

## Challenges Encountered by Libyan EFL Undergraduate Students in English Research Writing

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### Abstract:

This qualitative research paper is to identify the challenges encountered by Libyan EFL Undergraduate students in English research writing. The study adopted document analysis approach to identify and analyze the students' difficulties in writing their research projects. The data were collected through reviewing ten research papers that were done by ten students. The targeted students in this study mainly studied in the English department in faculty of education at Misrata university. They carried out their research projects and submitted them to the department in the past few years. The analysis focused on the use of intext citation, referencing, language used in terms of grammar and vocabulary, building argument and expressing own voice, coherence and organization of ideas. The data that were elicited from the research papers, were interpreted using the thematic analysis approach in which they were classified into four basic themes. The findings showed that the most significant issue that faced students was building argument in their work and analyze it critically. Referencing and citation tends to be problematic to some students as well. Other issues related to coherence, grammar and vocabulary appeared to be the less problematic. One of the main possible solutions that could be suggested to overcome the issue in this particular context is that research methods module is recommended to be taught within two semesters by means of integrating theory and practice.

**Keywords:** *academic research writing skills, research challenges, critical thinking, referencing, building argument, EFL Libyan students.*

التحديات التي تواجه طلبة ليسانس اللغة الإنجليزية الليبيون عند كتابة البحث باللغة الإنجليزية

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**الملخص:** هذه الورقة البحثية النوعية تحاول التعرف على التحديات التي تواجه طلبة ليسانس اللغة الإنجليزية الليبيون عند كتابة البحث باللغة الإنجليزية. هذه الدراسة اتبعت منهجية تحليل الوثائق للتعرف وتحليل

المشاكل التي يواجهها الطلبة عند كتابة بحوث مشاريع تخرجهم. تم تجميع بيانات الدراسة من خلال مراجعة عشر أوراق بحثية تم إنجازها من قبل عشر طالب وطالبة. الفئة المستهدفة في هذه الدراسة هم طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية التربية بجامعة مصراتة وقاموا بإجراء بحوث مشاريع تخرجهم وتسليمها الى قسم اللغة الإنجليزية خلال السنوات القليلة الماضية. التحليل ركز على استخدام الاقتباس داخل النص وتصنيف المراجع واللغة المستخدمة من ناحية القواعد والمفردات وكذلك بناء حجة البحث والتعبير عن رأي الباحث وتحليلها بشكل نقدي وتماسك بنية نص البحث وترتيب الأفكار. البيانات التي تم استخراجها من الأوراق البحثية تم تفسيرها عن طريق منهجية التحليل الموضوعي وتم تصنيفها الى أربعة مواضيع أساسية. النتائج أظهرت ان المشكلة الأكبر التي تواجه الطلبة هي بناء حوار وحجة البحث وتحليلها بشكل نقدي. تصنيف المراجع والاقتباس داخل النص هي مشاكل واجهت بعض الطلبة أيضا. وفيما يتعلق باستخدام القواعد والمفردات وبنية النص سببت اقل مشاكل للطلبة. أحد أهم الحلول المقترحة في هذه الورقة البحثية للتغلب على هذه المشاكل هو أن يتم تدريس مادة طرق البحث على مدار فصلين دراسيين من خلال دمج النظرية بالتدريب والممارسة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** مهارات كتابة البحث الاكاديمية- تحديات البحث، التفكير النقدي- تصنيف المراجع- بناء الحوار والحجة- الطلبة الليبيون الدارسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية.

## 1. Introduction

Conducting an academic research study has become one of the essential elements for students in order to fulfill the graduation requirements. In fact, it has become one of the necessary requirements for post-graduate students as well. The ministry of higher education and scientific research issued a decree that all post graduate students must accomplish a research study (dissertation) in order to pursue their future university career. That is generally to indicate the importance of research study.

Several empirical and theoretical studies that are relevant to the issue of writing research in the case of EFL field refer to variety of requirements that students need to command. Some of those requirements are the ability to investigate hypotheses, analyze information, extract points from variety of studies, evaluate the information gathered and the ability to arrive at a judgment (Nasser, 2018; Dwihandini, 2013). Above all this, students must be able to present the previous points with supporting evidence and use variety

of relevant sources. For this reason, writing a research project could reasonably be a complex task for college students to achieve.

According to considerable number of researchers, writing an academic research paper is not a straight forward process. Alsamadani (2010) and Abu Rass (2015) point out that in order to produce an adequate piece of academic writing, EFL learners need to consider several issues such as grammar, use of appropriate vocabulary, structuring good complete sentences, cohesion, organization of ideas and expressing complete thought and ideas of ones ' own.

In the field of teaching and learning English as a foreign language, researchers place great emphasis on productive skills which are writing and speaking. They indicate that students who learn English as a foreign language would face difficulties in mastering English writing mechanism (Nunan, 2003). Students in the context of the present study learn English as a foreign language and their first language is Arabic. In this regard, it is vitally important to draw attention to studies that were conducted on students whose first language is Arabic. For example, Alshehry (2014), Khan's (2011), Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) state that L1 affects students' L2 when it comes to produce the target language. Students in some cases would potentially transfer their ideas from their first language to the target language, which leads to encounter challenges in the process of writing. Therefore, there is a possibility that one of the main factors which contribute to face difficulties in writing English research project is the significant difference between Arabic and English language.

Consequently, the current study is aimed to identify the main challenges and difficulties that face Libyan EFL Undergraduate students when they write research papers, and to propose solutions to overcome research writing difficulties.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

In light of the fact that the researcher has a supervision experience on students' graduation projects, it is believed that there is a need to investigate the challenges of English research writing encountered by the targeted students. The difficulties that face the targeted students in this study has been noticeably determined, and it has commonly been assumed that they need to improve their academic writing and research skills used in their research papers.

Referencing, using hedging language, being persuasive and critical, the use of objective style of writing, building arguments, expressing their own voice and finding relevant and variety of sources are seemed to be the challenging issues that are faced by the students.

## 1.2 Objectives of the Study

The focus of this research is to identify the challenges encountered by EFL Undergraduate Libyan students in English research writing. The targeted students mainly studied in the English department in faculty of education at Misrata university.

## 1.3 Research Questions

The current study aims to examine the following questions:

- 1.What are the challenges that face the targeted students in writing their research project papers?
2. What solutions could possibly be recommended in order to overcome the issue in this particular context?

## 1.4 Significance of the Study

It is intended to address the results of this study to both lecturers and students of English department in faculty of education at Misrata university. The output of this research would provide students the ability to achieve proficiency in writing their English research projects. Moreover, the results could be significant to lecturers as it would raise their awareness of the process of supervising students' graduation projects.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Strategies and Skills of Writing Academic Research

There are many factors that contribute to make the process of writing a research project challenging for university students. Some of those are for example, grammar, use of appropriate vocabulary, structuring good complete sentences and expressing a complete thought and ideas of ones ' own.

It is vitally important in this section to shed light on mastering academic research writing skills and strategies in order to produce a good research project.

Research skills and academic writing techniques require students to command several characteristics which aid both the researcher's writing and the reader's understanding of the context.

A considerable number of researchers and writers define academic research writing by indicating that it is expressing ideas using precise and objective language (Abdulkareem, 2013). It involves EFL students to use rather formal language which means that it is different from the language that is used in everyday conversation or informal situations. It also involves them to write grammatically correct, besides avoiding expressing themselves using personal tones, that is to say they must use objective style of writing.

Al Fadda (2012) (p. 123) states that academic research writing is "mental and cognitive activity, since it is a product of mind" that is to say it demands students to make their minds work in a particular way of thinking in order to produce sentences.

Zemach et al. (2003), Mogahed (2013) and Gebhard (2006) mention that the most important features of academic writing are being persuasive and critical, analytical, descriptive (stating facts and informing the audience), using hedging language and well-structured sentences as well as backed up by evidence. They report that EFL students should apply in their research work such features to end up not having a poor-quality piece of work.

In regards to students being persuasive and critical in their research work means that the ability to think critically about the facts of the topic chosen to write about in their research. Then, when it comes to state and express their opinion that they arrived at, they need to support it with a related information. This is opposed to simply recalling facts and information in a research.

Critical thinking as mentioned by the above researchers is considered as an essential skill of academic writing which should be taught to university students to contribute to develop their writing competence.

Bloom et al. (1956) points out that thinking critically demands three vital steps. First, is to analyze information by breaking it down. Second is to extract points from variety of studies relevant to the issue and address them narratively in a creative way of the students' own style and finally, the ability to evaluate the information gathered from the research being addressed and arriving at a judgment. Above all this, students must be able to build an

argument in their work and at the end they should conclude their viewpoints by presenting supporting evidence.

Regarding the ability of using hedging language, Li (2007) explains that such a type of language use helps students to avoid being certain while they express their claims in the research. For example, he indicates that they ought to use number of verbs such as: appear to be, seem, look like, think, believe and tend which lead to obtain vague language.

Having discussed and mentioned the characteristics and features of academic writing that EFL university students should master, it is essential to pay a great attention to the first steps that they need to take into account before starting to write their research.

Tuan (2010), Al-Gharabally (2015) and Alakeeli (2013) consider effective academic reading and with deep understanding as a first step in researching the topic is significantly important. The researchers named suggest that means of library and learning resources are the most important facilities that provide students to widen their knowledge about not only choosing the topic but how to write about it. After that, they emphasize that note making from texts and writing the first draft must help students to organize their ideas and guide them to plan to write their research projects.

It is widely believed that it is essential to adequately teach academic research writing strategies module to EFL university students in order to improve their performance in conducting good research. Richards (2010) refers that material plays an essential role in both processes of teaching and learning. Both Sufficient teaching and students' effort to practice the process of writing research would feasibly result in overcoming challenges that EFL students encounter in their higher level of education. Moreover, it would reasonably train them, develop their talents, expand their perceptions, organize their ideas and express what is on their minds. This stage prepares them to present research in the future at the stage of master's and doctorate degrees.

## 2.2 Related Previous Studies

Presenting an overview of previous theoretical and empirical studies which are relevant to the issue of this paper, would hopefully provide a deep understanding of the reasons behind the challenges encountered by EFL university students in research writing and thus provide solutions that could

potentially help students overcome the difficulties, and improve research writing proficiency.

Learning research writing skills as a target language is considered as a complex task for learners whose first language is totally different from the target one. Especially if the learning and teaching process are conducted in L1 culture and environment.

In this regard, it is significant to draw Khan's (2011) investigation on teaching and learning ESL to Saudi Arabian university students. He concludes that English productive skills such as writing and speaking would potentially lead EFL learners whose first language is Arabic, face complexity in mastering them. He also indicates that the fact of the significant difference between English and Arabic in cultural and linguistic features, would contribute to impede EFL learners achieving their aims to the fullest.

According to Shihiba (2011), challenges that are confronted by EFL learners in regards to writing skills, might be due to the over use of L1 inside and outside classrooms by both students and teachers. He states that producing L2 competently requires EFL learners to think in the target language. However, he finds out that some learners transfer their ideas from L1 to L2 when it comes to writing. This possibly would be the same case performed by the Libyan students in university when it comes to write their research projects. Accordingly, this concept is supported by the qualitative research which was done by Amin and Alamin (2012). It revealed that the participants of the study found it difficult to paraphrase and summarize other's work when it comes to write their research papers. They point out that once the students write what they read, using their own words, and transferring their ideas from L1 to L2, it would result in making grammar mistakes; and thus, they receive poor results. Hence, attention must also be drawn to the conclusion that Hynninen and Kuteeva (2017)'s study reached. They shed light on the implications of the increasing L2 use of English in writing for research. They state that, "the findings suggest the importance of understanding disciplinary specific requirements for English – and that the teaching of academic writing should draw attention to the different means through which writers can achieve clarity and understandability" (p.30).

Most of the lecturers in the Libyan universities complain about students' reluctance and hesitation in starting writing their research projects and choosing the titles. One of the most significant studies related to this

issue was carried out by Alsied and Ibrahim (2017). They conducted a mixed method approach to investigate both Libyan university lecturers and undergraduate EFL Libyan Learners who had challenges in research teaching and Writing. The findings revealed that despite the fact that lecturers required students to identify their area of interest, choose a title and formulate a researchable problem, students found it difficult to do so. In regards to the learners who participated in the same study, the results showed that the majority of the 42 of them had challenges in writing literature review, methodology, results and discussion sections.

In this favor, Dwihandini (2013) is another researcher who conducted a study in Indonesia to investigate the factors influencing undergraduate students in writing research. The findings referred to choosing a title of the research was one of the main factors that affected students' research writing.

Regarding books and sources availability in libraries. Some students seem to complain that there is a shortage of books and sources at the library in their college. This could impede students to decide on appropriate topics to write about in their research project with adequate references. One of the studies that concluded the concerned issue was carried out in Saudi Arabia by Alshehry (2014). He examined the challenges that undergraduate students face in writing a research paper by conducting a semi structured interview. The result showed that one of the main obstacles was in finding relevant books and sources at libraries. As most of the participants in the study stated that their libraries had scarcity of books related to their field of study.

In addition, Nasser (2018) conducted a study to find out the difficulties that face university students in writing research papers, she reports that the majority of the participants had challenges in language use, coherence, and cohesion. She states that: "Writers usually aim at producing a piece of writing where the vocabulary is carefully chosen, the sentences are logically related, the ideas are clearly expressed, and the paragraphs are coherent. Based on students' responses, the data indicates that yet they find achieving them is quite difficult" (p.69).

### 3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative orientated research study in order to address the problems set in this study and achieve the aims. An investigation was undertaken to develop an in-depth understanding of the process of writing English research paper and its challenges that face

undergraduate students in terms of paraphrasing, referencing, using hedging language being persuasive and critical, the use of objective style of writing and building arguments. The reason to use this paradigm is that it is intended to explore the issue mentioned in means of its implementation and its natural context. In this regard, Robson (2011) states that qualitative research design focuses on the natural context of people's performance within their social interaction.

### 3.1 Data Collection and Instruments

In regards to data collection methods, an essential instrument was conducted to gather data; which is document review in means of (content-based analysis). By reviewing and analyzing number of research projects done by English department students who studied in faculty of education at Misrata university, it would potentially lead to gain an in-depth understanding of the issue. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) point out that content analysis method is used to interpret texts by skimming and reading them accurately in order to answer the research questions. Moreover, Punch (2003) states that a number of selected documents to be reviewed could be obtained in qualitative study to seek a deep analysis and understanding of an issue.

The data used in this research were ten research projects already done by ten final semester students and submitted to the English department in the faculty of education at Misrata university. The research papers were neither supervised nor examined by the researcher of this study. The ten of the papers were done by students who achieved the requirements of writing graduation research project. They studied modules like research methods and academic writing which preceded graduation project course. The targeted papers were submitted to the department in the past few semesters (years).

### 3.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues have been taken into consideration, so as the research projects were coded by using numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 instead of mentioning the fictional names of students who submitted them or mentioning the titles of their papers. In this regard, Oliver (2003) indicates that it is important to code the actual names of the participants when it comes to analyze data.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Findings that were elicited from the research papers are presented using a thematic approach. They were classified into four main themes in order to achieve the aims identified in section 1.2.

### 4. Findings of the Study and Discussion

This section discusses the results and findings that were emerged from the targeted students' papers. They are classified into the following themes which consider:

- 1 Sources used, referencing and citation
- 2 Building argument and expressing own voice
- 3 Coherence & cohesion (organization of ideas)
- 4 language used in terms of grammar and vocabulary

#### 4.1 Sources Used, Referencing and Citation

It was found that in seven of the research papers, citation was formatted incorrectly in some of the students' chapters. For example, in papers (1, 4) and (5) the use of other authors' exact words was presented like this:

- "Speaking is an oral interaction where participants need to negotiate....." (Brown, 2004:115). (Paper 1)

In this example the student quoted several definitions in this way which is totally incorrect as it is not formatted according to APA style. Page number was not mentioned as well.

Another example is:

- " Grammar is the structural foundation of our ability to express ourselves". (Richard Nordquist) (2020). (Paper 4)

Again, the referencing style was formatted incorrectly with no page number stated.

In papers 4, 5 and 6, students stated several facts and explained them with no referencing at all. The following is a selection of what the students wrote in their research papers:

-There are some factors that cause students' difficulties in speaking such as negative interlanguage and intralingual transfers in the form of adverbs interference, copulative verb interference... (paper 6)

-Acquiring a language is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information. (Paper 5)

- If you are a foreign English speaker- there is a 90% chance you are because you are reading my blog! - you are most likely familiar with anxiety of making mistakes.... (Paper 4)

Other examples of information in paper 7 were presented with no year of the published work. Students referred to authors' names only. For example, they stated:

-Kamelia Gulan tried to give as answer to the question asked by John Field, ....

Two of the research papers (8 and 4) included few sources compared to the work done in the research. As the number of references used and listed at the end, would largely depend on the students' work. Having too many or too few would feasibly affect validity of the research. Moreover, it was found that there was too much repetition of the same reference over and over. (paper4, p.8 and 9)

It has been noticed that most of the papers that were examined, stated authors' first names instead of last names. Students also paraphrased several authors' works and results without referring to their names or years of publication. Despite the fact that referencing and citation is taught to students within research methods module in their seventh semester, it seems to be still challenging for some of the students to use it properly. This could probably be due to the fact that they are not practicing academic research writing regularly. In this favor, Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) indicate that most of EFL Libyan undergraduate students who participated in their study found writing literature review section quite challenging as referencing and citation was considered as a dilemma.

## 4.2 Building Argument and Expressing Own Voice

It was deduced that building argument and expressing own voice in the context of the targeted students' papers, were rarely presented by the students. Most of the times they simply recalled facts and information as they are, rather than critically analyzed and evaluated them. As indicated by Zemach et al. (2003), Mogahed (2013) and Gebhard (2006) mentioned in section 2.1, students were expected to arrive at a judgment, build an argument in their work and at the end they should conclude their viewpoints by presenting supporting evidence. They were also expected to relate their conclusion and findings to the studies and works of other researchers that have been drawn in literature review chapters. However, what they did in the papers, was opposed to what has been mentioned in the previous chapter above.

The following is a selection of examples of the points indicated:

- According to Gardener? (1985), motivation involves four aspects: a goal, effort, ...(paper,3)

- Nunan (1999) stresses that motivation is important to notice....

- Dulay eta. (1998), defines affecting as the automatic transfer, (paper,10)

In (paper 9, p.4) the first whole page in literature review chapter had no reference at all. The two students who wrote the paper mentioned a considerable amount of information without arguing or comparing their own opinion with other authors' works. In addition, there was no supporting evidence.

Discussion and conclusion chapters in papers 8, 7, 10, 4, and 6 were written with no indication to neither other studies related to the topic of the research papers nor studies previously mentioned in the same chapters. After reaching a conclusion, students were expected to relate their findings and judgements to others' works.

In paper 3 (p.12) the importance of lesson plan section was explained and stated several facts with no indication to relevant studies and no critical evaluation presented.

### 4.3 Coherence and Cohesion (Organization of Ideas)

In Paper8 (p.1) literature review section was organized incorrectly, as sections of research questions, statement of the problem and significance of the study were positioned in literature review chapter. In addition, the same chapter explained about the title of the paper randomly with no division into categories in order to be organized and coherent. The student moved directly from one point to another with no classification, which would probably mislead the readers.

Organization of ideas in paper 7 was somehow misleading as the student investigated one aspect of the topic of his research area, whereas the topic included many aspects that should be investigated as well. The student in this paper explained the aspects in first chapters. However, he excluded them in data analysis and findings chapters.

It was found that coherence and organization of ideas in the selected research papers generally seemed to be difficult for students to achieve. This fact agrees with Nasser's (2018) findings that was mentioned in section 2.2 above.

### 4.4 language Used in Terms of Grammar and Vocabulary

Word choice and grammar that are used by EFL students in writing English academic research papers are considered challenging as indicated in various number of empirical and theoretical studies mentioned above in section 2. The selected research papers indicated that some students had difficulties in achieving accurate grammar in their writing, for example they wrote:

-There is research questions that this research will answer....  
(Paper 5, p.1) - in chapter four will be the results of research finding.

- how do they connected vocabulary to grammar.... (Paper 4 p.21and 2) -how does our new methods affect..... they chosen...the study is conducted a...

- when the teacher ask the students.... (Paper 6, p.6) every teacher do encourage. (P.7)

- students discusses it next class...teachers can have students match up pictures.... (P.24)

- reading skills is important .....which enable students ....(p.25) ... the teacher usually have .....

It seems that the students L1 has a considerable effect on their English grammar as most of their mistakes in writing were subject-verb agreement as mentioned in the previous examples. In this regard, studies done by Khan (2011), Amin and Alamin (2012) and Shihiba (2011) mentioned in section 2 in this study, greatly attribute such type of mistakes to the fact of L1 interference.

In regards to word choice and language used in writing the selected research papers, in some cases there has been a tendency of using informal words and expressions. For example:

- students get vocabulary from ..... (paper 3)
- the teachers maybe tell students to speak .... (Paper 10)

In some other cases, students tend to be certain when it comes to express their claims in the research. In this regard, Li (2007) points out that researchers should use hedging language by using particular verbs listed in section 2.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study aims at identifying English research writing difficulties faced by Libyan EFL Undergraduate students. The targeted students studied in English department in faculty of education at Misrata university. Results of this study were achieved by means of reviewing the targeted students' research projects. Accordingly, the findings revealed that building argument and expressing own voice were obviously the most significant challenges for the students. Referencing and citation tends to be problematic to some students as well. Other issues related to coherence, grammar and vocabulary appeared to be the less problematic. Moreover, this research attempts to provide solutions that could potentially help students overcome the difficulties identified and thus improve research writing proficiency. Therefore, on the basis of the results of this study, the following suggested recommendations have been addressed:

1- Students should practice academic research writing throughout their four undergraduate years. It is recommended that they frequently conduct research

on a topic related to every module they study in every semester, so that writing a research paper would be something familiar to them.

2- Students should be equipped with critical thinking skills that are required in academic research writing and should be trained to be able to build an argument in their work and at the end they should be able to conclude their viewpoints by presenting supporting evidence.

3- Research methods module is recommended to be taught within two semesters by means of integrating theory and practice. That is lecturers should teach the module to students theoretically in one semester and the following semester they should place more emphasis on how students effectively implement mechanics of writing a research paper.

4- Training and developing programs and workshops in EFL contexts should be taken into consideration by both lecturers and students. Such programs play an essential role in enhancing students' learning. In addition, they help students to achieve a satisfying research paper. Therefore, students at this level need to participate in such workshops and it is vitally important to include this as an integral part of the university program.

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