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Challenges in Writing "Master" Dissertations

تحديات كتابة أطروحة الماستير

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Abstract: Writing "Master" dissertation is one of the prerequisite for the second year master in the Algerian university. It is a form of academic writing which is very structured and needs certain skills to manage the whole process of writing. Supervising and evaluating the final master dissertation recurrently reveal learners' struggle to accomplish this last. The question to be investigated is "what are the difficulties that master students face in order to write their final dissertations?" A questionnaire was used as a research tool with second year master students at Badji Mokhtar University- Annaba. The results revealed that students face problems in writing the research proposal, designing the research, collecting data, using and analyzing certain research tools, and problems even in the writing process itself. In order to consider these challenges there is a call for collaboration between the teachers of written expression and research methodology for a better written master dissertation.

Key Words: Dissertation, academic writing, writing difficulties, supervision.

الملخص: كتابة أطروحة الماستير هي أحد الشروط الأساسية للنجاح للسنة الثانية ماستير في الجامعة الجزائرية. أطروحة الماستير تعتبر من أشكال الكتابة الأكاديمية فهي منظمة للغاية وتحتاج إلى مهارات معينة لإدارة عملية الكتابة بأكملها. إن الإشراف على رسائل الماستير وتقييمها يكشف عن معاناة الطلاب لإنجاز هذا المطلب الأكاديمي. السؤال الذي يجب التحقيق فيه هو "ما الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب الماستير من أجل كتابة أطروحاتهم النهائية؟" تم استخدام استبيان كأداة بحث مع طلاب السنة الثانية ماستير في في جامعة باجي مختار - عنابة - الجزائر. كشفت النتائج أن الطلاب يواجهون مشاكل في كتابة اقتراح البحث، وتصميم البحث، وجمع البيانات، واستخدام وتحليل بعض أدوات البحث، و صعوبات حتى في عملية الكتابة نفسه.

الكلمات المفتاحية أطروحة ؛ كتابة أكاديمية؛ صعوبات الكتابة؛ إشراف

Introduction:

By the end of the second year of the "Master" degree, students are required to submit dissertations. Dissertation's writing is a form of academic writing that is very structured and organized. Students need to follow the cycle of research in order to accomplish their dissertations. However, master dissertations reveal students' struggle for writing this last. The dilemma is that students were taught research methodology for 5 years (Bachelor degree (BA) 3 years and Master degree 2 years), but still could not conduct effectively an academic research work mainly when writing the final production. This recurrent situation raised our curiosity to investigate the following research question: "What challenges do EFL students face while writing the master dissertation?" We hypothesized that though students did acquire the knowledge from the research methodology module, they lack training to transform the knowledge into skills. Consequently, this article aims at developing awareness of the difficulties students face in writing their dissertations in order to provide solutions and enhance the quality of their writings. Therefore, it is important to gain knowledge of: what is an academic writing? Is there a difference between a thesis and a dissertation? What are the phases of dissertation writing? What about the role of the supervisor along the period of dissertation writing? And what are the challenges that students face in writing their dissertations?

1. Review of the Literature

1.1 Thesis / Dissertation Criteria

Academic writing is based on certain standards agreed on by the scientific committee. *Writing for Academic Purposes at the IIE* (2016) explains that academic writing is based on reading and evaluating sources in relation to the topic of research, "Academic writing is your process of taking the academic writing of other people and organizing it in a way that you are able to answer a question or suggest a solution or validate a position" (p. 3). The book highlights the main criteria of academic writing as follows:

1. Academic writing is highly structured and contains a beginning, middle and an end.
2. Referencing is an integral part of academic writing to either support or counter one's own opinion.
3. Academic writing follows the rules of punctuation and grammar to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

Al Badi (2015) further enlightens that no one can deny that academic writing is of importance not only to master English language but also to be successful in learning other disciplines where English is the medium of instruction(p. 65).

Although thesis and dissertation are different, they share common criteria. Chandrasekhar (2008) clarifies that the difference between undergraduate and post graduate theses is of the degree and not of kind as they share a common structure and need for logical rigour and it is only in the substance and the emphasis placed on it that the differences arise (p.1). He further explains,

> In short, a thesis—whether undergraduate or postgraduate—is evidence of the candidate's capacity to carry out independent research under the guidance of a supervisor, and to analyze and communicate the significant results of that work. The candidate for higher degrees must demonstrate, in addition, mastery of the literature and indicate clearly which is his or her original work and why it is significant (2008, p. 2)

Hence, dissertations or theses are evidence that the student can handle independently the research under the guidance of the supervisor and is able to present and discuss the findings. However, theses for higher degrees need the candidate to show a great command of the literature, the significance of his/her work and the originality of the research.

Moreover, Paltridge and Starfield (2007) see that master's dissertation should demonstrate:

- an original investigation or the testing of ideas;
- competence in independent work or experimentation;

- an understanding of appropriate techniques as well as their limitations;
- an expert knowledge of the published literature on the topic under investigation;
- evidence of the ability to make critical use of published work and source materials;
- an appreciation of the relationship between the research topic and the wider field of knowledge;
- the ability to present the work at an appropriate level of literary quality(p. 56).

Focusing on master dissertation, Biggman (2008) views the competent researcher as the one who shows "*proficiency in tackling the various phases*" (p. 4). He explains that master dissertation has a life cycle that consists of different phases. The first phase begins with the production of a research proposal which outlines the preliminary content of the research and the adapted methodology. It is followed with the phase of literature review where the candidate reads, evaluates, and reviews what has already been written about the topic of research. The next phase is the empirical data collection through designing and implementing the research method (s). The following phase deals with the findings of the research conducted by the candidate. It will be followed by the phase of conclusion and recommendations. Then, the final phase is submitting the dissertation.

1.2 Supervisor's Roles

The supervisor has an important role to play along the dissertation life cycle and even before. For instance, Mizany, Khabiri, Sajadi (2012) see supervisors as responsible for helping students in choosing an appropriate subject for their thesis, encouraging them to continue their efforts in writing thesis, establishing a good relationship with their students and finally having enough scientific capabilities in research methodology and statistics (p. 6). For more precision, Kumar & Bujang, Huat (2011) view supervisors' role as a mentor in supporting, encouraging, building confidence, and being aware of the changing needs of the supervisee (p. 19). They add that supervisors have to handle certain responsibilities as guidance and advice,

monitoring the progress of the research, initiating regular contact, being aware of the supervisee's developmental needs, giving both oral and written feedback on the supervisee's work and ensuring ethical and professional conduct. However, they pinpoint that supervisees do not like certain qualities in the supervisors as:

a) Too busy to be effective
b) Poor feedback
c) Lack of commitment and interest
d) Tensions/conflict within the supervisory team
e) Poor communication skills
f) Conflicting/unrealistic expectations
g) Selfishness and disrespectfulness
h) Supervisor not up to date in the field
i) Lack of experience as a supervisor
j) Personality clashes
k) Advocates a master-slave relationship (p. 23)

Furthermore, Izah, Norizan, Engku & Zulkifli (2012) affirm that effective supervision is one of the keys for a successful written research work. Through their research they concluded that the most significant criteria for an effective supervisor are: being friendly with the supervisees, open-minded and flexible, informed/ resourceful and encouraging student self- regulated learning. Besides, they confirm, "Supervisors play an important role in the academic life of the students as well as personal careers" (p.220).

1.3 Learners' Difficulties in Dissertation Writing

Dissertation writing is not an easy task, and students do face different problems along this journey. Zaid (2016) finds out that *"in thesis and dissertation writing where English is not the students' native language, the writing problems can be more than just linguistic matters" (p.*23). He pinpoints that the linguistic errors can be ranged from trivial to complicated ones as in the article use, tenses, infinitive, participle, sentence patterns, diction, parallelism, concord, and gerund.

Biggam (2008) sees that master students do not only face challenges with their master study, but "they are also required, largely

through independent study, and within tight time constraints, to complete a substantial dissertation project" (p.1). He clarifies,

> Students are aware that they have to write an Introduction, but they are not really sure how to go about it; they sort of know that they have to complete something called a Literature Review, but they are at a loss where to start or what it ought to contain, or what will get them good marks; the section on Research Methods (necessary if students are implementing their own practical research work to complement their Literature Review) seems so abstract to them. (p.2)

Then, students are aware of the 'what' unfortunately they face problems with the 'how'. They developed theoretical knowledge of what a dissertation involves but they lack the skill of applying that knowledge. Furthermore, Al Badi (2015) synthesizes literature and provides the following list of reasons causing the difficulties in academic writing:

a. Learners' dependence on their teachers and the lack of being trained as critical thinkers.
b. Teachers' high expectations while learners' proficiency level is low.
c. Low language proficiency including grammatical errors, inappropriate word choice, irregular verbs, incorrect punctuation and spelling.
d. L1 interference
e. Inadequacy of ideas and unclear instructions of tasks
f. Learners' personality attributes as shyness and lack of confidence.

He adds that in most cases the final writing production is not as good as expected to be; therefore, it is important to consider learners' academic writing difficulties and needs (p. 66). Moreover, in conducting his own research on learners' difficulties, Al Badi (2015) finds the followings as the major difficulties encountered by students when writing:

1. language use, coherence, and cohesion followed by

2. both expressing their own voice as well as selecting a significant topic and relevant references

3. However, paraphrasing, referencing, and citations were reported to be the least problematic (p. 68).

Komba (2016) confirms that facing challenges in thesis/dissertation writing is undeniable. He adds that writing a thesis or dissertation is not an easy task as they are "*essentially the product of effective training and proper guidance*" (p. 79). He proposes two main recommendations to minimize learners' weaknesses in thesis/dissertation writing. First, the need to review research methods courses offered in the universities, in terms of contents and teaching approaches. Second, the universities should strive to subject all postgraduate students to academic writing training, with a special focus on how to write research reports.

2. The Study

2.1. Questionnaire Analysis and Results

A questionnaire was conducted with master 2 students by the end of the first semester on January 2018; they were 45 students. Why this timing? They already chose the topic of their dissertations, their partners, they know their supervisors, and they finished the writing of the first chapter especially that they had the winter vacation. The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions beginning with the writing of the research proposal till the editing phase of the chapter. The research proposal was one of the requirements to accept the topic by the responsible of the master. Then, once accepted, supervisors' meeting will be held to choose their supervisees.

The analysis of the questionnaire revealed that the writing of the research proposal was difficult for the great majority (77.35 %) of the students under investigation while a minority (22 .23%) found it easy. Besides, 62.23% found that choosing the research topic was difficult while 37.77% found the opposite. Those who found it difficult provide the following reasons:

▪ " It is quite difficult due to the lack of data"

▪ "Because you do not know if you will find the information and that will help you or not. Difficult because you do not know how it will end".

▪ "Because I cannot find more information about it".

▪ "Because of the endless provided materials related to the topic itself".

▪ "Because I had many different topics that I wanted to deal with".

▪ " Because I had a list of topics and the choice was a little bit difficult"

▪ "I had many interest and I could not choose an area; everything seemed interesting and important".

▪ " Because I was confused about many topics and when I choose certain topics I don't find full information"

▪ "Because at the beginning it seems easy but when I give it to the administration, they changed it so that I could not find my way!"

▪ "Because the topic for our dissertation was chosen by the administration".

▪ " because the topic that I have chosen was studied before by previous students"

▪ "Because the topic was very vast to us but we chose it after all".

▪ "Because sometimes I cannot find something specific to focus on to make hypothesis"

▪ " Because we need to read more before selecting the appropriate topic, otherwise you will find problems with data collection"

▪ The reason is that I am looking for a non-discussed topic- new one- at the same time interesting and has value and weight for further studies".

Therefore, learners' problems can be summarized as follows: Lack or endless sources of data, confusion, administration intervention, various topics, vague topics, search for an original topic, lack of reading skills. The situation is so because students are not sure of choosing the appropriate topic for themselves, and even if they choose, they are not sure the administration will accept it!!

Furthermore, in writing the research proposal, students face difficulties as follows:

a) Writing the abstract   40%
b) formulating a research problem: 42.22%
c) formulating Research questions: 31.11%
d) formulating hypotheses: **62.23%**
e) Differing between the dependent variable and the independent one: **68.88%**
f) Finding reliable sources: **68.88%**
g) Literature review   **55.55%**
h) Selecting the appropriate information   42.22%
i) Quoting: short quotations   11.12%
j) long quotations   31.11%
k) In-text citation   **55.55%**
l) The reference list following the APA style   **55.55%**
m) The reference list for the internet sources   **62.22%**

We can conclude that in writing the research proposal, the majority of students under investigation face problems in the following rank according to the percentage:

1) Equally: Differing between the dependent variable and the independent one: 68.88% and Finding reliable sources: 68.88%
2) Equally : Formulating hypotheses 62.23% and   writing the reference list for the internet sources   62.22%
3) Equally: The reference list following the APA style   55.55% , In-text citation 55.55%, and Literature review   55.55%
4) While equally 42.22% found difficulties in selecting the appropriate information and formulating a research problem

In addition, 55.55% of the students affirm that they did not do a research design before starting the writing process. This explains their confusion and the difficulty of selecting the appropriate information as the research was not well designed in their mind. Consequently, the final version is the product of a not well thought out design.

88.88% of the students affirm that they know how to design a questionnaire, 55.55%   interview; however, **95.55%** do not know

how to design an experiment and 55.55% tests. Some students add classroom observation as area of weakness.

Concerning the division of the dissertation into chapters, 44.45% find that it is difficult while 55.55% affirm the opposite. Nevertheless, the division of chapters into sections was difficult for the great majority of students under investigation (**77.77%**), while a minority sees the opposite (22.23%).

In the writing process, students have problems with:

a.	Introduction	**44.45%**
b.	Conclusion	**44.45%**
c.	Coherence	**55.55%**
d.	Cohesion	**46.66%**
e.	Punctuation	35.55%
f.	Capitalization	4.45%

Then, the difficulties can be ranked as follows: 1) Coherence, 2) Cohesion, 3) Equally introduction and conclusion. These results confirm Al Badi (2015) findings as coherence and cohesion are the areas of major difficulties for master students. As a result, students have trouble in making the ideas logical, orderly, and consistent. Also, they face difficulties in how to move from one idea to the other using the linking words (cohesion).

Furthermore, **73.34%** affirm that they never did a research project respecting the APA style. The overwhelming majority (**88.88%**) of the students affirm that they need training on writing a research work in the classroom under the guidance of the teacher. This is a call for the teachers of research methodology to include practical activities in their sessions. Finally, all the students (**100%**) affirm that writing a master dissertation is not easy for them, and they advance the following reasons that will be grouped into categories:

➢ *Unclear methodology (Real sufferance)*

▪ "Because we must follow a right methodology which is not clear for me".

▪ "The methodology is difficult".

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- The is no guidance, it is so difficult to write with the APA style"

- "Because at the beginning everything is not clear, clumsy and vague".

- "It is difficult, I did not know from where to start, I did not know what I really want, I have problems in writing".

- "It seems so complicated, lots of contents, and I have to deal with precise crucial steps".

- "It is really a tough mission because it demands concentration, better information, high language level, respecting the already put standards".

> *Time limitation*

- "Because it needs time, reading and when even you read you come up with another idea. So also my weakness to go from one idea to another. In addition, the work is not easy because we tackled different disciplines".

- "Because it needs much processing of time and energy, you have to be responsible on all what has been written".

- "The time, we do not have much time"

- "It is difficult because we need much time to give an appropriate work. Also , when I have a lot of sources, I cannot choose the suitable one".

- "It needs more time, efforts and patience to do it".

- "Because there is no enough time that makes me all the time stressed. Even though, I know what am doing but am always hesitating whether it is correct and pleases my supervisor or not".

- "Because the time is not enough to write it in a good way".

> *Supervisor's Effect*

- "Lack of supervisor guidance. And also, we have studies in the first semester. I can't make the balance".

- "Because we have not enough support from the supervisor".

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- " Because we need big guidance from the supervisor who is not always available

- "Our supervisor does not want to meet us, or see our work or to give us comments".

- "The carelessness of the supervisor makes the student unmotivated".

- "Because it is highly qualified we are supposed to write as advanced level learners, we have also to meet our teachers' good expectations; moreover, we have to write something that is worth not just for the purpose of passing the year".

- "The absence of help and guidance from the supervisor".

  ➢ *Sources and Partner*

- "Because of the lack of sources".

- "We don't find appropriate sources especially on the internet. We don't have experience behind the practical part".

- "The most difficult thing that I have is how to find references and reliable sources".

- "From both sides collecting the information and organizing it in the correct way with avoiding plagiarism at the same times problems with my partner".

  ➢ *Coherence*

- "Because I find difficulties in selecting the appropriate information. Also, I find difficulties in formulating ideas and writing style".

- "Even if you are aware of how to write it, it is difficult because it requires a lot of time and efforts in order to achieve it. Also, each time we face problem in collecting the information and organizing them in both the theoretical and the practical parts".

- "It is an organized work that needs careful attention, and hard work "

▪ "It is difficult to write a master dissertation because of the huge elements it consists of. In addition, the insufficient time".

> ➤ *Fear of Plagiarism*

▪ "There are problems in paraphrasing where the student finds himself plagiarizing".

▪ "Because of the fear of disrespecting the ethics or methodologies, the limited time".

▪ How to avoid plagiarism is not easy especially when we paraphrase. The time also is limited and we have exams in the first semester.

> ➤ *Lack of Training*

▪ "In fact, it is not easy at all because first, we did not deal with real examples of research in the classroom. Second, every teacher of research methodology has his own method so I am confused. Third, we did not deal never with the APA styles or even the MLA style in our previous years so personally I find difficulty in distinguishing between them. Fourth, in my previous years, we did not make any training on both styles; it is not easy to write a master dissertation".

2.2 Pedagogical Implications

After being aware of the challenges and the difficulties that master students face in writing their dissertations, it follows certain pedagogical implications suggested to both teachers of research methodology and written expression and others for master 2 students themselves:

> *For Teachers:*

• Knowledge of what students should know in order to conduct a master dissertation is important, but the practical training is crucial for the knowledge to be transformed into a skill. It helps to move from the "what" to the" how".

• Training should go through all the steps of conducting an academic research work from the abstract till the bibliography- "Dissertation life cycle". Students choose a topic and work on it with

every lesson of the research methodology from the research question, hypothesis (es), referencing, …etc. This step should begin at least in the first year of the master degree if not before.

- Teachers of research methodology and written expression should complement each other's work as there is no good research without a well chosen title, good introduction and conclusion, coherence between ideas and cohesion between the organizations of the paragraphs. After that, the research methodology teacher will focus only on the technicalities of the research as statement of the problem, research questions, research hypotheses, different tools and methods of research and how to implement them in addition to the APA writing style.

- The written expression teacher should involve students in writing as a process not as a product; that is, they follow the steps of the writing process under teachers' guidance in the classroom. They only make the extra research of information outside the classroom.

- Both teachers- methodology and written expression- need to sit together and agree on syllabi that complement each other's for the best of a well written academic research work.

- The module of research methodology should not be conducted in an amphi theatre which was the case of the students under investigation; however, the classroom would be perfect for both the teacher and the students especially for the practice and training.

- Supervisors have a significant role in the accomplishment of the dissertation and in the quality of the work done. Their responsibility lies in guiding, supporting, encouraging and even threatening when the students are not active. Also, supervisors should avoid the list provided by Kumar & Bujang, Huat (2011) that student do not like about their supervisors. In addition, supervisor should keep in mind that effective supervision is one of the keys for a successful written research work as Norizan, Engku & Zulkifli (2012) advanced it. Every supervisor should reconsider supervisor-supervisee relationship.

- To solve the problem of limitation of time: the choice of the topic should be done in the first year of master with a well written research proposal. Then, during the summer vacation, students begin their readings. Then, in the second year, they collect data they begin the

writing following the APA style and conduct the practical part of their dissertation

For Students:

• Students should be given the absolute right to choose their topics by themselves and not to be imposed on them. Choosing the topic by themselves will develop their intrinsic motivation to surpass all the challenges and focus on the quality of the work

• It would be better if the choice of the topic could be done during the methodology session by the end of the first year master and not leave this to the second year while they will be overwhelmed by their study especially in the first semester.

• Students need to develop their reading skill from the first years of licence. Otherwise, reading for master 2 dissertation would be a real burden if not a nightmare as reading involves certain sub skills as skimming, scanning, intensive extensive, comprehension, analysis, synthesis and reflection.

• Students do not know how to read, what to select, what is the most important, important, and less important because they need to read a lot before deciding the degree of importance, but our students are in a hurry to finish the work this is why one of the students said that "it needs effort , time and patience". Reading needs patience and so does writing, "no one provide what he does not have"

• In addition, students do have the module of written expression from the first year of licence and still they speak about problems of coherence, cohesion, and paraphrasing. So, they lacked training even in written expression. However, students should feel the responsibility of improving their writings before being obliged to write a master dissertation. They should have developed a sense of autonomy and self-accomplishment.

• Students need to develop reading and writing as habits to be ready to use the developed skills through the methodology session, and as a result they will need less efforts and energy in writing the dissertation.

• Students need to know how to manage their time, plan the steps of their work and be in harmony with each other as partner. The tasks of every partner should be clear from the beginning.

- Students need to make a schedule of meeting with their partners and another with their supervisor to finish the work before the time limits.
- The partners should proofread each other's work before submitting it to the supervisor.

Conclusion

Students suffer as they do not have the necessary and the required writing skills so as to complete their dissertations. Language is important, grammar too, vocabulary, sentence writing, paragraph writing, essay writing, methodology, the relation with the supervisor; all these work towards a well written academic work. Therefore, students should invest time and energy in improving their reading, writing, and even thinking skills before being master students. These skills need time, practice and good will to develop. Sensitizing students of the requirements of the master degree from the licence degree will decrease the challenges they will face in writing their mater dissertation later. In addition, supervisors should be aware that the type of relationship they develop with their supervisees will affect either positively or negatively the final quality of the work. Finally, when teachers of research methodology and written expression cooperate, learners' challenges will diminish in writing their final dissertations.

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Appendix: Students' Questionnaire

1. How was the writing of your research proposal? Easy□ difficult□
2. Was it easy to choose the topic for your master dissertation? Yes□ No□
3. Explain…………………………………………………………………… …………………………………………………………
4. Do you have difficulties in
 a. Writing the abstract   Yes□   No□
 b. formulating a research problem: Yes□   No□
 c. formulating Research questions: Yes□   No□
 d. formulating the Hypotheses: Yes□   No□
 e. Differing between the dependent variable and the independent one: Yes□   No□
 f. Finding reliable sources: Yes□   No□
 g. Literature review Yes□   No□
 h. Selecting the appropriate information   Yes□   No□
 i. Quoting: short quotations   Yes□   No□/   long quote Yes□   No□
 j. In-text citation Yes□   No□
 k. The reference list following the APA style   Yes□   No□

1. The reference list for the internet sources   Yes□   No□
5. If you face difficulties with the literature review, Explain why?
   …………………………………………………………………………
   …………………………………………………………………………..
6. Have you made a research design before you start the writing? Yes
   No
7. Do you know how to **design**
   a) A questionnaire   Yes □   No□
   b) Interview   Yes□   No□
   c) experiment   Yes□   No□
   d) tests   Yes□   No□
   e) others……………………………………………………
8. Do you know how to **analyse:**
   a) questionnaire   Yes□   No□
   b) Interview   Yes□   No□
   c) experiment   Yes□   No□
   d) tests   Yes□   No□
9. Was the division of the chapters into sections: Easy□
   difficult□
10. In the writing process, do you have problems with:
   a) Introduction   Yes□   No□
   b) Conclusion   Yes□   No□
   c) Coherence   Yes□   No□
   d) Cohesion   Yes□   No□
   e) Punctuation   Yes□   No□
   f) Capitalization   Yes□   No□
11. Have you already made a research project respecting the APA style?
   Yes□   No□
12. Have you been trained on writing a research proposal? Yes□   No□
13. Do you need training on writing research in the classroom? Yes□
   No□
14. Is it easy to write a master dissertation? Yes□   No□
15. Please, explain
   ………………………………………………………………………………
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