

Developing EFL Students MA Dissertation Supervision Practice from Supervisors' Perspectives in Libyan Context

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الملخص

تهدف هذه الورقة الى فهم كيفية تطوير ممارسة الاشراف على رسائل الماجستير لطلاب اللغة الانجليزية الإنجليزية كلغة اجنبية من وجهة نظر المشرفين في السياق الليبي. وقد اثرت هذه المسألة بسبب خبرة الباحث كأستاذ ومكشرف. ولتحقيق هدف الدراسة، تم استخدام المنهج النوعي للحصول على بيانات متعمقة حول ممارسة الاشراف من وجهة نظر المشرفين. لذلك. تم استخدام المقابلات شبه المنظمة كأداة لجمع البيانات النوعية. حيث كان المشاركون في الدراسة ثلاثة مشرفي ماجستير، وتم اختيارهم عمدا بناء على خبرتهم. وتم تحليل البيانات التي تم الحصول عليها باستخدام اسلوب التحليل الموضوعي. وقد أظهرت النتائج ان المشرفين يعانون من تحديات مختلفة مثل نقص المعرفة الاساسية لدى الطلاب حول اجراء الابحاث. كذلك قلة الامكانيات والتسهيلات في المؤسسات التعليمية، واجهاد المشرفين بأكثر من مهمة في نفس الوقت

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في الخدمة، وعدم توفير الورش التدريبية للمشرفين ، و كذلك وجود بعض المشاكل المالية التي تعيق المشرفين عن ممارسة حياتهم المهنية في مؤسساتهم. ولهذا اوصت هذه الدراسة بالتغلب على هذه التحديات من اجل تطوير الممارسات الإشرافية للمشرفين التي تقود لتحسين قدرات الطلاب البحثية.

Abstract

This paper aims to understand how to develop EFL students' MA dissertation supervision practice from supervisors' perspectives in the Libyan context. This issue was raised due to the researcher's experience as an MA students teacher and supervisor. To achieve the goal of this study, the qualitative method was used to gain in-depth data about supervision practice from supervisors' perspectives. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were utilized as a qualitative data instrument. The participants of the study were three MA supervisors, and they were chosen in purpose based on their experiences. The data obtained were analysed by employing the thematic analysis method. The findings revealed that supervisors are suffering from different challenges such as; a lack of students' background knowledge about doing research, lack of facilities in the institutions, more than one duty supervisor have, lack of training workshops for Supervisors, and financial problems that hinder supervisors from doing their career in their institutions. Thus, this study recommended to overcome these challenges in order to

develop supervisors' supervision practices which lead to improve students' abilities of research.

Keywords: Supervision- Supervisors- Challenges- Supervisee

1. Introduction

Nobody can ignore the role of supervisors in developing students' abilities in the research field. Therefore, their rights should be given. Roberts and Seaman (2018) argue conducting research and defending it improves students' achievement and helps them to learn from it. Gedamu (2018) stated that the learning experiences students may not forget after graduation might be the supervision process they have undergone when they were carrying out their research. It means that supervision is commonly acknowledged as being complex and multifaceted. It was also argued that supervising students requires blending academic knowledge and the skillful management of personal and professional relations (Wood and Louw,2018). This reveals that supervision operation is a common and vital part of the relationship between and their supervisors' MA students in higher education. Roberts and Seaman (2018) are concerned that understanding the responsibilities of the students and their supervisors can be helpful to both students and supervisors so that they may examine what they should do and how they should go about playing their roles optimally.

2. Literature Review

This section aims “to get a sense of what we already know about a particular question or problem, to understand how it has been addressed methodologically, and to figure out where we need to go next with our research” (Norris & Ortega, 2006, p. 5). It reviews and addresses the theoretical concepts about the challenges EFL MA students’ supervisors encounter during the practice of dissertation Supervision. Therefore, the definition of supervision, students’ challenges during supervision Practice, and supervisor challenges that influence effective supervision are reviewed below.

2.1. Definition of Supervision

There are different definitions for effective supervision, researchers have come up with ways of defining it based on their vision, mission, values, and research outputs (Grant et al., 2014). Supervision is considered a complex process. It is a social interaction between two people who might have diverging views but the same objectives. It is also defined as an interpersonally focused one-to-one relationship between the supervisor and the supervisees (Wood and Louw, 2018). Pearson and Brew (2002) state the main goal of supervisory activity is to facilitate the student becoming an independent professional researcher and scholar in their field, capable of

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adapting to various research areas. Research work and the relationship between the supervisor and the student determines the successful completion of the research thesis (Da Costa, 2016). This means supervision plays a central role in any research. Supervisors' motivation to supervise the students is very important (Askew et al., 2016). It was observed that "the role of the supervisor is a complex one, requiring many skills and much is required of the host supervisor" (Chur-Hansen & McLean 2007b p. 274). The supervisor role becomes even more critical when a supervisor is required to build a culture of productive interaction with his/her supervisee (Easton, 2003).

Furthermore, Alsied et al., (2017) state that the quality of postgraduate research degree supervision depends as much on the supervisor's ability to meet the needs of a student as on the student's expectations of her or his responsibilities concerning those of the supervisor. Zhao et al., (2007) argue most relationships fall between these extremes; good in some ways, fair or poor in others. Moreover, Kiley (2011) argues that supervisors' responsibility is to support and guide students to identify feasible research topics and questions, develop study protocols, provide oversight of the research process, complete their projects on time, and integrate candidates into academia. Ladany et al., (2013) noted that quality supervision includes an expert in a given field guiding students through conveying garnered and useful information.

2.4. Students' Challenges during Supervision Practice

Libyan students face problems with their supervisors. For example, they may not know who to select and after some time they tend to change their supervisors for unknown reasons (Alsied et al., 2017). Furthermore, some supervisors may not be interested in working with students who choose fewer interesting topics or students who are not active and not motivated to cooperate with his/her supervisor. Other supervisors do not frequently follow up with the students because they are not available all the time in the college. Another obstacle is that when students ask for help or advice from the supervisor, the supervisor does not always offer or give any help or direction. As a result, he/she lets the student work most of the time on his/her own without even having a look at the student's work. And even if they give any comments some students find it difficult to understand and meet the requirements. Some students do not know how to write their thesis and depend on their supervisor to do the work for them (Elmarimi, 2021).

Moreover, another study conducted by Matin and Khan (2017, p 2) found that dissertation work needs to be done in a precise and systematic way and briefly mentions the problems encountered by the researchers as follows:

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1. personal problems i.e. lack of student knowledge and experience, lack of commitment in thesis work, lack of confidence, time management, excess workload, lack of funds, inadequate and irregular meetings with supervisors.
2. Institute-related problems i.e., inadequate guidance and resources of the institute, absence of research facilities, lack of formats of thesis writing.
3. Supervision related i.e., student supervision relationship, supervisor knowledge and interest, regular contact between supervisor and students, timely feedback.
4. Research environment related i.e. presence of dedicated facilities and research council/cell, peer support.

In addition, another study conducted by Alsied et al., (2017) found the main problems students face when they do their MA dissertations are identifying the area of interest, choosing a topic, formulating research problems, writing a literature review, and difficulties collecting data where resources are not easy to get and the internet is not always accessible. Costa (2018) students in higher education generally struggle to complete their research endeavor in a specified time. Moreover, Komba, (2016) concluded that both supervisors and students encounter challenges when they do research. They also stated that supervising students undertaking research is a significant part of the work of university lecturers.

2.5. Supervisor Challenges Influence Effective Supervision

The literature shows that the successful completion of any written research work depends on multiple factors about the supervisor and supervisee. These factors can be experience, attitude toward the completion of the thesis, and the ability of the student (Donnelly and Fitzmaurice, 2013). However, Elmaremi (2021), stated that supervisors sometimes focus too much on the completion of the thesis and ignore the development of academic competencies of postgraduate students as researchers. Moreover, certain problems can affect the completion of the thesis, such as time and its high-quality poor student-supervisor relationships, and inexperienced or incompetent dissertation supervisors (Rugg & Petre 2007). It also argues that the most common complaints from research supervisees are infrequent contact with supervisors, who may be too busy with administrative or teaching responsibilities, who have too many students, or who are away from the university too often (Ismail et al., 2011).

Furthermore, the literature shows that there are weaknesses in PhD supervision in Australian research-intensive universities due to the limited time available to supervisors and their inability to cater to larger and more diverse PhD supervisee populations who felt dissatisfied (Harman, 2002). Moreover, four other factors affect research supervisors' workload agreements, time pressures, quality of students, and recognition of the

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supervisors' contribution (Askew et al., 2016). It is also argued that there is a lack of research skills, conceptualized that lack of on-campus interpersonal dimension can be a disadvantage for research students as face-to-face interaction helps them in the acquisition of research knowledge (Lindner et al., 2001).

The literature also identifies several factors that contribute to mismatches between the roles and responsibilities of the supervisors, such as; poor matches between the student and organization (McDermott, 2008) or between the student and supervisor (Hastings, 2010). The inability of supervisors to provide the level of supervision that the student expects or requires due to conflicting demands and workload; time pressures; resource limitations; and cost implications is another issue (Allen, 2011; Chow & Suen, 2001; Spencer, 2007);. Moreover, the multiple roles and responsibilities the host supervisor assumes will, at times, conflict with one another i.e., assessor versus mentor; teacher versus manager (Bray & Nettleton, 2007; Hastings, 2004; Le Maistre et al., 2006; Neary, 2000).

In addition, other factors influence and impact how supervisors understand and perform their roles. The supervisor role is a complex one, requiring many skills and much is required of the host supervisor" Chur-Hansen and McLean, 2007b, p. 274). These key players, however, have many

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demands on their time aside from their supervision duties, and time constraints have been identified as a key barrier to quality experiences (Coates & Gormley, 1997; Hastings, 2004; Keating et al., 2010). Further, a study conducted by Abdulkareem (2013) pointed out that the obstacles that Arab-speaking post-graduate students struggle with are their weak academic writing, mistakes related to sentence structure, for instance, grammatical mistakes, organizing new word expressions, and most of the instructions are given in Arabic because the teacher is a non-native speaker.

Moreover, Spear (2000) found that the most common complaint from research students concerns irregular contact with supervisors, who most of the time are preoccupied with teaching or administrative duties, have too many supervisees' or have to be away from the university frequently for conferences or external examinations. Another issue mentioned by Allen (2008, p.2), who pointed out that "The majority of teachers have an insufficient command and training of English to be able to teach it effectively and teachers with insufficient subject knowledge have very little if any confidence". Karavas-Doukas's (1998) argued that innovation can lead to positive changes in curricula and the beliefs and behaviour of teachers. Thus, the authority of education and the universities should run training sessions for teachers and supervisors because this kind of knowledge is essential for teacher

development but these should be focused and organized to produce positive outcomes.

It is obvious in recent years there has been increasing research interest in whether and the extent to which L2 students writing a thesis in English experience difficulties in understanding and meeting the requirements of the genre. Supervisors report student difficulties in structuring a consistent and balanced argument in extended texts, particularly in organizing appropriate content for specific chapters. This may arise from insufficient knowledge of the genre (Elmarimi, 2021). Supervisors also report student difficulties in positioning arguments about those of the literature. This may be caused by a failure to use appropriate modal verbs when making claims about their research findings (Bitchener & Baskurkmen, 2006).

The literature above shows that most of the studies have focused on the issues faced by postgraduate students in writing their MA dissertations and ignoring the supervisors. Therefore, this study particularly has focused on the challenges faced by the supervisors. This study is still up to date in the Libya context. The reason behind conducting this study was that students' skills of research would never improve unless to overcome their supervisors' issues.

3. Statement of the Problem

It was noted in recent years, that there has been increasing research interest on students' challenges faced while writing their MA dissertations (Elmarimi, 2021), however, certain supervisors suffer from different issues. The literature showed that none of any studies investigated supervisors' challenges during their practice of dissertation supervision in the Libyan context. Thus, this issue is explored to improve the practice of dissertation supervision which leads to improving EFL students' research abilities.

4. Aims of the Study

This study aims to:

- identify the challenges supervisors of EFL MA students encounter during the practice of thesis supervision to develop students' abilities in research
- find out the solutions to the challenges supervisors face during supervision practice.

5. Research questions

1. What challenges do EFL MA students' supervisors encounter during their practice of dissertation supervision?
2. What are the solutions to these challenges that supervisors encounter during supervision practice?

6. Methodology Used

The researcher adopted a qualitative research design. It was used because; it dealt with the perspectives of instructional supervisors from their viewpoint of daily life in supervision. Therefore, a semi-structured interview was adopted as a data collection tool. The interview sessions were run with only three supervisors from the Libyan Academy and the University of Zawia in Libya. The data collected was transcribed and analyzed by using the thematic analysis method. All ethical concerns required in human research have been considered.

7. Data Analysis and Discussion

The data gained from the semi-structured interviews were analysed qualitatively and then discussed. The current study used theoretical analysis because the research analysis is driven by research questions. This method is called the thematic analysis method. The main goal of thematic analysis is to divide important and interesting data into themes and patterns (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). It is a method of analysing reporting themes within qualitative research data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The researcher needs to transform his analysis into an interpretable piece of writing by using vivid and compelling extract examples that relate to the themes, research question, and literature. The findings gained from the data showed many challenges supervisors encounter during their Practice of MA dissertation supervision.

These themes are students' lack of student' background knowledge about doing research, lack of facilities in the institutions, more than one duty supervisor, lack of training workshops for supervisors, and financial problems that hinder supervisors from doing their best in their institutions. These challenges are analysed and presented below.

Student's lack of background knowledge about doing research

The findings revealed that all the supervisors mentioned that they are certain students are not ready to start doing their dissertations. For example, Supervisor A stated that *some students have background knowledge about research. They do not know the idea or content of their work, and their work is full of mistakes and errors.* Supervisor B clarified his point of view by saying: *"I guess students come from a background where they are fully dependent on teachers and lack of critical thinking skills, lack of self-confidence in their writing skills and low language proficiency"*. In line with his opinion, supervisor D also agreed with the point that students lack practicality in research writing when he said:

Students have the subject entitled 'research methodology' that they know the theoretical part but they do not practice. In other words, students were not exposed to sufficient formal instruction in research

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methodology but to insufficient or ineffective research methodology courses.

The findings above are in line with Abdulkareem (2013), who argued that Arab-speaking post-graduate students struggle with their weak academic writing, mistakes related to sentence structure, for instance, grammatical mistakes, organizing new word expressions, and most of the instructions are given in Arabic because the teacher is a non-native speaker. Elmarimi,(2021) added that supervisors report student difficulties in structuring a consistent and balanced argument in extended texts, particularly in organizing appropriate content for specific chapters. This may arise from insufficient knowledge of the genre. Therefore, to overcome these challenges different actions should be conducted such as; building student-supervisor relationships, refreshing the supervisors' research knowledge, and the necessary development of skills and experience that support students' research work.

Moreover, all the supervisors agreed that the reason behind “the students' poor background” is the necessity to give students enough time to study the research methodology as a subject in early semesters to give them the chance to practice academic research writing as much as possible. Matin and Khan (2017) clarified that students suffer because they had a lack of knowledge and experience, lack of commitment in thesis work, lack of confidence, time

management, excess workload, lack of funds, and inadequate and irregular meetings with supervisors. Rugg and Petre (2007) argued that certain problems can affect the completion of the thesis, such as time and its high quality poor student-supervisor relationships, and inexperienced or incompetent dissertation supervisors.

Lack of facilities in the institutions

The interview findings revealed almost a similar point of view and most of the supervisors being interviewed had blames on the institution itself as it is the place where all English language skills are taught. The data show that all supervisors were suffering from poor facilities in their institutions. For example, Supervisors A, B, and D said that they do have good facilities such as a sitting room for them or offices to meet our students with internet access, and public libraries in their university. Supervisor B added that:

due to the circumstances in Libya sometimes students and supervisors can not meet. When talking about a Master's dissertation I strongly assure they need a special environment to do so. This is because it is very difficult to work in a miserable environment.

The findings are in agreement with Spear (2000) who found that the most common complaint from supervisees concerns irregular contact with their supervisors, who most of the time are preoccupied with teaching or administrative duties, have too many supervisees' or have to be away from the

university frequently for conferences or external examinations. The findings also showed that supervisor D argued that there is a shortage of teaching staff members. This lack leads teachers to work overload which affects their supervision. He suggested:

Students, especially need special academic guidance, and the college should have places to create workshops through which students can present their topics in front of the public this also will help them avoid their fears and use the language.

Similarly, supervisor A blamed the English department at his college. Supervisors suggested that the department should provide an academic environment where students can practice the English language as they cannot practice it outside. This is because dissertation work needs to be done in a precise and systematic way and briefly (Matin and Khan, 2017).

Lack of time management

The analysed data show that there are some obstacles supervisors face such as; time management, and carrying more duties at the same time. They all agreed that this hider them to improve their practice supervision. For instance, supervisor B considered time as one of the important challenges. He described this by saying:

The responsibility of setting time for students to write their dissertations is laid on the department side as they are who put rules

and list the schedule for us “supervisors and supervisees”. Supervisors are also lecturers at college and this means that we have other commitments as students do and if we do not have enough time we would not be able to submit well-written work.

Furthermore, supervisor D was also suffering from a lack of time management in his career as a teacher and supervisor. He said, *“It is very hard to manage between the different duties I have such as; lecturer, administrator, supervisor, other academic duties, and my family requirements at the same time”*. These findings are in line with Ismail et al., (2011) results, when they found the most common complaints from research supervisees are infrequent contact with supervisors, who may be too busy with administrative or teaching responsibilities, who have too many students, or who are away from the university too often. Therefore, the institutions should consider this issue. Costa (2018) argued students in higher education generally struggle to complete their research endeavor in a specified time.

Lack of training sessions for Supervisors

The findings revealed that none of the supervisors in this study were involved in any training sessions to improve their practice supervision. For example, supervisor A said, *“I have never had such a training session. Our university did not do anything training sessions related to supervision at all”*. This means these supervisors suffer from a lack of up-to-date knowledge related to

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how improving supervision practice. This finding agrees with Allen's (2008) argument in which he mentioned that most teachers have an insufficient command and training of English to be able to teach it effectively and teachers with insufficient subject knowledge have very little if any confidence. Furthermore, the findings show supervisor B added, *"I have not attended any English conference locally or internationally since I was a PhD student in the UK"*. Moreover, supervisor D said, *"As a teacher and supervisor, I did not receive any support from my university to become more active in my job. They let us work full-time as teachers in our colleges. This effect negatively on my research skills"*. This may affect their students' achievements in their classes and as researchers. This finding is against Karavas-Doukas's (1998) findings which say that innovation can lead to positive changes in curricula and the beliefs and behaviour of teachers.

Financial problems hinder supervisors from doing their best in their institutions

The findings gained from the data confirmed that all the interviewees suffered from financial problems at their University. For instance, supervisor A and D complained that they had not received any payments related to their teaching MA courses and their supervision sessions since they started. Supervisor B added I have a bad experience with the financial department at my University. I have other colleagues who are still suffering from the same issue. This may

effect negatively on the teachers' and supervisors' attitudes toward their careers at the university. One of these negative aspects is that these supervisors may not deal with new students to be their supervisees, or as Elmaremi (2021), stated they sometimes focus too much on the completion of students 'dissertations and ignore the development of academic competencies of their postgraduate students as researchers

8. Conclusion

This study provides a deeper understanding of the challenges that EFL Libyan supervisors encounter during supervision practice. It is being carried out to determine the reasons behind these challenges and it offers ways for overcoming them. This study employed qualitative methods using semi-structured interviews to collect data. Only three MA supervisors were interviewed. The gained data was transcribed and analysed by thematic analysis method. The findings revealed that supervisors have different challenges such as; a lack of students' background knowledge about doing research, lack of facilities in the institutions, more than one duty supervisor, lack of training workshops for Supervisors, and financial problems that hinder supervisors from doing their career in their institutions. For the research supervisor, it is vital to understand what the student is going through to have successful outcomes. Therefore, all of these challenges should be considered

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to develop students' research skills and supervisors' supervision practices in their institutions.

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