

EXPLORING CHALLENGES IN WRITING EFL MASTER THESES: STUDENTS AND SUPERVISORS' PERSPECTIVES

By

SAMAN EBADI *

FERESHTEH POURAHMADI **

*, ** Department of Applied Linguistics, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran.

Date Received: 06/01/2019

Date Revised: 27/03/2019

Date Accepted: 03/06/2019

ABSTRACT

This study is intended to explore challenges in writing master theses from postgraduate English as Foreign Language (EFL) students' and supervisors' perspectives. To do so, 40 EFL postgraduate students and 10 supervisors were selected non-randomly based on availability sampling from five major Iranian universities. Qualitative data were gathered via semi-structured interviews the results of which were analyzed by utilizing thematic analysis. The findings revealed a number of main challenges faced by postgraduate students in writing master theses as reported by supervisors and the students themselves, some of which were common challenges for both groups. The main common challenge reported by both the students and supervisors was the students' lack of research knowledge including the inability to write academically using academic vocabularies, lack of research design knowledge such as analyzing data by SPSS software and choosing a researchable topic. Implications of the study for universities, EFL postgraduate students, and their supervisors are discussed in this study.

Keywords: Challenges, Master Theses, Postgraduate Student, Supervisors

INTRODUCTION

Universities are important due to their various functions including modifying, converting, assuring the dynamism in the society, and conducting scientific research activities which can be considered as the most significant function (Tavsancil, Buyukturan, & Ozmen, 2012). Most postgraduate research includes basic research which attempts to create new knowledge and applied research attempting to solve problems by developing solutions and collaborative research which is jointly conceptualized (Mutula, 2011). Postgraduate research emphasis is not necessarily on producing innovation or extending knowledge rather it can be on developing systematic skills of investigation in research process.

According to Ekpoh (2016) "postgraduate education is the higher level of education which is provided after bachelor's degree" (p. 67) and varies from one university to another. Nowadays, there is a growing demand for master degrees and the postgraduate programs provide opportunities for students to specialize in the field (Tavsancil et al., 2012) with

the aim of training new researchers (Posselt & Black, 2012). Postgraduate students are required to write theses in their last semester in order to graduate. As one variety of writing, academic writing involves writing research papers, assignments, reports and finally theses (Stapa, Maasum, & Aziz, 2014) which are written for specific purposes and for particular people.

According to Sadeghi and Khajepasha (2015), writing in second/foreign language is challenging because the writer is not fully competent and postgraduate students are not an exception to this when writing their theses. Numerous researchers have concentrated on challenges of postgraduate students in writing specific chapters of theses. Stapa et al. (2014) and Maznun, Monsefi, and Nimehchisalem (2017), for example, attempted to find difficulties in writing introduction section of student thesis. Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) worked on difficulties in writing discussion section based on both supervisors and postgraduate students' perspectives (for more studies see Ekpoh, 2016; Komba, 2016; Matin & Khan, 2017; Mutula,

2011).

As far as Iran is concerned, no study has so far been conducted on challenges of postgraduate students in writing their MA theses. Likewise, no study has yet investigated students' challenges from both supervisors' and postgraduate students' point of view in Iranian context. Therefore, finding out about challenges of Iranian students in completing master research or theses from students' and supervisors' perspectives could significantly contribute to the literature in a number of ways.

First of all, this study is significant because writing theses or doing master research is the requirement of postgraduate programs in universities and students aim to summarize three years of education into a meaningful totality (Lundgren & Halvarsson, 2009). Secondly, as Lundgren and Harvalsson (2009) state, writing thesis is one of the main causes of stress for students; therefore, finding out about postgraduate students' perspectives about difficulties and challenges they may encounter in writing theses can provide important information which in turn would decrease their challenges. Thirdly, it is significant due to the importance of supervisors' role and their relationship with students in writing theses. Supervisors are similar to facilitators that can introduce a structured approach to writing and help students to adapt it based on their projects (Lee, 2008). The cooperation between supervisors and students can increase students' confidence, and change their attitude toward research and scientific knowledge (Lundgren & Harvalsson, 2009).

The following questions guided the present study:

1. What are the main challenges facing postgraduate EFL students in writing master theses from supervisors' perspectives?
2. What are the main challenges facing postgraduate EFL students in writing master theses from students' perspectives?

1. Review of Related Literature

Some researchers have investigated students' challenges in writing theses. For instance, upon investigating postgraduate students' challenges when completing master research, Saidin, Veloo, and Shari (2016) found that

postgraduate students encountered four main challenges in completing their master research which were counted as different fields of interest, time management, lack of research knowledge, and supervision. Additionally, 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. As declared by Ekpoh (2016), ninety-two percent of postgraduate students experienced some problems among which supervisor-related factors did not make a significant proportion; nonetheless, students and institutional-related factors were identified as the main challenges. Students-related factors resulting in these challenges were as follows: The problem of funding, lack of access to research materials, high cost of obtaining research materials, mode of study which was in conflict with employment, and problems of data collection. Institutional-related factors encompassed lack of internet facilities, unnecessary departmental delays, non-adherence to calendars, lack of research ambiance, and poor social service. Supervisors-related factors included supervisors' occupational workload resulting in lack of commitment to their roles, and non-availability of supervisors. Asogwa, Wombo, and Ugwuoke (2014) made an attempt to investigate postgraduate students' challenges of students of agricultural education in Nigeria. Twenty-eight identified challenges were: inability to select a researchable topic, inadequate fund to meet with the financial demand of theses writing, inability to understand and cope with the relationship of concepts in the topic approved, writing without guidance and assistance from the supervisor, nature of job tying students down, bitter politics among supervisors during proposals which disappoints students, inability to access relevant materials, series of faulty internet fluctuation or change of internet accessing password, natural phenomena interfering with students work, distance between supervisors and students hindering regular contact, late modification of topics by supervisor, supervisors insufficient time devoted to reading and guiding students, lack of library card or password to access analog or digital library, lack of supervisors' knowledge of students' topics, excessive social, political,

religious engagements leaving students no time for writing theses, sponsorship programs withdrawal due to delay in writing theses, respondents demanding money to participate in data collection, developing interest in topics which supervisors approved, disagreement between supervisors, inability to cope with other assignments outside theses writing, sexual harassment from supervisors, family responsibilities holding students down, complexity of approved topics and scanty literature, target respondent denying students' access for data collection, difficulty in collecting certification from reader in order to continue, lack of computer literacy, demand for cash or material from supervisors before attending the work, and spiritual realm hindering theses writing. Moreover, Mutula (2011) demonstrated that lack of facilities, equipment, software, chemicals, problems in mixing study and job, lack of financial support and adequate preparation of students at undergraduate level, inappropriate guidelines for writing the theses and supervision, change of project focus were among reasons behind delays in completing theses. Other researchers such as Sadeghi and Khajepasha (2015) investigated theses writing challenges for non-native MA students. The results revealed theses in universities suffered first and foremost from style, language and content problems, followed by organizational, and finally from methodological problems. Furthermore, Olaitan, Ukonze, and Ifeanyieze (2009) stated that inability to select a researchable topic, lack of resource materials, opposed attitude of supervisors, lack of students' motivation, lack of finance, and sickness among others were challenges that postgraduate students in agricultural education encountered (cited in Asogwa et al., 2014). Based on students and supervisors' perspectives, lack of knowledge, experience, funding, irregular meetings with their supervisors, commitment to work, time constraints, and excess workload assumed to be the most important and common problems of medical students in Bangladesh (Matin & Khan, 2017).

A number of researchers concentrated on research knowledge challenges and defined it as the main challenge. Mizany, Khabiri, and Sajadi (2012) stated that

The most important factor in writing a thesis is the

student and his/her scientific or practical capabilities. In other words, lacking appropriate abilities in writing theses such as research methodology and statistics, familiarity with scientific databases, and their usage and etc., make writing thesis so difficult or, in some cases, impossible (p.5).

According to Ezebilo (2012) majority of postgraduate students faced challenges in data collection methods, data analysis, writing publishable research papers, oral presentation skills, and inaccessibility of associated supervisors. Other researchers such as Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) defined students and supervisors perspectives expressing supervisors' viewpoints that students had difficulties in generalization, articulation of how ideas were linked, articulation of how ideas bunched together, development of ideas, and especially difficulties due to lack of language proficiency. Additionally, students declared their difficulties as lack of knowledge about connecting ideas, clarity of expression of ideas, language proficiency, the content of discussion section, and simplicity of their writing which made it boring. According to Kotamjani and Hussin (2017) students faced more language-related rather than general academic skills. In general academic skills critiquing existing research in a similar topic and determining research gap, writing an introduction, discussing the findings, and trying up the loose ends in the conclusion was the most challenging. Writing references or bibliography was the least challenging in general academic writing. In language-related skills, writing paragraphs coherently, using appropriate academic writing and vocabulary style, summarizing or paraphrasing sentences, linking sentences, using adequate grammar, and using appropriate vocabularies for making sentences and paragraphs were the most challenging. Understanding the specific language features of the academic genre was the least challenging language-related skills. The results of the study by Komba (2016) which attempted to explore the challenges of writing theses or dissertations among Tanzanian postgraduate students revealed that the majority of postgraduate students had difficulties in writing all chapters of theses or dissertation due to poor research

method course. Inappropriate presentation of various chapters of reports and lack of academic writing skills were Tanzanian postgraduate students' challenges in writing theses or dissertations. For instance, many postgraduate students had difficulties in presenting a statement of problems clearly, making a citation, giving reasons for selecting a special method, analyzing data, and separating and writing a conclusion and summary. Based on these findings, the researchers suggested that research method courses should be revised in terms of content and teaching approaches and academic writing training should receive more attention. Gurel (2011) studied doctorate students' challenges and demonstrated that lack of writing practice, lack of writing ability, having limited ability to express ideas, and having weak English background were main categories of challenges that doctorate students faced in dissertation writing. The students in Gurel's study asserted that because they were not required to write much at undergraduate or postgraduate level, they could not get experience in writing dissertation. Writing in inappropriate style and inability to write long passages were related to lack of writing ability. Sometimes students were unable to convey what they intended, use appropriate words or expressions, transfer ideas, and organize ideas in a logical order. This may be because of the effect of native language and studying in a technical program. Low proficiency in English which caused the main challenge for doctoral students originated from lack of adequate English education during their life time and thinking in native language when writing in English.

Other researchers such as Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) concluded that supervisors were the main challenge since lack of supervisory support, supervisor's workload, and poor feedback were among the main challenges which South African students faced in writing theses and made them unsatisfied. Moreover, Komba and Chiwamba (2017) found supervisors' opinion about challenges in supervising postgraduate students which can be divided into student-related and administrative categories. The first category included challenges like too much dependency on supervisors, lack of commitment by

some students, poor reading and writing skills, and plagiarism. For instance, students expected their supervisors to assist them in carrying out every section, they worked on different institutions instead of working hard on theses, and they weren't able to write academically. Thus, using wrong punctuation, and copying words and ideas of someone else without mentioning the source. The second category included challenges like too many students to supervise, bureaucratic process for approving proposals, poor remuneration for supervisors, admission of weak students, inadequate facilities, and students' inability to manage their time appropriately.

Furthermore, Mutula (2011) reported time-related problems when students spend more time collecting data or attempt to cover many objectives in a single project. Spending more time on collecting data rather than analyzing or reporting them results in unclear presentation of findings and their unintelligibility. Additionally, covering many objectives simultaneously causes difficulties, since relating objectives is a difficult task. Moreover, students have different beliefs, motivations, abilities and strategies in doing projects.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

A group of forty EFL postgraduate students (19 males & 21 females), and 10 EFL supervisors were recruited for the purpose of this study. The targeted participants were from five Iranian major state universities selected non-randomly based on availability sampling among postgraduate EFL students and their supervisors. EFL postgraduate students' age ranged from 24 to 33 with an average age of 28.5. The supervising experience of EFL supervisors, all male, ranged from 6 to 14 years with an average experience of 10 years. The ratio of men to women reflects the dominance of men in the supervision at these departments.

2.2 Instruments

The most widely used tool for collecting data in qualitative research is interviews (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2009). A semi-structured interview was conducted since it seemed more convenient for the purposes of this study. The semi-structured interview questions are presented in Appendix A.

2.3 Research Design

The researcher adopted a descriptive design to conduct the present study. It involved qualitative content analysis, "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). Downe-Wamboldt (1992) believed that "content analysis is more than counting game; it is concerned with meanings, intentions, consequences, and the context. To describe the occurrences of words, phrases, or sentences without consideration of the contextual environment of the data is inappropriate and inadequate" (p. 314). Qualitative research provides a deeper understanding of social phenomena and their dynamics (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Attride-Stirling also believed materials of qualitative research should be analyzed carefully in a way that results are meaningful and useful. Content analysis in this study is also used to code the transcribed data based on context, categorize themes, and finally to analyze the data.

2.4 Procedure

EFL postgraduate students at MA level and their supervisors were, initially, asked to participate in this study. Fortunately, some of them accepted to be interviewed and shared their experiences in writing theses. Next, the interviewees determined whether they preferred the interview to be conducted face to face or over the phone. Then, a number of questions were prepared. The interviews were conducted in Persian to avoid any misunderstanding between interviewees and the interviewer. All interviews were done by one of the researchers which were audio recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Each interview session lasted about 30 minutes. Finally, the respondents were appreciated for participating. In addition, the participants were assured that their personal information and responses would remain confidential. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study began by listening to audiotaped interviews several times in order to get more familiar with the content followed by transcription of data in Persian. Next,

the transcriptions were read several times in order to get more familiar with the content of the transcriptions which were translated into English in the next stage. Code numbers were used rather than names for the sake of confidentiality and securing the identities of participants. Finally, qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed, and coded. To analyze and interpret qualitative data in this study, thematic analysis was utilized. Thematic analysis which is a method of qualitative research is used for uncovering patterns and themes in a special phenomenon which themes that 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). Based on these codes different themes emerged and categorized.

3. Findings

To answer the first research question, the supervisors were interviewed about their postgraduate students' challenges in writing theses. A number of challenges were reported by supervisors which are presented in Table 1 below.

As Table 1 indicates, based on their supervisors' opinions, EFL postgraduate students face 7 challenges with lack of research knowledge in the first rank of postgraduate students' challenges in writing theses followed by time, supervisor, the lack of interest, university, sites, and financial matters.

Upon being asked the same question about challenges faced in writing master theses, EFL students postulated a number of challenges which are shown in Table 2.

Out of 10 challenges faced by EFL postgraduate students from their perspectives, the lack of research knowledge appears as the most confronted challenges and it is

Challenges
Lack of Research Knowledge
Time
Supervisor
Lack of Interest
University
Resources
Financial Matters

Table 1. Supervisors' Perspectives

Challenges
Lack of Research Knowledge
Time
Supervisor
Lack of Interest
Resources
University
Lack of the Participants' Cooperation
Not finding related Articles
Financial Matters
Distance

Table 2. Postgraduate Students' Perspectives

followed by time, supervisor, lack of interest, resources, university, lack of participants' cooperation, not finding related articles, financial matters, and distance.

4. Discussion

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, there was a consensus between supervisors and EFL postgraduate students about the main challenge faced by EFL postgraduate students in writing theses. The participants all reported lack of academic research knowledge as a hindering factor. Many supervisors reported postgraduate students to have lack of research knowledge since writing MA thesis is their first experience in writing academically. Postgraduate students cannot choose the topic easily since they either believe it is supervisors' responsibility or a novel topic which has not been conducted by anyone before must be selected. They also claimed most postgraduate students are not proficient enough to write academically especially regarding using academic vocabularies and analyzing data using SPSS software. Similarly, postgraduate students reported 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. After selecting the topic, writing thesis chapters including literature review, results and discussion is considered as challenging. Other sections like citation, punctuation, connecting paragraphs, writing coherently, and analyzing data are challenging, too. The results of this study are consistent with previous research conducted by researchers such as Mizany et al. (2012) who stated lack of knowledge as one of the factors making writing theses difficult, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006), Kotamjani and

Hussin (2017) who found using specialized vocabularies as challenging. The findings are also consistent with those of (Komba, 2016; Gürel, 2011; Lungren & Harvalsson, 2009) in which they also reported appropriate academic language is a challenge in writing theses. The results are also in line with (Ezebilo, 2012; Mutula, 2011) findings that reported inadequate preparation in ungraduated level as a challenge. This study corroborates Saidin et al. (2016) findings that considered the lack of research knowledge as one main challenge faced by postgraduate students. Similar to Sadeghi and Khajepasha's (2015), Ekpoh's (2016), and Asogwa et al. (2014) investigation of the same topic, the results of this study showed that language and style problems that are due to lack of required proficiency and data collections are sources of difficulty.

According to the findings of this study, supervisors believed many postgraduate students are not capable of managing time properly, that is, they cannot make a balance between writing their theses and their life. Generally, they do not write continuously and abandon their writing for a while which, in turn, results in not accomplishing their writing on time. Other factors, such as marriage, divorce, and childbearing can influence time management, as well. Like the supervisors, the students all mentioned time management as a challenge faced by them. Postgraduate students believed the allocated time for writing theses is limited and they have to balance writing theses and their life. Most students are not able to write continuously because they have a job, are married or divorced, and have children. This finding is in line with those of the studies conducted by Mutula (2011) regarding students problems in mixing their studies and jobs, and Saidin et al.'s (2016) conclusion about time management as one of the main challenges of students. It also highlights Asogwa et al. (2014) findings about family responsibilities holding students down or disabling them to cope with other assignments outside theses writing.

Based on the findings, supervisors have an important role in writing theses. Supervisors claimed postgraduate students faced difficulties since their colleagues are busy and cannot devote enough time to read postgraduate students' papers as soon as possible. Postgraduate

students also believed they faced difficulties when supervisors are busy and lack expertise, do not provide proper guidance or have to supervise many students simultaneously. Additionally, the relationship between students and supervisors or postgraduate students' inability in talking about their difficulties or even asking for more guidance due to the formal relationship is another hindering factor which sometimes disappoint them. This finding is similar to the findings of studies done by Asogwa et al. (2014), Ekpoh (2016), Ezebilo (2012), Komba (2016), Komba and Chiwamba (2017), Matin & Khan (2017), Sadeghi and Khajepasha (2015), Saidin et al. (2016), Wadesang and Machingambi (2011).

Findings of this study indicated that being interested or motivated would influence writing theses. Moreover, supervisors believed postgraduate students face a challenge because they are not interested in their topics or supervisors. Likewise, postgraduate students reported they think writing theses is time-consuming, impractical, and compulsory which cannot be helpful in future. This lack of interest hinders postgraduate students from writing well. Thus, interest directly affects writing theses which is in line with the findings of Lundgren and Harvalsson's (2009) study which indicated writing theses is a nightmare for some students, and Mizany et al.'s (2012) findings which showed students' perception about their abilities in writing theses was not satisfactory.

Some supervisors reported postgraduate students to have difficulties regarding university programs. They believed universities should define deadlines in due time, so that postgraduate students could devise their plan appropriately. If universities do not provide equipment, materials and dormitories, postgraduate students will face various challenges and increasing stress. Moreover, bureaucratic process of approving proposals and going through various stages is not necessary and is just a waste of time. They also declared that nowadays the number of universities has increased which requires enhancing entry qualification and the Internet facilities. University programs are reported as another challenge encountered by postgraduate students, too. Similarly, they objected to the fixed deadlines which are not subject to change and

should be announced earlier on, and called for department meetings for approving proposals to be set regularly. This finding is in line with Ekpoh's (2016) that reported institutional matters such as unnecessary departmental delays and non-adherence to calendars as some challenges in writing theses faced by students.

The finding of this study also showed a lack of access to scholarly journals is another challenge postgraduate students faced. They are required to access scholarly journals in order to enrich their data; however, they sometimes cannot access journal's websites to download the required articles and books due to filtering problems in Iran. Although nowadays postgraduate students have access to more websites, they still need more access to reputable journals' websites. In fact, the students themselves claimed that they need to access valid journals in order to read or download articles or books since they are required to be updated and knowledgeable about their topics of their theses.

Supervisors also reported some postgraduate students' financial problems as a challenge since they may abandon writing theses because of financial matters which in turn affect writing theses. If postgraduate students are unable to accomplish their theses on time, they will be fined and are required to pay some extra fees. Some students cannot afford to pay the fine and face some problems. Additionally, some students are required to spend money to be able to use special applications, analyze data or download some books or articles. In other words, when students do not have financial problems, they can concentrate more and write efficiently. This finding is consistent with those of previous research conducted by Asogwa et al. (2014), Ekpoh (2016), and Mutula (2011) that mentioned financial matters as one of the postgraduate students' challenges in writing theses.

In order to collect data, a postgraduate student needs to recruit participants to assist him/her by filling out a questionnaire, taking part in an interview, taking special tests, or participating in the control or experimental group. Some of these initiatives are, however, time-consuming and results in participants' abstaining from taking part in the

study.

Postgraduate students are required to read related articles in order to learn how to write their theses and what methods to choose. Few postgraduate students, however, are not capable of finding related articles when the topic is novel which might confuse postgraduate students in conducting their research.

Distance is another issue which causes anxiety for some postgraduate students. On one hand, they need to visit their supervisors frequently, and on the other hand, they miss their families or have to quit their jobs in another city which leads to a decrease in their concentration and an increase in their stress level.

Conclusions and Implications of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the main challenges facing postgraduate EFL students in writing master theses from EFL postgraduate students' and supervisors' perspectives. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that there was a consensus between postgraduate students and their supervisors about the main challenge in writing master theses which is lack of research knowledge. In other words, main challenges included the inability to write academically using special vocabularies, lack of research design knowledge such as analyzing data by special software and choosing a researchable topic. Moreover, it can be concluded that students and supervisors agreed that the inability in managing time, workload, lack of motivation, lack of job security were among the main challenges of postgraduate students in writing master theses, but their perspectives about other challenges varied. Although supervisors defined financial matters as the last challenge, postgraduate students identified more challenges including participants' unwillingness to cooperate, inability to find related articles, financial matters, and distance. In other words, postgraduate students reported more challenges in writing theses compared to supervisors. They believed that sometimes other individuals would not cooperate with or assist them in conducting a project or collecting data. They also mentioned their disappointment when they could not find related articles that could

contribute to their writing. Occasionally, financial matters or distance between university and home caused some challenges for them in writing master theses as they were required to visit their supervisors frequently.

As for implications, the findings of this study are useful in identifying challenges encountered by postgraduate students in writing master theses which usually results in abandoning thesis writing, inability to complete it on time or low quality theses from EFL postgraduate students' and their supervisors' perspectives in different universities in Iran. The researchers emphasize the value of insights gained from this study since universities can become aware of both postgraduate students' and supervisors' perspectives about challenges facing EFL postgraduate students and try to address these challenges in their programs. If EFL supervisors become more aware of the postgraduate students challenges in writing master theses, they would make an attempt to address these challenges. Additionally, it is very important for postgraduate students to be aware of supervisors' perspectives about their challenges in writing master theses.

To address the limitations of this study, the researchers refer to the limited generalizability of the findings as the data for this study were collected from EFL postgraduate students and their supervisors not from postgraduate students and supervisors studying various majors. Other researchers are recommended to replicate this study taking into account participants from a wide range of majors and universities. Another limitation is that just male supervisors participated in this study which necessitates the need for conducting a similar research with male and female supervisors as the participants of the study.

References

- [1]. Asogwa, V. C., Wombo, A. D., & Ugwuoke, C. U. (2014). Challenges and coping strategies adopted by postgraduate students of agricultural education in thesis writing in Nigerian universities. *American Journal of Operations Research*, 4(5), 311-318. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ajor.2014.45030>
- [2]. Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*,

- 1(3), 385-405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100307>
- [3]. Bitchener, J., & Basturkmen, H. (2006). Perceptions of the difficulties of postgraduate L2 thesis students writing the discussion section. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 5(1), 4-18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2005.10.002>
- [4]. Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- [5]. Downe-Wamboldt, B. (1992). Content analysis: Method, applications, and issues. *Health Care for Women International*, 13(3), 313-321.
- [6]. Ekpoh, U. I (2016). Postgraduate studies: The challenges of research and thesis writing. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 6(3), 67-74.
- [7]. Ezebilo, E. E. (2012). Challenges in postgraduate studies: Assessments by doctoral students in a Swedish university. *Higher Education Studies*, 2(4), 49-57.
- [8]. Gürel, N. (2011). Challenges of dissertation writing in the foreign language and strategies used: The perceptions of dissertation supervisors. *Ekev Academic Review*, 15(49), 217-234.
- [9]. Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- [10]. Komba, S. C. (2016). Challenges of writing theses and dissertations among postgraduate students in Tanzanian higher learning institutions. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education*, 5(3), 71-80.
- [11]. Komba, S. C., & Chiwamba, S. V. (2017). Towards improving the supervision of postgraduate students in Tanzanian higher learning institutions. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education*, 6(2), 29-40.
- [12]. Kotamjani, S. S., & Hussin, H. (2017). Perceptions of challenges in writing academically: Iranian postgraduate students' perspectives. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 6(4), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.6n.4p.1>
- [13]. Lee, A. M. (2008). Developing effective supervisors: Concepts of research. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 21(4), 267-281.
- [14]. Lundgren, S. M., & Halvarsson, M. (2009). Students' expectations, concerns and comprehensions when writing theses as part of their nursing education. *Nurse Education Today*, 29(5), 527-532. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2008.11.010>
- [15]. Matin, M. A., & Khan, M. A. (2017). Common problems faced by postgraduate students during their thesis works in Bangladesh. *Bangladesh Journal of Medical Education*, 8(1), 22-27. <https://doi.org/10.3329/bjme.v8i1.32245>
- [16]. Maznun, M. D. B., Monsefi, R., & Nimehchisalem, V. (2017). Undergraduate ESL students' difficulties in writing the introduction for research reports. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 8(1), 9-16. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.alls.v.8n.1p.9>
- [17]. Mizany, M., Khabiri, M., & Sajadi, S. N. (2012). A study of the capabilities of graduate students in writing thesis and the advising quality of faculty members to pursue the thesis. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 31, 5-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.12.006>
- [18]. Mutula, S. M. (2011). Challenges of postgraduate research: Case of developing countries. *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science*, 77(1), 184-190. <https://doi.org/10.7553/77-2-60>
- [19]. Olaitan, S. O., Ukonze, J. U., & Ifeanyieze, F. O. (2009). Troublesome areas in research to beginners: A case of generating a research topic. *Journal of Nigerian Vocational Association*, 14, 161-169.
- [20]. Posselt, J. R., & Black, K. R. (2012). Developing the research identities and aspirations of first-generation college students: Evidence from the McNair scholars program. *International Journal for Researcher Development*, 3(1), 26-48. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17597511211278634>
- [21]. Ryan, F., Coughlan, M., & Cronin, P. (2009). Interviewing in qualitative research: The one-to-one interview. *International Journal of Therapy & Rehabilitation*, 16(6), 309-314. [https://doi.org/10.12968/ijtr.2009.16\(6\), 309-314](https://doi.org/10.12968/ijtr.2009.16(6), 309-314)

16.6.42433

[22]. Sadeghi, K., & Khajepasha, A. S. (2015). Thesis writing challenges for non-native MA students. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 20(3), 357-373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2015.1063808>

[23]. Saidin, Kh., Veloo, A., & Shari, R. (2016). Exploring postgraduate students' challenges in doing master research. In Carmo, M. (Ed) *Conference Proceedings of International Conference on Education and New Development*, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

[24]. Stapa, S. H., Maasum, T. N. R. T. M., & Aziz, M. S. A. (2014). Identifying problems in writing thesis introductions in research methodology class. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 112, 497-502. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.1194>

10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.1194

[25]. Tavsancil, E., Buyukturan, E. B., & Ozmen, D. T. (2012). The subject areas of post-graduate theses completed at educational sciences between 2000-2008. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 5756-5762. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.06.511>

[26]. Wadesango, N., & Machingambi, S. (2011). Post graduate students' experiences with research supervisors. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 2(1), 31-37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09766634.2011.11885545>

[27]. Yarwood-Ross, L., & Haigh, C. (2014). As others see us: What PhD students say about supervisors. *Nurse Researcher*, 22(1), 38-43. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.22.1.38.e1274>

Appendix A

Interview questions

Supervisors' questions:

1. What are the main challenges facing postgraduate EFL students in conducting and writing master theses ?
In other words, what are main difficulties of postgraduate EFL students in writing theses?
2. What do you think about reasons of these difficulties ?
3. What do you think about theses with low quality or theses that are not completed?

Students' questions:

1. What challenges do/did you face during conducting or writing master theses? What difficulties did/do you have in writing theses?
2. What do you think about reasons of these difficulties?
3. What do you think about theses with low quality or theses that are not completed?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Saman Ebadi is currently working as an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran. His areas of interest are CALL, Dynamic Assessment, Qualitative Research, Syllabus Design, and ESP. He has published and presented papers in International Conferences and Journals.



Fereshteh Pourahmadi holds an MA in Applied Linguistics from Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran. Her areas of interest are SCT, Qualitative Research, and Syllabus Design. She has published and presented papers in International Conferences and Journals.