



An Investigation of the Challenges that Libyan EFL Postgraduate Students Face in Writing Research Papers: Voices from the Field

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دراسة للتحديات التي يواجهها طلاب الدراسات العليا الليبيون في مجال تدريس اللغة
الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية عند كتابة أوراق البحث: آراء من الميدان

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Abstract

Writing research papers is one of the most common requirements in postgraduate programs. The present study seeks to investigate the challenges that Libyan EFL postgraduate students face in writing research papers. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 students, the findings demonstrate that students perceived difficulties can be systematically classified into two primary categories. The first category pertains to subject-specific knowledge, particularly difficulties related to analyzing and synthesizing the relevant literature. The second category relates to English language proficiency, including an inadequate mastery of academic writing conventions and insufficient skills to develop research articles effectively at the lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels. In terms of supporting postgraduate students in writing research papers, the participants in this study suggest that the postgraduate programs should offer professional development opportunities through a series of related writing courses and workshops.

Keywords: Academic writing, EFL students, Research skills.

المخلص

تُعد كتابة البحوث العلمية من أكثر المتطلبات شيوعاً في برامج الدراسات العليا. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء التحديات التي يواجهها طلبة الدراسات العليا الليبيون الدارسون للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) في كتابة البحوث العلمية. ومن خلال إجراء مقابلات شبه مُنظمة مع 10 طلاب، أظهرت النتائج أن الصعوبات التي يدركها الطلبة يمكن تصنيفها بشكل منهجي إلى فئتين رئيسيتين. تتعلق الفئة الأولى بالمعرفة التخصصية، لا سيما الصعوبات المرتبطة بتحليل الأدبيات ذات الصلة وتركيبها. أما الفئة الثانية فتتعلق باتقان اللغة الإنجليزية، وتشمل ضعف التحكم في قواعد الكتابة الأكاديمية، ونقص المهارات اللازمة لتطوير المقالات البحثية بشكل فعال على المستويات المعجمية والنحوية ومستوى الخطاب.

وفيما يتعلق بدعم طلبة الدراسات العليا في كتابة البحوث العلمية، يقترح المشاركون في هذه الدراسة ضرورة أن توفر برامج الدراسات العليا فرص تطوير مهني من خلال تقديم سلسلة من الدورات وورش العمل المتخصصة في الكتابة الأكاديمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة الأكاديمية، طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، مهارات البحث العلمي.

1. Introduction

Postgraduate programs usually aim at improving students' skills in content knowledge and research skills. With the first step taken into postgraduate studies, Libyan English language students find themselves in an academic milieu where they are often required to write diverse academic writing genres as part of assessment and program requirements, most notably research papers, literature reviews, and research proposals. According to Swales and Feak (2012) the ability to write research papers is essential for the students' improvement.

In Libya, issues related to conducting research and publishing have attracted attention recently from the postgraduate administration and programs. Postgraduate students study academic writing and research methods courses from the first term of their master program. However, the content of these courses and the quality of the course vary from one instructor to another. In addition, most postgraduate students are not familiar with writing research papers in their college education and barely wrote extended written assignments before. Unsurprisingly, postgraduate students find writing research papers complex and challenging, (Frankel and McHale, 2002). Consequently, writing research papers requires mastering skills such as critical thinking and integrated writing and most students are struggling with these skills.

Within EFL programs, it is essential to investigate the challenges non-native English speakers encounter in writing research papers. Most of the studies in literature were conducted in western countries where English is the language of instruction, (e.g., Casanave, 2010; Gazza et al., 2003; Kamler & Thomson, 2014). The research in EFL context is less addressed (Chien, 2015). In other words, while there is rich literature on academic writing, there has been relatively little on this topic from the postgraduate students prospective seeking to improve their research and writing skills in non-medium education system. This study aims to fill this gap in literature by focusing on the Libyan context and investigating „how novice researchers“ cope with the difficulties that they face in writing research papers in EFL contexts, (Chien 2015).

2. Literature Review

Writing research papers plays an important role in postgraduate students' evaluation. Due to the fact that academic writing is challenging for most ESL/ EFL students, most students face problems writing research papers. Cooley and Lewkovicz's study (1995) of graduate students at the University of Hong Kong, showed that 50% of students indicated having lots of problems writing in the English language. Shaw's study (1991) also revealed that L2 students were usually concerned about their English language proficiency. Choosing the right word for the context and using the formal forms of the English language were selected as the most difficult areas of research writing. Here, the role of advisor is important to help students face such challenges. According to Casanave's (2010) findings, students need to know how to design and carry out research as well as how to present their research in an

acceptable language. As mentioned by Fernsten and Reda (2011), teachers need to help “students in meeting the challenges of academic writing more effectively” (p. 171).

With regard to the written discourse, different studies have investigated student perceptions of writing research. For example, Shaw’s (1991) findings showed that introduction and the discussion part were the most difficult sections to write for the participant of this research. In the United States, Cho’s (2004) research, which aimed to explore the challenges that international graduate students face in writing research papers, showed that language barrier was the most common problem. Similarly, Fageeh’s (2004) research which was conducted in Saudi Arabia to investigate the problems that EFL students face in writing research papers indicated that students’ main concerns were related to word choice and how to use grammatical structure properly. Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) explained that students usually utilize “expressions and chunks of language” (p. 11) found in literature to their own writing. Moreover, Li (2007) claimed that students usually borrow phrases and terms from the books and use them in their own writing. In addition, students had few opportunities to practice writing research papers as their assignments focus more on grammar drilling and micro skills. Ferenz (2005) suggested that students may receive feedback on their researches and writings from their classmates. Moreover, Cheung (2010a, 2010b) conducted research about graduate students in three universities. The findings showed that writing the literature is among the common problems that they face. To sum up, the literature has highlighted the areas which created problems for students in writing research papers. Specifically, students faced the problems of structure, choice of words, and organization of content. In addition, challenges such as appropriate citations, structure of arguments, and establishment of a link between the findings and the literature (e.g., Bazerman, 1988; Dudley-Evans, 1994; Johns, 1993; Mauranen, 1993; Swales, 1990). Additional student-related challenges include limited time, insufficient library resources, low motivation for research writing, infrequent supervisory meetings, and inadequate knowledge of research-related theories. (Bell, 2000; Anderson, Day, & MacLaughlin, 2006).

Dwihandini et al’s (2013) research, which was conducted in Indonesia to investigate the factors that influence college students’ research writing, showed that there are three main influencing factors: 1) the psychological factor that reveals low self- confidence in choosing a topic and could be the result of having poor background knowledge in research. 2) the sociocultural factor which demands students’ ability to understand and meet the standards of academic practices. 3) the linguistic factor which is related to the use of appropriate grammatical structure. Mapolisa and Mafa (2012) conducted a study to investigate the obstacles that undergraduate students encounter in conducting research at Zimbabwe Open University. The findings of the study showed that students faced many obstacles, namely poor library references, poor access to the internet, lack of interest in research, lack of time and funds and supervisor absence from work.

All these obstacles influenced negatively on students’ abilities to conduct research. In addition, Mahammoda’s findings (2016), which explored the factors that influence the quality of research among novice researchers in Ethiopia from supervisors’ perspective, showed that students’ low motivation, lack of analytical skills, lack of time management and funds are the

main obstacles. In addition to other factors related to the university such as lack of resources and little research assisted environment.

In Libya, although postgraduate students' writing of research papers in English is gradually becoming common in higher education, it is important to understand postgraduate students' the challenges that they face in their research writing process. Thus, this study aims to investigate the challenges that postgraduate students experience in writing research papers in English and their perceived needs in research support. As suggested by Woodward-Kron (2007), "more research is needed in different teaching contexts and at various stages of students' writing in order to provide a greater understanding of the writing support" (p. 253).

3. Research Method

3.1 Data Collection

In this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with nine Libyan EFL postgraduate students, who are studying at the Libyan Academy in Janzour.

The purpose of the interviews was to find out the challenges that postgraduate students faced and how they coped with these challenges in writing research papers in English. The format of interviews consisted of three parts. The first part was demographic information, including experience in writing in English and fields of research. The second part focused on the difficulties encountered by postgrad students in academic writing and how they dealt with them.

The third part involved postgrad students' perceived needs for support during their writing process.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study are nine postgraduate students. Seven of them are teacher assistants in the department of English and two are English teachers in private language centers. Their age ranges from 27-39 years old. They are studying at the Libyan Academy in Janzour.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed by the use of thematic analysis. Themes were identified from the interview transcription. The main themes were the difficulties that postgrad students face, how they deal with them and students' suggestions for the improvement in the research methods course.

3.4 Research questions

The present study aims to investigate the challenges that Libyan postgrad students face in writing research papers. The purpose of the study was twofold:

(1) to identify difficulties encountered by Libyan EFL postgraduate students in writing research papers; and (2) to make recommendations that address Libyan students' research needs so that it may make them feel confident in conducting research and writing research papers. It seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What are the challenges that postgraduate students face in writing research papers?
2. How do they deal with these challenges
3. What can be done to support postgraduate students during the research writing process?

4. Findings and Discussion

The following are the three main categories resulting from the transcription and coding of the participants' responses to the interview questions.

1. What are the challenges that postgraduate students face in writing research papers?

4.1 Selecting a topic

Most of the students considered selecting a topic as the main challenge that they face. They were confused about what could be considered a worthwhile research topic. S5: *„it is not just to choose a topic. The topic should be good, authentic and valuable.* Similarly, S1 added *„how can I select a topic that is going to be significant and gives me the rich data that I need'.* This is consistent with the results of Dwihandini et al (2013) research findings, which suggested that students had low self-confidence in choosing a topic and this may be due to the limited background knowledge.

4.2. Reviewing the Literature

Reviewing the literature was another challenging task for the participants in this study. Most of the students mentioned that they had little experience in reviewing the literature. They stated that their writing courses in college focus on personal narratives and essays rather than extended writing assignments and literature review. This aligns with Fageeh's (2004) research results which showed that students had a few opportunities to practice writing research papers as their assignments focus more on grammar drilling and micro skills. Second, in terms of reviewing the literature, Libyan EFL students generally have little research writing experience before their master's studies. Therefore, for them reviewing the literature is a difficult task because it requires skills such as critical thinking, searching sources, integrating and synthesizing theories. S1 said *„we are not used to writing our views or criticizing previous research. We used to take the information in the books as facts'.* In addition, most of them complained about the lack of resources in terms of English language books in the library. This aligns with Mahammuda's research finding (2016) which clarified that one of the factors that affect the quality of students' research is lack of resources. This also supports the results of Mapolisa and Mafa's (2012) research, which showed that students face many difficulties such as poor library references.

4.3 Writing Up the Research

Most of the students had problems in the use of structure and discourse organization. S3 said: *„I am not sure about what structure to use and how to make my writing more formal rather than colloquial English'.* Similarly, S4 added: *„As you know English is not our first language so writing in it is challenging in terms of how to organize ideas and how to choose the grammatical forms'.* This proves what Casanve (2010) argued that students need to know how to design and carry out research as well as how to present their research in an appropriate language.

Another challenge that some participants mentioned is the ability to write arguments and support their views. S5 mentioned *„the challenge is not just in writing the findings but to support it from the literature and to argue with previous results'.* This is in line with Cooley and Lewkowicz (1995) findings which indicated that students face difficulties in writing arguments in a consistent manner. Similarly, in terms of research writing, some students mentioned that they face difficulty in connecting their ideas and writing them in their own

words. S9: *„how to paraphrase the texts and write them by using my words is my big concern’*. S4 added: *‘how to put it all together is my nightmare’*. This is consistent with Bitchener & Basturkmen’s (2006) research findings which showed that students face challenges in expressing their ideas and organizing them in a proper way. Cheung (2010a, 2010b) reports that all interviewees identified the discussion section as particularly challenging, as it requires writers to persuade readers of the significance of their research and the validity of their arguments. Additional difficulties included establishing an appropriate authorial voice, using verb tenses accurately, and selecting suitable lexical items

2. How do postgraduate students deal with the challenges that they face?

Two levels of strategies can be identified in the participants’ answers: textual and social. At the textual level, students at the writing stage may read three or four papers about the topic and adopt the formats and headings in their own paper. S2 said: *„I collect related papers about my topic then I use their common heading and subheading in my paper’*. According to Bitchener and

Basturkmen (2006) students usually use “expressions and chunks of language” (p. 11) found in literature to their own writing. Similarly, Li (2007) mentioned that students borrow phrases and terms from the books and use them in their own writing.

At the social level, some students mentioned that they make use of their academic social network to help them in dealing with the difficulties. For example, some mentioned that they ask their instructors for help. S1: *I ask the teacher for some tips’*. Because some participants are teachers’ assistants in the department of English, they ask their colleagues for clarifications and guidelines. S4 said: *‘Being teacher assistant is advantageous for me. I usually ask my colleagues in the department for help’*.

In addition, two students mentioned that their teachers give them websites and online resources for extra information. S7: *‘some of the online resources that the teacher mentioned are of great help for us’*. Furthermore, all students mentioned that they are involved in different Facebook groups where they can share their questions and related materials. S1: *‘despite the poor internet connection, the face book group keeps me updated and it gives me a sense of support’*. Furthermore, students stated that their classmates could be a useful source of help on sharing references and practical tips. In line with this issue, Ferenz (2005) explained that students may depend on their classmates for feedback on their researches and writings. However, students’ answers might reflect that they are not familiar with research engines and the authentic research papers. For example, when I asked about how they get extra information, some of them mentioned Google as their reference. They also showed limited information about software such as end notes and SPSS.

3. What can be done to support postgraduate students in their research writing?

All the students mentioned that postgraduate programs should offer regular academic writing and research workshops as they needed instruction in research writing. S6: *„we need more support in terms of how to write research papers’*. S1 also mentioned *‘I cannot learn by myself. I need guidance in how to write properly’*. In a follow up question about why workshops, students mentioned that workshops are more flexible and suit their busy schedules. Also, they can choose from them the topics that they need. S9 added: *„Due to our busy schedules, workshops would be a good option as we can choose to attend the ones that*

we need. For me, I will attend the one about writing styles and how to paraphrase if offered'. This aligns with Fernsten and Reda's (2011) view that teachers need to help "students in meeting the challenges of academic writing" (p. 171).

While most students indicated the need for support through writing and research workshops, a few students tended to prefer regular academic writing courses. S3: *'I think what we need is more writing and research courses in the MA curricula'*. In addition to their need for more individualized tutorials. S4 *„we are not used to academic writing. Even in Arabic we lack this skill. The situation is worse when you have to conduct research and write your research paper in English. I feel lost'. I need someone to tell me if my method is correct and if my writing is adequate'*.

As mentioned earlier, all the participants in this study had taken the required advanced writing and research courses, but they apparently found them inadequate in addressing their writing needs. There was dissatisfaction among the participants about the content of the writing courses.

S1, for example, argued that *'the writing course is not enough to write a research paper. Writing a research paper requires more than the types of essays and linking words'*. S4 added *'we need a course about how to write a research paper. We need more writing opportunities'*. These views and suggestions might indicate that the traditional academic writing or research methods courses cannot adequately address students' needs in research writing. Rather, these courses need to be supplemented by research and writing workshops as well as individualized tutorials.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The current study investigated the challenges that EFL postgraduate students face in writing research papers and how they deal with them in the Libyan context. The findings indicate that the participants faced problems in reviewing the literature, how to organize their writing. Despite such challenges, students demonstrated a strong motivation to address these difficulties, as they recognized the central role of English in research writing. More specifically, their inclination to learn how to write research papers was shaped by their awareness of the necessity to develop and enhance academic writing skills essential for their prospective professional roles as university teachers.

The findings of this study reveals the importance of involving the postgraduate studies policymakers and university instructors regarding the potential discrepancies between students' needs for effective language support and the actual language provisions offered within postgraduate programs.

This highlights the need for policymakers and educators to engage in critical reflection on the planning, design, and delivery of relevant courses in order to align program offerings with students' expectations and support their research writing in English.

For students in a number of universities, however, this requirement often imposes an additional burden as a result of their limited writing experience and insufficient proficiency in English.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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