

Challenges faced by English majors when writing research papers

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of the study is to figure out some common challenges English majors encounter when writing their research papers. The participants are 53 English majors at Tra Vinh University. The questionnaire is the only instrument focusing on students' obstacles: preparing for conducting a research paper, writing the introduction, writing the literature review, identifying the research methodology, analyzing the data, and giving recommendations. The findings reveal that the participants face some difficulties including identifying a research topic, searching materials, recognizing the significance of the paper, selecting appropriate theoretical background, choosing and summarizing related studies, using correct style of citation, deciding the appropriate statistical tool for data analysis, using appropriate formulas for calculating the collected data, interpreting data clearly and concisely, and comparing the findings of the present study to those of related studies. From the findings above, some recommendations are suggested to assist students in overcoming their issues.

KEY WORDS: English majors, student-researchers, challenges, research writing, recommendations

I. INTRODUCTION

Research has been doing in many fields to improve the quality of people's life. According to Lester and Lester [1], there are several reasons why conducting research is significant. He claims that research is useful because it teaches methods of discovery, investigative skills, develops inquiry-based techniques, builds career skills, improves critical thinking, logic, and the basic ingredients of argument. Paler-Calmorin and Calmorin [2] believe that research is valuable to man because of some reasons. Research makes people's life better, improves instructions and students' achievement, satisfies man's needs, reduces the burden of work, has deep-seated psychological aspect and improves the exportation of food products.

In tertiary education, research methodology is usually considered a compulsory subject at colleges or universities. Winkler and McCuen-Metherell [3] argue that this subject will force students to learn lots about their chosen research topics, become familiar with the library through the "learning by doing" method, and consult experts about their research topic. They also believe that writing a research paper is beneficial to students since it can develop logic, imagination and common sense.

At Tra Vinh University, students of all majors must study Research Methodology subject and after the course, they are assigned to write a research paper individually or in groups. Teaching this subject for many courses, we recognize that most students face many challenges during the learning process as well as completing their assignments. In the scope of this article, we want to explore some common difficulties encountered by the senior English majors at Tra Vinh University when they write their research papers. From the collected findings, we propose some possible solutions to assist the participants in this study as well as future student-researchers in dealing with their research writing issues.

The purposes of this study aim to answer the following research questions:

- a. What are some common challenges English majors face when writing research papers?
- b. What recommendations can be made for the participants in this study and future student-researchers?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical background

2.1.1. What is research?

Paler-Calmorin and Calmorin [2] state: "Research is defined as a scientific investigation of phenomena which includes collection, presentation, analysis and interpretation of facts that links man's speculation with reality."

According to Kumar [4], research is a way that researchers examine different fields of human's activities, understand and formulate principles that obey a particular procedure then develop and test new theories to make a contribution to the progress of their practice and profession.

2.1.2. What is a research paper?

A research paper is a piece of writing researchers explain what they have found out after investigating an in-depth topic. It can consist of information from various sources beyond their own opinions and knowledge. More importantly, a research paper must occupy at least 80% of the researchers' own words (Sierra College, [5]).

McCarty [6] claims that a research paper has its own genre and differs from other types of writing. A research paper should contain other materials which provide evidence and data for research.

Winkler and McCuen-Metherell [3] state that a research paper requires the researchers to look for information about a subject, express a strong opinion on some issue, and prove something true by comparing with ideas or views of others. Then the researchers will present their results on the selected topic.

2.1.3. Elements of a research paper

Perneger and Hudelson [7] suggest that the structure of a research paper has introduction with literature review included, method, results and discussion with recommendation, limitation attached. The research paper consists of abstract, introduction-including literature review, method, results, discussion and conclusion, references and appendices.

Javed [8] provides a list of elements of a research paper: abstract, keywords, introduction, literature review, methodology, data analysis, finding, discussion and conclusion, references, appendix and future work.

2.1.4. Difficulties encountered by student-researchers

Ifeoma [9] identified three major categories of challenges affecting the success of a research paper, including:

- Mentor-student challenges comprised the lack of scientific training, supervision challenges and pacing of content.
- Student-related challenges identified students' issues such as research problem definition, time management, confidence issue, quantity of literature, working of deadlines, data collection and interpreting literature and data.
- Institution-related challenges stemmed from poorly equipped library and lack of access to resources.

Javed [8] pointed out four challenges that are often encountered by student-researchers.

- Being unfamiliar with the format
- Writing literature review especially in paraphrasing and avoiding plagiarism
- Choosing an interesting topic
- Being aware of text citation

Rind [10] discovered ten types of problems faced by researchers:

- Research topic selection
- Supervisor-related difficulties
- Unavailability of appropriate literature
- Time period of degree
- Research culture
- Lack of research funding
- Lack of research knowledge and skills
- Poor library management
- Data collection difficulties
- Interpersonal difficulties

2.2. Related studies

Dwihandini, Marjaeni and Suarnajaya [11] researched "The analysis of the factors affecting undergraduate students' difficulties in writing thesis in the English Department of Mahasaraswati University". The study aimed to find out the factors affecting undergraduate students' difficulties in writing thesis. The findings of the study identified three major influential factors: (1) psychological factors that comprise lack of confidence in choosing thesis title, having prior knowledge in the research field and writing a good thesis; (2) sociocultural factors including the ability to connect sentences into meaningful thesis writing, attain knowledge of appropriate lexical items and linguistic units and be aware of the format of the thesis writing in accordance to the culture department of the university; and (3) linguistic factors related to grammatical problems.

Javed [8] conducted a study on "What are the problems for students in writing the first research paper in a second language?". The purpose of this study was to examine some obstacles students faced when writing their first research paper in the second language. The findings showed that students had some issues in terms of choosing the research topic, writing the introduction, obeying the APA rules for writing the literature review, using wrong paraphrasing, finding materials related to the present study, and making grammatical mistakes in second language writing.

Qasem and Zayid [12] carried out a study on “The challenges and problems faced by students in the early stage of writing research projects In L2, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia”. The study aimed to investigate some common challenges students encountered during writing their research proposals and projects. The results revealed that students had some difficulties regarding deciding the research topic, lacking knowledge of methodology, being unable to find specialized and related reference, lacking interest in research, lacking understanding of the subject matter, lacking time and guidance for conducting the research. From the findings presented above, the authors gave some recommendations as follows. Students should participate in more training workshops concerning writing research. Besides, supervisors should give students good guidance about choosing the topics and appropriate materials. Moreover, teachers teaching research methodology should create some useful tasks or activities in class to help students be familiar with the research procedures.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

This is a descriptive survey study conducted to investigate the senior English majors’ obstacles in writing research papers. The mixed methods were employed in this study to analyze the qualitative and quantitative data from the questionnaire.

3.2. Participants

The participants involved in the current study were 53 senior English majors at Tra Vinh university. There are two reasons for choosing these participants to answer the questionnaire. First, these participants have learned Research Methodology subject. Second, through teaching this subject, we recognize that most students have faced challenges in writing their research papers.

3.3. Research instruments

To answer the research questions of the current study, the researchers employed a questionnaire. It focused on the participants’ difficulties in writing research papers which were fully developed through the theoretical background and previous studies. In the questionnaire, 26 items were designed by using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Besides, students were asked about other obstacles they faced in item 27 which they can choose more than one option. The questionnaire survey was adapted from Villanueva [13] who mentioned some challenges related to preparing for conducting the research paper, writing literature review, choosing methodology, analyzing data, writing conclusion and recommendations.

3.4. Research procedures

First, the questionnaire was designed and piloted to check if it was clear enough to respondents. The participants involved in the pilot were 10 students who study English majors. The data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed by using the software SPSS version 25 (Statistic Package for the Social Sciences).

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Findings

4.1.1. The reliability of the questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.900	26

The questionnaires were fully completed by a group of 53 students. All the data collected from the questionnaires were computed to check the frequency and the internal reliability coefficient. The result in table 4.1 shows that the questionnaire employed in this study was reliable with significantly high Cronbach Alpha’s coefficient of .90 for 26 items in total. Key findings of the current research are discussed in depth in the following sections.

4.1.2. Obstacles English majors face when conducting their research papers

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Obstaclesmean	53	2.10	5.00	3.97	.60

The descriptive statistic test shown in Table 4.2 reveals that the overall mean score of 26 items related to students’ obstacles in writing their research papers is high ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.60$). This proves that the participants encounter numerous difficulties when they carry out their research papers. Ten out of the 26 items are found to have higher mean scores than the others. The descriptive statistics of 10 items is indicated in Table 4.3 below.

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Searching materials for the research paper	4.25	.90
Identifying a research topic	4.15	.91

Identifying the significance of the paper	4.13	.68
Identifying which theoretical background should be used to support the research paper	4.11	.78
Choosing the title for the research paper	4.09	1.04
Choosing appropriate formulas for calculating the collected data	4.09	.93
Interpreting data clearly and concisely	4.08	.76
Comparing the findings of the present study to those of related studies	4.08	.98
Deciding the appropriate statistical tool for data analysis	4.04	.83
Using correct style text citation	4.00	.76

The descriptive statistic test shown in Table 4.3 reveals the obstacles of 10 items with high mean scores. Among them, searching materials for the research paper occupies the highest mean score ($M=4.25$, $SD=0.90$). This can be explained that the school library does not have enough resources for students to conduct their research papers. Also, students themselves may lack information searching skills. The two next difficulties are identifying the research topic and the significance of the paper ($M=4.15$, $SD=0.91$) and ($M=4.13$, $SD=0.68$) respectively. There are some major causes of these problems. It is difficult for students to find a new research topic in the foreign language field and implement a research paper which has some practical applications in teaching and learning contexts. In addition to those obstacles, students also feel hard to identify appropriate theoretical background to support their research papers ($M=4.11$, $SD=0.78$). This proves that students are not good at reading skills and sometimes do not understand some specialized terms or vocabulary from the original sources. Besides, due to numerous information from different sources, students can not select and organize the necessary information for the research papers. Choosing the title for the research papers and appropriate formulas for calculating the collected data are two other problems encountered by students, accounting for the same mean score ($M=4.09$) each. It is evident that students do not have creative ideas to come up with interesting titles to attract readers. Moreover, their knowledge of statistical skills is not sufficient enough to analyze the data which answers the research questions. Surprisingly, interpreting data clearly and concisely, comparing the findings of the present study to those of related studies constitute equal mean scores ($M=4.08$). Most students tend to report all the data shown from the table but they do not know how to select and explain the results. Some students can not find out the similarities and differences between their study and the related studies. Finally, deciding the appropriate statistical tool for data analysis and using correct style text citation also challenge some students with ($M=4.04$, $SD=0.83$) for the former and ($M=4.00$, $SD=0.76$) for the latter. As a result of various statistical tools, students may be confused to decide which one is suitable for data analysis. Furthermore, most students do not master the rules of text citation required for their research papers.

4.2. Discussion

From the findings above, it is concluded that the participants face various challenges when they conduct their research papers.

In the phase of preparing for conducting a research paper, participants encounter identifying a research topic and searching materials for the research paper. Similarly, Taskeen, Shehzadi, Khan and Saleem [14] discovered that choosing a new topic is hard because researchers were not aware of what criteria they should base on to choose a theme. The results are also in accordance with those of the study conducted by Javed [8] and the two authors Qasem and Zayid [12] who also found that the participants in their study face these two problems.

In terms of writing the introduction, the participants in this study find it hard to identify the significance of the paper while those researchers figured out their participants' obstacles in writing other parts of the research paper as mentioned below.

With regard to writing literature review, identifying appropriate theoretical background, choosing and summarizing related studies, and using correct style of citation challenge the majority of participants. By comparison, Javed [8] also believed that the participants in his study had the issue of obeying the APA rules for writing the literature review while Qasem and Zayid [12] indicated that the participants in their study were unable to find specialized and related reference.

In the process of writing methodology, the participants struggle with deciding the appropriate statistical tool for data analysis. By contrast, the participants did not face this issue in the study conducted by Dwihandini, Marjaeni and Suarnajaya [11], Javed [8], Qasem and Zayid [12].

For writing findings and discussion, choosing appropriate formulas for calculating the collected data, interpreting data clearly and concisely, comparing the findings of the present study to those of related studies. The results are aligned with those carried out by Ifeoma [9] who discovered that it was challenging for the participants to decide the best collection tool, explain the collected data, and connect his/her findings with previous studies.

V. CONCLUSION

This present study aims to investigate the participants' obstacles in conducting a research paper. The results show that the participants encounter some common issues including identifying a research topic, searching materials for the research paper, identifying the significance of the paper, identifying appropriate theoretical background, choosing and summarizing related studies, using correct style of citation challenge the majority of participants, deciding the appropriate statistical tool for data analysis, choosing appropriate formulas for calculating the collected data, interpreting data clearly and concisely, and comparing the findings of the present study to those of related studies. From the problems investigated above, the researchers make some recommendations for the participants as well as future student-researchers as follows:

- Think about their favorite topics or topics with high applications in teaching and learning a foreign language.
- Discuss their topic with the instructor or supervisor to orient their research.
- Spend as much time as possible to read research papers because it helps them not only improve their comprehension skills but also exploit their research topics and expand their academic lexical resources.
- Read related studies supporting researchers to gain a stable foundation for their research papers.
- Conduct chapter by chapter with timely guidance and corrections from their instructors or supervisors. By doing this, researchers can manage their time effectively.
- Read the rules for text citation and references carefully when they cite the original information to avoid plagiarism.
- Consult experienced researchers in their university or from other institutions to choose research topics, research methodology, as well as appropriate statistical tools.

Based on the recommendations, students and future researchers can improve their research writing. Besides, teachers can also benefit the findings of this study to adjust their teaching methods and facilitate students to learn this subject more effectively. However, the results of the study are found out by employing the questionnaire-the only instrument. Therefore, future researchers should combine the questionnaire with other instruments such as interview and observation to gain the reliability and validity of the research findings.

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