

Writing Thesis in English Education: Challenges Faced by Students

Hari Prasad Tiwari

Abstract

A thesis is the most important write up in a researcher's life. Writing the research document in the form of a thesis is considered as the most challenging among the students. Keeping this view in mind, the present study was conducted to investigate the major challenges facing by the students of Masters of Education (M. Ed.) in English under Tribhuvan University (T.U.) while writing thesis. Fifteen students who have submitted the final draft of thesis in the Department of English Education of their respective campuses in partial fulfillment of M.Ed. in English and waiting for viva-voce were selected employing non-random purposive sampling procedure. The researcher used interview as a tool to collect the data which included open ended questions only. Interviews were audio recorded and they were transcribed, thematized and presented in narrative form. The findings were presented employing descriptive technique of qualitative data analysis. The findings of the study revealed that unsupportive behavior of the supervisors and difficulties of selecting the appropriate field or area of the study are major challenges while writing the thesis in English Education.

Keywords: challenges, English education, thesis writing.

Introduction

Students are required to conduct independent research work i.e. thesis writing in the second year to complete Master of Education (M. Ed.) in English Education in annual programme and in the fourth semester in the semester based programme under the Faculty of Education, Tribhuvan University(T.U.) . Thesis writing is related to the specialization subjects. Faculty of Education has determined full mark 50 and pass mark 25 for this particular course. This course aims at helping the students to write a language related thesis. It consists of specific activities for three successive phases of a research. In the first phase the students begin with the background reading, formulating a research problem and developing a proposal. In the second phase the students carry out a research and in the third phase they produce the thesis.

Writing thesis is not as overwhelming as some may initially think. However, students face a lot of challenges while writing or even getting prepared for writing thesis. Their difficulties range from identifying and thinking of the area of investigation to the process of analyzing the collected data and reporting the findings. They seek for special help from the side of the supervisors to accomplish their theses. Being a lecturer of English Education in affiliated campus of Tribhuvan University, I also have been supervising theses of M.Ed. in English Education since 2066 B.S. During my theses supervision in English Education, I got chance to interact with my research students. In the conversations students tried to share their challenges while writing thesis in English Education. The interests of the students to share challenges during the time of writing thesis attracted me to investigate common challenges while writing thesis in English Education.

The main objective of the study was to find out the major challenges faced by students while

writing theses in English Education. Along with this, the study also tries to find out the causes of challenges while writing theses in English Education and to suggest some pedagogical suggestions and implications.

Review of Literature

A thesis is a document submitted for an academic degree or professional qualification presenting the author's research and findings. Paltridge (2002) has defined thesis as a written product of a systematic study that results from a period of supervision of the supervisor. Thesis writing can be taken as a piece of independent research to be successfully completed as a part of a bachelor's or master's degree course (Hart, 2005). It is generally a requirement for higher-level degree programmes and is a preliminary requirement for attaining a degree and graduate in honors. In Nepal, the term thesis is used specifically to refer to master's thesis which is submitted in partial fulfillment for master's degree in universities and campuses.

Thesis writing should be understood as an investigation requiring an authentic proposal performed by a student, and in the process investigation of theories or previous studies and the categorization of authentic or current data are required (Owens, 2009). It generates scientific mindedness and facilitates the learning of how to identify a research topic and research problem, how to formulate research questions and objectives, how to design and implement a research, how to manage and interpret data and how to report a research. Thesis work needs to be done in such a precise and systematic way so that the students' knowledge, skill, attitudes and values becomes apparent in the thesis work.

Thesis writing process normally starts from choosing an area and then a sub and sub-area in our subject. Next, we need to collect and assemble reference materials and relevant documents. After selecting a problem or point for further elaboration, we need to develop a proposal known as thesis proposal. The thesis proposal describes our idea; theme and the method of research that we plan to take up. Thesis should be written or accomplished in accordance with framework or format prescribed by the departments or campuses or universities. There seems to be slight differences in the format of the thesis in different faculties of T.U. Even within the same faculty, different departments have their own format to be followed.

Sharma (2008, p.250) has mentioned following framework for thesis writing which is prescribed by the Faculty of Education, T.U.

Preliminary Pages

It includes cover page, inside cover page, declaration, recommendation for acceptance, recommendation for evaluation, evaluation and approval, dedication, acknowledgement, abstract, table of contents, list of tables and charts and list of abbreviations and symbols.

The cover page and inside cover page include the information such as the title of the thesis, the name of the researcher, date of submission and the name of the institution to which the thesis is submitted. Similarly, declaration is written by the researcher claiming the originality of his thesis. The recommendation for acceptance and evaluation are written in the theses by the supervisors and research guidance committee with a request to the concerned body to evaluate and approve the theses. Precise summary of the thesis is stated in the abstract section. Finally table of contents, the list of tables and charts and the abbreviations and symbols are presented in different pages

The Body of the Thesis

The body of the thesis includes five different chapters. In the first chapter, we write an introduction including a precise background of the study, an explicit statement of problem, some clear objectives, research questions, significance of the study, delimitations of the research and operational definition of the key terms

Chapter two of the thesis includes review of the related literature. The review can be of both theoretical and empirical. This chapter also includes implications of the review of related literature and conceptual framework as a summary of the theory used in the research.

The third chapter of the thesis presents the methodology ,including research design, samples, sampling procedures, data collection tools and procedures and data analysis and interpretation procedures.

The fourth chapter states the analysis and interpretation of the data. Different charts, tables, figures, descriptions explanations, discussions, narratives etc. are used in order to process and display the collected data.

Finally, in the fifth chapter effective conclusion of the entire thesis is written. Based on the analysis, findings and recommendations are also presented. These are the specific suggestions for policy level and practice level.

References and Appendices

These are the parts that appear after the main body. The reference section presents the comprehensive list of books, articles, theses and other reading materials which are cited in the body of the thesis. Similarly appendices section presents tools of the research for example: questionnaires, tests, etc.

Writing thesis following above mentioned format is not an easy task for the majority of the students who are studying M.Ed. in English. They may face various challenges due to their incomplete knowledge of research methodology, lack of commitment, limited availability of resources, less support from the side of the supervisors, etc.

According to Murray (2011, p.2), ‘Thesis is a far bigger project than most students will ever have undertaken before, it requires more independent study, more self- motivation.’ In addition, Berndtss , et al. (2008, p.4) stated that the thesis project was probably the biggest project that students would have undertaken in students’ academic life. In line with those two ideas, Paltridge and Starfield (2007, p.25) stated that for all students, writing a thesis is a challenge; for those writing in English whose first language is not English, the challenges are even greater. No doubt, that thesis writing is not an easy project to be done and it is more challenging among the other types of writing for the students.

According to Helm (1989), as cited in Lessing and Schulze (2003, p. 159), ‘postgraduate research pose three problem areas, namely the research design, the data collecting and processing and the report writing’. The writing phase of the research report, be it a dissertation or thesis, has been posing a lot of challenges to students. Wang and Yang (2012) found challenges as their respondents were found to struggle with theoretical knowledge and logical organization, and they could not analyze and synthesize the existing literature about their own research topic, and think critically while writing their academic research report.

Wang and Li (2008) conducted a study to explore the thesis writing experiences of a small group of international postgraduate research students at one Australian university. In this study, the author sought to identify, among others, the challenges the students faced in their thesis writing process. The findings indicated that the students faced a lot of challenges in their thesis writing. Another similar study was conducted by Cadman (1997) in which it was revealed that the main cause of the challenges that students faced in writing their theses and dissertations could be attributed to different epistemologies in which the students had been trained and in which their identities as learners were rooted.

As the literature summarized above clearly shows, in the process of writing thesis there may occur several challenges. Scholars in the related area have suggested a variety of solutions to avoid these possible challenges or solve them. Han (2014) best summarizes these suggestions as follows: administrators, teachers and students should made efforts collectively. For independent institutions, it is important to raise both teachers' and students' awareness in the importance in thesis writing. Teachers should shoulder the responsibility of guiding students in thesis writing and enhancing their abilities. The following effective measures will be helpful: improving the quality of teaching; perfecting the curriculum; enhancing field research; improving pedagogy; improving assessment; improving educational management; cultivating students' rigor and diligence in learning and writing; researching every requirements of undergraduate thesis writing. All these mentioned above would push English teaching practice in the undergraduate level to a new height (p. 127).

Methodology

The study is conducted through qualitative research method and it is based on primary sources of data. The researcher purposively selected three campuses viz Mahendra Multiple Campus Nepalgunj, Bageshwori Multiple Campus Kohalpur and Babai Multiple Campus Bardiya and employed purposive sampling. After selecting three campuses, he selected fifteen students (five from each campus) who have submitted the final draft of their theses in the department of English Education of respective campuses and waiting for the viva-voce. The researcher used interview as a research instrument in the study. Open ended questions were asked to the students to discover the challenges facing by them while completing their thesis work. The interview was recorded in audio recording device and important notes were also taken during interviews. The face-to-face interview was conducted with each student only one time (altogether fifteen interviews) and they were transcribed and themetised. The researcher has analyzed and interpreted the data using narrative and descriptive techniques of qualitative data analysis.

Results and Discussion

The aim of the interview is to investigate the major challenges faced by the students while writing thesis in English Education under the Faculty of Education, T.U. The researcher conducted the interviews with the sample students. The audio recorded interviews were analyzed qualitatively and during the analysis five themes of challenges emerged. Analysis and interpretation of each theme has been presented here.

Supervisor Related Challenge

During the interview the participants complained about the uncooperative behavior of supervisors.

All the students stated that supervisors do not show any sympathy to the researcher and always speak angrily when they talk about the challenges of thesis. Thirteen participants say that supervisors always seek for personal benefit rather than helping students. One student further added that supervisors indirectly demand money from the students. In this line one participant reported that

“.....once I had problem about analyzing the collected data. So, I met him (supervisor) in the campus. He instructed me well. When I was ready to leave, he called me by my name and proposed me to take the insurance of three Lakh Rupees .His statement shocked me. When I politely refused his proposal, he urged me to take the insurance of one Lakh rupees. Lastly, I agreed and accepted his (supervisor’s) proposal. Later I came to know that he was the agent of one life insurance company.”

One of the participants shared his amusing behavior of his supervisor in the following way.

“I was in the final stage of the writing thesis. I printed the final draft of the thesis according to the format given by the supervisor and the research guidance committee. I visited my supervisor and handed the final draft to my supervisor. He looked that in a glance and looked at me with an angry mood and said the font size is small; font is not Times New Roman, double spacing is not maintained so you have to reshape it. I refused that saying sir I have one desk top center in the city, I have good knowledge of computer. I typed the thesis myself. The layout of thesis is prepared according to your guidance. I tried to assure him but he started to shout. The next day I brought the same copy by changing the cover and inside cover page only and I handed to my supervisor. He again looked that in a glance and accepted saying now its o.k. It proved that my supervisor was quite unfamiliar to computer.”

On the basis of the responses given by the respondents it can be concluded that supervisors show unethical behavior to the students while supervising their students in thesis writing. The statement made by the participant proofs that supervisors supervise the theses for money and for their personal benefit but not for the betterment of the researcher.

Resource Related Challenge

The respondents were asked whether the library of their campus provides students with books they need for doing research and their responses were almost similar except for one. Fourteen students stated that books are not available in the library. The library does not include all the books that are required for students and most of these books focus only on other faculties. There is a lack of up to date resources needed for research. So, students waste their time looking for the books and at the end they find nothing. One of the students reported that the library contained all the books the students need and the problem is not with the resources but with the students themselves because some of them do not know how to search and find the best books. All the students stated that the internet is not available in the campus and if it is available, the connection is very slow and is only for the teachers not for the students. Some students can have access to the internet only if they have their own network in their mobile phones. So, this is also another obstacle that most of the students face while writing thesis.

Topic Related Challenge

The analysis showed that the participants also suffered from topic-related challenges. Some participants (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 11, and 12) reported that choosing an appropriate and original topic was the hardest part. Some also complained that the topics assigned by their advisors did not appeal to them. The following excerpt can best prove these topic-related challenges:

“The supervisor gave the topic, well; the topic did not attract me. I do not have enthusiasm on the topic that does not attract me.”

All the students said that selecting the appropriate topic is really challenging and problematic in writing thesis in the department of English education. The selection of the research topic is chosen correctly when the researchers know the problem in details. The knowledge about the problem can be obtained by literature review, previous work experience, consultation with the experts in the related field. But, the students do not want to go through the literature and seek for readymade title from the side of the supervisor. In line with this three of the participants stated that they had visited their supervisors for topic but they (the supervisors) were not ready to provide the topics. They further stated that the duty of selecting the topic was of supervisors not the researchers. This fact revealed that students feel challenging to select the title due to their misconception regarding the selection of topic of research.

One student added “My supervisor gave me the list of theses carried out in various campuses under the department of English education. When I went out through that list I thought that there is no topic left for me.”

Five of the participants mentioned that their supervisors suggested them to read at least five sample theses and research books to finalize the topic. Two of the participants mentioned that they had tried to buy that books suggested by their supervisors but they were not available in the local market. One of the participants stated that he had gone to Kathmandu to buy books and to make photocopies of the sample theses. More interestingly, he further added that he went through the books that he bought and the theses but he could not finalize the topic.

Time and Money Related Challenge

Most of the participants were school teachers. Ten of them were the teachers of private schools. Most of the participants stated the inadequacy of time while writing the thesis. Eight of them stated that they have to be in school from 9: A.M. to 4:P.M. They have to prepare tests for the schools, check the answer copies of the test, and check the homework copies of the students during off hour of the school. So, they don't have time to read resources for writing the thesis. Twelve participants added that money is the main problem while writing thesis in English education. They also added that they have to buy books, pay for the external supervisor, pay for printing, photocopy and binding, for all these the cost of thesis goes high. In line with this one of the respondents shared

“... I have submitted the final draft of the thesis in the department and I am waiting for viva-voce. When I talked about the amount I should pay during the time of viva-voce to the department head, he replied that the external examiner is appointed by Dean's Office, Kathmandu. Generally the expert is appointed from central department of English education. So you all (students waiting for viva-voce) have to pay the airplane fare and daily allowance of the external examiner by dividing the amount.”

Ten of the participants stated that they were from poor family background. They also added that they

themselves managed the money for their study. So they regarded thesis writing as an economical burden for them. One of the participant interestingly added that his elder brother had already completed M. Ed. in English from the same campus. He had paid seventeen thousand rupees during the time of viva voce of his thesis. It has proved that writing thesis in M. Ed. in English is really costly.

Research Methodology Challenge

As ten of the participants mentioned that they were unfamiliar to the research methodology to carry out the research because they were not regular in the classroom. One of the participants mentioned that he had passed research methodology paper by reading guess paper. The participants felt difficulty to select appropriate research methodology to the topic on which they were going to carry out the research. All the participants touched upon problem areas such as gathering data, ensuring questionnaire validity, interviewing, analyzing data, and determining the sample. Two of the participants further added that campus never organized research methodology related workshop and seminars which are essential for students who are writing thesis.

Conclusion and Implications

It is worth noting that writing a thesis or dissertation is not an easy task. The students always need proper guidance and supervision from the side of the supervisor and research guidance to make their theses good in quality. Due to the lack of proper guidance of the thesis supervisors and students' incomplete knowledge of research methodology, a large number of students face many challenges during the time of writing thesis in English education. Moreover, thesis supervisors have to play supervisory roles so that the students feel easy to complete the thesis in time. The findings revealed that students are extremely frustrated with behavior of their supervisors during the time of thesis writing. So, supervisors should not forget ethical values and be able to distinguish about what is right and wrong while supervising students. Researcher and supervisors both should try to develop positive rapport. Similarly, selection of the appropriate topic causes problem to the students during the proposal writing phase of the students. Though the task of selecting topic is of the students but proper guidance and care should be given from the side of the supervisors for selecting the appropriate topic. Without sufficient literature review, the students cannot select the topic. But, there may not be sufficient resources in their institutions. So, supervisors should help them to locate the required literature. To help learners overcome such obstacles, supervisors must encourage their students to read widely to enrich their knowledge about research and research methodology. Moreover, students should also be involved in writing real empirical thesis.

It is recommended that more emphasis should be given to the investigation of the difficulties facing by the students in writing thesis in the Nepalese context. By doing so, it would be possible to be more aware of, and avoid, these challenges in the future. Further research should also focus on large number of participants to achieve generalization of the findings and more practical studies should focus on specific areas of research.

References

- Basturkmen, H. (2009). Commenting on results in published research articles and masters dissertations in language teaching. *Journal of English for Academic*, 8, 241-251.
- Bell, J. (2000). *Doing your research project*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

- Best, J. W. & Khan, J. V. (2006). *Research in education (10th ed.)*. Delhi: PHI Learning Private Limited.
- Bitchener, J., & Baskurkmen, H. (2006). Perceptions of difficulties of postgraduate L2 thesis student writing the discussion section. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 5, 4-18.
- Cadman, K. (1997). Thesis writing for international students: A question of identity? *English for Specific Purposes*, 16, 3-14.
- Hart, C. (2005). *Doing your masters dissertation*. New Delhi: SAGE
- Lessing A. C., & Schulze, S. (2003). Lecturers' experience of postgraduate supervision in a distance education context. *SAJHE/SATHO*, 17(2), 159-168.
- Li, X. K. (2012). *Exploring the generic features of MA theses in linguistics*. (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis). Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China.
- Murray, R. (2012). *How to write a thesis*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- O'Connell, F., & L., J. (2001). *A structural model of literature review: An analysis of Chinese postgraduate students' writing*. Paper presented at the BALEAP conference, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK.
- Paltridge, B. (2002). Thesis and dissertation writing: An examination of published advice and actual practice. *English for Specific Purposes*, 21(2), 125-143.
- Pearce, L. (2005). *How to examine a thesis?* New York Society for Research into Higher: Pearson Education
- Qiao, L. W. (2013). *A study of the language errors in MA thesis of English majors*. (Unpublished MA Thesis). Soochow University, Jiangsu, China.
- Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative inquiry in TESOL*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Samraj, B. (2008). A discourse analysis of Master's theses across disciplines with a focus on introductions. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7, 55-67.
- Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. (2000). *Intercultural communication: A discourse approach*. Beijing: Blackwell Publishers.
- Sharma, V. (2018). *Research methodology in English education*. Kathmandu: Sunlight Publication.
- Shen, F. (1989). The classroom and the wider culture: Identity as a key to learning English composition. *College Composition and Communication*, 40, 459-466 .
- Sidhu, K. S. (2001). *Methodology of research in education*. New Delhi: Sterling.
- Singh, Y. (2006). *Fundamental of research methodology and statistics*. New Delhi: New Age International.
- Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Swales, J. M. (2004). *Research genres: Explorations and applications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wang, T., & Li, L.Y. (2008). Understanding international postgraduate research students' challenges and pedagogical needs in thesis writing. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, 4 (3), 88-96.

Mr. Hari Prasad Tiwari is a lecturer of English Education at Mahendra Multiple Campus Nepalgunj, Banke where he lectures Interdisciplinary Readings and Language Testing to postgraduate students. He has completed M.Ed. in ELT. Currently he is pursuing Ph. D. from Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal.