



Examining the Perceived Challenges in Dissertation Writing for EFL Master's Students

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Abstract

Writing a dissertation is a crucial component of master's programs. However, EFL master's students often face various challenges during the dissertation writing process. This study aimed to investigate the difficulties encountered by EFL master's students in writing their dissertations. A quantitative research approach was adopted, and a questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. The sample for this study consisted of 94 EFL master's students, selected using a convenience sampling technique. The questionnaire assessed the students' perceptions of the difficulties they faced in various aspects of the dissertation writing process. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The findings revealed that EFL master's students encountered significant challenges in several areas of dissertation.

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1. Introduction

One form of scholarly writing, among others, is the thesis/dissertation. It is paramount to highlight the difference between thesis and dissertation as they are used slightly differently in different parts of the globe. Most American universities refer to the PhD as the dissertation and refer to the masters as the thesis while most British universities call the PhD the thesis and the masters the dissertation (Hart, 2005). In this paper, as no standards are set by the Algerian universities, particularly Setif 2 University, regarding what term needs to be used, the term 'dissertation' for master's research is used. It is a university prerequisite that students write a dissertation before they are able to graduate and obtain a diploma. In the Algerian context, a two-year master's program culminates in a dissertation which is a compulsory requirement for students to write in their second year of postgraduate level. "a dissertation is a text that is produced for assessment purposes, and the immediate audience is the examiner, or examiners. It typically presents an original and extensive piece of research conducted by the writer" (Thompson, 2009, p, 284).

Although writing a masters' dissertation is more viewed as a training and apprenticeship to students in doing research (Sarada, 2006), writing a genre such as a dissertation can be a daunting and arduous endeavor for all students, but even more challenging for students whose first language is not English (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). L2 students often

encounter difficulties in writing this genre (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006), It can be argued that promoting writing development of this genre requires a plethora of skills including genre knowledge and awareness, well-developed academic writing skills, extensive reading, and a thorough understanding of research methodology. For many students, a dissertation is the longest and most challenging piece of writing they have to produce in that the size, planning research, synthesizing the reading, and sustaining a coherent argument is an enormous challenge for any student writer, but it is more augmented for non-native speakers (Thompson, 2009).

Despite the large body of research being conducted on thesis and dissertation writing, it has, however, mainly focused on the product and to a lesser degree on the process, foregrounding how the different part genres are written and organized (Bhatia, 2005; Samraj, 2008; Kwan, 2006; Thompson, 2009; Thompson, 2005). Furthermore, the literature has focused on international students studying and writing their dissertations in English-speaking contexts (Hajar, 2018; Harwood and Petric (2019); Woodrow, 2020; Li, 2014; Chou, 2011; Cotterell, 2011; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). Scant empirical research exists on non-native speakers writing their theses in English in their home countries. Also, Existing literature on the challenges of dissertation writing has not focused on master's students in English language teaching (ELT), and even far less in the Algerian context. The challenge such a

genre poses for L2 writers has not been fully investigated, and there are very few accounts of research into the difficulties encountered by EFL students. This quantitative study aims to capture postgraduate students' experiences of writing their master's dissertation. It specifically focuses on exploring the difficulties and challenges that master 2 students encounter in writing the dissertation, and it, therefore, aims to fill the research lacuna by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of graduate students about dissertation writing?
2. What are the difficulties encountered by graduate students about dissertation writing?

2. Review of Previous research on students challenges in thesis/dissertation writing

The body of literature on the challenges associated with thesis and dissertation writing can be broadly categorized into two primary streams. The first body of research focuses on scrutinizing international students' challenges in English-speaking countries, and the second stream of literature investigates domestic EFL/ESL students' challenges within their own home countries while undertaking dissertation writing. Previous research has revealed that the challenges ESL/EFL students encountered in research writing are wide ranging compared to their domestic counterparts (e.g., Bitchener and Basturkmen, 2006; Bartlett & Chanock, 2003; Cadman, 2000; Larcombe et al., 2007; Cotteral, 2011; Tang, 2012; Wang and Li, 2008). Bitchener and Basturkmen

(2006) explored the difficulties experienced by postgraduate research students writing their theses in English as a second language. Using in-depth interviews with supervisor student pairs in a comparative mode, the study focused on students' difficulties in writing the discussion of results in the thesis. The study revealed discrepancies between the students' and the supervisors' views of writing difficulties. The students tended to see their difficulties in terms of limited English proficiency while the supervisors were more concerned about the students' lack of understanding of the rhetorical and structural requirements of a thesis.

In their study, which relied on questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, and presentation profiles to collect data, Wang and Yang (2012) explored how six graduate students of a TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) program learned to write their MA thesis proposals in English in a graduate course.. The results showed that the students encountered difficulties in selecting a research topic, designing the proposal research, grasping the genre of the thesis proposal, and doing a critical literature reviews. The students ultimately completed the writing of their research proposals by having discussions with their supervisors, observing their peers' presentations on research proposals, and reading relevant literature reviews.

A study by Wang and Li (2008) explored the thesis writing experiences of a small group of international postgraduate research students at an

Australian university. Seeking to pinpoint the challenges confronted by these students in their thesis writing process, which might arise from the different cultural backgrounds and academic traditions these students bring to their postgraduate research, the study reveals the cultural impact on their thesis writing, their efforts in developing competence and confidence in academic writing, and their pedagogical needs in thesis writing. The researchers argued it is of utmost importance that the supervisors to understand international research students' unique pedagogical needs and develop intercultural sensitivity in their pedagogical practice in postgraduate research supervision in order to assist international research students to triumph over the culturally embedded challenges in thesis writing.

Studies investigating domestic EFL/ESL students' challenges in thesis writing in their home lands have drawn either on the supervisors' perspectives, the graduate students' perspective, or corpus analysis. These studies aim to identify the difficulties and challenges these students face when writing theses and propose possible solutions to overcome these challenges. In a qualitative study, and drawing upon teachers' diaries and semi-structured interviews, Khozaei Ravari, Ul Islam, Khozaei, and Choupan Zarvijani, (2022) investigated the factors that hinder the thesis writing process of non-native MA students in ELT from the perspective of thirty supervisors. The study found that factors constraining students' writing were (1) students' lack of effort, (2) students'

lack of a strategy for writing, (3) students' lack of autonomy and (4) students' absence of voice. Similarly, Peng (2018) explored the generic difficulties in thesis/dissertation writing as perceived by supervisors. The results of the in-depth-interviews revealed that the thesis/dissertation writing difficulties related to narrative literature and lack of conceptual framework.

Several studies scrutinized the challenges of thesis writing from the eye of the graduate students. A longitudinal study conducted by F. Hyland (2016) investigated English as second language (ESL) doctoral students' writing problems and the strategies they developed to meet these challenges by interviewing eight students four times over a two-year period during their doctoral program. Also, a questionnaire was sent to over 150 postgraduate students to investigate their major writing challenges and their self-initiated strategies. The findings suggested that students' writing challenges were in two main areas: difficulties with expressing complex ideas in a second language; and difficulties with developing confidence and a convincing academic voice. Divsar (2018) examined the challenges encountered by 30 PhD EFL male and female candidates on the point of writing their dissertation. The study adopted mixed-methods design in which the data were collected through qualitative content analysis and then were subjected to statistical procedures through SPSS. The results demonstrated that all candidates encountered various problems such as linguistic challenges, lack of

knowledge about SPSS, APA and copyright law, poor planning and time management, finding novel topics, personal problems that impede them from the due schedule, finding the related literature, finding the participants and getting institutes to participate, negotiation with thesis supervisor and advisor, loss of interest and difficulty in finding the required instrument.

Using corpus analysis, Sadeghi & Shirzad Khajepasha (2015) analysed 60 randomly selected theses to compare Master's theses written by Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) students in three Iranian universities in terms of the challenges such academic writing poses for student-writers. Results revealed that, except for organisational problems, theses varied in terms of language, style, content and methodological problems. It was also found that theses mainly suffer from style and language problems. Komba, 2016 investigated the challenges of writing theses and dissertations among postgraduate students by analysing 103 research reports, including 39 theses and 64 dissertations from three universities in Tanzania. The findings indicated that students faced challenges in writing all chapters which were included in their research reports. The challenges included inappropriateness in presenting different chapters of the reports and lack of academic writing skills. Therefore, it is crucial to understand graduate students difficulties and challenges in writing a dissertation with the aim of designing

tutorials and workshops that focus on developing the writing of this genre.

3. Methodology

3.1 Aim of the study

The aim of the study is investigate students' experience with dissertation writing. More specifically, the study is guided by the aim of exploring these students' challenges and difficulties in writing the different chapters of the masters' dissertation.

3.2 Methods

The present investigation adopted a descriptive and exploratory research design to examine the perceived research writing difficulties encountered by master's-level students. According to waters Waters (2007), exploratory research facilitates an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon or situation, particularly when the problem has not been clearly delineated. Accordingly, the current study employed a quantitative survey methodology to gather data from the target population, and the questionnaire was administered to the participants in a face-to-face setting. This methodological approach was deemed appropriate given the exploratory nature of the inquiry and the researchers' aim to

uncover the salient difficulties as perceived by the target population.

3.3. Participants

The target population for the present study comprised master's-level students enrolled in the "Language Sciences" program

within the Department of English Language and Literature at Mohamed Lamne Debbaghine University, Setif 2, during the 2022 academic year. The total size of the population was 389 students, representing both male and female learners. To select the sample for the investigation, a convenience sampling technique was adopted. This non-probability sampling approach was deemed appropriate given the researchers' aim to recruit participants based on their accessibility, availability, and willingness to engage in the research study. The final sample consisted of 94 graduate students. The age range of the participants spanned from 22 to 25 years old, suggesting a relatively homogeneous sample in terms of the learners' developmental stage and academic maturity.

3.4. Data collection instrument

The data collection instrument utilized in the present study was a self-designed questionnaire comprising three distinct sections and a total of 53 items. The questionnaire items employed a combination of yes/no, multiple-choice, and 5-point Likert scale response formats, where 5 represented "Strongly Agree (SA)", 4 denoted "Agree (A)", 3 indicated "Neutral (N)", 2 signified "Disagree (D)", and 1 corresponded to "Strongly Disagree (SD)".

The initial section of the questionnaire was dedicated to eliciting the participants' demographic information, including their age and gender. The second section of the questionnaire focused on eliciting the participants' perceptions regarding

academic writing and research. The third section targeted the students' self-reported challenges and difficulties encountered during the research writing process. These items were further organized into thematic categories or sub-sections, each of which probed a specific area of difficulty, including academic writing skills, abstract, introduction, methodology, conclusion, study skills, citation practices, literature review, and data analysis and interpretation. To ensure the anonymity of the participants and mitigate potential biases, the questionnaire did not require the respondents to provide any personal identifying information.

4. Results and discussion

The use of descriptive statistics is well-suited for exploratory research, as the goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the data and identify potential areas for further investigation (Field, 2018). The utilization of the mean and standard deviation facilitated the interpretation and analysis of the data gathered within the scope of this study. Details regarding the dispersion or variability of the data points are necessary. Measures of data dispersion, such as the standard deviation, offer valuable insights that complement the information conveyed by central tendency statistics (Loerts et al., 2020).

4.1 Descriptive statistics of Students' perceptions of dissertation writing difficulty

The findings presented in table 1 provide valuable insights into students' perceptions regarding the difficulty of engaging in research-based writing, such as dissertation work. The data suggests that

the vast majority of the students (90.4%) consider writing research to be a challenging endeavor, with 9.6% reporting no such difficulties. This prevalence of the perception of difficulty among the student population warrants careful consideration from educators and educational

institutions by developing support mechanisms including designing and implementing tailored instructional strategies, resources, and scaffolding measures to help students overcome the difficulties they encounter during the research and writing process.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of Students' perceptions of dissertation Writing difficulty

	No		Yes	
	F	%	F	%
Writing a dissertation is challenging	9	9.6	85	90.4
I write the master's only because it is obligatory	38	40.4	56	59.6

Note n = 94

4.2. Descriptive statistics of Students' perceptions of dissertation writing difficulty

Within the scope of this investigation, participants were required to select their perceived level of difficulty regarding the statements presented, following a 5-point

Likert scale: very easy = 5, easy = 4, neutral = 3, difficult = 2 and very difficult = 1. The score interval used to interpret the results would be: 4.21 - 5.00: Very Easy; 3.41 - 4.20: Easy; 2.61 - 3.40: Neutral; 1.81 - 2.60: Difficult; 1.00 - 1.80: Very Difficult.

Table 2

Interpretations of the means and standard deviations of the categories

Category	M	SD	Interpretation
Academic writing skills	2,7191	,57610	Difficult
Abstract	3,1064	1,07231	Neutral
Introduction	2,9840	,70205	Difficult
Literature review	2,4840	1,78923	Difficult
Citing	2,6862	1,74088	Difficult
Methodology	2,8523	,84963	Difficult
Data analysis and interpretation	2,5160	,81963	Difficult
Conclusion	3,2553	,93827	Neutral
Study skills	2,4202	,7245	Difficult

Table 2 provides the means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for various categories related to the challenges and difficulties experienced by masters'

students in writing their dissertations. The findings indicate that students generally perceive academic Writing Skills (M=2.7191, SD=0.7610) as the most

difficult aspect of writing. Similarly, such aspects as

Literature review (M=2.4840, SD=1.78923), Introduction (M=2.9840, SD=0.70205), Citing (M= 2.6862, SD= 1.74088), Methodology (M=2.8523, SD=0.84963), Data analysis and

interpretation (M=2.5160, SD=0.81963), and were perceived difficult by students.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics of writing difficulties

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Distinguishing between academic writing and non-academic / creative	94	1,00	5,00	3,4787	1,12383
Employing the features of academic writing	94	1,00	5,00	2,7447	1,05684
Writing with formality in grammar and vocabulary	94	1,00	5,00	2,4362	,89873
Writing with complexity (more complex language in grammar)	94	1,00	4,00	1,8404	,78017
Choosing the right vocabulary in formality and complexity	94	1,00	5,00	2,5000	1,02391
Writing objectively	94	1,00	5,00	3,2128	1,05619
Writing with precision	94	1,00	5,00	2,8298	,92327
Writing coherently	94	1,00	5,00	2,8191	1,06723
Using cohesive devices correctly	94	1,00	5,00	2,7128	1,01200
Using the right tenses in the different parts of the thesis	94	1,00	5,00	2,6170	1,17415
Writing	94	1,50	4,70	2,7191	,57610

Findings in table 3 above reveal the mean value of writing (2.71). This indicates that participants yielded a relatively moderate level of difficulty as the value is close to (3.00), neutral. With regards to its standard deviation value (.57), the previous estimation can be confirmed since the responses are distributed around the value (2.71).

For the items accounting for the relatively moderate level of difficulty in writing a dissertation/ thesis, “writing with precision” and “writing coherently” are good indicators. Although the mean value of writing with precision (2.82) is a bit higher than writing’s, the standard deviation (.92) is for values scattered to

(2.70) or more. Similarly, the mean of writing coherently is (2.81), and the measure of spread is (1.06) which is almost the same of the aforementioned factor.

Furthermore, three items demonstrate are partially reflecting a relatively moderate level of writing. First, the mean of “employing the features of academic writing” is (2.74) and close to writing mean; however, the responses are scattered from the mean to the minimum value with a standard deviation (1.05). This is also the case for “using cohesive devices correctly”, which mean and standard deviation are respectively (2.71) and (1.01). “Deciding about the tenses I

should choose in the different parts of the thesis", the last item's mean is (2.61). The values in the data set are spread far from the mean to the minimum value (1.00) as the standard deviation is (1.17).

Nonetheless, the remaining items are not reflecting a relatively moderate level of difficulty in writing. Although the mean values of "writing with the level of formality required in grammar and vocabulary" (2.43) and "choosing the right vocabulary in terms formality and complexity" (2.50), their standard deviation values, (.89) and (1.02), report most of responses to be dispersed around (2.00), difficult point. In addition, the mean values of the items " Distinguishing between academic writing and other types of writing" (3.47) and "Writing objectively and maintaining an objective

tone when writing" (3.21) indicate a level of difficulty beyond the average, considering their measures of spread (1.12) and (1.05), which are relatively spreading around (4.00), easy point. In the item "writing with complexity", the responses are in less than difficult with a mean (1.84) with a standard deviation (.78).

In short, the participants revealed a relatively moderate level of difficulty in writing a thesis. This is mainly due to "writing with precision" and "writing coherently". This moderate level is also partially perceived in "employing the features of academic writing", "using cohesive devices correctly" and "using the right tenses in the different parts of the thesis".

Table 4

Descriptive statistics of citing difficulties

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reading and paraphrasing from sources	94	1,00	5,00	2,7553	1,17030
Reading and summarizing from sources	94	1,00	5,00	2,8085	1,08039
Properly using in-text citations using APA Style	94	1,00	5,00	2,4255	1,12153
Applying the APA style in all the script	94	1,00	5,00	2,4149	1,09161
Writing references	94	1,00	5,00	3,0000	1,42934
Citing	94	1,17	4,83	2,6862	,74088

The descriptive statistics presented in table 4 offer nuanced insights into the perceived difficulties students encounter when engaging in various components of "citing".

The mean value of 2.6862 for the overall "citing" item suggests that, on average, students perceive this task to be situated between a neutral and a difficult level of challenge. This central tendency statistic indicates a moderate level of difficulty experienced by students in this domain.

However, the relatively high standard deviation of 1.7408 reveals a substantial degree of variability in the responses. This implies a broad distribution of student perceptions, with some individuals reporting greater difficulty and others finding the literature review writing process less challenging.

Examining the individual citation-related tasks, the data reveals nuanced insights into students' perceptions of difficulty.

The item "Properly using in-text citations using APA style" exhibits a mean of 2.4235 and a standard deviation of 1.1215. This suggests that, on average, students perceive this specific sub-task as relatively more challenging, while the lower standard deviation indicates a relatively narrower distribution of responses.

Similarly, the item "Applying the APA style in all the citing" demonstrates a

mean of 2.4149 and a standard deviation of 1.0916. This indicates that this aspect is also viewed by students as comparatively more difficult, with a comparable level of variability in their experiences.

In contrast, the item "Writing references" has a higher mean of 3.0000 and a larger standard deviation of 1.4294. This implies that students tend to perceive this task as relatively less difficult, albeit with greater individual variation in their perceptions and approaches.

These findings suggest that while the overall process of citing sources is generally viewed as moderately challenging, certain sub-components, such as properly utilizing in-text citations and consistently applying the APA style, are experienced as more difficult by students on average.

Table 5

Descriptive statistics of students' difficulties in writing the introduction

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Identifying a good topic	94	1,00	5,00	3,0000	1,18231
Formulating the research problem	94	1,00	5,00	3,0638	1,18056
Writing a statement of the problem	94	1,00	5,00	3,1596	1,11010
Writing research objectives	94	1,00	5,00	3,2979	1,03519
Writing research questions	94	1,00	5,00	3,3085	1,16422
Creating a research gap	94	1,00	11,00	2,0745	1,33794
Introduction	94	1,33	4,67	2,9840	,70205

With regards to perceived difficulties in crafting the introduction section of a dissertation, item "Identifying a good topic," has a mean value of 3.0000 and standard deviation of 1.18231 which

suggest that, on average, students perceive this task as moderately challenging, with a relatively higher degree of variability in their experiences and perceptions. Similarly, the item

"Formulating the research problem" exhibits a mean of 3.0638 and a standard deviation of 1.18056, indicating that students also find this aspect moderately difficult, with a comparable level of variability in their responses. Examining the item "Writing a statement of the problem," the higher mean of 3.1596 combined with a lower standard deviation of 1.11010 implies that students tend to view this sub-task as relatively more challenging, with less variation in their perceived difficulties. The item "Writing research objectives" presents the highest mean of 3.2979 and the lowest standard deviation of 1.03519, suggesting that students generally find this aspect to be the most difficult within the introduction

writing process, with a relatively lower degree of individual differences in their perceptions. Lastly, the item "Generating research questions" displays a mean of 3.3085 and a standard deviation of 1.16422. This indicates that students also struggle the most with this sub-task, as evidenced by the elevated mean score, though the standard deviation is relatively higher compared to the previous item.

Overall, the findings suggest that students perceive various components of introduction writing as moderately to highly challenging, with generating research objectives and formulating research questions emerging as the most difficult aspects.

Table 6

Descriptive statistics of writing a coherent literature review

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Finding sources relevant to my topic	94	1,00	33,00	2,8404	3,36428
Reviewing and critiquing previous research	94	1,00	5,00	2,1277	1,09970
Integrating sources to my writing when I write the literature review	94	1,00	5,00	2,7128	1,13234
Literature Review	94	1,00	17,50	2,4840	1,78923

As shown in table 6, in writing a literature review, the mean value (2.48) is between neutral and points, and the SD (1.78) reveals the likelihood of the responses to be distributed farther to "difficult point". This can be demonstrated in the item "reviewing and critiquing previous literature", which mean is (2.12) and SD is (1.01) reporting responses around difficult

point. Nevertheless, the mean of "finding relevant sources to my topic (2.84) is close to neutral point with a SD (1.36). In this way, the responses are likely to be scattered to easy point. In few words, writing a literature review is difficult for reviewing and critiquing previous literature.

Table 7

Descriptive statistics of methodology

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Selecting the right design of the research	94	1,00	5,00	2,7979	1,13194
Writing the methods section	93	1,00	5,00	2,8172	,96624
Choosing an appropriate research approach for my study	94	1,00	5,00	2,9149	1,06417
Using the appropriate sampling techniques and strategies	94	1,00	22,00	2,9894	2,25520
Selecting the appropriate data collection instruments	94	1,00	5,00	2,7021	1,02475
Methodology	94	1,00	7,00	2,8532	,84963

Table 7 provides descriptive statistics associated with students' perceived difficulties in various aspects of the research methodology section. The item "Selecting the right design of the research," the mean value of 2.7979 and standard deviation of 1.13194 suggest that, on average, students perceive this task as moderately challenging, with a relatively higher degree of variability in their experiences and perceptions. Similarly, the item "Writing the methods section" exhibits a mean of 2.8172 and a standard deviation of 0.96624, indicating that students tend to find this aspect relatively more difficult, with less variation in their responses. Examining the item "Choosing an appropriate research approach for my study," the higher mean of 2.9149 combined with a standard deviation of 1.06417 implies that students generally experience greater difficulty in selecting an appropriate research approach for their studies, though the standard deviation is also higher. The item "Using the appropriate sampling techniques and strategies"

presents the highest mean of 2.9894 and the highest standard deviation of 2.25520, suggesting that students perceive the use of appropriate sampling techniques and strategies as the most challenging aspect, with a high degree of variability in their experiences. Conversely, the item "Selecting the appropriate data collection instruments" displays a lower mean of 2.7021 and a standard deviation of 1.02475, indicating that students tend to find the selection of data collection instruments relatively less difficult, with a lower degree of individual variability. Lastly, the "Methodology" item captures the collective difficulty experienced by students in the various methodological aspects, with a moderately high mean of 2.8532 and a relatively lower standard deviation of 0.84963.

This implies that students perceive the different components of the research methodology section as moderately to highly challenging, with the use of appropriate sampling techniques and strategies emerging as the most difficult aspect.

Table 8

Descriptive statistics of data analysis and interpretation

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Analyzing quantitative data	94	1,00	5,00	2,5000	1,10473
Analyzing qualitative data	93	1,00	5,00	2,2473	1,01784
Reporting the findings	94	1,00	5,00	2,7340	1,11852
Interpreting and discussing the findings	94	1,00	5,00	2,5851	1,07172
DataAnalysis.Interpreation	94	1,00	4,50	2,5160	,81963

Table 8 provides results of students' perceived difficulties in the data analysis and interpretation components. As for the item "Analyzing quantitative data," the mean value of 2.5000 and standard deviation of 1.10473 suggest that, on average, students perceive the analysis of quantitative data as moderately challenging, with a relatively higher degree of variability in their experiences and perceptions. In contrast, the item "Analyzing qualitative data" exhibits a lower mean of 2.2473 and a standard deviation of 1.01784, indicating that students tend to find the analysis of qualitative data relatively less difficult. However, greater difficulty is experienced in "reporting their research findings" with the higher mean of 2.7340, and a standard

deviation of 1.11852. With a mean of 2.5851 and a standard deviation of 1.01172, students perceive the "interpretation and discussion of findings" as moderately challenging. Lastly, the "Data Analysis Interpretation" item captures the collective difficulty experienced by students, with a moderately high mean of 2.5160 and a relatively lower standard deviation of 0.81963.

The findings indicate that students generally perceive the various elements of data analysis and interpretation within the research methodology as moderately challenging in nature. Notably, the reporting of research findings emerges as the most difficult aspect for the students.

Table 9

Descriptive statistics of writing the conclusion

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Writing the conclusion	94	1,00	5,00	3,2553	,93827

For writing the conclusion, the mean value (3.25) reveals an average level of difficulty, and the responses of the participants tends to be scattered from

"neutral" with a standard deviation (.93). Therefore, the participants revealed a level of difficulty beyond the average.

Table 10

Descriptive statistics of writing the abstract

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
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Writing the abstract	94	1,00	5,00	3,1064	1,07231
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Responses of the participants demonstrate an average level of difficulty with a mean (3.10), yet the standard deviation (1.07) unveils the responses plotted from

“neutral” to the maximum value. In this way, the participants found writing the abstract is relatively more than moderate.

Table 11

Descriptive statistics of study skills

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Managing time to write research	94	1,00	5,00	1,9255	,94174
Maintaining interest and motivation to write	94	1,00	5,00	2,1702	1,12296
Maintaining a positive and healthy relationship with the supervisor	94	1,00	12,00	3,1489	1,54473
Completing the dissertation in the time allocated	94	1,00	5,00	2,3298	,99880
Managing stress	94	1,00	11,00	1,9681	1,34766
Organizing working sessions with the supervisor	94	1,00	5,00	2,9787	1,27826
StudySkills	94	1,00	4,50	2,4202	,72452

For study skills, the mean value (2.47) indicates participants find it difficult to manage their thesis writing. The mean value can be confirmed as the standard deviation (.72) reports the responses to be distributed around difficult point. For the items, “completing the dissertation in the allocated time” mean (2.32) is approximately close to study skills’, and the measure of spread (.99) demonstrates the responses plotting on “difficult”. Thereby, difficulty in study skills is confined to completing the dissertation in the allocated time.

Furthermore, “maintaining interest and motivation to write” and “organizing working sessions with the supervisor” items are partially unveiling difficulty in

study skills. The mean of the responses in maintaining interest (2.17) is close to study skills, yet for the standard deviation (1.12), the scores are distributed to less than (2.00), difficult point. Besides, “organizing working sessions” mean (2.97) is close to neutral point, yet the distribution of the scores with a standard deviation (1.27) indicates the scores far from their mean to the minimum value.

The remaining items do not account for a difficulty in study skills. For “Managing time to write research”, the mean (1.92) and the SD (.94) reveal the responses to be around more than very difficult point. This is also the case for managing stress with a mean (1.96) and SD (1.34). The mean score for the item "Maintaining a positive and healthy relationship with the

supervisor" was 3.14, with a standard deviation of 1.54, indicating that the responses were generally beyond the neutral point on the scale. To sum-up, difficulty in study skills is mainly confined to completing the dissertation in the allocated time and relatively to "maintaining interest and motivation to write" and "organizing working sessions with the supervisor".

The present study's findings contribute to the growing body of research on the challenges and difficulties encountered by master's students during the dissertation writing process. The data collected from this investigation align with and extend the existing literature in several key ways.

Consistent with prior studies, the current research identified academic writing skills as a primary area of difficulty for master's students (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Elton, 2010). Participants struggled to craft clear, coherent, and well-structured prose, exhibiting deficiencies in areas such as paragraphing, logical flow, and the appropriate use of academic language and tone. This aligns with Paltridge and Starfield's (2020) observation that graduate students often lack the sophisticated writing abilities required for successful dissertation completion.

The challenges encountered in writing an effective introduction that clearly articulates the research problem, objectives, and significance also resonate with existing literature. As noted by Ridley (2008), establishing a strong foundation for the dissertation through a well-developed introduction is a common struggle for master's students,

underscoring the need for targeted support in this area.

Similarly, the difficulties experienced by participants in conducting a coherent and critical literature review align with the findings of studies such as those by Montalvo (2017) and Kwan (2008). These scholars have highlighted the complexities involved in identifying, organizing, and synthesizing relevant scholarly sources in a meaningful manner, which often exceed the capabilities of master's students.

Regarding the methodology section, the current study's findings corroborate the observations made by Luse et al. (2012) and Kahlke and Pete (2016), who have documented master's students' struggles with designing appropriate research approaches, collecting and analyzing data, and interpreting their findings in a rigorous and defensible manner. Limitations in research methods knowledge and data analysis competencies appear to be persistent challenges for this population.

However, the present study also identified additional areas of difficulty not prominently featured in the existing literature, such as citation problems and study skills-related challenges. While some studies have touched on these issues (e.g., Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Kearns et al., 2016), the current research suggests that these challenges may be more pervasive among master's students than previously acknowledged.

These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of the obstacles encountered by master's students during the dissertation writing process. Addressing these difficulties will require a

comprehensive approach that combines targeted academic skill development, enhanced supervisory support, and the provision of relevant resources and workshops by academic institutions (Roberts & Moreira, 2016; Wisker, 2012).

By acknowledging and proactively addressing the diverse challenges faced by master's students, universities can better support their students in navigating the dissertation journey and producing high-quality research that contributes to the advancement of knowledge in their respective fields.

In comparing the results of the present study with the previous ones, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) have documented the struggles students face in Organizing and structuring the discussion effectively, demonstrating a critical analysis of the findings, positioning their work in relation to existing literature, Using appropriate academic language and tone. In his study, Elton (2010) found that many master's and doctoral students lacked the necessary tacit knowledge required for effective academic writing, resulting in difficulties in areas such as appropriate use of academic language and conventions, Developing a clear and coherent structure, Expressing ideas concisely and logically.

Aligning with the present study findings, Ridley (2008), in a study where he explored the difficulties that doctoral students encountered in writing the introductory chapter of their dissertations, emphasized that participants struggled with clearly defining the scope and focus of their research in the introduction, often making the scope too broad or too narrow

in addition to having difficulties in effectively contextualizing their study within the existing body of literature and highlighting the significance and rationale of their research. The participants faced challenges in crafting a clear and logical structure for the introduction, including the development of a coherent narrative flow and lacked a clear understanding of the rhetorical functions and typical organizational patterns of an effective dissertation introduction.

As regards the difficulties in writing a coherent the literature review, this study's findings are consistent with the findings of Kwan (2008) where participants struggled with determining the appropriate scope and focus of the literature review, often including irrelevant or unnecessary content, analyzing and synthesizing the existing literature, leading to a more descriptive and less evaluative literature review, organizing the literature review in a coherent and logical manner, including the development of a clear conceptual framework, and identifying, selecting, and managing the relevant literature, as well as in developing a consistent and appropriate writing style.

Benavente et al. (2022) found that students struggled with effectively managing their time to complete the different stages of the thesis writing process. They also encountered challenges in developing strong research skills, such as identifying appropriate sources, conducting thorough literature reviews, and formulating clear research questions and objectives.

Besides, students faced obstacles in designing appropriate data collection

methods, gathering relevant data, and conducting rigorous data analysis to support their research findings. The study revealed that students lacked confidence and proficiency in academic writing, particularly in organizing their ideas coherently, adhering to proper citation styles, and ensuring grammatical accuracy. Interestingly, with regards to advisor guidance, participants expressed difficulties in establishing effective

5. Pedagogical implications

Numerous challenges and difficulties have been identified by master's students in the process of completing their dissertations, which hold significant pedagogical implications.

A key pedagogical implication is the need for structured guidance and resource provision by institutions to support students throughout the dissertation writing journey. This can entail the implementation of workshops, seminars, and training sessions focused on research methodology, literature review techniques, data collection and analysis, as well as effective academic writing. Such structured support can equip students with the necessary competencies to navigate the diverse challenges they encounter and enhance the overall quality of their dissertations.

Time management skills have also been recognized as a crucial factor for successful dissertation completion. Institutions could incorporate time management training into their curricula, enabling students to develop skills in planning, prioritizing, and scheduling their work. By equipping students with

working relationships with their thesis advisors, citing issues with timely feedback, clear communication of expectations, and availability of the advisors. As for emotional challenges, the study found that students experienced significant stress, anxiety, and demotivation during the thesis writing process, which negatively impacted their overall performance and progress.

effective time management strategies, they can better balance their academic, personal, and professional commitments, thereby mitigating the challenges associated with managing competing demands.

Furthermore, the promotion of research skills has been identified as a paramount pedagogical consideration. This can encompass training on locating, evaluating, and citing relevant sources, as well as the effective utilization of databases and digital libraries. By honing their research skills, students can overcome challenges related to resource accessibility and construct well-informed, comprehensive dissertations.

Another substantial aspect is the cultivation of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, which many students are observed to struggle with. Integrating activities that foster these skills, such as case studies, debates, and analytical writing exercises, can facilitate students' ability to navigate challenges in topic selection, data collection, and literature review.

The creation of a supportive academic community for dissertation students is also a key pedagogical implication. Institutions

could facilitate peer support groups, mentorship programs, and online discussion forums, enabling students to share experiences, discuss challenges, and seek guidance from faculty members and fellow students. This can provide emotional support, motivation, and collaborative opportunities, helping students overcome obstacles and maintain their momentum.

Institutions should also prioritize the incorporation of feedback and revision processes, encouraging a culture of regular feedback from supervisors and peers. This can enable students to make necessary changes and improvements, strengthening the coherence and quality of their work and addressing challenges in organizing their ideas.

Finally, enhancing digital literacy skills, including training on relevant software and technologies for data analysis, referencing, and research organization, can empower students to navigate the technological aspects of the dissertation process more effectively.

By implementing these multifaceted pedagogical strategies, academic institutions can better support master's students in overcoming the diverse challenges they face throughout the dissertation writing journey and ultimately improve the overall quality and success of their dissertations.

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summarize the content and purpose of the article. The conclusion of a research paper needs to summarize the content and purpose of the article. The conclusion of a research paper needs to summarize the content and purpose of the article. The conclusion of a research paper needs to summarize the content and purpose of the article.

6. Conclusion

The present study has illuminated the multifaceted challenges and difficulties that master's students confront during the dissertation writing process. The data collected reveals that students struggle with an array of obstacles experienced across the various aspects of the dissertation, from academic writing proficiencies to the effective execution of critical research components.

One of the primary areas of difficulty identified was the students' command of academic writing. Many participants struggled to craft clear, coherent, and well-structured writing, which is essential for producing a high-quality dissertation. Deficiencies in skills such as paragraphing, logical flow, and the appropriate use of academic language and tone were frequently reported.

The literature review component also emerged as a significant challenge for the master's students. Identifying, organizing, and synthesizing relevant scholarly sources in a meaningful and critical manner proved to be an arduous task. Students often lacked the necessary skills to effectively evaluate the quality and

relevance of existing research in their field.

The methodology section of the dissertation was another area of concern, as students grappled with designing appropriate research approaches, collecting and analyzing data, and interpreting their findings in a rigorous and defensible manner. Limitations in research methods knowledge and data analysis competencies contributed to these difficulties.

Furthermore, the students encountered challenges in crafting a well-developed and cohesive introduction that clearly articulates the research problem, objectives, and significance. Establishing a strong foundation for the dissertation emerged as an area requiring more support and guidance.

Beyond these dissertation-specific challenges, the study also revealed broader study skills-related difficulties. Time management, maintaining motivation and focus, and a good supervisor-supervisee relationship were common obstacles faced by the master's students.

These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges encountered by master's students during the dissertation writing process. Addressing these difficulties will require a comprehensive approach that combines targeted academic skill development, enhanced supervisory support, and the provision of relevant resources and workshops by academic institutions.

By acknowledging and proactively addressing the diverse challenges faced by master's students, it is imperative for universities to support their students in

navigating the dissertation journey and producing high-quality research that contributes to the advancement of knowledge in their respective fields.

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