Challenges Encountered by EFL Students in Writing their Master Dissertation The Case of Second-year Master Students at Frères Mentouri University, Constantine 1

Received: 13/12/2024; **Accepted:** 09/06/2025

Sabrina BOUHALI[1*], Riad BELOUAHEM[2]

[1] *Department of Letters and the English Language, Frères Mentouri University Constantine 1, (Algeria), bouhali_sabrina@hotmail.com*
[2] *Department of Letters and the English Language, Frères Mentouri University Constantine 1, (Algeria), riad.belouahem@hotmail.com*

Abstract

The present study aims at investigating the challenges encountered by Second-year Master students at the Department of English, at Frères Mentouri University, Constantine 1, during the dissertation writing process. The sample consisted of 61 second-year Master students enrolled in the department during the academic year 2023-2024. The data were collected through an Online questionnaire which was sent to the students via e-mail and WhatsApp. The findings revealed that the students faced many challenges among which was finding the related literature, choosing the appropriate methodology, as well as collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. This study suggests that students' awareness of the conventions that govern the writing of a dissertation should be raised, and that the students need an additional training on how to get access to reliable databases, how to manipulate the different referencing techniques, and how to use the different data collection and data analysis tools.

Keywords

Academic writing;
Dissertation writing;
Challenges in writing a Master Dissertation;
Second-Year Master Students.

التحديات التي يواجهها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية أثناء كتابة مذكرة الماستر، طلاب السنة الثانية ماستر بجامعة الإخوة منتوري قسنطينة 1 أنموذجا

ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى كشف الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب السنة الثانية ماستر بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة الإخوة منتوري، قسنطينة 1، أثناء عملية كتابة مذكرة التخرج. وتكونت العينة من 61 طالباً مسجلا في السنة الثانية ماستر بعنوان السنة الجامعية2023- 2024 . تم جمع البيانات من خلال استبيان إلكتروني تم إرساله إلى الطلاب عبر البريد الإلكتروني والواتساب. كشفت النتائج عن وجود العديد من الصعوبات التي واجهت الطلاب، من بينها إيجاد الدراسات السابقة ذات الصلة، واختيار المنهجية المناسبة، بالإضافة إلى جمع البيانات وتحليلها وتفسيرها. تشير هذه الدراسة أنه ينبغي رفع مستوى الوعي لدى الطلاب حول المبادئ التي تحكم كتابة المذكرة، وأنهم (الطلاب) بحاجة إلى تدريب إضافي حول كيفية الوصول إلى قواعد البيانات الموثوقة، وكيفية التعامل مع تقنيات التوثيق المختلفة، وكيفية استخدام أدوات جمع البيانات وتحليلها.

الكلمات المفتاحية

كتابة أكاديمية؛
كتابة مذكرة التخرج؛
تحديات اثناء كتابة مذكرة الماستر؛
طلاب السنة الثانية ماستر.

* *Corresponding author. E-mail: bouhali_sabrina@hotmail.com*
Doi:

© Constantine 1 University, Algeria, 2025.
E-ISSN: 2588-2007 ---Journal homepage: *http://revue.umc.edu.dz/index.php/h*

I- Introduction

Being discipline-governed, writing, in academia, is a complex task that requires not only mastery of some writing skills but also possession of some knowledge of the rules and conventions that govern particular fields and domains. Writing a dissertation, as one of the academic genres, is no exception, for it is a long process that begins with the selection of a topic, passes through conducting a literature review, selecting the research approach, devising research instruments, collecting data, analyzing and presenting information, and ends with the production of a well-written piece of writing. This long process may pose problems to undergraduate students—who are supposed to conduct a research work to obtain a Master degree—by making the research journey tiring, full of challenges and difficulties. This study aims at answering the following question: What are the challenges second-year Master students, in the Department of English, at Frères Mentouri University, Constantine 1, encountered in writing their dissertations? The paper opens with a literature review of writing a dissertation (aims, stages, and difficulties), then, considers closely the field work and its findings.

I.1. Writing a Dissertation

Students, at the end of their undergraduate experience, are expected to write a final-year product: a dissertation. It is, according to Hyland (2009), one of the assessing genres in academia that is directed, guided and regulated by a supervisor. In fact, it is a long process that serves many aims/objectives, passes through several steps and is affected by many factors which may pose difficulties to undergraduate students who will undoubtedly encounter many challenges during the dissertation writing process. All these are best discussed in the next subsections.

I.1.1. Aims for Writing a Dissertation

After being scaffolded, trained and supported by some research courses, undergraduate students are expected to write a dissertation to develop their intellectual skills. This cannot be achieved without giving some freedom to students who have to prove their independence in research which is "largely demonstrated by conducting a project and presenting the results in written and oral forms" (Hyland, 2009, p.139). In fact providing the opportunity for students to be independent is the main aim for writing the dissertation, for it leads to the realization of other objectives such as 1) enabling students to investigate, in depth, a subject they have chosen and are interested in; 2) encouraging them to be clear and deep in the analysis of the problem and arrangement of ideas; 3) providing them with the opportunity to learn how to collect data (the use of bibliographies, and getting access to libraries and library reference systems), and how to collect new data (interviews, questionnaires, etc.); and 4) improving their skills in using, presenting and communicating data (Naoum, 2007). Therefore, and as summarized by Hyland (2009), the purpose behind writing a dissertation is to assess students' ability to apply the methods and theories they have learnt in their courses, and in reviewing the literature, conducting research, analyzing results and presenting findings.

I.1.2. The Dissertation Writing Process

Writing dissertations is a long process that requires from students a long breath and knowledge of the conventions and rules that govern this important academic research genre. However, before engaging and starting the dissertation writing, undergraduate students are required to decide about the topic they are supposed to make research about. The choice of a dissertation topic usually comes from their interest in and value of a particular subject, "which are usually interrelated" (Naoum, 2007, p.3). The selected topic will be developed later into a series of questions which students will try to find answers to. Formulating the research proposal is necessary after the topic has been selected, for it contains the rationale, the aim(s), the research questions, the hypothesis, the methodology as well as the structure of the dissertation.

The stage that follows the selection of the topic and the submission of the research proposal is *Reviewing the Literature*. It "basically involves reading and critically appraising what other people have written" (Naoum, 2007, p.5) about the students' research area. Knowing the sources of information, getting access to reliable databases, understanding how libraries work, and mastering note-taking techniques—all these—will not but ease the task of collecting the suitable and necessary information and data related to the research topic. *Research Design and Methodology* is the next stage. In this part of the dissertation writing process, students need to be knowledgeable about the approaches to and the techniques for data collection such as the questionnaires and the interviews as well as the questions to be included in each research tool. After being collected, data needs to be analyzed and results to be presented. *Analysis and Presentation of the Results* is, then, the next stage. In this, students need to be skillful in describing and, more particularly, in analyzing data by using software programs that facilitate the process of data analysis and add reliability to the research findings. The writing process ends with *Structuring the Dissertation* and the addition of the missing parts such as the Abstract, the Introduction chapter, the Conclusion chapter, and the reference list (Bibliography). After passing through all these stages, the dissertation is now ready to be submitted in order to be evaluated by the supervisor whose role is best explained in the next subsection.

I.1.3. Essential Elements of Effective Dissertation Writing

In addition to the knowledge of the rules and conventions that govern a dissertation writing, student researchers need to be adequately guided and skillfully organized. Supervision and time management are, in fact, crucial elements during the dissertation writing process.

I.1.3.1. Supervision

The role played by the supervisor, who is either allocated or chosen, during the dissertation writing process is indispensable. It is, according to Hyland (2009), to assist students, guide them, monitor their progress, and advise them on their writing or "at least on where they can get such help" (p.140). Naoum's (2007) explanation of this crucial role was more detailed. He claimed that the supervisor's duty cannot be limited to helping supervisees develop their idea/topic, focus on their aim and objectives and sharpen their research questions and/or hypothesis. It should be extended to providing them with guidance about the appropriate research approach, approving their questionnaire before they distribute it to the respondents, and assisting them in structuring their dissertation. Moreover, the supervisor should discuss and monitor their progress, provide them with feedback on their chapters, and help them present the final dissertation. However, supervisees should not expect from supervisors proofread their works, to provide them with detailed feedback, or to correct all their spelling, grammar or punctuation mistakes (Naoum, 2007).

I.1.3.2. Time Management

Time management is a prerequisite in writing a dissertation especially that researchers will be exposed to difficulties and challenges among which are falling under the impact of stress and becoming "overwhelmed with feelings that there is not enough time to complete their work adequately" (Macan et al., 1990, p.760). This, as a result, will not but negatively affect their productivity and efficiency. Time management is, therefore, defined as "deliberate actions aimed at the effective use of time to achieve specific, goal-directed activities; it is a skill necessary to maintaining scholarly productivity" (Claessens, van Eerde & Rutte, 2007; as cited in Chase et al., 2013, p.156). From this quote, it may be clear that student researchers need to "maintain focus on their work, contributing to research productivity" (Chase et al., 2013, p.155), to get rid of stress-related outcomes, and, more particularly, to be skillful in managing time and to develop strategies to effectively realize this goal.

The first strategy to be developed for time management is *Setting Goals*. For this, it is recommended to identify and record all the realistic and attainable goals/objectives the researcher wishes to achieve (Chase et al., 2013). The second strategy is *Prioritizing*; i.e. arranging goals in order of priority and to begin with the important and urgent tasks. It is recommended, in this case, to avoid "dual tasking" (working toward two or three goals simultaneously), and to prioritize non-urgent tasks if they take less than five minutes. The third strategy is *Planning.* It is crucial to plan a schedule that includes both the tasks and the actually used time; however, figuring out a plan depends on personal choices and preferences (to work on the dissertation at least three hours per day, or to write two pages per day, or to prefer working in the morning, etc.).

In addition to the strategies stated above, it is indispensable to make a periodical evaluation of the realized goals, for they help the researchers "identify possible barriers and work to minimize [them] in the future" (Chase et al., 2013, p.162) in case the objectives were not achieved within the expected time frame. Those barriers can be unimportant activities, such as meetings and electronic devices, which are both energy and time consuming, or multi-tasking activities which make the researcher feel puzzled and stressed for not being able to finish all the tasks and be on time. Other strategies may be added such as asking for help whenever needed, saving enough time to reading and proofreading the dissertation, dividing chapters into sections and subsections, and, above all, starting writing as early as possible, and taking breaks from time to time for more productivity and efficiency.

I.1.4. Difficulties in Writing a Dissertation

Writing academically proved to be a challenging and a difficult task in language learning (Nunan, 1999). Therefore, many researche studies have been conducted to discover the challenges encountered by students in writing.

The findings obtained from research conducted by Aldabbus and Almansouri (2022) revealed that both graduate and undergraduate students had some problems in academic writing such as choosing the academic words, difficulty in developing a thesis statement, organizing ideas, and writing coherent paragraphs. All these were due to low English language proficiency, lack of writing practice opportunities, and lack of resources. The latter, as stated by Rahimi and Askari Bigdeli (2014) remains challenging for postgraduate students who, despite advances in technology that facilitated access to e-books, journals, libraries and applications, still encounter problems in writing academically. However, those difficulties were in almost all types of academic discourse: Academic papers, articles, and research proposals (Al Mubarek, 2017; Mafa & Mapolisa, 2011; Wei, 2017). Theses and dissertations are no exception.

Several previous studies have been conducted to investigate the difficulties and obstacles encountered by students in writing their theses (e.g. Sariyanto et al., 2015; Swarni, 2017; Lastari, 2020; Fauziyah et al., 2021). Those difficulties ranged from choosing the appropriate language to finding the related literature and using the appropriate instruments (e.g.

Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007; Stoilescu & McDougall, 2010; Zhou, 2009; Warschauer, 2010; Disvar, 2018). Linguistic difficulties in most of the students' academic writings were also found by McGarrel and Verbeem (2007, as cited in Disvar, 2018) who attributed them to the teacher's concern in teaching research methods with little, or no, focus on academic writing. Little guidance caused also difficulties in choosing the research topic as Luse et al. (2012) explained, "Many students are not prepared enough to engage in the appropriate training needed to select a research topic" (p.143). The lack of sufficient supervisory meetings and communication with the supervisor was also challenging (e.g. Alama, Alamb, & Rasul, 2013; Kimani, 2014). Other challenges were detected by many researchers such as the lack of resources in the library and the accessibility to the authentic databases (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2017), poor planning and poor time management (Thondhlana, Mawere, &Weda, 2011), difficulties in reviewing the literature (Brailsford, 2010), and lack of knowledge of how to analyze data (Alsied &Ibrahim, 2017; Mahammoda, 2016). In addition to all these, Fitria's (2022) research findings revealed the internal factors that caused troubles to EFL students in various universities and higher institutions in Indonesia; those factors were related to the students' feelings (e.g. feeling bored, pessimistic, and doubtful of their abilities), health problems, and disability to understand the systematics of writing a thesis.

Writing dissertations is also a challenging task. As clarified by Hyland (2009), "All writers need to consider who they are writing for and adjust their prose to meet the needs of readers. Anticipating reader's expectations and responses to what they write, however, can be very difficult for novice writers" (p.134). In other words, the students' ignorance of the nature of readers (teachers, peers, or examiners), or to whom they write, may be problematic leading to the use of a non-academic informal style. Nevertheless, few studies investigated students' challenges in writing their Master dissertation especially that they are expected to prove their knowledge and independence/autonomy on the one hand, and their engagement with readers, on the other hand, through their writing.

II– Methods and Materials

The present study is a descriptive- analytic research that employs both quantitative and qualitative approaches. At the onset of this study, the following research questions were asked:

- What are the challenges that EFL Master 2 students encounter during the dissertation writing process?
- What are the main reasons/causes behind those challenges?
- What is the impact of those challenges on the students' writing?
- How do students manage to handle those challenges?

II.1. The Sample

Since the focus of the present study is dissertation writing, it is obvious that second-year Master students, who are required to prepare a graduation project to hold a Master degree, will be the target population. The participants were enrolled during the academic year 2023-2024 and graduated in the same year from the Department of English at Frères Mentouri University, Constantine 1. It is worth reminding, however, that they were specialized in two different options: Didactics of Foreign Languages and Applied Languages. Nevertheless, this has no significance or negative impact on our research, for both options share the same features of academic writing and the methodology, except the research topic that should be relevant to the academic specialization.

II.2. The Research Tool

Identifying the challenges that second-year students encountered in writing a dissertation and unveiling the causes behind them necessitate the use of a questionnaire, and more specifically an *online questionnaire*. This particular data collection research tool could be more suitable to this study, for it has many benefits: 1) It quickly reaches the participants; 2) it makes them feel at ease, encourages them to answer truthfully and freely-- especially if they are asked about sensitive issues—because of the 'respondent anonymity' feature it has, and gives them time to answer; and, above all, 3) it helps the researcher to gain time since data is quickly collected, automatically recorded, and immediately analyzed.

The online questionnaire, with twenty-seven (27) items, includes two types of questions: closed-ended (*yes/no* and *multiple-choice*) questions to obtain quantitative data, and open-ended questions to gain qualitative insights. It is divided into three sections.

Section One, including seven (7) yes/no questions, is devoted to students' knowledge of academic writing conventions. It aims at gaining some insights about whether the students are knowledgeable about 1) how to write a dissertation (and its different parts); and 2) how to use the different techniques of referring to information from other sources in a dissertation (summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting), tools of collecting data (e.g. interviews, questionnaires), as well as tools of analyzing data (e.g. charts, diagrams, SPSS, software programs). Moreover, it investigates whether they have been explicitly and sufficiently trained to use those techniques and tools. Collecting data of this kind is crucial and beneficial, for it helps to interpret and understand students' choices in the next section.

Section Two, including a total of nineteen (19) closed-ended (yes/no and multiple-choice) questions and open-ended questions (where students are asked to explain or justify their answers), is devoted to the concern of the present

study: the challenges encountered by students during the dissertation writing process. In this section, the students are asked about:

- the choice of their research topic (whether it was an easy or a difficult task);
- language aspects that posed a problem when writing the dissertation (grammatical structures, word choice, summarizing, paraphrasing, etc.);
- the parts of the dissertation (The Abstract, The General Introduction, The Review of the Literature, etc.) that were difficult to write;
- the specific section(s) in the General Introduction (Statement of the Problem, Aims of the Study, Research Questions, etc.) they found more challenging to write;
- organizing and structuring their dissertation chapters (whether they found it an easy task);
- the finding of the related literature;
- the integration of sources and citing them correctly;
- problems encountered in the practical part;
- the supervisor's guidance and support (and their effects on their writing process);
- time management;
- any other challenges they have faced during their dissertation writing process;
- the main reasons behind those challenges; and
- the impact of the encountered challenges on their overall dissertation writing experience.

Section Three is devoted to suggestions. Students are asked to suggest any ideas, techniques, or strategies –based on their experience—to ease the task of writing a dissertation for future EFL Master students.

II.3. Procedure

By using Google Forms, an online questionnaire was designed, and its link was sent via E-mail and WhatsApp to second-year Master students after their graduation. Choosing the post-graduation timing was done on purpose. First of all, the period just before the viva/graduation was characterized by stress and work under pressure, for the students were limited by time and restricted by a deadline to submit their research works; so, if the questionnaire were administrated during that period, few students, if none of them, would respond, and, as a result, it would be impossible to obtain the necessary number of responses and data required in this research. Secondly, it was important to wait until the students finish writing the whole dissertation so that more insights will be gained as far as the encountered challenges during the whole writing process are concerned. After sending the questionnaire to 152 students, answers were received from sixty-one (61) participants who represent more than 40 % of the whole population; it is quite significant, and the findings may be generalized. The received answers were later analyzed and interpreted.

III- Results and Discussion

III.1. Students' Awareness and Training

To reach the aims of the present study and to answer the research questions it raises, it is quite important to have a background information about the students' writing awareness of academic writing conventions and the training they have received in using the different tools and techniques to write a dissertation. The findings of the first section may be important in interpreting the students' choices and answers in the next section that is devoted to the investigation of the main challenges encountered by second-year Master students. For this reason, seven (7) closed-ended (yes/no) questions were asked. The findings are clearly shown in **Table 1** below.

	Question	**Number of Answers (Percentage)**	
		Yes	**No**
1	Have you been explicitly taught how to write a dissertation?	**31 (50.8%)**	**30 (49.2%)**
2	Have you been guided to how to write the different parts of the dissertation?	**38 (62.3%)**	**23 (37.7%)**

3	Are you aware of the different techniques of referring to information from other sources in a dissertation (summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting)?	**52 (85.2%)**	**9 (14.8%)**
4	Have you been sufficiently trained on using those techniques?	**24 (39.3%)**	**37 (60.7%)**
5	Do you master these techniques in writing a dissertation?	**36 (59%)**	**25 (41%)**
6	Have you already been trained to use the tools of collecting data (interviews, questionnaires, etc.)	**30 (49.2%)**	**31 (50.8%)**
7	Have you already been trained to use the tools of analyzing data (charts, diagrams, SPSS, software programs, etc.)	**14 (23%)**	**47 (77%)**

Table 1. Students' Training and Awareness of Academic Writing Conventions

As shown in **Table 1** above, half of the sample (31 students) were explicitly taught how to write a dissertation while the second half (30 students) were not (**Question 1**). However, and as far as the writing of the different parts of the dissertation is concerned, more than the half (38 students representing 62.3%) was guided while less than 38% (23 students) were not (**Question 2**). The results also revealed that despite the insufficient training in using the different techniques of referring to information from other sources in a dissertation (summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting) of most students (60.7%) as shown in **Question 4**, the majority of respondents (85.2%) claimed that they are aware of those techniques (**Question 3**), and that they (representing 59 %) have a mastery of them (**Question 5**). Responses to **Question 6** revealed that almost half of the participants (49.2%) received some training in using the tools of collecting data (interviews, questionnaires, etc.) while the other half (50.8%) did not. Contrary to this, answers to **Question 7** make it clear that few students (23%) were trained to use the tools of analyzing data (charts, diagrams, SPSS, software programs, etc.) while the majority (77%) was not.

These results provide evidence that students did not receive the same training during the Methodology sessions, and that the teachers of this module are not following the same program. Moreover, this lack of training may negatively affect the students' writing and may cause challenges during the dissertation writing process. All these may be revealed after the analysis of students' answers in the next section that is devoted to the challenges encountered in writing their Master dissertation.

III.2. Encountered Challenges

III.2.1. Choosing the Topic

Answers to the first question (**Question 8**) in the second section of the questionnaire revealed that one of the challenges second-year Master students have faced was choosing the research topic. The findings showed that 35 students (57.4%) found it difficult to be chosen, contrary to 26 students (42.6%) who found it an easy task. According to the respondents' answers (**Question 9**), and as **Chart 1** below reveals, the students (27 %) whose topics were either suggested or imposed by their supervisors were the ones who encountered a difficulty in choosing their research topics, while the ones whose topic was a personal choice (representing the majority with 73%) did not. It is clear that the supervisor's role in academic research is indispensable; however, suggesting or imposing topics on students would not but harden the task of researching instead of facilitating it, for they (students) would work on topics they do not understand or are not motivated to make research on; this would create another challenge.

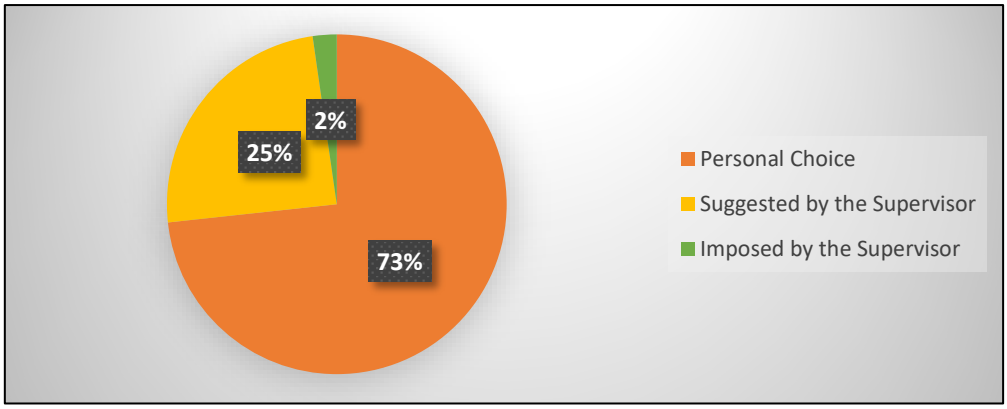


Chart 1. Students' Choice of the Research Topic

III.2.2. Language Aspects

As far as language aspects are concerned, students' responses to **Question 10**, as shown in **Chart 2**, showed that the aspect which posed a problem in writing the dissertation was the *organization of ideas* (44.3%), followed by *citing and quoting* (41%) and *Mastery of Academic Writing Conventions* (39.3%) with a difference of one response, *Punctuation* (31.1%), *Vocabulary Usage/Word Choice* and *Punctuation* with an equal number of choices (31.1%), *Grammatical Structures* and *Paraphrasing* with a similar number of responses (26.2%), and, finally, *Summarizing* with the lowest number (9.8%). This means that all the aspects were challenging to students but in different degrees.

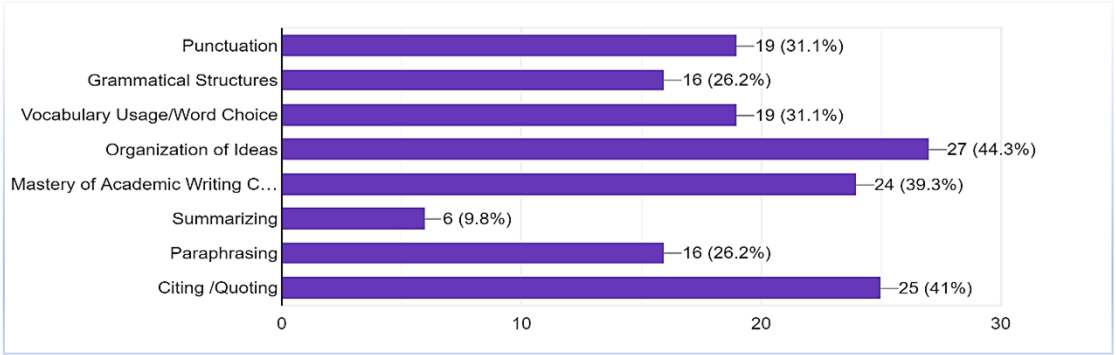


Chart2: Language Aspects Posing Problems in Dissertation Writing

III.2.3. Parts of the Dissertation

Results obtained from **Question 11** (a multiple-choice question) revealed that the most difficult part of the dissertation to write was the *Review of the Literature*; this may be due to difficulties in finding the related literature or using the different techniques of referring to information. Writing the other parts was also challenging: *The References* posed a problem to 25 students (41%); *The Practical/Methodology Part* was difficult for 19 students (31.1%) while *The General Introduction*, *The General Conclusion*, and *The Abstract* were problematic to 12 (19.7%), 9 (14.8%), and 8 (13.1%) students, respectively.

As for the General Introduction, the results obtained from **Question 12** (a multiple-choice question) revealed that 42 students; i.e. the majority (68.9%), found the *Statement of the Problem* section more challenging to write. The other sections, however, were less difficult. For a better clarification, the number of responses is associated with the different sections as follows: 12 responses (19.7%) with the *Structure of the Dissertation* section, 11 (18%) with the *Research Question* section, 10 (16.4 %) with the *Aims of the Study section*, 10 (16.4 %) with the *Research Hypothesis* section, and 7 (11.5%) with the *Research Methodology* section which was the least challenging to write. As far as the structuring of the dissertation is concerned, 41% of students struggled with organizing their dissertation chapters while it was not a challenging task to 59% of them (**Question 13**).

Finding the related literature was easy to 27.9% of students while the majority (72.1%) found it a challenging task (**Question 14).** Most students (76.7%), in **Question 15**, attributed this obstacle to the difficulty in getting access to reliable databases. Not far from this view, two (2) students (4.6%) provided a more specific reason; they claimed that reliable databases are not for free and need a budget. The difficulty for 32.6% of them, on the other hand, was related to getting access to the library. In this respect, one student added an important detail in which s/he described how they were obliged to use the library computers instead of searching for books; the net was so weak, and no e-books were reached: It was a waste of time. For 16.3% of the respondents, ignoring how to get access to reliable databases stands behind this difficulty. As for three (3) students (6.9%), they encountered a challenge in finding the literature related to their new topics.

When asked whether they had any difficulties in integrating sources and citing them correctly in their dissertation **(Question 16)**, 29.5% students said 'No' while the majority (70.5%) said 'Yes'. This finding raises questions especially that students claimed (as the results obtained from Q3 and Q5 revealed) that they are aware of the different techniques of referring to information, and that they do master them in writing a dissertation. Encountering this challenge may be due to the lack of training in using them as the previous results revealed (Question 4).

III.2.4. The Practical Part

The results obtained from **Question 17** revealed that many problems were encountered in the Practical Part. As shown in **Chart 3** below, the students faced difficulties in almost all the steps but with a slight difference: Data collection (29.5%), Analysis of the Collected Data (37.7%), Interpretation of the Obtained Results (36.1%), and Discussion of the Findings (34.4%).

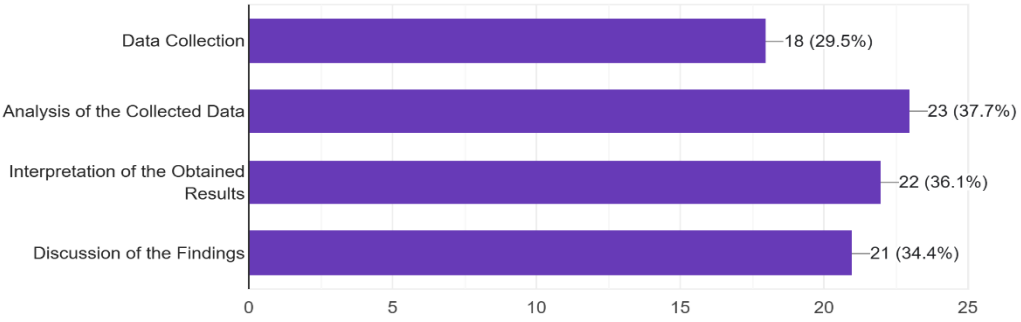


Chart 3. Problems Encountered in the Practical Part

As for Data Collection, the respondents' explanation (**Question 18)** showed that among the reasons behind the difficulties they encountered in this part was lack of seriousness; they complained that the sample they have chosen in their research "was not serious enough". Add to this lack of responsiveness on the part of both teachers and students; in this respect, many participants explained that most teachers were busy and did not have time to answer all the questionnaires, and that "students skip the classes before the end of the year". The students' unavailability was a real problem as one of the respondents claimed: "The difficult part was finding students to participate in the experiment […] It is challenging, and we were obliged to reduce the sample multiple times due to this reason". Convincing participants posed another challenge; one of the respondents wrote the following: "It was the first time I conduct an observation and an interview, so it was challenging to convince people to join us, talk to them and convince the responsible of the establishment to let us observe their setting". Another stated, "I conducted interviews and most of the participants were afraid to participate, and some of them initially accepted but then left during the interview due their discomfort in expressing their feelings and thoughts". The last challenge, mentioned by the participants, was discovering that gathering data was hard and time consuming.

The task of analyzing data was not easy as well. Among 23 students, eleven (11) students (almost the half) attributed its difficulty to their lack of knowledge; some of them admitted that they lack problem solving and analyzing skills while others said that they were not or insufficiently trained in how to analyze data. In this respect, one respondent described his/her struggle in analyzing the questionnaire: "For the analysis, the main difficulty concerned the analysis of the questionnaire that generates both qualitative and quantitative data; does the analysis take place at the level of each question with its appropriate analysis method or at the level of the entire questionnaire using a single analysis method for all questions?". Another respondent stated, "We did not study how to analyze data, specifically the quantitative data, and I did not find anyone to ask […] After deep research which took maybe one month, I found the suitable guideline to my case". Similarly, another wrote, "I had zero practice on how to actually analyze my own data, so I wasted a lot of time learning how to analyze correctly". Other students related the difficulty of data analysis to its "complexity and meticulous requirements to ensure accurate results", and to the high level of concentration it requires, for it is necessary "to relate the findings to the existing data already mentioned in the theoretical part"; it is "an important part in the practical part, and committing any errors will destroy all the work"; it is an exhausting and a time-consuming task".

Similarly to the preceding parts, the interpretation of the obtained results was challenging. Most students' ignorance of how to interpret data was the most influential factor. For this, one of the students stated that "it was hard to properly provide a good interpretation as we were not trained on how to interpret and generalize the findings and how to know what is important to mention". For others, the difficulty was due to the participants' answers which were, as many respondents explained, unclear, irrelevant, incomplete, complicated, and difficult to be interpreted. One student, however, described the challenge s/he encountered because of the nature of his/her research: "My research was purely qualitative, a culturally oriented perspective. So, the possibility to fall into subjectivity bias in the interpretation was higher. I faced problems trying not to interpret based on my personal experience knowing that I share the same cultural background as the participants. However, using triangulation of theoretical frameworks and reflexivity helped in minimizing subjectivity".

It was noticed that many students could not mention the discussion of the main findings without relating it to the previous part, the interpretation of the obtained results. One student stated that it was challenging to do both stages, for they "are fundamentally important and sensitive; they require a lot of time, patience and focus". Another student's challenge was his/her weakness in organizing thoughts and failure in writing a proper paragraph to interpret and discuss the findings. One of the respondents encountered a more challenging task: distinguishing between the interpretation and the discussion stages and what each of them entails; as a result, as she stated, "it was difficult to decide what to include exactly in each part, and how to make the relation between what has been found and the research questions".

III.2.5. The Supervisor's Guidance

The answers to **Question 19** (yes/no question) revealed that the majority of participants (77%) were satisfied with their supervisors' support and guidance while 23% of them reflected their negative attitude. The details, provided in **Question 20**, clarified these two distinct attitudes and explained their effect(s) on the students' dissertation writing.

The respondents, whose answer was 'yes', praised their supervisors and appreciated their immense help in correcting their mistakes; in providing them with the needed resources, clear research directions, constructive feedback, and pieces of advice; and, above all, for being good listeners, guiding their supervisees and respecting their views instead of giving them orders or imposing on them what to do. The impact of all these was significant in "facilitating the task of writing the dissertation", motivating supervisees to carry on researching, making "the dissertation good enough to be presented and evaluated" and in "presenting a final refined product" that allowed students to "end up with a good mark". One respondent explained his/her experience with their supervisor whose instructions were so beneficial in understanding methodological conventions: "I think, her clear instructions and expectations helped me greatly eliminating any extraneous variables that could deter me from my goals. She opened my eyes to something that may be apparent, but when you are conducting research, you get caught up and get blinded. Basically, she explained that sometimes things that may seem logical to do are not really welcomed to be done in the methodology world and would not provide what we think would provide. That ultimately changed my perspective on how to carry on with my research, and to always ask: Does this really align with the methodological conventions?".

Respondents with a negative attitude, on the contrary, had another view. The supervisor's absence or lack of guidance and support made many supervisees feel lost, "not knowing where to start from and how to get things together"; submit a final product full of "mistakes in writing, grammar, the experiment and the methodology"; and receive criticism on the defense day because of the "addition of unnecessary details that were not supposed to be in the literature review". Lack of support can be also in a form of imposing research topics and dictating on supervisees what to do; as one student explained, "The topic was partially imposed by the supervisor, and the implementation and the selection of the research methodology was rushed in before the review of the literature was conducted. So, we ended up by conducting a study based on very limited information". An interesting clarification was provided by one participant who tried to link the supervisees' guidance and the supervisor's limited knowledge; s/he stated the following: "Supervisor's with a limited experience in research may not be able to provide the necessary help concerning the practical part, for example, the way instruments are constructed, or the data analysis methods for each instrument, or even some sections in the practical part such as the interpretation of the results and the discussion of the findings and what to include in both, much less the citations". Contrary to all those views, one participant considered the supervisor's absence a factor that positively affected the process of writing his/her dissertation: "I did my best working out things by myself. I read about research methodology, international theses, and tried to get answers in different groups on social media".

III.2.6. Additional Support

Answers to **Question 21** made it apparent that the area in which the students felt they needed additional support or guidance while writing was the Practical Part. Most of them (28) found the task of choosing the appropriate methodology, the collection of data as well as their analysis and interpretation quite challenging and difficult to achieve. They claimed that not only the supervisor's support was needed but also an additional support of experts and specialized people to ease the task of data analysis. As for eleven (11) students, the support was needed mostly to write the Literature Review, how to relate it to the research topic, and what to include exactly as titles/sections. However, seven (7) respondents said that an equal support and guidance were needed in writing both chapters (theoretical and practical), and some said in writing the whole dissertation. In this respect, one student said, "I wish she (the supervisor) explained every part and what we should do in it". Another expressed his/ her feeling of being lost and need to be guided all along the dissertation writing by saying "I swear, I felt like I was blind, and no one properly guided me". As for the other respondents, guidance was needed in referencing (4 cases), receiving the supervisor's feedback (2 cases), structuring the dissertation (1 case), summarizing ideas (1 case), and in having more time to finish writing the research work without pressure. Contrary to all these, three (3) respondents claimed that no part was really challenging to ask for additional guidance or support. Three (3) participants did not provide us with any answer.

III.2.7. Time Management

Time management was another challenge for the majority of respondents (70.5%) while less problematic to 29.5 % of them as answers to **Question 22** revealed. As far as the strategies they implemented for its effective management and for remaining motivated while writing their dissertations, the participants provided us with answers (**Question 23**) according to their experience. The implemented strategies are summarized as follows:

- To put a deadline with the supervisor.
- To keep researching, reading, and writing.
- To focus on important tasks and to devote more time to them.
- To put a plan to be followed with a detailed timeline and a specific deadline.
- To adjust the plan/schedule as needed.
- To use the Pomodoro technique.
- To devote, at least, two (2) hours to writing the dissertation, and to choose the suitable time to work (early morning, at night, etc.).
- To take breaks between work periods to relax.
- To put the personal computer in front of sight.
- To work step by step (theory then practice, or the reverse) or simultaneously.
- To correct other students' (classmates') dissertations to get out of one's bubble and to learn from their mistakes.
- To work for a goal with passion and pleasure.
- To split the work (in the case of pairs).
- To start early.

An interesting experience was mentioned by one of the respondents who named the strategy s/he used to manage time and get motivated 'The Panic Mode': "This mode allowed me to read and check sources at night, then, wake up to start writing nonstop from morning to late night (analyzing and interpreting the data) while hoping it is done correctly".

III.2.8. Other Challenges

The respondents added other challenges in addition to the previously mentioned ones. Their answers to **Question 24** revealed that most of them suffered from stress, pressure and anxiety due to time limitation. What might worsen the situation was a personal computer that broke down; one of the students described this challenging situation and how s/he was obliged to work and study at the same time to gain some money and buy another computer; doing all that and rewriting almost everything was so stressful especially that time was clicking. Lack of motivation was another challenge as one of the students explained: "When you suddenly stop studying, you feel like you have no obligations, and I had one which is writing the dissertation, but it was so difficult to convince myself to do so". Ignorance of how to use the ICT and network issues made the task of researching more difficult. Working with a partner also posed problems to some students who stated that working with a lazy, irresponsible partner with limited capacities made all the work fall on them; add to this, the difficulty to meet – either in the library where speaking is not allowed or in classrooms where staying is prohibited —to discuss the work together. One participant summarized all the problems in one sentence: "Writing a dissertation for the first time was in itself a challenging task".

III.3. Reasons Behind the Encountered Challenges

Reasons behind encountering all the challenges in writing dissertations were shown in answers to **Question 25** (a multiple-choice question). According to most students' experience, the main causes were 'the insufficient training during the Methodology session' (55.7%) and 'time limitations' (54.1%), followed by 'lack of knowledge' and 'lack of resources' (47.5%). However, 'the supervisor's absence' and 'lack of motivation' were less influential with 27.8% and 22.9% of views, respectively.

III.4. The Challenges' Impact on Students' Writing

In **Question 26**, the participants were asked about how the challenges they experienced impacted their overall dissertation writing. Surprisingly, twenty-two (22) respondents liked the experience which was an amazing and a wonderful journey, "a though one but worth it"; they confessed that the encountered challenges pushed them to make more efforts (like anxiety which pushed them to finish writing their dissertations), to keep trying, to struggle to accomplish the research work, and, mainly, to develop skills (e.g. time management , self-reliance , organizational and problem-solving skills, note-taking techniques, resilience and adaptability, research abilities, and writing proficiency improvement).

On the contrary, eighteen (18) students found that writing a dissertation was really a hard and tiring task. They added that the challenges they encountered made them exhausted and demotivated which led to being late to submit the work. Because of time limitation, as one respondent explained, it was obligatory to narrow the topic down. For others,

their lack of knowledge led to receiving many comments from the supervisor about methodology and "losing hope to write anything academically appropriate", to work with doubt, to use wrong research tools to collect data (two questionnaires instead of a mixed method), to be criticized by the examiners for the wrong methodology, and to get a low score for a poor research work. Lack of training had also its negative impact in making students exhausted, "wasting a lot of time on searching up how things should be done" and "figuring out the basics of methodology". Add to all these, lack of cooperation from both teachers and students that had significantly affected some of the students' research findings "where generalizing results was not an option".

Seven (7) participants, however, claimed that the challenges they encountered did not have a real impact on their writing thanks to their supervisor who was there all the time, their knowledge of methodological conventions, and their efforts to not let them (challenges) have a negative impact on their work. It is worth mentioning that twenty-four (24) students either did not provide us with any answer or responded with unclear views.

III.5. Suggestions to Ease the Task of Dissertation Writing

Suggestions, in the last question of the questionnaire (*Section Three*), revealed that there is almost an agreement among respondents that more training in the Methodology subject is necessary to help second-year students write their dissertations without difficulties. Receiving more training may take place "throughout the five years of under- graduation" in which the focus is on practice rather than theory as one of the participants suggested, "We need to actually write a review at least once in those five years in university, or write a methodology chapter; we need more practice so that we know what we are dealing with and how to deal with it"; another respondent had a suggestion as far as data collection and analyses are concerned which was "having a lesson on data collection by actually going and collecting data from students with the teacher showing them the appropriate way to analyze it"; scheduling workshops earlier was also recommended to provide researchers "with sufficient knowledge on how to start till the end".

All these could not be achieved without both teachers and supervisors who were mentioned several times in the suggestions. As for the former, it has been suggested that only adequate and experienced teachers should be allocated to teach Research Methodology to guide students, "to provide them with the necessary information and tips to facilitate any expected challenges they may face in the future, and to teach them how to deal with impediments so that they manage to conduct perfect research". As for the latter, it has been recommended that serious and hard-working supervisors are needed to provide supervisees with the necessary guidance and details either in conducting the research or in overcoming the challenges they encounter during the dissertation writing process. For this, one respondent clarified: "The supervisor must devote the first meeting with his/her supervisees to discuss the types of researches along with different methodologies, and another (meeting), scheduled each week or fortnight, to discuss the mean time work progress". Another suggested that "every supervisor needs to be aware of what challenges their supervisees are going through so that they can help them overcome them based on their experience". Supervisees, in their turn, should have some features of good researchers to overcome all the encountered challenges: to be serious and hard workers; to carefully choose the supervisor (according to their topics and the supervisor's area of interest); "to focus deeply on the topic and not to hesitate to ask other teachers or classmates for guidance and do not fully rely on the supervisor"; to work smartly when organizing ideas and managing time; to have a topic and a clear plan right at the beginning; to improve one's own skills by reading as many books, articles, dissertations, and theses as possible; to start early; and to work individually (not in pairs).

Motivation was also present in the participants' answers. To stay motivated, the respondents suggested that Master researchers should not give the challenges too much importance and to be motivated by using advanced tools. In this respect, one participant recommended that students should not be suddenly and completely stopped from studying, for it demotivates them. Another's view was related to reducing the first semester so that students will have sufficient time to work on their dissertations without stress or pressure.

IV- Conclusion

The objective of the present study was to unveil le challenges encountered by second-year Master students at the Department of English at Frères Mentouri University, Constantine 1, during the dissertation writing process. The results obtained from the Online questionnaire revealed that plenty of obstacles were experienced among which was finding the related literature, choosing the appropriate methodology, as well as collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. These results would be quite beneficial to take the necessary measures that may ease the task of writing a dissertation. It is recommended that more importance should be given to the Methodology sessions in which the focus is on raising students' awareness of the rules and conventions that govern the writing of this important research genre, training them on how to use technology to get access to reliable databases, how to manipulate the different referencing techniques, and how to use the different data collection and data analysis tools. All these-- in addition to good supervision and time management—would not but make the task of writing a dissertation less stressful, enjoyable and successful.

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- Appendices

Appendix : Student Questionnaire

Link: **https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdIHxJJROwLzmLUwB7LCWaRWir4xy_0-STLTL2I9MHhYjRe4Q/viewform?usp=pp_url**

Dear Student,

This questionnaire is designed to collect data for research that aims at investigating the main challenges Mastre 2 students encountered during the dissertation writing process. Please, tick (✓) in the appropriate box (es) or give full answers whenever required. Thank you very much in advance for your contribution.

Section One: Knowledge of Academic Writing Conventions

Q1. Have you been explicitly taught how to write a dissertation?

- Yes
- No

Q2. Have you been guided to how to write the different parts of the dissertation?

- Yes
- No

Q3. Are you aware of the different techniques of referring to information from other sources in a dissertation (summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting)?

- Yes
- No

Q4. Have you been sufficiently trained on using those techniques?

- Yes
- No

Q5. Do you master these techniques in writing a dissertation?

- Yes
- No

Q6. Have you already been trained to use the tools of collecting data (interviews, questionnaires, etc.)?

- Yes
- No

Q7. Have you already been trained to use the tools of analyzing data (charts, diagrams, SPSS, software programs, etc.)?

- Yes
- No

Section 2: Challenges Encountered During the Dissertation Writing Process

Q8. Was choosing your research topic an easy task?

- Yes
- No

Q9. Was your research topic:

- a personal choice?
- suggested by your supervisor?
- imposed by your supervisor?
- Other:

Q10. As far as language aspects are concerned, which aspect(s) posed a problem when writing your dissertation?

- Punctuation
- Grammatical Structures
- Vocabulary Usage/Word Choice

- Organization of Ideas
- Mastery of Academic Writing Conventions (Lack of Knowledge)
- Summarizing
- Paraphrasing
- Citing /Quoting

Q11. Which part(s) of the dissertation was/were difficult to write?

- The Abstract
- The General Introduction
- The Review of the Literature
- The Practical Part
- The General Conclusion
- The References

Q12. Which specific section (s) in the General Introduction you found more challenging to write?

- Statement of the Problem
- Aims of the Study
- Research Questions
- Research Hypothesis
- Research Methodology
- Structure of the Dissertation

Q13. Did you struggle with organizing and structuring your dissertation chapters?

- Yes
- No

Q14. Was finding the related literature easy?

- Yes
- No

Q15. If no, was it because:

- it was difficult to get access to reliable databases?
- it was difficult to get access to libraries?
- you ignored how to get access to reliable sources?
- Other:

Q16. Did you have any difficulties in integrating sources and citing them correctly in your dissertation?

- Yes
- No

Q17. What problem(s) did you encounter in the Practical Part?

- Data Collection
- Analysis of the Collected Data
- Interpretation of the Obtained Results
- Discussion of the Findings

Q18. Whatever your choice(s) is/are, please, explain why.

Q19. Did your supervisor provide you with the necessary guidance and support?

- Yes
- No

Q20. Whatever your choice is, please, explain its effect(s) on your dissertation writing.

Q21. In what area(s) did you feel you needed additional support or guidance while writing your dissertation?

Q22. Was time management challenging?

- Yes
- No

Q23. What strategies did you implement to manage time effectively and stay motivated while writing your dissertation?

Q24. Can you describe any specific challenge (internal or external) you encountered while working on your dissertation, and how you handled it?

Q25. According to your experience, what is/are the main reason(s) behind the challenges you have encountered during the dissertation writing process?

- Lack of knowledge
- Time Limitations
- Lack of Resources
- Absence of the Supervisor
- Insufficient Training During the Methodology Sessions
- Lack of Motivation
- Other:

Q26. How did the challenges you experienced impact your overall dissertation writing experience?

Section Three: Suggestions

Q27. What do you suggest to reduce the number of all these challenges and ease the task of writing a dissertation for future EFL Master researchers?