Writing a successful review of the literature:

A dilemma for undergraduate students in EFL classes

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Abstract

In conducting research, students are supposed to undertake a long hard process of decision making at different levels. This implies following a strict well organized and thoroughly planned methodology. One of the levels where students have to make some critical decisions is the literature review. This component is very crucial in thesis writing as it contributes to the development of other sections.

The problem, however, is that in the current situation, as many teachers have observed, students have some misconceptions and fossilizations about what is literature review and how to develop it. Indeed, most students seem to consider literature review as a product rather than a process of summarizing and synthesizing that should be well handled. A literature review in this sense is limited to collecting information, presenting other researchers views and findings and listing numerous sources. Another main problem teachers may encounter as supervisors is that most students spend long time in writing the literature review claiming that they need to acquire some familiarity with the research subject and to acquaint themselves with the available research on the topic under scrutiny. But the result shows that they neither provide exhaustive comprehensive account to the topic nor they finish in time.

So students need to be made aware of the true process of literature review writing. And this paper is an endeavour to raise EFL learners' awareness of literature review writing difficulties and challenges. Moreover, it highlights the efforts required of both students and teachers to make writing literature review less frustrating task and more efficient.

Key terms: writing literature review, writing difficulties, writing skill, research methodology.

الملخص:

في إجراء البحوث، من المفترض على الطلاب إجراء عملية طويلة واتخاذ قرارات على مختلف المستويات. وذلك يعني اتباع منهجية صارمة منظمة ومنظمة جيدا. إحدى المستويات التي على الطلاب فيها اتخاذ بعض القرارات الحاسمة هو مراجعة الدراسات السابقة. هذا العنصر حاسم جدا في كتابة الأطروحة لأنه يساهم في تطوير الأقسام الأخرى.

ولكن المشكلة هي أنه في ظل الوضع الحالي، كما لاحظ العديد من المعلمين، فإن لدى الطلاب بعض المفاهيم والحفريات الخاطئة حول ما هو استعراض الأدبيات وكيفية تطويره في الواقع، ويبدو أن معظم الطلاب ينظرون في مراجعة الأدبيات السابقة كعملية تلخيص وتوليف. ويقتصر استعراض الأدبيات بهذا المعنى على جمع المعلومات وتقديم آراء الباحثين الآخرين والنتائج وإدراج العديد من المصادر. وهناك مشكلة رئيسية أخرى يواجهها المعلمون كمشرفين كون معظم الطلاب يقضون وقتا طويلا في كتابة الأدبيات السابقة مدعين أنهم بحاجة إلى اكتساب بعض الألفة مع موضوع البحث والتعرف على البحوث المتاحة فيه. ولكن النتيجة تبين أنها لا توفر جردا شاملا للموضوع ولا تنتهي في الوقت المناسب.

لذلك يحتاج الطلاب إلى أن يكونوا على بينة من العملية الحقيقية من كتابة الأدبيات السابقة. وهذه الورقة هي محاولة لرفع وعي المتعلمين وتجاوز الصعوبات والتحديات في الموضوع. وعلاوة على ذلك، فإنها تسلط الضوء على الجهود المطلوبة من كلّ من الطلاب والمعلمين لجعل استعراض الدراسات السابقة مهمة أقل إحباطا وأكثر كفاءة.

Introduction

Writing is one of the very frequent skills an English foreign language learner undertakes. He has to write notes, lectures, classroom assignments, homework, research papers, etc. Their

evaluation, basically is pen and paper test. In fact, an enormous number of studies were carried out in different contexts under the heading of search for the most efficient instructional modal for teaching second and foreign language writing. These studies has provided us with invaluable insights about issues such as learner writer's characteristics, his attitudes towards writing, second and foreign language writer's text, writing strategies and styles, teacher's feedback, teacher's role in a writing class, etc.(Spencer and Arbor (1996); Hyland (2009); Hinkel (2011).

Concerning methodology, it has been proved that the conflict in research was whether learners should follow a typical modal of text when writing in the target language, or they need to go through a process of brainstorming, planning, organizing, drafting and revising their writing pieces (Turner and Bitchener (2006); Brisk (2011)).The question then, was whether to regard learners' texts as final products that should apply the standards provided in the instructional written modal (product- based approach), or to deal with writing as a complex process(process-based approach). The findings of many experimental studies, however, seem to advocate the process-oriented approach as being more helpful in enhancing second and foreign language learners' writing skill.

Recently, the genre approach appears as a new concern in research. Hyland (2009) maintains that in genre writing, learner's text is "the result of the integration between contextual and linguistic input" (P: 40).

Although research in language writing evolves to help researchers and educators to build their own framework in research and writing instruction (Hinkel, 2011), it seems not sufficient enough to address learners' moment by moment writing difficulties and challenges. The case is that the research findings reported in a purely scientific and academic language are not explicit and direct enough to be accessible for learners. As a matter of fact, there has been valuable research on literature review genre, but still the answers provided are less practical than the expected ones at least on the part of the learner.

There is an agreement among researchers, however, that literature is an important genre

that almost all students (undergraduate and postgraduate) have to undertake. It is the most time-consuming section in any dissertation. Each year, English foreign language students at university have the experience of hard times in writing their literature reviews; they know about the feeling of being exhausted and expired while writing three, four or more drafts for a single element in one sub-title. And by the end, most of the reviews are not successful. Being aware of our students' challenges in writing the literature review, the present paper comes as an attempt to better understand the difficulties that hinder them from writing good literature reviews. We plan first to define the construct of literature review and explain its structure and purpose. The paper also provides some insights into the literature review writing process. The perspective underlying the paper is to approach the literature review as a research methodological issue and as a writing genre. After discussing the different learners' difficulties in writing literature review, we end up with some practical tips suggested for students to be able to develop successful literature reviews.

The literature review: definition, structure, and role.

Once you have set your perspective and research scope and therefore captured the reader's attention and interest in your research subject, it comes the moment to settle the reader soundly in your literature review. At that point, discussions about the relevant sources, ideas, theories and studies to be included, and the way in which information is going to be organized, presented and analyzed should already have been made(Seliger and Shohamy, 1989).

An overviewing of the literature informs us about different definitions to the concept of the literature review. These definitions indeed, fall in the scope of considering literature review as a comprehensive survey of the current published research that is relevant to the writer's investigation. The review is, as researchers argue, a kind of a report for the well-known theories and trends and a critical account for the influential findings in the area under scrutiny. Chandrasekhar (2000) points out that the literature review is a critical synthesis of the state of

knowledge. It means that the writer has to select, summarize, synthesize, compare, contrast, and evaluate what he has read. "In principle, that sounds easy enough but in practice it can prove to be anything but easy" as Bell (1999: 100) states.

The literature review is an opportunity for writers and readers to increase their familiarity and knowledge about the research subject. Nunan (2005) identifies the roles of literature review as "to provide background information on the research question, and to identify what others have said and /or discover about the question" (p: 216). Clearly, the literature review saves researcher's time and effort as it informs about what has been done so far in the subject. Thus, the researcher avoids repetition, and can start from the point others have reached.

The review of the literature contains three basic parts: introduction, body and conclusion. Usually, the topic and the main concern of the review in addition to the overall organizational patterns are stated in the introduction. In the body of the review, however, it appears the discussion of what has been read and organized, according to a chosen methodology. At that stage, students need to be selective and critical as Seliger and Shohamy (1989) explain, "they focus briefly on the major findings of these studies, and when and by whom they were conducted. Studies directly related to the research will be reported in more details, including information about the methodological approaches used" (p: 82). In the conclusion of the review, as a part of the dissertation, you recapitulate briefly the main issues raised so far and present the powerful evidence. In addition, you can highlight "research gaps" that your research comes to fulfill.

The process of literature review writing, however, includes three steps: the pre-writing stage, the writing stage and the post writing stage.

In the pre-writing stage steps one, two, three, and four will be taken (See figure.1 below). That is, the student selects a research topic and narrows it down into a research question, then looks for sources in relation to the topic and tries to develop an organizational framework from his literature data.

Figure1. The literature review writing process (adapted from literature reviews in a nutshell. (2000)).
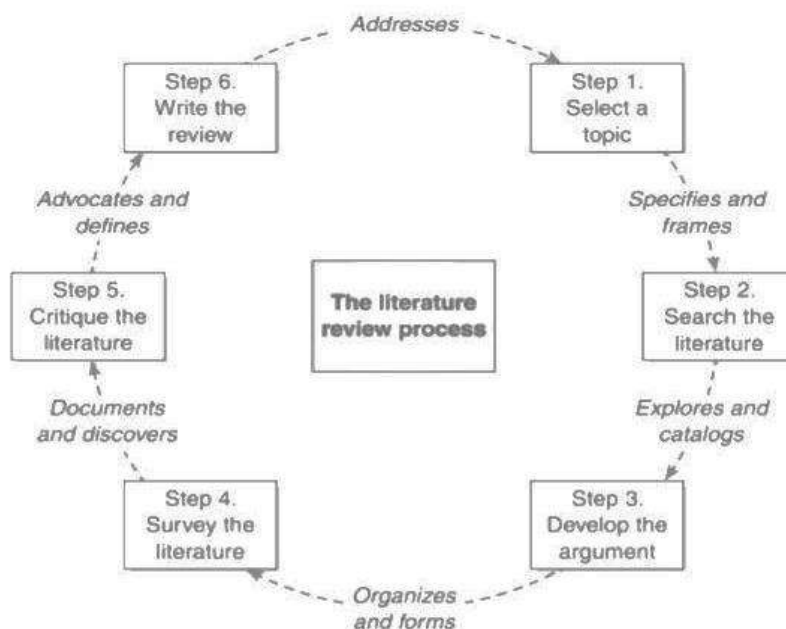
The writing stage, however, involves synthesizing, analyzing and evaluating the literature (steps five and six). In the post writing stage, which does not appear in figure1, the student is supposed to revise the language and content of his review before editing it.

English foreign language learners' literature review writing difficulties and possible solutions

No one can deny the fact that EFL learners in general face a big challenge whenever asked to write in the target language. Poor self-confidence, frustration and anxiety are some of the many overwhelming emotions a student might have when he takes the risk of writing. As a matter of fact, students usually write assignments, homework, compositions and tests as part of their instruction. Thus, writing figures so centrally in students' language output. Yet, the research devoted to second and foreign language genre writing informs us that writing literature review, as part of proposal, research paper or dissertation, proves to be quite daunting and highly demanding tasks for learners.

Researchers agree that in writing a literature review, the student undertakes a process of a critical decision making at different levels and carries out different tasks at once. As a novice writer, an English foreign language student should take care of the overall organizational patterns, grammar and mechanics and the academic language and style used. He needs to get control over the language lexical structural features as well as the text characteristics (content) (Hyland, 2009; Turner and Bitchener, 2008; Hinkel, 2011). Moreover, he needs to determine in advance the strategy followed in presenting information. As a novice researcher, the student should appropriately select the relevant references, clearly state the research question, thoroughly and comprehensively survey the available literature in relation to the topic, and carefully and critically summarize, synthesize and analyze the collected information and research findings.

In order to cover all these roles, the foreign language learner will integrate principally writing and research skills (Spencer & Arbor, 1996). Turner and Bitchener (2006) go further when they suggest that writing a literature review requires "a synthesis of a complex range of analytical and rhetorical skills as well as academic writing skills and understanding of what is meant by critical analysis and argument". Within the same purpose of improving students' literature review writing, other researchers encounter for the relevance of skills like organizing, summarizing, paraphrasing and critical thinking.

In the context of learning English as a foreign language at university level (LMD system) in Algeria, combining the above dynamic skills in writing literature review appears as a highly demanding task for many reasons. On the contrary, these skills are at the core of the common difficulties in writing a literature review. As mentioned earlier, it is hard for a foreign language learner to use such cognitive skills without having been trained earlier. Interestingly, these skills seem to reflect Bloom's famous taxonomy of the levels of knowledge within the frame of "the cognitive domain: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, and synthesis (Huitt, 2009).

Following Bloom's taxonomy principle of successive cognitive levels of knowledge

implies that the EFL learner has to master one skill (through training and practice for a limited time) before he discovers the next one until the necessary skills are developed all together. Such an approach allows students to make continuous and accumulative learning efforts and enhances the acquisition of writing and research skills.

Often students find it difficult to bridge the ground between what they read (some students fail even to digest what they read) and what and how to report the wide range of information they obtained from numerous sources in their own words and style. It is challenging for most students to combine critically the various pieces of the research surveyed in a puzzle of literature review to serve the dissertation plan and the research question. We know that students could easily be impressed by the literature they review. The unpleasant result is when they include all details, facts, citations, redundant information in the literature review thinking they are worth mentioning. Literature data, then will dominate the literature review instead of being submitted to the research outline and statement.

A way to remedy this is to be convinced that while reading literature careful selection is a "must". It should be centered closely on relevant literature to the research question, otherwise writing a literature review becomes reading literature itself. Consequently, as illustrated in figure 2 below, the task of writing turns to be simply a task of reading.
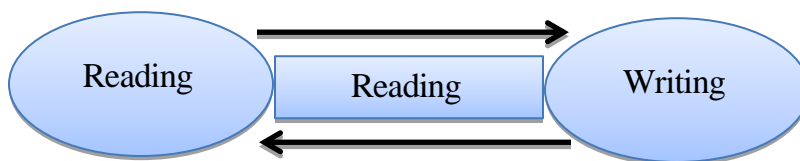

Figure 2.Writing literature review as a reading task.

In the literature review, as Chandrasekhar (2000) maintains, the student considers only the "essence of the current knowledge". There is recognition among researchers that students' Low proficiency level is one of the dominating writing problems (Spencer and Arbor (1996); Chandrasekhar (2000); Hyland (2009); Hinkel (2011). Indeed, the low proficiency level proves

to deprive foreign learners' texts from correct language and attractive simple style. Sometime it misleads the learner while reading. Unfortunately, reading EFL (undergraduate) students literature review widely reveals misuse to some grammar features like articles, tense, sentence structure as well as poor control over some discourse devices. The problem, however, could be solved gradually through extensive reading and writing. Encouraging students to go through a process of multiple drafting and revision to reshuffle their writing will be helpful.

Usually low proficient learners fall in plagiarism more than the others. At the level of students' literature review, plagiarism (to mention an idea which is neither yours nor belongs to common knowledge without giving credit to the source) becomes a serious problem. The phenomena could be attributed to factors as learners little knowledge about the research topic because of insufficient reading and the disability to summarize and synthesize information from the literature. Alternatively, students can quote or paraphrase ideas from literature and simply cite the original writers.

Apart from foreign learners' low proficiency and poor learning efforts, the difficulties discussed so far could be attributed to the inadequacy of the teaching method and content either in writing class or research methodology course or both. We often wonder why students do not apply what they learn, in terms of knowledge, insights, strategies and techniques in the written expression and research methodology classes to their dissertations. This is, indeed, the logic result of teaching writing skill and research methodology in a vacuum and without a context of practice. Eventually students are neither exposed to authentic modals of literature review in research methodology class nor are they involved in some practice in this genre during writing class. It is clear that in the current situation there is a gap between the theoretical knowledge students have about literature review as research device and the practical demands they have to respond to when writing the review. Most of the time students fail to implement this theoretical knowledge while writing. As a result, students' conceptualization and practice in the literature review genre is poor.

Spencer and Arbor (1996), Chandrasekhar(2000), Turner and Bitchener (2006) and many other researchers make the claim that students ignorance, or little knowledge , of the literature review genre can profoundly affect their performance in the literature review. But only few experimental studies have been carried out to measure the effect of the latter factor or to provide an alternative instructional technique that permits students to discover and practice the literature review genre writing. To this end, Turner and Bitchener (2006) conducted an experimental study to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching short literature review to intermediate and advanced proficient learners of English as an additional language in New Zealand. The teaching approach they adopted was a gradual one. They first gave students an initial familiarity with literature review genre during the first three days courses, and then they had them engaged in writing short literature reviews. The study investigates some aspect of literature review analysis like appropriate introduction, global organization, logical sentence-based proposition, cohesion and coherence (Turner and Bitchener, 2006). These features were similarly used to measure student writing improvement.

They found out that teaching short literature reviews for students and having them writing in this genre was effective in developing students' argumentative skill and writing ability in short literature reviews.

However, Spencer(1996) and Chandrasekhar(2000) suggest that a successful literature review depends on whether or not the student writer persuades his reader to keep on reading carefully. In this sense, the student should take the role of the reader and accordingly write with "the reader in mind". Chandrasekhar (2000) states the following inclusive advice:

"Think of your writing as a tense wire connecting your reader to you. If everything you say is old hat to the reader, the wire is slack and you have lost your reader to boredom or ever to sleep. If everything you say is new and not linked to something the reader already knows, the wire is too taut and will break at some point. You will again lose your reader, but this time to incomprehension. Monotony leads to boredom, unpredictability to confusion. You have a duty

to keep the reader challenged but not frustrated, engaged but not confused, comfortable but not bored"(p.19).

Chandrasekhar analogy illustrates student writer's responsibilities towards his reader. Furthermore, it represents literature review writing as a reader-centered approach. This perspective, however, helps even more students to be clear and precise while writing the literature review.

Practical tips to write a successful literature review

The list of suggestions made by researchers about how to write a good literature review is infinite as research in this area is continuously evolving. Research on this question also demonstrates that the basic requirements for a successful review is first to be able to manage the time available by determining in advance the time frame devoted for each stage in writing the literature review (for example: collecting sources, reading literature, selecting, summarizing and synthesizing information, etc.).

Second, students need to keep some "recording cards" for sources (index cards), notes and writers' names in order to facilitate organizing information according to the outline, the literature review and citing from other research wherever necessary. And finally students should have the ability to decide about the course of actions. The methodology they are going to follow while developing the literature review.

The following steps are practical quite helpful for students in writing their literature reviews.

1- Read literature reviews developed by other researchers about the same topic you are working on in order to get insights about the thematic and organizational patterns used.
2- Make sure you include the prevailing and current theories and trends, the well-known researchers, and authoritative studies in the field.

3- Read thoroughly and write comprehensively with your research question and outline in mind, and accordingly you make your selection of the information to be involved in the review.

4- Use consistent methodology throughout the literature review, simple and clear language, and concise and precise academic style.

5- Analyze critically other researchers' studies and findings through categorizing, comparing and contrasting conflicts in theories, research perspectives and findings.

6- Provide a logical link between sentences, paragraphs, and sections in the literature review so that they appear as complementary parts of one body.

7- Make certain you have done enough revision for the language and content of your review before editing.

Conclusion

The present paper has endeavored to provide a comprehensive understanding about students' writing difficulties particularly at the level of literature review. The premise was to approach students' literature reviews both as a research device and as a writing genre. However, problems like students' ignorance about the literature review genre and lack of practice together with difficulty in applying the theoretical knowledge learnt from research methodology class proved to affect much of English foreign language learners' development and performance in writing the literature review.

This urges mostly the need for an instructional environment that coordinates between research methodology course and learners' writing practice. It is also highly recommended to engage students consistently in activities that require them write literature reviews or any studied research pattern.

Interestingly, the modal of "teaching short literature reviews" developed by Turner and Bitchener (2006) could be an example to be used with our students at university. Such kind of

activities can bridge the gap between research theory and writing practice. In addition, they raise learners' awareness about the genre in question, enrich their writing experience and therefore increase exposure to the target language.

Teacher's role in the process is to encourage learners to read literature reviews of different topics and to keep writing and rewriting in the genre via classroom assignments. For motivation purposes, the teacher needs to praise good literature reviews and can give a plus mark for good achievers. Similarly, students who show improvement from one review to another should get a plus mark or any encouragement the teacher finds it possible.

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