

The Performance of Wasit University MSc Students in Writing Thesis in English

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Abstract— This paper investigates the performance of Wasit University Master of Science researchers engaged in thesis writing in English. The paper introduces thesis writing in general, and then in English, and a few related studies concerned with academic writing and thesis writing. The analysis tool is a pre-designed questionnaire. Following the selection of data, the setting of the analysis tool, and the administration of the questionnaire, the results of the questionnaire have been reached. The analysis results indicated a variety of respondents' replies. It has been found that the MSc researchers' experiences in thesis writing are variant and they are not only English-specific. The paper, finally, suggests several recommendations, studies, and tips to help facilitate thesis writing for those researchers.

Keywords— Thesis writing; Academic writing; Postgraduate studies; English-medium instruction; Science Majors; EAP; Higher education; EFL thesis writing; Graduate education.

I. INTRODUCTION

This research addresses the performance of Master of Science postgraduate students in thesis writing in English with respect to the difficulties, barriers, and experiences faced by those students. In Iraqi universities, as elsewhere, most Master of Science (hence MSc) postgraduate majors use English as the medium of instruction and research, that is, English is the language of teaching and research writing. After the students in these majors finish the theoretical courses, they are transitioned to thesis work or thesis writing. Here, they are required to write a thesis in their respective minors. Many MSc thesis researchers face difficulties in thesis writing, including proper academic writing, phraseology, grammar/spelling issues, and other form and style challenges. This paper, therefore, aims to recognize the sort of difficulties, challenges, and barriers that are faced by those researchers, and to investigate how those researchers choose to author theses in English. To realize this aim, a randomly selected group of MSc thesis researchers, who are in engaged thesis writing in various scientific, medical, and engineering minors at Wasit University, have been chosen in order to take a questionnaire set for that job.

Thesis writing, in general, proceeds in a step-by-step, systematic, and organized process of writing following regulations that might be different across universities, departments, countries, and disciplines. Writing or drafting is one of these regulations to which thesis writing is subject.

Xu and Zhang (2019) indicated that “thesis writing is a process of critically and analytically converting the research journey into communicable and presentable written work.” (p.9).

Evans et al. (2014) posited that “There is no standard definition of a thesis but it is generally understood to be the result of structured, original research that is produced for assessment” (p.6).

Postgraduates often face difficulties in thesis writing due to the complexity of the research and the amount of time and effort required to complete the project. Additionally, the lack of experience in writing a thesis can be a challenge. However, with the right guidance and support, postgraduates can overcome these difficulties and successfully complete their theses.

II. RATIONALE

This paper hypothesizes that most MSc thesis researchers at Wasit University face various difficulties, challenges, and barriers in writing their respective theses in English, and they, additionally, resort to different strategies and techniques in writing theses in English.

III. RELEVANT LITERATURE

Thesis writing has generally drawn the focus of many scholars, researchers, sociologists, linguists, psychologists, academics, and high education researchers. Thesis writing, in brief, has been the main concern of scholarly literature on learning, teaching, acculturation, academic writing, academic identity, and non-native settings. There are many contexts and settings where undergraduate or postgraduate researchers are required to write theses, as a final process of awarding a

graduate diploma, Master's, doctorate, or post-doctorate degree.

There are, also, other studies that have linked thesis writing to learning environments such as researchers' voice, cultural settings, identity, academic independence, and foreign language learning and teaching. Thesis writing has not only been a concern of writing or detailing facts and pages, but it has also been important in the way students proceed in higher education. In other words, how they turn from students to researchers.

Allison et al. (1998) proposed a thesis writing program for ESL researchers at the University of Hong Kong based on interviews with supervisors and supervisees. This proposed program showed that graduate researchers need assistance in presenting their theses in acceptable English. The study, also, accounted for the shortcomings of graduate writing as the main reason for low-quality writing, inability of writing extended paragraphs, and unstructured drafting.

Paltridge and Woodrow (2012), while conducting a study on local and international students engaged in a thesis writing course at an Australian university, maintained that familiarity with language proved to be a problematic issue for those students. The cultural and social aspects of writing in a foreign language can not be easily predicted because language alone is not enough for any academic achievement.

AlFadda (2012), in a study on postgraduate students' experience with academic writing in a Saudi university, found that students' interaction with native speakers can help those students improve their own academic writing. The study pointed out that those students can be guided and taught how to write theses.

Carlino (2012) examined thesis writing from a psychological and emotional side. To realize how graduate researchers experience thesis writing, Carlino suggested a series of seminars and workshops to be delivered to thesis researchers. Carlino's study concluded that thesis writing is a socialization process in writing where researchers can produce peer-reviewed works.

Peng (2018) conducted a study on Chinese students' difficulties in thesis writing from the perspective of supervisors. The study found that most of these studies were concerned with finding suitable previous literature and the lack of conceptual framework.

In proposal writing and drafting, Acheampong (2021) surveyed the difficulties international postgraduate students face in writing a research proposal. This study found that drafting a workable proposal represented a challenging task.

In M.A. thesis writing, Bigdeli et al. (2015), and Keyvandarian and Afzali (2019) investigated Master thesis writing in the Iranian higher education context.

There are several studies that focused on thesis writing but from ESL, EFL, and non-native contexts, especially on non-native researchers working in international universities. Dong (1998) conducted a study on researchers in U.S. universities. Wang and Li (2008) carried out a study on researchers in Chinese universities, Chou's study (2011) has been concerned

with Taiwanese students working at U.S. universities. As for Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006), Strauss (2012), and Xu and Zhang (2019), their studies have been made on ESL researchers in New Zealand universities. There is a study by Mousavi and Kashefian-Naeeni (2011) on Iranian postgraduates in Malaysian universities.

Additionally, several studies addressed thesis writing, along with the difficulties and challenges related, whether by undergraduate or postgraduate researchers, at local and international contexts. These studies are Cooley and Lewkowicz (1995) on Hong Kong students, Han (2014) on Chinese students, Bakhou and Bouhania (2020) on Algerian students, Komba (2016) on Tanzanian students, Divsar (2018) on Iranian students, Erbay and Yilmaz (2017), and Ekoç (2019) on Turkish students, and Tiwari (2019) on Nepalese students.

Nguyen (2017) conducted a study on thesis writing at a Vietnamese university based on analysis and interviews. The study included a genre-based structured move of thesis writing where the M.A. researchers are supposed to analyze, re-draft, and re-write.

In doctoral contexts, Alsaedi (2017) indicated that doctoral students face a challenging job represented by writing a thesis in English. Casanave and Hubbard (1992) were concerned with how assignments are written in doctoral contexts, and how doctoral researchers encounter pedagogical, institutional, and ideological barriers. Hanić et al. (2018) analyzed the process of thesis writing made by some Bosnian university M.A. postgraduates in terms of conceptualization.

There are certain theoretical approaches, such as Richards (1988). Sachs (2002), Paltridge and Starfield (2007), Odena and Burgess (2017), and Paltridge and Starfield (2020), which have urged the design of a thesis writing course. Such courses are meant to facilitate thesis writing for graduate researchers.

As Cadman (1997) indicated, thesis writing can be a matter of identity and not only authoring a creative work. When a researcher authors a graduate thesis in another language, they not only put words but also leave imprints, and the same applies to researchers in foreign or international universities.

The previous literature on thesis writing suggests that most of the previous studies on thesis writing by native or non-native researchers have focused more on Master students than on doctoral students. This is might be attributed to the fact that Master's students in general are fresh or beginner researchers, unlike doctoral researchers, who have had previous, yet limited, know-how and experience with thesis writing. This previous literature, also, indicates that thesis writing is a real challenge for all postgraduate researchers, regardless of physical, temporal, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, geographic, or academic differences.

III. SAMPLE, DATA, AND SOURCE

The study involves 30 MSc researchers who are engaged in thesis writing at Wasit University throughout the academic MSc term 2020-2021. Those students are specialized in various pure, physical, and life sciences, where English is the language of thesis writing. These included biology, physics, chemistry, agronomy, veterinary, geology, and engineering. For privacy and ethical considerations, the data of those researchers have been anonymized. Additionally, the questionnaire was applied to those researchers without sex or age variables. The sample is limited to 30 MSc thesis researchers because this is the number of MSc thesis researchers at the study time. The other science thesis researchers have been excluded either because they have been working for graduate diplomas or they have not embarked on thesis writing yet.

V. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

The research tool is a pre-designed questionnaire. It involves eleven items which the respondents are expected to mark as “Strongly agree”, “Agree”, “Slightly agree”, “Disagree”, or “Strongly disagree.” The table below details this questionnaire. The eleven items contained in this

questionnaire have been formulated following the author’s expectations, observations, speculations, and familiarity with the process of thesis writing in English by most MSc researchers at Wasit University. Table (1) below details the items of this questionnaire.

To verify the reliability and validity of this questionnaire, the questionnaire has been reviewed by a group of experts who are university faculty members specialized in linguistics, translation, and language teaching. The letter sent to those experts and the data of these experts is appended at the end of this paper. As for the procedures taken to accomplish this research, these are;

1. Designing a questionnaire
2. Choosing a sample of MSc researchers
3. Having the researchers respond to the questionnaire
4. Analyzing the respondents’ replies
5. Reaching conclusions and results

After the reviewing of the questionnaire items by the experts, and the sample subjects’ approval to take the questionnaire, the questionnaire was then sent to the respective MSc researchers via a Google Form survey, which the MSc researchers were set to fill in.

VI. ANALYSIS

In order to find the percentages and frequencies of the replies to the questionnaire items by the selected researchers, which is the main concern of this analysis, an SPSS-assisted computation has been made. This computation merges psychometric tools with arithmetic means in order to produce the required data. After the completion of the survey questionnaire, the replies have been converted into calculable data. Table (2) below demonstrates the amount of percentile and numerical data represented in the answers.

The eleven items of the questionnaire ranged differently in the scale of replies and frequencies. In this respect, item no.5 in the questionnaire (I face many grammar and spelling difficulties when writing the thesis in English) has made the highest frequency (90%), with about 51 replies strongly in favor of this. On the other hand, item no.7 (My only difficulty in writing the thesis in English is finding the suitable vocabulary) has made the lowest frequency (52%) in the same questionnaire, with about 52 replies agreeing strongly with this. In the middle of these frequencies stand item no.6 (I know the relevant scientific terminology but I lack the English phrases needed), where 62 replies agreed strongly with this statement.

TABLE (I) QUESTIONNAIRE

No	Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Slightly agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	I write the thesis in Arabic and then I translate it into English	42.9	14.3	000	28.6	14.3
2	I depend on my own knowledge of English in writing the thesis	44	30.6	14.3	000	000
3	I write the thesis in English and then I have it checked, proofread, and reviewed by an experienced translator, teacher, or specialist in English	29	58	000	14	000
4	I use offline and online software and applications to check my writing when I write the thesis in English	52	16	16	16	000
5	I face many grammar and spelling difficulties when writing the thesis in English	69	18	13	0000	000
6	I know the relevant scientific terminology but I lack the English phrases needed	58	15	14	13	000
7	My only difficulty in writing the thesis in English is finding the suitable vocabulary	58	000	000	28	14
8	My only difficulty in writing the thesis in English is connecting sentences grammatically	43	14	000	27	000
9	My only difficulty in writing the thesis in English is making the style sound more English	28	000	25	000	43
10	My only difficulty in writing the thesis in English is finding equivalents in both English and Arabic	25	23	44	000	000
11	I am required to write my thesis in English pursuant to the applicable regulations	45	24	27	000	000

TABLE (II) MEAN AND PERCENTAGE OF THE RESEARCHERS' REPLIES

No	Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Percentage
1	5	51	59	34	6	0	4.03	90%

2	1	57	53	28	8	4	4.02	85%
3	4	46	59	27	14	4	3.88	78%
4	8	37	59	42	11	1	3.87	77%
5	3	45	47	41	16	1	3.67	72%
6	6	62	35	28	18	3	3.70	65%
7	2	36	59	34	18	3	3.59	64%
8	10	24	69	47	6	4	3.42	62%
9	9	28	60	48	14	0	3.51	60%
10	11	41	48	33	25	3	3.34	59%
11	7	48	37	33	30	2	3.19	52%

As for the remaining items, those items ranging in between, these have shown approximate frequencies. About 80% of the replies stated the researchers write the thesis in Arabic and then they translate it into English, which is item no.1 in the questionnaire.

Interestingly, both items 4 and 8, which stated (I use offline and online software and applications to check my writing when I write the thesis in English) and (My only difficulty in writing the thesis in English is connecting sentences grammatically) respectively, ranged equally in the frequencies. About 78% of the replies indicated that those researchers face difficulties in grammar and they, therefore, use spelling checkers to write grammatical sentences.

Item no.3 (I write the thesis in English and then I have it checked, proofread, and reviewed by an experienced translator, teacher, or specialist in English) showed that 72% strongly agreed to have their theses checked by specialists in English. Items no. 2 and no.10 showed a close connection as the frequencies neared each other (64% and 62% respectively). The researchers' dependency on their own English and their attempt to find equivalents have been significant difficulties for those researchers.

The last items with the lowest frequencies are item no.9 (My only difficulty in writing the thesis in English is making the style sound more English) and item no.11 (I am required to write my thesis in English pursuant to the applicable regulations). Both items achieved 60% and 59% in the questionnaire.

VII. DISCUSSION OF ANALYSIS

The analysis stated above shows that there is a noticeable variation in the amount of replies and frequencies. There are replies with higher frequencies, and there are also replies with low frequencies. Such variation can be helpful in deciding the findings of this study. This variation, also, can be significant in understanding how the MSc researchers under study handle thesis writing in English. The three different ranges of replies stated in the analysis above signal different scopes of thesis writing. These are not only frequencies and numbers, but they also represent approaches followed by those researchers. Most of the replies agreed strongly that there are many grammar and spelling difficulties when writing the thesis in English.

Grammar, as it is known, is not a string of rules and

systems that speakers and learners need to follow, but it is also the way language is structured and ideas are expressed. Those researchers experience grammar and spelling difficulties not only because they are non-native speakers, but also because they are non-native researchers, which adds additional difficulty to the entire process of thesis writing. A non-native researcher often finds it challenging to produce native-like or near-native academic work. That researcher, though, can well author a work that is understandable by peer researchers. Those researchers lack the necessary research and academic skills, including writing and authoring in English properly and eligibly.

The analysis shows that item no.7 in the questionnaire (My only difficulty in writing the thesis in English is finding the suitable vocabulary) made 52%. Despite all the difficulties and challenges those MSc researchers face in writing theses in English, they, however, face no difficulty in picking the suitable vocabulary. The suitable vocabulary for those researchers is understood as the jargon of the related sciences, standing for all the words used in scientific, medical, or engineering English.

The analysis, further, shows that most MSc researchers agreed that they know the relevant scientific terminology but they lack the English phrases needed, which is the concern of item no.62. Knowing the suitable vocabulary in the required scientific or any other field is not sufficient to author a thesis in English unless the related researcher has a mastery of sentence structure and form in that language.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Following the previous discussions and analysis, this paper finds that:

1.The MSc researchers under study rely heavily on their own experiences in thesis writing in English, that is, they depend on their survival level in English.

2.Knowledge of English in general has been the key determinant in thesis writing for those researchers. This knowledge may upgrade or degrade the achievement of those researchers.

3.Grammar, suitable vocabulary, and proper style represented the highest matters for those researchers, whereas punctuation and academic writing represented the lowest matters for them.

4.Arabic-generated interference is a big challenge for those researchers, especially in sentence complexity, word order, and text connection.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the issue of thesis writing in English by MSc researchers, the following are suggested to ease the obstacles,

difficulties, and challenges faced by those researchers in that field:

1. Further researcher is encouraged to work on this issue by investigating and analyzing the challenges, experiences, and difficulties related in order to reach solutions and remedies.

2. More English-focusing courses, sessions, training, or workshops should be given to MSc researchers prior to thesis writing.

3. English language syllabus items set for higher education sciences should be reconsidered and modified to meet the needs of postgraduate researchers in these majors. Such modifications should focus on practical aspects (writing) and not only theoretical aspects.

4. MSc coursework students should be guided, directed, and taught how to draft and write in English and they should be taught the proper academic writing, as well.

X. FUTURE AREAS OF RESEARCH

1. A further study can investigate doctoral science students' performance in writing respective dissertations in English.

2. A study can research the common mistakes committed by MSc researchers in thesis writing.

3. A similar study can be conducted on graduate diploma researchers' performance in writing respective theses in English.

4. Direct method studies, such as interviews, can be conducted with MSc researchers in order to recognize the challenges of thesis writing in English in detail.

5. Another study may investigate the non-linguistic difficulties faced by Master's and doctoral thesis/dissertation researchers who are writing theses/dissertations in English.

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Appendix (1) Letter to the Experts for a Questionnaire Review

Wasit University
College of Education for Human Sciences
Department of English

Dear Mr., Mrs.,

The researcher intends to conduct a study entitled "The Performance of Wasit University MSc Candidates in Writing Thesis in English". The study aims at surveying the difficulties, obstacles, and barriers faced by Wasit University Master-of-Science researchers in writing postgraduate theses in English. To do so, the researcher randomly selected 30 Master researchers of various science disciplines in Wasit University, who have finished the course and are currently engaged in thesis writing throughout the Master course 2020-2021. Following the researchers' approval to take part in the proposed study, the researcher designed a questionnaire. The questionnaire, then, was circulated to the above-mentioned researchers. As an expert in your field, you are kindly requested to check the questionnaire items and to add, modify, alter, or rephrase any item as appropriate. Your comments, modifications, and suggestions will be highly appreciated and will be considered for the good of the study. Additionally, your name will be listed with the questionnaire review experts.

Thank you in advance

The Researcher

Appendix (2) Experts of Questionnaire Review

No.	Degree/Rank	Name	Major	Affiliation
1	PhD/Assistant Professor	Farah Abdul-Jabbar Mahdi	Linguistics	Department of English/ Faculty of Arts / Al-Mustanseriva University
2	PhD/ Assistant Professor	Faris Kadhim Al-Ataby	ELT	Department of English/ College of Education for Human Sciences/ Wasit University
3	PhD/ Assistant Professor	Tawfeek Mageed Ahmed	General Linguistics	Department of English/ College of Education for Human Sciences/ Karbala University
4	PhD/ Assistant Professor	Hadeel Kamil Ali	General Linguistics	Department of English/ College of Education/ Tikrit University