

Common Mistakes in Master Dissertations Made by EFL Students at DjilaliBounaama, KhemisMiliana University

الأخطاء الشائعة في رسائل الماجستير لطلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بجامعة جيلالي بونعاما خميس مليانة

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Abstract:

This study explores the different mistakes that EFL students make while writing up their master dissertation. It aims to understand the nature of these mistakes and address them from the student's perspective. Twenty second-year master students from the department of English at the University of DjilaliBounaama, KhemisMiliana, were invited to attend focus group sessions. All of the research participants are one month away from dissertation submission, which allowed them to provide more insights about the topic. Qualitative thematic analysis is the method used to analyse data. Verbal data from the focus groups was transcribed to facilitate thematic analysis, generating codes and building themes. The findings from this study showed that EFL master students make several types of mistakes while writing up their dissertations. The mistakes are related to language proficiency, literature review synthesis, the research process, and failure to follow citation guidelines.

Keywords: Dissertation writing, Common mistakes, EFL master students, Research skills.

ملخص:

تستكشف هذه الدراسة الأخطاء المختلفة التي يرتكبها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية أثناء كتابة أطروحات الماجستير. وتهدف إلى فهم طبيعة هذه الأخطاء ومعالجتها من وجهة نظر الطالب. دُعي عشرون طالبًا من طلاب السنة الثانية ماستر من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة الجليلي بونعاما بخميس مليانة لحضور جلسات مجموعات التركيز. وكان جميع المشاركين في البحث على بعد شهر واحد من تقديم الأطروحة مما أتاح لهم تقديم المزيد من الرؤى حول الموضوع. التحليل الموضوعي النوعي هو المنهج المستخدم لتحليل البيانات. وقد تم تفرغ البيانات الشفهية من مجموعات التركيز لتسهيل التحليل الموضوعي وتوليد الرموز وبناء الموضوعات. أظهرت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن طلاب الماجستير في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية يرتكبون عدة أنواع من الأخطاء أثناء كتابة أطروحاتهم. وترتبط هذه الأخطاء بإتقان اللغة، وتوليف المراجعة الأدبية، وعملية البحث، وعدم اتباع إرشادات الاقتباس. الكلمات المفتاحية: كتابة الأطروحة، الأخطاء الشائعة، طلاب الماجستير في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، مهارات البحث.

1.Introduction:

Writing a master dissertation is a significant step in the academic career of university students. It is a requirement that the students need to meet as a part of their master degree studies. Before reaching the stage of writing a dissertation, the students usually

receive trainings through different lectures at the university in grammar, academic writing, research methodology, ethics, and so many other lectures that will help guide the students to write up their master dissertation. However, writing a master dissertation is still a hard and challenging academic task (Huang, 2007). According to Tiwari (2019), identifying a research topic, collecting and analysing data, and discussing findings can be a challenge to EFL students. Therefore, this research is looking at the different difficulties that EFL master students at DjilaliBounaama, KhemisMiliana University, encounter during dissertation writing. It looks at the common mistakes that the students make while writing up their dissertations. The study is tackling the topic from the students' perspective and tends to answer the following questions:

- a) What are the common mistakes that EFL master students at DBKM university make while dissertation writing?
- b) What are the recommendations that should be considered to overcome these mistakes?

2. Literature review:

EFL master students at DjilaliBounaama, KhemisMiliana University, study academic writing as a part of the curriculum. During the writing sessions, the students usually learn about grammar, sentence structure, and how to write paragraphs and essays. By the end of the academic year, the students are supposed to write a well-structured piece of writing. Research methodology is also another lecture that the students attend throughout all their years of studies at the university. In this module, the students learn research techniques that include how to collect and analyse data, write a literature review, and draw conclusions. This guides the students to produce well-structured research that respects the methodologies followed in academic research. Although the students receive training in how to write academically, respecting the methodological aspect of academic research, students are still making mistakes while writing dissertations (Gurel, 2012). The mistakes are usually in both form and content of the research (Qasem and Zayid 2019). So, the students usually encounter several challenges while writing their dissertations, and this includes language proficiency (El Fadda, 2012).

According to Zaid (2016), "in thesis and dissertation writing when English is not the students' native language, the writing problems can be more than just linguistic matters" (p. 23). Therefore, students can make language-related errors that include mistakes in grammar and limited knowledge of proper citation techniques (Yanti, 2018). This may lead to plagiarism that happens when the students fail to acknowledge the authors of the quotations that they are referring to in the literature review section (Yanti, 2018).

There are several previous studies that looked at the different challenges that EFL students face during dissertation writing. A study by Shahsavar and Kourepaz (2020) focused on the problems that the students encounter during the production of literature reviews. The findings from this study showed that the students were unable to synthesise the literature related to their studies and unable to explain or elaborate on the previous studies related to their research.

Another study by Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) looked at the difficulties that face English as a second language postgraduate students in writing the discussion section. The findings from this research showed that the students are unable to discuss the findings from their research in relation to the literature review. Another study by Abedrabou (2022) that looked at the different challenges that Palestinian students face while writing their thesis. The findings from this research showed that the students faced many challenges during dissertation writing that include lack of training in research methodology, poor linguistic and academic writing production, and citation challenges. In the same context, another study by Aboud et al. (2019) looked at the challenges faced by Arab doctoral students in dissertation writing. The findings from this study showed that the students lacked knowledge and experience in research methods, along with a lack of English proficiency.

Gurel (2011) explored the different challenges faced by EFL students in dissertation writing within the Turkish context. The findings from this study showed that EFL Turkish students failed to communicate and discuss their research ideas in English. Therefore, several language difficulties occurred, such as the lack of writing skills, poor sentence structure, and grammatical mistakes. Another study by Yanti (2018) examined 10 research proposals of undergraduate EFL students from the university of Lotus, Indonesia. The findings from this study showed that the students make mistakes in relation to citations, and the study recommended providing more guidelines about citations (Yanti, 2018).

There are also several studies that tackled the challenges in writing dissertations faced by EFL students within the Algerian context. Bakhou and Bouhania (2021) explored the experiences of EFL students in writing their master dissertation. The study was qualitative, where 15 students from the department of English at Adrar University were interviewed. The findings from this study showed that the students have difficulties in the writing process, language-related difficulties, along with obstacles in the supervisory process. Another study conducted within the Algerian context as well is the study by Gouar (2019). The study was conducted with Master Two students of English at Badji Mokhtar University, Annaba, using a questionnaire as a research tool. The findings from this study showed that the students have difficulties in the writing skill and in the research process itself.

This study is looking at the different mistakes that EFL master students at DjilaliBounaama, KhenisMiliana University, make while writing up their dissertations. Unlike the previous studies in the field, this study is using focus groups to collect qualitative data. Focus groups allow the researcher to get as much data as possible to cover the research questions, and at the same time, the research participants benefit from the fruitful discussions within the focus group. This may allow them to correct the different mistakes spotted in their dissertations after the discussion and, therefore, submit a dissertation of good academic quality.

3. Research Methodology

To answer the research questions, focus groups are used as a data collection tool to collect qualitative data for this research. They are very important to gain information and experiences about the different mistakes that the students make while writing up

their dissertations. According to Bryman (2016), small samples are appropriate for qualitative research. Thus, twenty second year master students of English from the University of DjilaliBounaama, KhemisMiliana University, were invited to attend focus group sessions. The sample for this research is purposive. A purposive sample is when the researcher “does not seek to sample research participants on a random basis” (Bryman, 2016, p.408). Therefore, the sample for this research is not randomly selected because it is directly related to the research questions. The participants of this research fall under the criterion sampling approach, which is “sampling all units (cases or individuals) that meet a particular criterion” (Bryman, 2016, p.409). therefore, the findings from this research will be generalized on those populations who have the same criteria as this research’s sample.

The research participants are one month away from dissertation submissionwhich means that they already have written most of the chapters of their dissertations. They were asked to bring their dissertations with them to the focus group sessions so that they can share their experiences of dissertation writing by referring to some parts of their dissertations whenever it is needed. A total of four focus groups session were run as a part of the data collection process for this research. Each focus group contains five students, and each meeting lasts about two hours. English was the language used during the discussions. The sessions were recorded, and verbal data were transcribed manually to facilitate the data analysis process.

The research participants were given an information sheet that explains the nature and the aims of the research. The information sheet helped the potential participants to take a decision regarding their participation in the study. They also signed a consent form that contains a detailed clarification of the data collection process and that declares their agreement to take part in the research. During the data analysis process, the students real names were not mentioned; pseudonyms were used instead. The records and the transcripts were saved in a secured folder on a computer protected with a password.This research would not cause any physical or emotional harm to the participants.

Thematic analysis is considered as a significant method of data analysis for qualitative research. The data collected for this study were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used for “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 79). After transcribing the data collected from the focus groups, codes were identified. These codes were categorised later on into themes. Each theme is explained and supported by excerpts said by the research participants.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings from this research showed that EFL master students make mistakes while writing up their dissertations. The mistakes are related to language proficiency, the research process, and poor citation techniques. The findings identified from the data are explained and discussed as follows:

4.1 Mistakes Related to Literature Review Synthesis:

The findings from this research showed that the students find it difficult to point out the gap in the literature review. Most of the students spend a lot of time and efforts to make connections among concepts in order to identify the research gap. It is still, though, a hard process for them.

Excerpt 1: “It is so hard to read and link all those concepts together, some of them are really hard to be understood let alone linking it to other concepts”.

Excerpt 2: “Yes, I agree; I spent a lot of time trying to just identify the gap”.

Excerpt 3: “Identifying the gap is a huge step in the research; I tried hard with my other friends and supervisor to identify, we spent so many weeks in the library trying to work on the rationale of the study that will lead us to identify the gap, I can say we hardly managed to build the idea”.

Excerpt 4: “It took me reading more than 30 books and articles and website articles to formulate a good idea for this research”.

The students are also unable to develop themes and connections within the literature. I asked the research participants to list the most concepts and the previous studies they included in the literature review chapter. Most of them included just definitions of different keywords related to the research without any reference to the previous studies in the field. Few of them included some previous studies in the field of their study but failed to build a strong connection among the concepts, previous studies, and the study under investigation.

Excerpt 5: “I just included definitions and types of code mixing”.

Excerpt 6: “Oh! Shall we include studies that were done in the field before? [...] I just included information about the topic from different sources that explain the topic”.

Excerpt 7: “I am aware that we should include the previous studies, but I don’t know how to include them [...] I feel like I am writing a random piece of writing that contains information from here and there, most importantly covering the research topic”.

Excerpt 8: “I referred to the common theories in the field of our research, but I did not mention the previous studies”.

The findings also revealed that the students are unable to organise their ideas. While writing the literature, most of them do not know which section of the literature should be placed first in the chapter and which section should be placed second. Therefore, most of the students write the literature in a random way rather than a systematic way which may affect the quality of the dissertation.

Excerpt 9: “I sometimes lose the flow of ideas; therefore, I lose the truck while writing the literature”.

Excerpt 10: “It is hard to identify which section should be placed first... I was unable to organise the sections”.

The findings also show that the students are including low-quality sources. Most of them use sources that may affect the quality of the literature review. Thus, this may lead to the exclusion of some fundamental concepts related to the research.

Excerpt 11: “I look for information online using websites”.

Excerpt 12: “It is hard to access articles; most of them are paid, and this is why we rely on other sources like blogs and websites [...] even the information is sometimes hard to be understood, and this is why we rely on videos through different platforms to understand the idea”.

Excerpt 13: “I use YouTube videos to help understand the concept, then I explain it”.

The findings from this research showed that EFL master students from Djilali Bounaama, Khemis Miliana University, make mistakes related to the synthesis of the literature review. This finding is supported by Shahsavar & Kourepaz (2020), who stated that the students are unable to synthesise the literature and are unable to build connections among the concepts in relation to their research topic. Bakhou and Bouhania (2021) and Gouar (2019) also supported this finding and indicated that EFL master students within the Algerian context face difficulties in the writing process.

4.2 Mistakes Related to the Research Process

The findings from this research showed that the students have poor background about the research process. Many of them are not aware of the different strategies that should be followed as a part of the research process. The students do not distinguish between the types of qualitative and quantitative research methods. For example, when the students were asked about the different types of sampling methods, some of their answers were as follows:

Excerpt 14: “I thought that we just choose a sample and interview them”.

Excerpt 15: “The sample is randomly selected, this is what we always think of samples”.

Excerpt 16: “Yes, I thought that the sample of the research was selected on a random basis, I never thought of following certain rules to select the sample I am including in my research [...] just knowing who are the people you will be interviewing just go ahead and interview them [...] never thought of sampling as a complicated process with certain rules to be followed”.

Most of the research participants also do not distinguish between the qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. They were asked to name a list of qualitative data collection methods and another list of quantitative data collection methods. Some of their answers are as follows:

Excerpt 17: “Qualitative: interviews, questionnaire Quantitative: statistiques”.

Excerpt18: “Qualitative: semi-structured interviews, observation, survey. Quantitative: questionnaire, interviews”.

Excerpt19: “Qualitative: interview, observation. Quantitative:survey, observation, interview”.

Excerpt20: “Qualitative: semi-structured interviews, focus groups, documents likeletters and novels. Quantitative: questionnaire, survey”.

Thus, most of the students are not aware of the different types of data collection methods and which method follows the qualitative or quantitative research strategy. For example, they refer to interviews as a data collection method for qualitative research but not semi-structured interview. This indicates that most of the students do not give the research methods their exact names as they are common in the research methodology books. The findings also show that the students are not aware of the data analysis methods, whether the research is qualitative or quantitative.

Excerpt 21: “The data analysis process is a little bit unclear for me”.

Excerpt 22: “I think we just describe the answers of the interviews and elaborate on them”.

Excerpt 23: “We turn data into tables and charts and then explain them”.

The students are not also aware of the philosophical part of research methodology. When the students were asked about the different epistemologies, methodologies, and ontologies related to their research, all of them denied that they were aware of this.

Excerpt 24: “I have no idea about this”.

Excerpt 25: “never heard of the philosophical part of research methodology”.

Excerpt 26: “We never dealt with this in research methodology lessons”.

The findings also show that the discussion of the findings is a challenging process for the students. The students are not aware of the correct process of the discussion of the findings. They just give another description of the findings and present it as the discussion section.

Excerpt 27: “I think we just give a short summary of our research findings where we highlight what we are bringing from our research, kind of what is the new thing that we brought and what contribution we are providing”.

Excerpt 28: “it is that kind of process where we Reexplain the data analysis in other words, but this time we just highlight the most important elements that were raised from the data which we analysed, but this time we highlight them without referring to quotations from the data”.

Excerpt 29: “I have no idea how to do it, I have not started the data analysis stage yet, but my research data is ready, I am still familiarizing myself with the data as my supervisor asked”.

Excerpt 30: “The process of discussing the findings seems challenging and hard to achieve”.

Only one student said that the discussion of the findings is the stage where the researchers provide answers to the research questions and explain the process of how the research aims were achieved.

Excerpt 31: “We answer the research questions [...] we fulfil the research aims”.

Therefore, the majority of Master Two students of English are not aware of the process of discussing the findings.

Master Two students of English from the University of Djilali Bounaama, Khemis Miliana, face difficulties in the research process that led to making mistakes in the choice of the research strategies and the research methods. The findings are supported by Aboud et al. (2019), who indicated that the students have poor knowledge about the research methods. The findings also agree with the study by Bitchener & Basturkmen (2006), which reported that the students face difficulties in discussing the findings from their studies and are unable to link, discuss, and relate them to the previous studies in the field of their study. The study is reinforced also by Abedrabu (2022), who specified that EFL learners lack the training in research methodology.

4.3 Failure to Follow Citation Guidelines:

The findings from this research showed that the research participants are not aware of the correct guidelines for citation and referencing styles. Most of them face difficulties in doing the in-text citation according to the APA style.

Excerpt 32: “I feel that we cannot keep track of the in-text citations; I sometimes verify them, but for some citations I forget to work on them, or simply I don’t know how to work on them even when I am following the guide, especially when the quotation is from a source of multiple authors”.

Excerpt 33: “My friend used APA style in the literature review and research methodology chapters, and I used MLA style in the rest of the chapters; luckily the supervisor was there to guide us”.

Excerpt 34: “I always have a problem working on a lot of authors of the same work [...] the list of references is so hard to work on”.

The findings also show that the research participants lacked the experience and the skill in working on the list of references. Most of the students do the list of references manually and are not aware of the different citation machines that may help them to work on the list of references automatically. Therefore, the students put in a lot of time

and effort to finish the list of references, which may lead to making a lot of mistakes in providing the full source with accurate information and correct form respecting the APA guidelines.

Excerpt 35: “To work on the list of references is a very hard task; I wish we learnt more about them”.

Excerpt 36: “Working on the list of references is the hardest part of the research, eventhough I work hard to include all the sources I used in my research, my supervisor in a magical way always discovers that I am missing some sources from the list of references”.

Excerpt 37: “I heard of Zotero but never tried to work with it... I do the list of references in a traditional manual way”.

EFL master students from the university of DjilaliBounaama, KhemisMiliaana, make mistakes related to the in-text citation and the list of references section. This finding is supported by the study of Abedrabu (2022), which indicated that EFL learners face citation challenges, and the study by Yanti (2018), which indicated that the students commit mistakes related to the citations.

4.4 Language-related Mistakes:

The findings from this research showed that the research participants make many language-related mistakes while writing up their master dissertations. Orthographic errors that include spelling and typing mistakes are probably the most common mistakes that the students make.

Excerpt 38: “My supervisor always corrects typing mistakes from my work and the problem is that even though the supervisor corrects my mistakes, I sometimes unconsciously make those very same mistakes again”.

Excerpt 39: “Yes, my supervisor referred to typing and spelling mistakes”.

The students also make syntax-related mistakes while writing up their master dissertation. The students write poorly structured sentences, which affects the writing quality of the dissertation.

Excerpt 40: “My supervisor always asks me to rephrase some sentences”.

Excerpt 41: “My friends and I were asked to reformulate the whole chapter of the literature review because of poor sentence structure, which makes the explanation of each section not clear according to the supervisor, we tried hard to work on that but till now the supervisor is still asking for reformulations throughout the whole dissertation, especially the literature review part”.

The findings also showed that the students make grammatical mistakes while writing up the dissertation. The research participants reported some types of mistakes that they

made while writing up their dissertation, like using the wrong tense, using contradictions, and mistakes related to capitalisation and punctuation.

Excerpt 42: “The supervisor asked me to change the tense throughout the chapters from the past and future tense to the present and present perfect tense”.

Excerpt 43: “I always write don’t instead of do not and isn’t instead of is not; it is like a habit that we write what we pronounce, but at the end of the day it is a mistake that we should correct”.

Excerpt 44: “Capitals and punctuation are usually the two common mistakes that the supervisor always refers to”.

Excerpt 45: “capitals is always a problem for me, but spelling the word “and” capitalized at the beginning of the sentence was really a big problem although the supervisor referred to that so many times but I still am doing it”.

EFL masters students from the University of DjilaliBounaama, KhemisMiliana, make mistakes related to the language. This finding is consistent with the findings from Aboud et al. (2019) that claimed that the students lack English proficiency in dissertation writing. The findings are also aligned with the study by Gurel (2011), which indicated that EFL students face language-related difficulties in writing dissertations, and this includes a lack of writing skills, poor sentence structure, and grammatical mistakes. This finding is also supported by Abedrabu (2022), who claimed that EFL learners have poor linguistic and academic writing production.

5. Conclusion

The current study investigated the different mistakes that M2 EFL students at DjilaliBounaama, KhemisMiliana University, make during dissertation writing. The study has identified four common mistakes among the research participants. First, the poor linguistic background of the students leads to poor quality of the dissertations. Thus, the students make mistakes related to the different aspects of the language. Second, the lack of knowledge about the research methodology process affects the quality of the research. Therefore, the students make mistakes that are related to the research methodologies and research methods that are related to their research. Third, the students make mistakes related to the literature synthesis, the organisation of the chapter ideas, and building connections to the previous studies in the field of their research. Last, EFL students at DjilaliBounaama University are not aware of the citation techniques, mainly the APA style that the department of English is following in the criteria of writing a master dissertation. Thus, they make mistakes in the in-text citation and in the list of references.

This research suggests recommendations to students, supervisors, and higher education institutions within the Algerian context. Firstly, EFL students need to focus more on developing their writing and research skills. They are also recommended to follow the supervisors’ instructions during the supervisory process. Second, supervisors need to focus more on the problems that were previously mentioned in this research. They also need to provide more guidance about the research process. Supervisory meetings are also very important for the students and the supervisors. The arrangements of regular supervisory

meetings along with constructive feedback from the supervisors lead to the improvement of the dissertations' quality. Thirdly, higher education institutions should provide the needed equipment and resources for the students and supervisors that may facilitate the dissertation writing process. It is also recommended to run trainings and workshops by higher education institutions for students and supervisors in research skills and the writing process.

Finally, this research is a qualitative study that used focus groups as a data collection method with a small number of EFL students from the University of DjilaliBounaama, KhemisMiliana, and does not provide any numerical findings. Conducting more quantitative research will allow us to provide more insights into the topic. Also, the study was conducted from the students' perspective' and looking at the study from the supervisors' perspective will help understanding the topic from a different angle.

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