

A Thematic Analysis on the Obstacles Experienced by EFL Students and Supervisors in Master's Thesis Writing

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Abstract

As academic writing has become a daunting task for most English Foreign Language (EFL) students, the study at hand attempted to scrutinize the significant obstacles in writing theses from Master two EFL students' and supervisors' outlooks. To reach this aim, a purposive sampling consisting of 30 EFL graduate students and 10 supervisors was chosen from the Department of English, Ain-Temouchent University. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and the findings were analyzed using the so-called thematic analysis. The findings highlighted some obstacles confronted by the students in writing master theses as reported by the students themselves and their supervisors. Among these obstacles, some were common for both groups and thus, the main challenges reported by both the students and supervisors lay in the students' lack of research knowledge including the inability to write academically using academic vocabularies, lack of sources and flaws with supervisors. Implications of the study for universities, EFL graduate students, and their supervisors were also discussed in this study.

Keywords: Academic writing, EFL students, Master theses, obstacles, supervisors

ملخص:

ومع تحول الكتابة الأكاديمية إلى مهمة شاقة بالنسبة لأغلب طلاب اللغة الأجنبية في اللغة الإنجليزية، فقد حاولت الدراسة في تناول اليد التدقيق في العقبات الكبيرة التي تحول دون كتابة أطروحات من طلاب الماجستير اثنين من طلاب اللغة الأجنبية ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، اختير من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة عين تموشينت أخذ عينات هادفة يتألف من 30 طالبا من والمشرفين وتم جمع البيانات النوعية من خلال مقابلات شبه منظمة وتم .طلاب الدراسات العليا في الاتحاد الأوروبي لكرة القدم و 10 مشرفين وسلطت النتائج الضوء على عدد من العقبات التي يواجهها الطلاب في كتابة .تحليل النتائج باستخدام ما يسمى بالتحليل المواضيع ومن بين هذه العقبات، كان البعض شائعا بالنسبة لكلا المجموعتين ، .الرسائل الرئيسية كما أفاد الطلاب أنفسهم والمشرفون عليهم وبالتالي ، فإن التحديات الرئيسية التي أبلغ عنها كل من الطلاب والمشرفين كذبت في افتقار الطلاب إلى المعرفة البحثية بما في ذلك كما نوقشت في هذه .عدم القدرة على الكتابة الأكاديمية باستخدام المفردات الأكاديمية ، والافتقار إلى المصادر والعيوب مع المشرفين الدراسة الآثار المترتبة على الدراسة بالنسبة للجامعات وطلاب الدراسات العليا في الاتحاد الأوروبي لكرة القدم والمشرفين عليهم

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة الأكاديمية ، طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية، رسائل الماجستير ، العقبات ، المشرفين

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1. Introduction

A Master's thesis is probably the hardest piece of academic writing that students are supposed to write in their last year of study at university. Therefore, examining the hindrances faced by EFL master students in thesis writing and discovering the research variables that inform those hindrances from the students' and supervisors' perspectives are considered a milestone to deal with them. As one variety of writing, academic writing involves writing research papers, assignments, reports and finally theses which are written for specific purposes and particular people (Stapa, Maasum, & Aziz, 2014)

Writing thesis is one of the main causes of stress for students; therefore, finding out about Master (MA) students' perspectives regarding the difficulties and challenges they may encounter in writing theses, can provide important information which in turn would decrease their hindrances (Lundgren & Harvalsson, 2009). The study at hand tries to scrutinize the significant obstacles in writing theses from Master two EFL students' and supervisors' outlooks hoping that the scrutiny of such hindrances may help both students and supervisors to cope with them in the future to ameliorate students' theses writing. As such, this study is guided by the following main research questions:

1. What are the major obstacles facing MA EFL students in writing master theses from supervisors' perspectives?
2. What are the main hindrances facing MA EFL students in writing master theses from students' perspectives?

2. Literature Review

To better understand the concept of academic writing, it is of paramount importance to be familiar with its key- aspects. Singh and Lukkarila (2017) consider academic writing as, "Distinctively different" from other forms of writing in terms of purpose, tone, structure, style, audience, and word choice. It is, thus, important to search in the scholarship about the major types of obstacles students encountered in thesis writing. For example, Elzebilo (2012) opined that the majority of MA students faced challenges in data collection methods, data analysis, writing publishable research papers, oral presentation skills, and inaccessibility of associated supervisors. Yarwood-Ross and Haigh (2014) posited that major problems that emerged in completing theses were communication issues, academic regressions, lack of trust and supervisors' negligence.

Saidin, Veloo and Shari (2016) found that postgraduate students encountered four main challenges in completing their master research, which was counted as different fields of interest, time management, lack of research knowledge, and supervision. Kotamjani and Hussin (2017) identified that students faced more language-related rather than general academic skills. Summarizing or paraphrasing sentences, linking sentences, using adequate grammar, and using appropriate vocabularies for making sentences and paragraphs were the most challenging.

Additionally, a study conducted by Divsar (2018) of similar interest scrutinized the hindrances faced by Iranian TEFL students in thesis writing. The results of this study disclosed that linguistic flaws (e.g., grammatical and organizational problems and lack of

mastery of academic writing style) constituted a significant hindrance for Iranian EFL students. Nevertheless, results revealed that the students reported a wide range of other flaws which were grouped into three main categories: (i) instructional and pedagogical inadequacies (mainly students' lack of knowledge and experience in researching and writing up their thesis), (ii) personal problems and affairs such as poor management of time and the loss of interest and motivation in the process of thesis writing, and (iii) educational support such as the limited availability and assistance offered by the supervisor and adviser.

3. Methods

3.1 Sample population

To find out more about the obstacles encountered by MA students in writing their theses, the researcher relied on a random sampling including structured interviews with 30 EFL students and 10 supervisors whose teaching experience ranges from 10 to 14 years at the Department of English, Ain-Temouchent University, the place of the researcher's work. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the respondents to know more about the obstacles encountered in these writing from both the supervisors' and students' outlooks.

3.2 Research tools

The research tool used in this study was a semi-structured interview conducted with the respondents to know more about the obstacles encountered in these writing from both the supervisors' and students' outlooks.

3.2 Research design

To conduct this study, the researcher has adopted a descriptive design involving qualitative content analysis. It refers, in fact, to "a research method used for the subjective interpretation of the content of texts through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 278).

3.3 Research Procedures

EFL students at the MA level and their supervisors were, initially, asked to participate in this study. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Each interview session lasted about 30 minutes, and the participants were assured that their personal information and responses would remain confidential. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities.

3.4 Methods of Data Analysis

Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed and coded. To analyze and interpret qualitative data in this study, *thematic analysis* was used. Thematic analysis which is a method of qualitative research is used for uncovering patterns and themes in a special phenomenon which themes are known as "a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organized the possible observations and at a maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4).

5. Results

To answer the first research question, the supervisors were interviewed about their MA students' obstacles in writing theses. Some challenges were reported by supervisors which are presented in Table one. Based on their supervisors' opinions, EFL MA students face seven challenges lack of research knowledge in the first rank followed by time, supervisor, Inability to Write Academically, Lack of Interest, university and Lack of Sources.

Table1. *Supervisor's outlooks*

Obstacles

Lack of Research Knowledge
 Time
 Supervisor
 Inability to Write Academically
 Lack of Interest
 University
 Lack of sources

Upon being asked the same question about challenges faced in writing master theses, EFL students postulated some challenges which are shown in Tabletwo. Lack of research knowledge appears as the most confronted challenge, followed by time constraints, supervisor, inability to write academically, lack of interest, confusion in choosing a suitable topic, difficulties in methodology and finally, lack of resources.

Table 2. *Students' outlooks*

Obstacles

Lack of Research Knowledge
 Time
 Supervisor
 Inability to Write Academically
 Lack of Interest
 Confusion in Choosing a Suitable Topic
 Difficulties in Methodology
 Lack of Sources

The research questions of the present study posit the following:

What are the major obstacles facing MA EFL students in writing master theses from supervisors' perspectives? And What are the main hindrances facing MA EFL students in writing master theses from students' perspectives? As clearly shown in Table 1. And Table 2., both parties, i.e., Supervisors and students encountered various obstacles in the writing process of Master theses, among which time management, lack of research knowledge and inability to write academically were among the major hindrances faced.

5. Discussion

When asked about the challenges encountered in writing master theses, EFL students reported many. Lack of research knowledge appears as the most confronted challenge, and it is Hussin (2017) who found using specialized vocabularies as challenging. This study corroborates Saidin et al. (2016) findings that considered 'lack of research knowledge' as one main challenge faced by postgraduate students.

The students also reported their inability in academic writing and this goes hand in hand with the study conducted by Divsar (2018) where the results disclosed that linguistic flaws (e.g., grammatical and organizational problems and lack of mastery of academic writing style) constituted the significant hindrance for Iranian EFL students.

A consensus between supervisors and EFL MA students about the main challenge faced by EFL Master students in writing theses; lack of research knowledge was among the main challenges faced since writing MA thesis is their first experience in writing academically (Singh, et.al (2016). MA students cannot choose the topic easily since they either believe it is the supervisors' responsibility or a novel topic that has not been conducted by anyone before it must be selected.

Supervisors claimed that most students are not proficient enough to write academically especially regarding using academic vocabulary. Similarly, MA students reported a lack of research knowledge as their main obstacle to writing theses due to variation in research topics which results in their confusion in choosing a suitable topic. The methodological part of the thesis is also a hindrance for MA students.

6. Conclusion

The present study has attempted to scrutinize the significant obstacles in writing theses from Master two EFL students' and supervisors' outlooks. The main obstacles included the inability to write academically using special vocabularies, lack of research design knowledge and choosing a researchable topic. Students and supervisors agreed that the inability in managing time was among the main challenges of MA students in writing master theses, but their perspectives about other challenges varied. MA students reported more challenges in writing theses compared to supervisors. One proof of this is the students' claims about confusion in choosing a suitable topic and the difficulties in methodology.

7. Recommendations and Limitations

Following the results obtained in this study, it is highly recommended that supervisors should try to create a balance between their professional duties and supervision to provide students with effective guidance and ample assistance, especially timely constructive feedback on language, style, content, and structure of the thesis. Students, on their part, are also required to take responsibility for their learning and work hard to improve their academic writing and research skills.

To address the limitations of this study, the researcher refers to the limited generalizability of the findings as the data for this study were collected from EFL MA students and their supervisors not from MA students and supervisors studying different majors.

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