

## Challenges Master 2 Students of English at Adrar University Encounter While Preparing Dissertations: Supervisors' and Supervisees' Perspectives (2023-2024)

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### Abstract:

Our paper aims to figure out the challenges that M.A 2 students face when they are preparing their dissertations. A mixed method has been adopted in order to carry out this research; we administered a questionnaire to 81 students and interviewed 05 teachers at the Department of English of Adrar University. Our findings show that most students encounter methodological and spelling problems. While teachers relate the challenges to data collection process, sample selection, lack of guidance and absenteeism both on the part of students and on that of the teachers in charge, and the difficulty to make their way through the topic.

**Keywords:** research, dissertation, challenges, methodology, M.A 2 students

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## Introduction:

In the last decades, the number of Algerian universities has grown too fast because the number of Wilayas and population growth has increased as well. Each Algerian University, the same as the other states all over the world, consists of at least two faculties along with the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Science and Technology, Faculty of Arts and Letters..., and so forth. That of Arts, as its name implies, includes departments like that of Arabic, English, and Spanish. According to the new system of LMD that had been adopted by the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in September 2004 students can pass up to three phases: L stands for *Licence*; it is the equivalent of BA (Bachelor of Art). M denotes *Master* or MA (Master of Art). While D refers to *Doctorate* or the so-called PhD (Doctor in Philosophy). In order to obtain an MA degree, for instance, students have to prepare a research or dissertation to graduate. When we shed the light on MA 2 students of English at Adrar University, we deduced that writing a Master's Thesis in English is not challenge-free. To clarify more, M 2 students should have many competences to accommodate all dissertation writing difficulties. These skills can be related to language, reading (literature review), methodology, practice, communication, the choice of the topic, knowledge, and resource/reference choice. There could be a huge number of proficiencies as well. The absence of such skills will result in so many deficiencies.

To start with, we are going to define *dissertation*, *challenge* and the *proficiencies/skills* that help students write their dissertations. Concerning the notion of "*Dissertation*", Evans et al. (2014) considered it as a long research work. In other words, it is a long-term research. They also regarded it as a genuine search that is issued to be assessed by following researchers. A challenge is defined in Collins Cobuild Dictionary as: "Something new and difficult which requires great effort and determination". (Cobuild, 2024). When it comes to dissertation writing skills, Olmos (2010) said that those proficiencies were related to being well-versed to the content of the targeted topic, writing skills, researching skills, and motives behind highlighting a given topic. (Bakhou & Bouhania, 2020). Other academicians have added further competences that should be available in students in

order to exceed writing difficulties like the sociocultural context and the conditions under which students write can play a major role in the process of Master dissertation writing, either positively or negatively. Concisely, writing skills are numerous and controversial, so let us spotlight the aforementioned ones. Language or linguistic skills, as this name implies, concern phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Reading about the target topic is a must as well; such a process is called *Literature Review* in the field of research. To write a good literature review, which was defined by (McCombes, 2023) as a survey of scholarly sources on a specific topic. It gives an insight of recent knowledge, because it allows you to acquaint with relevant theories, methods, and gaps in the existing research that you can later apply to your paper, thesis, or dissertation topic, you have to read already existing topics to have correlations to yours. The purpose of reading here is to enrich your background. Another aspect that most researchers and mainly Master2 Students lack is research methodology. Methodology was perceived by (Dale, 2022) as the chapter where we comprehensively illuminate readers of our inquiry about plan choices and legitimize your reasons. This chapter is vital since it shows your understanding of scholastic investigate plan hypothesis, outlines that your discoveries will be sound (Dale, 2022).

When it comes to practice, we mean training on writing thoroughly and carrying out research works frequently as well. When we started our survey, it was obvious that most students didn't use to write too much to the extent that they feel anxious while writing a single simple sentence lest they make various sorts of errors. We recommend this category of EFL learners to take, at least, short stories preferably those written by native speakers and copy them in a copybook so as to acquire more knowledge of the language as well as writing skills. However, if they are not used to do pieces of researches from time to another, they will encounter many challenges while preparing their M.A Dissertation. Another criterion that indicated whether researchers are going to have a successful search journey is the good communication with their supervisors. Greetham (2019) states that supervisees don't behave with their supervisors in the same way. He also adds that some universities provide their students with timetables to meet their supervisors to avoid random appointments. For him, the success of the relationship between the two sides is based

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upon personalities (Greetham, 2019). Further to this, an intelligent *Master 2 student* the topic that he likes and able to handle; otherwise his/her research journey will be bizarre, resulting in failure and a psychological damage. Since *Master 2* students are non-native speakers of English, they should have a good knowledge of the tool of research (English).

The last skill that we see important to any researchers, along with *M 2* students of English, is the careful choice of references; the chosen sources must be relevant to the discussed dissertation subject and have to be various. There are primary resources and secondary ones. **Primary Sources, such as diaries and speeches,** help researchers to gather information from people. **Secondary Sources, like books and scholarly articles, bridge us to the first original source,** in spite of the fact that they often quote or otherwise use primary sources (Healy, 2024). As researchers, we rely on both of them.

### 1. Research Questions

We have generated the solutions that might alleviate the challenges that *Master 2* students encounter and fulfill their deficiencies while preparing their *Master* dissertations, which is the chief purpose of our study, through a series of questions directed to all supervisees of *Master two* students of English at Adrar university who outnumbered 80 students and some of their supervisors as well (05 teachers). The following research questions were put forward based on our general research problem:

1. Do *Master 2* students face any difficulties while they are writing their theses?
2. If so, what are these difficulties?
3. Are there any possible solutions to alleviate students' deficiencies?

## **2. Literature Review**

As researchers, we really believe in the sudden and often expected similarities between research works not only in terms of the subject under study but the resemblance in the target population and the place where the survey is carried out as well. When we skimmed through the previous studies that resemble ours, we noticed that there are various results depending on many criteria. All of those studies like the ones of Lestari (2020), Di Nuovo et al. (2018), and Gürel, (2011) proved that Master's dissertation writing, along with Doctoral theses, are accompanied with an unlimited number and kinds of challenges. Logically speaking, it is not surely enough to teach Master 2 students how to write their undergraduate dissertation without making the writing and searching process under control.

In her study which took place at Muhammadiyah University of Bengkulu in 2020, Lestari adopted a descriptive quantitative research. In other words, she mixed between the quantitative and qualitative approach in order to reach the goal of her study. The purpose of the researcher's work was to figure out the types of challenges that the targeted sample encounters and to find a way out to minimize those difficulties. She administered a questionnaire to 74 students of the seventh semester students of English Education Study Program of Muhammadiyah University of Bengkulu in the academic year 2018-2019. When the students filled in the questionnaire, they were interviewed by the researchers to elicit the data. The findings show the students' difficulties in thesis writing are as follows:

1. **English Proficiencies:** Proficiency, here, refers to competence or skill at the language. To be proficient in any language, you must be able to use it accurately and fluently. This linguistic competence is based upon mastering the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing; the latter is the pre-concern of most students since it is hard to acquire.
2. **Time Management:** In order for master 2 students to successfully write their dissertations, they should reconcile between their studies and their thesis preparation.
3. **Research Methodology:** Supervisees ought to consult with their supervisors to show them the methodology that fits with each topic.

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4. Students' Attitude: It impacts on the research either positively or negatively.
5. Research Topic: Each student is supposed to choose the subject that they are capable to deal with, the one they consider an interesting topic as they must check the availability of references.
6. Co-advisor Relationship: The relationship with the co-advisor must be good.
7. Students' Personalities: Students with strong personalities usually expect challenges in any task and do not easily give up. They try to find solutions instead. (Lestari, 2020)

In the same line of thought, Ebadi & Pourahmadi (2019) explored the challenges in writing master theses from postgraduate English as Foreign Language (EFL) students' and supervisors' perspectives. The researchers applied the qualitative approach to gather the data by conducting semi structured interview, which is a data collection method that relies on asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework. However, the questions are not set in order or in phrasing, with 40 students and 10 supervisors. The sample was non randomly selected. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the elicited results. The researchers found that supervisors and supervisees share some challenges like the difficulty to use academic vocabulary of research. Their study also elucidates the lack of research design knowledge such as analyzing data by SPSS software and choosing a researchable topic. (Ebadi & Pourahmadi, 2019)

Another study that we considered to fulfill our literature review and followed on the footsteps of preceding works was an article titled *“Challenges of Dissertation Writing in the Foreign Language and Strategies Used: The Perceptions of Dissertation Supervisors by Gürel* in 2011. The author used a mixed method by assigning questionnaires and conducting face-to-face interviews with dissertation supervisors. The obstructions that resulted in the deficiencies that students suffered from are listed below:

1. lack of writing practice
2. lack of writing ability
3. having a limited ability of expressing ideas

4. having a weak English background

In order to alleviate these challenges, advisors had suggested five strategies:

1. reading and correcting
2. teaching
3. making suggestions/advising
4. directing to sources
5. reading but not correcting

Their work has resulted in beneficial references for the pedagogy of English language, for teachers who teach writing, and for scientists concerned with English for Academic Purposes scholars (Gürel, 2011, p.1)

### **3. Research Method**

#### **3.1-Design**

Our research describes the difficulties that Master 2 students of English at Adrar University encounter in their theses writing; it is a descriptive piece of paper that mixed between the quantitative and the qualitative data collection method. The researchers have selected undergraduate students of English of two specialties (*Linguistics and Didactics and Civilization and Literature*) in their ninth semester in the Academic year 2023-2024. Arikunto (1988) stated that a descriptive research purpose is to collect a particular data of interest factually and accurately. Meanwhile, Ary (2010) also said that the main goal of descriptive research is to summarize the features of several groups or to test their opinions and toward given inquiries. The design suits the requirement of the current study

#### **3.2-Participants**

The focal sample of this study was 81 of Master 2 Students of English Linguistics and Didactics and English Civilization and Literature at Ahmed Draia University of Adrar in the Academic Year 2023/2024. They all asked filled out our questionnaire on one hand. On the other hand, and in order to enlighten our research with the

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supervisors' opinions as well, 05 teachers voluntarily participated in this survey.

### **3.3-Instruments**

Questionnaires and interviews have been used to collect the data. Our questionnaire pattern takes after that of Bakhou and Bouhania (2020). We also preferred to support our work with face to face interviews with 05 teachers at the Department of English. The teachers have been asked 04 questions, during the interviews. The chosen instruments validated our data. Questions Directed to Supervisors (teachers)

- 1) Do your supervisees encounter any challenges while they are preparing their dissertations?
- 2) What type of challenges do they face?
- 3) Why do they face such challenges?
- 4) What are the solutions?

#### **a) Questions Directed to Supervisees (students)**

- 1) Have you encountered any challenges while preparing your master's dissertation?
- 2) What are they related to?
- 3) Provided that you have faced linguistic difficulties, what are they?
- 4) Why did you face such challenges?

## **4. Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data that we have collected, we used the so-called SPSS, which is a software program used to convert any data into statistics to simplify the procedure of data interpretation. Various descriptive statistics were used to display the respondents' responses. The quantitative data were extracted from the questionnaire while the qualitative one was taken from the interview. We consider this process

as a two-edged sword because it targeted supervisors and their supervisees.

#### 4.1 Personal Characteristics

|           |                             | Count | Column N % |
|-----------|-----------------------------|-------|------------|
| Gender    | Female                      | 13    | 68,4%      |
|           | male                        | 6     | 31,6%      |
| Age       | Between 20 and 25 years old | 10    | 52,6%      |
|           | Between 25 and 30 years old | 1     | 5,3%       |
|           | Between 30 and 35 years old | 5     | 26,3%      |
|           | More than 35 years old      | 3     | 15,8%      |
| Specialty | No answer                   | 5     | 26,3%      |
|           | Civilization                | 3     | 15,8%      |
|           | Linguistics                 | 8     | 42,1%      |
|           | Literature                  | 3     | 15,8%      |

#### 4.2 The Questions

| Have you encountered any challenges while preparing your master's dissertation? |         |       |         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-------|---------|
| No                                                                              |         | Yes   |         |
| Count                                                                           | Row N % | Count | Row N % |
| 1                                                                               | 5,3%    | 18    | 94,7%   |

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| The encountered challenges are related to? |         |                   |         |             |         |       |         |
|--------------------------------------------|---------|-------------------|---------|-------------|---------|-------|---------|
| Linguistic Challenges                      |         | Literature Review |         | Methodology |         | Ohter |         |
| Count                                      | Row N % | Count             | Row N % | Count       | Row N % | Count | Row N % |
| 2                                          | 10,5%   | 5                 | 26,3%   | 10          | 52,6%   | 2     | 10,5%   |

|                                                            | Count     | Column N % |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| vIf you have faced linguistic difficulties, what are they? | No answer | 5 26,3%    |
|                                                            | Lexical   | 6 31,6%    |
|                                                            | Ohter     | 4 21,1%    |
|                                                            | Semantic  | 2 10,5%    |
|                                                            | Syntactic | 2 10,5%    |

|                                             | Count | Column N<br>% |
|---------------------------------------------|-------|---------------|
| Why do you face such linguistic challenges? | 11    | 57,9%         |
|                                             | 1     | 5,3%          |
|                                             | 1     | 5,3%          |
|                                             | 1     | 5,3%          |
|                                             | 1     | 5,3%          |
|                                             | 1     | 5,3%          |
|                                             | 1     | 5,3%          |
|                                             | 1     | 5,3%          |
|                                             | 1     | 5,3%          |

## 5. Findings and Discussions

### 5.1. The Challenges from the View of Supervisors

In order to find out the opinions of supervisors towards dissertation writing challenges, we conducted interviews with them. To do such a process, we prepared sheets, consisting of a series of inquiries, and filled them out with the teachers' responses. The supervisors we met taught different modules (General Linguistics, Phonology, Dialectology, Sociolinguistics, Research Methodology, British Civilization and Culture, Phonetics, Written Expression, Ethics, Literature, Bibliographical Research, and Oral Expression. The challenges listed below are the ones they consider the main obstacles of writing an undergraduate dissertation.

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### **5.1.1-First Difficulty: Lack of Meetings with Supervisors**

Each supervisee should have a supervisor to guide him/her from the first phase of carrying out the memoire to the last one. But, supervision is based upon meetings either online or in person. The lack of meetings leads to the lack of guidance; therefore, students may fail in writing their theses.

### **5.1.2-Second Difficulty: Processing of Data Collection**

Data collection process should be chosen carefully to gain the research objective. According to Greetham (2019):

“The aim of quantitative research is to be as objective as possible by basing conclusions on statistical findings and other measurable empirical data. The capability of turning the targeted case data into numerical and mathematical expressions is a must, simply in terms of percentages, averages and so on, or in more complex ways using statistical tests or mathematical models.” (p.168)

He adds that a qualitative research, in contrast to quantitative one, is based on data that cannot be converted into numerical form. Expressed in words describing attitudes, feelings, opinions, ideas, customs and beliefs, it cannot be reduced to averages, maximum and minimum values, or percentages. Still, this sort of material is often rich in subtle insights into human behaviour that are essential to understanding individuals, societies and cultures (Greetham, 2019, pp. 168-169).

### **5.1.3-Third Difficulty: Sample Selection**

Before designing any questionnaire or arranging any interview, the researcher should spotlight the relevant sample. Furthermore, he/she must know about the population since it bridges the students to the right sample. According to Bell (2005): “In very large surveys, like the census, sampling techniques will be employed in order to produce a sample which is, as far as possible, representative of the

population as a whole. Generalizations can then be made from the findings. In small studies, we have to do the best we can.” (p.145).

#### **5.1.4-Fourth Difficulty: Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Being still beginners in their research journey, Master’s students find it hard sometimes to analyse and interpret the collected data. They may not even differentiate between the two terms, i.e. analysis and interpretation. The former refers to the use of statistical programs, such as Excel and SPSS, to evaluate the data. The latter is the process of reviewing data and coming up with inferences to draw a final judgement or conclusion.

#### **5.1.5-Fifth Difficulty: Time Management**

Undergraduate students who are supposed to write a dissertation usually fall in the trap of time management; they don’t well balance between time devoted to studying and the one that is special to dealing with their research. In this case, they had better consult with their supervisors to show them how to manage their times.

#### **5.1.6-Sixth Difficulty: Language-related Problems**

Our respondents listed down the following linguistic challenges: spelling, grammar, capitalization, punctuation, sentences structure, and coherence. According to them, such issues are due to many factors like: lack of conscience and professionalism, reading, the unfamiliarity with this kind of lengthy writings, lack of practice, absence of rote learning, ignorance of how to use already acquired skills to build new skills, anxiety, procrastination, lack of motivation, disinterest, and lack of knowledge of conducting a research work. In short, a considerable number of studies have ranked language as the first difficulty and the main challenges for students who write their dissertation in English as a second or foreign language.

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### **5.1.7-Seventh Difficulty: Literature Review**

Nowadays, most of EFL master students feel blocked to read for any purpose, either for searching or for the sake of pleasure, keep away the reading that is related to reviewing the literature. One of the questioned supervisors asserted that supervisees encountered such an issue because they don't read and don't know what to read before and during the research journey and if they read some related topics, they could not decide what to include in the Literature Review chapter of the dissertation.

### **5.1.8-Eighth Difficulty: Choosing a Topic in the First Place**

Before taking the final decision of the topic to work on, one ought to think about the tendency to the topic, the background knowledge about the subject, and reference availability. Firstly, if any student or researcher wants to work on a certain theme, he/she must love this subject because liking and enjoying the subject may lead to creativity. Secondly, students should have prerequisites about the target subject. Thirdly, the sources (either primary or secondary ones) should be available to tackle the research. The three factors we have mentioned might alleviate the challenges and a master's thesis writing.

### **5.1.9-Ninth Difficulty: Methodological Issues**

In spite of the fact that all Algerian BA and M.A students of English, among which are Adrar students, study the module of research methodology, it still remains ambiguous for most of them when it comes to practice. That is, according to one of the teachers whom we interviewed, it is due to the lack of reading and the shaky writing skills. They see that this problem can be dealt through practice.

## 5.2.The Challenges from the View of Supervisees (students)

The questionnaire administered to 81 undergraduate students at the Department of English (Faculty of Arts-Ahmed Draia University-Adrar) resulted in the following: First, the majority of our respondents (66.7%) were females while the rest (33.3%) were males. Second, the majority of the informants (53.8%) studied Linguistics and Didactics, and those who belonged to Civilization and Literature amounted to 46.2%. Third, approximately all students (94.4%) said they encountered a plethora of challenges while they were writing their master theses. Fourth, most supervisees (55.6%) related the challenges to methodology, some of them (27.8%) see that the difficulties are due to literature review, whereas few of them (11.1%) think that linguistic deficiencies lead to such challenges.

We tried to go deeper by highlighting language-related challenges to test the perceptions of our sample, so the students had various opinions towards the linguistics issues. We raised a mixture of open and close-ended question which was as follows: *“Provided that you face linguistic difficulties, what are they?”*

1-Lexical

2-Syntactic

3-Semantic

4-Other (kindly mention the kind of the problem)

The collected data was as follows

| Lexical | Syntactic | Semantic | Other |
|---------|-----------|----------|-------|
| 46.2%   | 7.7%      | 15.4%    | 30.8% |

The data show that most students commit spelling mistakes. This issue can be dealt with or at least minimized through the overuse

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of words in writing because the less you write the less you misspell words. The ordinary way of practicing writing, with a pen rather than typing vocabularies on a piece of computer, works better. It is advisable by some experts to take a short story in English, for instance, and copy it in a copybook to assimilate the spelling of words on one hand. On the other hand, this activity will us help acquire more linguistic proficiencies.

Despite the low ratio of syntactic problems (7.7%) among M 2 students of English at Adrar University, the sentences being written by them or even by doctoral students remain everyday structures. In other words, by skimming through the pages of some old master memoires, we observed that most students tend to use simple sentences. If they try to vary between sentence patterns, they often copy-paste ready-made complex or compound structures instead of building their own. So, reading and writing too much might result in writing competency and creativity.

The statistics collected from our questionnaire also reveal the existence of semantic problems. Committing semantic mistakes can result from different factors. Literal translation is the most famous source for this problem. When students think in their mother tongue, they will surely translate ready-made sentences in Arabic into English. In addition, the low background of English vocabulary may lead to the misuse of the searching medium (language). In other words, if the student knows the appropriate word he/she has to use in his research and they ignore its appropriate equivalent in English, he/she will be blocked. The former issue is *interlingual* since it is due to the influence of the first language of EFL learners while the latter is *intralingual* because it refers to lack of knowledge of the target language. Thinking in the target language, learning as much big vocabulary as possible, and the use of the acquired words in the suitable context might help supervisees avoid semantic-related challenges.

Last but not least, we asked the respondents to enrich our questionnaire by mentioning other categories of M.A dissertation writing challenges, but they did not include any. Consequently, it seemed that the problems they encountered were restricted to the ones we proposed only, or they might face a huge number of difficulties, but they preferred not to unveil them.

Afterwards, we asked our informants to list the reasons behind their theses writing challenges; they shared the following responses:

1. Lack of reading
2. I don't face any challenges.
3. Because I have not read sufficiently.
4. Teaching issue
5. Due to a mixture of diverse varieties of people who have distinct identities and come from different places.
6. Less practice of language.

## **Conclusion**

Our study was a mixture of quantitative qualitative approach. It investigated the case of EFL students of English at Adrar University while working on their master's topics. It took into account both of the perception of teachers and students towards dissertation writing issues. The findings of this paper show that the participants, supervisors and supervisees, have listed a series of challenges.

There are nine challenges that the supervisors we interviewed shared in their answer: lack of meetings with supervisors, process of data collection, sample selection, data analysis and interpretation, time management, language-related problems, literature review, choosing the topic in first place, and methodological issues. When we had a look at similar topics, we found out that those studies had often revealed the same results.

Students, on the other side, see that three research criteria are the main factors that obstruct the writing process if they are not

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committed to: methodology, literature review, and language respectively. They see that it is not easy to select the relevant research method, and if they succeed at doing so, they find it hard to word the research questions. Some supervisees are not accustomed to read at all; keep aside reviewing the literature that can fit with their studies. The most salient deficiency for most students is language. Some M.A candidates try to festoon their theses with an aesthetic language, but they make plenty of mistakes. They had better used simple English that is mistake-free. Doing much research works and language skills practice can lessen the above mentioned problems.

Research journey is an umbrella that covers many surrounding obstacles. The latter is regarded as something positive for EFL amateur researchers because committing mistakes is a sign of learning. On the other hand, students or novice researchers are going to catch two birds with one stone; they are going to solidify their English through dissertation writing as they are going to infer what research methodology means through practice rather than the burden of classroom courses.

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## **6. Appendices:**

### **Teachers' Interview**

Greetings sir/miss/mrs,

We are conducting this interview in order to know the challenges that MA 2 students of Adrar face while writing their Master's Dissertation:

1. Could you please kindly answer these questions?
2. Which module/modules do you teach?
3. Do you supervisees encounter any challenges since they are preparing their dissertations?
4. What type of challenges do they face?
5. Why do they face such challenges?
6. What are the solutions?

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***THANKS FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION***



## **Students' Questionnaire**

### **The First Section: Demographic Information**

1. Gender

☐ Male

☐ Female

2. Age

☐ Between 20 and 25 years old

☐ Between 25 and 30 years old

☐ Between 30 and 35 years old

☐ Older than 35 years old

3. Specialty

☐ Civilization

☐ Linguistics

### **The Second Section: Dissertation Writing Challenges**

4. The encountered challenges are related to:

☐ Literature Review

☐ Methodology

☐ Linguistic Challenges

5. Provided that you have faced linguistic challenges, what are they?

☐ Lexical

☐ Syntactic

☐ Semantic

6. Why do you face such linguistic challenges?