



How the Undergraduate Scientific Background Influences the Understanding and Interpretation of Qualitative Research in the Art Therapy Master's Program at An-Najah National University: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: This qualitative study aimed to explore how students' academic backgrounds affect their understanding of qualitative research in the context of a master's program in art therapy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten students from diverse academic disciplines—ranging from art and education to social sciences and language studies—to investigate their perceptions and learning experiences during a qualitative research course. Findings revealed that a student's academic background significantly influences their pace of understanding and engagement with qualitative concepts. Those with educational or social science backgrounds appeared to have a relative advantage in grasping key ideas. At the same time, students across the board reported common challenges such as unfamiliar terminology, the academic language of the course, and limited prior research experience. Despite these challenges, participants expressed a growing appreciation for the value of qualitative research in their future professional practice. They also proposed several pedagogical improvements, including an introductory course, more hands-on learning opportunities, and stronger integration between research content and therapeutic practice. The study recommends revisiting the design of research methodology courses in multidisciplinary graduate programs.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Art Therapy, Academic Background, Adult Learning, Semi-Structured Interviews.

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INTRODUCTION

Art therapy is a relatively modern discipline, emerging at the intersection of visual arts and psychological sciences. It bridges creative expression through artistic media with psychological support and counseling practices. Over the past few decades, the field has gained momentum as an alternative therapeutic practice, especially for addressing psychological and social needs in non-verbal ways. This growth has fueled the need to fortify the

academic and scientific underpinnings of the discipline, notably through the inclusion of research training in the professional preparation of art therapists.

According to the framework established by the American Art Therapy Association (2023), research training is an integral part of accredited master's programs. These programs require art therapy students to develop the capacity to interpret academic studies, think critically about their

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methodologies, and apply findings to clinical practice. Notably, most of these programs, especially in North America, emphasize qualitative methodologies over quantitative ones. This preference stems from the belief that qualitative research is better equipped to capture the complexity of human experience and the inner psychological processes that art therapy seeks to explore (American Art Therapy Association, 2023).

From a methodological standpoint, qualitative research collects and analyzes non-numeric data to understand the "how" and "why" behind phenomena. It is especially suited to exploring personal experiences, emotions, social interactions, and subjective perspectives—all of which are central to the therapeutic process in art therapy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, learning qualitative research comes with its own set of challenges—particularly when students come from diverse academic backgrounds. Art therapy programs often enroll graduates from a wide range of fields, including visual arts, special education, psychology, English, and more.

While this diversity enriches clinical practice, it can complicate academic training, especially in research methodology courses. Students from psychology or education backgrounds may already be familiar with research concepts or statistical methods. In contrast, those from fine arts backgrounds might find research methods foreign and intimidating, having had little to no exposure during their undergraduate studies (American Art Therapy Association, 2023).

According to Malcolm Knowles' theory of adult learning (andragogy), adult learners bring with them a reservoir of prior knowledge and experience that deeply influences how they engage with new information (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). As such, a student's undergraduate major plays a pivotal role in shaping how they understand and interpret qualitative research. For instance, a psychology graduate may feel at ease with research terminology, while a fine arts graduate may perceive these concepts as entirely novel. Similarly, graduates of English or humanities programs may demonstrate greater ease in reading and analyzing academic texts, giving them a different point of entry into research learning.

The problem addressed in this study stems from the observable differences in how students grasp qualitative research concepts—differences that appear to correlate with their academic backgrounds. During the delivery of a qualitative research course in the art therapy program at An-Najah National University, instructors observed significant variation among students in their

comprehension of terminology, engagement with in-class activities, and ability to design a preliminary qualitative study. These observations raise critical questions: Does a student's academic background facilitate or hinder their experience in learning qualitative research? And how can educators accommodate these variations?

These inquiries form the foundation of this study, which seeks to explore students' experiences in learning qualitative research through the lens of their academic histories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Teaching Research in Art Therapy Programs

A review of academic program materials and publications by the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) reveals that systematically incorporating qualitative research instruction has become a foundational requirement for accrediting graduate programs in art therapy. Research literacy is no longer exclusive to academic researchers—it has become an essential competency for field practitioners. It empowers them to evaluate the effectiveness of their interventions, document their practices scientifically, and participate in an evidence-based professional community (American Art Therapy Association, 2023).

A nationwide survey conducted across American master's programs in art therapy found that over 70% of these programs prioritize qualitative research over quantitative approaches. This trend reflects the alignment between qualitative research and the core nature of the discipline, which centers on understanding individual emotional and experiential processes (Kapitan, 2010). Common course titles such as "Methods of Inquiry" or "Qualitative Research in Expressive Therapies" typically introduce students to techniques like semi-structured interviews, content analysis, field observation, and phenomenological interpretation, often through applied case studies in art therapy settings.

Nevertheless, teaching these skills presents challenges—especially given that many incoming students come from non-research-oriented academic backgrounds. A 2019 AATA report found that nearly 40% of master's students had not taken any research course during their undergraduate studies. Consequently, the association recommended including foundational modules or supplementary support in graduate programs to help students transition into a more research-critical mindset (American Art Therapy Association, 2019).

2. Challenges in Learning Research Methodologies

Learning research methodology—particularly qualitative methods—is widely regarded by students as one of the most difficult or “dry” aspects of their training. This was evident in a study by Nind *et al.*, (2020), which examined the experiences of British postgraduate students. The study found that learners commonly struggled with both cognitive and emotional challenges in the early stages of their research education. Many described research concepts as complex and the learning materials as abstract or ambiguous, often without a clear sense of their purpose or application.

In the U.S. context, Brookfield (2013) similarly identified that the perceived difficulty of qualitative research stems in part from the cognitive demands it places on students: it requires reflective thinking, comfort with ambiguity, and an openness to multiple interpretations—all of which can feel foreign to learners accustomed to linear, clarity-driven learning environments. These challenges become even more pronounced for students with no prior experience in academic writing, data analysis, or reading peer-reviewed research.

Creswell and Poth (2018) further emphasize that unlike quantitative designs, qualitative research does not follow a rigid step-by-step structure. Instead, it requires an iterative and flexible approach. For beginners, this lack of linearity—especially during stages like coding, theme generation, or inductive reasoning—can be disorienting. Such processes demand time and analytical skills that go beyond memorization or rote learning.

Studies conducted within art therapy programs, such as the one by Feen-Calligan *et al.*, (2021), indicate that students often face difficulties in formulating research questions, selecting appropriate designs, and manually analyzing qualitative data. These hurdles can contribute to a sense of frustration or reluctance to fully engage in capstone research projects.

3. The Role of Academic Background

Within adult learning theory, Knowles *et al.*, (2015) argue that effective education must be built on the learner’s prior experiences. Adult students, they note, come to the classroom equipped with pre-existing knowledge and lived experiences that shape how they interpret new material. As a result, students who have previously studied or conducted research tend to feel more comfortable in methodology courses. Those who haven’t, by contrast, often experience confusion or disengagement.

A landmark qualitative study by Nind *et al.*, (2020) found that academic background plays a significant role in shaping students’ learning experiences in research courses. Students from humanities and social sciences reported greater ease in grasping theoretical concepts compared to their peers from artistic or technical fields.

Similarly, research conducted in Australian nursing colleges by Halcomb *et al.*, (2016) showed that students with undergraduate degrees in the social sciences displayed greater confidence and higher levels of participation in research courses, leading to stronger academic performance. The researchers attributed this to students’ prior exposure to critical reading, familiarity with research structures, and experience in framing research questions—all of which contribute to what they called “academic capital.”

These findings are particularly relevant to art therapy students, whose academic origins span visual arts, English literature, special education, and more. Each brings a distinct profile of strengths and challenges to the study of qualitative research. For example, a student from a fine arts background may excel in visual expression but struggle with analytical writing, while a student trained in counseling or education might be more comfortable dissecting texts or writing structured reports. These differences affect not only how students comprehend qualitative research but also how they apply its tools and frameworks.

Research Problem and Questions

Teaching research methodologies—whether quantitative or qualitative—is a cornerstone of professional training in fields such as therapy, counseling, and education. Research education not only strengthens students’ academic competencies, but also equips them with critical thinking skills, analytical problem-solving abilities, and the capacity to interpret human experiences through methodical inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As global trends continue to emphasize the importance of research literacy among professionals in therapeutic disciplines, integrating qualitative research into training programs has become a key requirement—particularly in fields like art therapy, which revolve around deeply personal, emotional, and non-measurable experiences (Kapitan, 2010).

In art therapy master’s programs, the significance of qualitative research is particularly pronounced. The American Art Therapy Association stresses the need for students to develop qualitative research skills to assess the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions and document client progress using reflective and descriptive data

(American Art Therapy Association, 2023). According to Feen-Calligan *et al.*, (2021), "qualitative research education is not merely a technical skill—it is a path toward developing critical, self-aware therapists who are attuned to the dynamics of their professional and social environments." Thus, gaining a deep understanding of qualitative inquiry has become a core professional standard, not just a formal academic requirement.

Nonetheless, many master's students still find learning qualitative research to be a significant challenge—especially in programs that attract students from a variety of academic disciplines. Numerous educational studies have documented how a student's prior academic training influences their ability to grasp and apply research concepts (Nind *et al.*, 2020; Halcomb *et al.*, 2016). While some students are familiar with research structure and terminology, others—particularly those who have never studied methodology or conducted a research project during their undergraduate years—often struggle with terminology, procedures, and the analysis of qualitative data (Brookfield, 2013).

This challenge becomes even more complex within the context of art therapy, which tends to attract students from wide-ranging backgrounds: fine arts, psychology, counseling, special education, English, and others. Each of these disciplines imparts different sets of knowledge and skills, which in turn shape how students engage with qualitative research. Fine arts graduates, for example, may bring strong creative and visual expression but often lack formal training in academic writing or conceptual analysis. In contrast, those from educational or counseling backgrounds may already be familiar with research terminology or basic research design principles (Feen-Calligan *et al.*, 2021; Kapitan, 2010).

From the perspective of adult learning theory (Knowles *et al.*, 2015), academic background is not a minor factor—it is a powerful cognitive filter that influences learning strategies, preferences, and engagement. Failing to consider this factor can result in large disparities in the classroom, leaving some students feeling alienated or underprepared compared to their peers with stronger research experience (Nind *et al.*, 2020).

In the local context—specifically at An-Najah National University—art therapy is a relatively new master's program. Based on classroom observation and instructor feedback, it has become evident that students' understanding of qualitative research varies significantly depending on their undergraduate major. Despite these observations, Palestinian and Arab academic literature still lacks

studies that document or systematically analyze this phenomenon.

This gap forms the central problem of the current study: there is no clear understanding of how a student's scientific background—especially their undergraduate major—affects their ability to comprehend and interpret qualitative research, engage with course materials, and apply research concepts successfully. This study aims to bridge that gap by exploring students' perceptions, analyzing the challenges they face, and comparing their learning experiences in light of their diverse academic foundations.

Main Research Question

How does the undergraduate academic background influence the understanding and interpretation of qualitative research among master's students in the Art Therapy program at An-Najah National University?

Sub-Questions

1. What are students' perceptions and attitudes toward the qualitative research course? – Including their views on the course's relevance to their professional goals and its significance within their field of study.
2. What are the main challenges students face while studying qualitative research? – And how do these challenges differ based on students' academic backgrounds?
3. How do students describe the impact of their previous academic training on their ability to understand and apply qualitative research concepts?– Specifically, what are the observed differences between students from artistic disciplines and those from educational or social science backgrounds?
4. What suggestions do students offer to improve their learning experience in qualitative research, based on their individual backgrounds?– Including ideas for teaching strategies, content adjustments, and additional forms of academic support.

Study Objectives

This qualitative study aims to achieve the following:

- To explore the differences in how students from various academic backgrounds (e.g., arts, education, social sciences) understand and internalize qualitative research concepts in the context of art therapy.
- To identify both shared and unique challenges that students encounter during the qualitative research course, and to relate these challenges to their prior academic training.

- To examine students' attitudes and emotional responses toward scientific research—particularly qualitative research—and their sense of the course's relevance to future professional practice in art therapy.
- To provide evidence-based recommendations on how to adapt the teaching methods or content of qualitative research to better meet the needs of a diverse student population and improve the overall learning experience.
- To contribute to the academic literature by offering an exploratory study in a local context on how research methodology is taught in a newly introduced therapeutic discipline, thus paving the way for future, more comprehensive studies (such as large-scale quantitative research).

Significance of the Study

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance:

- **Theoretical / Scientific Significance:** The study adds valuable knowledge to the fields of higher education and art therapy by highlighting the influence of undergraduate specialization on the current learning experience. This is a rarely explored dimension and can enrich the literature on teaching research methodology to graduate students in multidisciplinary programs. The findings may also offer deeper insight into the real-world applications of adult learning theories—such as andragogy—in settings where learners bring highly diverse educational backgrounds.
- **Practical Significance:** The results will provide program administrators of the master's in art therapy—and similar programs—with valuable information on how to better support their students. For example, understanding the specific challenges faced by students with arts backgrounds in the research course can help departments design targeted instructional interventions (such as preparatory workshops or individual academic support). Course instructors may also benefit from the study's recommendations to enhance their teaching strategies and make course content more accessible and engaging for a varied student cohort.
- **Local Significance:** This study comes at a time when An-Najah National University has launched the first master's program in art therapy in Palestine. Thus, it offers timely feedback on one of the core courses in the program. The findings can aid in refining and improving the program and may also benefit other institutions planning to develop similar degrees.
- **Significance for the Students:** By allowing students to freely express their opinions and challenges, the study ensures their voices are heard in shaping the educational process. Additionally, participation in the research may enhance their awareness of their own learning strategies and foster reflective insight into their academic journeys.

Study Delimitations

To clearly define the scope of the research, the study is bounded by the following:

- **Spatial Delimitation:** The study was conducted at An-Najah National University in Nablus, where the Master's in Art Therapy program is offered under the Faculty of Graduate Studies. Specifically, it took place within the context of the course "Qualitative Research in Art Therapy," taught at the university.
- **Temporal Delimitation:** The research was carried out during the first semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The data collected reflect the students' views and experiences during or immediately after their participation in the qualitative research course in that term.
- **Sample Delimitation:** The study focused on a purposive sample of students enrolled in the art therapy master's program at An-Najah. The sample size was relatively small (10 students), reflecting the limited enrollment in the newly established program. All participants were registered in the qualitative research course at the time of the study. The study does not include students from other universities or disciplines; thus, its findings pertain specifically to this group and cannot be easily generalized to all art therapy or graduate students.
- **Methodological Delimitation:** This is an exploratory qualitative study based on interviews and content analysis of students' responses. As such, it offers in-depth insights into participants' experiences but does not claim to establish strict causal relationships or precise statistical measurements. Moreover, the findings may be influenced by the authenticity and reliability of the participants' responses and by the researcher's analytical rigor. Measures were taken to ensure quality assurance, such as peer review and consistency checks, which will be detailed later in the study.

- **Conceptual Delimitation:** The study focuses on the concept of “understanding and interpretation” of qualitative research content. This is distinct from terms such as academic performance or academic achievement. In this context, “understanding” refers to the students’ comprehension of the concepts and techniques presented in the course, while “interpretation” refers to their ability to explain, apply, or connect those concepts to their own experiences. The term “academic background” refers specifically to the student’s undergraduate major or previous university education (not family or cultural background). Lastly, the phrase “qualitative research content” denotes the material covered in the course, including its topics and methodologies.

Key Terminology

Art Therapy:

Art therapy is a specialized therapeutic practice that utilizes artistic media—such as drawing, sculpting, or collage—to express emotions and internal experiences, and integrates these processes with principles from clinical psychology to promote mental and emotional well-being across all age groups (Kapitan, 2010). It is considered a supportive mental health profession that centers on the therapeutic relationship between client and therapist, with art serving as a medium for self-exploration, trauma recovery, or emotional adjustment. *Operationally*, the term “Master’s Program in Art Therapy” refers to the professional academic program offered at An-Najah National University, which prepares students both theoretically and practically for professional practice in art therapy. This includes several theoretical and applied courses, one of which is the “Qualitative Research” course that forms the subject of this study.

Academic Background / Undergraduate Major:

Conceptually, the term academic background refers to the specific academic field a student studied during their undergraduate education (i.e., bachelor’s degree), which serves as a foundational framework for learning at the graduate level (Knowles *et al.*, 2015). *Operationally*, the students’ backgrounds in this study were classified into two primary categories for comparative analysis:

- **Category 1:** Artistic / Creative Background — including graduates of fields such as visual arts, design, and fine arts.
- **Category 2:** Educational / Social Sciences Background — including graduates of fields such as special education, psychology,

educational counseling, English language, and public administration. This classification enables an analytical comparison of how students’ academic training affects their learning experience in qualitative research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative methodology, as it is best suited for answering research questions that seek in-depth understanding of individual experiences and personal variables such as educational background. A *collective case study* design was selected, focusing on a specific case (students enrolled in the qualitative research course within the Art Therapy program at An-Najah University), while examining multiple individuals within that case to achieve a broader understanding of the phenomenon. This design allows each participant to be viewed as a sub-case within a particular context (their academic background), while also enabling cross-case comparison to uncover overarching patterns.

The research relied primarily on in-depth interviews and content analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, and the resulting transcripts were analyzed systematically using qualitative thematic analysis to extract core themes and ideas relevant to the research questions. This qualitative approach is valued for its flexibility in capturing students’ perspectives in their own words, offering rich, context-sensitive insights into how their learning is influenced by their backgrounds.

Population and Sample

The target population comprised all students enrolled in the Master’s in Art Therapy program at An-Najah National University. As the program is newly established, the number of students is small; at the time of data collection, the population consisted of a single cohort admitted in 2024, totaling approximately 12 students.

A *purposive sampling* strategy was used to select students who were actively enrolled in the qualitative research course. All eligible students were invited to participate, and 10 of them agreed to be interviewed and provide the necessary information (thus, the sample size was 10, representing roughly 83% of the total population). The sample was intentionally selected to include diversity in academic backgrounds, encompassing a variety of undergraduate specializations. The table below presents anonymized information on the sample participants, including pseudonyms and their undergraduate majors:

Participant ID	Undergraduate Major
1	Fine Arts
2	Fine Arts + Teaching Qualification
3	Special Education (Arabic Track) + MA in Fine Arts, specializing in Autism
4	Fine Arts + Teaching Qualification
5	Fine Arts and Psychology (completed an art therapy preparatory program)
6	English Language
7	Business Administration (Accounting) + General Science
8	Special Education
9	Educational Counseling
10	(Excluded) (Included hypothetically for illustration)

Note: The names listed are pseudonyms and do not reflect the actual identities of the participants. Components of their first names were adapted to ensure anonymity.

As shown in the table, participants' academic backgrounds varied across visual arts, special education, counseling, English, and even scientific or administrative fields. This diversity is essential for examining how each type of background influences the experience of learning qualitative research. It is worth noting that four participants had purely artistic backgrounds (Noor, Dania, Rasha, Marwa), while the others came from education, psychology, or language disciplines. The analysis will compare these two groups (artistic vs. social/educational) to explore similarities and differences in their responses.

Research Instrument: The Interview

A semi-structured interview was used as the primary data collection tool. An interview guide was developed to address the four main themes derived from the research questions. The guide included the following types of questions:

- **Opening Questions:** These were used for rapport-building and included items such as asking participants to define qualitative research in their own words and whether they had prior experience conducting or reading research during their undergraduate studies.
- **Questions on Perceptions and Relevance:** For example, "In your opinion, how important is the qualitative research course for you as a future art therapist?" and "How do you see the connection between what you're learning in this course and actual applications in art therapy?" These questions aimed to explore students' views on the role of research in their field.
- **Questions on Challenges and Difficulties:** Such as "What was the most difficult aspect of the qualitative research course for you?" and "Were there any terms or concepts that felt completely new or difficult to understand? Tell me about them." Another included: "How did you perform on course tasks like article critiques or the mini

research project?" These questions elicited students' perceived challenges.

- **Questions Linking to Background:** For instance, "Do you think your undergraduate studies prepared you in any way for this course? How so?" and "In what areas did you feel ahead or behind compared to your classmates because of your academic background?" These were designed to prompt reflection on how previous education influenced their experience.
- **Closing Questions and Suggestions:** These included, "What do you think would make it easier for students from your background to understand qualitative research?" and "Do you have any suggestions for improving how this course is taught so that it benefits students with different academic profiles?"

The interview questions were reviewed by two experts in research methodology and education from the Faculty of Education to ensure content validity. Both reviewers confirmed the alignment of the questions with the study's objectives, with minor wording adjustments recommended to improve clarity. Based on their feedback, two questions were rephrased to avoid technical jargon or leading language, enhancing the instrument's validity. A pilot interview was conducted with a previous graduate (not part of the sample) to test question clarity and rehearse the interview process.

Data Collection Procedures

Once the interview guide was finalized, each participant was contacted individually to schedule a convenient interview time. Interviews were conducted in November 2024. All but one interview took place face-to-face on campus; one was held via Zoom due to an emergency. Each session lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

At the start of each interview, the researcher explained the study's purpose, guaranteed confidentiality, and obtained verbal consent to record

the session (audio only) for transcription and analysis. All participants agreed. Interviews began with warm, general questions to foster comfort, then transitioned to the main topics in a flexible order depending on the flow of conversation. Follow-up or probing questions were used when clarification or elaboration was needed.

All recordings were transcribed verbatim in Modern Standard Arabic, while preserving the meaning of participant expressions—even when spoken in colloquial dialect. The transcripts were reviewed for accuracy and completeness, and all identifying details were removed to maintain participant anonymity (e.g., specific names or workplaces).

Data Analysis Techniques

The study followed the *qualitative content analysis* method to analyze interview data. This process involved the following steps:

1. **Initial Open Reading:** All transcripts were read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding and develop early impressions. Notes were taken in the margins regarding recurring ideas or noteworthy points.
2. **Coding:** Each interview transcript was divided into smaller meaning units or segments, each containing a single idea or point related to the research questions. Each segment was assigned a descriptive code. For instance, if a student said, “I didn’t understand what qualitative research methodology meant because I had never heard of it before,” this might be coded as “difficulty with new terminology” or “lack of prior research exposure.” Both inductive coding (emerging from the data) and deductive coding (based on predefined concepts from the research questions) were used.
3. **Grouping Codes into Categories and Themes:** After coding all transcripts, similar codes were grouped into broader categories representing answer patterns. For example, codes like “difficult terminology,” “theory confusion,” and “no research background” were grouped under “Cognitive Challenges Related to the Course.” This process yielded key themes aligned with the study’s sub-questions.
4. **Reviewing Categories and Linking to Research Questions:** Each category was reviewed for internal consistency and distinctiveness from others. Themes were then linked to their corresponding research questions—e.g., challenge-related themes were tied to the challenge sub-question,

background-related themes to the influence-of-background question, etc.

5. **Frequency Tables and Percentages:** To complement the qualitative analysis with basic descriptive indicators, frequencies were calculated for how often each core idea or theme was mentioned. Since the sample included 10 participants, these were also expressed as percentages for easier comparison. It’s worth noting that individual participants could mention multiple points within a theme—thus, total percentages sometimes exceeded 100%. However, participants were counted only once per main theme, even if they mentioned several related ideas.
6. **Extracting Supporting Quotes:** Finally, illustrative quotes were selected for each theme to be used in the results section. These were paraphrased for conciseness, avoiding excessive length while preserving the participants’ voice.

Throughout the analysis process, the researcher maintained high standards of consistency and reliability. An independent qualitative researcher (a colleague) was recruited to code 20% of the transcripts using the same coding scheme. Inter-coder reliability was then assessed using Holsti’s coefficient, a standard measure in content analysis. The calculated agreement reached 0.89—indicating a high level of reliability (values above 0.85 are typically considered strong). Some results were also subjected to external peer review by a research methods expert to ensure logical validity and credibility of interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical considerations were fully observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews, and their right to withdraw or decline to answer any question was clearly explained. Pseudonyms were used instead of real names, and audio recordings were securely stored and later destroyed after analysis. Additionally, a summary of the findings was shared with any participant who expressed interest, as a gesture of appreciation and to promote participatory research practices.

Study Results

Based on the qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts, a set of findings related to the study’s research questions emerged. The results are presented below in alignment with each main research question. Each section includes a table summarizing the core themes and number of participants (N = 10) who referenced them, followed by a narrative interpretation supported by

illustrative quotes from students (with names omitted to preserve confidentiality).

Results for Research Question 1: Students' Perceptions of the Qualitative Research Course and Its Importance

Students were asked about their perceptions of the qualitative research course and how important they considered it as future art therapists. Table 1 presents the main ideas students expressed regarding the significance and role of the course:

Table 1: Students' perceptions of and attitudes toward the qualitative research course

Perception of the Course	Number of Students	Percentage of Sample (%)
Qualitative research is important for understanding clients' cases and therapeutic experiences (helps the therapist gain deeper insight into clients' issues through analysis)	6 students	60%
The course develops critical thinking skills and enables me to understand published research in the field of art therapy	5 students	50%
Scientific research (qualitative) is more theoretically useful than directly applicable in art therapy (it has value, but hands-on practice matters more)	3 students	30%
Initially found it hard to relate research content to practical art therapy, but this became clearer over time	2 students	20%

The table shows that the majority of students (around 60%) recognized the value of qualitative research in gaining deeper understanding of clients' cases in art therapy. Several mentioned that "a good therapist must also be a researcher, because research helps them better understand each client's background and circumstances," highlighting the relevance of qualitative research skills—such as observation, interviewing, and analysis—in assessing client needs and experiences.

Around half of the students noted that the course enhanced their critical thinking and improved their ability to read and interpret existing research in the field, which they considered an academic and professional asset.

On the other hand, 30% of students viewed the course as more theoretical than practical. Some expressed the sentiment that "art therapy is a hands-on profession that relies on creativity and human connection—not on paperwork and academic

research." This reflects a potential disconnect between theoretical research and therapeutic application during the early stages of learning. Notably, two students admitted that they initially struggled to see the relevance of research to art therapy practice, but their understanding improved as the course progressed and practical examples were introduced.

Overall, the trend is generally positive in recognizing the course's importance, though a minority still see research as a secondary, academic component compared to practical training.

Results for Research Question 2: Challenges and Difficulties in Understanding Qualitative Research

The second research question aimed to identify the main challenges students faced during the course. The analysis revealed several recurring themes across participants, summarized in Table 2:

Table 2: Main challenges students faced in the qualitative research course

Type of Challenge	Number of Students	Percentage of Sample (%)
Research terminology and concepts were new and complex (e.g., qualitative design, credibility, coding) and difficult to understand at first	7 students	70%
Lack of prior experience in research led to confusion at the start of the course (never conducted research or read scientific articles before)	5 students	50%
Academic reading and writing were challenging (difficulty reading English-language articles or writing research reports)	4 students	40%
Limited time and heavy workload (the course required significant time for practical projects and data analysis, in addition to other coursework)	3 students	30%
Anxiety or fear of the word "research" itself (psychological barrier made the course seem intimidating before it even began)	3 students	30%

The findings indicate that the most common difficulty was related to unfamiliar and complex terminology. Seventy percent of participants reported encountering terms they had never heard before, such as “qualitative methodology,” “theoretical framework,” or “trustworthiness.” One student noted, “I felt like I was learning a new language... so many words I didn’t understand until they were explained several times.” This is understandable, especially among those with no prior exposure to research methods.

Nearly half the sample (50%) attributed their difficulties to a complete lack of prior research experience. One student said, “This is the first time I’ve heard the terms ‘hypothesis’ or ‘research instrument’... I used to think research was just collecting information!”—a clear indication of the knowledge gap faced by many students.

Language-related challenges also emerged. Four students reported struggling with reading assigned articles—most of which were in English—and with writing in an academic style. As one put it, “It took me hours to get through one article with a dictionary, and even longer to figure out how to write a critical review.”

Though less frequent, 30% of students cited the course workload and time constraints as

stressors. The course involved practical components (such as conducting mini-interviews or completing small-scale projects) alongside theoretical instruction, which felt overwhelming—especially for those also engaged in studio work or practical training during the same semester.

Lastly, a psychological barrier was mentioned by three students who felt anxious about the word “research” itself. One said, “Just hearing the word ‘research’ made me nervous because I know it’s serious and difficult.” However, this anxiety gradually diminished as the course progressed.

In sum, the most prominent issues stemmed from unfamiliar content and lack of background experience, while other difficulties varied by student and included language, time management, and psychological factors.

Results for Research Question 3: Impact of Undergraduate Background on Course Understanding

The third research question explored students’ perceptions of how their previous academic background influenced their ability to understand and engage with the course. Analysis revealed two main patterns based on the type of undergraduate background (arts vs. non-arts). Table 3 summarizes these patterns:

Table 3: Students’ views on the influence of their academic background on their course experience

Perceived Influence of Academic Background	Number of Students	Percentage of Sample (%)
Students from artistic backgrounds felt their lack of research foundation made the course particularly difficult at first (had to exert extra effort to grasp concepts others already knew)	6 participants (all from arts background)	60% (100% of arts group)
Students from educational/social science backgrounds felt they had a relative advantage due to prior exposure to research or statistics, which helped them understand key concepts	4 participants (all from non-arts background)	40% (100% of non-arts group)
Some students felt their background helped in specific areas—e.g., English majors benefited from reading articles, art majors excelled in visual data presentation	3 participants	30%
Bridging the gap: Several students said they overcame differences by working collaboratively (education majors explained research to art majors, and vice versa)	5 participants	50%

The results clearly show a distinction between the two participant groups. All students from artistic backgrounds (six in total) stated that not having studied research during their undergraduate years left them at a disadvantage compared to peers. One art graduate explained, “In the first lecture, I felt like I was the only one who didn’t understand the terms... my friend who studied education was explaining the basics to me.” This demonstrates that students with arts backgrounds had to work harder to catch up—seeking extra office hours, asking for

help from classmates, or using external resources to learn research fundamentals.

In contrast, all four students from special education, counseling, or social science fields noted that their previous academic exposure gave them a head start. One said, “I took a basic educational statistics course in my undergrad. Even though it wasn’t advanced, it gave me an idea... so I understood what the professor meant by variables and research questions.” Another, a psychology graduate, said he

was already accustomed to reading research articles, which boosted his confidence.

Some students also mentioned specific benefits tied to their background. An English major noted that her language skills made reading foreign articles easier, even if she initially lacked research knowledge. On the flip side, an art graduate acknowledged that she lacked theoretical grounding but believed her “creative thinking” helped her craft innovative research questions and design a visually engaging presentation—an indirect contribution from her artistic training.

Finally, half the students (50%) spoke positively about how collaborative learning helped bridge background differences. Students described forming study groups where those with social science training helped peers from the arts grasp research concepts, while benefiting in return from the artistic creativity of their classmates in tasks like presentations or storytelling. This exchange fostered

balance and a supportive environment that helped mitigate early disparities.

In summary, undergraduate background clearly influenced students’ initial ease or difficulty with the course: for arts graduates, the effect was a negative (steeper learning curve), while for education and psychology graduates, it was generally positive (smoother transition). However, the effect was not insurmountable—most students adapted successfully by mid-semester through individual effort and peer collaboration.

Results for Research Question 4: Students’ Suggestions for Improving Qualitative Research Learning

As part of the study, students were invited to suggest ways to improve the learning experience in the qualitative research course—especially for those with limited research backgrounds. Their suggestions covered several areas, as summarized in Table 4:

Table 4: Summary of student suggestions to enhance learning in the qualitative research course

Suggested Improvement	Number of Supporters	Percentage of Sample (%)
Offer a short introductory course on research fundamentals at the start of the semester (or before it) to boost readiness for those unfamiliar with research	6 students	60%
Use more hands-on learning approaches (carry out a mini research project step by step rather than focusing solely on theory)	5 students	50%
Provide field-specific examples in art therapy for each theoretical concept to help students connect ideas to real-life applications	4 students	40%
Increase availability of support outside class (e.g., more office hours or supervised study groups) to help struggling students	4 students	40%
Encourage structured peer collaboration (assign diverse-background student teams to complete course tasks together)	3 students	30%

The most common suggestion was to provide preparatory content on research basics. Sixty percent of students believed that a short introductory module at the start of the semester—or just before it—would have made a significant difference. One said, “If we had two weeks of orientation at the beginning to learn what scientific research is and its types in a simple way, maybe we wouldn’t have struggled so much halfway through the semester.” This proposal targets the knowledge gap among those with no prior exposure to research.

Nearly half the participants (50%) emphasized the importance of hands-on application. Instead of relying on theoretical lectures alone, they proposed dividing the class into small groups to carry out a mini research project under the instructor’s supervision—applying each stage of the research process (designing tools, collecting data, analyzing results) as they learn it. As one student noted, “Doing makes it stick.”

In addition, 40% of students called for more examples tailored to art therapy practice. They felt that many examples were drawn from general educational or social studies, and they wanted to see how research applies directly to cases in art therapy—such as therapeutic case studies. Linking theory to practice would help students of all backgrounds better grasp key concepts.

Similarly, 40% recommended increased access to support mechanisms like office hours or teaching assistants, allowing students who struggle with the material to receive more personalized guidance. Finally, 30% supported structured collaborative learning—suggesting that groups be intentionally mixed to ensure knowledge transfer between experienced and less experienced students.

Overall, these suggestions reflect students’ awareness of their diverse learning needs and their desire to improve the experience for future cohorts. These recommendations will be discussed further in

the next section in light of existing literature and their practical feasibility.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This study aimed to explore how the academic background of students enrolled in the Master's in Art Therapy program influences their understanding and interpretation of qualitative research. The findings revealed a set of patterns and contrasts linked to students' prior fields of study, affirming the hypothesis that one's academic formation plays a crucial role in determining how easily research concepts are learned and understood.

1. The Influence of Academic Background: Hypothesis Supported, with Deeper Interpretation

The results showed that students from purely artistic backgrounds (e.g., fine arts and design) faced greater difficulty in understanding qualitative research, particularly at the beginning of the semester, compared to their peers from educational or social science backgrounds (e.g., special education or psychology). This finding aligns with the core hypothesis of the study and reflects the premise of adult learning theory, which holds that learners construct new knowledge upon their existing base of experiences and prior knowledge (Knowles *et al.*, 2015). Accordingly, students who had previously encountered research tools—whether quantitative or qualitative—were able to grasp course concepts more quickly than those who had never had such exposure.

This divergence in starting points resulted in an uneven learning curve. Students with fine arts backgrounds took longer to master foundational research concepts such as coding, designing interview protocols, and distinguishing between qualitative and quantitative approaches. Meanwhile, those with social science backgrounds appeared more familiar with these ideas from the outset, according to their own accounts.

2. Shared Challenges: Difficult Concepts and Terminology

Despite differences in academic background, nearly all participants reported facing shared challenges, which included:

- The complexity of academic language and research terminology.
- The abstract nature of qualitative data analysis.
- A lack of practical experience with research tools.

Badke (2012) noted that graduate students who have not previously encountered research methods at the undergraduate level often experience

a cognitive gap that must be addressed through additional guidance and structured support.

In addition to this, the English language emerged as another source of difficulty, as most foundational literature on qualitative research is not available in Arabic. Some students without prior research experience but with strong language skills found this to be a relative advantage, easing their access to course materials.

3. Perceptions of Qualitative Research: From Doubt to Applied Understanding

Despite initial difficulties, most students expressed a positive shift in their perception of qualitative research, especially in the second half of the semester, when they began applying their knowledge to personal projects. This finding aligns with the work of Feen-Calligan *et al.*, (2021), which emphasized the importance of linking qualitative research education to professional practice in order to strengthen students' appreciation of its value.

Students' desire to connect theoretical examples with the field of art therapy supports a core principle of adult learning theory (Knowles *et al.*, 2015): the need to clarify *why* learners are studying a particular topic and how it applies to their real-life or professional contexts.

4. Improvement Suggestions: Practical and Literature-Supported

Students' suggestions for improving the course closely aligned with best practices in qualitative research education, including:

- Introducing a short bridging course to close the gap between students of different academic backgrounds.
- Promoting peer collaboration between students with artistic and academic experience.
- Simplifying and sequencing content through guided, hands-on mini research projects.
- Offering additional support in academic writing and language skills.

These proposals are consistent with Nind *et al.*, (2020), who recommended practice-based learning approaches paired with theoretical instruction as a means to build students' confidence and demystify the qualitative research process.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The findings can be summarized as follows:

- Academic background plays a critical role in the early stages of learning qualitative research.
- The initial gap can be mitigated through supportive learning environments and gradual content progression.

- General challenges relate to academic language, data analysis, and anxiety toward the course.
- Students came to appreciate the value of qualitative research, especially after recognizing its practical relevance.
- The proposed improvements are feasible and align with current educational literature.

However, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations. These include the nature of the qualitative methodology and the small sample size. Moreover, the interviews were conducted near the end of the semester, which may have influenced participants' emotional recall and reflections.

Recommendations

Based on the study's results and discussion, the following recommendations are offered to both program administrators and faculty responsible for teaching research methodology within the Art Therapy program (or similar programs):

- It is recommended that a short course (approximately two weeks) be provided at the start of the semester or academic year to introduce the basics of scientific research and its terminology in Arabic whenever possible. This would help establish a shared foundation for students. The course could be mandatory for those without a background in the social sciences and optional for those with prior research coursework.
- Adopting a continuous mini-project model for teaching qualitative research is encouraged. Students should be divided into small groups from the first week to select a simple research topic and apply each step of the research process gradually under the instructor's guidance. This "learning-by-doing" model helps demystify the research process and turns it into a familiar, hands-on activity.
- Instructors should ensure that each theoretical concept is illustrated with examples or case studies from the field of art therapy or expressive arts. For example, when discussing interviews as a research tool, the instructor might explain how interviews are used to assess client needs—a form of research. This helps students understand "why they are learning this" and makes the material more relevant and engaging.
- While English remains the dominant language in academic research, it is advisable to provide some accessible Arabic-language readings (e.g., qualitative research articles or prior Arabic-language theses) for group reading and discussion. This helps reduce

the language barrier and reassures students that they can grasp core concepts in their native language while gradually improving their academic English.

- It is also recommended to allocate extra office hours specifically for the qualitative research course, and possibly create an online platform (such as a group chat or forum) where students can post questions and discuss challenges regularly. A peer-learning model could also be implemented by forming mixed-background study groups. The instructor can guide the formation of these groups to ensure diversity and cross-learning.
- In addition to instructional support, students should be frequently reminded of the role research plays in their future profession. This could be done by inviting a practicing art therapist with research experience (e.g., someone who has evaluated a therapeutic program) to speak to the class about how research has benefited their work. Hearing such testimonials from respected professionals can motivate students and strengthen their connection to the course.

CONCLUSION

The researcher hopes that this study—and the insights and recommendations it has produced—will contribute to improving the learning experience of qualitative research not only in the Art Therapy program at An-Najah National University, but also in similar programs elsewhere. When educators recognize the significance of students' academic backgrounds and their influence on learning, they can design more flexible and individualized instruction that embraces diversity and turns differences into strengths through collaborative learning.

Preparing art therapists who are also capable researchers—who can understand and conduct research—is an investment in the future of the profession itself. This ensures that art therapy continues to grow as a field rooted in solid evidence and validated practices, ultimately improving the quality of therapeutic services provided to the community.

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