



Mapping Participant-Related Limitations in Translation Studies Doctoral Dissertations in Iran

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Abstract

The present study aimed to identify, classify, and compare participant-related limitations reported in doctoral dissertations in Translation Studies. The study employed a descriptive design and qualitative content analysis of 17 doctoral dissertations involving human participants, including 11 from Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU) and 6 from the University of Isfahan, completed between 2021 and 2026. Participant-related limitations were coded thematically at the unit level using MAXQDA and organized into six overarching themes. Sample, participants, and linguistic and professional scope was the most pervasive theme across both universities. At ATU, sample size and linguistic scope limitations each accounted for 15.79% of the identified limitations, whereas this theme accounted for 50% at the University of Isfahan. Methodological and design limitations were reported in 80% of dissertations from ATU and 83.3% from the University of Isfahan. The findings suggest that participant-based research involves interconnected methodological challenges, from participant selection and access to data collection and research design. The findings indicate that sample adequacy is multidimensional, encompassing participant number, representativeness, experiential diversity, target-population fit, linguistic and professional scope, and research context. Mapping these limitations helps researchers anticipate methodological risks and make informed decisions before data collection.

Keywords: Methodological risks, participant-based doctoral dissertations, participant-related limitations, translation studies

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1. Introduction

Research in the social sciences often begins with access before it begins with data: access to texts, archives, tools, the field, and, in many forms of empirical research, access to people. In studies that take individuals' knowledge, experiences, perceptions, behaviors, decision-making, or performance as their object of inquiry, participants are not merely one component of the research methodology; in many cases, the very possibility of generating data depends on their presence. Accordingly, research that seeks to generate knowledge through the experiences, performance, perceptions, decisions, or responses of a particular social group faces a simple yet decisive prerequisite: whether it is actually possible to find individuals who are willing to participate in the research.

At first glance, this question may appear to be merely an operational and peripheral concern; in reality, however, it reaches into the heart of research methodology. In the process of study, an insufficient number of participants, the refusal of eligible individuals to join, difficulties in accessing the target population, or replacing the intended population with a group that is simply more accessible can all generate a chain of methodological repercussions. These consequences may range from a reduced sample size to sampling bias, diminished statistical power, threats to internal or external validity, limited generalizability, changes to the original research design, and even the reformulation of the research question. Participant recruitment, therefore, can shape the quality of the knowledge produced; it cannot be regarded merely as an operational difficulty. This issue is particularly significant in Translation Studies, since in recent decades, this field has increasingly turned its attention to translators, interpreters, audiences, and other actors involved in the translation event.

Despite this, an important issue has received comparatively little attention: what do we know about the challenges of participant-based research? What proportion of doctoral research in Translation Studies in recent years has been participant-based? More importantly, how have researchers represented these challenges in the Limitations sections of their studies? The challenges associated with participant recruitment and access therefore warrant systematic investigation as an independent and researchable phenomenon.

This gap becomes even more significant at the level of doctoral dissertations. A doctoral dissertation is not merely an individual study; rather, it is one of the most resource-intensive and long-term forms of academic knowledge production and can therefore provide a relatively rich picture of the methodological decisions made by a generation of researchers. From this perspective, *Allameh Tabataba'i University* and the *University of Isfahan* can, as two important academic settings for Translation Studies in Iran, provide a suitable context for such an investigation. The present study focuses on doctoral dissertations in of this filed at these two universities over the past five years. The authors have identified and examined dissertations that relied on human participants for data generation. The aim is not merely to count participant-based studies or list the limitations reported in them; rather, the study seeks to identify patterns of participant-related limitations.

The significance of the present study becomes particularly evident at this point. If participant-related limitations remain merely as scattered and individual experiences of researchers, each doctoral researcher will inevitably have to encounter and navigate the same difficulties independently. However, if these experiences are extracted, categorized, and compared across a body of doctoral dissertations, they can provide the basis for constructing a map of methodological risks associated with participant-based research in Translation Studies. Such a map can alert researchers, before data collection begins, to which participant groups may be more difficult to access, which barriers recur most frequently, and what types of limitations may threaten the feasibility of a research project from the very stage of research design. This gap underscores the need for a systematic examination of doctoral dissertations in Translation Studies to identify, categorize, and compare participant-related limitations.

Accordingly, the present study approaches limitations not as an afterthought to research, but as part of the prerequisites for research feasibility. A systematic examination of these questions can illuminate the gap between methodological theory and the practical realities of conducting research and, ultimately, contribute to the design of future research in Translation Studies that is more realistic, transparent, and methodologically robust.

2. Literature Review

Previous research has shown that limitations are an inevitable part of the research process and can affect the interpretation, validity, and generalizability of a study's findings. Greener (2018), emphasizing that all studies, regardless of their format—from qualitative research to clinical trials—have limitations, defines limitations as weaknesses within a study that may affect its findings and conclusions. Accordingly, research limitations should not be regarded merely as peripheral shortcomings; rather, they should be understood as part of the process of knowledge production and interpretation. Along the same lines, Ross and Zaidi (2019) define research limitations as weaknesses in research design that may influence study outcomes. They further emphasize that researchers have an obligation to the academic community to report the limitations of their studies fully and honestly. Nevertheless, Sumpter et al. (2023) argue that even in scientific research, study limitations are often not reported explicitly and systematically, and authors frequently resort to generic, repetitive, and relatively uninformative descriptions when discussing limitations.

The importance of reporting limitations lies in the fact that failing to present them can hinder an accurate assessment of research findings. Adler and Clark (2003) as well as Greener (2018) argue that reporting research limitations can encourage readers to identify opportunities for improvement in future research. In this sense, limitations do not merely constitute statements of a study's shortcomings; rather, they can reveal gaps in existing research and the literature and thereby provide a basis for extending future lines of inquiry. Drotar (2008), in turn, regards the reporting of research limitations as an ethical component of the scientific research process, as it enables researchers to provide the academic community with a more transparent and realistic account of their research process and findings. Similarly, the findings reported by Annesley (2010), Bunniss and Kelly (2010), and also Chasan-Taber (2014) indicate that reporting limitations contributes to greater transparency regarding both the research and the researchers and can also enhance the transferability of findings. Eva and Lingard (2008) likewise emphasize the role of reporting limitations in the reproducibility of research methods. Ioannidis (2007) further argues that acknowledging limitations supports the appropriate interpretation and assessment of findings, because situating findings within the limitations of a study enables readers to make more accurate judgments about the validity of its conclusions and to generalize its findings appropriately and with due caution. Thus, reporting limitations constitutes not only an element of scientific transparency but also a means of facilitating the appropriate interpretation of findings and guiding future research.

Among the various types of research limitations, those associated with participants and the recruitment process are of particular importance because, in human-participant research, the ability to generate data fundamentally depends on access to eligible individuals and their willingness to participate. In this regard, Dowling and Wiener (1997) regard participant recruitment as one of the most challenging stages of a research study and note that, despite its importance, the issue is not adequately reported in the research literature. From this perspective, difficulties in recruiting participants cannot be regarded merely as an operational issue; rather, such difficulties can directly affect the feasibility of the research design and the quality of the data generated.

The participant recruitment process is important because of its primary objectives. Hulley et al. (2001) as well as Keith (2001) identify two main goals of participant recruitment: obtaining a sample that

adequately represents the target population and recruiting a sufficient number of participants to meet the requirements for sample size and statistical power. Successful recruitment is therefore important both in terms of achieving an adequate number of participants and ensuring appropriate representation of the target population. When this process fails, problems that may initially appear to be merely operational can lead to broader methodological consequences. For example, Ashery and McAuliffe (1992) showed that recruitment difficulties can disrupt the timetable of a research project, consume a considerable amount of researchers' time, and ultimately even result in the complete termination of a study.

One of the most important consequences of difficulties in participant recruitment concerns their effects on the sampling process and the representativeness of the sample. Woods et al. (2000) and Hulley et al. (2001) have shown that the sampling process may encounter problems such as non-response and the resulting selection bias during participant recruitment. Consequently, difficulties in accessing participants do not merely reduce the number of individuals included in a sample; they may also alter the composition of the sample and, ultimately, affect the validity and generalizability of the research findings.

This issue is not confined to the initial stage of recruitment; participant retention is also an important component of the research participation process. Sumpter et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of participant retention and show that retaining participants can be costly in both time and financial resources. Accordingly, participant-retention strategies should be incorporated into recruitment strategies from the planning stage of the study. In this regard, Nishimoto (1998) argues that participant retention requires the establishment and strengthening of relationships with participants to encourage their continued involvement in the research. Recruitment, therefore, cannot be viewed as a process that ends once an individual enters the study; rather, participant recruitment and retention should be regarded as interconnected and continuous stages of the data-generation process.

In addition to its methodological consequences, the manner in which participants are recruited also has ethical dimensions. Lyddy (2002, as cited in Patel et al., 2003) points out that researchers may recruit friends and colleagues as participants simply because they are easily accessible, while in some cases students may receive course credits or educational benefits in exchange for volunteering to participate in research. Such practices may raise concerns about the extent to which participation is genuinely voluntary. Sumpter et al. (2023), in this regard, argue that participants should be able to volunteer to participate in research freely and without coercion. Therefore, the ease of accessing a particular group should not take precedence over considering the group's appropriateness in relation to the target population or the principle of voluntary participation.

At the same time, individuals' decisions to participate are influenced by a range of factors related to the participants themselves and to their interaction with the researcher. Based on the studies by BootsMiller et al. (1998), Dowling and Wiener (1997), Hough et al. (1996), Lindenberg et al. (2001), Ribisl et al. (1996), and Sibbald et al. (1994), participants are likely to undertake some form of personal cost-benefit analysis when deciding whether or not to participate in research. According to Sumpter et al. (2023), researchers' attention to factors that participants perceive as costs or benefits can help establish their trust and increase the likelihood of successful recruitment. In this process, researchers' personal characteristics such as conscientiousness, professional integrity, meticulous attention to detail, respectfulness, tolerance, tactfulness, and approachability become important. Therefore, the relationship between the researcher and the participant is itself part of the conditions that make research participation possible, and recruitment cannot be regarded solely as a technical or administrative process.

Alongside the characteristics of participants and researchers, the nature and context of each study also play a role in determining appropriate recruitment strategies. Perez et al. (2022) showed that

perceived time constraints and the burden of participation are among the barriers that can reduce individuals' willingness to participate, particularly in studies addressing sensitive topics. They also emphasized that a single strategy cannot be applied successfully to all research contexts; in other words, a recruitment strategy that is successful in one study will not necessarily be successful in another. Therefore, the selection of recruitment strategies should be tailored to the nature of the research, the characteristics of the target population, and the circumstances of the participants. This perspective demonstrates that difficulties in participant recruitment are neither fixed nor uniform phenomena; rather, they can take different forms depending on the type of research, the target group, the conditions of participation, and the context in which the research is conducted.

3. Methodology

The present study employed a descriptive-documentary research design incorporating qualitative content analysis. It examined the prevalence of participant-based research in doctoral dissertations in Translation Studies and analyzed the limitations reported in such studies, with particular attention to limitations concerning participants and the participation process.

The research corpus consisted of doctoral dissertations in Translation Studies registered at Allameh Tabataba'i University and the University of Isfahan between 2021 and 2026. These dissertations were identified through advanced searches of both universities' digital and central library collections. The selection of these two universities was based on the researchers' institutional affiliations, as the researchers were PhD students in Translation Studies at the respective universities and therefore had direct access to their central and digital library collections.

During the data-collection period, forty doctoral dissertations registered at Allameh Tabataba'i University and 15 registered at the University of Isfahan were identified within the specified period. A preliminary examination of their research designs showed that 11 dissertations at Allameh Tabataba'i University and 6 at the University of Isfahan employed a participant-based research approach. Dissertations relying exclusively on textual analysis, corpus-based analysis, theoretical research, bibliographic or documentary research, archival sources, or other non-human sources were excluded. The identified participant-based dissertations were subsequently used to determine the frequency and percentage of participant-based research within each university and across the combined corpus.

For the analysis of reported limitations, the complete set of 11 participant-based dissertations from Allameh Tabataba'i University was initially examined. One dissertation did not report any limitations and was therefore excluded from the limitation analysis, resulting in a final corpus of 10 dissertations. The six participant-based dissertations identified at the University of Isfahan were analyzed using the same procedure. The limitations reported in each dissertation constituted the primary data for qualitative analysis. Although the study specifically focused on limitations related to participants and the participation process, other reported limitations were retained and coded to provide a comprehensive account of the limitations identified in the dissertations and to facilitate comparison across the two universities.

In the first stage of analysis, the relevant sections of each dissertation were read several times to familiarize the researchers with the scope and nature of the reported limitations. The extracted limitations were then entered into MAXQDA for systematic coding. Each phrase or clause expressing an independent limitation was treated as a unit of analysis. When a single clause contained more than one independent limitation, it was divided into separate analytical units. Consequently, a single passage could receive more than one initial code where it contained distinct limitations. Participant-related limitations were first identified and coded separately, and their frequencies and percentages were calculated using SPSS. These calculations were performed separately for each university and for

the combined corpus to determine the proportion of participant-based dissertations within the total number of dissertations examined.

In the subsequent stage, the initial codes were consolidated into core categories according to conceptual similarity, shared underlying mechanisms, and methodological implications. This intermediate stage linked the codes closely grounded in the data to the final thematic structure. Rather than merely reducing the number of codes, the core coding stage was used to clarify the relationships among the conditions underlying a limitation, their effects on the process of data generation, and their potential consequences for the validity of the research.

The core categories were subsequently organized into six main themes, which provided the basis for analyzing the frequency and nature of reported limitations in participant-based dissertations. The consequences associated with the limitations within each theme were then examined to determine how the reported constraints could affect the research process and its outcomes. The same analytical procedure was applied independently to the dissertations from the University of Isfahan.

Finally, the findings from the two universities were compared. This comparison was intended not merely to identify differences in frequencies or percentages, but also to examine the extent to which the two datasets converged in their conceptual organization of limitations and to identify differences in their analytical emphases.

4. Results

Of the 40 doctoral dissertations identified at Allameh Tabataba'i University, 11 (27.5%) used a participant-based research approach. At the University of Isfahan, 6 of the 15 (40.0%) were participant-based. In total, of the 55 doctoral dissertations reviewed at the two universities, 17 (30.9%) employed a participant-based approach.

4.1. Allameh Tabataba'i University Dissertations

Initially, participant-related limitations were identified through initial coding and classified into broad categories in Table 1. Subsequently, to provide a more detailed analysis, the types of problems and limitations related to participants were separately identified and analyzed in terms of their frequency in Table 2.

Table 1. Reported Limitations in Participant-Based Dissertations at Allameh Tabataba'i University

No.	Initial Code	Final Code
1	Small Sample / Limited Sample	Sample, Participants, and Scope
2	Limited Expert Participants	Sample, Participants, and Scope
	Restricted Language Pair / Scope	Sample, Participants, and Scope
	Restricted Genre / Professional Scope	Sample, Participants, and Scope
3	Limited Graduate Stakeholder Access	Sample, Participants, and Scope
	Target-Population Mismatch	Sample, Participants, and Scope
4	Convenience Sampling	Sample, Participants, and Scope
	Attrition / Sample Loss	Sample, Participants, and Scope
	Limited Experience Range / Novice Participants	Sample, Participants, and Scope
5	Restricted University Access / Two-University Sample	Sample, Participants, and Scope
	Attrition	Sample, Participants, and Scope
6	Restricted Persian–English Language Pair	Sample, Participants, and Scope
7	Small Sample Size	Sample, Participants, and Scope
8	Limited Book / Material Access	Sample, Participants, and Scope
	Historical / Scope Limitation	Sample, Participants, and Scope

9	Novice Translator Participants	Sample, Participants, and Scope
10	Short One-Minute Clips	Sample, Participants, and Scope
	Small Sample	Sample, Participants, and Scope
	Restricted Language Pair	Sample, Participants, and Scope

Table 2. Frequency of Participant-Related Limitations at Allameh Tabataba'i University

Unified Initial Code	Sample Codes Present in the Data	Frequency	Percentage
Sample Size Limitation / Small Sample	Limited Sample; Small Sample; Small Sample Size	3	15.79
Language Scope / Language-Pair Limitation	Restricted Language Pair / Scope; Restricted Persian–English Language Pair; Restricted Language Pair	3	15.79
Attrition / Sample Loss	Attrition / Sample Loss; Attrition	2	10.53
Experience Limitation / Novice Participants	Limited Experience Range / Novice Participants; Novice Translator Participants	2	10.53
Limited Access to Participants / Universities	Limited Graduate Stakeholder Access; Restricted University Access / Two-University Sample	2	10.53
Limited Access to Materials / Resources	Limited Book / Material Access	1	5.26
Historical / Study Scope Limitation	Historical / Scope Limitation	1	5.26
Limited Expert Participants	Limited Expert Participants	1	5.26
Target-Population Mismatch	Target-Population Mismatch	1	5.26
Convenience Sampling	Convenience Sampling	1	5.26
Genre / Professional Scope Limitation	Restricted Genre / Professional Scope	1	5.26
Length / Stimulus-Type Limitation	Short One-Minute Clips	1	5.26
Total	—	19	100

The findings presented in Tables 1 and 2 show that sample adequacy and representativeness, along with language domain limitations, were among the most frequently identified limitations in participant-based dissertations (15.79%). This pattern suggests that in these dissertations, participant-related issues were not limited solely to sample size; access to participants, diversity of experiences, language pair, and degree of sample fit to the target population also contributed to the limitations of the research.

Based on the coding and categorization process, the initial codes identified from the reported limitations were consolidated into core categories based on conceptual similarity and methodological relevance. Then, by examining the relationships among these categories, six final themes were developed: Sample, Participants, and Scope; Methodology and Research Design; Data Collection, Technology, and Infrastructure; Cultural and Contextual Factors; Instruments, Materials, and Assessment; and Constructs, Interpretation, and Knowledge Transfer. Table 3 presents the distribution of these six final themes across the studies examined.

Table 3. Overall Frequency of Limitations in Participant-Based Dissertations at Allameh Tabataba'i University

No.	Final Theme	Number of Studies	Percentage
1	Sample, Participants, and Scope	10 out of 10	100%
2	Methodology and Research Design	8 out of 10	80%
3	Data Collection, Technology, and Infrastructure	7 out of 10	70%

4	Cultural and Contextual Factors	5 out of 10	50%
5	Instruments, Materials, and Assessment	6 out of 10	60%
6	Constructs, Interpretation, and Knowledge Transfer	2 out of 10	20%

In Table 3, the percentages were calculated at the study level, and the themes are cross-cutting; therefore, the percentages do not sum to 100 percent. As shown in Table 3, the themes, sample, participants, and linguistic and professional scope were observed in all ten studies and represent the most prominent common pattern across the dataset. The reported limitations are not confined to small sample size; rather, they also encompass access to eligible participants, participant attrition, limited experience, convenience sampling, target-population mismatch, and restrictions related to language pairs, genres, professional domains, geographical coverage, and historical periods.

The findings indicate that research limitations are not merely a matter of sample size; rather, they constitute an interconnected network of constraints related to representativeness, research design, data generation, limited access to adequate and effective technology, cultural context, measurement instruments, and theoretical interpretation. Among these, sample-related limitations have the broadest scope, whereas constructs, interpretation, and knowledge transfer, although less frequent, are of considerable theoretical significance (See Table 3).

The reported limitations can have implications for various dimensions of research validity and quality. Limitations such as inadequate control over variables, cross-sectional designs, inconsistencies in time intervals, artificial research environments, and differences in implementation conditions may reduce internal validity, as they limit the researcher's ability to attribute the findings to the mechanism under investigation. External validity may also be affected by small or non-representative samples, consequently reducing the generalizability of the findings. Measurement validity may be compromised by the use of adapted questionnaires, modified data, changes in the assessment model, and mismatches between constructs and measurement instruments, thereby reducing the precision of construct operationalization. Issues such as EEG noise during the research process, single-rater measurement, and low inter-rater agreement may also affect reliability, resulting in reduced consistency of the findings. In addition, self-reporting, social desirability, platform filtering, and data loss may compromise data quality, reducing data completeness and trustworthiness. Finally, limitations related to culture, language, genre, historical period, and specific samples may constrain transferability, limiting the applicability of the findings to other contexts.

4.2. University of Isfahan Dissertations

Initially, participant-related limitations were identified through initial coding and classified into broad categories in Table 4. Subsequently, to provide a more detailed analysis, the types of problems and limitations related to participants were separately identified and analyzed in terms of their frequency in Table 5.

Table 4. Reported Limitations in Participant-Based Dissertations at the University of Isfahan

No.	Initial Code	Final Code
1	Small Sample Size	Sample, Participants, and Scope
2	Limited Experience Range	Limited range of experience, approximately 1 to 5 years
3	Target-Population Mismatch	Mismatch between the Iranian sample and the target population of Australian migrants
4	Small/Narrow Sample	Limited sample of specialized translators and respondents
5	Small Sample Size	Small sample size
6	Limited Representativeness	Lack of representativeness of the participants

Table 5. Frequency of Participant-Related Limitations in Participant-Oriented Dissertations at the University of Isfahan

Unified Initial Code	Sample Codes Present in the Data	Frequency	Percentage
Sample Size / Scope Limitation	Small Sample Size; Small/Narrow Sample; Small Sample Size	3	50.00
Participant Experience Limitation	Limited Experience Range	1	16.67
Target-Population Mismatch	Target-Population Mismatch	1	16.67
Sample Representativeness Limitation	Limited Representativeness	1	16.67
Total	—	6	100

The findings presented in Tables 4 and 5 show that limitations related to sample size and scope were by far the most frequent participant-related limitations in University of Isfahan participant-based dissertations (50%). This was followed by limitations related to participant experience, sample fit, and sample representativeness (16.67%). This pattern suggests that participant-related limitations in these dissertations were mainly related to sample size and scope, while participant experience range, sample fit, and sample representativeness were also significant considerations.

Based on the coding and categorization process, the initial codes identified from the reported limitations were consolidated into core categories based on conceptual similarity and methodological relevance. Then, by examining the relationships among these categories, six final themes were developed: Sample, Participants, and Scope; Methodology and Research Design; Data Collection, Technology, and Infrastructure; Cultural and Contextual Factors; Instruments, Materials, and Assessment; and Constructs, Interpretation, and Knowledge Transfer. Table 6 presents the distribution of these six final themes across the studies examined.

Table 6. Overall Frequency of Limitations in Participant-Based Dissertations at the University of Isfahan

Rank	Final Theme	Frequency	Percentage
1	Sample, Participants, and Scope	6/6	100%
2	Methodology and Research Design	5/6	83.3%
3	Data Collection, Technology, and Infrastructure	4/6	66.7%
4	Cultural and Contextual Factors	4/6	66.7%
5	Instruments, Materials, and Assessment	4/6	66.7%
6	Constructs, Interpretation, and Knowledge Transfer	1/6	16.7%

In Table 6, the percentages were calculated at the study level, and the themes are cross-cutting; therefore, the percentages do not add up to 100 percent. As shown in Table 4.9, the themes, sample, participants, and linguistic and professional domain were identified in all six studies and constituted the most prominent common pattern in the dataset.

The findings indicate that research limitations are not merely a matter of sample size; rather, they constitute an interconnected network of constraints related to representativeness, research design, data collection, technology, cultural context, measurement instruments, and theoretical interpretation. Among these, sample, participants, and linguistic and professional scope-related limitations were the most pervasive, occurring in all six studies (100 percent). In contrast, constructs, interpretation, and knowledge transfer, although less frequent, remain theoretically significant (see Table 6).

The reported limitations have implications for several dimensions of research validity and quality. Uncontrolled variables, differences across universities, time intervals, and group differences may reduce internal validity by limiting the ability to attribute findings to the mechanisms under investigation. External validity may be constrained by small samples, restricted genres, geographical concentration, and differences between the sample and target population, thereby reducing the generalizability of findings. Measurement validity may be affected by adapted questionnaires, changes in the assessment model, and construct mismatch, which may reduce the precision of operationalizing the intended constructs. Low inter-rater reliability and single-rater measurement may compromise reliability, resulting in reduced consistency and dependability of the results. Transferability may be limited by small interview samples and context-specific cultural settings, restricting the applicability of findings to other contexts. Causal inference may also be constrained by cross-sectional designs, which limit the ability to establish temporal relationships and draw causal inferences. Finally, self-report, memory bias, social desirability, and data loss may affect data quality, reducing the completeness and trustworthiness of the data.

Table 7. Scientific Comparison of Participant-Based Dissertations at Two Universities

Dimension of Comparison	Allameh Tabataba'i University	University of Isfahan	Comparative Finding
Size and Scope	10 dissertations	6 dissertations	The first project is broader in scope.
Final Framework	6 themes	6 themes	Very strong structural convergence
Sample / Participants / Scope	100%	100%	Strongest empirical convergence
Methodology / Research Design	80%	83.3%	Highly prominent in both projects
Data / Technology / Infrastructure	70%	66.7%	Highly similar; the first project shows greater infrastructural heterogeneity.
Culture / Context	50%	66.7%	Relatively more prominent in the second project
Instruments / Measurement	60%	66.7%	Slightly more prominent in the second project
Constructs / Knowledge Transfer	20%	16.7%	Infrequent in both, but theoretically significant

As shown in Table 7, the strongest convergence lies in the presence of the sample, participants, and linguistic and professional scope limitations in both projects, with a prevalence of 100 percent. The main divergence concerns the analytical emphasis, rather than the conceptual framework. Allameh Tabataba'i University, owing to its larger number of studies and greater thematic diversity, provides a broader and more heterogeneous picture of limitations related to technology, infrastructure, political and institutional factors, and methodology. In contrast, University of Isfahan, despite its smaller dataset, highlights more prominently the mechanisms related to data quality, context, measurement, bias, and interpretation through more fine-grained initial coding.

Figure 1 is an overview of the limitations identified in one of the doctoral dissertations at Allameh Tabataba'i University, categorized into the themes of Sample, Participants, and Scope/ Instruments, Materials, and Assessment/ Data Collection, Technology, and Infrastructure.

1.9. Limitations of the Study

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a laboratory setting restricts the generalizability of the findings to real-world contexts. Although controlled environments allow for greater consistency and precision in data collection, they do not fully capture the complex and dynamic conditions in which professional interpreting typically occurs. As a result, participants' behavior in the laboratory may differ from their performance in naturalistic settings, thereby affecting the study's ecological validity. Furthermore, considering short one-minute interpretation chunks can be seen as a limitation because in real-world interpreting conditions, the interpreters interpret at least for 20 minutes. Therefore, this limitation might also affect the validity of the study. Second, the study was constrained by a small sample size and was conducted with only 12 participants, which reduces the statistical power of the analyses and increases the risk of sampling bias. Last but not least, the fNIRS cap, with its array of optodes, is considered to be heavy and uncomfortable during extended use. Considering that SI is already a cognitively demanding task, the added physical strain of the equipment risked increasing participant fatigue and potentially confounding the data. Consequently, while the findings provide preliminary insights, they cannot be confidently generalized to larger populations. This highlights the need for further research with larger and more diverse samples, as well as studies conducted in more naturalistic contexts, to confirm and extend the conclusions drawn here.

Figure 1. An Example of Limitations Identified in One of the Doctoral Dissertations at Allameh Tabataba'i University

Figure 2 is an overview of the limitations identified in one of the doctoral dissertations at Allameh Tabataba'i University, categorized into the themes of Sample, Participants, and Scope/ Instruments, Materials, and Assessment/ Data Collection, Technology, and Infrastructure/ Constructs, Interpretation, and Knowledge Transfer.

5.7. Conclusion

5.7.1. Study's Limitations

The present study acknowledged several methodological limitations that needed to be addressed to enhance the reliability of the findings. One of the primary concerns was the relatively small sample size, which potentially compromised the precision and generalizability of the results. A limited sample may not adequately represent the broader population, leading to skewed interpretations and conclusions that cannot be reliably applied to other contexts. To mitigate this limitation, future research should prioritize the use of larger sample sizes, ideally exceeding 400 participants. Such an approach would enhance the statistical power of the analyses, allowing for more robust and reliable findings that could be generalized across various settings.

In addition to sample size, the time-consuming nature of the OPIE and PIE methods applied in the study presented practical challenges. These methods required considerable time and effort for implementation, which could affect the overall efficiency of the research process. To address this issue, the adoption of a computer-based platform could significantly expedite data analysis. By automating aspects of the evaluation process, researchers could not only streamline their workflow but also reduce the likelihood of subjective biases in scoring and response selection. Such a platform would facilitate the automatic generation of a comprehensive list of correct and incorrect responses, thereby enhancing both the objectivity and efficiency of the assessment procedures.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the importance of researchers possessing in-depth knowledge and proficiency in statistical software packages such as Stata and Jamovi. This expertise was crucial for the meaningful interpretation and analysis of data. Advanced analytical tools enable researchers to conduct complex statistical analyses that can uncover nuanced patterns and relationships within the data. Without a solid understanding of these tools, researchers may struggle to draw valid conclusions from their findings. Therefore, future studies should emphasize training and professional development in statistical methodologies to ensure that researchers are well-equipped to handle the analytical demands of their work.

Figure 2. An Example of Limitations Identified in One of the Doctoral Dissertations at Isfahan University

5. Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify, classify, and compare the limitations reported in participant-based dissertations in the field of Translation Studies, and specifically examined doctoral dissertations from Allameh Tabataba'i University and University of Isfahan that were conducted between 2021 and 2026. The present study examined the limitations as evidence of conditions affecting research feasibility, the quality of data production, and the validity of research inferences. Of the 40 doctoral dissertations identified at Allameh Tabataba'i University, 11 (27.5%) employed a participant-based research approach. At the University of Isfahan, 6 of the 15 identified dissertations (40%) were participant-based. The relatively low proportion of participant-based doctoral dissertations at Allameh Tabataba'i University may suggest that the practical and methodological challenges associated with participant-based research have discouraged doctoral researchers from pursuing this research orientation.

At the first level, the findings of Allameh Tabataba'i University showed that the theme of "sample, participants, and linguistic and professional scope" was the most prevalent in the data set. At the frequency level of limitations, sample size and language range limitations were both the most frequent at 15.79%, followed by limitations related to participant experience, sample attrition, and limited access to participants or universities. This finding indicates that the sample issue in the reviewed dissertations is not limited solely to the small number of participants; rather, sample adequacy also depends on factors such as diversity of experience, language, field of expertise, target population, geographic location, and accessibility. This result is consistent with the views of Hulley et al. (2001) and Keith (2001), who consider sample adequacy and target population representation to be the two basic goals of the participant recruitment process. Also, the findings related to convenience sampling and target-population mismatch indicate that easy access to participants does not necessarily mean that they are suitable for answering the research question; An issue that can directly affect generalizability and external validity.

The findings from the University of Isfahan also confirmed the same general pattern, although with different intensity. In this set, the limitation of "sample size/scope" was by far the most frequent participant-based limitation at 50 percent, and the limitation of participants' experience, the lack of target population fit, and the limitation of sample representativeness each accounted for 16.67 percent. Thus, in both universities, the adequacy and representativeness of the sample were at the center of the reported limitations. However, the findings from University of Isfahan show that even in a smaller set, the sample issue is shaped by various dimensions such as size, scope, experience, and fit with the target population. From this perspective, the findings from the two universities support the view that sample evaluation should not focus solely on the number of participants, but should also consider its fit with the target population and the characteristics of the research.

The findings of the present study have shown that research limitations are not just a matter of sample size, but a network of limitations related to representation, design, data generation, technology, cultural context, measurement instruments, and theoretical interpretation. This pattern is clearly visible in Tables 3 and 6. At Allameh Tabataba'i University, after sample content, participants, and domain, "research methodology and design" were ranked next, with a presence in 80 percent of studies, and "data collection, technology, and infrastructure" with 70 percent. At the University of Isfahan, these two areas were also among the most important families of limitations, with a prevalence of 83.3 and 66.7 percent. This convergence indicates that participant-centered limitations in practice go beyond the sampling process and are also reproduced in the design, implementation, and data generation stages.

Therefore, the validity of findings is affected by a set of interrelated conditions, from sample selection to data generation, measurement, analysis, and communication of results. This finding is also consistent with the existing literature on reporting research limitations, as by reporting limitations, the researcher not only reveals the weaknesses of the study but also makes clear to the reader the conditions that should be considered in interpreting and generalizing the findings (Greener, 2018; Ioannidis, 2007; Ross & Zaidi, 2019). From this perspective, the present findings suggest that the limitations section in doctoral dissertations can be used as a resource for identifying recurring patterns of methodological risk, beyond a retrospective report of problems.

The comparison of the two universities also revealed a significant pattern of convergence and divergence. The strongest convergence is the limitation of "sample, participants, and linguistic and professional scope" in both projects, with a prevalence of 100 percent. The second convergence is related to methodology and design. The three themes of data/technology, culture/context, and tools/measurement are also prominent in both projects, although their contributions differ. The theme of structure/transference is small in both, but conceptual and theoretical. Therefore, the existence of a common six-theme framework in the two sets suggests that the limitations of participant-based

dissertations, despite differences in topic, data volume, and number of studies, have a relatively stable conceptual structure.

In contrast, the differences between the two universities were mainly observed in the intensity and analytical emphasis of the themes, rather than in their overall structure. Allameh Tabataba'i University, due to its larger number of doctoral dissertations and greater thematic diversity, revealed a more heterogeneous range of technological, infrastructural, political, institutional, and methodological constraints. In contrast, University of Isfahan, despite its smaller data volume, highlighted mechanisms related to data quality, context, measurement, bias, and interpretation through more detailed initial coding.

In sum, the findings of the present study show that participant-based doctoral dissertations in Translation Studies face a series of methodological decisions and limitations that start from the selection and access to participants and continue to the production and quality of data, measurement, analysis, interpretation, and transmission of results. The findings of the current research show that "sample adequacy" should be considered as a multi-dimensional concept and, in addition to the number of participants, it also includes representation, variety of experience, adaptation to the target community, linguistic and professional scope, and the field of research. Based on this, the map of limitations presented in this research can be used as a tool for predicting methodological risks, more realistic selection of participants, more appropriate research design, and more cautious interpretation of findings before starting the data collection phase. Finally, systematic attention to these limitations can lead to the production of research in Translation Studies that is more robust in terms of feasibility, methodological transparency, inference validity, and transferability of findings.

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