Exploring the Challenges Faced by Iranian TEFL Students in their Doctoral Dissertation Writing

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ABSTRACT

Writing a dissertation is a laborious task that requires adequate knowledge of the field as well as writing skill. This study tried to uncover the PhD candidates' main challenges in writing a dissertation. The participants of this study were 30 PhD EFL male and female candidates on the point of writing their dissertation. A semi-structured interview with series of open-ended questions was employed to gather the data. The study adopted mixed-methods design in which the data were collected through qualitative content analysis and then were subjected to statistical procedures through SPSS. Cohen's Kappa (κ) was used to report intra and inter rater reliability which were found to be .89% and .88%, respectively. The data analysis indicated that all candidates encountered various problems such as linguistic challenges, lack of knowledge about SPSS, APA and copyright law, poor planning and time management, finding novel topics, personal problems that impede them from the due schedule, finding the related literature, finding the participants and getting institutes to participate, negotiation with thesis supervisor and advisor, loss of interest and difficulty in finding the required instrument. Moreover, based on the findings of the present study, it is recommended that more practical courses on research be embedded in the curricula and more attention be paid to the existing courses in order to overcome the encountered challenges as described by the PhD students. The results can be of help to the policy makers, curriculum developers, instructors and students.

1. Introduction

Doctoral dissertation has a significant role at postgraduate level, because it reflects students' degree of academic knowledge and their ability to manipulate and elaborate new ideas and to write correctly and academically (Anderson & MacLaughlin, 2006). In fact, it is one of the principal panel through which students demonstrate their capability as PhD candidates and the basis on which their PhD degree is awarded. Therefore, doctoral dissertation can be a source of considerable anxiety. The increasing number of PhD students and a greater diversity of students enrolling in doctoral programmes highlight the importance of paying attention to this critical issue. The challenges to writing doctoral dissertation need to be addressed meticulously since the quality standards at this level of education have to be assured. Therefore the present study aims to contribute to a reflection about the challenges that can affect doctoral dissertation and its quality in particular.

Only when the challenges that contextualize this issue are discovered, it will be possible to put into practice several actions to improve the quality of doctoral dissertations.

2. Literature Review

Developing second language writing skill is a challenging task. From all the writing genres, academic writing proves to be difficult for most postgraduate students (Cai, 2013). As Nunan (1999) stated "the most difficult task to do in language learning is to produce a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing, which is even more challenging for second language learners" (p. 271).

Many researches (e.g. Al Mubarak, 2017; Mafa & Mapolisa, 2011; Wei, 2017) discovered that students experienced numerous difficulties in their academic writings such as academic papers, proposals, theses and dissertation. Writing a dissertation which is the manifestation of the incorporation of the right words in the right place in the right order in the right format and right structure, is the source of great

anxiety for many postgraduate students (Bitchener, & Basturkmen, 2006). The problems ranged from not knowing what to include in the proposals to the basic ethical considerations of the research. Postgraduate students have to have not only good knowledge of language, grammar, writing mechanism, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and letter formation, but also they should have an acceptable degree of knowledge on the control of content, format, elaboration of the topic, thesis structure and regulations.

Although the access to internet, research engines, online utilities and applications have made the accessibility to virtual libraries, books, journals, and articles easier, the process of writing a research still remains challenging and multifaceted task for postgraduate students (Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2014). Casanave (2002) examined how new graduate students dealt with the myriad of academic writing tasks in an MA TESOL program. The finding revealed that students learned to play the writing games partly through following assignment descriptions meticulously, and partly through reading and receiving their professors' written feedbacks on their own individual papers. Numerous studies cover a wide range of topics on the complexities that postgraduate students encounter in acquiring academic literacy (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Carter, Ferzli, &Wiebe, 2007; Dysthe, 2002; Li, 2007), lack of adequate language proficiency as well as the effect of different educational, cultural and linguistic factors (Anderson, Day, & MacLaughlin, 2006; Belkhir & Benyelles, 2017), the effect of supervision on graduate students' writing (Chou, 2011; Odena & Burgess, 2017), and the different strategies postgraduate students adopt and adapt to manage the writing tasks (Damiani, Alves, Frison, & Machado, 2011.; Lee 2002).

However, few studies investigated postgraduate students' challenges in the process of writing doctoral dissertation. Theses and dissertations reflect the academic face of the postgraduate education, and that is why the quality of these academic accomplishments should be assured (Hasrati, 2013). This study tried to find out what the major challenges that Iranian PhD TEFL students encounter in writing the dissertation in applied linguistics are and whether there is any significant difference among the types of challenges in dissertation writing reflected by the students.

3. Methodology

A descriptive, exploratory research design was employed to explore the challenges encountered by Iranian EFL PhD students in writing their dissertation. Quantitative analyses were also employed to present the results. Therefore, it takes the advantage of the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain comprehensive insights into the problems at hand. This result in ''well-validated and substantiated findings'' (Creswell, 2005, p. 217).

3.1. Participants

The study was conducted with 30 Iranian EFL PhD students who were sampled based on availability from the population as the participants of the study. The sampled population comprised both 19 female and 11 male students majoring TEFL. Most of them had the experience of teaching at academic level and had the experience of writing thesis as well as academic papers.

3.2. Instrument

The major instrument used in the present study to collect the data was interview. Burns (1999) stated that, "interviews are a popular and widely used means of collecting qualitative data" (p. 118). The interviews were conducted in the form of semi-structured ones through series of open-ended questions. The open-ended questions not only enable the respondent to answer in as much detail, as they likes in their own words but also avoid the bias that may result from suggesting responses to individuals.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Before an interview took place, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, study details and given assurance about ethical principles, such as anonymity and confidentiality. As building a rapport with the participant has been emphasized by many scholars (Berg, 2004; Rubin & Rubin 2005) the researcher tried to establish rapport with participants prior to the starting interview have a positive effect on the subsequent development of the interview. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviewer stated the interview by asking demographic questions about their age, research experience, and academic degree to warm up the interviewee and allow the interviewee to get in the interviewing mindset. The interviewer tried to engage in the interaction with the interviewees and probes carefully to get more in-depth answers or to follow up

Cite this article as: 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.*

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on points of interest. The researcher tried to listen carefully and attentively to what is being said, so that interviewees would be able to recount their experiences as fully as possible, without unnecessary interruptions. The 'strategic use of silence' (Creswell, 2005) was also followed to get respondents to contemplate their responses and talk more. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim afterwards, as this protects against bias and provides a permanent record of what was and was not said.

Both qualitative and quantitative content analyses were used to analyze the collected data. First, the data were analyzed using content analysis, which "is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns, themes, within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Then, quantitative descriptive analysis, (frequency & percentage), as well as Chi-Square test, were run to find out the statistical significance of the differences, across categories. The steps employed in the content analysis of this study, was carried out first through transcribing the verbal data, and then searching for the common themes, reviewing the themes, defining and categorizing the themes, and producing the report (Rubin & Rubin ,1995) claim that analysis is exciting because "you discover themes and concepts embedded throughout your interviews" (p. 226).

4. Results

4.1. Reliability of the Coding Procedure

Intra-rater and inter-rater reliability were computed to ensure the reliability of the content analyses. To determine intra-rater reliability, % 20 of the randomly selected transcribed data were coded twice by the researcher after a two-week time interval and the Cohen's Kappa (κ) reliability was found to be % 89, indicating high intra-coder reliability.

Table 1: Cohen's Kappa Intra-rater Reliability Symmetric Measures Symmetric Measures

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error[a]	Approx. T[b]	Approx. Sig.
Measure of Agreement	Kappa	.899	.022	39.913	.000
N of Valid Cases		452			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Cohen's kappa *(κ)* was also run to determine if there was agreement between two raters' judgments on the 20% of the randomly selected prescribed interviews.

There was strong agreement between the two raters' judgments, κ = .889 ($p < .05$).

Table 2: Cohen's Kappa Inter-rater Reliability Symmetric Measures

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error[a]	Approx. T[b]	Approx. Sig.
Measure of Agreement	Kappa	.889	.020	39.913	.000
N of Valid Cases		422			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

The results of the qualitative content analysis lead to the identification of then categories reported by the participants. The identified challenges are enumerate into ten main categories and presented in order of frequency.

1. Linguistic Challenges of Thesis Writing (% 23)

a. Problems mainly with various grammatical structures, vocabulary usage, articles

b. Problems with Organization of the ideas

c. Problems in expressing one's own voice, and evaluating the related literature

d. Limited Knowledge of the formal academic writing styles (lack of a mastery of academic writing conventions)

2. Lack of practice in academic writing (Lack of experience)

a. Lack of knowledge (% 20)

b. Lack of knowledge of APA and Copyright law

c. Discounting plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty seriously

d. Lack of experience in organizing the different sections of a dissertation

e. Lack of SPSS knowledge to run statistical analysis and related formulas

f. Lack of knowledge of how to report the SPSS results and tables

3. Poor Planning and poor time management (% 15)

a. Failure to accomplish their dissertation in the offered available time

a. Choosing topics (% 12)

b. Difficulty in finding an innovative and novel topic for research

c. Unresolved discrepancy between the selected topic and the supervisor's selected one

d. Difficulty in developing interest in the topic selected by the supervisor

e. Lack of facilities or control to conduct the selected topic

4. Personal problems (%10)

a. The nature of job or my tight schedule in the work place ties me down.

b. Family responsibilities hold me down.
5. Finding the related literature (% 8)
a. Difficulty in accessing reliable databases
b. Difficulty in accessing libraries
c. Lack of information about how to access reliable sources
6. Finding the participants and getting institutes to participate (% 8)
a. Difficulty in finding participants to fill out the questionnaires
b. Difficulty in finding institutes to cooperate
c. Difficulty to obtain the agreement of the principals to conduct the research in their institutes
7. Negotiation with the thesis advisor and supervisor (% 6)
a. The limited availability of the supervisors
b. The limited assistance offered by the supervisor and adviser
c. The insufficient knowledge of the supervisor(s)' about the topic
8. Loss of interest and motivation (% 6)
a. Getting embarrassed in the process of doing the research
b. Getting too lengthy till it is completed
9. Finding the instruments (% 5)
a. Difficulty in preparing the instruments and questionnaires.

Table 3: Statistics for the Types of Challenges Faced by the Students

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Linguistic Challenges of Thesis Writing	23	20.4	20.4	20.4
Lack of knowledge	20	17.7	17.7	38.1
Poor Planning and poor time management	15	13.3	13.3	51.3
Choosing topics	12	10.6	10.6	61.9
Personal problems	10	8.8	8.8	70.8
Finding the related literature	8	7.1	7.1	77.9
Finding the participants and getting institutes to participate	8	7.1	7.1	85.0
Negotiation with the thesis advisor and supervisor	6	5.3	5.3	90.3
Loss of interest and motivation	6	5.3	5.3	95.6
Finding the instrument	5	4.4	4.4	100.0
Total	113	100.0	100.0	

Based on the data obtained from the interview, the frequency of occurrences for the first item (f= 29, p= 20%) was higher than the frequency of other items. In other words, "Linguistic Challenges of dissertation writing" was the most frequently reported challenge for the students closely followed by "lack of knowledge" (f= 20, p= 17.39%) and "poor planning and poor time management   (f= 15, p= 13.04%). Moreover, the students rated the challenge of "choosing innovative and novel topic" (f= 12, p= 10.43%) higher than "personal problems" (f= 10, p= 8.69%)" and "Finding

the related literature" (f= 8, p= 6.95%) and "finding the participants and getting institutes to participate" (f= 8, p= 6.95%). Furthermore, "Negotiation with the thesis advisor and supervisor" (f= 6, p= 5.21%), "Lack of interest and motivation (f= 6, p= 5.21%), and "Finding the instruments (f= 5, p= 4.34%) were among the least frequent challenges reflected by the PhD students, respectively.

The nonparametric test of Chi-square goodness-of-fit test was run to determine whether the distribution of the cases in the categorical variable (i.e., types of challenges, consisting of ten types follows the hypothesized distribution. First, the main assumptions underlying Chi- square test were checked. Based on the first assumption, there should be one categorical variable (i.e., the variable can be dichotomous, nominal or ordinal). In the present study, nominal variable including ten types of challenges was used. According to the next assumption, there should be independence of observations, which means that there is no relationship between any of the cases. Therefore, the main assumptions for running Chi-square test were met.

Table 4: Chi-Square Test for the Ten Types of Challenges

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Linguistic Challenges of Thesis Writing	23	11.3	11.7
Lack of knowledge	20	11.3	8.7
Poor Planning and poor time management	15	11.3	3.7
Choosing topics	12	11.3	.7
Personal problems	10	11.3	-1.3
Finding the related literature	8	11.3	-3.3
Finding the participants and getting institutes to participate	8	11.3	-3.3
Negotiation with the thesis advisor and supervisor	6	11.3	-5.3
Loss of interest and motivation	6	11.3	-5.3
Finding the instrument	5	11.3	-6.3
Total	113		

Table 4 provided the observed frequencies for each type of challenges, as well as the expected frequencies. The difference between the observed and expected frequencies was provided in the **Residual** column.

Table 5: Test Statistics for the Types of Challenges

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Test Statistics	
Chi-Square	30.628[a]
df	9
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 11.3.

Table 5 provided the result of the Chi-square goodness-of-fit test. The results showed that the test statistic was statistically significant: χ^2 (9) = 30.628[a], p < .01. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and it was concluded that there were statistically significant differences in the types of challenges reported by the students, with less rate of occurrences for the " finding the instrument " ($N = 5$) compared to either the "Linguistic Challenges of Thesis Writing " ($N = 23$) or "lack of knowledge" ($N = 20$) .

5. Discussion

Dissertation is the scholastic manifestation of the academic qualifications in "integrating disparate ideas, synthesizing perspectives, and extending theory which demand a higher-level construction skills and perspective-taking, as well as greater concern for accuracy, voice, and audience" (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007, p. 809). As Huang (2007) stated "to the vast majority of students, writing the dissertation is by far the most challenging piece of academic work" (2007, p. 30). As Alsamadani (2010) considered EFL/ESL writing as a difficult, complex and challenging process. The results collected from the semi-structured interviews revealed that there were ten categories of challenges in the way of writing dissertation at academic level ranging from linguistic deficiencies to accessing and gaining the instruments. The results are supported by Lavelle and Bushrow (2007), Stoilescu and McDougall (2010), Zhou (2009), and Warschauer (2010) who found relatively the same difficulties in the way of students' academic writing.

Writing in the first language is already challenging for many EFL students (Alshehry, 2014; Ezebilo, 2012). EFL writing students encounter even greater challenges if they are requested to produce a piece of academic writing in English because they need to express themselves with the syntactical and rhetorical devices of the language which they are still learning. The findings are in congruent with those of McGarrell and Verbeem (2007) who found the linguistic difficulties in most of the students' academic writings. They found that the professors of the research courses focused more on teaching research methods assuming that postgraduate students had acquired the basic writing qualifications. Most students were not satisfied with the writing training that they had received the course of their education. The results were confirmed also by those of Wang and Li (2008) who found that the students faced a lot of challenges in their thesis writing which might have emanated from pedagogical shortfalls and instructional inattention to academic writing.

When it comes to selecting a novel and innovative topic, the students take long time to identify and select the area of interest. As Thomson and Walker (2010) stated, the students undertake various topics in which they are interested in but they are in two minds which field to take. The results are in line with those of Luse, Mennecke, and Townsend (2012) who confessed that "many students are not prepared enough to engage in the appropriate training needed to select a research topic" (p. 143). They disclosed that "while overarching ideas of contribution to the field and the experiential background of the student are mentioned, very little guidance is given as to how to select a research topic" (p. 143).

The results tie well with previous studies (e.g. Baptista, 2011; Costley, & Lester, 2010) wherein they emphasized a much needed consideration for the process of writing doctoral dissertation early in the academic career. They disclosed some challenges encounter by the candidate from the early stages of inaugurating a project with an idea to writing proficiency, supervisory styles, institutional culture, shorter training periods and revising the academic manuscript.

Effective supervision practices can facilitate the professional development and growth of the students. However, this process does not move smoothly all the time (Alama, Alamb, & Rasul, 2013; Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 2004; Kimani, 2014). The conceptualization of the power dynamics within supervisory relationships, the lack of enough communicational skills on the behalf of the students to handle the relationship with the supervisors, lack of accepted knowledge on the selected issue on the behalf of the supervisors, the characteristics of the supervisors, and lack of sufficient supervisory meetings to which brings out the commonalities across

different stages, the intended tasks and individual students, and the number of the students under supervisions all lead to an imbalanced and unsatisfactory output. the results are supported by Ibrahin (2017), Bowker (2012) and Bruce and Stoodley (2013) who emphasized that among all aspects of the research such as management, procedure, and policy, research supervision has received the most attention from researchers as it is considered to be a determining factor in the success of any PhD student. The supervisors should clarify it to students that the emphasis is on developing their autonomy and self-sufficiency in the process of writing the doctoral dissertation that consequently "lead them in such a way as to allow them to act as competent, albeit peripheral, participants in this community" (Anderson, Day, & MacLaughlin, 2006, p. 321). Wang and Li (2008) proposed the principled responsiveness of the supervisors and the dual responsibility of supporting and organizing the academic work.

The other aspect of investigation in this study focused on the candidate's abilities to collect the required information through authentic sources. The findings of this study are in same direction with previous research which has conducted by Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) who confirmed that one of the biggest challenges is the lack of resources in the library and the accessibility to the authentic database. Most of these data bases that offer well reputed and well documented articles are monetary and the individuals cannot easily have access on them. This result is consistent with another study by Mapolisa and Mafa (2012) which revealed that most students from under developing countries face challenges relating to the lack of library and online resources.

This will also affect their accessibility to find out the needed instruments such as questionnaires and the checklists. Consequently, this inclines to delay the completion of their project and make them less encouraged to proceed in their work (Taskeen, Shehzadi, Khan, & Saleem, 2014). The difficulty in finding a sound and innovative topic, authentic sources and databases, trouble in accessing and negotiating the supervisors, and miscalculating the available time, make the process of writing dissertations a bit long. Although ample time is offered to the candidates to accomplish the task, their personal affairs and job related concerns prevent them from starting their proposals or dissertations later in their academic years.

Normally 5th or 7th semester they get down to writing the dissertation. As confirmed by Thondhlana, Mawere, and Weda, (2011), poor planning and poor time management decrease the individuals' interest and motivation to accomplish the task in due time. This is also confirmed by the study of Chabaya, Chiome, and Chabaya (2009) who worked on the students' failure to submit research projects on time.

Similarly, there are connections with the findings of this study and the research of Biermann and Jordaan, (2007) who found that students at graduate level experienced a large array of problems related to academic writing. They found that postgraduate students shared similar concerns about research-related issues such as linguistic difficulties, selecting a topic, and organizing the different sections. Academic research suffers from more time being spent on finding a topic, finding instruments, finding participants and institutes to cooperate, collecting data as well as on the on analysis and robust reporting. Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) also found that one of the common problems that students encounter in terms of research methodology is selecting the sample of research or getting the institutes to give hand and cooperate with them.

The finding are also in line with those of Brailsford (2010) who revealed that most of the candidates were unable to derive knowledge gaps from the reviewed literature. They were sporadic and suffered from lack of coherence and cohesion. Most parts of the review of literature seemed to be rather too descriptive with little critical insights. Their results confirmed that candidates' theses and dissertations showed that the candidates had difficulty in managing the information of review literature. In fact it is not just the section related to review of literature which is problematic to them but also sometimes they encounter difficulty in writing other sections such as introduction, statement of the problem. Significance of the study and the reports and analyses of the results of SPSS. Lack of knowledge of how to analyze quantitative and qualitative data and reporting the statistics were also reported by Alsied and Ibrahim (2017), Alshehry (2014) and Mahammoda (2016).

Despite numerous problems that the student encountered in writing thesis, different personal problems, qualifications and attitudes affect the process of academic writing. It was found that the students encountered such challenges as lack of

theoretical knowledge and insufficient background, lack of ability to synthesize different ideas in topic direction, and lack of critical thinking in the process of writing. Moreover the data analysis revealed that in order to able to gain control over their thesis writing and meet the faced challenges, the students tried different tackling strategies to solve their problems. In fact TEFL students have used the mixture discipline to elevate and enrich their thesis writing. They try to follow and use other articles, papers, theses, and dissertations to get guidance.   This incline the academic writing to plagiarism.

Plagiarism is a common phenomenon in the academic world. Empirical studies (Ahmadi, 2014; Ardalan, Arfaei, Mansouri, Balalimood, Farhud, & Malekzadeh, 2009; Erbay, & Yılmaz, 2017; Howard, 2007) show that both students and lecturers still commit plagiarism in their papers due to several reasons such as lack of knowledge of citation and referencing, paucity of time, dishonesty, and the poor academic writing ability. It is important that students especially at higher academic levels learn about how to appropriately acknowledge others work, data and ideas. Plagiarism is scientific transgression that decrease the value of their own job. The results are supported by Abasi and Graves (2008) who argued that most students had difficulties in following the issues related to ethics and APA rules that lead to plagiarism.

6. Conclusion

Improving students' academic writing skill is a challenging task especially in the case of foreign learners. The complexity of writing as a cognitive process requires profound considerations to the rules, and cautious use of the target language. This study investigated challenges faced by Iranian postgraduate EFL students in writing doctoral dissertation. The results revealed that linguistic challenges supersede the other ones and finding research instruments was the least frequently reported challenge. The result of the study also showed that lack of APA and SPSS knowledge, poor planning and time management, identifying the area of interest and choosing a topic, personal problems, finding related literature, finding the participants and getting institutes to participate, negotiation with the thesis advisor and supervisor, and the loss of interest and motivation in the process of writing dissertation were among the other reported challenges. The encountered challenges can be sorted into three categories ranging from instructional and pedagogical inadequacies, personal problems and affairs, and educational support. To help learners overcome such obstacles, more practical and advance courses on academic writing and empirical research should be inserted in EFL curricula at all BA, MA and PhD levels and instructors should take academic writing more seriously and encourage the students to enrich their knowledge as far as academic writing, APA, ethics of research and SPSS are concerned. PhD students also learn how to manage the available time to accomplish the task in due time alongside with their personal affairs and problems. Universities likewise should be more agile and active in getting the academic database authorizations to offer PhD students the accessibility to authentic and up-to-date journals and dissertations.

It is recommended that more weight should be given to the investigation of difficulties of academic research writing at MA and PhD levels. This will shed light on the challenges that might have been rooted in early years. By doing so, it would be possible to be more aware of the possible problems, and resolve these difficulties in the course of time. Further research should also focus on larger number of participants to achieve generalization of the findings and more practical studies should focus on specific areas of research. Finally, it is hoped that the findings of the present study would make a great contribution to the body of related literature and help policy makers, practitioners, instructors, and curriculum designers especially at higher educational levels.

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Cite this article as: 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.*

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