A Qualitative Inquiry into the Difficulties Experienced by Algerian EFL Master Students in Thesis Writing: 'Language is not the Only Problem'

Boufeldja Bakhou
Laboratory of African Studies for Human and Social Sciences
Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Languages
University of Adrar, Algeria

Bachir Bouhania
Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Languages
University of Adrar, Algeria

Abstract
For the last few decades, difficulties encountered by non-native English students in the process of thesis writing have attracted considerable attention from researchers. However, most of the previous research on this topic has given priority to the language-related/linguistic problems and has focused on international students studying in L1 contexts. Thus, the aim of this qualitative study was to gain insight into Master students' experiences of thesis writing in a conspicuously underexplored EFL context, Algeria. Specifically, the study explored both students' and supervisors' perceptions of the difficulties and challenges encountered during the course of thesis writing, with a focus on the non-linguistic factors underlying this academic undertaking. Semi-structured in-depth interviews, supported by open-ended questionnaires, were used to obtain from 30 students and six supervisors, purposely selected from English departments at eight Algerian universities. Findings indicate that the process of thesis writing is a formidable and daunting academic undertaking for Algerian EFF Master students due primarily to sociocultural challenges and then linguistic difficulties. These latter ones included students' lack of some academic writing skills and their limited knowledge about thesis writing and research whereas the identified sociocultural challenges included lack of supervisor and family support, lack of cooperation of the research sample, and insufficient academic preparation. Pedagogical implications for stakeholders and suggestions for future researchers were presented in the end of the current study.

Keywords: Algerian EFL Master students, thesis writing, linguistic difficulties, sociocultural challenges

Introduction

During their second year of Postgraduate level, Master students spend the bulk of their time preparing a thesis. This latter can be defined as an official academic document that a student writes and submits as partial fulfillment of the prerequisites for getting the Master's degree. It is a write-up that presents the outcomes of a research project/study autonomously, though with the help and guidance of a supervisor, undertaken by a student within a master program (Hardling, 2004). Notwithstanding, the process of writing a master thesis involves not only writing per se (Brause, 1999), but it also encompasses a number of phases and steps beginning with the selection of a researchable topic up to the final stage, which is the writing up of the thesis manuscript. Han (2014) argues that "The process of thesis writing is more important than the writing result itself. For EFL learners completing a thesis is a big project, which will take up almost every student's last year at university'' (p. 120).

Quite understandably, thesis writing is a challenging task for most EFL students since it requires from them the ability to have several hard skills such as planning, doing research, critical thinking, the correct use of language (grammar, choice of words...etc.) and style, to mention but a few. Consequently, they have to deal with and may confront a significant number of challenges while writing it. As a result of the large number of skills that are required as well as the need to keep motivated and self-regulate, students often face anxiety in researching and writing their thesis (Vos, 2013). Further to this, the fact that it is the first time for these students to engage in the process of writing a thesis makes this academic mission even more problematic. According to Todd, Smith and Bannister (2006), "The introduction of any new approach to learning is always unsettling, and students will inevitably experience challenges when completing their first piece of truly independent work" (p. 162). Consequently, unavoidable complexities of writing a thesis for EFL students have attracted the attention of researchers in several countries and academic contexts.

For the past couple of years, however, research into thesis writing challenges (for instance, Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Cadman, 1997; Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995; Gürel, 2011; Komba, 2015; Sadeghi & Khajepasha, 2015; Strauss, 2012) has concentrated on the writing up of the thesis manuscript ignoring, to a large extent, the process aspect of this academic task. Further to this, it has often overlooked the sociocultural challenges experienced by students during this critical academic journey. Nevertheless, it is necessary now to give due attention to the challenges that EFL students encounter in the different steps of writing their master thesis. In other words, researchers are called upon to investigate thesis writing not only as a product but as a process, too. In order to add to the growing literature on linguistic and rhetorical challenges in structuring a thesis, more empirical studies are needed on investigating barriers in the research phase, supervision issues and personal as well as other sociocultural challenges in this academic journey.

In the Algerian context, albeit thesis writing is a mandatory academic task and a significant process for Algerian EFL Master students, and one during which they may experience many challenges because of several factors, it is perhaps surprising that the students' experiences and the challenges facing them have received remarkably limited attention in the Algerian context. Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap. With this purpose in mind, the current study chose to investigate the thesis writing experiences of Algerian EFL Master students with an emphasis on non-linguistic writing difficulties in this academic journey, hence considering not

only difficulties facing them in writing but also their concerns, issues, and challenges in the whole process of thesis writing. In the first place, the study set out to ascertain if they encountered any difficulties. It then examined the students' and supervisors' opinions about the nature of such difficulties and the sort of them that rendered the process of thesis writing a challenging academic task. As such, it is hoped that the findings of this investigation will contribute to the improvement of the quality of Master's thesis writing in EFL at Algerian universities since it has provided useful information about the challenges facing students in this academic undertaking, which will allow all stakeholders to think of the possible solutions to overcome them. For the purpose of the study, the following research questions were formulated: 1) To what extent do Algerian EFL Master students experience difficulties during the course of writing their thesis? 2) What is the nature of these difficulties? 3) What sorts of difficulties are more challenging for them?

Literature Review

Acknowledging thesis writing challenges and attempting to address them, a good number of scholars have conducted research studies in various higher educational contexts around the world with the aim to uncover those challenges (for example, Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995; Dong, 1998; Gurel, 2011; Hajar, 2016; Ho, 2013; Komba, 2016; Lessing & Lessing, 2004; Sadeghi & Khajepha, 2015; Strauss, 2012; Todd et al., 2006; Wang & Li, 2008; Zuber-Skerritt & Knight,1986). In the current study, however, we will particularly review some salient previous research on the difficulties and challenges encountered by students while attempting to write their thesis in English as a foreign or a second language.

When reviewing different research studies about the challenges that EFL and/or ESL students face in writing their thesis, it has become evident for us that most of them provided valuable insights into the nature of such challenges; nevertheless, they did not address the writing of the master thesis from a holistic perspective. They instead focused on its product aspect: Shaw (1991), Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006), Ho (2013), Komba (2016) and Singh (2015), for example, have found that students faced difficulty in structuring the constituent parts of the thesis. The outcomes of these studies showed that the most difficult thesis chapters to write were: Introduction and Discussion (Shaw, 1991), Literature Review (H0, 2013) and Discussion of Results (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). These difficulties were attributed to EFL students' insufficient genre-specific writing skills and unawareness of the rhetorical structure of the thesis. In another study, Singh (2015) indicated that international EFL students found writing the Literature Review, Methodology, and Findings sections very difficult.

Apart from the generic and rhetorical challenges, the literature, on the other hand, shows that some students, who have to write a thesis in English as a foreign or as a second language, still struggle with more palpable linguistic difficulties such as problems with grammar and punctuation and limitation in vocabulary to express ideas and views (Chang & Strauss, 2010; Dong, 1998; Idri, 2015; Singh, 2015; Strauss, 2012). For example, the findings of Singh's (2015), study showed that thesis writing presented various challenges to international Master students from different EFL backgrounds including students from Middle Eastern, African, East Asian, and Southeast Asian countries. Using appropriate academic style, writing coherent paragraphs and expressing ideas in correct English were found as the major difficulties those international students faced. Although most of the EFL-based research studies have reported students who struggle with different sorts of

language issues, Taiwanese EFL graduate students, in Yeh's (2010) research study, assumed that their language skills were adequate for the purpose of writing their master thesis and exhibited a rather laid-back attitude towards the language problem.

Despite the tendency of research publications on thesis writing in English as a foreign language to focus on linguistic difficulties in writing up the thesis, some researchers have investigated it beyond its product aspect focusing on a number of additional sources of difficulty including issues concerning the selection of topic and the reviewing of the literature (Yeh, 2010), troubles in data collection and analysis and limited access to resources in the library (Alsied & Ibrahim,2017), difficulty in accessing the research sample (Huang, 2007), lack of enough support from the supervisors, student's negative attitude toward thesis writing (Bigdeli & Kazemi, 2015), and students' inability to manage their time between work and thesis writing (Divsar, 2018; Erbay Çetinkaya & Yilmaz, 2017).

For example, Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) explored challenges in research writing from Libyan EFL undergraduate students' and their teachers' perspectives. In order to do so, a sample, consisting of 42 EFL students and four teachers, was selected from a Libyan state university. This study employed a mixed-methods design and obtained data using questionnaires and interviews. The findings of this study showed that EFL students faced great difficulty in the research stage of the thesis writing process. Mainly, they find problematic the tasks of identifying the area of interest, choosing a topic, formulating research problems, and writing a literature review. Besides, they confronted other challenges such as difficulties in collecting and analyzing data, weak background knowledge about research, lack of motivation, and lack of resources in the library.

In addition, Divsar (2018) conducted a study of similar interest which investigated the challenges encountered by Iranian TEFL students in thesis writing. The results of this study revealed that linguistic difficulties (e.g., grammatical and organizational problems and lack of mastery of academic writing style) constituted the major challenge for Iranian EFL students. However, findings showed that the students reported a wide range of other difficulties which were grouped into three main categories: (i) instructional and pedagogical inadequacies (mainly students' lack of knowledge and experience in researching and writing up their thesis), (ii) personal problems and affairs such as poor management of time and the loss of interest and motivation in the process of thesis writing, and (iii) educational support such as the limited availability and assistance offered by the supervisor and adviser.

Findings from these studies suggest that the process of thesis writing can be made even more complex and problematic when language-related issues are coupled with other non-linguistic challenges. Also, EFL students do not just face difficulty in writing per.se, but they also have to deal with personal and social obstacles and challenges in the whole process of writing their thesis. Nevertheless, the limited number of this type of inquiries indicates that there has been little research devoted to personal and sociocultural factors in the process of thesis writing in EFL, whereas more attention has been given to the linguistic and structural challenges. Hence, there is obviously a need to approach the topic of challenges in thesis writing in English as a foreign language from a holistic perspective.

In general, a detailed literature review indicates that most research studies confined their attention to difficulties students face at the level of the thesis text; that is, the linguistic, structural, and rhetorical problems. Thus, with language-related/linguistic difficulties in thesis writing for EFL students having received more attention than other types of challenges (i.e., non-linguistic challenges) in previous research, it is now necessary to shift our attention to sociocultural and personal writing difficulties which in many cases compound the already complex nature of thesis writing. Moreover, although writing the Master thesis is part and parcel of EFL students' academic career in the Algerian context, there have been no research publications that share the same focus and aims as the current one. Therefore, this study is seemingly the first attempt to fill this significant research gap by exploring the issues and challenges facing EFL students in the course of writing their thesis, taking into consideration not only linguistic difficulties in producing the thesis text but also non-linguistic challenges in the whole writing journey.

Method
Research Design
The researchers' aim in this study was to explore and investigate students' experiences of thesis writing so as to provide a detailed picture and analysis of the problems and challenges that faced them. Therefore, an interpretive qualitative research approach was used in this study in order to gain a deep understanding of EFL students' lived experiences in their natural setting (Creswell, 2003; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Flick, 2002). The qualitative research design is particularly suited to the current study because it is deemed as the best for "representing the views and perspectives of people in a study" (Yin, 2011, p.7).

Participants
The research sample of the present study consisted of thirty students and six supervisors from English departments at a number of universities in various provinces covering the southern (University of Ahmed Draya (Adrar), Kasdi Merbah University of Ourgla, Hamma Lakhdar Eloued University, and University of Bechar) and northern (University of Oran-2, Abderahmane Mira University of Béjaïa, University of Batna, and University of Blida-2) parts of Algeria. The typical qualitative purposive sampling approach was employed to select participants. The rationale for using purposive sampling was to recruit the participants who were more likely to provide the researchers with the most reliable and richest information about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry (Patton, 2002). The following criteria were established for the selection of the study's informants who were willing to express their views with regard to thesis writing challenges. First, to be selected as participants, students needed to be second-year EFL Masters who had finished or almost finished writing their thesis. Second, they also had to be only those students who had graduated a year before the time of the investigation. This was to ensure that they were able to remember the process of thesis writing well, hence providing the most reliable information. Third, only supervisors who had more than five years of experience in supervising EFL Masters were selected because they were expected to give richer information for the study than any new university teacher.

In order to cater for the representativeness of the study's sample, students and supervisors were purposefully selected from eight universities in Algeria with maximum variation in students' gender, age, Master specialty, …etc., and in supervisors' academic rank, gender and teaching

experience. In particular, nineteen of the students were males, and eleven were females. All of them were in their 20s or 30s except for four whose ages ranged between 35 and 45. Twenty students majored in Linguistics and Didactics, whereas eight of them studied literature and civilization. We also included in the sample participants from both genders who had other social commitments (e.g., family and work) in addition to being a Master student in order to have diverse students' experiences of thesis writing. Concerning the second group of informants, all the supervisors who took part in the study were experienced teachers who had supervised both Master and Doctorate students for several years, and they all have a Ph.D. degree in their field of study. There were two females and four males, and their ages ranged between 30-60.

Data Collection Instruments

The main instrument used to collect data in this study was a semi-structured in-depth interview with 14 students and six supervisors. Final year students were interviewed in May and June 2019, while the recent Master graduates and the supervisors were interviewed three months earlier. The participants were interviewed either in person or through phone and Internet. On average, each interview took nearly one hour. Each participant was interviewed once, but some of them were interviewed more than once because they exhibited a unique interest in our research and provided richer information than other informants. The participants were first familiarized with the theme and purpose of the current inquiry then asked to give some background information about themselves, such as their age, gender, field of study, and university. After that, the researchers used a set of main, probing and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) to give the interviewees the chance to express their views adequately and to speak thoughtfully about their experiences of thesis writing. The interviews were conducted in English with both the students and the supervisors. However, when interviewing students, we sometimes had to resort to the use of Arabic, their L1, so as to allow them to express themselves more freely. After the permission was gained from the respondents, the interviews were reordered and later transcribed verbatim. The researchers do not use their real names when reporting the results in the study; pseudonyms are instead used for the purpose of keeping the participants' confidentiality. Another source of data collection was an open-ended questionnaire. This instrument was used in order to reach out to information-rich cases who were unwilling to be interviewed. Data collected through the open-ended questionnaire was used to support the interview findings so that a fuller picture of the students' writing difficulties was attained. The questionnaire was divided into two parts; the first one was devoted to demographic information, and the second part focused on students' perceived difficulties in the process of thesis writing. The same questions of the interviews were used in the open-ended questionnaire. This latter was emailed to 16 student participants. After two weeks, all the questionnaires were filled and sent back.

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interview transcripts and students' answers from the open-ended questionnaires were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analytical process was inductive, and we followed the systematic procedures recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). As a first step, the researchers attempted to acquaint themselves with the raw data by listening attentively to the recorded interviews, then reading their transcripts thoroughly and repeatedly. This first step of data analysis enabled us to identify initial codes. Then, meaning units or codes were examined and grouped based on their similarities to determine thematic categories. As a next

step, the codes in each identified theme were reviewed and scrutinized to make sure that they constitute a coherent pattern. Finally, following their refinement, the themes were named and divided into subthemes.

Results and Discussion

   Based on the thematic analysis of data, the difficulties were classified under three dominant themes: personal/psychological problems, sociocultural difficulties, and students' lack of preparedness. Quite interestingly, the types of difficulties represented in the emergent themes did not have the same negative effect on the participants. Therefore, in what follows, the first thematic categories, sociocultural difficulties and students' lack of preparedness, will be presented and discussed because the participants ranked them as the most challenging types of difficulties, respectively. However, due to lack of space in this article, personal/psychological problems will be reported elsewhere.

The First Category of Difficulties: Sociocultural Difficulties

   Evidence from the interviews and open-ended questionnaires showed that EFL students' progress in the process of writing their Master thesis was negatively affected by a number of sociocultural factors. Notably, these students floundered not only because they had to write their thesis in a foreign language (English) with insufficient academic writing and research skills, but also due to cultural and social challenges. One of the interviewees sadly commented on the sorts of difficulties EFL students faced in the course of writing their thesis, "language is not the only problem" (student N.14). The sociocultural challenges were divided into two subthemes: the first one is inadequate support and cooperation, and the second is poor-quality academic preparation/education for students.

Inadequate Supports and Cooperation

   Students considered that the role of their supervisors was focal in assisting them in completing the thesis writing processes. Nevertheless, some of them believed that the help their supervisors provided them with was not enough. Some of them (student: N.03, N.07, N.11, N.13, and N.04) indicated that their supervisors were not approachable all the time, and they spent a great deal of time correcting their thesis drafts. A student stated,

> I remember that I met him few times; he was always busy because he is the Dean of the Faculty. So, I always gave the work to his secretary to give it to him and waited like three weeks to receive the correction. (student N. 13)

 Similarly, students in previous studies also decried the supervisors' unavailability and untimely feedback about the students' drafts (Erbay & Yilmaz, 2017; Bigdeli & Kazemi, 2015; Wang & Li, 2008; Paltridge & Woodrow, 2012). In addition to this, the participants of our study opined that their supervisors were less supportive than they expected them to be, and they were more reactive and less proactive. Hence, students were usually left to deal with difficulties by themselves. In this respect, one student (N.02), talking about her supervisor, said, "she never encouraged me to work; she only waited to me to give her my work, and if I didn't, she didn't ask me why or what were my problems".

The teaching commitments for some supervisors and administrative roles for others may have contributed to the problem of the supervisor's inaccessibility and lack of time for effective supervision. In addition to this, the increase in the number of students who pursue their studies for the Master level has burdened the teachers with extra numbers of students to supervise. Thus, correcting students' works and returning them on time becomes difficult. Unfortunately, this discouraged the students and slowed down their paces in thesis writing.

With respect to the family support they received, students shared the view that some of their families were naïve about the time students needed to complete the writing of their Master thesis. Thus, the students' writing progress was hindered because family members made large demands on their time. Corner & Poi (2017) have noted that students may often experience big struggles in balancing their role as a student trying to complete a thesis successfully and their role as a family member from a collectivist culture wherein family needs are put before individual needs. For instance, a female married student (N.02) reported the following:

> I couldn't work a lot on my thesis because my husband asked me to look after his mother because, you know, she is old and can't cook or wash or do anything else. So, he told me that his mother has the priority. (student N.02)

Furthermore, another source of difficulty for Algerian EFL students was the discouraging ambiance for writing the thesis at their homes. Student N.08 complained,

> I avoided going home during the holidays because I knew I couldn't write anything; whenever I opened my laptop to write they start: go do this go do that. So, I stayed in the campus to complete writing on time. I mean before the deadline. (student N.08)

From another angle, students reported that they had negative experiences in undertaking research due to uncooperative research samples. This finding corroborates Huang's (2007) results, which suggested that students experienced difficulties because of uncooperative respondents. The data of this study indicated that some informants were not willing to participate in the students' research for unclear reasons. This happened with student N.10 who was investigating the speaking difficulties among Third-year LMD students in her university. She reported this saying, "I gave them the questionnaires and asked them to fill them, but some of them just ignored me and went and others said that they wanted to fill them at home but they never returned them to me". This perplexed her, and she had to ask one of the teachers to convince them to fill the questionnaires. Another student grumbled,

> People don't take you seriously. They are indifferent, or maybe they are lazy to answer your questions. I remember that I posted my online survey on Facebook and begged secondary school teachers to fill it but no responses except six or seven. I was really disappointed. So, I told my supervisor, and she advised me to continue with a different sample. (Student N.14)

In their open-ended responses, students also expressed their frustration about unhelpful respondents. For example, one of them (student N. 12) wrote,

I remember another thing. I really felt angry when one of the teachers I wanted to interview kept me waiting outside his office for one hour and half, and when she came out, she said 'sorry I must go come another time' and left. (student N. 12)

Poor-quality Academic Preparation/Education

The students were asked if the courses and modules they studied in their master programs had prepared them to write the Master thesis. In general, they were unsatisfied with the teaching and training they received in those courses. Student N.01, for instance, pointed out that "everything was theoretical just definitions and theories and things that we memorized them, but in practice it was difficult to apply them". The students also added that they were not trained adequately to use the APA and MLA referencing styles; that is why they experienced difficulty in adhering to them when writing their theses. Furthermore, students complained about the constant absence of some teachers who taught them the subjects necessary for writing the thesis. For example, in one of the participants' universities, the module of Methodology was not taught for one semester because the lecturer was on extended sick leave.

The supervisors were also of the view that students might have received poor-quality education throughout the Master level. They touched on some problems such as the fact that some important modules, like Methodology and Written Expression, both in the BA and Master levels, were assigned to inexperienced teachers, who might not be able to provide the students with good-quality instruction. They also mentioned that the courses were not so beneficial because they were not based on the students' real writing needs. Supervisor N.06, N.04 and N.01 emphasized that students should receive better training in statistics and computer skills, advanced academic writing skills, and in how to analyze data qualitatively. In this respect, Odena and Burgess (2017) noted that "It appears that difficulties and problems faced by ESL students are not fully addressed by the courses on academic writing that they might attend" (p. 584).

The Second Category of Difficulties: Students' Lack of Preparedness

Being prepared for writing the thesis entails that students must manipulate a wide range of skills, including adequate knowledge of how to undertake research and write up the different chapters of the thesis. Nevertheless, it was alarming that both the students and the supervisors reported the students' lack of the skills necessary for researching and writing up the Master thesis.

Insufficient Academic Writing Skills

All the supervisors in this study complained about students' poor academic writing in general and their lack of knowledge of the thesis genre in particular. They reported various linguistic issues students struggled with while writing up their theses. These issues included minor problems at the sentence level, such as incorrect use of grammar and punctuation, failure to adhere to formal writing styles, and the use of incorrect tone or voice. Besides, students faced major rhetorical problems in writing up some chapters of the thesis. For example, when asked to comment about their students' writing skills, some supervisors (Supervisor N. 03 and Supervisor N. 05) said that:

well, I have been teaching for many years and I have supervised hundreds of Master students in my career. I can safely say that my main concern when correcting their thesis works has always been their poor English. They make all sorts of mistakes. I have noticed

that some of them still write grammatically incorrect sentences and have problems with the use of some punctuation marks, especially the use of comma and the semicolon, though they have been taught these things since their first year in university. In addition, I often find it very hard to understand what they are writing because their writing lacks clarity, and they tend to express their ideas in very long sentences; or perhaps they think in Arabic and write in English. (Supervisor No. 03)

I think that the major challenge for these students is to write academically. Most of them are unaware of academic writing conventions, so they tend to use informal or colloquial language, personal pronouns, abbreviations like i.e., and emotive expressions. Instead of focusing on the content of their dissertation, I found myself correcting the use of tenses, articles, prepositions and dealing with other writing issues such as coherence and unity. It took a lot of time and effort to make them overcome all these problems. (Supervisor No. 05)

Similar language-related problems were reported by scholars who investigated thesis writing challenges in EFL (Gurel, 2011; Komba, 2015; Sadeghi & Khajepasha, 2015; Wang & Yang, 2012) or in ESL contexts (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Dong, 1998; Shaw, 1991; Strauss, 2012). For example, Strauss (2012) found that the two subjects of her study ''had great difficulty with what are generally regarded as basic grammatical skills: use of articles, prepositions, tense and punctuation. Sentence structure was problematic. Many of the sentences were very long and complex'' (p. 285). The findings of our study are also consistent with Algerian based research on thesis writing in EFL. It was found by Idri (2015) that Algerian EFL Master students face numerous writing difficulties, including their lack of academic writing sub-skills such as paraphrasing and summarizing. These linguistic writing difficulties lead to students' use of copy-paste mechanisms. However, unlike Idri's small case study, our investigation was not confined to linguistic problems in thesis writing. The findings of this study have unmasked previously unexplored thesis writing challenges that Algerian EFL Master encounter.

The students themselves expressed concerns over inadequate writing skills. However, most of them were more concerned about their incompetence in paraphrasing and summarizing information properly as well as their inadequate ability in expressing ideas with enough argumentation and clarity. On the other hand, they seemed to be confident of their general writing skills. This was stressed by an interviewee when she stated the following:

since I have time to write and review my writing again and again, I didn't have a problem with words and grammar and punctuation and so on, but I faced difficulty in summarizing and paraphrasing what I read from the literature. When I tried to write in my own words, my supervisor didn't like my sentences. She told me to write again and to be clearer and more concise. (student N.10)

An interesting finding that we did not expect was that students expressed their confidence in their general writing skills. Although this perspective conflicts their supervisors' views, it resonates with Taiwanese EFL masters' laid-back attitude towards language-related issues in Yeh's (2010)

study. Quite surprising, like the students who participated in this investigation, most of Yeh's informants were seemingly unworried about writing in the foreign language.

Another common challenge for students, as reported by the participating supervisors, was their lack of knowledge concerning how each section and chapter of their thesis should be written. They stated that students faced difficulty in writing the Literature Review because here they needed to read a lot of sources and then draw the relation between the reviewed books and articles, finding a research gap and restate information in their own words. Earlier research studies indicated that writing the Literature Review is a formidable task that poses numerous difficulties for students (Ho, 2013; Shaw, 1991; Singh, 2015; Yeh, 2010). According to Ho (2013), difficulty in writing the Literature Review "often resulted in some problematic issues, such as improper or mistaken citations, or even plagiarism, especially when students had to write multiple papers at the same time near the end of the semester" (p. 85).

The supervisors' perspectives were in parallel with the views of their students. The participating students reported that they faced difficulty in writing the various chapters because it was the first time for them to deal with the genre of research writing. For instance, one student (student No.22) noted that it was challenging for him to write the Literature Review:

> In order to write the second chapter, I mean the literature review you know you must read a lot about your topic. It was exhausting. And I didn't know what is the difference between theoretical and conceptual framework. And I didn't know what to include in this chapter because there was a lot of information. And I was afraid to commit plagiarism. (student No.22)

Lack of Research Skills

Lack of research skills and knowledge presented another hurdle for EFL students in the process of writing their master thesis. Undertaking research is an integral part of this process writing. However, evidence from the data of this study suggests that given their lack of experience in doing scholarly research in the BA degree, EFL students proceed to the Master level with insufficient theoretical knowledge and practical skills of research. The majority of students stated that they experienced difficulties in the various research stages, including formulating the research questions, choosing the research methodology, designing instruments for data collection, and analyzing data statistically. The following extracts from the interview elucidate this idea:

> Although we were taught how to choose the right methodology for our research by our teachers of Methodology, me and most of my classmates were complaining about how difficult it was for them to decide whether to use quantitative or qualitative or mixed method design. So, for myself, I read again the notes of Methodology lecture and borrowed methodology books from the library and used them to see what is the best methodology for my research. (student N. 12)

> For me the data analysis was very difficult. My supervisor advised me to use SPSS but I didn't know what was that software and know how to use it. So, I asked my sister who was studying Economy to explain everything to me. She taught me how to use computer to

analyze data form the questionnaire. Also, I didn't know how to use Microsoft to present the data you know… I mean the pie charts, bar graphs and tables and pictures I didn't know how to create them. (student N. 06)

I needed to create an online survey but I didn't know how to create it because we didn't see this in class. I asked my supervisor and he said that I should learn that on my own. So, I watched YouTube and, in the end, I was able to create it There is something else, the questionnaire and interview… yes it was hard for me to design them so I just used similar ones from the articles and theses that I read. (student N. 09)

Lack of research knowledge and skills, which was coupled with inadequate academic writing skills, made the thesis writing journey even daunting and more problematic for Algerian EFL masters. These findings are in line with the outcomes of previous research in similar EFL contexts such as the Libyan one (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2017), the Iranian context (Divsar, 2018), and the Turkish EFL context (Erbay & Yilmaz, 2017). Therefore, more research is needed both in the context of the study and in other EFL contexts to determine the effective solutions for the problems of EFL students' lack of preparedness for writing their theses.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The current study explored the difficulties Algerian EFL Master students experienced in the process of writing their thesis, from their own as well as their supervisors' perspectives. The key purpose of the study, which was the identification of those difficulties, has been successfully achieved. Interestingly, unlike most previous research studies, the findings of this study revealed that Algerian EFL students perceived linguistic problems as less problematic than sociocultural challenges. This study has also succeeded in filling a great research gap, which is the dearth of research publications on EFL students' experiences of writing the Master thesis. Thanks to the current study, a general picture about the experiences of EFL Master is now available for all those genuinely interested in enhancing the quality of thesis writing in EFL in the Algerian context. It concludes that the process of thesis writing is a formidable and daunting academic undertaking for Algerian EFF Master students due primarily to sociocultural challenges and then linguistic difficulties.

Based on these findings, a major recommendation made by this study is that supervisors and teachers ought to be aware that language is not the students' major difficulty in writing their Master theses, and the non-linguistic challenges identified in this study must not be overlooked when teaching or supervising Master students. It is also recommended that supervisors should try to make a balance between their professional duties and supervision in order to provide students with effective guidance and amble assistance, especially timely constructive feedback on language, style, content, and structure of the thesis. Students' families are also required to facilitate their journey through encouragement and less demand on their time during the period of thesis writing. Furthermore, despite the significant role the supervisor has in the process of thesis writing, the onus is on the student throughout this academic journey to warrant the final production of a fine write-up. Therefore, students are required to take responsibility for their own learning and work hard to enhance their academic writing and research skills. On the other hand, as Komba (2015) has suggested, university teachers are advised to revise the teaching methods and the contents of

academic writing and methodology modules so as to make them cope with the needs of EFL students to accomplish the writing of the thesis. Further to this, universities and EFL English departments are required to adequately train and prepare Master students for writing their theses by organizing training days and workshops on the different steps and aspects, especially the most difficult ones, of writing the Master thesis.

Finally, given its small number of participants, it is not our contention that the findings of this qualitative study can be generalized. Consequently, it is recommended that further research involving larger samples and using different methodological designs should be conducted in all Algerian universities to have a broader picture of thesis writing challenges and the factors that generate them. Also, it would be useful to investigate what strategies students use to overcome those difficulties. Future research can also be done to explore the views of Doctoral EFL students about their dissertation writing challenges in order to find out if they face the same or different types of challenges.

About the authors:
Boufeldja Bakhou is a current PhD student at the department of English at University of Adrar, Algeria. He got his Linguistics and Didactics Master's degree from the same university in 2014. His research interests include academic writing, thesis/dissertation writing and supervision, and English language teaching. He has taught English as a foreign language in high school since 2014.
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4677-3549

Prof. Bachir Bouhania holds a doctorate in Sociolinguistics obtained from the University of Oran in 2007. He teaches at the department of English, Faculty of Arts and Languages of the University of Adrar since 1997. Former head of department and vice-dean for scientific research, he is the actual institutional representative for the European projects, Erasmus+.
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4019-0449

References
Alsied, S.M., & Ibrahim, N.W. (2017). Exploring challenges encountered by EFL Libyan learners in research teaching and writing. *IAFOR Journal of Language Learning, 3*(2), 143-160. https://doi.org/10.22492/ijll.3.2.06
Bigdeli, R. R. A., & Kazemi, A. (2015). Master's thesis writing: Cinderella of Iranian ELT education. *Research in Applied Linguistics, 6*(1), 28-39. doi: 10.22055/rals.2015.11258
Bitchener, J., & Basturkmen, H. (2006). Perceptions of the difficulties of postgraduate L2 thesis students writing the discussion section. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 5*(1), 4–18. doi: 10.1016/j.jeap.2005.10.002
Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and methods* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
Braun, V., &. Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
Brause, R. S. (1999). *Writing your doctoral dissertation: Invisible rules for success*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Cadman, K. (2000). 'Voices in the air': Evaluations of the learning experiences of international postgraduates and their supervisors. *Teaching in Higher Education, 5*(4), 475-491. https://doi.org/10.1080/713699170

Chang, C. E., & Strauss, P. (2010). 'Active agents of change?' Mandarin-speaking students in New Zealand and the thesis writing process. *Language and Education, 24* (5), 415-429. doi: 10.1080/09500781003789873

Cooley, L., & Lewkowicz, J. (1995). The writing needs of postgraduate students at the University of Hong Kong: A project report. *Hong Kong Papers in Linguistics and Language Teaching, 18*, 121-123.

Corner, P. D., & Pio, E. (2017). Supervising international students' theses and dissertations. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 16*(1), 23-38.

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications.

Divsar, H. (2018). Exploring the challenges faced by Iranian TEFL students in their doctoral dissertation writing. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies, 6*(3), 195-203.

Dong, Y. R. (1998). Non-native graduate students' thesis/dissertation writing in science: Self reports by students and their advisors from two U.S. institutions. *English for Specific Purposes, 17*(4), 369–390. doi: 10.1016/s0889-4906(97)00054-9

Erbay Çetinkaya, Ş., & Yılmaz, S. (2017). How BA students perceive graduation thesis writing process: A qualitative inquiry. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies, 5*(8), 46-58.

Flick, U. (2002). *An introduction to qualitative research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications.

Gürel, N. (2011). Challenges of dissertation writing in the foreign language and strategies used: The perceptions of dissertation supervisors. *Ekev Akademisi Dergisi, 49,* 217-234.

Hajar, A. (2018). Understanding Arab students' challenges, strategy use, and future vision while writing their masters dissertations at a UK University: A qualitative inquiry. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, 12*(3), 260-273. doi: 10.1080/17501229.2016.1199555

Han, Y. (2014). An analysis of current graduation thesis writing by English majors in independent institute. *English Language Teaching*, *7*(1), 120-127. http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v7n1p120

Hardling, C. (2004). *Planning and organizing a master's thesis*. United Kingdom: Study mates limited.

Ho, M. C. (2013). The difficulties in disciplinary research writing: A case study of first year graduate students in Taiwan. *Journal of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2*(4), 77-87.

Huang, R. (2007). A challenging but worthwhile experience: Asian international student perspectives of undertaking a dissertation in the UK. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education, 6*(1)*,* 29-38. doi: 10.3794/johlste.61.130

Idri, N. (2015, January16). *Questioning academic writing performance among master students: English for academic purposes perspectives.* Paper presented at The Cultures of EAP, University of Bejaia, Algeria.

Komba, S. C. (2015). Challenges of writing theses and dissertations among postgraduate students in Tanzanian higher learning institutions. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education, 5*(3), 71-80. doi: 10.5861/ijrse.2015.1280

Lessing, N., & Lessing, A. C. (2004). The supervision of research for dissertations and theses. *Acta Commercii*, *4*(1), 73-87. doi: 10.4102/ac.v4i1.54

Odena, O., & Burgess, H. (2017). How doctoral students and graduates describe facilitating experiences and strategies for their thesis writing learning process: A qualitative approach. *Studies in Higher Education, 42*(3), 572-590. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1063598

Paltridge, B., & Woodrow, L. (2012). Thesis and dissertation writing: Moving beyond the text. In R. Tang. (Ed.), *Academic writing in a second or foreign language: Issues and challenges facing ESL/EFL academic writers in higher education contexts* (pp. 88 – 104). London: Continuum

Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Reading, S. (2013). Starting your dissertation journey. In A. Glasper, & C. Rees (Ed.), *How to write your nursing dissertation* (pp. 2-13). Oxford: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2011). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data.* SAGE Publications, Incorporated.

Sadeghi, K., & Khajipasha, A. S. (2015). Thesis writing challenges for non-native MA students. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 20*(3), 357-373. https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2015.1063808

Shaw, P. (1991). Science research students' composing processes. *English for Specific Purposes*, *10*(3), 189–206.

Singh, M. K. (2015). International graduate students' academic writing practices in Malaysia: Challenges and solutions. *Journal of International Students, 5*(1), 12–22.

Strauss, P. (2012). 'The English is not the same': challenges in thesis writing for second language speakers of English. *Teaching In Higher Education*, *17*(3), 283-293. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2011.611871

Todd, M.J., Smith, K., & Bannister, P. (2006). Supervising a social science undergraduate dissertation: Staff experiences and perceptions. *Teaching in Higher Education, 11*(2), 161-173. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510500527693

Vos, L. (2013). *Dissertation study at the postgraduate level: A review of the literature.* New York: Higher Education Academy.

Wang, T., & Li, L.Y. (2008). Understanding international postgraduate research students' challenges and pedagogical needs in thesis writing. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, *4*(3), 88-96. https://doi.org/10.5172/ijpl.4.3.88

Wang, X., & Yang, L. (2012). Problems and strategies in learning to write a thesis proposal: A study of six M.A. students in a TEFL program. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *35*(3), 324-341.

Yeh, C. (2010). New graduate students' perspectives on research writing in English: A case study in Taiwan. *Journal of Academic Language & Learning, 4*(1), A1–A12.

Yin, R. K. (201 1). *Qualitative research from start to finish.* New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Zuber-Skerritt, O., & Knight, N. (1986). Problem definition and thesis writing. *Higher Education*, *15*(1-2), 89-103.