
Difficulties Encountered by Libyan University Students When Writing Their Final Research Project for Graduation

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Abstract

University students are required to write a research paper as part of their graduation requirements, which is a significant aspect of their education. However, this task is not easy for most students, as they encounter various difficulties throughout the process. Although several studies have examined the obstacles and issues encountered by students in academic writing, none have specifically focused on the problems experienced by Libyan undergraduate students majoring in English Language at Elmergib University when writing a graduate research paper. Hence, the primary goal of this study was to investigate challenges that encounter EFL undergraduate students at Elmergib University of Libya in the Department of English when writing their graduation project. Data collection for this study was conducted through the utilization of a questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was to ascertain the factors contributing to the difficulties encountered by students in the process of writing their graduation project. The participants consisted of 60 undergraduate students studying English Language. The results revealed that the foremost challenges included the insufficient understanding of the research paper, lack of academic preparation

regarding research project writing techniques, limited access to resources, and a lack of familiarity with research methodology. Consequently, this study provides suggestions and recommendations aimed at mitigating the challenges faced by graduate students during the composition of their graduation research project.

Keywords: writing research projects difficulties, factors, strategies to overcome.

Introduction

Meyer (2014) highlights that academic writing poses significant challenges for both native and non-native English language students. However, for Arab learners studying English as a Second Language (ESL), academic writing is just one of the many skills they need to acquire. Writing is a comprehensive process that reflects the writer's unique voice, shaped by a combination of stages, skills, and background knowledge. In the case of ESL students, the process of writing is preceded by a range of integrated skills developed throughout their four years of academic study, including speaking,

reading, vocabulary, composition, and grammar (Zimmerman, 2009; Weigle, 2014; Cumming, 2016). Consequently, the acquisition of academic writing skills becomes a critical stage for students in higher education institutions (Zakaria & Hashim, 2020).

During this process of writing, majority of students encounter numerous challenges that impact their ability to write their dissertation. These challenges include their proficiency in the second language (L2), as well as a lack of knowledge regarding the process of writing dissertation. For example, students may struggle with selecting a suitable topic that aligns with their major, choosing appropriate resources, and crafting effective research proposals. Moreover, various personal and external factors also play a role in influencing students' writing of the research paper.

To the best of my knowledge, there has been no investigation conducted on the typical difficulties encountered by Libyan undergraduate students at Elmergib University when writing their graduation projects. As a result, this study seeks to address the following questions:

- 1- What are the obstacles that university students encounter when writing their research project at university of Elmergib / Libya?
- 2- What factors contribute to the challenges in academic writing experienced by these students?
- 3- What strategies are required to overcome these difficulties?

The aims of the study

- 1- The objective of this study is to offer support to both English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students and academic staff in Libyan universities by identifying and resolving the challenges related to writing graduation research papers. By shedding light on these problems, this research intends to create awareness and understanding among stakeholders involved.
- 2- Offer potential solutions to overcome these challenges, with a particular focus on undergraduate students majoring in English Language. The study aims to provide practical recommendations and strategies that can help alleviate the difficulties encountered by these students in successfully completing their research graduation project. By doing so, it aims to enhance the academic experience and outcomes of English Language in Libyan universities.

Literature Review

Academic writing plays a crucial role in language production across various disciplines. It is characterized by formal features, objectivity, and accuracy. Formality in academic writing entails presenting information in an impartial manner, focusing on the main theme without personalizing or directly addressing the writer or reader. From a technical standpoint, academic writing

should possess linguistic precision to effectively convey the intended message to the reader. Therefore, researchers, professors, scholars, and students utilize academic writing to express perspectives, ideas, arguments, and engage in scholarly conversations.

Writing, however, has always posed challenges and difficulties in different contexts and directions. Learning how to write encompasses two key aspects: effective communication and addressing the specific challenges faced by second language (L2) writers (Bhowmik & Ghaudhuri, 2022; Neumann, et al 2019; Huang & Zhang, 2022). The challenges of academic reading and writing are not exclusive to native English speakers, but are more pronounced among non-native students who are required to write in English, which is a global medium for the dissemination of knowledge (Mahboob, 2014; Jieyin & Gajaseni, 2018). ; Singh, 2019)

Numerous scholars have delved into the realm of academic writing as a genre. According to Swales (1990), any text can be viewed as a series of moves that serve specific functions for both the writer and the discourse community. These moves are discursal or rhetorical units that perform a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse (Alharbi, 2021). Swales (1990) defines a genre as a category of communicative events that share a common set of communicative purposes. The expert members of the discourse community acknowledge certain

objectives that underlie the genre. These objectives play a significant role in shaping the overall structure of the discourse, as well as determining the content and style used. The communicative purpose is not only essential for evaluation but also ensures that the genre maintains a clear and consistent scope, allowing for comparable rhetorical expressions. Alongside the purpose, examples of the genre exhibit recognizable patterns concerning their structure, style, content, and target audience. When these commonly expected characteristics are fulfilled, the exemplar is considered representative and typical within the discourse community.

Altikriti (2022) mentions that academic writing can be viewed as a way of categorizing texts, which demonstrates how writers commonly use language to address recurring situations. This means that academic writing has certain characteristics that are typical of the genre, such as a formal tone, use of third-person perspective, and precise word choice. Essentially, academic writing functions as a cognitive tool that facilitates language development, arranges thoughts, communicates information, builds arguments, and nurtures critical thinking skills (Tahira & Haider, 2019; Quitadamo & Kurtz, 2007; Manalo & Sheppard, 2016). Guo (2014) emphasizes that research papers, in particular, are both persuasive and knowledge-creating by nature. Therefore, within any academic context, academic writing exemplifies formal written work

that can take various forms, including dissertations, literary analyses, and research papers. This study primarily focuses on the latter form.

A research paper is a specific form of academic writing that is rooted in genre and pedagogy. It involves a process that necessitates critical thinking skills to search for information on a particular subject, assess sources, organize ideas, and construct a compelling argument supported by the perspectives and opinions of others (Winkler & Metherell, 2011). Notably, the research paper contributes not only to the discourse on the topic being explored but also offers students the opportunity to delve deeper into the field and acquire more advanced knowledge. Swales (1990, p. 93) contends that a research paper, often referred to as a "research article," is characterized by the following:

A written document, typically consisting of a few thousand words, that presents the findings of an investigation conducted by the author(s) is known as a research article (RA). It may include non-verbal elements as well. The research article not only reports on the author's own investigation but also establishes connections with the findings of other researchers. Additionally, it may delve into theoretical or methodological issues. Research articles are commonly published in research journals, although they may also appear in edited collections of papers, albeit less frequently (Swales, 1990, p. 93). According to Neville (2007, p. 1), research can be described as a structured and ethical process of

exploration and examination, with the purpose of solving real-world problems and advancing our knowledge. Writing a research paper offers students in any degree program a valuable opportunity for independence and control over their learning. A student's advancement in composing a scientific research paper as a culmination of their studies can be impacted by multiple factors. Numerous research studies have explored the academic writing obstacles faced by students, focusing on different factors, such as those related to teachers, students, and the social context. Many of these studies have specifically examined the academic writing difficulties encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, both in writing assignments and when working on their projects (Mustafa, et al 2022; Alsied & Ibrahim, 2017; Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020; Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022; Mahmmouda, 2016). These studies differ in their exploration of the difficulties experienced by non-native students, especially when it comes to generating high-quality writing.

The obstacles associated related to writing any written work are not confined to any specific area but are pertinent to both non-scientific and scientific disciplines (Rajasekar et al., 2013). The term "research" itself encompasses the process of searching, investing time and effort in investigating, evaluating, and interpreting sources, ultimately leading to the development of an original viewpoint on the subject under consideration. In the educational context, researchers and educators strive to gather significant and

reliable information that can contribute to solving pertinent issues within the educational community (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2010; Tripp & Shortlidge, 2020). This is especially noticeable among English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, who frequently encounter difficulties when it comes to writing, with a considerable portion of their difficulties stemming from writing apprehension (Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Abdulkareem, 2013). Writing is universally perceived as a challenging language skill, regardless of learners' native or non-native status, and this is especially true for EFL learners (Hanna, 2010; Al-Qaderi, 2016). Thus, the main aim of this study is to examine and analyse the difficulties faced by Libyan university students when they engage in writing their graduation research papers.

Method

Research design

In this study, a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods was employed to explore, identify, and determine the challenges encountered by Libyan university undergraduate students majoring in English language when writing their graduation projects. The research design involved gathering data from participants using a 3-point Likert scale questionnaire consisting of 22 items. The questionnaire aimed to assess the students' attitudes and opinions regarding their experience of writing their graduation projects and the specific challenges they encountered. The

questionnaire design focused on capturing various difficulties that graduate students may face in their research and writing processes.

Procedure:

Initially, the questionnaires' reliability was ensured through a pilot study involving two students who completed Questionnaire. Following minor adjustments, questionnaires were then distributed to students who study at Elmergib University. Subsequently, the data collected from these questionnaires was confirmed as valid.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of a total of 60 undergraduate students from Libya, specifically enrolled in the English Language program at the Department of English, Al-Mergib University. These students were specifically chosen as they were in their final academic year, preparing for their graduation projects. Among the participants, 26 were female, while 24 were male. It is important to note that all participants were pursuing their studies in the English Language major.

Findings and Discussions

Difficulties Faced by Students When Writing Their Graduation Projects.

In this section, the researcher examined the attitudes of the students towards writing a research paper as their graduation project. This section focuses on the levels of agreement among students, as measured by the Likert Scale, with regard to the 9 points discussed in the questionnaire.

Table 1: *Frequency and percentage of students' responses to the questionnaire's items*

Questionnaire items	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I possess the necessary knowledge to write a research paper	24 (53.3%)	6 (13.3%)	15 (33.4%)
My supervisor selects the topic for my research paper	20 (44.4%)	9 (20.0%)	16 (35.6%)
I rely on the internet as my primary source of knowledge	11 (24.4%)	2 (4.4%)	32 (71%)
I rely on books as my primary source of knowledge	9 (20%)	11 (24%)	25 (56%)
I have sufficient time to complete my research paper	14 (31.1%)	11(24.4%)	20 (44.5%)
My supervisor consistently reads and checks my paper	11 (24.4%)	2 (4.4%)	32 (71%)
I am knowledgeable in selecting a topic for my research paper	23 (51%)	9 (20 %)	13 (29%)
Writing a research paper comes easily to me	25 (56%)	9 (20%)	11 (24%)
My supervisor provides substantial support	13 (29%)	5 (11%)	27 (60%)

The analysis, presented in Table 1, revealed several noteworthy findings. Out of a total of 60 students, a majority of 35 (78%) lacked knowledge on how to write a research paper. This lack of understanding is a critical issue for students who are required to complete a graduation project. The results of the current study agree with results of Rubiaee et al (2019) which pointed out

that when students express their concerns about the challenges of writing in a second language, they are not solely referring to the struggle of choosing the appropriate words and applying correct grammar. They are also referring to the difficulty of discovering and articulating ideas in an unfamiliar linguistic context. Additionally, 24 (53.3%) students did not have the opportunity to study a course

specifically focused on research paper writing, as there was no prerequisite course on this subject prior to the research writing stage. Moreover, the results were consistent with the findings of Defazio et al. (2010), who indicated that a shortage of courses focused on enhancing students' writing skills hindered their ability to write projects effectively. Choosing a suitable topic for the graduation project proved to be a challenging task, as 23 (51%) of the 45 students admitted to lacking knowledge in this area. Furthermore, 20 (44.4%) students relied on their own judgment rather than seeking guidance from their supervisor when it came to selecting the topic for their research. Interestingly, the data analysis revealed that 32 (71%) of the students heavily relied on collecting data and information from the internet, while only 25 (56%) depended on books as their primary knowledge resource. This preference for online sources may stem from the limited availability of

resources in libraries and the desire for direct and specific information related to their chosen research topic. Consequently, this scarcity of resources in libraries could significantly impact students' choices regarding the topic of their graduation paper.

In terms of their overall perspective on writing a research paper, a majority of 25 (56%) students acknowledged that they viewed it as a difficult undertaking. As for managing their time while writing the research paper, 20 (44.5%) students felt that they had enough time to complete the task adequately. However, the other half of the students had differing opinions, primarily due to external factors such as part-time employment or being burdened with extensive study and assignment commitments.

Factors affecting Libyan undergraduates' writing of their graduation projects.

Table 2: Frequency and percentage of students' responses to the questionnaire's items

To what extent do you agree with the following idioms	Agree	Strongly Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Challenges arising from communication and language differences	40 (66.6%)	17 (28.33%)	2 (3.33 %)	1 (1.66%)
Limited timeframe to complete and submit the project	27 (45%)	28 (46.66%)	3 (5%)	1 (1.66%)
Inadequate funding for the project	8 13.33 %	3 (5%)	6 (10%)	43 (71%)

Limited proficiency in utilizing technology.	13 (21%)	29 (48.33%)	11 (18.33%)	7 (11.66%)
Inability to access relevant research materials and sources	23 (38.33%)	26 (43.33%)	9 (15%)	2 (3.33%)
Lack of motivation	36 (60%)	20 (33.33%)	3 (5%)	1 (1.66%)
Inadequate availability of resources in the library	49 (81%)	11 (18.33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Insufficient research-focused environment in the college	50 (83%)	5 (8.33%)	3 (5%)	2 (3.33%)
Supportive and cooperative supervisor	20 (33.33%)	38 (63%)	2 (3.33%)	1 (1.66%)
Limited frequency of meetings with the supervisor	38 (63.33%)	19 (31.66%)	1 (1.66%)	2 (3.33%)
Insufficient practical guidance provided by the supervisor	20 (33.33%)	18 (30%)	11 (18.33%)	11 (18.33%)
Inconsistent review of project chapters by the supervisor	18 (30%)	23 (38.33%)	11 (18.33%)	8 (13.33%)
Delayed feedback and return of project work by the supervisor	25 (41.66%)	15 (25%)	9 (15%)	11 (18.33%)

The above table presents the data obtained from the questionnaire regarding the factors that might affect students in writing their graduation projects.

Regarding the challenges arising from communication and language differences, more than half of the surveyed students agreed that it posed a difficulty to their

project completion. Specifically, 40 students (approximately 49.4%) agreed, while 17 students (around 20.9%) responded with a strong agreement. On the other hand, a small percentage of students disagreed, with only 2 students (around 2.5%) expressing disagreement, and 1 student (approximately 1.2%) strongly disagreeing. These results are in line with the findings of Horner et al. (2011), which emphasized that language barriers and cultural differences are the main factors contributing to students' weaknesses in their English writing. When it comes to the limited timeframe to complete and submit the project, a substantial proportion of students shared this concern. Out of the respondents, 27 students (approximately 33.3%) agreed, and a slightly higher number of 28 students (around 34.6%) strongly agreed that the limited timeframe posed a difficulty. However, a small percentage of students disagreed, with 3 students (around 3.7%) expressing disagreement, and 1 student (approximately 1.2%) strongly disagreeing.

In terms of inadequate funding for the project, the majority of students did not perceive it as a significant challenge. Only 8 students (approximately 9.9%) agreed, while an even smaller number of 3 students (around 3.7%) strongly agreed that inadequate funding posed a difficulty. Conversely, a considerable percentage of students disagreed, with 6 students (around 7.4%) expressing disagreement, and a significant number of 43 students (approximately 53.1%) strongly disagreeing. Regarding limited

proficiency in utilizing technology, a notable proportion of students acknowledged its impact on project completion. Approximately 13 students (around 16%) agreed, and a higher number of 29 students (approximately 35.8%) strongly agreed that limited proficiency in utilizing technology posed a difficulty. Additionally, 11 students (around 13.6%) disagreed, while 7 students (approximately 8.6%) strongly disagreed. The results were in accordance with the findings of Salem & Foo (2023), which highlighted that student who lacked proficiency in using technology faced difficulties in accessing relevant sources of information for their studies. As a consequence, their ability to write their projects was impacted. Concerning the inability to access relevant research materials and sources, a significant percentage of students agreed that it was a challenge. Specifically, 23 students (approximately 28.4%) agreed, while 26 students (around 32.1%) strongly agreed. Conversely, 9 students (approximately 11.1%) disagreed, and only 2 students (around 2.5%) strongly disagreed. When it comes to the lack of motivation, the majority of students agreed that it posed a difficulty in completing their projects. Around 36 students (approximately 44.4%) agreed, while 20 students (around 24.7%) strongly agreed. Conversely, a small number of students disagreed, with 3 students (around 3.7%) expressing disagreement, and 1 student (approximately 1.2%) strongly disagreeing. Regarding inadequate availability of resources in the library, the

vast majority of students agreed that it was a challenge. A significant number of 49 students (approximately 60.5%) agreed, while 11 students (around 13.6%) strongly agreed that inadequate availability of resources in the library posed a difficulty. Notably, no students disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Regarding an insufficient research-focused environment in the college, a substantial number of students agreed that it posed a difficulty. Out of the respondents, 50 students (approximately 61.7%) agreed, and 5 students (around 6.2%) strongly agreed. Conversely, a small percentage of students disagreed, with 3 students (around 3.7%) expressing disagreement, and 2 students (approximately 2.5%) strongly disagreeing. When it comes to the supportiveness and cooperation of supervisors, the majority of students had positive experiences. Approximately 20 students (around 24.7%) agreed, while a higher number of 38 students (approximately 46.9%) strongly agreed that their supervisors were supportive and cooperative. A small number of students disagreed, with 2 students (around 2.5%) expressing disagreement, and 1 student (approximately 1.2%) strongly disagreeing. Regarding the limited frequency of meetings with supervisors, a significant number of students expressed their concerns. Approximately 38 students (around 46.9%) agreed, while 19 students (approximately 23.5%) strongly agreed that the limited frequency of meetings posed a difficulty. On the other

hand, a small number of students disagreed, with 1 student (around 1.2%) expressing disagreement, and 2 students (approximately 2.5%) strongly disagreeing. Regarding insufficient practical guidance provided by supervisors, a notable proportion of students acknowledged its impact on their project completion. Approximately 20 students (around 24.7%) agreed, while 18 students (approximately 22.2%) strongly agreed that insufficient practical guidance posed a difficulty. Additionally, 11 students (around 13.6%) disagreed, and an equal number of 11 students (approximately 13.6%) strongly disagreed.

Regarding the inconsistent review of project chapters by supervisors, a significant number of students acknowledged its impact. Approximately 18 students (around 22.2%) agreed, and a higher number of 23 students (approximately 28.4%) strongly agreed that the inconsistent review of project chapters posed a difficulty. Conversely, 11 students (around 13.6%) disagreed, and 8 students (approximately 9.9%) strongly disagreed. Concerning the delayed feedback and return of project work by supervisors, a considerable number of students acknowledged its impact. Approximately 25 students (around 30.9%) agreed, while 15 students (approximately 18.5%) strongly agreed that the delayed feedback and return of project work posed a difficulty. Additionally, 9 students (around 11.1%) disagreed, while 11 students

(approximately 13.6%) strongly disagreed.

The solutions that were suggested by the current participants to overcome the difficulties in writing research projects.

Regarding strategies to overcome writing projects challenges, the study collected students' responses to an open-ended question. The students recommended the establishment of contemporary libraries with excellent internet connectivity and access to PCs. These resources would aid them in acquiring diverse sources for their projects. One of the participants stated, *"If the university provides us with libraries containing updated books and fast internet, it will help us develop our writing, and it will be easier to find sources that can be used in our projects."* Moreover, in the open ended responses in the questionnaires, the participants passionately emphasized the critical need for courses that specifically address the intricacies of crafting a well-structured literature review chapter. They expressed the desire for guidance on how to effectively identify gaps in the existing research, a skill they felt was indispensable for their academic pursuits. One of the participants articulated their viewpoint, stating,

"I think we need some training on how to find suitable data that could be used in the literature review and, more importantly, how to use it skillfully to narrow down our studies."

The participants elaborated on the challenges they faced while attempting to

craft comprehensive literature reviews. Many felt overwhelmed by the vast amount of information available, struggling to discern which sources were the most relevant and how to synthesize the information in a coherent manner. Consequently, they expressed a strong desire for courses that would not only equip them with the necessary tools to efficiently locate suitable data but also teach them how to effectively incorporate it into their research, creating a focused and compelling narrative. Recognizing the value of a well-structured literature review in underpinning the credibility of their own research, the participants emphasized the impact it had on shaping the direction of their studies. They believed that the ability to identify gaps in existing literature and build upon prior research would enhance the originality and depth of their own contributions. Moreover, such a skillset would empower them to engage in critical academic discourse and enrich their academic journey while studying in Libya. The participants' earnest requests for courses tailored to their needs reflect a genuine enthusiasm for advancing their writing skills and academic acumen. Their insights into the challenges they encountered underscore the importance of creating a supportive learning environment that fosters the growth of their research capabilities. Addressing these needs and providing targeted training could be instrumental in enabling these postgraduate students to excel in their studies, benefitting not only their own academic pursuits but also

contributing to the broader academic community.

In addition, the students pointed out the importance of writing workshops and courses that have a clear focus on various aspects of academic writing, such as structuring a literature review, crafting a clear research question, organizing ideas, and refining language skills. They believe that these strategies would significantly help them develop their writing abilities for their research projects. One student remarked, "Having workshops and courses specifically designed for research project writing will help us recognize the main aspects involved in writing our research projects." Furthermore, the students stressed the importance of establishing writing groups where they can meet regularly to share their progress, exchange ideas, and offer support. They believe that such writing groups can foster a positive writing community, providing motivation and accountability to help each other stay on track with their writing goals. By participating in these groups, students can receive constructive feedback and encouragement, which can lead to improved writing skills and greater confidence in their research projects.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study shed light on the considerable difficulties that undergraduate students encounter when undertaking their BA graduation projects. The challenges they face encompass every aspect of the project, from selecting a suitable topic

and crafting a proposal to establishing a research plan that includes identifying the problem statement and formulating research questions and aims. The literature review emerges as one of the most formidable hurdles for students, while the decision-making process regarding the methodological framework, sample selection, and data collection tools presents additional obstacles. Furthermore, the research findings indicate that students struggle with analyzing the gathered data and effectively discussing their findings in relation to the research questions and existing literature. In addition to these challenges, the study highlights significant obstacles in academic writing, including referencing and supervisory issues. Overall, these difficulties can be attributed to a lack of both theoretical and practical knowledge regarding research writing in general and graduation projects in particular.

Furthermore, the findings from the questionnaire highlight several factors that affect students in writing their graduation projects. Communication and language differences were perceived as a challenge by more than half of the students, while limited timeframe and limited proficiency in utilizing technology were also significant concerns. Inadequate funding, inadequate availability of resources in the library, and an insufficient research-focused environment were identified as relatively less problematic. Lack of motivation, inconsistent review of project chapters, and delayed feedback and return of

project work were found to be difficulties faced by students. However, the majority of students reported positive experiences regarding the supportiveness and cooperation of supervisors, although the limited frequency of meetings and insufficient practical guidance were concerns expressed by a notable proportion of students. These findings provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by students during their graduation projects and can inform efforts to enhance the support and resources available to them.

Recommendations and suggestions

- Implement mandatory research writing courses to build students' theoretical and practical knowledge.
- Adopt a staged, scaffolded approach across each undergraduate year to progressively develop research skills through assignments, workshops, mentoring, etc.
- Provide regular academic writing workshops and seminars to improve skills like referencing, critical thinking, etc.
- Create peer writing groups and assign mentors to allow for collaboration, feedback, and guidance.
- Integrate research skills development into existing courses through relevant assignments and activities.
- Expand library resources and increase access to academic

databases as well as research technologies.

- Offer detailed project guidelines, templates, schedules and exemplars to guide students.
- Improve supervisor training to standardize project mentoring, review, feedback, and administrative practices.
- Increase supervisor-student meeting frequency for ongoing guidance and timely feedback.
- Develop students' research knowledge and skills holistically across all project stages.
- Promote student motivation through activities like presentations and recognizing achievements.
- Evaluate current research programs and teaching practices and implement necessary curriculum reforms.

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