



Challenges facing Jordanian undergraduates in writing graduation research paper

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Abstract

Writing a research paper as a graduation requisite by university students is an important part of university education. It is not a simple task for most university students who face several problems during writing the graduation project. Several kinds of research have been conducted on recognising the challenges and problems that face students in academic writing, but to the researcher's best knowledge, no study has been conducted on the problems faced in writing a graduate research paper by Jordanian undergraduate students of the English Language and Literature major. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the academic writing challenges and difficulties encountered in writing graduation papers by EFL undergraduate students in the Department of English at Alzaytoonah University of Jordan (ZUJ). The data for the study was collected through distributing a questionnaire of three parameters: attitude about writing a research paper, methodology challenges, and background knowledge about research. The questionnaire is based on identifying the causes of the students' challenges in writing their graduation papers. The respondents were 45 undergraduate students of the English Language and Literature. The findings revealed that the most important problems were lack of an academic prerequisite of teaching the techniques of how to write a research paper, lack of knowledge of research paper writing process, lack of resources, lack of the methodology, etc. Thus, for these reasons, the present study attempts to present suggestions and recommendations to overcome such hurdles faced by graduate students in writing their graduation research papers.

Keywords: academic writing; challenges of writing graduation project; undergraduate students; research paper genre

1. Introduction

Most native and non-native English language students face significant challenges with academic writing (Meyer, 2014). Academic writing is not the only skill that is required for most Arab learners who learn the English Language as Second Language (ESL). As a process, writing encompasses a journey that reflects the voice of the writers resulted out of a set of stages, skills and background knowledge that mould what they want to say. For ESL students the stage of writing is preceded by a list of other skills integrated in their four academic years that lead to their writing improvement such as grammar, vocabulary, reading, speaking, composition, etc. (Zimmerman, 2009; Weigle, 2014; Cumming, 2016). Thus, academic writing skills represent a critical stage to be acquired by students in higher institutions (Zakaria, N. Y. and Hashim, H., 2020). One stage that shows comprehension ability of the students to those skills is when they write their graduation project. In this process, students face

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a series of challenges such as those related to their proficiency in L2, lack of knowledge in writing a research paper such as choosing the topic that suits their major, choosing the correct resources for their project, writing the proposals, etc. Various factors affect the student's writing of the research paper, i.e., personal and external.

To the best of our knowledge, no study has explored the common problems faced by Jordanian undergraduate students in writing their graduation projects. Therefore, the study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by undergraduate students in writing a research paper at AlZaytoonah University of Jordan?

2. What are the aspects that cause the academic writing challenges among the students?

3. What is needed to overcome the challenges?

This study attempts to achieve the following objectives:

1. Help both EFL students and academic staff in Jordanian universities to envisage the problems associated with writing graduation research papers.

2. Shed light on solutions to overcome such issues especially for undergraduate students majoring English Language and Literature.

2. Literature Review

In every discipline, academic writing represents a significant skill in language production. This skill is governed by features of formality, objectivity, and accuracy. To say that academic writing is formal means conveying information in an unbiased way where objectivity realized in the main detailed theme regardless of personalizing or making a direct reference to the reader or the writer. From a technical point of view, academic writing should be accurate in its language structure so that message is delivered explicitly to the reader. Hence, researchers, professors, scholars, and students use academic writing to convey perspectives, ideas, arguments, conversations, etc. In fact, writing has always been a challenge and even troublesome in various directions and in different contexts because learning how to write is governed by two factors: being a tool for effective communication and the examination of the various issues faced by L2 writers (Graham & Perin, 2007; Lee & Tajino 2008; Negari, 2012; Dar & Khan, 2015). Such a challenge can be seen not only with native English students but more with non-native students who must write in the English Language as a globe mediation of knowledge (Hyland, 2003; Mahboob, 2014; Marlina & Giri, 2014).

As a genre, academic writing has been explored by a number of scholars. According to Swales (1990) in his book *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*, he believes that any text is usually made by a series of moves with functions that serve both the writer and the discourse community:

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. Communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and one that operates to keep the scope of a genre as narrowly focused on comparable rhetorical action. In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience. If all high probability expectations are realized, the exemplar will be viewed as a prototypical by the parent discourse community. The genre names inherited and produced by discourse communities are

imported by other constitute valuable ethnographic communication, but typically need further validation (Ibid, p. 58).

Hyland (2009: p. 46) considered academic writing as a means of “grouping texts together, representing how writers typically use language to respond to recurring situations”. Therefore, academic writing is conducted in various forms and may cover the variety of critical approaches that can be applied to a certain subject. In other words, academic writing is a thinking tool for language development, organizing idea, transforming information, structuring arguments, critical thinking, etc. (Hyland K, & Tse P., 2004; Hyland and Tse, 2005; Tardy, 2005; Turner, 2011; Bacha, 2010; Bacha, 2012). Guo, Y.H (2014, p. 56) pointed out that research paper is both persuasive and knowledge-creating per se. In this respect, and in any academic setting, academic writing is an example of a formal written work that may come in different forms such as the most common ones of the dissertation, literary analysis, research paper and it is the latter that is more to be concerned within the present study.

A research paper is a genre-based form of academic writing with pedagogy. Writing a research paper is a process that requires critical thinking for seeking out information about a certain subject, evaluating sources, organizing and composing ideas to stand out and back them up with the opinions and views of others (Winkler, A. and Metherell, J., 2011). In fact, the research paper adds not only to the subject under discussion but also it serves the student(s) with more advanced knowledge in the field at hand for more exploration. Swales (1990: p.93) argued that a research paper or as he called it a ‘research article’ is:

A written text (although often containing non-verbal elements), usually limited to a few thousand words, that reports on some investigation carried out by its author or authors. In addition, the RA will usually relate the findings within it to those of others, and may also examine issues of theory and/or methodology. It is to appear or has appeared in a research journal or, less typically, in an edited book-length collection of papers. Swales (1990: p. 93)

Swale compared the organisation of any research article to an hourglass where it resembles the transition made from a general field to a specific topic in the article and then another transition is made from the findings of the study to implications of the general findings at the end of the article as shown in Figure 1 below:

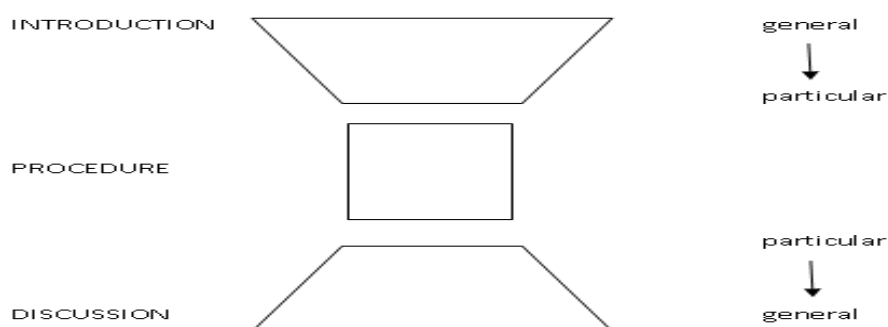


Figure 1. The hour-glass model of article structure in Swales (1990: p.134)

According to Neville (2007, p. 1), research is “a process of enquiry and investigation; it is systematic, methodical and ethical; research can help solve practical problems and increase knowledge.” Thus, writing a research paper provides the student of any degree course a remarkable

opportunity for independence and control on what they learn. Several factors govern the student's progress in writing a scientific research paper as a graduation project. Several studies which discussed the challenges that students face with academic writing have considered such various factors. Some of these studies were more concerned with the teacher-related, with the student-related, or with the social-related factors. The focus of most studies was on the academic writing problems faced by the EFL learners with writing assignments or even when writing their dissertations (Pearson and Kayrooz, 2004; Thondhlana et al., 2011; Al-Sawalha & Chow, 2012; Dwihandini, L. A., Marhaeni, A.A. I. N., & Suarnajaya, I. W., 2013; Pineteh, 2013; Mahammoda, S. A, 2016; Al-Qaderi I., 2016). Most of these studies varied in discussing the challenges faced by L2 learners, especially in producing an excellent quality of writing.

Concerning the challenges and difficulties accompanied by writing a research paper, it is not limited to a certain field, rather significant to both scientific and unscientific fields (Rajasekar et al., 2013). Thus, the word "research" composes two parts research which means to search again and spend time and efforts investigating, evaluating and interpreting sources and eventually come up with a unique perspective on the topic at hand. Respectively, scientific researchers and educators aim to and hope for obtaining considerable and reliable information about any topic that may be of benefit to solve problematic issues for the educational community (Lodico, M., Spaulding, D. and Voegtle, K., 2010; Bocar, 2013). This is clearly shown with ESL and EFL learners who often face challenges while writing in the English language and most of their problems are because of writing apprehension (Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Abdulkareem, M. 2013). It is an apprehensive task for both native and nonnative speakers since language learners at all levels consider writing as a difficult language skill (Hanna, 2010; Al-Qaderi I., 2016), especially for the EFL learners. Therefore, the primary concern of the present study is to address and investigate the challenges and obstacles faced by Jordanian university students in writing their graduation research paper.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

The present study has used qualitative and quantitative approach to explore, identify and determine the difficulties that Jordanian university undergraduate students of English language and literature major face in writing their graduation project. The method of this study is based on conducting data statistically from the participants by using the a 3-point Likert scale questionnaire of 25 items which address the students attitudes and opinions towards their experience of writing their graduation project and what kind of challenges they faced in that distribution. The students were asked to choose from three points grading as *agree*, *neutral* and *disagree*. The design of the questionnaire targeted a number of writing research difficulties that may face graduate students.

3.2 Participants

The respondents of this study comprised 45 Jordanian undergraduate students of English Language and Literature at the Department of English, Al-Zaytoonah University. These students are only of English Language and Literature major and preparing for their final year graduation project. They were 30 female and 15 male in their final academic semester.

3.3 Data analysis

The data analysis of the study is based on a questionnaire that is divided into three parameters covering the problems facing the students:

- 1- Attitude about writing a research paper
- 2- Methodology Challenges
- 3- Background knowledge about research

Each of these parameters highlights a list of items that target the obstacles faced by the students in writing a graduation project. To measure the students' responses, the data were processed statistically distributed with frequencies and percentages.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Attitude

The first parameter targeted the various attitudes of the students towards writing a research paper as a graduation project. As noted from the analysis and shown in Table (1) that out of a total of 45 students, most of the students 35 (78%) lack knowledge of how to write a research paper. This is a very critical issue for any student who asked to write their graduation project. Another important finding is that 24 (53.3%) students didn't have the chance to study a course on how to write a research paper, since there is no prerequisite course of how to write a research paper before stepping into the research writing stage. Considerably, choosing a topic for the graduation project is not an easy task as 23 (51%) of the total 45 students agreed they lack knowledge of choosing a topic for their research paper, and 20 (44.4%) students depend on themselves in choosing the topic of the research and not on the supervisor. What it interestingly realized from the data analysis is that 32 (71%) of the total 45 students depend on collecting data and information from the internet more than borrowing resources from the libraries; whereas 25 (56%) depend on books for their knowledge resources. This is because some students prefer to access direct and specific information from the net rather than reading books related to their selected topic of research, since they sometimes face challenges with the lack of resources in libraries. Such difficulty will genuinely affect the students' choices for a topic to write about for their graduation paper.

When the students were asked about their general attitude towards writing a research paper, 25 (56%) believe that writing a research paper is not a simple task. Regarding time management for writing the research paper, 20 (44.5%) agreed upon its sufficiency while the other half varied in their opinion because of either having a job or overburdened with study and assignment obligations. Finally, most of the students agreed the supervisor is very supportive.

Table 1. Distribution of the students' attitudes about the problems in writing a research paper

Questionnaire items	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
	Freq %	Freq %	Freq %
I have knowledge of how to write a research paper	7 (15%)	3 (7%)	35 (78%)
I took a university course on writing a research paper	15 (33.4%)	6 (13.3%)	24(53.3%)
My supervisor chooses the topic for me	16 (35.6%)	9 (20.0%)	20(44.4%)
I depend on the internet for my knowledge resources	32 (71%)	2 (4.4%)	11(24.4%)
I depend on books for my knowledge resources	25 (56 %)	11(24 %)	9 (20%)

I have enough time for writing my research paper	20 (44.5%)	11(24.4%)	14(31.1%)
My supervisor reads and checks my paper constantly	32 (71%)	2 (4.4%)	11(24.4%)
I have knowledge of choosing a topic for my research paper	13 (29 %)	9 (20 %)	23 (51%)
Writing a research paper is easy for me	11 (24%)	9 (20%)	25 (56%)
My supervisor is very supportive	27 (60%)	5 (11%)	13 (29%)

4.2 Methodology

On the research methodology parameter, as shown in Table (2), 18 (40%) agreed on knowing to make a good research methodology. This finding reflects the confusion and misconception as on the level of attitude previously, most of the students disagreed with knowing how to write a research paper. The general information they get from the supervisors does not start writing the papers. Linking to this challenge, 24 (53.3%) of the total 45 students believed they lack having an obvious idea of how to collect data for their research, and this led to another hurdle in shaping the correct research methodology. On the other hand, 24 (53.4%) know how to write both the introduction and conclusion of the research paper since they have taken essay courses in their academic years. 26 (57.8%) students agreed they understand how to organize ideas. Another important finding is that 27(60%) of the students face difficulty in paraphrasing the selected information from resources. Most students misunderstand the difference between paraphrasing and summarizing. Sometimes students face difficulties in finding the right word and sentence structure that fits the selected resource information without changing the original content. In other words, students need to understand how to paraphrase or they would fall under the trap of Plagiarism (Yulia, 2012).

The impact of the Arabic language system as L1 affects the students' critical thinking in the second language (L2). Similarly, 22 (42.9%) lack knowledge of making an in-text and work cited list when documenting information taken from resources that serve their selected topic for research. Again, this difficulty is related to not having the chance to study an academic course related to teaching students the techniques for writing a research paper. Yet, 17(37.8%) students are familiar with critical thinking that is needed in academic writing.

Table 2. Distribution of the students' challenges about research methodology

Questionnaire items	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
	Freq %	Freq %	Freq %
I know how to make a good methodology for my research paper	18 (40%)	16 (35.6%)	11(24.4%)
I have a clear idea of how to collect data for my research	12(26.6%)	9 (20.0%)	24 (53.3%)
I have knowledge of how to organize ideas	26(57.8%)	7 (15.6%)	12(26.6%)
I have knowledge of writing both introduction and conclusion	24(53.4%)	10 (22.2%)	11(24.4 %)
I have knowledge of how to paraphrase	8(18%)	10 (22%)	27(60%)
I know how to make in-text citation and work cited list	16(35.5%)	7 (15.6%)	22(42.9%)
I have knowledge of making a critical thinking	17(37.8%)	14 (31.1%)	14(31.1 %)

4.3 Background knowledge

The data analysis shows that students' background knowledge about which style of research paper they should choose is not clear. This is shown in Table (3) where 32 (71.1%) of the total 45

participants who have no clear idea of the differences between MLA, APA, AND Chicago Styles of writing a research paper. On the level of adequate knowledge on academic writing, 30 (66.6%) of the students agreed they do because of knowledge earned from previous academic courses. 20 (44.4%) of the students depend on their point of view in the discussion of data analysis since they believe it is easier to depend on their understanding rather than on literature review. Such finding is very overwhelming since students should learn how to not put their personal opinions when analyzing data, especially that is concerned with English literature and that they should verify such opinions based on either previous studies in the field or on books of criticism. Another interesting finding is that although 26 (58%) of the students know how to find books in the library, yet it is shown that they prefer to select information from resources on the net rather than from the library. Comparably was 21 (47%) of the students agreed they can access plenty of resources that serve their paper. Furthermore, 19 (42%) of the respondents to this questionnaire claimed they know how to write a literature review for the study. 26 (57.7%)–28 (62.3%) regularly meet the supervisor and commit to his / her guidance.

Table 3. Distribution of the students’ challenges about background knowledge in writing research

Questionnaire items	Agree Freq %	Neutral Freq %	Disagree Freq %
I depend on my point of view in the data analysis	20 (44.4%)	10 (22.2%)	15 (33.3%)
I have a clear idea of the differences between MLA, APA, AND Chicago Styles of writing a research paper	5 (11.1%)	8 (17.8%)	32 (71.1%)
I know how to find books in a library	26 (58%)	10 (22 %)	9 (20 %)
I know how to write a literature review for the study	19 (42 %)	12 (28 %)	14 (31 %)
I can access plenty of resources that serve my paper	21 (47%)	15 (33 %)	9 (20%)
I am committed to the supervisor's guidance	28 (62.3%)	11 (24.4%)	6 (13.3%)
I regularly meet my supervisor	26 (57.7%)	9 (20.0%)	10 (22.2%)

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The current study sheds light on the challenges and difficulties faced by Jordanian students in writing their graduation research paper and whose major is English Language and Literature. The following chart sums the overall responses from the participants to the questionnaire as shown in Figure 2 below:

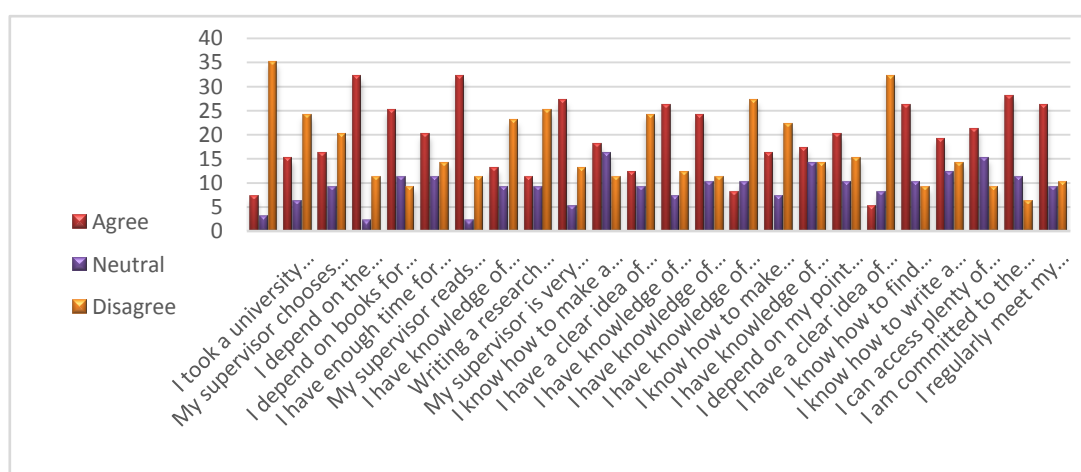


Figure 2. The Total distribution of participants’ answers to the questionnaire of the study

As pointed out previously, 45 students were submitted to answer a questionnaire of three parameters and the results identified the issues and challenges that affected writing their graduation project and eventually led to frame potential solutions to those challenges.

Based on the data analysis, it is found that many challenges and difficulties faced the students in writing their graduation research papers in the major of English Literature. The present study revealed that students lack knowledge and adequate understanding of the essence of how to write a research paper because they lack a prerequisite course of writing a research paper. This is a very overwhelming finding as it led the students to confusion in writing the research. This confusion started from the hurdles they face in choosing the topic, lack of resources for their research and dependence on the internet for general information more than collecting information from authentic resources like books and articles in the libraries. Moreover, they endure confusion in writing a literature review, citing information, and framing a good methodology for the research, especially as they lack knowledge of the differences between styles of writing a research paper (MLA, APA, or Chicago).

Consequently, and as the findings of the present study showed, it can be concluded that the students of the major English Language and Literature at AlZaytoonah University of Jordan meet a lot of shortcomings in writing their graduation research paper. This is because of their lack of understanding of the significance of research and how it needs hardworking and patience. Therefore, it is recommended that the students should have a prerequisite course in their curricula on how to write a research paper besides other academic courses they already have. Furthermore, the students must be involved in heavy duties of writing research papers for most of the academic courses taken and to be introduced to the ways of how to collect data from authentic resources in the library and try to encourage them to not depend highly on general information from the internet. This would help the students not be indulged in the dilemma and fear of writing a research paper and not to only focus on the techniques of how to write a paragraph or an essay. Also, it is recommended to expand the scope of the present study to a wider platform of students from different Jordanian universities to understand the essence of the challenges faced in writing graduation research papers. It is also hoped that the present study encourages academics in universities to seriously consider the importance of teaching courses in writing research papers, as attention is paid to other academic skills.

It is suggested that further studies should be done on the difficulties and challenges the face university undergraduate students not only of EFL / ESL majors, but of different fields.

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