

# **Challenges and Strategies in Graduate Thesis Writing: Insights from a Literature Review**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper aims to critically review the challenges faced by graduate students while writing thesis and strategies they employ to solve the problems of thesis writing. The research approach adopted in this study includes views, reviews, and critics put forward in different literature. Many students find it challenging to dedicate enough time for research, writing, and revisions, which often results in last-minute efforts and heightened stress. Selecting an appropriate and manageable topic can be intimidating, as students may feel overwhelmed by the vast amount of available research. Additionally, many struggle with writing skills, making it difficult to express their ideas clearly and concisely, which can compromise coherence and academic quality. Inconsistent or insufficient feedback from advisors can also lead to confusion and frustration, affecting the overall quality of their thesis. This paper outlines the main challenges students encounter while writing their theses, including issues with time management, choosing a topic, writing abilities, and receiving feedback. It also discusses effective strategies for tackling these problems, such as developing organized timelines, obtaining support from peers or advisors, and enhancing writing skills through workshops and resources. Ultimately, the conclusion stresses the significance of addressing these challenges to improve the quality and success of thesis projects.*

**Keywords:** Writing skill, academic writing, challenges, strategies

## **Introduction**

A graduate student in a university level education has to write a thesis at the end of their semester in order to be eligible to be awarded the graduation degree. Thesis is one kind of academic writing that must be written by students in university level (Turmudi, 2017). Writing a thesis in master's degree course has been made mandatory in Nepalese universities. Tribhuvan University, the oldest university in Nepal, has been running many Master's Degree courses in different disciplines such as English Education, Humanities, and Management to name a few in which every student must write a thesis under the supervision of a supervisor on

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their areas of specialization. In order to be able to write the thesis, the student needs to have a sound knowledge on the research, appropriate structure, vocabulary, linguistic aspects, and grammar. Evans et al. (2014) argue, “a thesis must demonstrate logical, structured, and defensible reasoning based on credible and verifiable evidence presented in such a way that it makes an original contribution to knowledge, as judged by experts in the field” (p.1). However, students in Nepalese universities often face challenges of different kinds when writing the thesis. As a result, students’ priority seems to be on the completion of a thesis rather than learning. In fact, writing a thesis has been a kind of ritual activity which they have to complete by hook or crook. Neupane and Bastola (2020) explored that students’ focus was on the completion of a thesis rather than learning. Her research participants in the study –ten supervisors, complained that their students were interested only in the completion of their thesis to such an extent that thesis writing was just ‘a ritual for the majority’ (p. 10). In this context, some research studies have been conducted to identify the challenges the students face while writing thesis. Similarly, students’ perspectives towards thesis writing has also been explored to some extent. However, a comprehensive research study has not been carried out to explore the students’ perceptions of thesis writing, the challenges they face while writing the thesis, and the strategies they adapt to face the challenges. Therefore, I felt the necessity for a study that explores the perspectives towards thesis writing thereby identify the problems students commonly face and the solutions to overcome those problems related to thesis writing.

Academic writing has been classified into different types. Badreddine (2019), classified academic writing in seven types; essay, research paper, research article, dissertation, thesis, technical report, and research project. All these types have their individual features and resolutions, but in the current research the main concentration of the researcher is merely on master’s dissertation writing and defense. The master’s thesis is the high point of all projects which is conducted by a graduate scholar while completing their master’s degree program. Therefore, graduate scholars must understand the fundamental concepts of thesis writing and defending, which is an ideological research work contested with reasonable logic. In Nepal ESL graduate candidates frequently face many challenges in writing and defending their theses. The researcher noted these problems and decided to conduct research on this topic, which will prove beneficial for Nepali master’s degree candidates.

## **Significance of the Study**

Writing a thesis and defending it successfully is a daunting task for a graduate student. However, supervisors and department faculty can guide the scholars but they must take responsibility to make possible this herculean journey. In countries like Nepal where English is used as a second language, scholars face many challenges in writing and defending a thesis/dissertation. Keeping in mind this point, the researcher will conduct this significant research study, which will prove valuable for ESL educators, scholars, and researchers. Firstly, the results of this research study will contribute to ESL instructors in overcoming future complications support to minimize the problems, as a result, the relationship between supervisor and supervisee will be more ideal. Secondly, the current study will provide ideas

and views to graduate scholars about their difficulties and complications in dissertation writing and defense. The results of this study will provide remarkable advantages to graduate scholars and will support them to be equipped for the forthcoming challenges which they will probably face in dissertation writing and defense. Thirdly, the results of the research study will aware the researchers in future by providing information about the problems faced by graduate scholars in dissertation writing and defense. Lastly, for the researcher, this research study is a medium to share his viewpoints about graduate dissertation writing and defending challenges.

## **Review of Related Literature and Conceptual Framework**

### **A Brief Introduction to Thesis Writing**

In a general sense, the terms "dissertation" and "thesis" are utilized interchangeably to denote research papers submitted for the purpose of acquiring an advanced academic qualification. These papers are handed in as a mandatory component for the completion of a postgraduate degree, either at the master's or doctoral level. To specify further, a student will present a dissertation to fulfill the requirements for a master's degree, whereas the pursuit of a Ph.D. necessitates the submission of a thesis. This differentiation is rooted in the practices of British educational institutions, whereas the reverse is true in American academia (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007).

Thesis writing is a crucial academic task for students pursuing degrees at various levels (Burton, 2000; Cuschieri et al., 2018). It involves original research and follows a structured format, typically including introduction, methods, results, and discussion sections (Cuschieri et al., 2018). The process can be challenging and time-consuming, often representing a barrier to timely completion (Lindsay, 2015). Successful thesis writing relies on three key factors: structure, substance, and style (Chandrasekhar, 2002; Cuschieri et al., 2018). Helpful strategies include adopting intrinsic behaviors, receiving supervisory support with a project-management approach, and employing a continuous-writing method (Lindsay, 2015). To write effectively, students should state their hypothesis clearly, keep meticulous records, write rough drafts, and revise thoroughly (Chandrasekhar, 2002). Additionally, proper citation and attention to potential plagiarism are essential (Cuschieri et al., 2018). In conclusion, thesis writing is a complex but manageable task when approached systematically.

### **Theoretical Framework for Thesis Writing**

I used Vygotsky's (1994) notion of *perezhivanie* (A Russian term referred to "lived experience" to examine the process of composing a thesis in Nepal. Vygotsky (1994) initially introduced *perezhivanie* to elucidate the progression of children's cognitive faculties as influenced by their interactions with the surrounding milieu. It was discerned that an individual's advancement was prompted by their encounters with specific circumstances. This concept was subsequently applied in language acquisition research to comprehend how the surroundings catalyze learners' development. Swain et al. (2015) perceived *perezhivanie* as the lived experience shaped by emotions and explored the emotional aspects in language learning, whereas Mok (2015) and Mochizuki (2019) construed *perezhivanie* as the amalgamation of

experience, encompassing one's cognition, emotions, and social environments. I will adhere to the latter viewpoint and examine the process of EFL graduate thesis composition holistically, aiming to delve beyond affective components.

### **Challenges of Thesis Writing in English**

Writing a thesis, particularly for EFL undergraduate students, poses a considerable challenge. The process itself is intricate and time-consuming. According to Berndtsson, et al (2008), the thesis project stands out as one of the most substantial endeavors students will undertake in their academic lives. EFL students encounter various obstacles in academic writing and/or thesis completion, such as language barriers (Abrar, et al., 2023; Al Khasawneh & Maher, 2010; Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Dwihandini et al., 2013; Kristy, 2012; Puspita, 2019;), unhelpful supervisors (Agricola, et al., 2021); lack of self-assurance (Puspita, 2019; Dwihandini et al., 2013), inadequate resources (Alyan, 2022), and diminished motivation (Lestari, 2020; Ramage, 1990). Thus, the successful completion of a thesis necessitates unwavering determination, sustained effort, and steadfast dedication.

Conducting a thesis is an empirical investigation carried out by senior scholars aiming to attain an advanced academic credential within a specific discipline. The process of thesis composition necessitates thorough investigation as a fundamental constituent of collegiate prerequisites. As posited by Sentia (2022), the principal objective of a thesis centers on the researcher's analytical endeavors, which employ principles of rational inference aligned with the academic domain, designed to satisfy the conditions for securing an advanced academic qualification. Nevertheless, learners encounter challenges in assimilating themselves into the academic realm. Moreover, Qasem and Zayyad (2019) accentuated that students confront various obstacles throughout the research process. Some students encounter internal hindrances like lack of motivation, whereas others encounter external impediments such as comprehending research methodologies, sustaining motivation, and acquiring experience. In a similar vein, Miles (2019) revealed that the most common writing mistake made by students pertains to erroneous grammatical utilization. Furthermore, Miles (2019) unveiled that students encountered difficulties in grasping the academic writing conventions for thesis composition, formulating a thesis topic, and constructing a suitable literature review. It was also evident that students frequently struggled with paraphrasing source material into their own words. Similarly, Qasem and Zayid (2019) unearthed that students encountered challenges in selecting a research topic, comprehending research methodologies, procuring relevant sources, fostering research interest, understanding the research problem, as well as managing time and seeking research-related guidance. Subsequently, Lestari (2020) noted that the impediments faced by students during thesis composition primarily revolve around their English language proficiency, time allocation, research methodology selection, choice of research topic, attitude towards research, the abundance of supervised students, advisor workload, issues of plagiarism, co-advisor interactions, individual characteristics of students, and ultimately, motivational hurdles. However, notwithstanding the challenges encountered by students in thesis composition, various studies have proposed coping mechanisms to assist students in surmounting these barriers. For example, the study by Eldaba & Isbell (2018)

underscores an action plan involving the establishment of a mentorship initiative, provision of diverse support services, dissemination of resourceful links, and motivational guidance. Additionally, Freire et al. (2020) implemented a person-centered approach as a coping mechanism to enhance students' self-efficacy.

### **Challenges of Thesis Writing in English in Nepal**

Graduate students in Nepal encounter numerous obstacles when composing dissertations in the English language. These obstacles encompass challenges in selecting appropriate research areas, incorporating literature, constructing theoretical frameworks, and employing suitable research methodologies (Tiwari, 2019; Tiwari, 2023). Scholars also encounter difficulties with academic language usage, citation practices, and referencing (Tiwari, 2023). The provision of feedback from supervisors is a pivotal element in the process of thesis writing; however, there is often a disparity in perceptions between supervisors and students regarding engagement and challenges within this context (Neupane Bastola, 2020). Supervisors typically identify the primary challenges as stemming from constraints related to students and institutions (Neupane Bastola & Hu, 2023). Moreover, they tend to evaluate students' response to feedback less favorably compared to the objectives and focal points of the feedback provided during supervision (Neupane Bastola & Hu, 2023). The lack of supportive behavior from supervisors emerges as a notable hurdle for students (Tiwari, 2019). These outcomes underscore the intricate interplay of variables influencing the writing of dissertations in English for graduate students from Nepal.

### **Strategies students employ to cope up with challenges of thesis writing**

Graduate students face numerous challenges when writing theses in English. Common difficulties include lack of research knowledge, inability to write academically, and struggles with data analysis (Şaman & Fereshteh, 2019). Many students resort to writing in their native language first and then translating to English (Liu, 2023). Linguistic challenges such as over-reliance on translation and rhetorical differences between languages are prevalent (Ma, 2020). Students also encounter socio-cultural challenges, including social isolation and differing learning expectations (Ma, 2020). Selecting appropriate research topics and writing literature reviews are considered particularly challenging aspects (Liu, 2023). Unsupportive behavior from supervisors can exacerbate these difficulties (Tiwari, 2019). To overcome these challenges, students employ strategies such as reading more literature and imitating published papers (Liu, 2023). Universities, supervisors, and academic literacy professionals play crucial roles in supporting EAL students through targeted language support services and training programs (Ma, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

This paper outlines the main challenges students encounter while writing their theses, including issues with time management, choosing a topic, writing abilities, and receiving feedback. It also discusses effective strategies for tackling these problems, such as developing organized timelines, obtaining support from peers or advisors, and enhancing writing skills

through workshops and resources. Ultimately, the conclusion stresses the significance of addressing these challenges to improve the quality and success of thesis projects.

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