

Pathways to Understanding Research in Language Educational Studies

Received date:08/11/2023 Accepted date:10/06/2025 Published date:11/06/2025

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Abstract:

The current descriptive paper attempts to address the following question: Why are Algerian EFL graduate students such poor researchers whose theses seethe with inconsistencies and unethical practices of all kinds? It is suggested that these deficiencies are occurred by poor training in research methodology and academic writing, poor supervision, L1 interference, and lack of research skills. On the theoretical level, graduate students have been exposed to a wealth of information, but on the practical level, they turn out to be helpless and inadequate. It is claimed throughout that a needs analysis, teacher awareness, and provision of updated, appealing (re)sources need necessarily be reconsidered prior to any introduction of innovation in the research methodology course in order to come to the assistance of an otherwise disenchanted graduate student community.

Keywords: graduate students; poor researchers; deficiencies; needs analysis; teacher; awareness

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1. INTRODUCTION

Research is basically about knowing with a view of understanding and dispensing solutions. It is an innate activity that accompanies humans from birth to death. Babies cry out because they are looking for physical and emotional comfort while the elderly keep looking for spiritual comfort. Students research an unknown word in their dictionaries, academics conduct research to explore new horizons and hopes. Sinners desperately seek forgiveness. Detectives seek to uncover criminals. Politicians look for ways to get reelected. Career men and women look for promotion; jobless people look for decent jobs. All seek a sense of belonging. And, all look for love. (Re)search is what defines humans and adds to their human identity. For many academics and scientists, research is a way of life, which defines their whole existence.

If research is inherent in being a homo sapiens then why are some individuals less inclined to engage in research? Governments across the globe champion their involvement in research and development but few are really interested in promoting scientific research. On score of that most higher education graduates pursue other pathways rather than engaging in pure and/ or applied research. The question that comes to mind: Why does this aversion from a meaningful experience in research exists? The current paper undertakes to explore why EFL students in Algeria are such poor researchers. It is within the range of this paper to try to uncover the underlying reason for



the failure of the Algerian higher education institutions to produce high quality researchers.

2. Definition of Research

Research has number of relative cognates such as inquiry, quest, investigation, and study. Oftentimes, scholars of different scientific backgrounds use freely all these terms interchangeably. Research is obviously derived from Latin (re+ cerca) meaning to repeatedly search or look for something. The etymology of the term "research" implicitly discloses the true nature of research: the ongoing process of trying and retrying to find facts that lead to uncover the hidden truths.

Collins English Dictionary defines "research 'in the following terms:' "systematic investigation to establish facts or collect information on a subject. In other terms, research is an orderly process to find out facts on a subject or the process of data collection concerning a subject.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English comes forth with the following definition " to study a subject in detail, especially in order to discover new facts or test new ideas. This means that research is a thorough study to establish facts that were not already known or it could also mean conducting experiments to confirm new hypotheses.

Leedy (1976, cited in Catane 2000: 1) defines research as " simply a systematic quest for undiscovered truth". Thus, Leedy considers research as an orderly process that aims to disclose the truth that would explain why things happen the way they do.

Catane (2000: 1) states "Research ... is a very practical way of discovering possible answers to existing problems". Differently couched, research lends itself to finding solutions to actual

challenges. In the same breath, Catane (ibid.) further notes that research proves itself to be a scientific activity which attempts to identify the variables, relate them to one another, and explain the relationships that bind them. Research, therefore, attempts to account for the correlation between variables.

As for Wallimann (2011: 1) research "is a term used liberally for any kind of investigation that is intended to uncover interesting new facts". Differently couched, the main objective of research is reveal facts that were not known before and they need be so attractive and valuable to the scientific community and other stakeholders (i.e., politicians, businessmen, and society at large). Creswell (2012: 3) identifies research as " a process of steps to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or an issue". Research is, therefore, seen as a series of interrelated operations to gather data (numbers, facts, etc.) to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of a research issue or problem.

Research could also be seen as the process of purposeful, systematic, objective, focused search for fact-based knowledge to reach the ultimate truth and, hence, create new knowledge that would benefit society at large.

3. Research Aims

Much effort and commitment are required to attain research aims as research is an ongoing process of searching and researching for the ultimate truth. McBurney and White (2012: 1) note " The goals of science make it different from other human activities. These include the **description** and **discovery** of **regularities**." In the abstract, scientific research aims to find out **common features** which characterize issues under investigation. But, the main goal of scientific research, according

to McBurney and White (ibid.) "is developing a **theory** to **explain facts and laws**. Science may be considered a **problem-solving activity**".

Arthur et al. (2012: 9) spell out the four aims of research. These include:

3.1. Scientific: This kind of research sets out to understand the world, to build, test and support theory, to discover or create knowledge (ibid.). Scientific research undertakes to review critically previous knowledge, expand it, recreate it, and enrich it. Scientific research could be likened to a bicycle: If it does not move forward, it falls down.

3.2. Political: This research aims to change the world. [...] Research funders increasingly call for research to have an "impact" (ibid.). The international community tries to cooperate to fight global warming, diseases such as COVID-19, and improve quality of life, etc.

3.3. Therapeutic: Such a research sets out to help individuals [...] the individuals are participants in the research. (ibid.). The ultimate aim of research is to seek to heal patients and relieve their pain or discomfort.

3.4. Esthetic: Saunders (cited ibid.) states that esthetic aim sets out "to affirm, or represent human experience, to "engage, surprise, shock, delight, connect the unconnected, stir the memory and fertilise the unconscious" or "to communicate something ultimately unsayable". The esthetical aim targets to stimulate emotions.

A good example would be Bacon's story:

In the year of our Lord 1432, there arose a grievous quarrel among the brethren over the number of teeth in the mouth of a horse. For thirteen days the disputation raged without ceasing. All the ancient books and chronicles were fetched out, and wonderful and ponderous erudition such as was never before heard of in this region was made manifest. At the beginning of the fourteenth day, a youthful friar of goodly bearing asked his learned superiors for permission to add a word, and straightway, to the wonderment of the disputants, whose deep wisdom he sore vexed, he beseeched them to unbend in a manner coarse and unheard-of and to look in the open mouth of a horse and find answer to their questionings. At this, their dignity being grievously hurt, they waxed exceeding wroth; and, joining in a mighty uproar, they flew upon him and smote him, hip and thigh, and cast him out forthwith. For, said they, surely Satan hath tempted this bold neophyte to declare unholy and unheard-of ways of finding truth, contrary to all the teachings of the fathers. After many days more of grievous astrife, the dove of peace sat on the assembly, and they as one man declaring the problem to be an everlasting mystery because of a grievous dearth of historical and theological evidence thereof, so ordered the same writ down."

From personal experience and despite its challenging 17th English diction, this "funny" story attracts students' interest, goads their curiosity, and stimulates their imagination.



4. Features of Research

Unlike other human activities, scientific/ academic research has a certain number of characteristics. Arthur et al. (2012: 11) mention six (6) characteristics of research. These are:

4.1. Critical: Research does not take occurred issues for granted. Rather, it is self-evaluative in that it undertakes to verify "explanations" by applying the principle of skepticism (i.e, doubt). Everything is relative, and nothing is absolute.

4.2. Systematic: Research is an orderly process which follows a fixed pattern of steps. It is essentially "a deliberate, planned, intentional activity" (ibid.).

4.3. Transparent: Research is public not private in the sense that " its aims, methods, assumptions, data, and claims are stated explicitly and clearly" (ibid.). Research findings need be shared with the scientific community first, then made public.

4. Evidential: Research is fundamentally fact-based; it is to come up with evidence to back up one's claims. It needs to "appeal to evidence" (ibid.)

4.5. Theoretical: Research is theory-based and theory-oriented. Arthur et al. (ibid.) state " research is guided by theory and seeks to build and test theory". Differently stated, research is based on what other pioneers have produced and seeks to produce documented new knowledge.

4.6. Original: An original research is the one which has not as yet been carried out previously or elsewhere in the same manner. It "adds to existing knowledge" (ibid.) in a **significant** way.



Other characteristics of research that Arthur and his fellow researchers seem to have ignored, and which are *by no means* less important, are that research should be ethical, objective and unbiased. The latter qualities are discussed below:

4.7. Ethical: Research needs to abide by strict moral obligations and values such as academic/ scientific integrity or maltreatment of human or animal subjects.

4.8. Objective and Unbiased: Research cannot be unduly biased, influenced by certain way of thinking, or emotionally controlled. It is cerebral. Researchers need be dispassionate and detached of personal biases, stereotypes, taken-for-granted beliefs, and preconceived ideas.

5. Research Uses

Since research is a systematic, fact-finding process, it is absolutely necessary for researchers to rigorously sort out things. Wallimann (2011: 8-9) outlines the operations that researchers carry out to find out facts and ultimately the hidden truth. These are:

5.1. Categorize: Research seek to box issues, objects, findings into typologies.

5.2. Describe: Relying on observation, researchers try to "examine situations to establish what is the norm" (ibid.). In other words, researchers address the following: "What can be predicted to happen again under the same circumstances?" (ibid.)

5.3. Explain: Researchers should aim to interpret complex issues.

5.4. Evaluate: To evaluate refers to the quality of making educated judgments. Researchers, therefore, try to make "judgements about the quality of objects or events" (ibid.)

5.5. Compare: By comparing and contrasting, researchers outline similarities and differences.

5.6. Correlate: To correlate derives from Latin meaning establishing relationships between or among variables. It is to try to address the extent to which variables have an impact on one another.

5.7. Predict: Normally, under similar circumstances, future outcomes could be predicted.

5.8. Control: Once the correlation between variables is understood and established, finding ways to put them under control becomes inevitable.

6. Typology of Research

According to Arthur and his fellow researchers (2012: 9), research could be categorized into:

6.1. Basic/ Pure Research vs. Applied Research: Basic (or pure) research is conducted for the advancement of knowledge, with no concern about whether the research is directly or immediately useful in any way (ibid.). Differently stated, basic research is conducted for research's sake. Applied research aims to put research findings to good use for the wider public.

6.2. Empirical Research vs. Theoretical Research: Empirical research attempts to establish factual knowledge by providing general rules that ultimately govern natural phenomena. Navikov and Navikov (2013: 22) corroborate "Empirical acquisition of knowledge is the only way to the truth". Theoretical/ conceptual research, on the other hand, tries to "focus on concept or theory that explains and describes the phenomenon" (ibid.). Unlike empirical research, theoretical

research does not resort to experimentation. Rather, it relies on observation and aims at generalizations (ibid.). It is noteworthy to mention that both empirical and theoretical are "inherently interconnected" (ibid.). Jonker and Pennick (2010: 27) affirm that research cannot possibly be carried out without theory.

6.3. Nomothetic Research vs. Ideographic Research: In Ancient Greek, *nomos* refers to "the law". Nomothetic research is "[...] directed towards the discovery of general laws [...] such laws will allow researchers to make predictions" (ibid.). By understanding and explaining common cases, nomothetic researchers will be able to extend their conclusions to include further cases. Ideographic research, however, focuses on studying individual cases "in considerable length" (Navikov and Navikov 2013:22) hence "ideo", belonging to individual. Arthur *et al.* (2012:10) note "It aims to understand what is unique and distinctive about a particular context, case or individual".

6.4. Interventional Research vs. Descriptive Research: By definition, interventional research is all about the intervention (or introduction) of some change and study its effects. Descriptive research attempts to "provide information" (Wang and Park 2016: 85) describing "what is, without attempting to change it" (Arthur *et al.* 2012: 10).

7. The Nature of the Research Methodology Course

One proverb claims: To teach one must know the nature of those whom one is teaching. This proverb holds true in education in general and in research methodology course in particular. If EFL students are not gradually eased into the course, they would experience dramatic gaps that would eventually prevent them from attaining satisfactory levels. The nature of the course is too technical as it is the case of Math and, therefore, poses serious

problems to non-native students of English. Research methodology course is after all "tricky" for many. According to Murtonen and Lehtinen (2005), research methodology is perceived by Finnish students as a challenging subject.

One of the challenges of the research methodology course lies in teachers' reliance on theory, which bombards student researchers with conflicting views and gibberish terminology preventing them, thus, from a coherent vision and meaningfulness of the content of the course. The other challenge seems to derive from researchers' discriminatory stereotypes that certain designs are more scientifically prestigious than others, which leaves student researchers with a feeling of uneasiness if their choice tends to be less experimental. Yet another challenge is statistics: Student researchers dread calculations and all that these represent. DeMaria (2008) states "I must confess to always having viewed studying statistics as similar to a screening colonoscopy; I knew it was important and good for me, but there was little that was pleasant or fun about it". Overall, despite its necessity, research methodology with its intricate, complex, and conflicting views leaves no room for an entertaining experience.

8. Challenges facing EFL student researchers

Algerian EFL student researchers' educational career has been chaotic for most. The Algerian curriculum is not graded, crowded (too many lessons), and delivered poorly by teachers whose main concern is not to teach students but to complete planned course content. To train EFL students to become professionals, a host of measures are necessary. In the following section, five elements in the enhancement of research professionalism are discussed.

8.1. Supervision

Supervision refers to the process of advising, guiding, mentoring and supporting student researchers in the process of research from inception to completion. The graph below illustrates the roles of supervisor

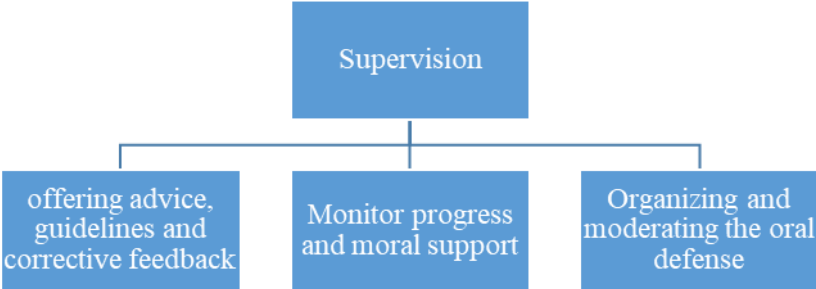


Fig.1. Tasks/ roles of supervisors

Supervision is not an easy task; it requires engagement on both the supervisor's and student researcher's parts. Supervisors are expected to offer advice, guidelines, and corrective feedback to help student researchers overcome challenges that come across their way. They are also expected to monitor student researchers' progress; if left to their own devices student researchers may never complete their research. By setting timelines for the completion of chapters and conducting experimentations and seeing that student researchers respect those set timelines will help them progress in the completion of their research. Black dogs, to put it in Churchill's terms are those moments of desperation and loss of motivation can be debilitating in the process of research. Supervisors need be there to support student researchers. Supervisors are also at the heart of setting the examination board that would examine student researchers' research.

It is most unfortunate to point out that some supervisors do not take supervision seriously. In the periodic supervision meetings, they focus on student researchers' inability to complete satisfactorily a set task. A supervisor confided in an interview for the purpose of this research paper conference paper "Master 2 students' are lazy and expect me to write for them their theses. I have to be "tough" to urge them to work". Some supervisors ask their candidates to submit a final copy which they browse and provide candidates with general feedback guidelines such as: Mind your grammar, restate your hypothesis, or rewrite a longer abstract, etc. Such poor supervision will be of little help.

8.2. Poor Study Skills

By definition study skills are skills which are concerned with the process of studying. Skills such as time management, note-taking, completing reading assignments, mind-mapping, revision strategies, online access, and preparation for tests, etc. are necessary for a meaningful and engaging higher education career.

A supervisor noted that her candidates suffer terribly from poor study skills. According to her, her candidates are unable to summarize or paraphrase a simple text. They seem to engage in plagiarism easily. Another interviewed teacher sounded frustrated because her candidates could not respect deadlines and poorly managed their time. She complained that she often rewrites parts of her candidates' theses as they either plagiarize or wrote and delivered unreadable materials. Many interviewees pointed out that despite clear instruction most candidates are unable to stick to one referencing system.

8.3. Poor Research Skills

Research skills refer to the ability to collect information from primary and secondary sources either from libraries or online sources, analyze, interpret, organize and present data, etc. These skills are important to conduct research and short of having a firm hold in them, there are risks of "miscarriage" of research.

Algerian EFL student researchers are poorly equipped to conduct research according to the norms set by academic circles. It is not out of experience to note that in the fieldwork section of master's 2 students' theses that some question-items are irrelevant and poorly discussed. Oftentimes, student researchers are categorical while their findings do not suggest so.

8.4. Linguistic Incompetence

By and large, students do not come into English because they would like to start a career in English studies. Most of them are streamed into English departments through a computer software program that streams according to highest scores in the BAC results and a list of students' "wishes".

Most EFL student researchers struggle with English grammar and spelling. An interviewed teacher bitterly stated that he wished that theses had to be dropped because- if not plagiarized- they are replete with linguistic inconsistencies: grammatical and orthographic errors, mechanics of writing are violated more often than not. Supervisors complain that most of their time is spent on correcting writing errors.

Master's 2 theses are poorly crafted and delivered confessed all the interviewed supervisors to the extent that they felt frustrated.



8.5. Poor Academic Writing Skills

Academic writing has strict rules: brevity, accuracy, and stylistic appropriateness. It is claimed that student researchers' written productions are replete with redundancy, inaccuracy, poor word choice, informality, and L1 stylistic interference.

Algerian EFL student researchers are poorly taught to write appropriately in L1 (Arabic), second language (French) or foreign language (English). Curriculum developers in Algeria dread the writing skill because its teaching seems too time consuming. This explains why it is disregarded and left to later stages, which in the long run has created very poor writers.

9. Conclusion

In the abstract, research is an inborn quality of humans. Academic and scientific research is not random. Rather, it is a conscious, systematic, rigorous if flexible process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data by using books (i.e., relevant literature) in libraries, research skills and measurement techniques. Short of a complete mastery of the research skills and awareness of what makes a thorough research, all the undertaking would be meaningless. Most student researchers (namely, master's students, are unable to undertake research according to the norms set by prestigious research and development institutions. It is recommended that a research methodology course backed up by well developed curriculum in academic writing need be implemented as from first years module. Teachers need be trained to supervise in accordance with the guidelines of prestigious institutions. The portrait of the Algerian EFL higher education researcher portrays a poorly clad,

shabby looking, and disenchanted young man whose prospects are grim.

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