervention data?
4. Does enabling students identify research topic enhance students' motivation to learn research?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This action research employed concurrent mixed methods approach [26]. The study was framed within the quasi-experimental research design, where pre and post-intervention were collected to evaluate the effect of the intervention [27]. The study was conducted in CLCS with BHS first year students (N=95) to whom the researcher was teaching Basic Research Method course.

Following the principle of census survey, baseline data were collected from 95 students. Self-designed questionnaire with 10 statements describing different research idea sources was used to collect quantitative data. In addition, participants submitted a topic each for the research project in research method course. The topics were then sent to four experts for evaluation. The baseline findings were used to formulate the intervention strategies to teach students how to find research topics. In addition, to get in-depth understanding on the participants' experience in finding the topics, a focus- group interview was conducted with six participants (one male and one female each from three sections). The researcher also maintained a field note in the course of classroom intervention which helped to substantiate illustration and evidences to other data.

Based on the baseline data, intervention strategies were formulated and administered (see the section on intervention phase for details) to the students for three weeks starting March 1<sup>st</sup>. Baseline data were collected in the second month of the semester, because the participants had learned basics about research by then. Post intervention data were collected in April

employing the same data collection tools as for the baseline data on same group of students (N=95) using the same survey questionnaire. A focus group interview (N=6) was conducted to understand their experience in how to find research topics. Further, to assess if there was difference in their ability to find topics after the intervention, students were asked to submit their finalized topic for the project. They could submit the same topic they submitted for the baseline data or a new one. The same experts were requested to assess and rate the topics like with the pre-intervention topics.

### 2.1 Baseline Data Analysis and Finding

The students (N=95) submitted a research topic each after two days of assigning them to select a topic. The topics were sent to four experts (2 PhDs, and 2 Master’s in applied linguistics who are active researchers in the field of education and social sciences) requesting them to rate the topics on the scale ranging 1= Not-researchable, 2=Too broad, 3=too specific, 4=appropriate and 5=good. The experts’ ratings on each topic were compared to examine for consistency to confirm students’ ability to choose a good research topic. Further, a self-designed questionnaire was administered based on a four-point Likert type scale ranging from 4=strongly agree, 3=agree, 2=disagree and 1=strongly disagree to 95 students present in the class on the day. A total of 10 items measured students perception on difficulty of finding research topic (3 items) and their existing practice in identifying the topics (7 items). A focus-group interview was also conducted in order to get in-depth insights from the students’ experience in finding a search topic each. The six participants are named P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6 in reporting them to assure identity confidentiality. The data from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS to calculate mean and standard deviation. The mean scores were interpreted employing Best and Kahn’s criteria [28] as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Interpretation of the scale values**

Scale	Range	Interpretation
4	3.26-4.00	Very High
3	2.51-3.25	High
2	1.76-2.50	Low
1	1.00-1.75	Very Low

Further, the data from interview and the researcher’s observation were analyzed applying

content analysis technique and triangulated with the findings from the quantitative data.

### 2.2 Students’ General Practice in Selecting Research Topic

The baseline data showed that the students selected their topics mostly based on their personal experiences (M=3.27; SD=0.68) and by asking their friends (M=3.22; SD=0.73) as shown by their higher means as shown in the interpretation of the scale value in Table 1. Students also searched for topics in previous and books (M=2.83; SD=0.61) and online materials (M=2.79; SD= 0.93). Asking their tutor scored the lowest mean (M=2.37; SD=84) which, according to the Table 1. In selecting the topics, the survey shows that students also looked into the relevancy of the topic to their program (M=2.87; SD=0.78). The qualitative finding from the interview conformed that students did explore various sources for topics, largely depending on their personal experiences. The interview extract below illustrates a participant’s experience:

“For me, I just tried thinking of some problems we have in college and then picked up one of the issues as my research topic. I think, that way, it is easier to search for research topic. I tried to look for a research topic which is related to BHS. But I could not think of any; I thought attendance issue in evening prayer needs to be researched, so I picked it as my topic.”

Likewise, students felt other sources ineffective for research topics. In deviation to survey finding, qualitative findings revealed that students felt reading previous studies too difficult. The interview revealed that some students adopted the research titles directly from the previous studies without actually reading or understanding the paper. P1 stated, “I think some of the friends copied the topic directly the topics of some papers. They may not have read the article completely.” P6 added, “To me reading research article is difficult to understand. It could be my poor reading habit.” Other participants agreed that most of the students have “no reading habit” which makes reading ineffective way to find topics. P2 lamented, “I read almost four papers without understanding much what it is about, so I could not really find a research idea from it”.

Aligned to the survey and interview, the researcher’s observation on types of students’ topics also suggested that students mostly

selected their research topic based on the practical problem they observe in the college.

### 2.3 Students' Pre-perception on Finding Research Topic

Overall average ( $M=3.3$ ;  $SD=0.75$ ) of the students' perception on difficulty of finding research topic falls between the range 3.26 and 4 which is very high as shown on the interpretation of scale value Table 1. Thus, it indicates that the students generally perceived selecting research topic very difficult. Indeed, most of them agreed that finding research topic was difficult for them ( $M=3.09$ ;  $SD=0.27$ ), and strongly agreed that the most difficult part of research was to find a good research topic ( $M=3.52$ ;  $SD= 0.67$ ). This was confirmed by the focus group interview. All participants agreed that finding a research topic was difficult. This seems to be even instilling fear and anxiety in students. P4 wondered, "If I fail to find a research topic, how can I do a research. I think I cannot do research." On the other hand, P1 thought that there was need for more time to learn research to be able to undertake it. The participant stated, "Learning how to do research for a semester does not prepare us enough; we need more training before we start doing projects."

The interview showed that the students have little or no idea about research. "Since it is first time, it is difficult for me to think of any topic that can be researched," a participant postulated. P4 echoed, "Actually, it is very difficult for me to find the topic and to decide which topic because, firstly, research is new module for us, and the knowledge I have on conducting research is limited." Further, the participant added, "Although I have interest in some topic, it difficult to say whether it can be research topic or not". In general, the findings show that students perceived finding research topic as a difficult task.

### 2.4 Students' Ability to Select Appropriate Research Topic

The experts' rating on each topic showed that most of the students have difficulty in identifying research topics. Out of 95 topics, only six were rated *Good* against 20 *Not-researchable* by all the raters. There were 10 topics rated appropriate for researching, 19 as *too broad* and 17 as *too specific* by all the experts. In addition, three topics were rated *Good* and seven rated *Appropriate* by three experts each. In overall, the students ability to select appropriate research

topic as per the experts' rating was low as shown by the mean ( $M=2.23$ ;  $SD=0.41$ ). Further, the interviews findings showed that students admitted that they were unsure of whether the topics they chose can be actually studied. Although the criteria for good research topics were taught, students seemed to have difficulty in determining the feasibility of the study they choose.

### 2.5 Intervention Phase

Intervention strategies were designed based on the baseline findings. Searching research topic was a challenge to the students. Their poor reading habit and linguistic deficiency limited their access to academic articles and previous studies. Therefore, students largely depended on their personal experience for the topic. Hence, enabling them to generate topics by linking the personal experience to academic field would be an effective strategy.

The strategies were adapted from [12,1] and [2] suggestions on selecting research topics. These scholars suggested that personal experience offers a good source for a research topic. And that, selecting a topic that bears significance to individual will augment interest and motivation in research learners. So, following Lester and Lester Jr's [2] exercise where students need to draw link between personal interest and academic field was implemented for three weeks. Likewise, Bui's [1] four important facts for selecting a research problem: personal significance, critical issues in the field, the existing research literature and ethical consideration, and topic evaluation criteria were used for assessing students' topics.

#### 2.5.1 Stage 1. Identifying personal experience and connecting to scholarly topic

Bui [1] stated that research topic can be found firstly from personal interest, and secondly from observing immediate surroundings. Following that, Lester and Lester Jr.'s [2] exercise was adopted in order to facilitate the students how to develop link between personal interest and an academic area. Students were made to list down their interest in relation to academic studies, social issues and cultural backgrounds they belonged to. With the help of friends and the tutor, students linked those areas of personal interest to some areas of academic subject, or social issue which then were formulated into possible research topic.

For example, if a student chose learning Dzongkha language as personal interest, related academic subject associated was language learning. From this, students could formulate a possible topic as Factors contributing to Dzongkha language development or Factors affecting Dzongkha learning.

Following worksheet helped them undertake the exercise.

1. Combine personal interests with an aspect of academic studies

Personal interest  
Academic subject  
Possible topics

2. Consider social issues that affect you and your family

Personal interest  
Social issue  
Possible topics

3. Let your cultural background prompt you towards detailed research into your heritage, your culture, or the mythology of your ethnic background

Ethnic Background  
Personal interest  
Possible topics

Students expressed that the exercise employing personal experience to find research idea made little sense initially. However, they affirmed that it came handy to them gradually. On the other hand, they shared their difficulty in narrowing down the idea to researchable topic. Also, it was observed that many students had the difficulty to actually relate their personal experience to an academic field. Thus, although baseline finding showed that students found reading previous studies difficult, it was assumed that it would be easier for the students to relate identified experience to some previous studies. This would be different from finding research idea from previous studies, which students might not find so useful. Hence, in next stage, students were let to relate their personal experience to academic discipline following some previous studies.

### **2.5.2 Stage 2 –relating identified issue to previous studies**

In this stage, in addition to finding their personal experiences, students were also asked to use their imagination to contemplate the issues and

problems worthy of investigation. Ideas could be generated by free writing, listing keywords, and narrowing by comparison. After they identified a general idea, they were asked to find previous studies on the ideas or topic they identified. They were then asked to read the abstract of the previous study and see whether the paper is related to their idea. In case of relevant papers, students were asked to read introduction, literature and conclusion parts of the paper, and see if they could now formulate their idea into a researchable topic. Also, they were asked to then fill out the same work sheet used in the stage 1 to locate the topic into an academic discipline.

This way, the students could find relevancy between their possible topic and the previous studies which provided them better insight to formulate a topic. Besides, it could also improve students' ability to read scholarly articles and use previous studies in finding topics. Students also shared that it was helpful for them to read the previous studies after they had a general idea to focus unlike reading the papers randomly in search of topics.

### **2.5.3 Stage 3 evaluation**

In this stage, students were made to evaluate their own topics. Students were asked to examine whether the topic is personally significant to them, whether the issue is important in the areas of study they identified, and whether it has any ethical issue when undertaking [12]. They were then let to assess their topics by following Bui's criteria: Feasibility – realistic it will be to access data or participants and the time needed to complete the study; Accessibility – the ability to gain access or entry to the research site and participants; and time – researcher's time to complete the task and available time to devote to the task.

To assist the researcher perform the intervention processes effectively, the critical friend observed the lessons twice a week for the entire duration of the intervention. The observer made note under the three themes related to the researchers teaching: clarity of the strategy delivery, students' response and teaching approach. It helped the researcher restructure the lessons, provide feedback and relate the strategies to the students better.

### **2.6 Post Intervention Data Finding**

The findings of the post intervention data are categorized under the three research questions.

The data were gathered employing the same data collection methods and tools as the baseline data. Questionnaire (N=95) and experts' rating on students' topics (N=4) were used to gather quantitative data, and focus group interview and participatory observation during the course of intervention were employed to generate qualitative data. Data from all these sources are triangulated to provide answers to each research question.

**2.6.1 Question 1: What ways do students employ in order to find research topic?**

Pre-and-post-survey findings and post-intervention focus group interviews answer the above research question. The means and standard deviations of the two surveys against the statements describing students' research topic finding practices are shown in Table 2.

The post-survey means are higher than pre-survey on all the ways to find research topic except looking for the topic online. This depicts that students still seek the research topics in various sources. While the students still hold personal experience (M=3.51; SD=0.68) the most agreeable source; it is interesting to see the highest mean difference on students' agreement on finding a topic based on the relevance to their program (M=2.87 < M=3.34). Likewise, the students' agreement on searching topic from academic articles (M=3.00 > M=2.83) also increased. Substantiating the survey finding, the interview divulged that the intervention benefited the students in generating research topic from their personal experience. The researcher's field note also recorded that students were using the worksheet on linking personal idea with academic areas effectively. Further, qualitative findings also revealed that students read more

previous studies when they have recognized a topic of their interest.

**2.6.2 Question 2: Is there change in the students' perception on the level of difficulty in finding research topic?**

Table 3 shows students' perception on the level of difficulty in finding research has significantly (P=.05) dropped after intervention. The drop in post-intervention average mean 2.96 (SD=0.84) from pre-survey average mean 3.3 indicates improvement in students' perception on finding research. Student participants (N=6) in the post intervention focus group discussion shared that, after knowing how to link their personal experience to academic subject, finding research topics became easier. The field note researcher took also recorded that students could at least come up with acceptable topics much easily each time they executed the exercises in the class.

**2.6.3 Question 3: Is there significant difference in experts' rating on pre-and post-intervention topics students submitted?**

Students (N=95) were asked to submit a research topic each again after intervention. The same baseline data experts rated the topics on the scale ranging from Good to Not-researchable. The inter-rater congruence against each topic was analyzed, and accordingly topics were labeled on the scale as shown in the Table 4. Only the topics which received same rating from at least three experts were labeled under particular scale. Frequency, mean and standard deviation were calculated to analyze the experts' ratings on the pre-intervention and post-intervention topics as shown in Table 4.

**Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of pre and post intervention survey**

	Pre-intervention		Post-intervention	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Read academic articles	2.83	0.61	3.00	0.61
Reading articles and journals helped	2.99	0.83	3.00	0.83
Asked tutors for help	2.37	0.84	2.47	0.84
Asked friends	3.22	0.73	3.24	0.73
Based on my personal ideas	3.27	0.68	3.51	0.68
I looked for the research topic online	2.79	0.93	2.53	0.93
Relevant to my program (BHS)	2.87	0.78	3.34	0.78

**Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of pre and post intervention survey**

	Pre-intervention		Post-intervention	
	Mean	S D	Mean	S D
It was difficult for me to find a research topic	3.09	0.83	3.00	0.83
I think most difficult part of research is to find a good research topic	3.51	0.67	2.91	0.84
<i>Average</i>	<i>3.3</i>	<i>0.75</i>	<i>2.96</i>	<i>0.84</i>

**Table 4. Experts' assessment of students' pre and post- intervention research topics**

Frequency	Frequency						SD
	Not Researchable	Too Broad	Too Specific	Appropriate	Good	Overall Mean	
Pre-Intervention	27	21	20	17	10	2.23	0.41
Post Intervention	12	7	9	42	25	4.01	0.32

The result shows there is significant improvement in experts' rating on post-intervention topics from pre-intervention topics. The mean rating has increased to 4.01 from 2.23 indicating students' ability enhancement in finding research topic. Further, the increase in *Good* and *appropriate* topic (25 and 42 respectively) against decrease in *Not researchable* topic (12) also suggest students' topic finding skills development. The post intervention focus group interview confirmed that the students felt more confident in finding their topics. Interview participant, P5, shared that learning to evaluate research topic "gave confidence in selecting my topic."

The interview finding also suggested that students' ability to find research topic helped them in generating their interest in learning research. The participants in the discussion shared their excitement when they could find a topic of their interest: "I think, it is topic which is very important in research. If I could find a good topic, I think we can somehow do a research," fathomed one of the participants. Another added, "I thought I cannot do research when I could not find a research topic. Now I am more confident."

### 3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Research by nature is perceived as a difficult task by the students of all levels, especially the undergraduate students who have little exposure to the field [4]. One of the challenges research-learners confront in research is their inability to find a research topic. Conforming to [7], the findings of this study revealed that students perceived finding research topic very difficult.

Likewise, this study also conformed to [9] that students experience anxiety and frustration when they fail to find a research topic. Also, it was found that students lose their confidence in learning research when they could not find a topic. In return, finding topic rather becomes confusing and they become less confident to decide their topic.

Likewise, students could also lose confidence and interest in research when they have less access to academic materials [8]. The interview findings suggested that students' poor reading habit and linguistic deficiency disable them from reading the previous researches and comprehending what they read. Familiarizing the students to various means to finding topic and redesigning, the research teaching methods specific to the context and students' competence could ameliorate students' interest and enthusiasm in learning research [1]. In general, this study showed that teaching how to use students' personal experience to formulate research topic enabled them find research topic. The finding was compatible to [12] and [2] who suggested that exploring research topic within personal experience is an effective factor that facilitates finding research topic.

The findings also suggest that students' ability to find research topic has close association to their motivation to learn research since that gives a sense of connectivity to their learning. Lester and Lester Jr. [2] further offered a frame to link personal idea to academic field, which was employed as an intervention in this study to augment students' knowledge and skills to search research topic. The findings showed that

the method assisted the students significantly in finding their research topic. The post survey findings on students' choice of finding research topic showed that while students mostly agreed that personal experience provides them the research topic, there was a drastic increase in their agreement for reading previous studies and looking into the relevancy to their program. This suggests that with proper instruction and guidance, students could overcome some of the practical challenges such as their inability to comprehend academic material. Besides, the students also demonstrated their augmented ability to find research topic. The inter-raters' mean on students pre (M=2.23) and post intervention (M=4.1) topics showed there was a significant improvement in the research topics, indicating that the intervention strategies helped them formulate ideas, identify and evaluate topics effectively.

This study shows students can be taught how research topic could be searched. It was also discovered that students' confidence and interest in research could be augmented by providing instructional assistance in finding their topics. Several previous studies (e.g., 3, 4) from across the world have recorded that students experience anxiety, frustration and disinterest in research because of numerous factors, of which, confusion and low confidence in deciding research topic appears commonly. Also, the studies pointed that students experience such emotional displeasure because they lack knowledge and skill to perform the assigned task. For example, the participants of this study revealed that it was difficult for them to read and comprehend the academic works, suggesting that research tutors should be cognizant of their students' ability when assigning independent tasks such as finding research topic.

In conclusion, personal experience could be effective source of research topic for the students. However, it might require the tutor's input in order to link personal experience to academic fields. The study also suggests that teaching how to find research topic is an essential part of research course in order to boost and sustain students' interest and confidence in learning research. Finally, the study showed that the perception of the students on level of difficulty in finding research topic changes with their knowledge and skill to tackle challenges in undertaking research task. So, with pedagogical intervention in the process of students' research learning, the research

learning experience for the students could be improved.

#### **4. LIMITATION**

This study was undertaken with the first year students of CLCS and the findings are context specific. So, the findings of this study may not be applicable to other contexts [26]. Moreover, this study does not establish any causal effect since it did not have any control group.

#### **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Findings of this study suggest that students' interest and motivation in learning research can be enhanced by providing assistance and guidance in the fundamental steps of research such as finding research topic. Teaching research, therefore, entails not only focusing on core research methods, but also must focus on augmenting and sustaining students' emotional state and attitude towards research learning. One way it can be done as per the findings of this study is by providing assistance to the students in initial steps of research, such as finding research topics. So, teaching how to find research topic should be part of research methods lesson, since it sets the students goal of learning research course.

Personal experience could be effective factor the tutors could use the students to find their topic. The study found that students enhanced their ability to use their personal experience to determine their research topic by linking to the academic field. This also enhanced the students' perception on reading academic works, which is an essential learning strategy. Therefore, students could be taught how to use their personal experience to find research topics, as well as encouraging reading academic works.

#### **CONSENT**

As per international standard or university standard, participant's written consent has been collected and preserved by the author.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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