
**Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Academic Research to EFL Master Learners
:A Case Study. Dr. Mourad TOUATI**

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Master Learners:A Case Study.**

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Abstract

Since the 1980's research on teachers' and learners' beliefs got ample concern from educationilsts and practitioners in order to acount for the multitude of teaching and learning hindrances that are daily encountred by both teachers and learners in language classroom. However, attention has so far been concentrated on language learning with relation to skills and content, but little attention was directed to language learning with relation to advanced learners' performance at academic research. This study aimed to address this gap and examined teachers' beliefs about their EFL learners' thoughts and practices at academic research. Thirteen teachers of English as a foreign language participated in this study. The present inquiry not only intends to unveil the beliefs that teachers hold about their learners' aptitude, motivation, expectations, the nature of academic research and the strategies used, but also to assess the areas of beliefs that are shared by the teachers and to determine the reality of how teachers viewed this situation.

Keywords: teachers, beliefs, academic research, EFL Master Learners

Résumé

Depuis les années 1980, la recherche sur les convictions des enseignants et des apprenants a largement préoccupée les éducateurs et les praticiens afin de représenter la multitude d'entraves à l'enseignement et à l'apprentissage quotidiens des enseignants et des apprenants dans la classe de langue. Cependant, l'attention a été concentrée sur l'apprentissage des langues étrangères par rapport aux compétences et au contenu, mais peu d'attention a été portée à l'apprentissage des langues par rapport à la performance des apprenants universitaires dans le domaine de recherche académique. Treize enseignants d'anglais comme langue étrangère ont participé à cette étude. La présente enquête a non seulement pour objectif de dévoiler les convictions que les enseignants tiennent sur l'aptitude, la motivation, les attentes, la nature de la recherche académique et les stratégies utilisées, mais aussi pour évaluer les domaines de croyances partagés par les enseignants et déterminer la réalité de la façon dont les enseignants ont vu cettésituation.

Mots-clés: enseignants, convictions, recherche académique, étudiants de Master

**Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Academic Research to EFL Master Learners
:A Case Study. Dr. Mourad TOUATI**

Introduction

By the end of the 1980s, research on both learners' and teachers' beliefs about foreign language learning became the most attractive domain of education research. Since then the topic attracted more and more researchers everywhere yielding a multitude of studies exploring teachers' and learners' language learning beliefs with relation to different areas (Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Bernat, 2006, Kavanoz, 2006 ; Posen, 2007 ; Zheng, 2009). Different Researchers explored beliefs about foreign language learning from different dimensions. Yang (1992) investigated the connection between foreign language learning beliefs and strategy use, Mori (1999) explored connections relationship between foreign language learning beliefs and epistemological beliefs, Carter et al. (2009) discussed learners' beliefs with relation to personality traits. Wenden (1999) focused on the relationship between learners' metacognitive knowledge and their beliefs. Altan (2006) discussed beliefs about language learning and age, Kavanoz (2006) investigated teachers' beliefs and learner-centeredness, while Canh and Barnard(2010) debated teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching.

Despite the availability of extensive research on beliefs about foreign language learning, studies on this topic on the Algerian context are scarce especially when it comes to investigating both teachers' and learners' beliefs about English language teaching and learning at an advanced level and practically when Master students are involved in academic research that is becoming very challenging. On the one hand, academic research methodology is a recent compulsory credit integrated in learners' curriculum to maximize their learning potential and outcomes. On the other one, Master learners are supposed to submit some research work by the end of their studies under their teachers' supervision and guidance to fulfill the requirements of a Master degree in English language, literature and civilisation.

The present inquiry aims to investigate teachers' thoughts and reflections on their respective learners' aptitude, learning investment, motivation, expectation and achievements at research in order to construct a global view of what really happens in language classroom and inquire if teachers' beliefs are realistic and converge with one another at each stage of the investigation.

Literature Review

Philosophically speaking, Fenstermacher (1994) defines a belief as a mental state which has as its content a proposition that is accepted as true by the individual holding it. According to Richardson (1996) beliefs are "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true". Mostly, beliefs are shaped by people's surroundings, backgrounds and previous experiences. Barcelos (2000) asserts, "Beliefs cannot be separated from our identities, actions, and social experiences". They play a major role in guiding people's thoughts and behaviour (Borg, 2001). In language teaching and learning, beliefs are confined to individuals' investment and aspirations (Wenden, 1999).

Learners, when entering a language classroom, do possess some expectations about what learning a foreign language entails. When advanced learners engage in foreign language learning they certainly have some ideas about the language difficulty and their own ability. They also set expectations for their achievements. From their previous

**Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Academic Research to EFL Master Learners
:A Case Study. Dr. Mourad TOUATI**

language learning experience, they might have developed an awareness about what learning strategies to be used and have constructed views about classroom proceedings and teacher's role. Some inquiries have asserted that learners' beliefs are resistant to change (Peacock, 2001), others indicate that beliefs do evolve over time and teachers play important role in shaping learners' beliefs (Rubin, 1987; Wenden, 1987). The latter conclusion appears to be more practical with the recent findings of the studies conducted on beliefs about language learning with correlation to different variables ; identity, age, gender, and content and concluded that learners need to constantly adapt to their new circumstances, and this involves making some rectifications to one's personal beliefs and assumptions.

In a learning environment, context is very indispensable to include whenever we want to explore learners' or teachers' beliefs about foreign language learning. Sometimes beliefs of both categories coincide and therefore, learning and teaching proceedings yield good outcomes. However, when teachers and learners do not share the same beliefs, educational efforts go in vain. Allen (1996) us a contextual approach to investigate teacher's beliefs, and the extent of influence on learners' beliefs found that teachers' beliefs did not coincide with learners' beliefs and this ensued a catastrophic outcome. However, Kern (1995) in his longitudinal study among university students found that some of the learners' beliefs changed over time though very little, later on, language students' involvement with their instructor was quite intensive, and ensured a more successful learning outcome and students arranged their learning behaviour to accommodate the perceptions of their teachers. Kuntz (1996) concludes that "these changes may reflect program activities and personal experiences. Hence when both teachers and learners possess realistic beliefs and there's accomodation to the learning / teaching expectations certainly there are some positive results to reach.

The current research aims to answer the following significant questions: (1) What are the areas where the teachers' beliefs about learners' aptitude, motivation and strategy use are most uniform and what are the areas where those beliefs are mostly inconsistent? (2) Are all teachers' beliefs uniform about academic research with relation to their learners' perceptions, assumptions, and expectations and to what extent are teachers' views realistic regarding academic research ?

Research Method

Thirteen teachers of English as a foreign language out of twenty-three at M'sila University took part in this research. Most of the teachers have been teaching English at an advanced level for more than seven years. Four of them have taught English at secondary schools for more than twenty years. All these teachers have always supervised Master' students research dissertations that are supposed to submit by the end of their studies. Moreover, these participants are the only teachers who have always taught research methodology courses whether for undergraduates or for Master students. Our sample is fairely representative to provide reliable and valid information.

Instrument

Teachers were given questionnaires, one per person. The questionnaires employed a 5 point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" statements. Horwitz's (1987) *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)* was consulted and adapted to meet the objectives of this study. The assessment targeted five major areas : 1) - aptitude at formal research and academic writing ; 2) - the nature of formal

**Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Academic Research to EFL Master Learners
:A Case Study. Dr. Mourad TOUATI**

research; 3) -the difficulty in conducting formal research;4) –the use of research strategies ; 5)- motivation and expectations.The questionnaire comprised (25) statements that were intended for investigating teachers' opinions and beliefs about their respective learners at academic research. The intention was to investigate what teachers think of their learners at academic research. The teachers' opinions about academic research was an interesting aspect to investigate so as to determine whether what teachers believe is realistic and converge to construct a theory on which we will draw some pedagogical recommendations.

Procedure

The study used a survey questionnaire to obtain relevant information from participants. Self-report questionnaires , though sometimes are thought to be more complex are thought to be more reliable, because they combine the opportunity for a flexible response with the ability to determine frequencies, correlations and other forms of quantitative analysis. They afford the researcher the freedom to fuse measurement with opinion, quantity and quality (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005). The survey was developed to assess teachers' opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to English as a foreign language and practically at formal research and academic writing as a basic course in their learners' curriculum that begins with studying basic skills, develops through practice to reasonably produce better academic essays, projects, research articles, and culminates with dissertations or theses (Lyons & Heasley.2006). Eventually, students would have been able to systematically investigate into and study of material resources...in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions (Thompson, 1996).

The questionnaires were distributed after the end of the first semester of the academic year 2016/2017. The teachers completed answering the questionnaires and returned the forms to the researcher. Thus, the response rate was (100%). In order to ensure that the respondents expressed their own views, they were invited to answer individually after spending enough time to provide reliable and rigorous answers.

Data Analysis & Findings

Items 1, 2, 3,4, 5, 6, relate to teachers' beliefs about the general existence of specialized abilities with relation to EFL learning at formal research and about the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful learners at research. Thus, these items address the issue of individual potential for achievement at EFL learning and particularly at formal research. In this study, the respondents mostly did not endorse the concept of special abilities among Master students. Some **(76.91%)** of the teachers disagree or strongly disagree with the statement : *It is quite easy for any EFL Master student to conduct some research*. Additionally, **(46.15%)** of them were neutral with the statement ; *some Master students have outstanding abilities to apply any approach along their research work* and **(23.07%)** of the teachers disagreed or strongly disagree with it.However, only **(23.07%)** of the participants endorsed the statement saying ; *students who are good at studies are good researchers*. Table 1 below shows teachers' responses.

Table 1. Teachers' beliefs about learners' aptitude at research.

**Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Academic Research to EFL Master Learners
:A Case Study. Dr. Mourad TOUATI**

Learners' aptitude at research		N = 13				
Statements		Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	It is quite easy for any EFL Master student to conduct some research.	0.00%	07.69%	15.38%	23.07%	53.84%
2	Some Master students have outstanding abilities to apply any approach along their research work.	07.69%	23.07%	46.15%	15.38%	07.69%
3	It is easy for the students who have learnt about research in other languages to carry out their research in English.	23.07%	23.07%	23.07%	15.38%	15.38%
4	Students with some scientific traits and backgrounds tend to be better young researchers.	07.69%	15.38%	0.00%	46.15%	30.76%
5	Male students are better than female ones at conducting research	23.07%	15.38%	07.69%	30.76%	23.07%
6	Students who are good at studies are good researchers	15.38%	07.69%	0.00%	30.76%	46.15%

The difficulty in conducting research

Items 7,8 and 9 concern the general difficulties faced when conducting research and the investigation about the easiness of research in EFL in comparison with other academic disciplines. Moreover, teachers appear to vehicle a great deal of theoretical information and through the statements we attempted to unveil teachers' beliefs with regard to learner's ability when it comes to follow up assignments and to apply what they have learnt into practice. Collecting data is a basic step in conducting research, but what is more important is using this data in providing reasonable analysis and interpretation. In this study, (61.53%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *As far as research is concerned, it is more difficult to conduct in the discipline of EFL than other academic subjects.*

Moreover, the study provided information about data collection, interpretation and analysis, the study revealed that (84.60%) agree or strongly agreed with the statement, *Collecting data is much more easier than interpreting and analyzing it* and the same rate for Item 8 ; *Learning about research is always easier than doing it.* Table 2 below shows teachers' responses.

Table 2 Teachers' responses on The difficulty in conducting research.

**Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Academic Research to EFL Master Learners
:A Case Study. Dr. Mourad TOUATI**

The Difficulty in conducting research N= 13						
7	As far as research is concerned, it is more difficult to conduct in the discipline EFL than other academic disciplines.	46.15%	15.38%	07.69%	23.07%	07.69%
8	Learning about research is always easier than doing it.	38.45%	46.15%	0.00%	07.69%	07.69%
9	Collecting data is much more easier than integrating it adequately in some research.	30.76%	46.15%	0.00%	15.38%	07.69%

The Nature of formal research.

Items 10, 11, 12, and 13 include a broad range of issues related to the nature of research in EFL learning. Item 10 concerns learners' investment in learning about the research topic in order to manipulate it with easiness. Item 11 and 12 determine if the learner gives importance to learning about concepts, theories and approaches to conduct research easily. Item 13 relates teachers' views on research methodology learning in comparison with other learning subjects. Interestingly, we found that **(84.60%)** of the respondents believed that, *it is very basic to learn a lot about the research topic to be able to manipulate it easily*, and **(69.21 %)** of them agree or strongly agree with the idea that ; *the most important part in research is to know a lot of concepts*.

Furthermore, **(76.91%)** of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with item 13 which states that ; *learning research methodology is more difficult than learning other academic subjects*. Meanwhile some **(92.34%)** of the teachers agreed and strongly agreed with the item 12 ; *learning about all research theories and approaches is very useful to conduct research*. Table 3 shows teachers' responses below.

The Nature of conducting research N= 13						
10	It is very basic to learn a lot about the research topic to be able to manipulate it easily.	46.15%	38.45%	0.00 %	07.69%	07.69 %
11	The most important part in research is to know a lot of concepts.	38.45%	30.76%	15.38%	15.38%	0.00 %
12	Learning about all research theories and approaches is very useful to conduct research.	30.76%	61.58 %	07.69%	0.00	0.00%

**Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Academic Research to EFL Master Learners
:A Case Study. Dr. Mourad TOUATI**

13	Learning research methodology is more difficult than learning other academic subjects.	30.76%	46.15%	0.00 %	07.69%	15.38 %
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Table 3 Teachers' beliefs about the nature of conducting research

Research Strategies

Items 14, 15, 16, 17,18, 19, and 20 address the use of research strategies and are probably the most directly related to a student's actual language learning and research practices. Items 15 and 16 refer to collaborative work and interaction with peers, item 14 cognitive readiness before engaging in research assignments , item 17 concerns learners' psychological states whenever they are given some research works, and item 18 is related to mistakes tolerance while doing some mini-projects and if it negatively impacts students achievements while carrying out their final dissertations. However, item 20 concerns learners' inspiring from other research works. Some (61.52%) of the teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with **item 14** that states ;*it is important that all students excel at academic research*. Moreover, (69.21%) of them endorsed the statement ;*learners feel disapointed whenever they are given research assignements*, and (61.53%) of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement Item 19 : *If Master students are permitted to make some mistakes in research mini-projects it will negatively impact their achievements at the requirements of the degree*. Table 4 provides more details about teachers beliefs.

Table 4 Teachers' beliefs about learners' use of research strategies

Research strategies		N = 13				
14	It is important that all students excel at academic research.	15.38%	15.38 %	07.69%	23.07 %	38.45%
15	Students shouldn't attempt any research work unless they know totally what to do.	38.45 %	30.76 %	0.00	15.38%	15.38%
16	Students enjoy doing research works with peers.	30.76 %	23.07 %	07.69%	30.76%	07.69%
17	It is important for students to know about their peers' research achievements.	30.76 %	23.07 %	15.38%	15.38%	15.38%
18	Learners feel disapointed whenever they are given research assignements.	30.76 %	38.45 %	07.96%	07.69%	15.38%
19	If Master students are permitted to make some mistakes in research mini-	46.15 %	15.38 %	07.69%	07.69%	23.07%

**Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Academic Research to EFL Master Learners
:A Case Study. Dr. Mourad TOUATI**

	projectsit will negatively impact their achievements at the requirements of the degree					
20	It very essential to imitate research works formerly discussed and adopt them.	30.76 %	15.38 %	15.38%	15.38%	23.07%

Motivations and Expectations

Items 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25 targeted teachers' beliefs about their students' confidence, desires, expectations perseverance and achievement and what they foresee for

23	Some students feel that they have a strong flair to carry out research activities at any time.	38.45%	23.07%	07.69%	15.38%	15.38%
24	If EFL Master students succeed at research they will be able to reflect on their learning.	07.69%	30.76%	07.69%	23.07%	30.76%
25	The majority of EFL Master students would like to be outstanding researchers	07.69%	15.38%	0.00 %	15.38%	61.58%

their future. Items 21 and 22 relate to teachers' beliefs about learners' ability to carry out any type of research assignments with respect to deadlines and what future traits to develop. However, items 23 targets students' self-confidence not only in succeeding at research, but also in reflecting on their learning successfully. Meanwhile, Item 25 concerns learners' expectations about developing the traits of a researcher and how many of them do expect themselves to be great future researchers.

Data revealed that (**53.84 %**) of the teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with Item 22: *it is obvious that all EFL Master students should develop the traits of future researchers.* However, (**61.52%**) agreed and strongly agreed with statement 23; *some students feel that they have a strong flair to carry out research activities at any time.* Yet some (**76.96%**) of them do not expect their Master students to be future outstanding researchers. Table 5 illustrates below provides more details about teachers' responses.

Table 5 : teachers' beliefs about learners' motivations and expectations.

Discussion & Interpretation

Firstly, an analytical reading of the collected data revealed that though teachers have spent a relatively long period in teaching and training their learners on study skills and research they do exhibit a number of beliefs that are sometimes negative, sometimes divergent and even contradictory. Some of the 'negative' beliefs teachers hold may impact learner's knowledge outcomes and achievement at research. According to teachers; Master learners exhibit levels of motivation below the average. For example, though working to deadlines is always a targeted behaviour by both the students and their teachers, some (**69.22%**) of the teachers did not believe that *learners are able to fulfill their research works before deadlines* that totally contradicts with their response to **item 23**, some (**61.52%**) of them agreed or strongly agreed with the statement; *some students feel that they have a strong flair to carry out research activities at any time.*

**Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Academic Research to EFL Master Learners
:A Case Study. Dr. Mourad TOUATI**

Furthermore, (23.07%) of the teachers did not believe that their students have outstanding abilities to apply any approach along their reasearch work added to (46.15%) that neither expressed agreement or disagreement. Hence, some (69.22%) of the teachers still held a negative belief about the learners' aptitude whether explicitly or by abstention. Furthermore, The results consolidated teachers' responses to **Item 1**. Some (76.91%) of the teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, *it is quite easy for an EFL Master student to conduct some kinds ofresearch and (15.38%)*were neutral. Therefore, (93.22%) might be considered to be holding negative beliefs.

The findings revealed some interesting opinions related to the nature of research. Some (95.37 %)of the teachers totally endorsed the statement ; *Learning about all research theories and approaches is very useful to conduct research* and (07.69%) expressed no opinion. Moreover, (69.21%) of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *the most important part in research is to know a lot of concepts*. From the discussed data it is quite apparent that teachers give more importance to theoretical learning to develop knwoledge outcomes rather than training learners to develop analytical traits that are key targeted goals while training learners on acdemic research.

Secondly, the investigation revealed some interesting data from a pedagogical point of view, are the beliefs expressed in **(Item 18)** ; *If Master students are permitted to make some mistakes in research mini-projects it will negatively impact their achievements at the requirements of their degree*, where (61.63%) of the teachers expressed agreement with the statement. While learning and training, learners are encouraged to get involved despite the mistakes they make and gradually they would perfect through practice. If teachers do not tolerate mistakes at assignments students are psychologically hurt and lose interest at learning. This view is reinforced by teachers' view on their learners affect whenever they are given research assignment. Some (69.21%) of the teachers did agree with the statement ; *learners are disapointed whenever they are given research assignments*, hence learners' psychological states seem to be ignored or misunderstood by their teachers. This psychological atmospherereported by teachers would affect learners' motivation and teachers' opinions are apparent in statements related to expectations and motivation.

Meanwhile more than a half of the teachers seem to give importance to co-operative learning that is quasi-fundamental in modern language learning practices, but only (53.83%) of the teachers agree with the satement ; *Learners enjoy doing research works with peers*, additionally the same rate for the statement ; *It is important to know about peers' research achievement* ; where (53.83%) of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. In cooperative learning interaction is very important. It paves the way to better understanding and performance. Frequently, learners learn better from one another than they sometimes do with their teachers. The importance of in-depth knowledge about research topic for learners is quasi-fundamental and cooperative work is so advised by educationalists even for advanced learners. Therefore, if we establish links between teachers' beliefs about learners' aptitude, motivation and expectations wenotice that more than (50%) of the teachersto (75%) hold negative views on their learners' and even sometimes these views are unrealistic. Presumably, students who have been learning and practicing research would have developed an aptitude that has favoured them to have an access to Master studies and by no means we belittle their motivation underestimate their motivation and expectation

**Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Academic Research to EFL Master Learners
:A Case Study. Dr. Mourad TOUATI**

Moreover, in what concerns the nature of research, teachers' perception on how to conduct it and the strategies that are generally used seem to be so unrealistic. Since from (50% to 80%) favour theory to practice and do not give advantage to learning, but rather to teaching research and even they have described research methodology and follow up practice as being so challenging if not difficult. These convergent negative beliefs might have influenced teachers—learners rapport and hence learners' potential. If teachers think that all EFL Master students should excel at academic research it is very necessary that they should review their beliefs not only about learners' aptitude, motivation and expectation, but also about syllabus content, strategies and objectives. Certainly, the findings unveiled many incorrect and unrealistic beliefs about EFL learning and mainly academic research and this might have influenced their teaching. However, this does not mean that teachers' knowledge, beliefs, aspirations and practices should be alike, but surely they provide an insight on language classroom practices.

Pedagogical Implications

Researchers who have investigated learners' beliefs have repeatedly emphasized the value of insights gained in language classroom experience. Teachers can draw on findings to facilitate more effective instructional planning and implementation, greater consideration for choice of teaching methods and materials, lesson content and sequence. Moreover, the knowledge of students' beliefs will make it possible for teachers to create a mode of instruction in which students' needs and goals are satisfied (Sakui & Gaies 1999). For example, the respondents in this survey strongly endorsed the idea of collaborative learning and eagerness to know about peers' achievements. In fact, (75%) had reported the necessity of knowing about peers' achievements and (59.37%) favoured cooperative work.

Equipped with this knowledge, the teacher of such learners could ensure that the curriculum, lesson planning and learning modes meet the perceived needs and expectations of the learners. However, if the degree of importance placed upon one aspect of language learning (such as research) is unrealistically high, the teacher could discuss its relative importance compared with other aspects of language learning and negotiate its weight in the course with his/her class. This will provide for a more learner-centred approach to formal research teaching, where different learning styles are accommodated and the curriculum is negotiated.

It is estimated that when language classes fail to meet student expectations, students can lose confidence in the instructional approach and their ultimate achievement can be limited (Horwitz 1987). Consequently, it will take too much time and energy to investigate negative beliefs and then to foster positive beliefs that lead to effective learning strategy use and minimizing negative beliefs that inhibit learning. Teachers can remove students' misconceptions by providing knowledge and training on formal research strategies with adequate follow up assignments and learning modes that develop learners' competencies.

Finally, it is important that teachers' methodologies should be compatible consistent with learner beliefs. As Horwitz (1988) put it: 'knowledge of the relationship of learners' beliefs about language learning and strategy use should provide teachers with better understanding of the students' expectation of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their language classes'. Possessing clear insights on learners' aptitude, and providing learners' with enough knowledge and practice about the nature of formal research and how to conduct it, minimizing hindrances for learners through adequate strategy use to meet students' expectations can lead to a more efficient learning and

**Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Academic Research to EFL Master Learners
:A Case Study. Dr. Mourad TOUATI**

better achievement at formal research. Thus, it is quite urgent to consider any negative belief that affects learning behaviour. Therefore, continuous and empirical research of language classroom is always required to maintain foreign language achievement.

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**Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Academic Research to EFL Master Learners
:A Case Study. Dr. Mourad TOUATI**

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