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## Thesis Writing Experiences of Post Graduate Students at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature

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**Abstract:** The study aimed at exploring the thesis writing experiences of graduate students in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, College of Humanities, Language Studies and Journalism and Communication, Addis Ababa University. Specifically, the research looked into research knowledge and skills graduate students brought with them to the theses writing task, the challenges they encountered in the process of writing the thesis, and the underlying reasons that accounted for the challenges. Following Tan (2007), the study employed a qualitative research approach, narrative inquiry, to explore the actual experiences of students. The participants of the study were graduate students enrolled in 2010-11 academic year and subsequently defended their theses successfully. Out of the 157, 43 students selected using random sampling filled in the questionnaire. Of the 43 students, 11 were randomly sampled for a focus group discussion. The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed in conjunction with the qualitative data. The findings showed prominent problems that ranged from selecting topics to organizing contents and expressing these in acceptable language. Stating research problems in clearer terms and drawing research objectives and questions from them; producing a well-documented literature review; linking up coherently the different components of a research work and building a coherent and cohesive text were challenges students faced. The qualitative data obtained from the FGD and the questionnaire also revealed that students experienced frustrations, dissatisfaction, uncertainties and moments of satisfaction and achievements. The underlying causes included the knowledge, skills and attitude the students brought with them for the task, the inadequate support system they were provided with, and the time frame within which they had to work. Recommendations that would help in addressing the problems are forwarded.

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## **Background**

Graduate students are often required to write thesis or dissertations in partial fulfillment of their studies. Upon the completion of the work, students are required to present and defend their work. Both the writing and the oral examination that follow offer platforms for promoting professional discourses where the candidates are expected to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and practice in their areas of study. Postgraduate students in the Faculty of Language studies of the Social Science and Humanities, Addis Ababa University, also write theses to meet the academic requirements for Master of Arts and PhD degrees.

Writing a research paper that merits the envisaged qualification has always been a challenge to several students, however. The limited research and writing skills and experiences of students have been the major causes of the challenges. Nollan and Roco (2009) observe that students are sometimes not able to write clear, focused research reports even when they are well along in their graduate work. Writing fragmented ideas, unsupported opinions and suffering from what Buck and Hatter (2005) call a 'disorganization fog' are problems observed in students' theses and dissertations.

Literature and practice show that the writing problems of graduate students are varied and that the causes of the problems are diverse. This study postulates that understanding the experiences of graduate students who passed through the thesis writing process would help reveal the challenges they encounter, and more importantly, the possible explanations behind the challenges.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Observations and studies reveal problems that relate to the research report writing abilities of graduate students. The problem starts with

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how students perceive themselves as graduate students and with how they perceive what academic writing is. Some graduate students are not aware of the implications of what being a research student is and what it entails. As a result of this lack of awareness, many of them are not ready to exert as much time, energy and hard work as the task demands. Quite a significant number of them do not conceptualize the work that it has a specific communicative purpose addressed to an academic community that has its own academic conventions and standards. Because of this gap in perception, many students do not commit themselves sufficiently to the work the task entails.

The other problem relates to the inadequate research report writing knowledge and skills that they bring with them. The writing ability of quite a substantial number of students is so worrying that it has now become common to hear faculty members complaining about the theses and dissertations that their advisees write. Students, for instance, have often been observed having problems in putting their studies in contexts, in crafting acceptable problem and purpose statements. They have also been observed having problems in integrating source materials into their work, in analyzing and synthesizing ideas, in making interpretations and in drawing conclusions. Inabilities to develop acceptable research proposals, write conceptual papers, and well-structured analytical paper such as a literature review have been reported by faculty members as major shortcomings in students' papers. In general, quite a substantial number of students are observed having problems in producing acceptable and successful theses or dissertations.

These problems have been confirmed by research works done in some colleges and departments in Addis Ababa University (Belay, Ayalew and Demissie, 2008; Amare, Derbesa and Zenebe, 2000; Daniel and Tasew, 1993). It is with these problems as a background that this study set out to explore what graduate students' experience with regard to

these and other problems that they encounter at the various stages of the theses writing process, and with regard to what they think the causes of the problems are.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of the study was to explore and describe the experiences of graduate students during the theses writing process. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- examine the perceived research knowledge and skills that graduate students brought with them to the theses writing experience;
- explore the challenges that they faced at the various stages of the thesis writing process; and,
- examine the causes for the challenges.

Based on the specific objectives, the study intended to address these issues: the students' perception with regard to the adequacy of the research knowledge and skills that they brought with them to the thesis writing process; the difficulties they encountered in the process of writing the thesis; and, the major causes of the problems in the process of writing the thesis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Pundits in the field agree that writing a research report or a thesis is very demanding and challenging (Rudd, 1985; Torrance, Thomas and Robinson, 1992). This is because writing a research report calls for a number of abilities and skills. Thorough knowledge in the area of research interest, good use of cognitive processes that involve both lower and higher order thinking skills, good language proficiency and familiarity with the organizational schema or the genres of a research

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or components of a research report are some of the essential abilities and skills amongst others.

Having adequate knowledge in the area is fundamental because it is knowledge that provides the student researcher with the contents from which she/he supposed to produce the paper. Writing a paper also involves knowledge and use of cognitive processes such as analyzing, synthesizing, interpreting, evaluating texts, events or actions. It is through the appropriate use of these cognitive processes that the student writer employs structuring techniques such as classification, comparison, cause-effect, analysis etc. and writes a successful thesis or dissertation. In other words, these cognitive processes are manifested in the theses that students write. The linguistic knowledge of the student writer is also crucial as language is the tool that mediates this link- the link between cognition and communication.

Researchers who are interested in theses and dissertation writing quite often take the written texts or the thesis produced by the students as the object of the study. In other words, these researchers look into the practices and problems of students by analyzing the texts/theses that have been produced by students.

Studies conducted locally tend to focus on assessing students' theses and dissertations mainly with an objective to examining the problems that are common in students' theses. Belay, Ayalew and Demissie, (2008), Amare, Derbessa, and Zenebe (2000), Daniel and Tassew, (1993), Seyoum (1980) are some studies, amongst others, carried out in relation to post graduate students' research and research report writing skills and abilities. Belay et al. (2008) in what they said was 'a modest attempt at assessing the qualities of MA thesis produced in the College of Education including the possible factors that would account for their quality, sampled 20 MA theses and critically assessed them using 'existing evaluation formats as guides'. Their finding shows that

the quality of the theses work "... is so low to such a level that appears seriously compromising the standards expected of an MA thesis". They said that these theses, in many cases, 'were meant to serve no purpose (other) than certifying for degree - no professional contributions, not even making practical contributions.'

Another perspective adopted by some researchers is to look into the research writing experiences of students. Using the experiences of students involved in the process as a lens, they studied students' perceptions, attitude, practices and problems. The researchers tended to focus more on the process rather than on the product to study problems that relate to thesis writing.

Tan (2007), for instance, using narrative inquiry as a technique, studied the research experiences of undergraduate students at a comprehensive university. Involving a total of four focus groups, representing different faculties of the university, she examined the experiences of the students at three stages, which she named as *Groping*, *Developing* and *Accomplishing* stages.

Feelings of insecurity and fear were reported to be the prevalent experiences at the groping stage which occurred in two phases: when they were given orientation regarding the expectations and requirement of the work and when they had to search for related referred studies to guide them in problematizing and conceptualizing their research problems. Mixed feelings characterize the developing and the accomplishing stages, according to the study. In general, the findings revealed that undergraduate students who were under competent, motivating and supportive mentors undertook the rigorous research process and experienced various activities and mixed feelings (p. 206).

Bloom (1981) tried to see the experience of post graduate students. In this work, Bloom showed how the experiences of postgraduate students differ from that of the undergraduate students'. Bloom said

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that postgraduate students even suffered the more intense version of the same problem that distress undergraduate and other anxious writers. He contends that “the multiple roles and ambiguous situations of graduate students, the mixture of dependence and independence, freedom and responsibility, create tensions and problems particular to their writings” (p.1). His studies confirmed that misapprehension about thesis and dissertation topics also plagued anxious graduate students.

It is the latter perspective that is adopted for the present research. By way of looking into the experiences that the graduate students walked through, the research looked into the challenges that graduate students encountered at the various stages of the thesis writing process and the underlying causes that account for the challenges.

### **Methodology**

Following Tan( 2007), the study employed a qualitative research approach, narrative inquiry, as a technique to see the lived experiences of the students. Narrative inquiry, as Tan describes it, is “a qualitative research method for gathering information through story telling” (p.206). Narrative explanation can be used, as Freeman (1984) says, to tell and re-tell and provide an insight only possible when looking back. The technique enables a researcher to describe individuals’ or groups’ narratives of a particular life episode (Polkingborne,1988). In other words, descriptive narrative research can reveal how respondents explain a given situation. Furthermore, explanatory narrative research, as Polkingborne (1988) suggests, can be an alternative to statistical technique for establishing causes or exhibit causal connections by clarifying the significance of events (including perceptions, motivation and actual occurrences).

Narrative research technique is adopted for the present research primarily because the research objectives set would best be addressed by the functions mentioned above. A group of graduate students were invited to look back at their experiences and narrate their stories about the challenges they faced and the coping strategies they used in the process. Through their stories and “by clarifying the significance of events” (Polkingborne, 1988), attempts were made to establish causal connections. In other words, through the stories, the underlying causes for the challenges were explored. The collective experience of 43 students who filled in the questionnaire designed for the same purpose was also used to supplement and complement the data from the narratives.

### *Setting*

The study was conducted in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of the College of Humanities, Language Studies, Journalism and Communication. Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is one of the graduate programs in the Department. Candidates in this program are required to write theses as partial fulfillment of their MA or PhD degrees. When students finish writing their papers, they have to defend their work to qualify for graduation.

### *Participants*

The participants of the study were graduate students who enrolled in 2010-11 academic year and who subsequently defended their theses successfully. Out of the 157 students enrolled in the program, 43 students, who were selected using systematic random sampling technique, were requested to fill in a questionnaire. From these students, eleven students were randomly selected for a focus group discussion. The analysis of the quantitative data is based on the responses obtained from the 43 students.



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*Instruments**Focus group discussion*

The main purpose of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was to gather information with regard to the overall experiences that the students went through in general and with regard to the challenges they encountered in the process of writing the research paper. The FGD was also used to gather data pertaining to the possible causes that accounted for the problems that students faced. Three major questions that aimed at probing information were used to trigger discussions for the FGD. These discussion questions/points were adapted from Tan's (2007) guide that she used to explore the experience of undergraduate students. Tan's guide consisted of 11 items, but the adapted guideline used for the present study consisted of three questions. The purpose of the first question was to elicit information on what the participants thought with regard to the knowledge and skills they had at their disposal when they came to the thesis writing task. The second question elicited information about the experiences and the challenges they encountered at the various stages of the writing process. The third question focused on the overall reflections / experiences that the students got as a result of the thesis writing process.

The group discussion was preferred over individual interviews for two reasons. First, as Bennett and McAvity (1994) argued, 'the naturally unfolding dialogue in group sessions can be highly relevant'. Secondly, such sessions, as Fontana and Frey (1994: 365) said, are "data rich, flexible, stimulating to respondents, recall aiding and cumulative and elaborative over and above individual responses'

### *The Questionnaire*

The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather further information from a relatively large number of students with a view to supplementing the data obtained from the FGD. The questionnaire had three parts: Part 1 was concerned with the research and writing experiences that the students brought with them from their trainings and readings; Part II focused on the experiences they went through in the process of writing the thesis. It was specifically concerned with the challenges that they encountered in the process of writing the report. The open-ended questions in Part III were specifically designed to probe further information about the challenges and about the possible explanation behind the challenges. The questionnaire was developed mainly on the bases of insights derived from Tan's (2007) instrument. Questions that relate to students' writing experiences were set taking the various stages involved in the process as the basis.

### *Procedure*

A list of students who defended their MA thesis was taken from the Department. Using this list 43 students were randomly selected. The randomly selected 43 students were called for a brief meeting in which they were told about the purpose of the research and about the questionnaire that they were requested to fill in. The Questionnaire was then distributed. All of the participants filled in the questionnaire and returned. 11 students were randomly selected for the FGD from the 43 students. Members of the group were invited to give their ideas on each of the three issues set for the purpose of the discussion. Participants were allowed to use English or Amharic or both to communicate their thoughts. The discussion, which was audiotaped and transcribed, took approximately 2 hours.

## **Data Analysis**

In order to see the challenges that the students had experienced at the various stages of writing process and the reasons that accounted for the challenges, the data from the FGD and the open ended questions were analyzed qualitatively. The transcribed data from the FGD was first organized and discernible patterns of reactions/behavior were identified. These thoughts were then categorized into themes. The analysis was iterative in that the researcher had to go back and forth between the data and the themes to 'verify the meaningfulness, salience, uniqueness, and accuracy of the categories and the information in them" (Tan 2007:206). The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed in conjunction with the qualitative data.

## **Results**

One of the research questions was concerned with examining what students thought about whether the research knowledge and skills from which they were working on their papers was adequate or not.

**Table 1: Perceived Research Knowledge and Skills**

	Strongly disagree		Somewhat disagree		Somewhat agree		Strongly agree	
	Fre.	%	Fre.	%	Fre.	%	Fre.	%
I had sufficient knowledge/understanding of what an MA thesis is and what writing an MA thesis involves	7	16.27	5	11.62	28	65.11	3	6.97
My knowledge about research and the research process was adequate enough to enable me to write a successful thesis.	7	16.27	12	27.90	19	44.18	5	11.62
I had an (some) experience of conducting research and writing a report	7	16.27	10	23.25	20	46.51	6	13.95
I had the requisite academic writing skills to write a successful research report	5	11.62	12	27.90	20	46.51	6	13.95
I had the opportunity and the time to see/read theses written by earlier batches & by the academic staff.	7	16.27	7	16.27	16	37.20	13	30.23
I had an (some) idea about research topic/area that I wanted to study.	2	4.65	3	6.97	18	41.86	20	46.51

As Table 1 shows, 31 students (72 %) believed that they had sufficient understanding or idea of what an MA thesis was and what writing an MA thesis involved. 12 students (28%), however, reported that they did not have any idea about MA thesis and they didn't know much about what writing an MA thesis involved. 19 (44%) students thought that their knowledge about research and the research process was not adequate enough while 24 (56%) students believed that the research knowledge that they had was adequate to enable them to do research and write a successful report. 17 students (40%) reported that they were not exposed to any kind of experience in conducting research while 26 (60%) respondents reported that they had some experience of conducting a research and writing a report. Regarding the opportunity that they had to see and read theses written by earlier batches and by the faculty of the College, 29 students (67 %) said that they had the opportunity while the remaining 14 (33%) students reported that they didn't have the opportunity to do so. 26 (60%) of the respondents replied that they had the requisite academic writing skills while the

remaining 17 students (40%) said they didn't have sufficient writing skills that would enable them to write a successful research report.

Despite the fact that a large number of the students reported that they brought some knowledge and skills to the thesis writing task, it was still possible to see from the data that quite a considerable number of them didn't come with adequate research knowledge and skills that the task demanded. The qualitative data from the FG D clearly indicated that this was the case.

As a follow-up question, the students were asked if they had faced difficulties or not at the various stages of the writing process. Table 2 below shows the responses given by participants.

**Table 2: Challenges Faced in the Process of Writing Theses**

Items	Very difficult		Difficult		Average		Easy		Very easy	
	Fre.	%	Fre	%	Fre	%	Fre	%	Fre	%
1 Deciding on the area of research and the research topic.	12	27.90	13	30.23	13	30.76	3	6.97	2	4.65
2 Identifying a problem for the research and stating it in clearer and convincing manner	10	23.25	15	34.88	15	34.88	3	6.97	-	-
3 Stating the purpose and objectives of the research in a more focused manner	5	11.62	8	18.60	20	46.15	7	15.38	3	7.69
4 Identifying/analyzing related works and putting my research in the context of these works	2	4.65	8	18.60	13	30.23	20	46.51	0	0
5 Deciding on the appropriate research methodology and describing it in clearer manner	5	11.62	12	27.90	18	41.86	5	11.62	3	6.97
6 Developing, describing, justifying research instruments	2	4.65	7	16.27	21	48.83	12	27.90	2	4.65
7 Presenting/describing findings in words and visually	0	0	3	6.97	20	46.51	20	46.51	0	0
8 Drawing conclusions (making generalizations)and giving recommendations	2	4.65	0	0	18	42.30	18	41.86	5	11.62
9 Preparing the bibliography and the appendices	0	0	2	4.65	10	23.25	16	37.20	15	34.88

The data is indicative of the prevalence of difficulties that the students encountered as they wrote their theses. Problems that ranged from topic selection to organizing contents and to expressing them in good language were reported as difficulties that students encountered. Data from the FGD and the questionnaire shows that selecting a topic for the research project was, for instance, one of the difficulties that research students faced. '**Student 1**' explained the situation that he was in as follows:

I had to change the title that I delivered in the synopsis to the Department and replace it with a new one. When I chose the topic, I'd taken sufficient time to think about it seriously; however, I had to leave that and choose another.

One student (No. 7) reported that he had changed a topic over 6 times until he settled with one that he thought was good enough.

*Let me add something on the problem of topic selection, said 'Student 3' who had to make 3 to 4 attempts before he settled on the topic he chose for the thesis,*

To me, the greatest problem I encountered is on topic selection. Normally, as mentioned earlier, we were told to submit our titles within one week in July. Everybody submitted the title in haste without thinking about it. I also submitted one topic. I had been reading throughout the 'kiremt' (Summer time) on it. When I read in some details and when I see some things, I realized that the title wouldn't take me far, so I changed.

The same student disclosed that he had to change a topic when the advisor told him that the topic chosen was not a researchable one.

The quantitative data also shows that deciding a research area/topic was a challenge to a substantial number of students. As Table 2 shows, 25 students (58%) had difficulty in identifying the area of research or research topic.

Other difficulties mentioned both in the FGD and the Questionnaire included: stating research problems in clearer terms and drawing research objectives and questions from them; producing a well-documented literature review; interrelating the different parts or components of a research paper and build a coherent text (macro - organization of the thesis)

Identifying a research problem and stating it in clear and convincing manner was, for instance, reported as a challenge by 25 (58%) students. Stating objectives in a more focused manner was reported as a challenge by 13 (30%) students. 12 (46%) of the students described the challenge as average though.

The other reported challenging area was the literature review. One student reported that:

selection of contents - topics and sub topics for literature review is not simple/easy. It is a bit difficult for me to decide which topic is comfortable or relevant. I also find it difficult to use the notes which were excessive, I collected for the literature. The first part was unnecessarily long because of the details included.

A student confirmed that sorting and sifting ideas to write an organized literature review was difficult. Another student even suggested that students fall into the trap of plagiarism when they found expressing their own thoughts in clearer terms difficult.

The quantitative data nonetheless shows that writing the literature review was reported as difficult by only 10 (23 %) students. A substantial number, 13 (30%) students, however, rated it as average. Presenting findings in words and visually, drawing conclusions and giving recommendations and preparing bibliography and appendices were not major problems as the Table shows. By way of



acknowledging the challenges that they encountered, graduate students, however, admitted that their work was affected by setbacks such as poor organization of the thesis, inability to express what is in mind, inability to discuss issues, insufficient editorial work and proof reading.

#### *Lived experiences of students*

One of the objectives of this research was to see the overall experiences that graduate students had passed through the process of writing theses. The qualitative data obtained from the FGD and the open ended questions of the questionnaire revealed that students were having both hard times characterized by, frustrations, disappointments, dissatisfactions, uncertainties and moments of satisfaction and achievements.

The first stage of the writing process - the time when students looked for a research/ thesis topic- was, for instance, reported to be one of the very difficult and stressful periods. A student succinctly described the frustration that he felt as follows: *The fact that I had done my synopsis and proposal in rush and crush highly affected the quality of my work.* Another student disclosed that when he found it difficult to decide on a topic, he had to take one from earlier works done. The data also revealed feelings of uncertainties about whether the research knowledge and skills that they had brought with them was adequate or not to carry out such a task. This is how a student (**Student 9**) reflected on the problem that he had with regard to the research knowledge that he brought with him to the task.

While we write the literature review, we don't take any position. Our scope of knowledge ... limits us from doing that... people who have published that book know better than us so apart from giving a personal view, there is no way of contributing in terms of knowledge. There is what they call misrepresentation - we fear that we may misrepresent an author - when what s/he says is different from how we understand a certain concept.

The qualitative data also revealed that insufficient advice given by supervisors during the research process was a cause for frustration and dissatisfaction for some students. *He (my advisor) never provided me with constructive comments rather than saying go ahead with writing the proposal and... the thesis* said one student. Another student reflected the following:

My advisor helped me on some points, but he misled me to a great extent. I have got amazed in the way he gave me feedback because he used to use de-motivating words though his comments were finally found to be not right at the end.

The students were asked to reflect on the issue of what being a research student was and on what it entailed. By way of reflecting on what being a research student should or should not involve, this was how a student described himself.

I am a little bit sluggish type of person. I always think everything is easy and will be done in a very short period of time. At the end of the day and throughout the whole process, I have realized that paper work is a daily activity or it needs a great follow up.

One of the questions relate to what they thought the strengths of their theses were. Some expressed sense of satisfaction in their work. A student expressed his satisfaction saying: I did my work independently without support from the so called 'advisor. Feeling of pride for being part of the research community was also expressed: since the topic is new, it will also contribute something for language teaching, said one student. Another student said unlike some others who fabricated the thesis, the study is my original work.

Regarding the ramifications that the process of passing through the experience has brought them, they reported benefits that relate to the development of their knowledge, skills and attitude. The intensive and extensive readings that they were engaged in were mentioned as a major factor/responsible for the development of their knowledge. The opportunities that they had to discuss with their advisors, colleagues and with other experts were reported as factors that helped them for the development of good communication and thinking/reflective skills. Patience, good time management ability and perseverance were a few amongst the attributes mentioned that having passed through the process has brought about.

This was how a student described the overall experience that he got from the process:

At the start/beginning human beings do not tell/differentiate good and bad things drawing their knowledge. They can do this only after having gone through the experience. Now that I have gone through an experience, at this stage if someone asks me what I can think about research and research organization, and if I am given another opportunity, I can work on a new work that will entitle me for a better grade, and a work that can contribute something at a national level. If someone asks me if this knowledge was there earlier, I would say no, there wasn't, Why, simply because I haven't experienced.

*Reasons that account for the challenges*

The third major objective of the research was to see the underlying causes of these difficulties. The analysis of the qualitative data revealed three major causes:

- *Research knowledge/skill base*

The data from the FGD and the questionnaire revealed that the research knowledge-base from which graduate students were working their paper on was not adequate for the task. Insufficient understanding about the various research components and about their respective communication functions has, for instance, been reported as a cause for the challenges encountered in the process of writing the paper. The quantitative data confirmed that not less than 30% of the students thought that the research knowledge and skills that they were working from was not adequate enough. In other words, their knowledge of the conceptual tools that they needed to carry out and report a research undertaking was not adequate enough.

This was what '**Student 8**' expressed his experience,

I personally didn't have any problem in choosing a topic, but as I delved into the main work things began to be sources of problem. For instance, I found it difficult to see the difference between background and statement of the problem. I am still confused about these two.

I have a problem in seeing the distinction between a background and a statement of the problem. Still now I have that problem, said '**Student 4**'.

Student 13 reported that he found it "difficult to understand and to distinguish some very basic concepts for research clearly". Writing the background and stating the problem for instance had been challenges to quite a considerable number of the students. This is confirmed in

both the quantitative and qualitative data. 25 (58%) students admitted that they had difficulty with stating research problem in clearer terms. Insufficient knowledge about the concept of a problem statement and about how it is developed was reported in the qualitative data. Some students were not aware of where problems for a research are found and how these problems are operationalized. Some of them even have a misconception about a problem statement that they confused it with the background. This problem comes, as one participant remarked, from *lack of know-how (Knowledge)- knowledge about research*.

Drawing clearer general and specific objectives on the basis of the stated problem and setting appropriate research questions were difficulties reported in the FGD and questionnaire

In order to keep the research in track, there is the problem from which emanates the general and the specific objectives, I had a problem in aligning these three and in getting the work well focused. I was able to do this after 7 or 8 writings/improvements with the assistance of my advisor. I had seen many ups and downs to come up with a clear problem statement. Still now I cannot claim I have knowledge about problem statement.

All these responses and reactions from the students show that there was insufficient understanding of the tools needed, as Knight (2005:69) said *to foster understanding, integration and application of research*. For quite a considerable number of students, it was a big challenge to interrelate different components of research work together (background with problem statements, problem statements with objectives, objectives with conclusions, and conclusions with recommendations).

One student attributed the problem regarding the knowledge/skill deficiency to the research methodology course that they had taken earlier. This is what he said:

The reason for this is that the research methodology course I have taken has not helped me to see the distinction. The course was given in a very short time so that such issues have not been treated sufficiently.

This observation was confirmed by another student as follows,

... this problem is specifically caused after the introduction of the new modular approach – we were taught about research and the components in it only for 3 days - contents that were used to be given over a semester. The new approach has left us in the dark/in confusion. We didn't learn, so I think we have not been able to get some concepts clearly.

- *Support system*

The support system includes the resources/ facilities that they needed for the work and the advice/ professional guidance that they were provided with. Both the FGD and the questionnaire revealed that the inadequate support system was one of the main causes responsible for some of the challenges they encountered; and even for some of the apprehensions, frustrations and disappointment that they experienced in the process.

#### *Advisors*

As there were several positive remarks made by the participant pertaining to advisement and particularly to advisors, there were also some negative remarks that revealed students' dissatisfaction and

disappointments. A student remarked that the advice he got was “sufficient enough” in that it provided him with a framework for his work: ambivalent remarks such as “neither good nor bad,” “sufficient but not critical and supportive”, “somewhat good but not enough”, were also noted in the FGD.

The data from the FGD also show some unfavorable remarks such as the following made against advisors:

I can say frankly that if advisors’ role is simply for having advisee, I would rather suggest their absence because I don’t know what my advisors contributed to my work.

A student expressed regrets about his advisor saying, *I have better search for co-advisors before going deep into the research work with a misconception implanted by my advisor.*

Some advisors were criticized for not giving sufficient advice to students at the different stages of the thesis writing process, particularly at the initial stage when students were seeking for appropriate research topics. Some advisors were criticized for giving more attention to trivial rather than to substantive matters, for looking down at students’ work and for giving disparaging remarks and for showing disrespect to students.

- *Time-related factors*

The data from both the questionnaire and the FGD revealed that the time given for the candidates to carry out the research and do the report writing was a reason for the challenges they encountered.

A student described the adverse effect of shortage of time as follows:

Truly speaking, I am very surprised with the given time for conducting the research and for the write-up. It affects the work because the students may not get enough time to read the materials and to think how to organize the work.

Another student described the situation:

One of the main difficulties I had was shortage of time starting from submitting synopsis, proposal and final work which was full of sudden and unexpected notices of the Department. The fact that I had done my synopsis and proposal in rush and crush highly affected the quality of my work.

A third student complained as follows:

Around July, we were told to submit our title within a week's time - that was the greatest problem I faced. At the time everybody had to do in haste without giving it any serious thoughts.

A participant expressed his frustrations by saying that "it was a great shame to give 3-4 months for MA thesis". He said that because of the insufficient time allotted to the whole process "the quality of the research and its strength becomes weak". Yet another participant expressed regrets by saying that if the time had not been short, his work would have been more coherent and its quality would have been enhanced.

Mentioning that it was only three months that was given for the whole process, a candidate expressed his disappointment with this rhetorical question: "So how can I do a research – a good research within this time?"



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## Discussion

The findings from the qualitative data reveal three factors that account for the problems and challenges that the students encountered in the process of writing their theses: the knowledge, skills and attitude that they brought with them for the task, the inadequate support system they were provided with, and the time frame that they had to work with in.

A cursory look at Table 1 shows that graduate students thought that they had come with some knowledge and research skills as they join the programs. Their undergraduate studies - their background in general - could account for such perceptions. The point of contention here, however, is whether the knowledge and skills that they brought from their undergraduate studies were adequate to help them cope with the academic challenges in post graduate studies. This is a level, where, as Knight (2005:69) argues *students need complex cognitive capabilities which would help them demonstrate mastery of challenging concepts and skills required to read theory and research*. Knight contends that research skills are 'elusive and difficult for graduate students to acquire (ibid).

Secondly, despite the assumptions that undergraduate skills will easily transfer to the graduate level performance (Buck & Hatter, 2005, Granello, 2001; Harris, 1997, 2005, 2006), by explaining the difference between writing a term paper and a rigorous scholarly paper, argues that these basic capabilities do not necessarily translate into scholarly writing skills. Harris underscores the need for instruction for post graduate students.

One possible explanation for the misconceptions and misunderstandings reported by students could be the inadequate knowledge/skill base that they came with or they started working from.

The causes for the apprehension, frustrations and disappointments experienced by a good number of students could also be attributed to the same causes. Conception or misconceptions are constructs that are generally made based on what people already know, on how they perceive something and feel about it. The misconceptions reported by students arose as they were not confidently certain about the task that they were undertaking.

As mentioned earlier, writing a thesis or a research report calls for cognitive abilities/higher order skills and other language and writing related skills. It requires the writer to have analytic, synthetic, interpretive and reflective skills. On top of this, writing thesis demands good mastery of academic writing skills that include summary writing, paraphrasing, quoting and outlining. Being deficient in some or all of these requisite skills can pose a serious challenge to researcher in general and to novice researchers in particular. That is what is evidenced from the data obtained from the FDG and the questionnaire.

The attention given to the writing aspect of the research process could be another reason for the problem. Duleavy (2003) suggests that the writing aspect of the research process is often neglected in research training programs. This is because of the wrong assumption that graduate students 'innately know how to do it' (Nollan and Rocco, 2009, Gaillet, 1998). The traditional model of PhD that Dunveal mentions assumes that writing is a by-product that the students will come to master as a result of mentoring from the advisor and as a result of exposure to other theses and dissertation. Such a model assumes that students will be able to write as a result of observations that they do. Because of this view, students are sometimes left on their own to manage the write up work.

The corollary of all these is that graduate students need adequate knowledge and skills in research and in research report writing if they

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have to overcome the challenges they encounter and write a successful thesis that merits the qualification they are seeking for.

The support system that students have to be provided with includes the psychological, social and financial aspects needed for undertaking a research project. Giving appropriate orientation so that students can be aware of the expectations and requirements that they have to meet; running short training programs, organizing research groups, providing good infrastructure and resources, networking or collaborating with peer mentors or faculty mentors, constitute the support system that departments and colleges can provide. The financial support that they may need may come from the University as a whole or from the students' respective sponsors. Other supports may have to be provided by peers, and teachers and by the departments. Professional and personal growth are benefits that students get from such support systems (Dohm & Cummings, 2000). Psychological benefits such as self-confidence, self-esteem, and feeling of affiliations can grow partly out of such support system. Improvement of research culture as a whole comes partly from the support system and partly from their own individual endeavors.

All these suggest the need for a well- functioning support system. The role of advisors in such support system is immense. It is critical too. As the data clearly shows, however, there were quite a considerable number of students who were not happy with the support that their advisors were giving them. The implication of this is that something needs to be done to improve the quality of advisement given to graduate students.

The findings clearly show that time constraint was one of the factors that had adversely affected the quality of the different components of the research paper. The time given for taught courses - **Research and Report Writing** - and more specifically for writing the thesis was barely

enough, as revealed in the qualitative data. Poor research design, inadequate data analysis, insufficient reading and inadequate review of literature and poor macro organization are all problems that are attributable to time factor as the data revealed. Combined with the inadequate research report writing skills that they bring with them, and the inadequate support system that they are provided with, time constraints no doubt would affect the quality of the students' papers. Students may also find it difficult to incorporate comments and feedbacks given by advisors if they are constrained by time.

To make matters worse, quite a considerable number of these students cannot devote sufficient time to their studies as they have to struggle for their livelihood by working in various institutions. This no doubt will leave a marked adverse effect of its own on their work. As Nolan and Rocco (2009: 267) remarked the "hectic pace of life means the ability to write clear, focused reports on research often seems beyond graduate students' abilities even when they are well along in their graduate coursework".

The benefits that the students accrued as a result of passing through the experience - improvement in confidence, research skills, problem solving, and higher thinking skills - are all desirable outcomes. There is no doubt that these are all merits of hard work or challenges. As Wade (2004) says, when one faces challenge, he/she learns, grows, and discovers truth and himself/herself. Challenge was one of the best things experienced by the students. It is always, however, important and essential that students face such challenges sufficiently armed with the tools and with the psychological and material preparations that they need. In other words, students can rise to the challenges only when crucial conditions are met.

The last point is related to the limitation of this study. Generalizations are quite often mentioned as a drawback of qualitative research. This may be true to this research as qualitative data is the predominant one

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used in the analysis. Of course, efforts have been made to supplement the qualitative data with some quantitative data from the questionnaire. Still it is the qualitative data that comes out prominently in the analysis. That could be taken as a limitation of the work. As Adler and Clark (2000: 344) said, "because qualitative data come from some combination of the observation or interview of real world participants than in the speculation of the researcher," it is argued that the findings from the qualitative data from this research can still yield insights into the writing experience of graduate students and the challenges they face. The insights that can be drawn from the study can also be applicable to any endeavor made to address the thesis/dissertation writing problems of graduate students in other colleges and departments.

### **Conclusion**

Why do a significant number of graduate students in the Department or elsewhere find it difficult to craft a good research paper? Why do they find it difficult to write an acceptable background or introduction, for instance? These are very critical questions the answers of which can lie on a number of factors that include the course, the support system that students are provided with and other factors such as time that students can allot for the work.

This study provides a window to reflect on the practices we have been engaged in so far. It should provide a good reason for critically looking into the programs and the practices being followed. It is, in other words, high time that the way the research and report writing course is structured and delivered be critically reviewed. The philosophy behind the course, and more importantly, the purposes for which it is offered need to be re-examined. Looking into the support systems that students are provided with and ensuring that the systems create a

conducive or enabling research environment is a critical issue to be attended to.

### **Recommendations**

- The Department of Foreign Languages and Literature needs to rethink about the research and report writing course that it is delivering to graduate students. It is incumbent upon the Department that it revisits the objectives, the contents and more importantly the method of delivery of the course and ensures that the course is more relevant and more responsive to what the students critically need to carry out research and write a successful research report.
- A well-functioning support system that includes following be in place:
  - Providing orientation/induction programs in different formats so that students would be well aware of what is required and expected from the work that they undertake. Expectations and requirements should also be shared with students in the form of guidelines and handbooks.
  - Organizing platforms such as seminars, discussion groups where students would learn to present their work and get feedback from their instructors, advisors and peers, and where they would learn to cope with criticisms, and to entertain divergent views and perspectives.
  - Establishing a support network such as writing circles, interested groups, etc. where students would become part of a community of researchers and its research culture.
  - Creating a research environment by availing ample rooms/spaces where students could sit and work, and

where they could use other facilities such as computers and internet, photo coping and printing facilities.

- The Graduate Program of the university resumes the short term pre-sessional training on academic reading and writing that it was providing to new entries to the postgraduate program. Such kinds of programs would assist graduate students in developing the academic reading and writing skills that are crucial for a successful completion of a program of study.
- Extending the program time may not be admissible for various reasons. It is, however, possible to entice students to use the available time properly and effectively. By creating enabling situations where students would relieve themselves from other extra duties responsibilities, and more importantly from the daily inconveniences that they find themselves bogged in, it may be possible to help them direct all their time and energy to the work.

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