

EFL Libyan Students' Perceptions of Writing Research Project: A Case Study during the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the learning experiences of Libyan students at a Libyan University with regard to writing projects. It is a qualitative study and the methods of data collection are semi-structured interview and observation. The aims of this study are to identify the difficulties that Libyan students face in writing their projects and to explore the reasons behind their challenges. This paper answers the following research questions: What are the challenges that undergraduate Libyan students encounter in writing their projects? And why do they face these challenges? Data analysis is done manually and is presented according to a priori and emergent themes. The findings of this study reveal that the main challenges are language barrier owing to the impact of their previous educational experiences, the conflict and the pandemic. Lack of motivation is also considered challenge due to unmet expectations and the effect of the pandemic and conflict. Furthermore, lack of deep understanding of the essential requirement of conducting a research because of the lack of practice and the negative impact of the conflict with regard to weak connection and power outages. Moreover, lack of proper supervision owing to the lack of the constructive feedback and a quick response, and, finally, lack of the facilities due to the impact of the conflict and the lockdown because of the pandemic.

المخلص

تركز هذه الدراسة على الخبرات التعليمية للطلبة الليبيين في الجامعة الليبية وبالتحديد على كتابة مشروع التخرج. المقابلة هي الطريقة الرئيسية لتجميع البيانات والملاحظة في الفصل. الدراسة تركز على 12 طالب وطالبة يدرسون في قسم اللغة الانجليزية في الفصل الأخير. الهدف من الدراسة التعريف بالصعوبات التي

يواجهونها فى كتابة بحث التخرج. وأكتشاف أسبابها. أسئلة البحث هي ماهى الصعوبات التى يواجهها الطلاب فى كتابة مشاريع التخرج. وكيف يتم التغلب عليها. نتائج الدراسة أظهرت الصعوبات هي اللغة وتأثير الصراع الليبي وكورونا فايروس، عدم وجود دافع، عدم الدراية الكافية بكتابة الدراسات السابقة و طرق البحث وتصميم والتحليل البيانات والنتائج. عدم الدراية باستخدام المراجع والإقتباس. عدم اعطاء تعليقات بناءة من قبل المشرف. كذلك إنعدام الإمكانيات .

KEYWORDS EFL learners, challenges, writing, pandemic, COVID-19, and conflict

Introduction

Writing is one of the four skills and writers are required to control specific techniques and rules in order to be good writers. According to Nunan (1991), writing is a productive skill and way of communicating thoughts and ideas coherently and logically. Durga and Rao (2018) highlight the significance of academic writing because it plays an essential role in most of the courses since students are required to write assignments, proposals, and projects in order to pass their modules successfully. However, many students struggle with writing because it is a challenging task that requires in-depth knowledge of the subject, planning, care, and hard work (Qasem and Zayid, 2019). Thus, the main reason for conducting this study is to explore the learning experiences of Libyan undergraduate students in terms of writing research project. "Libyan students" represent group of people seeking educational experiences, but studying in a country that is post-conflict and at time of change and development.

Literature review

Little studies have been conducted about the challenges that EFL students face in writing research projects, while there are many studies about the difficulties that they face in writing in general. Writing research project is a difficult skill for many students, particularly Arab learners who learn English in a foreign context. For instance, Qasem and Zayid (2019) indicate that language barrier is one of the most challenges that undergraduate Saudi students face in writing research projects because writing requires both high level of language and cognitive skills to organise and present thoughts and ideas coherently and in a logical flow. Qasari (2016) reveals that undergraduate students at University of Yemen encounter challenges that relate to weakness of students' level of English. Moreover, Manchishi, Ndhlovu, and Mwanza (2015) highlight that one of the most common challenges that postgraduate students face is lack of understanding of methodology.

It can be inferred that although EFL learners have different nationalities and study English in different contexts, they have similar challenges. However, Libyan students who are studying in an environment which suffers from the impact of the conflict and in the highest risk country in the era of the COVID-19 may have unique and different challenges.

Therefore, this study focuses on the learning experiences of Libyan undergraduate students in terms of challenges in writing research project.

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative because it is concerned with Libyan students' perceptions and perspectives. This study forms a case study because it focuses on a small group of Libyan students who are studying in final semester in English Language Department to gain in depth understanding of their learning experiences. Case study was chosen because it allows the researchers to refer to the context (Yin, 2009). Purposive sampling was used because it is common in qualitative studies (Denscombe, 2010) in that 12 participants were selected deliberately rather than randomly. The sample was selected according to the following criteria: Libyan students who volunteered to participate in this study, studying in the 8th semester in English Language Department because they are required to write research project in the final semester. However, the ethical issues such as permission, anonymity, and informed consent were taken into account (The BERA, 2011).

Interviews and observations were used to collect the data. Semi-structured interview was selected because it allows the researcher to follow up the answers of the interviewees

and to ask for clarification if necessary (Kvale, 2007). One-to-one interviews were conducted with 12 participants at the beginning of 2021 academic year. The participants comprised of 6 males and 6 females, generally between the ages of 20 and 21. The interviews lasted about 20-30 minutes and were conducted in a quiet place at a university. The participants were also observed in the classroom during lectures. The observation was selected because field notes are used as complement to the interview data and to see the impact of the context (Robson, 2011). In this study, we tried to be friendly to reduce the effect of power relationship. The data was collected in Arabic language. Then, it was transcribed, translated, and analysed by using thematic analysis. The five stages of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used: Familiarisation with data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; and defining and naming themes. However, it is an important to mention that all participants in this study were given pseudonyms in order to protect their identities and to encourage objectivity.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The Challenges and the Reasons

Language Barrier

The data reveals that almost all students consider writing research project is difficult. Some participants such as Hajer, Yumna, and Mariam reported that writing in other language which is not your mother tongue is challenging. For instance, Hajer stated that *“I would perform better if the project research and the proposal were in Arabic”*. It is clear that English is a challenge. For her, writing would be easy if it is in the Arabic language. Hajer indicated that her previous educational experience had been test-driven and her prior writing was only for passing examinations:

Since the first semester, teachers gave us hand-outs; we memorised them and write them on the exam paper. To make matters worse is the closure of the university because of the COVID-19 in Zliten. It is difficult to be in touch with my tutor. Lack of internet does not encourage teachers to promote self-study.

Hajer’s comment reveals that she was a rote-learner before the pandemic, but the pandemic exacerbated the problem. Accordig to Hajer, the main source of information in the Libyan education system was a teacher because only teachers have the right to speak in class and students should be silent. For her, the internet connections is non-existent owing to the number of power outages that Libyans faced since the conflict.

Therefore, Hajer perceived her tutors did not encourage autonomous learning. On the contrary, they preferred to use a teacher-centred approach. She also highlighted the negative impact of the pandemic on her learning experience due to the lockdown, and this made the contact between Hajer and her tutors difficult. It appears that her city (i.e. Zliten) was the highest risk due to the significant increase in the number of deaths and infected cases. Yumna also stated that her low proficiency in English affected her performance in writing research projects adversely. For her, this affected coherence and unity which are the main elements in academic writing:

My level in English does not help me to write efficiently. I cannot write a paragraph in which the relationship between sentences is clear and one idea connects to the next. The connection of all ideas to a single topic is problem.

During the observation, when the tutor asked students to write a paragraph about any topic they like, Yumna and her colleagues were unable to write individually. However, when her tutor asked them to work in groups, Yumna and her colleague started to discuss with each other and share thoughts and ideas together in Arabic language. Then, they transferred and translated them into English. It is clear that Yumna was struggling with English language because she had ideas and thoughts in Arabic and her colleague translated them into English. Like Hajer, Yumna stated:

From primary school to university level, I did not have opportunities to practice writing. All modules were 100% exams. Each module has two exams: mid-term exam and final exam. Teachers and tutors did not teach us how to write and give comments on our writing. Consequently, I lacked confidence. The lowest mark is writing. We had no library in our school. The library in our university did not have new references. It is closed all the time since the widespread of the pandemic. Thus, our tutors prefer to evaluate us by exams.

Yumna's comment reveals that she was teacher-centred and familiar with assessment by examination before the conflict. She indicated that she lacked confidence in her writing because she did not practice it and receive feedback. It is clear that learning as social participation in which the learner learns from his or her colleagues and tutors in shared activities through constructive feedback and peer review have completely been ignored in the Libyan education system. Her comment revealed poverty and negative impact of the COVID-19 on her educational experience because of the closure. This did not encourage tutors to use independent learning. This was the situation before the pandemic, but the ongoing spread of Covid-19 exacerbated the problem.

The findings of this study are in line with Qasem and Zayid (2019) who have found that language barrier is one of the challenges that Saudi students face. However, this study found out that the previous educational experience,

conflict, and pandemic had adversely affected the learning experiences of Libyan students in terms of using teacher-centered approach, weak internet connection, and closure of the university.

Lack of Motivation

The findings of the study reveal that about half of the participants were unwilling to write proposals for various reasons. Najla, for example, stated that:

There is no encouragement at all (silence and tears). The tutor who taught us in the 6th semester in the module 'Research Methods' gave us just headlines. Then, he evaluated us by exam. Finding sources about research is problem because there were no references in the library. Nowadays, it is closed all the time. I had not got access to online resources because of the electricity. The download sometimes takes three hours (silence). I lost the desire to write.

The comment of Najla shows that she expected her tutor to motivate her and to feed her with knowledge since she was familiar with teacher-centered approach. Like Yumna, she also indicated poor library because of the shortage of references that related to 'Research Methods' module. For her, the ongoing speed of the pandemic affected her learning experience adversely because she wanted to develop her writing by reading references about research, but the closure of the library prevented her. In addition to the COVID-19, the conflict had a negative impact on Najla due to power cut and the weak internet connection as

mentioned by Hajer. Her tears and silence indicate that she needs support from her tutor and colleagues. It appears that previous studies do not consider the motivation as one of the challenges in writing. This study reveals that unmet expectations and the effect of the pandemic and the conflict with regard to lockdown, shortage in references, weak connection, and power cut are the main reasons behind their lack of interest.

Lack of knowledge of the research

The data indicates that most students had little knowledge of the main chapters. For instance, Omar said that:

I know that I should write these chapters. Literature review is about previous studies, methodology is about research design, and data analysis is analysis that include codes. The problem is that I do not know how it should be written. I read some websites and research papers. I am trying to follow the same style. Some terminologies are difficult to be understood. We did not write in the previous semesters, we memorise and answer in the exam. The electricity that is not available for 24 hours and the weak internet do not help me to develop my self (silence).

It is clear that Omar has a general idea about what should be written in each chapter; however, there are details that are essential in writing each chapter. For instance, writing literature review requires synthesis of previous studies, building discussion, and linking with your study. Writing methodology chapter means what you did and why (i.e justification). It requires deep knowledge of research design

and approach. Understanding the main components of the research project has the potential to help students in writing their proposal and project efficiently. However, his perception revealed that power outages and the weak internet connection since the conflict adversely affected his learning experience. It is clear that this was the first time that Omar started writing because the Libyan education system focuses on the evaluation by exams rather than practicing on writing.

Previous studies such as Manchishi et al. (2015) highlight that lack of understanding of methodology is one of the challenges. However, this study adds that lack of practice, focusing on theoretical side. The negative effect of the conflict are the main reasons for lack of the deep understanding of the requirements of each chapter.

Lack of proper supervision

The data revealed that almost all participants reported that lack of prompt response was the main challenge. For instance, Rana reported that:

When I gave the proposal to my supervisor, he spent 28 days to send the feedback. I sent him one chapter of my research, it took a month. After waiting, I received comments which are not helpful at all. He focused on mistakes. He made me disappointed.

The above comment indicated that Rana did not receive quick response. For her, the supervisor's feedback is not

constractive since it focuses only on the weakness rather than both strengths and weakness, and this negatively affected the educational experience of Rana.

In a similar vein, Jenan said that:

When I sent him several pages, he took more than two weeks to reply (Silence) and to send comments. The comments are not beneficial. Thus, I go to another person to help me.

The above comment illustrates that lack of quick response and constructive feedback affected Jenan's educational experience adversely. Thus, she asked for assistance from others within her class community.

Lack of facilities

The findings show that Sama, Seraj, Rana and Ali reported that the effect of the conflict was about lack of essential facilities and resources. For example, Sama was distressed when explaining her educational experience:

I was studying in containers since the first semester. There was no library, no internet, we did not have labs for 'Listening and Phonetics' modules. They promised that there would be better facilities, but I'm in the last semester and nothing is new (silence and tears).

Sama's comment shows poverty of her prior educational experience. This was the situation before the conflict, but the conflict had exacerbated the problem. The observation confirmed that there was no internet and no library at the faculty and students are struggling to find the references.

During the interaction with Sama and her colleagues, they reported that when they went to the central library, there was few up to date references in 'English Language Department'. Sama told me that she came from a small village in the south and because of the conflict and the civil war, she moved with her family to the town:

Coming from a small village to the town, it is a significant transition. I am comfortable because I learn in class. In the listening module, all the students were familiar with the recording apart from me.

Sama's perception revealed that she considered herself less familiar with the relevant equipment than her colleagues because she moved from rural area to urban one. In Libya, it is very common to find cities and towns are better provisioned than villages in terms of services and facilities. Despite the fact that Sama had more sustained learning curve than many of her peers, she was positive 'I feel comfortable' 'I learn in class'.

Conclusion

The results indicate that the main challenges are language barrier and lack of motivation owing to the impact of their previous learning experiences and the lockdown. Lack of understanding the requirements of conducting research is also found one of the challenges, and this is owing to lack of practice and focusing on theoretical side. Furthermore,

lack of proper supervision is challenge to the participants due to the lack of constructive feedback and a quick response. Lack of facilities is considered difficult to most of the participants because of the impact of the Libyan conflict and their previous educational experiences. The data indicates that the reasons of these challenges might be attributable to the negative impact of the pandemic and the consequences of the conflict.

Recommendation

Training workshops about writing projects such as writing methodology, writing literature review, building discussion and argument, and thinking critically have the potential to make students familiar with writing projects and assist them to face less challenges. Furthermore, supervisors should provide students with constructive feedback and a quick response and appreciate time pressure. Officials should improve working conditions in the educational institutions through providing libraries with up-to-date references, good internet connection, and generator in order to solve electricity problems and its consequences. Moreover, the Ministry of Higher Education in collaboration with educators should support student-centred approach, independent study, and learning as social participation through shared activities. Further research with larger

sample from various universities in Libya or another EFL context would be more fruitful and give plausible results. Further research is recommended to explore the topic from tutors' perspective in order to gain full understanding and a wider picture of the topic under investigation.

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