Thesis Writing Challenges Facing Palestinian EFL Master's Students: A Qualitative Case Study

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ABSTRACT: *This study probed challenges of writing thesis among Palestinian English as a foreign language (EFL) master's students (MA). A qualitative case study was employed, and the data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The participants were eighteen MA students and ten supervisors from the department of English at the Islamic University of Gaza. The main findings identified in the study included, among others, selecting an appropriate research topic, limited research and methodology training, linguistic and academic writing inadequacies, insufficient feedback from supervisors and course instructors, and limited resources and online digital materials. To minimize these challenges and empower MA students, the study offered some recommendations and suggestions for further future studies.*

INTRODUCTION

Presently, there has been a growing number of Palestinian students willing to pursue for graduate studies in their fields. After completing coursework, they usually proceed to the research stage, which requires a candidate to choose an original researchable topic, plan, and high quality research thesis. An academic excellence in MA programs is essentially associated with solid academic writing, particularly thesis writing quality (Ho, 2013). Further, writing a master thesis is a complex process comprising a number of stages such as formulating research questions and objectives, designing and carrying out research, collecting and analyzing data, and reporting findings and final product of a manuscript (Bakhou & Bouhania, 2020; Tiwari, 2019).

However, writing a master thesis can be a daunting task for both native and nonnative speakers (El Freihat, 2021, Komba, 2015). In practice, thesis writing is a challenging process for most EFL master's students, and it has been a burning concern for faculty members as well (Huang, 2007). It requires effective writing and competent hard skills, such as planning, conducting research, critical thinking, linguistic competence, etc. Because it requires essential cognitive and linguistic competences, writing tends to be a tough skill for Arabic speaking students, and Palestinian students are no exception (Ali, & Ishaq & Hassan & Ishaq & Ahmad, 2022). Additionally, due to the large number of skills involved in writing, students often experience a nagging anxiety in writing their thesis (Vos, 2013). As a member of an academic staff in one of the Palestinian

universities, the author has taught, supervised MA EFL students, and served as internal and external examiner for a good number of students. Understandably, it has become evident that thesis writing has been academically challenging task for the vast majority of MA students.

Most of the studies conducted worldwide on thesis writing have focused on issues pertaining to academic writing and supervision (Hajar, 2016; Ho, 2013). Moreover, some studies in the Arab world have focused on challenges of writing thesis that face Arab students pursuing their graduate studies in countries where English is used as an official language (e.g. Al-Zubaidi, 2012) or studying at local Arab universities (e.g. Boufedja & Bouhania, 2022; El-Freihat, 2021). However, there has been a shortage of research investigating challenges that encounter MA EFL students' from students and supervisors' perspectives, especially in the Palestinian university context. Alostath (2021) argues that there is lack of rigorous research that investigates academic writing challenges facing MA students. Therefore, this study fills the gap in literature about students and supervisors' perspectives on the Palestinian MA students' challenges during writing their theses. Investigating theses perspectives would foster our understanding of these challenges and make both students and supervisors more conscious about them. Therefore, through their narrative, students and supervisors share their first-hand experiences and impart approaches on how to cope with these challenges.

Research questions
The investigation was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges in thesis writing from MA EFL students and supervisors' perspectives?
2. What are some practical recommendations to solve or minimize these challenges?

This study was timely as the existing body of literature coupled with the empirical insights were hoped to inform and enlighten both students and academic staff in Palestinian higher education institutions about some thorny issues and challenges related to thesis writing. The findings were expected to serve as baseline information for providing a 'menu' of potentially illuminating insights and practical recommendations for overcoming challenges facing MA EFL students. The next section focuses on the available scholarship on thesis writing, highlighting different challenges that might arise during the course of writing, with more focus on the EFL graduate contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing an MA thesis can pose potential challenges to EFL students. Tiwari (2019) argues that writing an academic work is not an easy task, for students experience challenges such as identifying research interest, collecting and analyzing data, reporting findings, developing discussion, and writing implications and recommendations. He believes that the major problem students face when writing thesis is lack of focus on the writing process; furthermore, they seem to lack language competence and necessary skills to write clear sentences.

Thesis writing challenges fall into a number of broad categories such as using proper academic language, framing the research and structuring the text, selecting appropriate research methodologies, referencing one's own work and the literature, lack of motivation, and relation with supervisors (Ali et al., 2022; Turmudi, 2020). Similarly, Kombo and Tromp (2011) contend that possible challenges among MA students encompass the selection of a title, using poor language structure, and lack of ability to communicate effectively with supervisors. Additionally, these challenges may result, for instance, from problems related to research and supervisory practices (Huang, 2007).

Lack of proper linguistic competences and writing experience can be possible reasons for such challenges. Hinkel (2004) maintains that limited knowledge of second/foreign language grammar and vocabulary and the complexity of the writing process itself seem to be key variables for the inferior quality of theses written by non-native speakers. Mirhassani, Samar, and Fattahipoor (2006) advocate that MA students' academic- writing experience remains relatively limited and tend to be inappropriate to meet the essential academic requirements of university and graduate courses. Due emphasis is placed on successful completion of thesis writing, rather than providing graduate students with sufficient support to enhance their academic writing skills (Mirhassani et. al., 2006).

Besides the academic competencies, successful completion of a thesis is partially determined by certain psychological considerations, for instance students' self-esteem, public image, family relationships, financial status, work and health conditions. Key factors that may have substantial impact on graduate students' ability to complete their theses successfully involve prior knowledge, experience, commitment, and the likelihood of losing interest or passion for the research topic (Ali et al., 2022).

The available scholarship indicates that a number of studies have been conducted worldwide on either supervision or thesis writing challenges. For example, Boufeldja and Bouhania (2020) conducted a qualitative research, with focus on non-linguistic factors, to explore thesis writing experiences of Algerian supervisors and MA students' perceptions of thesis challenges faced during the course of writing process. The main findings indicated that thesis writing is a daunting experience due to sociocultural and linguistic challenges. These challenges arise essentially from students' weakness in academic writing and research skills, limited knowledge about thesis writing, lack of supervisor and family support, and insufficient academic preparation.

Moreover, Shahsavar and Kourepaz (2020) carried out a similar study to identify postgraduates' problems in writing the literature review section. Using the Akindele's (2008) guidelines, the researchers evaluated 40 completed master theses and analyzed qualitatively semi-structured interview responses from 10 postgraduate students. The findings indicated that most students were not able to synthesize, critique, or explain the literature in their writing and apparently focused more on summarizing other researchers' findings and interpretations. Therefore, students seemed

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to lack knowledge and time to complete their literature review, yet some advisors did not provide them with the necessary information for writing it.

Likewise, Divsar (2018) investigated challenges encountering Iranian EFL students in thesis writing. The main causes were attributed essentially to linguistic difficulties (e.g. grammatical and organizational problems and lack of mastery of academic writing style). The study also reported a spectrum of other difficulties ranging from instructional and pedagogical inadequacies to time management, limited supervisory support, and loss of passion or motivation.

Interestingly, to examine writing challenges amongst Tanzanian graduate students, Komba (2016) reviewed a total of 39 theses and 64 dissertations. The findings revealed that the majority of candidates faced numerous writing challenges such as writing all the chapters, inappropriateness in presenting different chapters and lack of academic writing skills.

While previous studies investigated challenges facing MA graduate students in different academic contexts, Aboud & Alafeshat & Shamsi (2019) explored challenges facing Arab doctoral candidates in an English Medium of instruction. After analyzing the semi-structured interviews qualitatively, the study revealed that Arab doctoral candidates encountered some challenges, such as lack of experience in research methods, poor academic English, and publication skills. The current study, however, examines the different challenges facing Palestinian MA EFL students in writing their theses, from students and advisors' perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, the study used qualitative case study methodology. According to Kennedy & Edmonds (2017), case study seeks to understand a particular phenomenon (i.e., challenges in thesis writing) within a naturalistic setting through the voice of participants. This methodology is particularly ideal for under-researched and real-life phenomena (Meyer, 2001) as it allows for contextual nuances (Yin, 2011). Although this study depended primarily on interviews as a main source of data, it maintained key reliable features of rigorous academic qualitative research and ethics, e.g. quality, credibility, trustworthiness, and neutrality (Davies & Dodd, 2002). All the interviews were about the participants' first-hand experience of thesis writing challenges; however, supervisors' interviews manifested their experience of students' problems in thesis writing. To protect the identities of participants, all the names used in this research are pseudonyms.

The study chose MA students and supervisors who were interested in the research and accepted to take part. There were 28 participants (10 supervisors and 18 MA EFL students) from the department of English at the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG). The supervisors varied in terms of educational background, age, and teaching experience. The students were MA EFL students (9 male and 9 female students) who finished writing their theses in linguistics or translation and graduated from the university. Marshall and Rossman (1999) argue that decisions about sampling

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people are usually based on information-rich cases. In-depth semi-structured interview schedules were prepared and carried out in English, recorded, and transcribed for thematic analysis. The study asked the participants, a critical friend, and community of practice to search for other possible explanations and sound interpretations. They also helped in identifying the blind spots and suggesting various ways of looking into the data. It was hoped that the research findings and recommendations could help Palestinian MA students, advisors, and graduate programs overcome the problems and challenges facing MA students in writing their theses.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

In analyzing the interview data of the Palestinian supervisors and MA students, several themes relating to thesis writing challenges emerged, and they will be discussed in this section. The main themes of the study were:

(a) Selecting an appropriate research topic
The majority of supervisors argued that topic selection posed a thorny problem for MA EFL students. For example, Hammam, argued: 'Thesis writing challenges include choosing a topic. From my experience, students feel lost and confused, and they keep changing very general topics'. In addition, Moneer asserted: 'Some students find it difficult to choose an innovative and original topic to investigate.' Further, Omar pointed out: 'Constructing a correct title containing the study variables and problem is a serious problem.'

Students agreed with their supervisors' observations that topic or title selection formed a first barrier for them. Heba, for instance, argued: 'I spent months to have a clear title to work on.' Salma also maintained: 'One of the challenges was choosing a title or a topic because not all lecturers would like to help or advise due to their busy schedules (only two responded to my email or Whatsapp messages). Current research shows that graduate students struggle with the initial stage of thesis writing process, mainly topic selection with potential research problems (Kumar, 2021; Kombo and Trom, 2011).

(b) Limited research and methodology training
Several supervisors expressed burning concerns about students' lack of knowledge and training in research methodology and experience. For example, Basim illuminated:
Students have not absorbed the methodology course they are taking, so they write without following the steps stipulated in the course. They struggle to write the introduction, problem statement, defining questions, objectives of the study, and connecting their study with previous studies. They suffer from general weakness.

In addition, Hammam noted: 'They find problems in data collection, designing tools, choosing appropriate data collection tools. Most of them cannot use qualitative research. Likewise, Salim, pointed out: 'The most difficult challenge is writing the results, conclusions, and recommendations because writing the conclusions part requires high creativity and deep thinking. Omar also added:

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'Students find it difficult to integrate the literature review, how to formulate their questions, and how to delineate tools, objectives and the framework.' Further, Mohannad confirmed: 'Discussing the results logically and effectively is a major challenge. They don't know how to justify the results of the studies and how to connect them with previous studies' results and the literature review.' Omar explained students' lack of understanding of the major benchmarks of thesis writing:

Students do not know how to construct hypotheses. Another level of challenge is a proper understanding of what a research paper is about. A research paper is articulating an argument, formulating research questions, articulating research gap, formulating/identifying objectives of research and putting together a solid argument for a research topic; some students are not aware of these issues.

Additionally, students reported various obstacles associated with methodology and training. For example, Zaina argued:
The course we had on writing research was excellent, but it walked us through the proposal, not the actual thesis. I understand the similarities, but I felt a gap when I started working on the thesis. Sometimes I felt blank, especially when it came to working on the methodology chapter; it was difficult to handle.

Furthermore, Anwar complained: 'The problem is basically that I didn't receive sufficient instruction and training on how to make a good research.' In brief, MA students had numerous challenges in the methodology chapter, particularly describing the processes they go through to investigate the problem and findings of their empirical research. Consequently, many participants suggested that students needed more training on research methodology, and offering only one slim course might not be enough. Wadison (2021) resonates with these findings as the methodology part is rather challenging because students have to study and understand clearly the appropriate methodology, instrument, and data analysis.

(c) Linguistic and academic writing inadequacies
According to supervisors, some students have low English language proficiency, inability to use mechanics of writing, and limited understanding of the essence of research process. Said argued: 'Some students have poor writing and lack the basic academic writing skills (i.e., writing well-formed sentences, using punctuation, paraphrasing, and well-organized paragraphs.) Furthermore, Hammam, pointed out: 'Another challenge students face while writing is to write creatively. A thesis requires an element of originality and creativity.' Anwar illuminated: 'They face challenges at all levels from writing the proposal to the seminar-writing, the abstract, writing summaries, connecting the chapters, connecting different sections, coherence and cohesion.' Similarly, Omar, maintained:

Many students find it difficult to follow the APA style rules, verb tense consistency. Some students do not master the rules of academic writing, so their writing is full of redundancy, repetition, and

ungrammatical and ambiguous sentences. They lack authorial voice; the voice of the researcher is missing.

Further, Hammam referred to students' lack of planning before the writing process 'From my experience, they start writing without a clear vision, plan, or a timeline, as a draft timeline. It takes them a long time to start or complete the first chapter. In short, students seemed to encounter a variety of difficulties in writing mechanics, use of tenses, ungrammatical sentences, errors in punctuation, vocabulary selection, rephrasing, and synthesizing information in longer pieces of discourse. Therefore, apparently they were not well prepared for polished academic writing required for approved master thesis.

(d) Student's inconfidence in their academic writing skills
Students expressed overriding concerns about their inability in sustaining arguments and synthesizing ideas, using coherence and cohesion, and appropriate academic language. For instance, Nour argued: 'It was difficult to write coherently and cohesively. It would be rather difficult to read different texts and be able to analyze and connect texts in order to produce or generate a new one of your own, showing your personality and understanding.' Further, Nora complained: 'Organizing ideas into chapters and the way I connect the paragraph together and the points in every chapter together was not easy. I believe the idea of coherence and cohesion in addition to the logical smooth sequence are highly significant.'

In addition to synthesizing difficulties, using appropriate vocabulary and academic style in structuring theses was equally challenging for MA students. Soha, for example, pointed out: 'Linking the frame to the actual idea was challenging; it was challenging to decide which expressions and words were academically suitable for this context. I didn't know which results to include in the abstract.' Finally, Mohammad, complained: 'Sometimes fear of confusing your language and style with previous studies. You feel that your own language isn't your language but cited from others. Also fear of plagiarism as there isn't any available programs for students for checking it, such as Turnitin.' Obviously, both supervisors and students agreed on the fact that graduate students needed to develop their academic writing skills and find a practical solution to their constant fears.

(e) Citation and documentation challenges
Supervisors reported many problems about students' inability to use in-text citation and references properly. For example, Anwar maintained: 'Many students find it difficult to follow the APA style rules in index citation, bibliography, and citing sources. Some of them don't know how to cite a book, an online website, an online link, for example and so on.' Some supervisors suggested training students on using computerized applications of citation and references. Salim, pointed out: 'Another challenge during writing is not using computerized and up-to-date methods of citation and references including 'Mendeley and Endnote' or other citation platforms or applications.'
By the same token, students reported difficulties in mastering proper citation of APA style. For instance, Morad complained: 'I suffered from insufficient mastery of all sorts of citations, I mean

APA in this regard.' Jameel , also, noted: 'I made errors in citation and documentation. Referencing the related books and previous studies following the APA style was not easy. To me, referencing was time consuming and even tedious since it required a lot of thought, effort, and scrutiny.' In conclusion, both supervisors and students observed inadequate understanding and mastery of citation rules following the APA style. Kendall (2005) contends that many graduate students encounter difficulties with citing and referencing bibliographic sources.

(f) Insufficient feedback from supervisors and course instructors
Many students argued that they did not get enough feedback from their supervisors and course instructors. For example, Fadwa complained: 'I expected to finish earlier and to have regular meetings with quick responses from my supervisor. I also wished to have more profound suggestions and advice, yet he was sometimes busy, and it took me more time than I expected.' Likewise, Marwan pointed out: 'The most difficult thing is that there was zero supervision. I was left alone, with no real clue with the structure of the thesis and the content as well. The entire help was in correcting grammar and vocabulary, only language mistakes.'

Moreover, supervisors argued that students did not receive enough feedback and clear guidance. Therefore, Hammam suggested: 'Every supervision session should be documented through forms. Supervisors and supervisees should complete a form after each regular session.' To give students more training and feedback, supervisors recommended that all courses in the MA program should be research oriented, and assessment should be based on writing papers. Basim noted: 'Research writing should be integrated in all courses. It's a collective responsibility of the whole staff, and instructors should give appropriate feedback to students.'

Additionally, supervisors argued that students needed an official manual stipulating the different steps in thesis writing and some basic skills related to citation, documentation, formatting, and structuring their theses. Mostafa illuminated: 'There should be a manual stipulating the guidelines, telling them the formatting part, abstract, paraphrasing, writing introduction, conclusion, examples of citation, documentation, internal citation, and final citation. It makes their life easier.'

These findings concur with Tenenbaum, Crosby, and Gliner's (2001) study, which identified three types of help students expect to receive from their supervisors: psychosocial, instrumental, and networking. Supervisors develop sympathy and empathy for their students' concerns and feelings. They allow and encourage students to talk openly about anxieties and personal feelings, and academic abilities. Finally, supervisors could provide instrumental help by assisting their highly motivated students find the right venues for publication and introduce them to eminent researchers in the same field (Tenenbaum et al., 2001).

(g) Limited resources and online digital materials
Many students reported lack of quality library materials and free online facilities. For them, this was an obstacle in writing their theses in a short time. Omar, for instance, argued: 'The lack of resources is a massive hindrance. We don't have a rich library, whether for the hard or soft copies.'

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Wisam asserted: 'I didn't have access to paid online sources, so I used my sister's credit card in order to get access to paid online sources.' Likewise, Rama complained: 'Finding free resources to help me track what to write in the thesis was another major problem throughout the writing process.' In some cases, lack of resources had affected negatively students' motivation, and they spent more of their valuable time in looking for quality resources. Omar, pointed out:

Writing the thesis in English was quite interesting for me in the very beginning; however, this passion started to fade during progress in the thesis. The point is that most of the resources that were important for me were not accessible. So, instead of exerting additional effort and focus on the thesis itself, more and more focus was dedicated to supplying the needed resources.

In a nutshell, many MA students found it difficult to find quality resources to write their theses, whether on campus or accessing online facilities. Consequently, there was lack of up-to-date resources necessary for conducting quality research. The unavailability of paid online journals/materials was another hurdle that most of the students faced during thesis writing. These findings are line with Tiwari's (2019) study in which the participants expressed similar sentiments pertaining to the lack of resources as a tough challenge in writing their theses.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be detected that thesis writing tends to be a daunting task for MA EFL students. Evidently, polished thesis writing is essentially the outcome of proper research training and clear guidance. This study confirms the findings of previous studies about the potential challenges MA students encounter while writing their theses. As shown in the findings section, the participants in this study revealed quite a few challenges, most of which implied pedagogical orientations inadequacies, especially in research methodology and training, academic writing skills, and feedback from supervisors and course instructors.

In the light of the research findings, the following recommendations are presented as potential approaches to empower students and minimize their thesis writing challenges. It is recommended to review the research methodology course offered in the MA department in terms of content, assessment, and teaching approaches. The MA department is recommended to offer more intensive courses and training on academic writing and research writing skills. Besides offering more courses, the department is recommended to organize orientation and enrichment workshops to familiarize students with research writing and the different parts of a standard thesis. The department could offer a three-credit thesis seminar course in order to engage students in serious practical activities; furthermore, it is suggested to offer more courses on research such as qualitative and quantitative methods. Topic selection can be a serious problem; therefore, the English department is recommended to provide students with lists of general topics or themes, related to reality, to choose from, and they can organize more training on how to choose appropriate titles with different variables and study problems.

Due to the significance of developing proper citation and integrating technology, it is recommended to encourage students to use computerized applications such as 'Mendeley and Endnote'. Further, to overcome citation problems, MA departments can provide up-to-date brochures illustrating their adopted referencing style of writing. Departments should have a detailed manual that stipulates the different stages of an MA program, particularly thesis writing, with clear illustrative examples. Universities also should provide students with a list of sources and resources; in addition, they should help them to have access to paid journals through university library. Supervision meetings should be biweekly, and they could be standardized and documented through completing formal forms. Instructors are recommended to focus on writing assignments and research papers in all courses and make them research oriented. They are encouraged to conduct joint research with their MA students as a way to help them publish their work in reputable journals.

Finally, the main goal of this study was to investigate students and supervisors' perspectives on challenges facing MA EFL students in thesis writing in order to trigger potential recommendations for promoting successful teaching-learning practices. The first practical contribution of the current research is that it raises keen awareness about the numerous challenges facing MA EFL students in writing their theses. Exploring these challenges may help supervisors make informative decisions about more effective teaching practices based on students' needs and mounting concerns. With purposeful work and due professional considerations, teachers can help students foster the skills, knowledge, and experience they need to complete their theses successfully. Further, practical research teaching methodology and academic writing skills can stimulate interactive activities like small group discussions and research training workshops. In these workshops, experienced supervisors and outstanding graduate MA students share their experiences in thesis writing and approaches in coping with any potential challenges. Therefore, currently enrolled MA students may not make the same mistakes in writing their theses by following supervisors and colleagues' footsteps and guidance (Hawari & Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2021).

Future Research
Future research can focus primarily on challenges of each element of thesis writing, for example, students' challenges in writing an abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, citation and documentation, etc. Future studies may investigate students' psychological, sociocultural, and supervision problems. Researchers could also examine thesis-writing challenges of larger samples in other Palestinian universities.

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