

Dissertation Writing Challenges as Perceived by a Group of Algerian Master Students at Adrar University

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Abstract:

The present research study is an attempt to shed some light on EFL students' experiences of writing their Master dissertation. It particularly aims to give them the chance to express their views about the sorts of challenges that confront them in this academic journey, so as to pave the way for addressing such challenges. In this qualitative case study, fifteen students chosen from the department of English at the University of Adrar were thoroughly interviewed to identify the challenges in the dissertation writing process. The obtained results showed that Master students face a number of challenges, including difficulties in the beginning of the writing process, language-related problems and supervisor-related challenges.

Keywords: dissertation writing; challenges; difficulties; Algerian EFL Master students.

ملخص:

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى استكشاف تجربة مذكرة الماستر لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية وذلك من خلال إعطائهم فرصة التعبير عن الصعوبات التي تواجههم من أجل تعبيد الطريق لمعالجتها. يعد هذا البحث النوعي دراسة حالة حيث قام الباحثان باستخدام المقابلة الشخصية المطولة مع مجموعة من طلبة الإنجليزية بجامعة أدرار وذلك لتحديد تحديات كتابة مذكرة الماستر لهم. أظهرت النتائج التي تم الحصول عليها أن الطلاب يواجهون عددًا من التحديات، بما في ذلك الصعوبات في بداية عملية الكتابة، المشاكل المتعلقة باللغة والتحديات المتعلقة بالمشرف.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كتابة مذكرة الماستر؛ تحديات؛ صعوبات؛ طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية الجزائريون

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a noticeable growth in the number of higher education institutions and universities across our country, which has bestowed on many students the opportunity to enroll not only in the Bachelor (**License**) degree but also in the Master degree. Central to the successful completion of the Master level is the students' ability to master academic writing. Not only because they have to do their assignments and answer the exam questions of the different courses in acceptable academic writing, but more importantly because they have to write a dissertation, which is a difficult genre of academic writing. Needless to say, the dissertation writing process is a challenging and difficult task for most students since it requires from them the ability to have several hard skills such as planning, doing research, critical thinking, the correct use of language (grammar, choice of words...etc.) and style, to mention but a few. Consequently, they have to deal with and may confront a significant number of challenges while writing their Master dissertation.

Writing a dissertation involve a myriad of skills including, “content knowledge, academic writing, researching skills, and arguments of the writer to express his posture” (**Olmos, 2010, p. 148**). Furthermore, the challenge of writing a dissertation is particularly difficult for our students—being non-native learners of English—because they have to write it in a foreign language (English) in which they are not fully knowledgeable (**Sadeghi & Khjepasha, 2015**). Also, the sociocultural context and the conditions under which students write can play a major role in the process of Mater dissertation writing, either positively or negatively. As such, During the course of writing their Master dissertation, EFL students face various challenges. They may not only face linguistic challenges in the writing up of their dissertation manuscript but also other sorts of challenges: research-related and supervision-related challenges.

Master students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the University of Adrar are required to conduct research and write a dissertation as partial fulfillment of the Master degree. Doing research and reporting it in a dissertation is generally a new experience for these EFL Master students; therefore, it is unsurprising that it may pose several challenges for them. Informal interviews with university teachers and academics at the department of English in the University of Adrar have shown that they tend to complain about students' poor

academic writing in general and poor dissertation writing specifically. However, complaining about students' poor dissertation writing is not enough; understanding the difficulties facing them in the process of dissertation writing is rather necessary. Such an understanding can be best attained through an exploration of the perceptions and views of the students themselves about the challenges facing them while writing their Master dissertation. Hence, this study's problem is concerned with understanding the perspectives of EFL students regarding the challenges that they experience in the course of writing the Master dissertation.

Research Questions

The general aim of conducting this research was to enhance the quality of Master dissertation writing in English as Foreign Language (EFL) in The Algerian contexts. With this broad objective in mind, the study set out to find out the students' major challenges and difficulties in this academic undertaking, meanwhile suggesting some practical solutions to alleviate the challenges. In order to achieve these objectives, the following research questions guided the study:

- 1:** What sorts of challenges do EFL Master students face in writing their dissertations?
- 2:** What can be suggested to overcome the challenges?

Literature Review

According to Huang (2007), "to the vast majority of students, the dissertation is by far the most challenging piece of academic work" (p.30). A brief review of the research studies pertaining to the difficulties in dissertation writing shows that most of these studies have ascertained that students face several challenges when writing their dissertations (for instance, **Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Cadman, 1997; Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995; Dong, 1998; Flowerdew & Li, 2009; Hyland, 2004; Kwan, 2008**). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the greatest amount of research about dissertation writing has been done in either western countries, where English is the students' native language, or in ESL contexts where English is used as a medium of teaching. Therefore, there is a need for attention to be given to dissertation writing in the (unexplored) EFL contexts, where this important academic endeavor (dissertation writing) is usually overlooked by researchers.

Examples of previous research studies about dissertation writing challenges include, for instance, **Bitchener & Basturkmen (2006)** who used in-depth interviews with four supervisor–student pairs to unmask

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the students' difficulties in writing an individual chapter of their dissertation, namely the discussion of results section (DRS). The findings of this study indicated that underlying the students' difficulty in writing the Discussion Chapter of their dissertation is their limited knowledge of the function of the DRS as a genre. Specifically, it was reported in this study by the supervisors that student faced difficulty in establishing the link between the outcomes of their studies and the existing literature.

In the same line of thought, Komba (2016), in turn, explored challenges which Tanzanian students faced in writing all chapters of their dissertations. He conducted a qualitative study which used a documentary research method. Data were drawn from the review of students' dissertations (n=103). The outcomes of this study showed that due to their lack of training and poor background in dissertation writing, students faced challenges in writing all the chapters of the dissertation. In particular, inappropriateness in presenting the different chapters of the dissertation and lack of academic writing skills were among the challenges revealed by the study's results. In another similar study, Ho (2013) investigated the difficulties facing both native English and non-native English graduate students in writing papers. His findings showed that unlike their native English peers, non-native English students had little experience in research paper writing which manifested in their lack of genre-specific writing skills and unawareness of the rhetorical structure of the paper. The subjects of Ho's study shared the view that the Literature Review section of a research paper was the most difficult part to write.

In their textual analysis of sixty MA dissertations taken from three Iranian universities, Sadeghi and Khjepasha (2015) found that the examined dissertations suffered mostly from style and language problems. Likewise, Gurel (2011) used both quantitative and qualitative means of data collection to explore the challenges encountered during dissertation writing in English at the Turkish context. She administered a comprehensive survey to 44 dissertation supervisors and conducted face-to-face interviews with eleven of them in order to identify those challenges. The results of this mixed methods study showed that Turkish students at the stage of dissertations writing in English as a foreign language faced several language difficulties, such as lack of overall writing skill, failure to express and present ideas clearly because of not having enough

vocabulary. In addition, they used improper grammar in the text of the dissertation. The researcher ascribed these challenges to students' inexperience in writing and to the fact that they had received insufficient English education throughout their lives at all levels.

In contrast to the reviewed research studies, we did not limit our investigation to linguistic problems. Also, unlike the above-mentioned studies, the current study was conducted in the Algerian context. The intent of the researchers of this study is to draw scholars' attention and stimulate inquiry into dissertation writing in the Algerian context which is characterized by remarkable scarcity of the literature about this topic.

Methodology

The study adopted an interpretive qualitative research methodology and a case-study research design. Qualitative research methodology was opted for in this exploratory small-scale study as the researchers' aim was to develop an understanding of individuals and events in their context (**Borg, Gall & Gall, 1993**). Thus, this design is believed to be appropriate since it gives the students the chance to express their views regarding the sort of challenges which they experienced during their Master dissertation writing journey.

The sample of the study consisted of fifteen (eleven males and four females) students who were purposefully chosen from the department of English at the University of Adrar. Two important criteria were taken into consideration for the selection of the students who were interested in participating in our study. First, they had to be second year Master student who had just finished and were about to submit their dissertations. Second, only recently graduated students were selected because these were more likely to remember their experiences of dissertation writing and, therefore, they were more capable of reporting detailed and reliable views about the challenges encountered in it.

To elicit data from the informants, a qualitative research instrument was utilized, namely the semi-structured interview. Within a period of three weeks all the participants were individually interviewed using face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interviewees said that they had no problem in conducting the interview in English, yet they were asked to shift to their mother tongue, Arabic, whenever they wanted so that they can express themselves freely and clearly. After gaining consent from the respondents, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The

researchers didn't use participants' real names when reporting the results in the study for the purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms (e.g., **student 1, student 2...etc.**) were rather used.

Qualitative content analysis was used in the current study to analyze the data obtained from the participants through the semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2007). Following each interview, the recorded data were attentively listened to then transcribed. After that, the manuscript was read several times to identify codes and classify them under a number of major and sub-major categories or themes according to their similarity and uniqueness (Patton, 1990). The summary and classification of similar codes resulted in three major categories. Each of these three major categories was named.

Results and Discussion

The process of doing research and writing up a master dissertation is a difficult and challenging experience for Algerian EFL Master students as it has been proven by the current study. The findings of this study were generally in line with a number of studies that were conducted either in EFL contexts (**for instance, Komba, 2015; Gurel, 2011; Sadeghi & Khajepasha, 2015**) or elsewhere (**for example, Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Cadman, 1997; Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995; Dong, 1998; Flowerdew & Li, 2009; Hyland, 2004**). The challenges encountered by the students in writing their dissertations ranged from language-related difficulties, personal and cultural difficulties, to problems faced in the research phase and supervision process. These difficulties were not only at the level of the dissertation text due to students' relative incompetence in the skill of writing in general and in academic writing particularly, but the participants of the study also met research-related difficulties in the initial steps of selecting the topic and reviewing the literature, in addition to supervisor-related problems.

The process of content analysis of the current study's data pertinent to the students' challenges while writing their Master dissertation culminated in the identification of a number of those challenges which will be presented under three major categories:

1. Difficulties in the Beginning of the Writing Process

1.1. Difficulties in Choosing a research topic

The majority of students reported that identifying a theme or selecting a topic for their dissertation was not an easy task. The fact

that some teachers suggested topics for the students didn't seem to solve this problem as some of the students reported that those topics didn't appeal to them, and that they wanted to select the research topic on their own. Yet, the freedom to choose the topic resulted in perplexity and hesitation. The following quote from the interview manuscript proves this:

yes, I know, but I wanted to choose a topic on my own...laughter... unfortunately it was very difficult for me. Whenever I read about a topic and decided to take it for my memoire, I came across another one that was easier or more appealing, so I was jumping and moving from one topic to the other. (Student 2)

Other students faced topic-related challenges because they wanted to choose "impressive topics":

I didn't want to waste my time on a normal topic. I wanted to write about something that impresses my supervisor, so I started reading and reading about it...in the end I couldn't take it. It was difficult to deal with it just in one year. (Student 8)

Similar to our study's findings, several research studies (**for instance, Erbay & Yilmaz, 2017; Huang, 2007**) ascertained that topic selection constitutes a difficult step in the dissertation writing process. Thus, supervisors can play a key role in solving this problem by discussing with their supervisees what fields of study they are interested in, and, based on this, they suggest the topics because doing research and writing about a topic of interest will motivate the students and push them to complete the dissertation successfully.

1.2. Difficulties in Reviewing the Literature

EFL master students in the present study also had difficulty in searching and reviewing the literature related to their topic of writing. The literature review is an important step in the process of writing a dissertation, which has a significant role to play in broadening the student's knowledge about his/her research. However, it is not an easy undertaking according to the students who participated in this study. In the main, they complained about their lack of reading skills, their inability to locate and synthesize the related literature; that is, they could not decide on what to read and what to include in the Literature Review chapter of the dissertation. One student had the following to say in the interview concerning this problem: *"I spent a lot of time in reviewing the literature finally when I finished reading, I wasn't sure*

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about what to and what not to include in my thesis” (Student 7).

In addition to the challenge of identifying a topic for their dissertation, it was also found that students faced some problems in reviewing the literature. Chief among these is their inability to decide on what to select from the available literature related that to their topic. This problem is due to their lack of experience in research writing. Literature review is a demanding process, and one which can be daunting even for experienced writers due to the fact that it requires identifying terms to use in the literature search, locating the literature, reading and checking the relevance of the literature, organizing the selected literature and writing the literature review (Creswell, 2002). These findings seem to emphasize Yeh’s (2010) observation that “*for EFL graduate students, reviewing the literature – a task that requires skills such as mining sources, integrating and synthesizing ideas and theories – is often a brand-new experience and constitutes a formidable task” (p. A6).*

2. Language-related Challenges

It was not surprising that, given the fact that they are EFL students who have very limited contact with the English language outside the classroom, students admitted having had linguistic difficulties during the writing up stage of their dissertation writing process. These language-related challenges can be categorized into: problems in English language general writing skills and the issue of lack of academic/research writing skills.

Problematic areas concerning general writing skills include not having enough vocabularies to express ideas, incorrect use of grammar (for example, use of articles and prepositions, proper use of some tenses, subject verb agreement), lack of organization (for instance, lack of coherence—how to connect sentences and paragraphs; lack of unity—when to end the paragraph and start a new one, irrelevant ideas). For example, this student complained about dearth of vocabularies to express his idea: “*I used to spend a lot of time staring at my PC waiting for words to come out of my brain...*” (Student 3)

In such cases when students are confronted with lack of words they might resort to copy and paste mechanisms: “*I used to spend a lot of time staring at my PC waiting for words to come out of my brain...[laughs]... I don't think I must say this... lack of words and time pushed me to copy paste to accelerate my writing” (Student 3)*

On the other hand, some students faced issues in coping with the

specific requirements of academic writing in their dissertation (for example, academic jargon, formal style, paraphrasing, quoting, referencing and citation, e.g., APA, MLA, ...):

... of course, I used to write before the thesis, but in the thesis, you have to write in an academic way I mean like the other theses in the internet...so this was so hard for me because I was used to personal writing. (Student 5)

As clearly stated in this quote, unfamiliarity with writing the dissertation, as an academic writing genre, caused a problem for the participants in this study.

Also, when asked about which parts of the dissertation were the most difficult, the majority of the students replied that the Methodology chapter and the Discussion chapter were very difficult to write. For instance, this in interview extract a student stated that, “*For me, the discussion of the results was the most difficult stage in my research*” (Student 11). Besides, the following extracts illustrate students’ difficulties with writing the Methodology chapter of the dissertation:

At first, I hesitated in choosing the research method then I decided to follow the quantitative method, but the justification for choosing it was really difficult to me...I mean why not other methodology. Also, I faced problems creating the questionnaire, so I just used one from another memoire. (Student 15)

I needed to read about everything again...yes we did them with the teacher...not all of them, so in every section I look for books and articles that deal with it for example definitions of the terms like method methodology sampling...yes which sampling method to choose and a lot of other things. I mean you have to read a lot to understand what to write. So, Methodology was not easy. (Student 10)

The participants reported their inability to cope with the requirements of writing a dissertation both in terms of the general writing skills such as grammar, vocabulary and organization, and in terms of the writing skills particularly needed for dissertation writing such as paraphrasing, quoting, summarizing, and the proper use of style and mechanics. This could be ascribed to the fact that they are EFL learners who have limited contact with English and therefore are not very fluent in it, not only in terms of writing but also in terms of the other language skills. As a matter of fact, a considerable number of studies have ranked language as the first difficulty and the main

challenges for students who write their dissertation in English as a second or foreign language (for instance, Flowerdew & Li, 2009; Kwan, 2008). On the other hand, students perceived dissertation writing difficulties, including the difficulty in writing the discussion and methodology chapters, could be attributed to their lack of experience in doing research and reporting in academic writing since it is the first time for them to write a dissertation or a similar work in their academic carrier.

3. Supervisor-related Challenges

Most of the participants were generally satisfied regarding the support and guidance they received from their supervisors, yet they reported two supervisor-related challenges: unavailability of the supervisor when needed by the student and issues related to feedback.

3.1. Unavailability of the Supervisor

Some of the participants mentioned that they faced the problem of their supervisors not frequently meeting them to provide guidance and support. This was revealed by one of the participants in the following quote: “...oh... I don't want to remember...[laughs]...he was all the time busy or outside university. I sent him many emails and he didn't reply, so it was disappointing. I had to ask other teachers for help...” (Student 1). The tight schedule of the supervisors because of their various teaching and personal duties might be a contributing factor for their lack of time to meet frequently with their students. However, supervisors should compensate for their inability to meet with their students in person by contacting them through alternative ways such as through the phone, Messenger, Viber and email.

3.2. Issues related to feedback

Another important problem reported by our informants has to do with the insufficient, and sometime unsatisfactory, feedback their supervisors provided them with. This was echoed in the following quotes:

“I used to give him my work and wait for three weeks for him to correct it...you see... this hindered my progress” (Student 7).

“I didn't understand some of her comments. Sometimes she just put a long line under my sentences with no remarks...sometimes she wrote for a whole paragraph ‘change it it's not clear’ and it was hard to rewrite... and it always about grammar or writing mistakes, but what about other things” (Student 12).

It is clear from the above quotes that supervisors spent much

time correcting students' dissertation drafts, and they gave feedback not as quickly as their students wanted. A possible reason for this may be related to the students' tendency to delay writing the dissertation until the last month of the final semester; the time when supervisors are usually busy with attending meeting and preparing and correcting end-of-term exams. Another observation, based on the above quotes, is that students perceived the quality of the provided feedback as rather ineffective. Thus, it is necessary for supervisors to couple written feedback with oral feedback to eliminate the students' ambiguities, hence improving their writing and motivating them to progress in the process of completing their dissertations.

The findings of this study concerning the supervisor-related challenges that our participants encountered in writing their dissertation is consistent with other research results elsewhere. For example, they are in line with Erbay & Yılmaz (2017), who conducted a qualitative survey study with semi-structured in-depth interviews to investigate the twelve BA candidates' perspective in a north-eastern state university of Turkey, and they found that students were confronted with difficulties related to supervision. Furthermore, the results of our study also corroborate the outcomes of Wadesango and Machingambi's (2011) research study. This latter found that only a few students claimed satisfaction with their supervisors whereas a significant percentage (75%) of respondents were not satisfied at all with supervisors' feedback.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was a qualitative investigation, employing case study approach, into the challenges faced by Algerian EFL students in the process of dissertation writing. The findings revealed that the students who participated in this study encountered a number of challenges in the course of writing their dissertation; the most important of which were language-related, supervisor-related and difficulties pertaining to the research phase. These results were in line with other studies that were reviewed in this research paper. On the basis of these findings, some suggestions and recommendations can be drawn from the present study. These recommendations are aimed at decision makers, supervisors, Master EFL students, and future researchers who may be interested in conducting studies about dissertation writing in English as a Foreign Language, especially in the Algerian context.

To begin with, decision makers and educational authorities in Algeria, especially in the University of Adrar, are recommended to

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make sure that there are enough qualified teacher/supervisors at English departments to make supervision of EFL students more manageable. Furthermore, they should require teachers to adapt their courses to make them attend to the students' specific needs concerning dissertation, instead of teaching them blindly. Universities are also recommended to provide students with all the means which can facilitate their dissertation writing journey, including formal dissertation writing guides and practical training on academic writing and research methodology in the form of regular workshops and seminars. Secondly, supervisors should reflect on and rethink their supervisory methods; they are recommended to not only focus on correcting students' language mistakes in the dissertation drafts but also give them various constructive feedback, and help them in all the steps of the writing process in a regular and timely manner. Thirdly, students should be aware of the pedagogical benefits and value of writing the Master dissertation as well as its difficult nature, and, hence, they must prepare themselves well for this academic task by learning more about grammar, the conventions of academic writing, and how to conduct research. Finally, future researchers are recommended to conduct larger quantitative studies and new case studies in other Algerian universities about dissertation writing challenges so that a general and more profound picture of the students' experiences can be attained. Given that this study focused on only the students' perceptions, it would be useful to investigate the views of the supervisors about the dissertation writing challenges facing the students they supervise as well. It would also be useful to explore both supervisors' and students' views about the reasons behind the difficulties in the dissertation writing process.

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