The difficulties in thesis writing faced by Masters in TESOL students in Vietnam

Thi Minh Chau Tran
Phu Xuan University, Vietnam
Bao Trang Thi Nguyen, Pham Thi Hong Nhung,
Lien-Huong Vo and Van Huy Nguyen
Hue University of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Vietnam

Our study examined the difficulties Vietnamese Masters (MA) in TESOL (Teaching English to speakers of other languages) students encountered while writing their MA theses. Using a a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, data were collected from 29 MA TESOL students who had completed their theses at a university in central Vietnam. Fifteen subsequently participated in individual semi-structured interviews. The study found that intense difficulties were voiced around the new genre of writing an MA thesis with its different chapters as subgenres serving different communicative functions. In particular, writing the introduction, the literature review and findings and discussion chapters were the most daunting for the participants. Limited language proficiency was only a surface factor; their top concerns involved how to use appropriate language to express intended meanings, and a lack of awareness about the genre of thesis writing and its communicative functions, alongside plagiarism, critical thinking, and thesis organisation. Cultural influences and a lack of motivation and research experience and perceived self-doubt intensified the perceived difficulties. These findings offer useful implications for key stakeholders in MA TESOL programs in Vietnam and perhaps in similar settings.

Introduction

Writing a Masters (MA) thesis in English as a foreign or second language (L2) poses a wide array of obstacles for novice writers in a multitude of disciplines (e.g., Harwood & Petrić, 2020; Pringle Barnes & Cheng, 2019;). For the particular disciplinary domain of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), MA programs have proliferated not only in English-speaking but also non-English speaking countries (Liyanage et al., 2014). TESOL has thus become an area of growing pedagogical and empirical attention worldwide. Considerable research has largely examined the experiences of international students writing their MA TESOL theses in host English-speaking countries (e.g., Friedman, 2019; Harwood & Petrić, 2017; Wette & Furneaux, 2018; Woodrow, 2020). There is limited research in non-English speaking countries (Hajar & Mhamed, 2021), with some studies exploring the difficulties that MA students in EFL contexts coped with while writing their theses in English (e.g., Duff & Anderson, 2015; Friedman, 2019; Saeed et al., 2021). Most of the studies in the latter strand draw on a corpus-based approach to analyse written texts produced by L2 students and identified problems in general or problems specific to certain parts of the thesis. While this line of research is useful to inform pedagogy and support, the difficulties writing the different sections of the MA thesis from the voices of students as novice writers need further investigation, especially in EFL contexts.

In Vietnam, every year hundreds of students pursue MA TESOL studies in different educational institutions (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015) in order to obtain an MA degree to develop professionally, secure their teaching position and/or earn a higher salary. At a Masters level, students are typically required to produce a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the MA degree. L2 writing is cognitively demanding for many L2 learners (Barkaoui, 2021) and writing an MA thesis in L2 is even more daunting due to the novelty of the genre that involves sub-genres with their inherent rhetorical and communicative structures and functions (Hyland, 2007). It is thus important to understand students' experienced difficulties in writing the different parts of their MA thesis in order to provide timely institutional and instructional support. However, little research has probed into the perspectives of MA TESOL students working on their MA thesis in Vietnam, though several studies exist that analysed the genre features in the different parts of an MA TESOL thesis written by Vietnamese postgraduates (e.g., Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014a, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2016a).

Understanding the concerns and challenges students face in writing their MA thesis in TESOL will inform the instructional contents of MA TESOL programs, advise supervisory and institutional support provision, and better prepare prospective students for successful thesis completion. This is essential, as thesis writing is quite often conceived as an "opaque, poorly understood" phenomenon (Harwood & Petrić, 2017, p. 3). Little research, to the best of our knowledge, has comprehensively examined the self-reported challenges Vietnamese MA students in TESOL encounter while writing each chapter of the thesis in English in Vietnam. Our study fills this gap by addressing the following question:

> What difficulties do Vietnamese MA TESOL students encounter in writing their theses in English?

Literature review

Thesis writing

An MA thesis is a research report which follows its special ways of communication and organisation (Woodrow, 2020). It is "considered as a genre because it is written for proving to advisors, examiners and the committee, who are the intended audience of the discourse community, the worthiness of a degree". MA TESOL students are thus viewed as novice writers "who are becoming members of the TEFL community, required to demonstrate thesis writing skills in academic L2 in order to consolidate their membership" (Pitura, 2022, p. 2362). In this way, thesis writing denotes a different genre which entails "socially known ways of using language" (Sükan & Mohammadzadeh, 2022), with each section of the thesis serving its special functions and communicative purposes (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Nguyen, 2017; Odena & Burgess, 2017; Staples, et al., 2024; Woodrow, 2020).

For example, the abstract introduces the thesis, methods of data collection and analysis and summarises the results of the study and offers implications for stakeholders (Hyland, 2016).

The introduction aims to problematise the research, the motivation of the study, and gaps that the present research fills, the research questions and the significance of the study. Similarly, the literature review is meant to "situate the study within the field of knowledge" which requires "structured arguments" that involve not just summarising prior research but also, synthesising and critically evaluating source use around the topic, identifying and addressing gaps and forge links with the study purpose (Woodrow, 2020). Proper citation is additionally required where students are "expected to develop voices as members of a research-oriented TESOL/applied linguistics community" (Friedman, 2019, p. 23). In the methodology, information about research design, approaches, participants, data collection tools, and procedure should be presented in an explicit manner. How data were analysed additionally needs delineation and the issues of reliability and validity discussed. The findings and discussion chapter is another key component of the thesis where "new knowledge" is presented and discussed with the aim of answering the formulated research questions (Woodrow, 2020). In the Conclusion chapter, key findings are summarised, implications discussed, and the limitations of the study and future research directions addressed. For novice writers, the whole process of writing an MA thesis is daunting (Duff & Anderson, 2015; Göçen Kabaran, 2022). It is argued that each thesis chapter represents a novel genre that adds challenges to the endeavour of EFL thesis writing (Nguyen, 2017; Wood, 2020). These challenges could be intense, even for MA TESOL students who choose English as their major career.

Previous studies

Research on the challenges MA students encounter has been conducted in three broad contexts: (i) international students of differing disciplines in foreign contexts; (ii) MA TESOL international students in English-speaking countries; and (iii) MA TESOL students in their home countries.

Difficulties international MA students encounter in thesis writing in foreign contexts
Writing a MA thesis has been reported to be difficult for L2 learners studying as international students from various disciplines writing their MA theses in English-speaking countries (e.g., Hajar & Mhamed, 2021; Harwood & Petrić, 2017, 2020; Pringle Barnes & Cheng, 2019; Woodrow, 2020). The difficulties include failure to demonstrate sufficient critical and analytical thinking abilities in their thesis (Pringle Barnes & Cheng, 2019) which could arise from the influence of one's native culture (Jones, 2005; McKinley, 2013). Other challenges were related to limited language abilities, time management (Paltridge & Woodrow, 2012), understanding supervisors' feedback (Saeed et al., 2021), or supervisory relationships (Pitura, 2022).

Another line of research has examined the challenges related to certain parts of an MA thesis. For example, Qian and Krugly-Smolska (2008) found that Chinese graduate students in Canada had mainly linguistic challenges such as using appropriate vocabulary and grammar in writing the Literature review. Difficulty realising the function of the Results and Discussion section were the additional concerns of international students in New Zealand, due to a lack of awareness of the conventions requirements of the

discussion chapter (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). Writing the Methodology section, the Findings and Literature review chapters were among top challenges experienced by international students in Malaysia (Singh, 2016). In a Turkish context, thesis organisation, a lack of methodological knowledge and competences were among problems facing graduate students (Göçen Kabaran, 2022).

Academic writing difficulties TESOL students encounter when studying overseas
A number of studies have investigated the academic writing challenges facing international students majoring in TESOL in foreign countries where they pursue their MA studies. For example, Phakiti and Li (2011) examined the academic difficulties that 51 TESOL postgraduate students faced at an Australian university, using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. They found that plagiarism, synthesising ideas, lacking authorial voice, coherence, and linking from theory to practice were the salient problems the students encountered while writing academically. However, English language proficiency was not the only factor and students with high IELTS scores (IELTS, n.d.) did not necessarily face less difficulty (Phakiti & Li, 2011).

Al Badi (2015) surveyed 20 TESOL postgraduates of four nationalities (Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Omani) at a university in Australia. He found issues related to establishing coherence/cohesion and expressing their own voice, finding relevant topics and sources, referencing and in-text citation. International students' lack of experience and limited knowledge about academic writing and institutional and faculty requirements and expectations were some reported causes of such concerns. Arkoudis and Tran (2007) focused on two Chinese international students who enrolled in an MA TESOL course in Australia, revealing that they did not know how to write or write in an appropriate manner to meet the course requirements. The institutional factors, their motivation, experiences and personality were found to have an impact on their writing difficulties. Other studies uncovered numerous obstacles such as planning and organising their writing and choosing appropriate language terms and structure (Kho & Muhammad, 2013), citation problems (Friedman, 2019), and genre structure in acknowledgments (Chan, 2015; Hyland, 2004).

Difficulties MA TESOL students encounter in thesis writing in their home countries
Research on MA TESOL students studying in their home countries has identified the different challenges in different EFL contexts. For example, Alsied and Ibrahim (2018) targeted Libyan learners and reported major problems that involved identifying the area of interest, choosing a topic, formulating research problems, writing the literature review, and collecting and analysing data. In an Iranian EFL tertiary setting, Sadeghi and Shirzad Khajepasha (2015) analysed 60 theses written by TEFL students at Iranian universities. Results uncovered that their MA participants were confronted with three major difficulties including limited English proficiency, poor time management skills and failure to understand supervisory feedback. In a Chinese EFL context, Wang and Yang (2012) found that critiquing previous studies was challenging for students, and this was believed to be influenced by their native culture. In Algeria, Bakhou and Bouhania (2020) reported that their TEFL participants had limited knowledge about how to write each chapter of the thesis and the challenges were not associated with the only factor of language proficiency. '*Imposter syndrome',* negative emotions such as uncertainty and inadequacy in

thesis writing, was experienced by MA TESOL students in Kazakhstan (Hajar & Mhamed, 2021).

In a number of related studies (Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015a, 2015b), text analysis was adopted to analyse language features, steps and moves in the different chapters of 24 MA TESOL theses written by Vietnamese graduates in the South of Vietnam. These include citation in the introduction chapter (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014b, 2015a), the literature review (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014a, 2015b, 2016a), the methodology chapter (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015c), the results-discussion chapter (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015d), or cross chapters and offering genre-based recommendations (Nguyen, 2017), and the conclusion chapter (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2016b). Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2014a) found that Vietnamese MA students employed direct quotations to a large extent without paraphrasing other scholars' ideas or demonstrating sufficient evaluation or critiquing. Regarding the results chapter, a tendency to report the findings without interpreting them was another issue (Nguyen, 2017). The results of these studies generally show that the students had challenges in realising the function of each thesis chapter. While they have significant contributions to our understanding of Vietnamese students writing their MA TESOL thesis in Vietnam from a text-based analysis perspective, the voices of Vietnamese MA TESOL students in relation to thesis writing and writing the different thesis sections have largely been under-explored. More research is clearly needed to explore their concerns and difficulties.

Research methodology

The MA TESOL program

In the two-year MA TESOL program, the context of the present research, Vietnamese MA students are typically required to study numerous subjects such as Academic Writing, ELT Methodology, Second Language Acquisition, Research Methods in Language Education, Language Testing, to name a few in the first year of their studies as part of the whole 60-credit package. Among these courses, Academic Writing prepares them with fundamentals in general scholarly writing and Research Methods in Language Education guides them through the basics of doing research (i.e., research design, data collection, data analysis, reliability and validity). How to write a literature review is particularly addressed in both courses and as a final assessment of the latter, students are required to write a research proposal on any research topic of their interest. In the second year, they work on their MA research under the supervision of an academic after research proposal approval by the institutional scientists' committee. Within a one-year timeframe, they are scheduled to formally defend their thesis to be qualified for a Masters degree.

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants in the present study. Only those who had completed their MA thesis were selected and they did so within a year so that they could have the experiences to share and still be able to recall their challenges. In total, 29 students (24 females and 5 males) out of the approximate target cohort of 60 Masters

graduates at the time of data collection (from June to July 2019), completed the questionnaire on a voluntary basis. They were English teachers from different schools in central Vietnam who enrolled in the target MA TESOL program available for full time study in both online and offline modes. They were typically required to teach at their respective schools while pursuing their studies. However, their school employers flexibly adjusted their schedules and some reduced teaching hours, depending on staff availability. Their teaching experiences varied widely, from one to 15 years. More than half (55.2%) were aged between 24-30; Five participants (17.2%) were from 22-25 years of age and seven (24.1%) were in the 31-34 age group and one (3.4%) was above 35 years old.

The participants also varied in terms of English proficiency. Sixteen participants (55.2%) reported having an upper-intermediate level of English language proficiency; four (13.8%) and nine (31.0%) students rated their English proficiency as intermediate and advanced respectively. One participant (3.4%) reported having an IELTS writing score of 6.0. Three had an IELTS writing score of 6.5 and six 7.0 and above. Also, 19 participants had not taken an IELTS test yet.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed with two main sections. The first was about participants' background information such as age, gender, level of English, etc. The second part consisted of 50 items to survey the difficulties MA students might encounter during thesis writing. These challenges are categorised into two broad groups: general difficulties and challenges writing particular chapters. The items were sourced and adapted from the related previous studies (Al Badi, 2015; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014a, b, 2015; Qian & Krugly-Smolska, 2008; Shabanza, 2013; Singh, 2016). As shown in Appendix 1, Part 2 of the questionnaire is composed of seven clusters (1-7) and all the items were designed with a five-point Likert scale (1= Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Don't know, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree). The Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .728 to .866, which demonstrated satisfactory internal reliability by reference to a minimum figure of .70 to be acceptable (Field, 2018).

Questionnaire administration

The questionnaire was piloted with four volunteer MA TESOL students who had already finished their MA studies, with the aim of checking whether the questionnaire items were comprehensible to the respondents and whether they had any problem completing it. The questionnaire was in English, because a Vietnamese version was not necessary, according to the pilot participants, who reported having no difficulty completing it. The official questionnaire was uploaded through a familiar application, *Google Forms* and remained active for three weeks. It took the participants approximately 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. In total, 50 participants returned their completed questionnaire, but only29 valid responses were analysed in the current paper.

Interviews

The interview aimed to further understand the challenges facing Vietnamese MA TESOL students in thesis writing and the reasons behind them. The students' responses in the questionnaire guided the interview questions. An individual semi-structured format was adopted because of its flexibility to allow follow-up questions to delve into a phenomenon of interest (Cohen et al., 2018). The interview questions were first piloted with four volunteer students who had completed the questionnaire, and they were excluded from the official interview. In the official round, 15 (14 females and 1 male) of the 29 respondents of the questionnaire were interviewed on a voluntary basis. The interviews were in Vietnamese so that the participants could easily express themselves. Each interview lasted about 20 to 30 minutes and with their prior consent was audio recorded. Five interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format and 10 via mobile phone calls, where the participants elected this as their preferred interview mode.

Data analysis

The questionnaire data were first entered into an Excel spreadsheet with the participants' names being de-identified and assigned codes. They were cross-checked carefully for accuracy before analysis. Descriptive statistics such as means (M) and standard deviation (SD) and frequencies for the five-point Likert scale were computed via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 20.0) (Appendices 2 - 8). Cut-off points to interpret the mean scores were guided by Khorsheed (2018) as follows: Low (1 - 2.34), Mid (2.34 - 3.67), High (3.67 - 5).

The original interviews were first transcribed in written form and a verbatim account was created. The data were then read repeatedly to identify initial themes that surfaced via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Each individual interview response was coded and analysed for themes that emerged. Themes and subthemes were then entered into an Excel spreadsheet for each and all the interviewees to identify patterns and frequencies. Analysis was performed in the Vietnamese language of the interview to retain the intended meaning (Cohen et al., 2018). While both the original language and translations should be presented (Yin, 2015), yet due to limited space, only translated excerpts were used. The translations of transcripts and illustrative excerpts were verified by a Vietnamese EFL teacher who was experienced in doing qualitative research.

Results

Students' perceptions of general difficulties in thesis writing

Much difficulty was reported in using appropriate vocabulary, defining terminology, expressing ideas critically, presenting paragraphs coherently, avoiding plagiarism and including three steps in the writing process (see details in Appendix 2). In addition, 17 students (58.6%) found it challenging to make in-text citations whereas only seven (24.1%) reported having no difficulty. Sixteen students (55.2%) admitted having difficulty in building a reference list while this was not problematic for 13 students (44.8%). Using

appropriate grammar also received mixed responses, with the same number of students (13 or 44.8%) considering it was (not) challenging and three having a neutral position.

Difficulties related to writing the abstract

Students' perceived difficulties related to writing the abstract of the MA thesis are summarised in Appendix 3. Particularly, reporting the key findings of the study (M = 2.21, SD = 0.98), describing the research procedure (M = 2.28, SD = 0.88), following the required length (M = 2.38, SD = 1.05) were reportedly most challenging. Furthermore, providing keywords in the abstract received mixed responses, with 14 students (48.2%) considering it challenging while 12 students (41.4%) did not identify such difficulty.

Difficulties related to writing the Introduction chapter

The results demonstrate that identifying the gaps (M = 1.97, SD = 0.78), indicating what had prompted the study (M = 2.48, SD = 1.12) and stating research questions or hypotheses (M = 2.76, SD = 1.18) were reportedly challenging (Appendix 4).

Difficulties related to writing the Literature review chapter

Overall, writing the Literature review chapter was challenging for students (M= .190; SD = .82). The greatest concerns were reported with presenting and evaluating the related theoretical frameworks and classifying literature (M= 1.66, SD = 0.55). In addition, 27 students (93.1%) had difficulty in evaluating previous studies (M = 1.69, SD = 0.81). Synthesising the findings of related studies (M = 1.97, SD = 0.87), establishing a connection among studies (M = 1.97, SD = 0.87) and indicating knowledge gaps (M = 2.00, SD = 0.96) were consistently difficult for the majority of the students. Describing previous studies (M = 2.14, SD = 0.95) and deciding on the order of their review (M = 2.14, SD = 1.03) were also major concerns for them (Appendix 5).

Difficulties related to writing the Methodology chapter

Overall, students found it challenging to write the Methodology chapter (M =1.90, SD =0.82). In particular, it was difficult for them to address the research validity and reliability, M = 1.86 (SD = 0.69) and M = 2.00 (SD = 0.60) respectively. Additional challenges include justifying analysis of qualitative data (M = 2.24, SD = 0.87) and quantitative data (M = 2.41, SD = 0.87), describing qualitative analysis (M = 2.41, SD = 0.98) and justifying the selected research methods (M = 2.38, SD = 0.90). Individual variation existed, with 15 students (51.7%) reporting having difficulty describing quantitative data analysis while only five (17.2%) not having this difficulty. In addition, describing data collection procedure was not an obstacle for quite a majority of the participants (58.6%) whereas 11 (37.9%) still found it challenging to do this (Appendix 6).

Difficulties related to writing the Findings and Discussion chapter

The results (Appendix 7) indicated that the greatest challenges were associated with linking the results back to the literature (M = 1.72, SD = 0.84), analysing and interpreting the findings (M

= 2.00, SD = 0.89) and discussing them (M = 2.00, SD = 0.96). Linking different parts of the results and discussion chapters (M = 2.10, SD = 0.90), reconsidering key concepts in the study (M = 2.34, SD = 1.04), reporting classroom observation findings (M = 2.41, SD = 0.91), expressing opinions about the findings (M = 2.45, SD = 1.06), reporting quasi-experimental results (M = 2.48, SD = 0.74) and summarising the findings (M = 2.48, SD = 1.06) were also difficult for these students.

Additionally, 17 students (58.6%) found it challenging to report the interview findings whereas ten (34.5%) expressed they did not do so. Reporting the questionnaire findings was difficult for 14 students (48.2%) while 13 (44.8%) did not experience this difficulty. Meanwhile, visualising findings in graphic forms received mixed responses with nearly half of the students reporting (not) having difficulty.

Difficulties related to writing the Conclusion and Implications chapter

The reported difficulties related to writing the Conclusion and Implications chapter received mixed responses, as mean scores ranged from M = 2.59 (SD = 1.05) to M = 2.97 (SD = 1.24). In particular, 15 participants (51.7%) found it hard to summarise the study while eleven (37.9%) reported having less difficulty in doing this. Indicating the limitations of the research was not difficult for about half of the students (51.7%) whereas 13 (44.8%) reported having this difficulty. For 14 students (48.3%), making recommendations for further research was a pronounced challenge while 13 students (44.8%) did not experience such difficulty. More than half (62%) identified drawing pedagogic implications was problematic, but this was not difficult for nine students (31.0%) (Appendix 8).

Students' accounts through interviews

In the present study, 15 participants who had completed the questionnaire were further interviewed in an individual format. The findings revealed that *English language proficiency* was mentioned by several as one major barrier in their reading comprehension of scholarly materials. It was essentially not the underlying factor in written language production, but how to use appropriate vocabulary related to one's specialised field was demanding:

> It was really difficult for me to use the correct vocabulary in the field of my study. While writing a thesis we needed to have a wide range of field-related vocabulary but I found it difficult to choose specialised vocabulary. (Student 5)
> In spite of having a high level of English language proficiency (IELTS writing score: 7.5), I still struggled and wasted much time in choosing appropriate vocabulary while writing my thesis. (Student 2)

Apparently, a high language proficiency level (IELTS score of 7.5) does not necessarily exempt MA candidates from hurdles and concerns. The 'struggle' and 'time investment' were mentioned repeatedly, pointing to the daunting act of thesis writing in TESOL for these English teachers. Using tenses, which is arguably a simple and easy task for English teachers, was perceived as confusing and difficult when it came to thesis writing:

> I was really confused about which chapters I should use the present tense, past tense, etc. It was difficult for me at the beginning of each chapter. (Student 14)

Thesis writing was viewed by the interviewees as *a new genre*, with different functions that each chapter serves (*sub-genres*), of which many they were not aware of. Ten students (out of 15) shared that they had problems in unpacking *what to write* in each chapter of the thesis. One participant narrated:

> I never wrote a thesis in my first degree, so I truly did not know what to write or the requirements of a thesis. I thought it would be easy to write the Literature review because I thought I just needed to summarise the field-related studies. But you know what, I needed to evaluate those studies and find the knowledge gaps. I did not know that. (Student 4)

Given that scholarly writing required in a literature review chapter should go beyond description to analyse, evaluate and critique existing work (Woodrow, 2020), these challenges were more pronounced for MA students as novice researchers who were not aware of the chapter's rhetoric function. Another participant verbalised the greatest difficulty in writing the Methodology chapter and again what to write surfaced as arduous, due to a lack of expectations of what is required of it:

> The Methodology chapter was a big challenge for me. I did not know what to write, really. I was only given a guideline for thesis writing and it was not enough for me. It was too ambiguous, and it did not tell me what the requirements of the Methodology chapter were. (Student 3)

About half of the interviewees explicitly reported that that it was not much difficult to report and interpret the findings, but the most demanding was how to relate the results back to the literature in the Discussion chapter:

> The Discussion chapter was difficult too. I tended to just explain what I got from the data and did not compare my findings with other scholars'. After receiving feedback from my supervisors and asking some friends, I realised I did not know the function and content of this part. (Student 6)

Clearly, there are nuanced aspects involved in writing each chapter that make it problematic for MA students. *Organisation* issues were further voiced by seven of the interviewees, identifying linking and organising ideas in the different chapters of the thesis as highlighted challenges. Two students commented:

> In the Literature review chapter, I found it difficult to organise ideas cohesively and coherently. You know, it was hard to find the previous studies related to your field, but the harder thing was how to put them in the correct order. (Student 3)
> Organising ideas in the Findings and Discussion chapter was extremely difficult. After collecting the data from the questionnaires and interviews, I did not know how to organise ideas to make it easy for the reader to understand what story the data told. (Student 15)

Plagiarism was additionally a major concern for these novice thesis writers. Many narrated that despite being repeatedly warned about plagiarism by their supervisors, and in their prior courses such as Academic Writing and Research Methods in Language Education, they also had much difficulty as they cited being not good at paraphrasing ideas and it was not easy to paraphrase scholars' ideas which were perceived the best versions. Surprisingly, nine students reported that plagiarism resulted from their automatic absorption of the information from the readings:

> Actually, I experienced plagiarism once. You know, we had to read a lot of books and articles related to the topic. The scholars' ideas were automatically in my mind after reading several things. The ideas just came out and I thought they were my ideas until my supervisors told me I was plagiarising. After that, I had to struggle a lot to paraphrase the ideas carefully. (Student 1)

The issue of *critical thinking* was also perceived as intensely challenging for many interviewees. In their view, the Vietnamese culture does not support evaluating others:

> The most difficult thing for me was how to evaluate I mean... have an opinion about other's works. In our culture, it is not supported much to give your own opinions or evaluate others' works, especially prestigious scholars' work. Therefore, it affected my writing. (Student 13)
>
> It was hard work to evaluate others' work, I thought. I grew up without giving opinions on others' ideas, especially on people who had higher education than me. I thought I did not have enough knowledge to debate with others. (Student 6)

Showing utmost respect for experts and being humble were perceived as welcome traits in the Vietnamese culture that prevented students from evaluating others' work, which might have led to the difficulty in expressing authorial voices in their writing.

The tough challenges originated from writing an MA thesis as a new genre where each chapter is intended to realise different functions. A lack of research experience further intensified their difficulties, which was reported by more than half of the students:

> To me, I had never done research before, so it was hard from the very beginning. I thought it was like we were trying to find a needle in a haystack. (Student 2)

The metaphorical comparison *"a needle in a haystack"* charted the extreme difficulties that students went through without a guided map. Some students expressed poignant concerns about their inadequacy in doing research and writing their thesis. *Self-inflicted anxiety, a lack of confidence* and *self-doubt* (Paltridge & Starfield, 2020) were common as they recounted their experiences, especially those who taught in non-urban areas:

> You know, I am a lower secondary school teacher, teaching in a rural area, I feel I struggled a lot, I was worried that I am not capable, not able to write up to the expectations of my supervisor and the university. I often have this kind of feeling, this insecurity. Sometimes I want to give up. (Student 14)

Inferior complexity was existent, which was a serious hindrance for many in their journey of conquering their MA research. This was both cognitively and emotionally taxing for them as challenges accumulated from different sources, plus the additional workload of being working teachers who were doing research.

Discussion

Our study set out to investigate the difficulties in writing an MA TESOL thesis that Vietnamese TESOL students experienced. The interview findings are consistent with what was found from the questionnaire and further highlight that English language proficiency was not the sole major concern, rather the genre of thesis writing and writing each of its chapters were featured more strongly as serious obstacles. These findings are generally congruent with prior research on various disciplines in English-speaking contexts (e.g., Hajar & Mhamed, 2021; Harwood & Petrić, 2017, 2020; Pringle Barnes & Cheng, 2019) and TESOL in particular, in international and home settings (e.g., Bakhou & Bouhania,2020; Friedman, 2019; Phakiti & Li, 2011).

Writing the Introduction, the Literature review chapter and the Findings and discussion chapters were particularly difficult for the participants in the present study, due to a lack of knowledge about their communicative functions, and what and how to write in each chapter. These findings corroborate prior research (e.g., Alsied & Ibrahim, 2018; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Nguyen, 2017; Singh, 2016) and could be attributable, at first glance, to the fact that they were schoolteachers with limited research experience. For a closer look, unfamiliarity with new genres and functions was the underlying factors adding to the intense difficulties. The findings collectively indicate that language proficiency is not a 'default' cause of difficulties as perceived in some studies (e.g., Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006), but the students in the present study identified the subtle difficulties involved in writing an MA TESOL thesis as a new genre for them.

Note that Academic Writing and Research Methods in Language Education were among the courses that they had studied before embarking on their MA research. Their struggles could well indicate that course instruction was not effective or at least not geared to supporting students in their research writing. Regarding this, the participants further explained that these courses were helpful overall, but they were not specifically sufficient to guide their own research. Furthermore, at the time of attending these courses, they recounted not having any idea of what they would do for their MA thesis yet, and thus adopted what they called "a surface strategy" to learn for the sake of course completion, due to the additional time constraints as full-time teachers. This could explain the difficulties in the later stage of their thesis writing because different types of research designs in different sub-domains of TESOL might pose different challenges.

It is also worth noting that how to avoid plagiarism through paraphrasing was problematic for the students in the present study. This finding broadly aligns with previous studies (e.g., Singh, 2016) showing that their MA students committed plagiarism due to ignorance and a lack of training. Yet it is alerting that these students also attributed plagiarism to the fact that

they absorbed information automatically without noticing they were copying. This further points to the complexity of the issue, while understandable as students have to read extensively around their disciplinary domain, suggests that different forms of support might help alleviate the challenges.

Critical thinking was another considerable challenge reported by the majority of students, which echoes other studies (e.g., Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014a; Wang & Yang, 2012). Culture and misinterpretation of the concept were cited to cause this difficulty. In Al-Zubaidi's (2012) study, critical thinking was often thought to criticise other people, and it was not supported in some cultures. In Atkinson's (1997) words, "critical thinking is cultural thinking" (p. 89) and in this respect, critical thinking could be quite difficult for non-native students, especially those whose native culture embraces different concepts of critical thinking (Jones, 2005; McKinley, 2013).

It is interesting to note that the Vietnamese MA students in TESOL faced similar writing difficulties as those studying overseas (e.g., Kho & Muhammad, 2013; Phakiti & Li, 2011; Qian & Krugly-Smolska, 2008). This could be perhaps due to the fact that the requirements of the MA TESOL program at the research site were developed in conformity to the standards of thesis writing in Western academic cultures. For example, referencing follows the American Psychological Association (APA) 7th format and supervisors were trained in English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, America, and England. Supervisory expectations and requirements were thus framed from the faculty's education in the Western academic culture. From a personal perspective, the self-inflicted worries, uncertainty and insecurity that students experienced found resonance in other research with other groups of postgraduates (Paltridge & Starfield, 2012, 2020), which suggests that thesis writing could be challenging not only for EFL students, but also for others is a difficult hurdle that needs timely support and perhaps 'treatment' to facilitate novice writers' 'enculturation' into the research writing discourse.

Conclusions and implications

Our study aimed to explore the difficulties in thesis writing faced by Vietnamese MA students in TESOL in a Vietnamese university. The findings revealed that expressing ideas critically, presenting paragraphs coherently in the writing process and organising ideas were generally difficult for students. Moreover, their biggest challenge was related to the genre of thesis writing where each chapter is to realise a different communicative function. They particularly found it most daunting to write the Introduction, the Literature review, and the Findings and Discussion chapters. Plagiarism and critical evaluation of prior research were additional major difficulties. From its findings, our study offers several important pedagogical implications for TESOL MA program staff, supervisors and MA students.

Firstly, the greatest challenges related to the genre of the thesis suggest that different mechanisms of support need to be in place. For the teacher participants in the present study who were English teachers, writing an MA thesis in English was still daunting for

them and language proficiency was not the only hurdle. Timely support on the part of supervisors will help alleviate the burdens facing students in TESOL, especially "feedback which clarifies what good performance is and feeds forward into future work" (Strobl et al., 2019, p. 34). Support could be provided in the form of training and tutoring sessions to explicitly guide students to write each thesis chapter. Nguyen (2017, p. 180) noted that "explicit genre instruction on rhetorical moves and linguistic features helps shape novice non-native English writers' knowledge of writing for scientific papers".

Secondly, the finding that the MA students did not know what to write while writing their thesis suggests that reading to acquire knowledge especially from the related field could be useful. Sample texts of MA theses written by both successful international and Vietnamese writers could be helpful in guiding students to identify and practice writing different moves such as identifying gaps, critiquing, hedging, among others. Appropriate quality articles published in the intended field could also be employed as text models, "textural mentors" (Hyland, 2016, p.166) for students to learn from. Additionally, given that within the TESOL program of the participants, Research Methods in Language Education and Academic Writing courses are provided, sample MA theses and articles can actually be provided in the readings list of these courses. Next, corpus-based learning would be useful for students to get exposed to varied sources of input which contain lexical and structural features of thesis writing. This will increase genre awareness, "a conscious understanding of what genre is and how it influences textual choices" (Tardy et al., 2022, p. 3).

Given that the norms and rhetoric functions of writing moves are adapted from the Western academic culture, Vietnamese students should be given sufficient time and practice to learn new ways of writing. In this respect, it is instrumental to offer training on how to paraphrase or cite ideas from the original materials to avoid plagiarism as well as how to hone critical and analytical abilities. Providing useful phrases for students to identify research gaps, review previous studies, report and discuss findings would also be useful. All these might need incorporating into the respective courses such as Research Methods in Language Education to a greater extent in the first year of the MA program. Equally, it is essential to explicitly communicate university and faculty expectations and assist non-native postgraduates in "navigating the darkness in the jungle" of writing their theses (Jeyaraj, 2018, p. 29) and in coping with the *'imposter syndrome'* (Hajar & Mhamed, 2021), one kind of self-inflicted anxiety due to perceived inadequacy, confusion and self-doubt in many aspects of thesis-writing (Paltridge & Starfield, 2020). Finally, surveying graduate outcomes satisfaction as Australia annually does (QILT, 2023) could provide additional feedback for MA TESOL program providers in Vietnam to assist students in overcoming challenges.

From the personal experience of the first researcher in the present study, MA students should develop time management skills. Typically, MA TESOL students in Vietnam are working and studying at the same time, thus it is necessary for them to plan to write their thesis well ahead of the deadlines so that they can finish their chapters well in advance for supervisory feedback. Since motivation in doing research plays a significant role, how to cultivate positive attitudes towards conducting research among MA students should also be

taken into consideration. Equally important, schools where MA candidates teach might need to consider officially reducing teaching hours or provide better support mechanisms so that they could have sufficient time for their MA research.

Despite the significant insights from this study, several shortcomings need discussion. First, the data were collected through purposive sampling at one university, thus limiting its generalisability. Further studies could be carried out on a larger scale with participants from different institutions in Vietnam to seek more comprehensive insights into the thesis writing as a new meaning-making genre that could inform MA TESOL programs in Vietnamese contexts. Secondly, the questionnaire with detailed structuring around thesis sections could be a potential limitation, thus calling for further research to adopt a more open design format that could yield more holistic perceptions. Next, understanding the challenges students face from their supervisors' perspectives could be an additional, useful avenue for future research. Finally, since "first-person accounts may not be fully accurate or complete due to the limitations of memory" (Jackson, 2017, p. 102), future research might benefit from adopting a longitudinal format and stimulated recall methods and/or interviewing students at each stage of their thesis writing.

References

Al Badi, I. A. (2015). Academic writing difficulties of ESL learners. In *Proceedings 2015 WEI International Academic Conference*, Barcelona, Spain. (pp. 55-76). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280696919_academic_writing_difficulties_of_esl_learners

Alsied, S. M. & Ibrahim, N. W. (2018). Exploring challenges encountered by EFL Libyan learners in research teaching and writing. *Journal of Language Learning*, 3(2), 143-158. https://doi.org/10.22492/ijll.3.2.06

Al-Zubaidi, K. O. (2012). The academic writing of Arab postgraduate students: Discussing the main language issues. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 66, 46-52. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.11.246

Arkoudis, S. & Tran, L. T. (2007). International students in Australia: Read ten thousand volumes of books walk ten thousand miles. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 27(2), 157-169. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188790701378792

Atkinson, D. (1997). A critical approach to critical thinking in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(1), 71-94. https://doi.org/10.2307/3587975

Bakhou, B., & Bouhania, B. (2020). A qualitative inquiry into the difficulties experienced by Algerian EFL Master students in thesis writing: 'Language is not the only problem'. *Arab World English Journal*, 11(2), 243-257. https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no2.17

Barkaoui, K. (2021). Exploring second language learners' writing processes and texts when writing to different audiences. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 77(3), 234-238. https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr-2020-0055

Bitchener, J. & Basturkmen, H. (2006). Perceptions of the difficulties of postgraduate L2 thesis students writing the discussion section. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 5(1), 4-18. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2005.10.002

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Sage. https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/successful-qualitative-research/book233059

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education*. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/Research-Methods-in-Education/Cohen-Manion-Morrison/p/book/9781138209886

Duff, P. A. & Anderson, T. (2015). Academic language and literacy socialization for second-language students. In N. Markee (Ed.), *Handbook of classroom discourse and interaction* (pp. 337-352). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118531242.ch20

Field, A. P. (2018). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics* (5th ed.). Sage. [6th ed.] https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/discovering-statistics-using-ibm-spss-statistics/book285130

Friedman, D. A. (2019). Citation as a social practice in a TESOL graduate program: A language socialization approach. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 44, 23-36. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2019.01.004

Göçen Kabaran, G. (2022). Graduate students' perceptions of the academic writing process and its problems: A qualitative study in Turkey. *Issues in Educational Research*, 32(3), 943-959. http://www.iier.org.au/iier32/gocen-kabaran.pdf

Hajar, A. & Mhamed, A. A. S. (2021). Exploring postgraduate students' challenges and strategy use while writing a master's thesis in an English-medium university in Kazakhstan. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 27(3), 187-207. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11233-021-09072-6

Harwood, N. & Petrić, B. (2017). *Experiencing Master's supervision: Perspectives of international students and their supervisors*. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/Experiencing-Masters-Supervision-Perspectives-of-international-students-and-their-supervisors/Harwood-Petric/p/book/9781138579590

Harwood, N. & Petrić, B. (2020). Adaptive master's dissertation supervision: A longitudinal case study. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 25(1), 68-83. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1541881

Hyland, K. (2007). Genre pedagogy: Language, literacy and L2 writing instruction. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16(3), 148-164. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2007.07.005

Hyland, F. (2016). Challenges faced by second language doctoral student writers in Hong Kong and their writing strategies. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 39(2), 158-180. https://doi.org/10.1075/aral.39.2.04hyl

IELTS (n.d.). *The world's most trusted English test*. https://ielts.org/

Jackson, J. (2018). Intervening in the intercultural learning of L2 study abroad students: From research to practice. *Language Teaching*, 51(3), 365-382. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444816000392

Jeyaraj, J. J. (2018). It's a jungle out there: Challenges in postgraduate research writing. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 18(1), 22-37. http://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2018-1801-02

Jones, A. (2005). Culture and context: Critical thinking and student learning in introductory macroeconomics. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(3), 339-354. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070500095788

Kho, M. G. W. & Muhammad, Y. Y. (2013). Writing difficulties faced by postgraduate TESOL students. *Proceedings of the USM-PPIP TESOL Colloquium*, 258-280.

Khorsheed, A. (2018). How we can find the cut off score of the scale tool? https://www.researchgate.net/post/How_we_can_find_the_Cut_off_score_of_the_S cale_tool

Liyanage, I., Walker, T. & Singh, P. (2015). TESOL professional standards in the "Asian century": Dilemmas facing Australian TESOL teacher education. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 35(4), 485-497. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2013.876388

McKinley, J. (2013). Displaying critical thinking in EFL academic writing: A discussion of Japanese to English contrastive rhetoric. *RELC Journal*, 44(2), 195-208. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688213488386

Nguyen, T. T. L. (2017). TESOL master's dissertation writing in Vietnam: Problems and genre-based remedial suggestions. *The European Journal of Applied Linguistics and TEFL*, 6(1), 173-194. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327903527_TESOL_master%27s_dissertat ion_writing_in_Vietnam_Problems_and_genre-based_remedial_suggestions

Nguyen, T. T. L. & Pramoolsook, I. (2014a). A move-based structure of the master's thesis literature review chapters by Vietnamese TESOL postgraduates. *LangLit: An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal*, 1(2), 283-301. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284142641_a_move-based_structure_of_the_master%27s_thesis_literature_review_chapters_by_vietnamese_tesol_postgraduates

Nguyen, T. T. L. & Pramoolsook, I. (2014b). Rhetorical structure of introduction chapters written by novice Vietnamese TESOL postgraduates. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies,* 20(1), 61-74. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279216833_Rhetorical_Structure_of_Intro duction_Chapters_written_by_Novice_Vietnamese_TESOL_postgraduates

Nguyen, T. T. L. & Pramoolsook, I. (2015a). Citation in Vietnamese TESOL: Analysis of master's thesis introduction chapters. *The Asian ESP Journal*, 2(1), 95-120. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283675053_Citation_in_Vietnamese_TES OL_Analysis_of_master%27s_thesis_introduction_chapters

Nguyen, T. T. L. & Pramoolsook, I. (2015b). Reporting verbs in literature review chapters of TESOL master's theses written by Vietnamese postgraduates. *ESP Today*, 3(2), 196-215. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329131371_Reporting_verbs_in_literature_review_chapters_of_tesol_master%27s_theses_written_by_Vietnamese_postgraduates

Nguyen, T. T. L. & Pramoolsook, I. (2015c). A move analysis of method chapters by Vietnamese TESOL master's students. *Research Scholar: An International Refereed e-Journal of Literary Explorations*, 3(1), 14-28. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284142444_A_move_analysis_of_method_chapters_by_Vietnamese_TESOL_master%27s_students

Nguyen, T. T. L. & Pramoolsook, I. (2015d). Move analysis of results-discussion chapters in TESOL Master's theses written by Vietnamese Students. *3L: Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 21(2), 1-15. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282515935

Nguyen, T. T. L. & Pramoolsook, I. (2016a). Citations in literature review chapters of TESOL master's theses by Vietnamese postgraduates. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 16(2), 18-32. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306209431

Nguyen, T. T. L. & Pramoolsook, I. (2016b). A move-based analysis of TESOL master's thesis conclusion chapters by Vietnamese postgraduates. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 6(1), 2-12. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305769218

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

Paltridge, B. & Starfield, S. (2020). *Thesis and dissertation writing in a second language: A handbook for students and their supervisors*. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/Thesis-and-Dissertation-Writing-in-a-Second-Language-A-Handbook-for-Students-and-their-Supervisors/Paltridge-Starfield/p/book/9781138048706

Paltridge, B. & Woodrow, L. (2012). Thesis and dissertation writing: Moving beyond the text. In R. Tang (Ed.), *Academic writing in a second or foreign language: Issues and challenges facing ESL/EFL academic writers in higher education contexts*. Continuum. https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/academic-writing-in-a-second-or-foreign-language-9781441173980/

Phakiti, A. & Li, L. (2011). General academic difficulties and reading and writing difficulties among Asian ESL postgraduate students in TESOL at an Australian university. *RELC Journal*, 42(3), 227-264. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688211421417

Pitura, J. (2022). Technology-enhanced socialisation into disciplinary writing in L2: Insights from the perceptions of MA TEFL students. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 35(9), 2361-2390. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1880440

Pringle Barnes, G. & Cheng, M. (2019). Working independently on the dissertation proposal: Experiences of international Master's students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(8), 1120-1132. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1450965

Qian, J. & Krugly-Smolska, E. (2008). Chinese graduate students' experiences with writing a literature review. *TESL Canada Journal*, 26(1), 68-86. https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v26i1.391

QILT (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching) (2023). *Graduate outcomes survey*. https://qilt.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey-(gos)

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

Saeed, M. A., Al Qunayeer, H. S. & AL-Jaberi, M. A. (2021). Exploring supervisory feedback formulation on academic writing of research proposals and postgraduates' responses to feedback: A case study. *SAGE Open*, 11(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211007125

Singh, M. K. M. (2016). International graduate students' academic writing practices in Malaysia: Challenges and solutions. *Journal of International Students*, 5(1), 12-22. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i1.439

Staples, S., Conrad, N., Dang, A. & Wang, H. (2024). Building language and genre awareness through learner corpus data in a second language writing course. *International Journal of Learner Corpus Research*, 10(1), 146-182. https://doi.org/10.1075/ijlcr.00043.sta

Strobl, C., Ailhaud, E., Benetos, K., Devitt, A., Kruse, O., Proske, A. & Rapp, C. (2019). Digital support for academic writing: A review of technologies and pedagogies. *Computers & Education*, 131, 33-48. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2018.12.005

Sükan, S. & Mohammadzadeh, B. (2022). Challenges of writing theses and dissertations in an EFL context: Genre and move analysis of abstracts written by Turkish M.A. and Ph.D. students. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, article 925420. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.925420

Tardy, C. M., Buck, R. H., Jacobson, B., LaMance, R., Pawlowski, M., Slinkard, J. R. & Vogel, S. M. (2022). "It's complicated and nuanced": Teaching genre awareness in English for general academic purposes. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 571, article 101117. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2022.101117

Wang, X. & Yang, L. (2012). Problems and strategies in learning to write a thesis proposal: A study of six M.A. students in a TEFL program. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 35(3), 324-341. https://doi.org/10.1515/cjal-2012-0024

Wette, R. & Furneaux, C. (2018). The academic discourse socialisation challenges and coping strategies of international graduate students entering English-medium universities. *System*, 78, 186-200. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.09.001

Woodrow, L. (2020). *Doing a master's dissertation in TESOL and applied linguistics.* Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/Doing-a-Masters-Dissertation-in-TESOL-and-Applied-Linguistics/Woodrow/p/book/9781138587298

Yin, R. K. (2015). *Qualitative research from start to finish.* The Guilford Press. https://www.routledge.com/Qualitative-Research-from-Start-to-Finish-Second-Edition/Yin/p/book/9781462517978

Appendices

Appendix 1: The questionnaire design and reliability

	Focus	No of items	Cronbach's alpha
Cluster 1	Thesis writing difficulties in general.	9	.823
Cluster 2	Difficulties with the abstract chapter.	5	.728
Cluster 3	Difficulties with the introduction chapter.	3	.696
Cluster 4	Difficulties with the literature review chapter.	8	.866
Cluster 5	Difficulties with the Methodology chapter.	8	.803
Cluster 6	Difficulties with the findings and discussion chapter.	12	.840
Cluster 7	Difficulties with the conclusion and implications chapter.	4	.814

Appendix 2: Students' perceptions of general thesis writing difficulties (N=29)

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	SD
When I was writing my MA thesis in general, I found it difficult to ...	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)		
1 ... use appropriate vocabulary.	4 (13.8%)	19 (65.5%)	2 (6.9%)	4 (13.8%)	0	2.21	0.86
2 ... define field-related terminology.	9 (31.0%)	14 (48.3%)	5 (17.2%)	1 (3.4%)	0	1.93	0.80
3 ... use appropriate grammar.	1 (3.4%)	12 (41.4%)	3 (10.3%)	13 (44.8%)	0	2.97	1.02
4 ... express ideas critically.	10 (34.5%)	13 (44.8%)	3 (10.3%)	3 (10.3%)	0	1.97	0.94
5 ... represent cohesive, coherent paragraphs.	8 (27.6%)	12 (41.4%)	1 (3.4%)	8 (27.6%)	0	2.31	1.17
6 ... avoid plagiarism.	11 (37.9%)	10 (34.5%)	4 (13.8%)	4 (13.8%)	0	2.03	1.05
7 ... include three steps (planning, writing and revision) in the writing process.	6 (20.7%)	13 (44.8%)	5 (17.2%)	5 (17.2%)	0	2.31	1.00
8 ... make in-text citations.	3 (10.3%)	14 (48.3%)	5 (17.2%)	7 (24.1%)	0	2.55	0.99
9 ... build a reference list.	6 (20.7%)	10 (34.5%)	0	11 (37.9%)	2 (6.9%)	2.76	1.35
Total						2.34	1.02

Appendix 3: Difficulties related to writing the abstract (N=29)

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	SD
When I was writing the abstract, I found it difficult to ...	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)		
1 ... limit the length.	5 (17.2%)	15 (51.7%)	2 (6.9%)	7 (24.1%)	0	2.38	1.05
2 ... describe a sequence of how/ what was done logically.	3 (10.3%)	20 (69.0%)	1 (3.4%)	5 (17.2%)	0	2.28	0.88
3 ... provide keywords.	5 (17.2%)	9 (31.0%)	3 (10.3%)	12 (41.4%)	0	2.76	1.18
4 ... avoid writing complex sentences.	3 (10.3%)	13 (44.8%)	5 (17.2%)	8 (27.6%)	0	2.62	1.01
5 ... describe the key findings of the study.	6 (20.7%)	16 (55.2%)	2 (6.9%)	5 (17.2%)	0	2.21	0.98
Total						2.45	1.02

Appendix 4: Difficulties related to the introduction chapter (N=29)

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree		
When I was writing the introduction chapter, I found it difficult to ...	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	Mean	SD
1 ... identify knowledge gaps.	7 (24.1%)	18 (62.1%)	2 (6.9%)	2 (6.9%)	0	1.97	0.78
2 ... indicate what had prompted to conduct my study.	4 (13.8%)	16 (55.2%)	1 (3.4%)	7 (24.1%)	1 (3.4%)	2.48	1.12
3 ... state research questions or hypotheses.	3 (10.3%)	13 (44.8%)	3 (10.3%)	8 (27.6%)	2 (6.9%)	2.76	1.18
Total						2.40	1.03

Appendix 5: Difficulties related to writing the literature review chapter (N=29)

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree		
When I was writing the literature review chapter, I found it difficult to ...	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	Mean	SD
1 ... describe relevant studies.	6 (20.7%)	18 (62.1%)	0	5 (17.2%)	0	2.14	0.95
2 ... choose which studies to review first.	8 (27.6%)	14 (48.3%)	2 (6.9%)	5 (17.2%)	0	2.14	1.03
3 ... synthesise the results of related studies.	9 (31.0%)	14 (48.3%)	4 (13.8%)	2 (6.9%)	0	1.97	0.87
4 ... evaluate the previous studies.	13 (44.8%)	14 (48.3%)	0	2 (6.9%)	0	1.69	0.81
5 ... establish a connection among studies reviewed in the chapter.	8 (27.6%)	17 (58.6%)	1 (3.4%)	3 (10.3%)	0	1.97	0.87
6 ... indicate knowledge gaps.	9 (31.0%)	15 (51.7%)	1 (3.4%)	4 (10.3%)	0	2.00	0.96
7 ... present and evaluate the related theoretical frameworks.	11 (37.9%)	17 (58.6%)	1 (3.4%)	0	0	1.66	0.55
8 ... classify literature coherently and logically.	11 (37.9%)	17 (58.6%)	1 (3.4%)	0	0	1.66	0.55
Total						1.90	0.82

Appendix 6: Difficulties related to writing the methodology chapter (N=29)

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree		
When I was writing the methodology chapter I found it difficult to ...	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	Mean	SD
1 ... provide justifications for the selected research methods.	3 (10.3%)	17 (58.6%)	4 (13.8%)	5 (17.2%)	0	2.38	0.90
2 ... describe data collection procedure.	2 (6.9%)	9 (31.0%)	2 (6.9%)	15 (51.7%)	1 (3.4%)	3.14	1.13
3 ... describe analysis of quantitative data.	4 (13.8%)	11 (37.9%)	9 (31.0%)	5 (17.2%)	0	2.52	0.95
4 ... justify analysis of quantitative data.	3 (10.3%)	15 (51.7%)	7 (24.1%)	4 (13.8%)	0	2.41	0.87
5 ... describe analysis of qualitative data.	4 (13.8%)	15 (51.7%)	4 (13.8%)	6 (20.7%)	0	2.41	0.98
6 ... justify analysis of qualitative data.	5 (17.2%)	15 (51.7%)	6 (20.7%)	3 (10.3%)	0	2.24	0.87
7 ... address the validity of the research.	8 (27.6%)	18 (62.1%)	2 (6.9%)	1 (3.4%)	0	1.86	0.69
8 ... address the reliability of the research.	5 (17.2%)	19 (65.5%)	5 (17.2%)	0	0	2.00	0.60
Total						2.37	0.87

Appendix 7: Difficulties related to the findings and discussion chapter (N=29)

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree		
When I was writing the findings and discussion , I found it difficult to ...	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	Mean	SD
1 ... visualise findings in the form of graphs, tables, charts.	1 (3.4%)	12 (41.4%)	2 (6.9%)	13 (44.8%)	1 (3.4%)	3.03	1.09
2 ... report the questionnaire findings.	3 (10.3%)	11 (37.9%)	2 (6.9%)	13 (44.8%)	0	2.86	1.13
3 ... report the findings from (quasi)-experiments.	1 (3.4%)	16 (55.2%)	9 (31.0%)	3 (10.3%)	0	2.48	0.74
4 ... report the interview findings.	2 (6.9%)	15 (51.7%)	2 (6.9%)	10 (34.5%)	0	2.69	1.04
5 ... report the findings from classroom observations.	3 (10.3%)	16 (55.2%)	5 (17.2%)	5 (17.2%)	0	2.41	0.91
6 ... analyse and interpret the findings.	8 (27.6%)	16 (55.2%)	2 (6.9%)	3 (10.3%)	0	2.00	0.89
7 ... summarise the findings.	4 (13.8%)	15 (51.7%)	2 (6.9%)	8 (27.6%)	0	2.48	1.06
8 ... discuss the findings.	8 (27.6%)	17 (58.6%)	1 (3.4%)	2 (6.9%)	1 (3.4%)	2.00	0.96
9 ... link the results back to the literature.	13 (44.8%)	13 (44.8%)	1 (3.4%)	2 (6.9%)	0	1.72	0.84

10 ... express my own opinions about the findings.	4 (13.8%)	15 (51.7%)	4 (13.8%)	5 (17.2%)	1 (3.4%)	2.45	1.06
11 ... reconsider key concepts in my study.	6 (20.7%)	13 (44.8%)	4 (13.8%)	6 (20.7%)	0	2.34	1.04
12 ... link different parts of the findings and discussion chapters.	7 (24.1%)	15 (51.7%)	4 (13.8%)	3 (10.3%)	0	2.10	0.90
Total						2.38	0.97

Appendix 8: Difficulties related to the conclusion and implications chapter (N =29)

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree		
When writing the conclusion and implications, I found it difficult to ...	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	Mean	SD
1 ... summarise the study briefly.	5 (17.2%)	10 (34.5%)	3 (10.3%)	11 (37.9%)	0	2.69	1.47
2 ... indicate the limitations of my research.	4 (13.8%)	9 (31.0%)	1 (3.4%)	14 (48.3%)	1 (3.4%)	2.97	1.24
3 ... make recommendations for further research.	2 (6.9%)	12 (41.4%)	2 (6.9%)	13 (44.8%)	0	2.90	1.08
4 ... draw pedagogic implications.	3 (10.3%)	15 (51.7%)	2 (6.9%)	9 (31.0%)	0	2.59	1.05
Total						2.78	1.14

Appendix 9: Interview questions for MA TESOL students

1. Could you tell me about yourself, your job, age, working experience?
2. What difficulties did you encounter when writing each thesis chapter? Why?
3. Which chapters were the most difficult to you? Why?
5. What factors do you think caused difficulties in writing your MA TESOL thesis? Why?
6. What factors influenced your writing? Why?

Thi Minh Chau Tran is a lecturer in the Faculty of Language and Tourism, Phu Xuan University, Hue, Vietnam. Her research interests are digital transformation in higher education and writing assessment.
Email: chau.tran@pxu.edu.vn

Bao Trang Thi Nguyen (corresponding author) is a lecturer, researcher in TESOL and applied linguistics. She has published in the fields of task-based language teaching and learning, teacher cognition, L2 writing, vocabulary acquisition, language and culture, learner proficiency and second language acquisition in diverse journals including *Language Teaching Research, System, TESOL Journal, RELC Journal, Asia Pacific Journal of Education, International Journal of Comparative Education, Language Testing in Asia, Language-Related Research*, and *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5285-7255
Email: ntbtrang@hueuni.edu.vn

Dr Pham Thi Hong Nhung obtained an MA and a PhD in applied linguistics with the University of Queensland, Australia. She has taught various postgraduate courses for the Faculty of English, University of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Hue University, Vietnam, and published in the field of applied linguistics and language education.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9621-8482
Email: n.pham@hueuni.edu.vn

Dr Lien-Huong Vo is senior lecturer at the University of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Hue University, Vietnam. Her main research expertise pertains to theoretical linguistics and translation studies. She is also interested in using linguistic tools to disentangle cultural notions in languages to support language teaching.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7922-7416
Email: vtlhuong@hueuni.edu.vn

Dr Van Huy Nguyen is a Lecturer in Applied Linguistics and TESOL at Hue University of Foreign Languages and International Studies. He earned his PhD in language education from The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. His main research interests are in the area of language planning and policy, with a special focus on language-in-education policy, English as the medium of instruction (EMI), and educational leadership in developing countries.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6826-6188
Email: nguyenvanhuy@hueuni.edu.vn