

# Narratives of EFL Postgraduate Thesis Writing at a University in Thailand

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Received 13/06/2021	<b>Abstract</b>  The researchers have asserted thesis writing's important role and demanding nature for EFL postgraduate students. However, the experience of writing an EFL postgraduate thesis in non-native English-speaking contexts has been relatively neglected. Besides, most of the previous studies have been confined to genre analysis or text-based interpretation. The available literature indicates a need to explore the process of writing a thesis from the writers' perspective. The current research aims to explore what EFL postgraduate students experience when writing a thesis at a university in northeastern Thailand. Fifteen EFL graduate students from eight disciplines participated in the study. First-hand accounts were collected through written narratives and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The thematic analysis finds that the practice of thesis writing, challenges & strategies, and emotions contributed to the students' perceptions of the experience. EFL postgraduate thesis writing is more than writing itself. It is also a site for
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	the students to develop scholarly identity and exercise agency. The students encountered linguistic, personal, and social challenges. Despite the challenges and emotional ups and downs along the journey, the students learn to handle the writing practice and strive toward the desired acceptance as newly emergent members in academia.
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## Introduction

Studies in Graduates' Second Language Writing have gradually attracted scholarly attention that previously focused on L2 young learners, high school learners, and university students (Leki et al., 2008). However, only 10.7% of empirical studies published in the *Journal of Second Language Writing* focuses on graduate students' writing (Starfield & Paltridge, 2019). Writing is integral to graduate school in any discipline (Ruggles, 2012) and pivotal for graduate students' success (Singh, 2016). The widely spread assumption is that EFL graduate students have developed into sophisticated graduate-level academic writers (Haas, 2011; Morss & Murray, 2001; Lee & Boud, 2003). However, in reality, postgraduates' writing ability is "not at a polished scholarly writing quality" (Harris, 2006, p. 136). This lack of proficiency in academic writing (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000) does not meet faculty members' expectations that undergraduate students have mastered the necessary writing skills (Collier & Morgan, 2008) and transferred these capabilities to their graduate-level performances (Buck & Hatter, 2005).

Thesis writing is a process to construct a new body of disciplinary knowledge (Belcher, 2013; Geng & Wharton, 2019). The significant role of thesis writing in the obstacle course to graduation has been acknowledged (Hyland, 2004). Studies on EFL postgraduate thesis writing are in two different research orientations. The first orientation has identified the demanding nature of EFL thesis writing (Swales, 2004). EFL thesis writing presents unique challenges for master-level (Bakhou & Bouhania, 2020; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006) and doctoral students (Casanave, 2019; Shen et al., 2019). Challenges in EFL postgraduate thesis writing have been reported in educational contexts in America (Shang-Butler, 2015), New Zealand (Shen et al., 2019), Algeria (Bakhou & Bouhania, 2020), Columbia (Gomez, 2014), Tanzania (Komba, 2016), and

Malaysia (Imani & Habil, 2012). Besides, difficulties in writing an EFL postgraduate thesis have been examined from the supervisors' (Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1997) and the students' perspectives (Imani & Habil, 2012).

With the second orientation, the researchers have examined individual sections of EFL postgraduate thesis and provided appropriate recommendations. Hyland (2004) discussed the critical role of acknowledgments in thesis writing. Akindele (2008) found that most of the students were uncritical in reviewing the literature. Geng and Wharton (2019) found three main patterns of discussing the results and applied them to teaching practice. Bunton (2005) analyzed the generic structure of the conclusion chapter. Komba (2016) found that Master-level students have problems in writing all the chapters. The aforementioned studies identified EFL graduate students' difficulties in the overall organization or specific sections of thesis writing. Most of them were based on the investigation of genre and examined the student writers' or supervisors' perceptions of thesis writing at the postgraduate level. Therefore, research on EFL graduate thesis writing has drawn attention to pedagogical concerns. Hyland (2004) suggested that teachers employ meta-discourse to show students how to practice writing for a discourse community. Gomez (2014) explored how master's thesis writers developed general and academic writing skills. Furthermore, some researchers offered suggestions to raise students' awareness of disciplinary writing.

EFL postgraduate thesis writing is a situated social practice. Not all L2 writers encounter the same difficulties or perceive the process in the same way. The available literature indicates a gap in little research about EFL postgraduate thesis writing in Thailand. Recently, Thailand has been internationalizing its higher education and has become the third most popular study destination in Southeast Asia. In 2017, Thailand attracted around 12,000 international students, most of whom were from neighboring Asian countries (British Council, 2019). Nevertheless, for postgraduate students in international programs, English is the medium of instruction. Students can only obtain their degrees if they can meet the high standards of writing a thesis in English. However, the majority of postgraduate thesis supervisors are Thai and EFL users. This unique context may impact the experience of writing a thesis.

To sum up, topics related to postgraduate thesis writing have been generally confined to genre-based, pedagogy-oriented circles with the completed theses as the primary research data source; however, this product-based approach can not represent a complete picture. The process of thesis writing per se attracts little attention. To be noticed, thesis writing is more than writing itself (Han, 2014). It is a complicated process involving procedures starting from selecting the research topic to the final output of the thesis. To conclude, there is a need for further discussion on issues beyond the text level. Giving voice to EFL graduate writers can provide us first-hand accounts of their actual and individual thesis writing experiences.

We adopt Vygotsky's (1994) concept of *perezhivanie* ("lived experience" in English) to explore the experience of writing an EFL postgraduate thesis in Thailand. Vygotsky (1994) first used *perezhivanie* to understand how children's minds developed through their interaction with the environment. It was found that one's development was stimulated by his experience of specific situations. The concept was later employed in language learning studies to understand how the environment stimulates learners' development. Swain, Kinnear, and Steinman (2015) understood *perezhivanie* as the lived experience through emotions and investigated emotional dimensions in language learning, while Mok (2015) and Mochizuki (2019) translated *perezhivanie* as the unity of experience, consisting of one's cognition, emotions, and social contexts. We follow the latter perspective and investigate the experience of EFL postgraduate thesis writing holistically, attempting to uncover more than affective aspects.

The current study aims to direct scholarly attention to EFL graduate students' thesis writing experience in Thailand. One leading question is formulated: What do EFL postgraduate students experience in writing a thesis in Thailand? The research is expected to provide some first-hand accounts of EFL graduates' experiences in writing a thesis in a non-native English-speaking context.

## Methodology

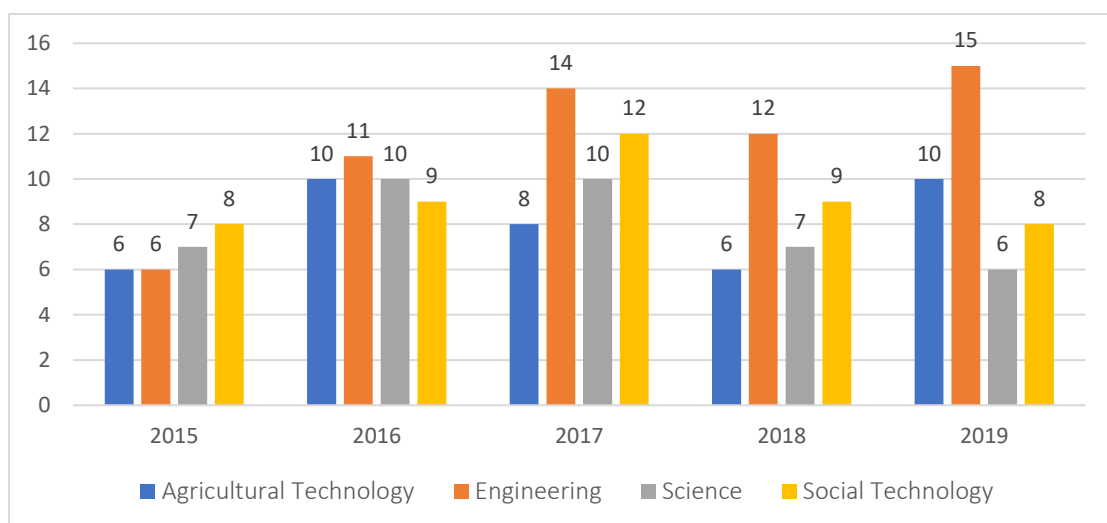
The current research employs a narrative inquiry approach, both written and oral (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), to explore EFL postgraduate thesis writing in Thailand. Narrative inquiry helps understand human experiences (Richardson & Vaithyanathan, 1995). This approach uses the told stories as data and understands human experiences as lived and shared through biographies, autobiographies, and life stories (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007). The stories can be in written or oral forms. As an influential research methodology in the field of education (Kim, 2016), narrative inquiry can “give the dimensions of realism, authenticity, humanity, personality, emotions, views, and values in a situation (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 553)”.

### Research Setting

This research collected data at a large university in northeastern Thailand. The university provided 39 graduate-level English programs at four institutes, nineteen for masters’ level, and twenty for Ph.D. level programs. Figure 1 shows that from 2015 to 2019, the university enrolled 184 graduate students.

**FIGURE 1**

*Enrollment of International Graduates*



According to the university, a master's program aims at producing academics and professionals who are well-informed in the subject areas and competent in conducting research. In contrast, a doctoral program is expected to develop the students' competency in conducting research independently for new knowledge construction and sustained academic progress. All graduate students are required to complete a thesis.

## Research Participants

Fifteen EFL postgraduate thesis writers were recruited with a purposive sampling approach. Purposive sampling helps enroll the participants who could provide reliable and rich information about the researched issues (Patton, 2002). The primary premise of sampling is that the informants can provide first-hand accounts of EFL postgraduate thesis writing. The second criterion is that the respondents have diverse cultural, linguistic, disciplinary, and education backgrounds. The invitation letters were distributed in person or via email to the potential participants. A positive response was received, and more thesis writers were introduced with snowballing methods.

The participants from six Asian countries were enrolled in eight different graduate programs: Foreign Language (n=8), Food Technology (n=1), Physics (n=1), Preclinical Studies (n=1), Chemistry (n=1), Information Technology (n=1), Biotechnology (n=1), and Environmental Engineering (n=1). Table 1 provides a detailed profile of the participants:

**TABLE 1**

### *Profile of the Participants*

Pseudonym	Nationality	Gender	School
<b>Master</b>			
Lucy	Chinese	Female	Foreign Language
Zoe	Chinese	Female	Foreign Language
Anna	Indonesian	Female	Chemistry
Nico	Thai	Female	Foreign Language
<b>PhD</b>			
Tom	Chinese	Male	Foreign Language
Daniel	Chinese	Male	Foreign Language
Amy	Chinese	Female	Foreign Language

John	Indonesian	Male	Food Technology
Tyler	Chinese	Male	Physics
Emma	Indonesian	Female	Preclinic
Fanny	Thai	Female	Information Technology
Murray	Laotian	Female	Foreign Language
Laura	Indonesian	Female	Biotechnology
Jack	Myanmar	Male	Environmental Engineering
Bess	Vietnamese	Female	Foreign Language

## Procedures

Two data collection instruments were developed and validated, piloted, and modified. First, the participants were asked to write under the two prompts: 1) retrospection of personal academic writing practices; 2) current experience of graduate thesis writing in English. Then, we administered a semi-structured in-depth interview to obtain supplementary oral data. An interview is useful for collecting information about human experiences and opinions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). Face-to-face communication provided us with an opportunity to probe more deeply into the questions, and when necessary, ask for further clarification. The interview questions were arranged into two categories. The first was a semi-structured interview with eight open-ended questions concerning the thesis writers' writing style, habitual practices, challenges and solutions, and perceptions of writing their theses. The other questions were asked in a "talk-around-texts" manner (Lillis, 2008). These questions emerged from our analysis of the written narratives. The interviews were audiotape recorded and lasted from 20 to 30 minutes.

The research instruments' validity and reliability were checked. Item-objective Congruence (IOC), developed by Rovinelli and Hambleton (1977), was adopted to ensure each item of each instrument was relevant and precise. The result of the IOC analysis for the written narrative was 100%, and the interview was 86.7%. These statistics indicate a high content validity compared to a minimum acceptable value 0.5 (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1977).

## 2.4 Data Analysis

Content analysis (Creswell, 2009) and thematic analysis (Buetow, 2010) were used. Content analysis was employed to generally describe and categorize the units of meaning related to EFL postgraduate thesis writing experience. Then thematic analysis was used to discover patterns and interpret the emerged themes. The qualitative data analysis included the following seven steps: 1) organizing and preparing the data; 2) importing the prepared data into a qualitative analysis software Atlas. Ti 8; 3) coding data; 4) categorizing units of meaning; 5) developing themes; 6) refining the themes; 7) interpreting the relationships between themes. The analysis did not follow the steps sequentially. Some procedures were repeated when necessary. To ensure the “qualitative reliability” and avoid individual bias, two coders read and coded independently to check the consistency of coding. The inter-coder agreement (Creswell, 2009) was 90%, higher than the minimum 80% (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, the two coders discussed and finalized the coding system.

## Results

Several factors influenced how the participants perceived the trajectories of EFL postgraduate thesis writing: the practice of thesis writing, challenges and strategies, and emotional response.

### Practice of Writing a Thesis

It was found that the participants exercised agency through selecting a supervisor, developing the research topic, and habitual practice of writing. Agency was central to decision-making throughout the procedures.

#### *Selecting the Supervisor*

Most of the participants could choose their supervisors. Moreover, if necessary and helpful for the research progress, the students could request to change the supervisors. Research motivation and supervisor’s expertise were the most important concerns when making choices. All the participants chose the faculties who were



expertized in the research areas. For instance, John met his supervisor at an international conference and found that they worked in the same research area. He expressed the expectation to work with her and then successfully applied for her scholarship. Tyler decided to “follow the most famous professor in this area in Thailand (from Interview).” Likewise, Laura selected the professor who was an established writer in the discipline:

I did not know which professor to join. The school head offered me to join her lab. I rejected because her work was too far from my interest, and I did not have experience with her work. Then I carefully read the supervisors’ profiles, trying to match with my experience. Finally, I chose the most productive laboratory for paper publication. (Laura, Interview)

As shown in the excerpt, it is hard for Laura to make the decision. She refused the school head's offer and determined to work on what she was interested and experienced in. She reviewed the information about the available thesis supervisors. What motivated her to settle down was the supervisor's competencies in publications.

For Bess, rationally thinking is the key to selecting her adviser; however, her choice was emotional compared to her counterparts. In addition to the research interests, Bess considered emotional bonds, interpersonal communication, and thinking modes with the supervisor:

I chose my thesis supervisor based on nature of my study and my feelings. To a certain extent, my adviser and I have similar vibes and a compatible way of thinking. (Bess, Interview)

### *Developing the Research Topic*

Overall, the thesis topics reflected the participants’ research interest. The participants did not develop a research topic arbitrarily. They made the decision within the disciplinary scopes. The values and beliefs established in the discourse community have a crucial impact on choice making. Tom got inspiration from his Chinese language teaching

experience in Thailand and would like to check his hypothesis with EFL learners. Amy's supervisor encouraged her to work on a topic that would contribute to her institution's teaching practice.

My advisor expects his Ph.D. advisees to do something relevant to their careers. So, when we finish, we can go back to our university, to show them this is what we found, and this is how we are going to contribute to the teaching practice in the institution. (Amy, Interview)

Topic selection is a negotiation process between the thesis writer and the thesis supervisor. Laura described her struggles for setting the research topic:

I designed my own idea and told him the overview and steps. But he rejected it. Then we have many discussions, change the idea, and revise. After many times of rejection, he gave me one topic to do. (Laura, Written Narrative)

Laura went through a difficult time of initiating an idea and the idea being rejected by her supervisor. After several rounds of revision and being disagreed, she had to work on one topic provided by her supervisor. Luckily, her compromise was not in vain. She got remarkable preliminary findings on that topic and could see the light of her thesis research.

Topic selection is also a process of the participants' struggling for a sense of self. The excerpt from Nico displayed an awareness of owning the research topic. She was clear about her goal and resolute to the research topic she is interested in. In the same way, Emma stuck in her research area. One of Emma's co-advisors suggested another topic, but she refused to change. She negotiated with her principal thesis supervisor and insisted on the research issue that fitted her researcher position in her affiliation.

For me, choosing the topic is the easiest because I know what I really wanted to do. (Nico, Interview)

I told her I do not want to change because I'm not interested in that. And, I'm a researcher in my country. After I graduate from here, I need to go back to my office and continue the same research as before. So, if I change

my scope, I'm not sure I can go back and do the same research as before. (Emma, Interview)

In a word, the research topic represented the participants' research interests, values, and beliefs. As Fanny proclaimed, "the topic is my logo (from Interview)." The negotiation between the thesis writers and their supervisors play a crucial role in developing the thesis research topics.

### *3.1.3 Habitual Practice of Writing a Thesis*

Thesis writers showed individual traits in writing practices, for instance, approaches in writing engagement, habitual times and space, and comfort zones. For example, Fanny preferred to handwrite her drafts and enjoyed writing in a quiet environment -- "writing in the group actually disturbed and interrupted the writing (from Interview)." Another aspect that distinguished the writers is the habitual textual practices. John, for example, kept a relatively stable rhythm of writing. He set a goal of writing up 200 words each morning, afternoon, and evening. Also, Daniel transformed in the ways of dividing texts. He used to write a long paragraph cluttered with many ideas. His supervisor compelled him to include one main idea in each short paragraph. He finally picked up this "friendly to readers" method.

In addition to the two aspects, some thesis writers visualized the writing. Mind mapping and recording one's thoughts were employed to help straighten out the train of thought. Bess said, "The feeling of being pushed to write within the deadline destroyed my enjoyment of writing and sometimes even blocked my inspirations (from Written Narrative)." She enjoyed writing at her speed because she expected to write academically and professionally:

I hope what I write can meet some of my own requirements. Does a specific piece of writing sound sensible, academic, and professional? Is it attractive and friendly enough to read? Have I felt satisfied to let it go or free myself from it? The circle of revising only ends when I think the specific piece of writing is all right. (Bess, Written Narrative)

She took a reader's perspective toward her writing and wanted to make it interesting and convincing. Besides, she usually organized her thoughts when she was engaged in cooking, having a bath, exercising, or shopping. She could visualize what the writing would be.

My mind usually pictures or outlines what and how to write.  
I usually organize my ideas when doing physical works,  
eating, staring into spaces, or when I cannot sleep. (Bess,  
Interview)

The above examples explain well how the personal traits influenced the writers' choices in writing a thesis.

### Challenges and Strategies

The participants shared a feeling that writing a thesis in English is challenging or difficult. The participants reported two main kinds of challenges. The first group is the language-related difficulties with two sub-categories. The data revealed that when asking about the challenges of writing a thesis in the English language, twelve participants mentioned the language problems. First, an insufficient mastery of English grammar is found. Irritatingly, some participants reported problems in using punctuation, prepositions, tenses, relative clauses, and choosing appropriate vocabulary. Interestingly, all four Indonesian participants reported their problems with English grammar. John had to check his writing with some grammar-checking tools. Laura was not satisfied with her writing that she still had some grammatical mistakes in it. Nico thought that ignoring grammar and punctuation might hinder her from good writing. Emma believed that grammatical mistakes revealed her weakness in English writing. She saw grammar as her "enemy." Even going to a private tutorial school could not help her. Negative feelings arose when the lecturer pointed out her grammatical mistakes.

I do not pay attention to grammar and structure. This probably hinders me from writing a good thesis. (Nico, Written Narrative)

Grammar is like my enemy for writing skill. Although I joined a private English course, it is still my difficult part. I got some critics from one lecturer in my school about my

grammar. It's so bad. I feel so sad. (Emma, Written Narrative)

In addition to these difficulties with surface forms and structures, the students mentioned their hardship in developing coherent and cohesive arguments. All these problems challenged the student writer's writing skills. In Daniel's case, his supervisor pointed out many problems in his writing, incoherence, information missing, and lacking transition paragraphs. Before that Daniel never realized he would be criticized for so many language errors.

The paragraph is too long and hard to read. There is no coherence or cohesion among sentences. Some section is missing, but much literature unrelated to the thesis topic is included. Many introductory paragraphs after subtitles are missing. (Daniel, Written Narrative)

Second, the participants experienced difficulties in meeting the thesis genre requirements. For example, Murray wrote whatever she thought was essential in describing her research, but her supervisor thought those parts unnecessary and asked her to remove them. She was also confused about what content is proper in individual sections.

My writing is not academic. I got confused about the problem statement and the significance. The literature review is quite difficult for me because I don't know what to review. I reviewed a lot, but my supervisor said those things were not related to my research. (Murray, Interview)

Murray's case illustrated that some participants did not master the disciplinary conventions of thesis writing.

In line with this, institutional requirements were hard to figure out. For example, Lucy realized that her thesis proposal format was not correct:

I followed the wrong template. It's from our university, but it's not the same as our school requires. (Lucy, Interview)

Lucy was not informed the thesis proposal format in her school. She thought all the schools shared the same template, therefore, she asked for the template from a friend in the School of Engineering.

Not only Lucy, more than half of the participants complained they did not know the university's thesis format requirements. The difficulty in figuring out the institute's expectations or requirements increased the challenges in thesis writing. Besides, putting the content into the required format was very trivial; minor mistakes were always picked out by the supervisors or examiners. Thus, Jack expected that some staff could help deal with this:

That's a great problem. I don't believe students should format their own thesis. Whenever we format it according to the school regulations, in the end, there will be a lot of complaints and rejection from the school. (Jack, Interview)

The other group of challenges is beyond the act of writing the text. Writing a thesis in an extended stretch of time required self-discipline and commitment from the students. However, the time-management was not easy to do. The graduate students had to balance life and research work and writing. During the research process, some of the participants had to go back to their work positions. They struggled to research and write in a limited time. Writer's block was also cutting off the students' moving on. Lucy once could not write for more than one month. She could not get herself rid of the gloomy mood of anxiety and desperation. She said, "no one could help me." Writing anxiety was intensified when the writers lacked the abilities to synthesize the previous studies. Anxiety in writing also came from the frustrating communication with people who had definitely powerful voices. Failing to convince the supervisor(s), hard to combine all the co-supervisors' ideas, and having to change the research direction as suggested by the thesis committee, made the students writers grieved yet helpless.

Some participants thought the native perfection was far away from reach. For example, Tom believed he could never solve his problem with the English language. Moreover, his supervisor ascribed his language shortcomings to his non-Native-English-speaker identity:

My supervisor pointed out that you Asian students have problems with English prepositions. (Tom, Interview)

For John and Tyler, likewise, eradication of grammatical errors was deemed unnecessary and impractical.

Responding to the difficulties, the EFL thesis writers across the disciplines turned to various strategies. The strategies can be categorized according to their functions. To compensate for the limited language proficiency, most participants used grammar books or online sources to learn grammar knowledge. Before submitting the drafts, the students usually ran spelling and grammar check. They imitated the well-written sentences and grammatical patterns from the readings. Difficult words and complex sentence structures were avoided, trying not to expose one's weakness. To better understand and meet specific genre requirements, the participants read theses and research articles in the discipline to learn the universal layout of a thesis. The required content and related function of each chapter were followed. To deal with the difficulties more related to cognition than linguistics, such as expressing and linking ideas, some students sought assistance from the supervisors, professional proofreaders, private tutors, and fellow friends who had better English background.

### **Emotions Emerged**

The present research discovered an inherently emotional response to EFL postgraduate thesis writing practice. A variety of emotional states were fundamentally tied to the development of EFL thesis writing and the sense of self as writers. The emotional identities of successful thesis writers were positive. Enjoyment, pleasure, sense of security, self-confidence, assurance, the ease at writing, and satisfaction with the written products were the positive emotional experience of EFL postgraduate thesis writing. Amy was a very confident and fluent writer. Her reflection on the journey was "full of sweet memories" in which her supervisor's encouraging notes sustained her on the road. She wrote, "thesis writing was a smooth and steady process of growing in terms of researching and writing skills." Her writing was almost undisturbed; much

freedom to write the thesis in her own way was given with her supervisor's trust. These positive feelings inspired her and promoted her sense of being a researcher in the field.

On the contrary, negative feelings to the practice increased the participants' anxiety in writing and decreased their self-efficacy. Perceiving EFL postgraduate thesis writing tough and demanding, a negative emotional identity was linked with feelings like frustration, desperation, exhaustion, pressure, discouragement, hopelessness, and self-doubt. A general sadness and hopelessness emerged when communication between the students and the supervisor are unsatisfactory. For instance, Daniel experienced severe emotional depression at his earlier stages of thesis research and writing:

I felt so frustrated and discouraged. I began to doubt whether I was suitable for the doctoral education. My advisor asked me to revise one paragraph so many times. That made me almost crazy. I could not see any hope in finishing my proposal writing. I could not make any progress. I wanted to quit the program. I felt desperate. (Daniel, Written Narrative)

Daniel was discouraged upon the harsh feedback from his supervisor. A sense of self-doubt with the feelings of irritation, discouragement, and hopelessness affected his writing progress. He turned for the school's help and solved his problem with another supervisor:

I keep on writing with the suggestions and comments from my new advisor. She gave me hope that keeps me going on even if the journey is long and painful. (Daniel, Interview)

The example showed that the supervisors' feedback to a great extent affected the thesis writers' feelings. A better communication between the students and the supervisors could reconcile the negative emotions.

### **Perceptions of the Thesis Writing Practice**



The writers from the fields of Biology, Physics, Engineering, and Preclinics did not think thesis writing very difficult. They tended to separate thesis writing from thesis research and scholarly publication. The disciplinary conventions of writing made it possible for them to compile all the manuscripts into one book. Therefore, some parts of their writing had been checked and modified by the journal editors. Tyler said that in his discipline the ideas counted more than the writing quality. That is, some minor mistakes were tolerable if the meanings were intelligible. In contrast, the student writers from Social Science, especially from the School of Foreign Languages, concerned more about their language. They mentioned more about the language deficiency of non-native English speakers.

The participants' perceptions presented a dichotomy. Some reflected the practice very difficult, while others wrote the thesis with passion, excitement, confidence, and a sense of authorship. Interestingly, this dichotomy of perceptions acted in a corporation with that of emotions experienced through thesis writing. The participants who had positive emotional identities were more likely to hold positive attitudes toward thesis writing, while those who experienced negative feelings tended to perceive the practice passively. The participants generally take thesis writing as a long commitment for academic growth, recognizing the critical role of thesis writing in building scholarly credentials.

## Discussion

This section discusses the lived experience of EFL postgraduate thesis writing from three perspectives: exercising agency, challenging experience, and emotions in identity formation.

### Exercising Agency

The practice of EFL postgraduate thesis writing provides a site for the participants to exercise agency. The participants made tremendous efforts and committed a lot to identify themselves as researchers, even newly emergent ones. Their investment can be discussed in the notion of agency, "the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world" (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013, p. 63). Acting as profoundly social

agents (Lantolf, 2013), the participants develop their individualities from the culturally organized thesis writing activities. The case of Bess shows “writing-specific aspects of the autobiographical self” (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010, p. 239). She has a strong sense of self, consciously knowing her expectation of writing quality.

Decision-making is central to EFL postgraduate thesis writing. The participants were actively engaged in the practice. They made decisions about which supervisors to follow, what research topics to work on, which theories to adopt, which established researchers to cite, how to frame the argument, which results to discuss, and to what extent to claim their ideas. These activities provide the platform for the students to exercise agency. All through the process, the student writers are situated in social networking. They draw on personal research interests associated with the values and beliefs commonly shared in the discipline. They do not want to give up the original ideas, but sometimes have to incline to the ones that suit better the institutional expectations. They may get rid of the familiar writing styles and turn to the disciplinarily or institutionally welcomed patterns. Although Laura had her original idea of the research topic, she had to choose the topic provided by her supervisor. Also, Daniel stepped out of his comfort zones and changed the way of dividing the texts. In a word, the participants’ agency is socially and culturally implicated in EFL postgraduate thesis writing. The participants negotiated agency through appropriating, resisting, or following the socially available conventions. Agency exists in “the interaction between writers and readers that is mediated by the text” (Matsuda, 2015, p.153).

### **Challenging Experience**

Thesis writing presents significant challenges for research students. It is especially demanding for postgraduate students who use English as a foreign language (Imani & Habil, 2012; Swales, 2004). As discussed in the literature, language is always the main concern for EFL students when referring to academic writing (Costino & Hyon, 2007; Qu, 2017).

First, the findings showed that the participants, both Master and Ph.D. students, generally encountered challenges associated with English language use. Writing difficulties were reported at the sentence and

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paragraph level, especially in grammatical accuracy, vocabulary appropriateness, and punctuation accuracy. This finding is consistent with Imani & Habil (2012). Embarrassedly, most of them admitted being “poor in the English language.” According to Bitchner and Basturkmen (2006), the students tended to defend their difficulties with limited language proficiency. Generic discursive skills (Curry & Lillis, 2004), such as cohesion and coherence and logical argumentation, were also challenging for EFL postgraduate thesis writers.

Researchers, students, and supervisors seem to have an ambiguous attitude toward these grammar-based difficulties. On one hand, noticing this deficient grammar and vocabulary mastery, great importance is attached to grammar check as a remedy. The student writers developed strategies such as asking for professional help and avoiding difficult words or complex sentence structures. The supervisors provided comments and suggestions related to English language structure and grammar to make the theses linguistically closer to native-speaker writing (Hinkel, 2004). On the other hand, there existed a tolerance of this grammatical inaccuracy. Some participants believed that they were non-native writers of English; thus, a small number of grammatical mistakes were tolerable. This phenomenon is similar to the “justification” in Imani and Habil (2012).

Second, the participants suffered from difficulties with the specific genre requirements of thesis writing. Two reasons could account for this finding. First, the student writers may confront insufficient exposure to writing the genre of the thesis. The current practice was the first experience of thesis writing for some postgraduate students (e.g., Emma, Anna, Fanny, and Laura). In their previous literacy activities related to EFL academic writing, the participants have received “micro feedback” (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006, p. 13) on ideas and rhetoric. However, for the content and function of the elements, they have to acquire naturally through practice-based participation (Tardy, 2006; Wang, 2017). Second, the students may unintentionally neglect the organizational requirements of the institution. The writers had to consider many issues when developing their thesis, personal research interest, disciplinary knowledge, writing knowledge, supervisors’ suggestions, results from the data. Too many things ought to be

integrated. Furthermore, some schools did not provide instructions. The students assumed their seniors' theses were suitable to follow.

Thesis writing brings about challenges beyond the texts. The participants in this study were from different cultures, had various educational trajectories, and experienced a range of disciplinary practices. Once they came to this university and started writing a postgraduate thesis, they were forced to integrate all their antecedent knowledge and adjust to this new culturally loaded social practice. The students' social communication, particularly with the supervisors, played a crucial role in their acquisition and adjustment to the practice. The tension perceived from poor communication may increase anxiety in writing and lead to self-depreciation. Insufficient support makes figuring out the institutional requirements problematic. Personal problems, such as lack of self-discipline, add to the difficulties in writing a thesis.

### **Emotions in Scholarly Identity Development**

The experience of EFL postgraduate thesis writing is pervaded with emotions. Thesis writing is a social practice that puts the research students under pressure to engage in knowledge construction and develop a scholarly identity. Using the lens of lived experience (Vygotsky, 1994), previous studies have suggested the interrelation of cognition, emotions, and the social contexts in thesis writers' experiences.

Not only the Ph.D. students experience the "rollercoaster of confidence and emotions" (Christie et al., 2008, p. 225); the results showed that both master's and doctoral students went through a dimension of positive and negative emotions (Wu & Buripakdi, 2021). Emotions are viewed as learned behaviors, socially constructed through practice (Lupton, 1998). Emotions are "dynamic and relational" (Micciche, 2004, p. 28). Shifts in emotions take place along with the change of historical and social contexts. Daniel's case demonstrated a successful overcoming of the negative feelings of pressure, frustration, and a sense of failure through his actively interacting with the school and his supervisor. Effective communication could eliminate the effect of bad feelings on thesis writers.

Emotions are basically caught up in all human performances (Gkonou, 2017), forming perceptions, inspiring thinking, and affecting communication (Lupton, 1998). This positive correlation can explain why the participants who underwent destructive emotions perceived thesis writing negatively as difficult, robust, and exhausting, while those who held optimistic opinions toward the practice experienced constructive feelings. As shown in the participants' circumstances, the positive emotions contributed to promoting thinking and motivating writing, while negative feelings inhibited thinking. For example, Amy manifested a passion for doing and writing up her research. She was pleasantly encouraged to develop her own writing and was optimistic about the writing progress. She acknowledged the motivational and psychological effects of pleasant emotions. On the contrary, the emotional states of irritation and desperation delayed Daniel's progress. The examples of Amy and Daniel also evidenced the impact of emotions on the progress of their studies. This finding was consistent with Cotterall (2013)'s claim that "emotions can inspire, guide and enhance research; if ignored or suppressed, they can delay and even derail it" (p. 185).

The role of emotions in educational contexts has been discussed. The beneficial impacts are providing "motivational and physiological energy" (Pekrun et al., 2002, p. 96), motivating persistence (McCormack, 2009), achieving the desired goals (Hopwood, 2010). Conversely, negative emotions, such as anxiety, interfered writing abilities (Castello et al., 2009). The rich data obtained from this narrative inquiry uncover a link between the emotional aspects of postgraduate thesis writing and scholarly identity formation. This finding can find empirical support from previous research. In Lemke's (2008) reflection, "traditional notions of identity elide the significant role of fear, desire, anger and other powerful feelings in shaping the forms of action" (p. 23). In the study of Thompson and Walker (2010), emotional aspects and the formation of scholarly identity were profoundly implanted in the characteristics of the successful Ph.D. students. Crawford & Rivas (2015) found that emotions were closely related to identity that the participants' emotions influenced their language choices. Teimouri (2017) claimed the cause and effect of language learners' L2 self on their divergent emotional experiences.

Finally, the individual thesis writers vary in their writing practices. Studying the individual characteristics can perpetuate voices to writers and can probe into the detailed and profound description of autobiographical self. It is the individuality that fascinates the qualitative research. As the previous researchers claim, through writing a thesis, the students continuously negotiate their identities (Ma, 2019; Starfield & Paltridge, 2019; Thompson, 2012). Based on the evidence provided, the participants, both doctoral and master's students, all experience identity development. Thesis writing is a transactional process of identifying to the scholarly identities.

### Conclusion

This research aims not to identify the universal experiences in EFL postgraduate thesis writing, but rather to take an intensive study on the fifteen participants' perspectives. The in-depth exploration reveals how EFL postgraduate students in a Thailand university exercised the agency in the culturally loaded social practice of writing a thesis. Decision-making throughout the practice, negotiating with the disciplinary conventions, and figuring out the institutional expectations, all contributed to the thesis writers' development in agency and struggle for scholarly identity. EFL postgraduate thesis writers have somewhat conflicting attitudes toward the linguistic problems encountered. The participants from the fields of Biology, Physics, Engineering, and Preclinics are more tolerable of the language mistakes than their counterparts from the School of Foreign Language. Little exposure to the thesis genre, unintentional ignorance of the institutional accepted thesis structure, tension in communication with the supervisors are the genre, personal, and social challenges. Effective communication helps the participants overcome depression and anxiety in writing. Despite the challenges and emotional ups and downs along the journey, research students learn to handle the writing practice and fight for the desired acceptance as newly emergent members in academia. The interaction of experience, emotions, perceptions, and identity formation can be concluded with a limited size of participation in this specific context.

This research enriches the literature of EFL postgraduate thesis writing in non-native English-speaking contexts. The findings indicate a

link between the scholarly development and perceptions of writing a thesis, which might provide a reference for future studies to examine identity development in EFL postgraduate thesis writing. Further research with larger samples and in different educational contexts is recommended. Besides, an ethnographical approach can observe how emotions impact thesis writers' perceptions of the writing practice, and then how the two aspects influence the writers' acculturation into the disciplines.

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