



The Challenges Encountered by EFL Students in Writing Graduation Projects at Tripoli, Gharian and Zawia Universities: Supervisors' perspectives

التحديات التي تواجه الطلبة الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في كتابة مشاريع التخرج في جامعات طرابلس وغريان والزاوية: من منظور المشرفين

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تاريخ الاستلام: 2025/12/8 - تاريخ المراجعة: 2025/12/12 - تاريخ القبول: 2025/12/19 - تاريخ للنشر: 17/1/2026

Abstract

This study investigates the challenges encountered by EFL students in writing their graduation projects from supervisors' perspectives and their attitude towards students' work. A semi-structured interview was used to collect the qualitative data from 6 supervisors. It was revealed that Libyan students encounter several challenges regarding writing their graduation projects. Academic writing, gathering sources, choosing a topic and insufficient research methodology courses were the most significant challenges thus supervisors have negative attitude towards students' work. The study also revealed that supervisors play a vital role in overcoming these challenges and they offer some solutions and procedures, such as enhancing both research methodology and academic writing courses.

الملخص :

تكشف هذه الدراسة التحديات التي يواجهها طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية أثناء كتابة مشاريع تخرجهم من وجهة نظر المشرفين، وتبيّن انطباع المشرفين حول أعمال الطلبة. استُخدمت اداة المقابلة شبه المنظمة لجمع البيانات النوعية واجريت المقابلة مع ستة مشرفين. وكشفت النتائج أن الطلبة الليبيين يواجهون عدداً من التحديات في كتابة مشاريع التخرج، وكان من أبرزها ضعف مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية، وصعوبة جمع المصادر، و اختيار موضوع البحث، إضافة إلى عدد مقررات غير كاف من مادة طرق البحث. نتيجة لهذه

التحديات، يتبنى المشرفون انطباعات سلبية تجاه أعمال الطلبة. كما أظهرت الدراسة أن للمشرفين دوراً محورياً في التغلب على هذه الصعوبات، حيث قدم المشرفون عدداً من الحلول والإجراءات، من بينها تعزيز مقررات مناهج طرق البحث والكتابة الأكاديمية.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Academic research is a process of gathering and analyzing information in order to understand a specific topic or a problem (Creswell, 2012: 3). Every university student needs to be engaged in this process and conduct a graduation project to enhance their knowledge and to graduate. By performing a good graduation project (GP), communication skills will be enhanced to help in future workplace. Moreover, according to Washington University website, graduate students may gain academic benefits by using their project as a website, a community service project, or exhibition (Washington University, n.d.). According to University of Tripoli, the aim of conducting a GP is to train the student to conduct research in his field by applying the concepts and principles he studied during the previous semesters at the college (University of Tripoli, n.d.). However, GP demands planning and doing much reading and writing to get a degree (Vyhmeister & Robertson, 2014). Thus, it can be a challenge for many undergraduate students as it needs adequate knowledge, motivation, and hard work (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2017: 144). Some studies have been conducted to overcome these challenges and facilitate the process of writing a GP. Altikriti (2022: 65) suggested that a prerequisite course should be taught to undergraduate students on how to write a research paper, students need to be involved in actual duties of collecting data and gathering information from authentic sources, and teaching courses of writing research papers should be taken into account by all universities.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Writing research projects can be challenging for most of the students since it requires many skills to be sufficiently conducted. Some previous studies revealed that undergraduate students face several challenges regarding writing their GPs (Alshakah, 2015; Emhammed et al., 2020; Javed, 2019). Hence, it is necessary to investigate the challenges that face students who study English as a foreign language (EFL) from supervisors' perspectives as they have been through supervision and read a number of research and identify their views towards students' work in order to recommend solutions that may help to overcome these challenges.

1.3 Aims of the study

This study aims to:

- 1- Investigate the challenges encountered by EFL students in writing research projects.
- 2- Identify supervisors' attitude towards their students' work.
- 3- Recommend procedures to overcome those challenges.

1.4 Research questions

The study addresses three main questions:

- 1- What challenges are encountered by Libyan EFL students in writing research projects?
- 2- What is the supervisors' attitude towards their students' work?
- 3- What are the possible procedures to overcome the challenges?

1.5 Significance of the study

Preparing research projects is a universal practice. Studies have been conducted around the world to shed light on specific challenges encountered in preparing research projects such as the academic writing issues and research methodologies. Yet, this study focuses on a number of challenges and issues that may face students in many aspects. Also, the current study emphasizes the difficulties in conducting GP at more than one university. That is, it emphasizes the challenges from the perspective of Libyan supervisors at Tripoli, Gharian, and Zawia Universities. There is a lack of research that studies challenges in a wide area of universities in the Libyan context. Finally, this research studies the use of technology in GPs and its effects on student-supervisor relations which only very few studies mentioned before. Therefore, there is a need to do more research on this issue.

2. Literature review

2.1 Academic research

The word “research” has been defined by many scholars regarding their fields of study. Research, as the word indicates, means searching for knowledge. It is a systematic study of a specific problem that has a particular strategy and starts with choosing the design, collecting data tools, processing and interpretation, and ends with finding solutions (Grover, 2015: 1).

2.2 Graduation projects

Graduation project is considered to be a branch form of academic writing with pedagogy. That is, it is a formal written work that requires critical thinking to find out information about specific topic (Altikriti, 2022: 60). The project refers to the first degree that undergraduate students seek to have at universities. It is the students' opportunity to experience the knowledge that they have gained during the university program (I' Anson & Smith, 2004: 20-21).

According to Bushnaq (2018: 536-537), the university usually offers the students with the recommended guidelines of the GP, each university has its own requirements.

2.3 Challenges regarding writing graduation projects

Some studies have been conducted both locally and internationally to illustrate the difficulties encountered by senior students in writing their projects. Altikriti (2022) has conducted a study in order to encounter the challenges that face the Jordanian undergraduates in writing their projects academically. A questionnaire was distributed to 45 students in the department of English at Alzaytoonah University of Jordan and the data revealed that the students lack knowledge of the techniques of how to write a GP. In their study, Qasem and Zayid (2019) asked 60 participants at the University of Bisha of Saudi Arabia about the problems they faced when writing research work. Their respondents stated that they were unable to decide the topics of their research projects and they also highlighted difficulties in finding proper sources. In a study conducted in Coimbatore, India, the researchers Amuthanayaki and Prasad (2020) have revealed many challenges that have been faced by 100 people of Coimbatore city. The results revealed that more than 70% of the participants were facing difficulties regarding research projects. The challenges were lack of understanding of the subject, difficulty in choosing the topic, lack of good quality knowledge of the methodology, inability in finding modern, specialized and interrelated references, lack of time, and research guiding. In the Libyan context, in a study conducted at the department of English at Sebha university, Alseid and Ibrahim (2017) tried to investigate the major challenges of the EFL undergraduate students in writing their projects and supervisors' attitude towards students' work. A mixed approach (a questionnaire and an interview) was used with a sample of 42 students and 4 supervisors. The study revealed that Libyan EFL students have difficulty developing a research project and reporting the findings. Also, it was found that academic writing was the most challenging. Other problems are related to research methodology, phases of conducting research, background knowledge and organization of references. Supervisors, as revealed in the study, have negative attitudes towards the students' work.

2.4 The role of the supervisor

One of the main factors that determine the students' success in writing GPs is the effectiveness of the supervisor. But what does "affective supervisor" mean? In research conducted at the University of Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia, the researchers tried to answer this question and clarify it in detail. In their study, they revealed that "supervisors should be friendly, approachable and flexible; knowledgeable and resourceful; and encourage students to work

and plan independently" (Tahir et al., 2012). Furthermore, the relationship between the supervisor and the student plays an important role in completing the project's journey successfully. To reach a good relationship for the project success, the two parties need to have respect for each other's' opinions (Hodza, 2007: 1156). Supervisor's duties and responsibilities differ depending on the university and the department rules. Generally speaking, the supervisor's duties according to Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University (2023: 9) are as follow:

- 1- Participating in making the plan and defining the research problem for the project in a fixed timetable.
- 2- Assisting students with deciding the research objectives and choosing specific sources and references.
- 3- Making sure that students do the work themselves and they do not plagiarize it and submit follow-up reports to them.
- 4- Drawing students' attention to any shortcomings and help them to make better versions.
- 5- Preparing students for the final presentation.

Regarding feedback, Abdulkhaleq (2019) has conducted a study about students' prospections of supervisors oral and written feedback in Malaysia. In his study at Xiamen university, in-depth semi-structured interviews and global supplementary interviews were used to a sample of four students and four supervisors. The study revealed that students perceived their supervisors' feedback as vital, helpful, and useful in the revision of their drafts. Students, however, perceived written feedback as more valuable than oral feedback due to some weaknesses in communication skills of some students.

2.5 The use of technology in graduation projects

Nowadays, technology plays a vital role in every part of our lives as it helps in making the life easier and the communication closer. Regarding GPs, technology is being considered as a must in each level of the journey. For instance, students need to use the internet in gathering the information from different sources. For supervisors, Track Changes is considered to be the most important feature in Microsoft Word regarding feedback and corrections. That is; after receiving students works, supervisors can easily read and write comments in the document using track changes feature. Then, students can receive the document with comments in the margins that indicate where the errors are, when they are written and comments to edit them. Students can easily accept and reject the comments by a single click. This feature helps in saving time and money because students do not need to print papers and meet supervisors every

now and then to receive feedback. Also, Oral feedback and comments are not always clear and preferable by students.

Other important tools which help in students-supervisors communication are emails and social media. That is, students can send their works to the supervisor via Gmail, for instance, for its flexibility and ability to send large volume files with different properties. Also, supervisors can send back edited files with comments and feedback as soon as they complete them. In his exploratory study, Ahmed (2018) distributed a questionnaire to 73 university students and 21 supervisors in the Department of English at the University of Zawia, Libya. The questionnaire aimed at investigating integration of technology in writing and supervising GPs. The study revealed that most of the students do not integrate technology while writing, editing, sending their GPs and those who integrate it have limited experience of using it.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

According to Creswell (2012: 20), research designs are “the specific procedures involved in the research process: data collection, data analysis, and report writing”. Qualitative research is used to know more about specific problem. That is, you gain data from participants in order to explore a phenomenon. Also, the data analysis will be in the shape of sentences and segments rather than statistics (Creswell, 2012: 16).

3.2 Data collection instruments

An instrument is “a tool for measuring, observing, or documenting data... the instrument may be a test, questionnaire, tally sheet, log, observational checklist, inventory, or assessment instrument” (Creswell, 2012: 151). A semi-structured interview was used to answer the research questions. It was used as the interviewer “has the freedom to probe the interviewee to elaborate on the original response or to follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee” (Fox, 2000: 115). Some notes were first taken from the supervisors for the sake of analysis such as the name of the university, his/her years of experience as a supervisor and his/her highest degree of education. 10 questions were the basic questions of the SSIs and some follow-up questions were raised due to the flexibility of the SSIs. (see appendix)

3.3 Participants of the study

SSIs were conducted face-to-face with 6 supervisors from three different universities (Gharian, Tripoli, and Zawia universities). Two supervisors from each university. A convenience

sampling method was chosen to reach the supervisors who were “willing and available to be studied” (Creswell, 2012: 145).

3.4 Data collection procedure

The questions of the SSI were formed and categorized into themes to make the process of both collecting and analyzing data easier for the researcher. A pilot study was conducted to enhance the reliability and validity of the instrument. Then, the interviews were conducted. The researcher went to the buildings of some colleges and had to wait till supervisors were ready to be interviewed. The interviews were recorded after taking the supervisors’ permission.

3.5 Data analysis procedure

The recorded data was transcribed and manually converted into texts. After that, the main topics and codes were highlighted and classified into their categories. Responses were then analyzed and quantified easily. For data analysis, a qualitative content analysis method was adopted. It is “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005: 1278).

3.6 Ethical consideration

In research, “ethics refer to the norms and values that guide decisions regarding the collection of data and analysis of said data, as well as the dissemination of findings” (Mirza et al., 2023: 442). In conducting this study, participants have been informed about the topic and the aims of the study before participation. Also, personal information was not collected for the sake of anonymity. Regarding confidentiality, no names have been mentioned and the identity of the supervisors was kept secret and they were referred to by using letters (A, B, C, ...) in the results section. In addition, permission was taken from the supervisors before starting interviewing as well as their permission for recording the interviews. Regarding the literature review, credit was given to authors in a proper way to avoid any kind of plagiarism.

4. Results

The results revealed that students face numerous challenges in writing GPs. From supervisors’ perspectives; academic writing, gathering sources, choosing a topic and insufficient research methodology courses were the most significant challenges. Thus, supervisors have negative attitude towards students’ work. Supervisor E highlighted that, “*99% of the students struggle from this problem because they have been assessed throughout the years using traditional*

teaching assessment methods. The majority of supervisors (B, C, D, E, and F) stated that the time is enough for students to submit their works

All supervisors stated that they meet their supervisees twice a week except for supervisor D. They sometimes connect with students via apps regarding giving notes, receiving works or share informative sources. Regarding feedback, the study revealed that supervisors use both written and oral feedback depending on the type of mistake and students themselves. Also, the data indicated that the majority of supervisors do not use specific programs for editing students' works, and those who do they do not know the names of such tools. Supervisor E, for instance, explained that "*For some notes, you have to write something down for them to explain the structure.... For some other notes, they are very minor.... you can do it oral*".

The results also revealed that supervisors play a vital role in overcoming these challenges (e.g., they help in gathering informative sources. Participant supervisors suggest procedures and solutions to overcome these challenges, such as providing both research methodology courses and academic writing courses with qualified supervisors, stretching research methodology courses, providing institutions with writing centers, developing teaching labs, and giving proposals before conducting GPs. Lastly, according to supervisor D, "*The rules are there, they just need to be followed*".

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 discussion

Supervisors stated that one research methodology course does not seem to be enough. This finding was in align with Qasem and Zayid (2019) and Alseid and Ibrahim (2017). They revealed that the number of courses related to research was inadequate. Also, in supervisor' perspectives, students find it difficult to choose a suitable topic that they can search about. This was in agreement with the findings of Qasem and Zayid (2019) who found out that students face difficulty in deciding the topics of their research. Some supervisors claimed that students might find suitable topics yet they struggle in finding relevant sources. This was also in alignment with the findings of Qasem and Zayid (2019) and Amuthanayaki and Prasad (2020) who stated that students were unable to find relatable sources.

According to the SSIs, supervisors stated that they give their feedback either orally or in a written form depending on the type of mistake and students themselves. This corresponds to

the results of Emhammed et al. (2020) who stated that supervisors were helpful to their students in the supervision process.

Participant supervisors mentioned that if students are hardworking and have good experience, time is more than enough for them. However, this was in disagreement with the results of Qasem and Zayid (2019), Amuthanayaki and Prasad (2020) and Emhammed et al. (2020) who stated that time was insufficient for students to write their GPs.

5.2 conclusion

Writing a GP is significantly important for university students to gain a degree and to enhance their skills for further research. Thus, this qualitative study was conducted to investigate the challenges encountered by EFL students in writing GPs from supervisors' perspectives to explore the challenges and suggest solutions for students, supervisors and institutions to overcome these challenges. The study took place at three universities and the findings revealed that Libyan university students encounter several challenges in writing their GPs.

5.3 implications and further studies

The current study revealed that Libyan EFL university students encounter several challenges regarding writing their GPs. A great effort needs to be made regarding overcoming these challenges and facilitating the process. Supervisors need to be helpful and give the right instructions to their students and give feedback regarding content, style, and language. Also, institutions should provide students with training teachers, regular workshops, rich libraries and teaching labs. The study used one instrument (a semi-structured interview) to collect the data from the participants. Different methods might be used to investigate the challenges from different perspectives.

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