Writing a review of the literature in EFL: Challenges and perspectives

كتابة فصل الدراسات السابقة بالإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية: تحديات ووجهات نظر

Écrire une revue de la littérature sur l'EFL : Défis et perspectives

Abla Benbellal et Kamel Khaldi

Laboratory of Phonological Studies and Research – Alger 2 الجزائر

Introduction

No one can deny that the review of the literature is one of the pillars of academic papers, including theses and dissertations, as it is the basis upon which writers establish context for their research, identify the gap in previous research, formulate their own research problems and develop their research design and data collection tools. In the English department where this study took place, writing the review of the literature section/chapter receives a great emphasis in Master's program, more specifically in academic writing and research skills modules. In these modules, students are taught how to:

- Search for materials for their research papers and critically evaluate their relevance, quality and credibility.

- Write in text-citations and list of references following two referencing styles namely APA and MLA.

- Record notes from various relevant sources by quoting, summarizing and paraphrasing.

- Establish relationships between sources and show areas of similarities and differences.

- Write a preliminary outline for their literature review section/chapter using their prior knowledge about the topic, the available relevant documents and their preliminary readings on the topic.

- Write the first draft of the literature review section/chapter.

However, writing the review of the literature is not an easy task for experienced writers let alone novice researchers who have never written lengthy academic papers. My observations during the oral defenses I attended last year (2018/2019) in the department of English and the discussions I had with supervisors and examiners revealed that most students encountered many issues

in writing different parts of their dissertations including the literature review chapter. This was also evident in academic writing classes. Being their teacher, the researcher has always asked her students to tell her about their experiences with research and writing their dissertations. The majority of students pointed out that writing the review of the literature has become their nightmare.

Therefore, the focus in this study is to explore the difficulties faced by Master's students in writing the literature review chapter of their dissertations as well as the causes that led to their (i.e. students) failure to meet the requirements of writing a good literature review chapter.

This study is important as it contributes to the current body of knowledge by raising students' and teachers' awareness of the challenges that are encountered by graduate students in writing the literature review chapter of their dissertations. It also develops students' and teachers' understanding of the main elements that should be included in this chapter by following universal frameworks. More importantly, the significance of our study lies in the suggestions and recommendations that are offered to teachers/supervisors, students and academic institutions to improve students' writing performance and meet, at least, the basic requirements for writing a literature review.

1. Review of Related Literature

1.1. Definition and Purpose of the Literature Review

Before explaining the framework that was adopted in the analysis of the corpus of our study, we believe it is important to shed light on some definitions of the concept 'literature review'. The latter was described by Creswell (2012) as a piece of writing that involves summarizing what has been already said and done in relation to the phenomenon being studied. Moreover, a review of the literature is seen by Ridley (2012) as a chapter of a dissertation which is mainly concerned with reviewing previous studies and theories related to the topic under discussion. She further added that reviewing the literature is a process of determining relationships between works cited that would enable writers establish their theoretical positions. Similarly, Machi & McEvoy (2016) defined a literature review as "a written document that presents a logically argued case founded on a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge about a topic of study. This case establishes a convincing thesis to answer the study's question." (p. 4). According to Kiteley & Stogdon (2014) and Foss (2018), the importance of the literature review section/chapter can be demonstrated in the various functions it serves. Some of these functions include:

- Identifying gap in previous research.

- Showing readers that the researcher is knowledgeable about key authors, key concepts and key findings in their area of interest.

- Establishing context for the research and familiarizing readers with key theories and relevant studies.

- Evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology adopted in previous research. This would, therefore, help researchers determine the appropriate research tools needed to collect data and answer their research questions.

1.2. The Structure of the Literature Review Chapter in Master's Dissertations: Discussion of Chen and Kuo's Framework (2012)

While the few available studies on this topic focused on examining the structure of doctoral theses, Chen and Kuo (2012) was the first and the only study that was conducted to analyze the structure and content of the literature review chapter in 20 applied linguistics Master's (MA) dissertations. In their study, the researchers applied Kwan's framework that was developed in 2006, based on the revised CARS model by Bunton (2002), to analyze the literature review chapter in doctoral (Ph.D.) theses. However, as shown in **table 1**, they have added two new moves namely: introduction and conclusion and a new step (concluding a part of literature review and indicating transition) in move 2. The adjusted framework, therefore, consists of the following moves:

1.2.1. Introductory move

This move serves to introduce the literature review chapter through indicating its organization (i.e. the sections to be included) and justifying the themes to be reviewed.

1.2.2. Move 1

Establishing one part of the territory of one's own research: this move aims at establishing theoretical context for the research undertaken. It is achieved by three main steps:

a. **Surveying the non-research-related phenomena or knowledge claims:** identifying the themes that were not thoroughly examined and non-research practices that are related to those themes.

b. **Claiming centrality**: demonstrating the significance of the themes reviewed in the dissertation.

    c. Surveying the research-related phenomena: this includes reporting previous studies' results and defining and explaining theories and constructs that are relevant to the phenomenon being studied.

1.2.3. Move 2

Creating a research need (in response to move 1): this move is realized by the following steps:

    a. Counter-claiming: this includes discussing strengths and weaknesses of previous related studies.

    b. Gap-indicating: this involves referring to scarcity of related literature or/and identifying the related areas that have not been researched yet.

    c. Asserting confirmative claims about knowledge or research practices surveyed: by this step, writers demonstrate the importance and contribution of a particular citation or theory.

    d. Asserting the relevancy of the surveyed claims to one's own research: it is about confirming the relevance of the reviewed items or studies to the researcher's topic.

    e. Abstracting or synthesizing knowledge claims to establish a theoretical position or a theoretical framework: this includes identifying relationships between the reviewed works and establishing a new knowledge or position on the basis of those relationships.

    f. Abstracting or synthesizing knowledge claims to establish a theoretical position or a theoretical framework: this includes identifying relationships between the reviewed works and establishing a new knowledge or position on the basis of those relationships.

    g. Concluding a part of literature review and/or indicating transition to review of a different area: it is about showing transition from one section to another.

1.2.4. Move 3

Occupying the research niche by announcing: this move is achieved by four steps:

    a. Indicating research aims, focuses, research questions or hypotheses: it is about stating the aim of the study being carried out.

    b. Indicating theoretical positions/theoretical frameworks: this includes identifying the related theories or theoretical approaches that are adopted to explain the phenomenon under study.

c. **Indicating research design/processes:** this is rather an optional step as it rarely occurs in the literature review chapter. It involves a brief indication of the methods used and procedures followed to collect data.

d. **Interpreting terminology used in the dissertation:** this refers to providing operational definitions of key terms (i.e. in relation to the context of the study).

1.2.5. Concluding move

The aim of this move is to conclude the literature review chapter through providing a summary of what has been discussed in the body and establishing the link between the literature reviewed and the researcher's study.

Table N°1: Chen and Kuo's Framework for the analysis of the literature review chapter

Moves	Steps
Introduction	*Indicating organization of the review chapter(s) and justifying the themes (areas) to be reviewed*
Move 1: Establishing one part of the territory of one's own research	- Surveying the non-research related phenomena or knowledge - claiming centrality - Surveying the research-related phenomena
Move 2: Creating a research need (in response to move 1)	- Counter-claiming - Gap-indicating - Asserting formative claims about knowledge or research practices surveyed. - Asserting the relevancy of the surveyed claims to one's own research - Abstracting or synthesizing knowledge claims to establish a theoretical position or a theoretical framework. *- Concluding a part of literature review and/ or indicating transition to review of a different area*
Move 3: Occupying the research niche by announcing	- Indicating research aims, focuses, research questions or hypotheses - Indicating theoretical positions/theoretical frameworks - Indicating research design/processes - Interpreting terminology used in the thesis
Conclusion	*Providing a summary of the review of the themes and relating the review to the present study.*

Source: Chen & Kuo, 2012, pp. 48-49

1.3. Studies on Students' Difficulties in Writing the Literature Review Chapter

The studies we are going to review in this section were carried out to investigate students' challenges in writing all sections and chapters of the dissertations. However, since the focus of our study is only on one particular chapter, we will highlight mainly the issues related to writing the literature review.

With an eye toward getting in-depth understanding of the students' experiences with research writing and the challenges they faced during their research process, Yeh (2010) conducted a qualitative interview-based study at a Taiwanese university with a group of graduate students who have been interviewed in their mother tongue (Mandarin Chinese). The results of the interview revealed that reviewing related literature was one of the most challenging tasks for graduate students. The latter reported that they were novice researchers who have just started their journey in the world of scientific research and academic writing. Hence, writing the reviewing the literature was something hard to do because their knowledge about searching for sources and evaluating their relevance and quality was limited. Additionally, they pointed out that they experienced difficulties in restating others' ideas in their own words and the correct use of vocabulary and academic formal language.

Focusing on supervisors' views, Mafa and Mapolisa (2012) carried out a qualitative study at the Zimbabwe Open University to get in-depth understanding of the supervisors' experiences in supervising Master's dissertations and the challenges encountered by their students during research writing process. The majority of supervisors reported that their students' literature reviews were descriptive summaries instead of critical evaluations of previous studies' strengths and weaknesses. Other problems that emerged from the interviews included finding and selecting relevant sources, use of outdated sources, lack of synthesis and issues in citing and referencing.

Investigating the same problem in the Vietnamese context, Loan (2017) indicated that referring to irrelevant sources and lack of synthesis were among the major difficulties faced by students when writing their literature reviews. Besides, the content analysis and interviews revealed that summarizing and paraphrasing proved challenging activities for students.

Moreover, the issue of the literature review being one of the most difficult sections to write was confirmed by Peng's study in 2018. The latter was conducted at a Chinese university to investigate supervisors' perspectives with regard to their graduate students' difficulties in writing their dissertations. During

the interview, supervisors noted that this section suffered from many weaknesses. One of the limitations was the students' inability to synthesize previous research and establish theoretical frameworks as the candidates' reviews were just summaries of previous works without any attempt to examine similarities and differences between them and how they were related to their (i.e. students) own research. Another issue highlighted by supervisors was lack of critical evaluation of previous research which in turn resulted in poor research design. According to Peng's study, one of the main reasons behind the difficulties encountered by students in writing the literature review chapter was their weak linguistic abilities in English. This involved a lot of mistakes in grammar, spelling and formality. Another cause reported by the supervisors was class size where students outnumbered teachers who were not able to correct their students' assignments. Therefore, students' opportunities to write and overcome their linguistic problems were very rare.

1.4. Gaps in the Literature and Aim of the Study

As previously noted, only a few studies were carried out to examine the structure of Master's dissertations. The focus of these studies was mainly on general problems related to dissertation writing. However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has investigated the challenges encountered by graduate students in writing the literature review chapter. Moreover, research on this topic has not yet been conducted in the Algerian context. Hence, the aim of this study is to explore the difficulties encountered by Master 2 students of didactics at Blida 2 University in writing the literature review chapter of their dissertations. It also sheds light on the major factors that negatively affect students' success in meeting the requirements of writing a good review of the literature. In order to achieve these aims, two research questions are investigated:

1. What challenges do Didactics students at Blida 2 University encounter in writing the literature review chapter of their Master's dissertations?
2. What are the reasons for students' difficulties in writing the literature review chapter?

2. Method

Our case study intends to shed light on the challenges encountered by graduate students in writing the literature review chapter of their Master's dissertations. To this end, the qualitative approach was employed.

2.1. Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in the department of English at Blida 2 University at the end of the academic year 2018/2019 after the students submitted the final version of their dissertations. Regarding the sample of the study, it consists of 10 Master's students (8 females and 2 males) who were randomly selected from a population of 53 students majoring in didactics. In order to ensure the anonymity of the participants, we referred to each student using the code 'ST' followed by a number as shown in table 2.

2.2. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

To answer the research questions, two research instruments were used namely an interview and a document analysis. First, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the 10 students. The interview aimed at getting in-depth understanding on the participants' experiences with writing the literature review chapter. Before conducting the interview, a consent form was sent to the participants to invite them to take part in our study, inform them of the research objectives and agree on the participation's conditions. Each interview lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour where each student was asked about the definition and function served by the literature review chapter, the meaning of a gap in the literature, the content of the chapter, the extent to which they found the literature review difficult to write, the difficulties they experienced in writing the chapter and the major reasons for each difficulty (See Appendix A).

Next, in order to increase the validity of the results obtained from the students' interview, more specifically the difficulties faced by the students, we employed document analysis as a second data collection tool. In fact, our intent was to analyze the content of literature review chapters in the dissertations that were written by the same 10 students who were interviewed. However, we could get access to seven dissertations only because the three remaining students did not give us permission to use their dissertations in our research. The document analysis was done to identify the extent to which the students could meet the requirements of writing a good literature review based on Chen and Kuo's framework (2012).

Table N°2: Participants' profiles

Number	Students' Codes	Gender	Age group	Literature reviews' codes
1	ST 1	Female	20 – 25	*LR 1
2	ST 2	Female	20 – 25	LR 2
3	ST 3	Female	20 – 25	LR 3

4	ST 4	Female	20 – 25	LR 4
5	ST 5	Male	26 – 30	LR 5
6	ST 6	Male	20 – 25	LR 6
7	ST 7	Female	20 – 25	LR 7
8	ST 8	Female	20 – 25	LR 8
9	ST 9	Female	20 – 25	LR 9
10	ST 10	Female	20 – 25	LR 10

LR = Literature Review

2.3. Data Analysis Procedures

The students' interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. In order to protect the participants' identities, we used codes as shown in table 2. The data were categorized in light of the interview questions (see appendix A). First, we conducted a within-case analysis that involved an in-depth analysis of each student's account and identifying relationships between the concepts and themes s/he produced. Next, we carried out a cross-case analysis with the aim of investigating the themes that extended beyond individual cases and applied to all cases (i.e. participants).

As for the document analysis of the literature review chapters, we analyzed the structure of each chapter separately using line-by-line coding to identify thematic categories (i.e. issues related to writing this chapter). After the analysis of each case (i.e. chapter), we identified relationships between themes across different cases (i.e. literature review chapters) and the similarities and differences between them. Last but not least, we analyzed the themes emerged from the content analysis of the literature review chapters in relation to those that were already identified in the interviews. The primary aim behind this comparison of data sets was to cross-check the findings (i.e. identify similarities and differences between students' claims during the interview and their writings) and increase their validity.

3. Results

3.1. Definition of the literature review

The results of the students' interview revealed the following definitions:

1. **The literature review is a general theoretical background about the topic and variables**: According to five students (ST 2, ST 5, ST 6, ST 7& ST 10), a review of the literature is a set of long essays that aim at providing readers with the theoretical background about the topic under discussion and

the variables. In this sense, ST 5 said: "for me, it is simply defined as a theoretical background of the study. It is the set previous facts and hypotheses and theories that explain and accredit the main variables under investigation"

2. **The literature review is an account of previous theories and studies**: Three students (ST 3, ST 4 & ST 9) defined a review of the literature as the theoretical part of the dissertation that discusses theories and studies related to the topic under investigation. According to ST 3, "a literature review is a part from the dissertation devoted to the theoretical framework of the study where the researchers highlight the different theories and studies done before on the topic you are investigating."

3. **The literature review refers to the identification of the research gap** According to ST 1, the review of the literature refers to the theoretical part of the study which aims at identifying the gap in previous studies.

4. **The literature review is a critical evaluation of previous related studies** For ST 8, a review of the literature encompasses a critical evaluation of previous works related to the topic under study.

3.2. Function(s) of the literature review

According to the interviewees, the review of the literature serves the following functions:

3.2.1. Reviewing previous research in the field

Two students (ST 4 and ST 2) concurred that the main aim served by the literature review is to describe what other researchers have done in relation to the researcher's (student) field of interest.

3.2.2. A Critical evaluation of previous studies

One student (ST 3) believed that the review of the literature aims at critically presenting and evaluating theories and studies related to the topic under investigation. In this regard, she said: "the purpose of the literature review is to inform the reader that this topic existed before and most importantly is to discuss and evaluate the theories and studies similar to your topic."

3.2.3. Planning for research and signaling the gap in previous studies

ST 1 declared that the review of the literature serves as guide that shows the researcher how to tackle his/her research topic and identify a gap in previous research. In this vein, she said: "the purpose of the literature review is to

find out how to approach your research and to establish a link between what is known and what is unknown (what you want to find out).”

3.2.4. Supporting the student's research, reviewing related theories and showing relationship between variables

Two students (ST 8 & ST 9) said that the review of the literature is used to support the student's research topic and justify its significance. In this sense, ST 8 stated: “the purpose of the literature review is to highlight others’ (could be experts in the field of your study) works and use it to reinforce your research.”

Justifying the research topic's importance has been highlighted by ST 5 in addition to two other functions ‘**Reviewing related theories’** and **‘showing the relationship between the variables.**’ In this sense, he notes: **“**the review of the literature is the hierarchical representation of concepts, facts and theories about the variables of a certain topic under investigation and it aims justifying the co-relation between variables and the importance of the topic.**”**

3.2.5. Other functions

Other functions served by the literature review include ‘Giving theoretical background about the topic’ (ST 7) and ‘showing that the researcher is knowledgeable about his/her topic’ (ST 6).

3.3. Definition of a gap in the literature

3.3.1. The area that has not been tackled in previous studies

Almost all the students (9) agreed on a common definition of ‘a gap in the literature’. They said that a gap in the literature refers to the limitations in previous research and shows how a particular area or aspect has been totally ignored in previous studies or tackled superficially. For example, ST 5 defined a gap as “what has been neglected, not been taken into consideration or simply what the researchers failed to make into practice in the previous studies.” In other words, “it means that the previous studies did not cover an important part or did not tackle an important aspect which is called ‘gap’ and your research is going to fill this gap and investigate what was not researched before.” (ST3).

3.3.2. Identifying the research gap

The following table presents the number of students who could identify the gap in the literature and those who could not.

Table N°3: the research gap

Options	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Yes	ST 06. ST 01. ST 04. ST 08. ST 02. ST 03	70
No	ST 10. ST 05. ST 07. ST 09	30
Total	10	100

3.3.3. The main elements that should be included in the literature review chapter

As far as the content of the literature review chapter is concerned, the interviewees mentioned the following elements/sections:

- review of previous theories and studies (ST 1, ST 2, ST 6, ST 3, ST 4, ST 9 & ST 10),
- gap in the literature (ST 6),
- theoretical and conceptual frameworks (ST 5 & ST 8) and
- the relationship between variables (ST 1, ST 2 & ST 7).

3.3.4. The extent to which the review of the literature was difficult to write

Table N°4: the degree of difficulty of writing the literature review chapter

Options	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Extremely difficult	ST 10	10
Very difficult	ST 02. ST 03	20
Difficult	ST 07. ST 01. ST 05	30
Slightly difficult	ST 04. ST 08. ST 06. ST 09	40
Not at all difficult	0	0
Total	10	100

3.3.5. The challenges experienced by the students in writing the literature review chapter

In this section, we present the results of the students' interview and the content analysis. First, we present the issues that were identified by the students during the interview and found in their reviews during the content analysis. Then, we highlight other issues that were not mentioned by the students, but were revealed during the analysis. It is worth reminding that the codes ST and LR refer to 'Student' and 'Literature Review' respectively.

3.3.5.1. Summarizing and paraphrasing ideas

Summarizing and paraphrasing others' ideas were among the major difficulties reported by ST1, ST 2, ST 5 & ST 7. They noted that these two academic writing techniques were the most challenging to them. For instance, ST 5 said: "an example of the difficulties I faced was at the level of summarizing and paraphrasing previous quotes…The problem was when I tried to paraphrase. I couldn't have the most appropriate synonyms for the quotes…When summarizing, I found difficulties to find a language similar to the original one." In addition, ST1 stressed that restating quotes in their own words was very difficult to her especially when she did not understand their content. In this regard, she noted: "Sometimes, when the quote is a bit difficult and you barely understand it, so you find it difficult to paraphrase it. And sometimes the contrary…the quote is clear to the point that you cannot even paraphrase it since it is clear the way it is. So, you will be afraid that it won't be the same when you paraphrase it." This issue was also confirmed by the content analysis of some literature reviews. The overuse of direct quotations which made some literature reviews (LRs 6, 7 & 10) look like shopping lists of other people's ideas clearly indicated the difficulty of paraphrasing to some students. Doing that would give readers the impression that the student did not grasp the content related to his/her topic. In other words, the dominance of others' words and expressions results in the students' loss of their voices as writers and their topics' ownership.

3.3.5.2. Counter claiming and gap indicating in previous research

Counter claiming and gap indicating are among the most important steps followed by writers to achieve Move 2 (Creating a research need). The latter comes as a response to Move 1 (establishing one part of the territory of one's own research) where researchers survey previous research and demonstrate the importance of reviewing key concepts, themes and studies related to their topic. Next, after claiming centrality, researchers are required to critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the related studies (counter-claiming). On the basis of previous studies' limitations, researchers indicate the gap in the literature. However, the analysis revealed that counter-claiming and writers' critical stance were missing in all the literature reviews as the students just reported and summarized the findings of previous related studies without any discussion of their advantages and shortcomings.

As for the second step (gap indicating), the content analysis demonstrated that it was absent in five literature reviews (LRs 5, 6, 7, 8 & 10) as the writers

neither demonstrated the scarcity of the research practices related to their topics nor identified the issues that were not explored or needed further investigation to be addressed satisfactorily. As stated by the five writers during the interview, gap indicating was one of the main difficulties they faced in writing the literature review chapter especially that they were novice researchers. For instance, one student said: "it was difficult to identify the gap in the literature… we searched a lot and checked in the library that our topic did not exist in the English department…it was time and efforts consuming."

In two literature reviews (LRs 1 & 3), however, the writers included some statements at the end of the chapter to indicate the lack of research in the context within which they conducted their studies and the need for in-depth understanding of the topics they worked on as illustrated in the following passage from LR 3:

This problem **did not receive attention** in the Algerian context **particularly in the English Department of Blida 2 University** in which studies dealing with absenteeism are **not found**. Therefore, it is **important to conduct** this study. It is hoped that this research **will add more** to the existing body of literature.

3.3.5.3. Writing in-text citations and the list of references

Five students (ST 3, ST 5, ST 6, ST 7 & ST 9) identified another problem related to in-text citations. Some of them declared that they could not even distinguish between APA and MLA styles' conventions though they have studied them in academic writing classes. In this vein, ST 9 noted: "to be honest, writing the references or within a text is still difficult for me…I guess forever…I don't distinguish between APA or MLA!" Another student (ST 7) stated that she got confused when she had to cite secondary sources in her text. She described this problem in the following way: "writing in-text citations was difficult when I have secondary sources… for example, when and where should I put the name of the original source and the second name of the secondary source."

The content analysis of the literature reviews confirmed this issue. It revealed that there are remarkable violations in citing sources in all the literature reviews we analyzed. For example, in three literature reviews (LRs 6, 7 & 10), we noticed that students included the author's surname and first name when citing references in text (such as, (Aras Abdelkarim Amin, 2017) in LR 10 and (Piere Bourdieu, 1) in LR 6) while the rule requires writers to insert the surname only. Another issue related to in-text citations was identified in two literature reviews

where the writers inserted others' ideas in their texts without acknowledging the source as illustrated in the following example extracted from LR 7: "*Mispronunciation of words is one of the main factors that prevent students from participating in the oral performance of the second language; this is the reason that prohibits them from doing speaking activities freely and without stress*". In this case, not crediting the source is considered as plagiarism. Moreover, in four literature reviews (LRs 5, 6, 7 & 10), we found that the year of publication and page number were missing in many direct quotations as shown in the following examples:

> **LR 10:** Harmer (2007b) stated that "the main task of the teacher is to motivate and provoke the students" (cited in Ghodbane, **year?** p. 67).
> **LR 6:** One of the anthropologists is John H, Bodley. He simply defines culture as "What people think, make and do"

As far as direct quotations from sources are concerned, writers are required to provide information about three elements in the text namely: the author's name, year of publication and page number. However, some of these elements, mainly the page number, are missing in many direct quotations included by the students in their literature reviews. Moreover, though it is required from writers to enclose the quotation that consists of less than forty words with quotation marks, the analysis showed that some students did not put inverted commas (or quotation marks) around many quoted texts in their literature reviews (LRs 1, 5, 6, 8 & 10). In contrast, when the quoted material contains forty words and more, quotation marks should not be used and the quotation should be indented and written as a separate block. However, this was not the case in three literature reviews (LRs 1, 5 & 6) where many long-quoted sources were written as part of the text and enclosed in quotation marks.

The last issue related to in-text citations was identified in L 6 where the student used the MLA style but failed to acknowledge sources appropriately in many sections. According to MLA style conventions, it is only when the document has no author's name on the title page (i.e. anonymous) that writers are required to mention the title of the document instead. However, in LR 6, we noticed that the student mentioned the title of the source at the end of many direct quotations although the name of the author was identified. This can be better illustrated in the following examples:

> **Byram** states that the concept of 'culture' has changed over time from emphasis on literature, the arts and philosophy to culture as a shared way of life (**Intercultural dimension**, **5**). Language as a set of « meaning-making resources » that are crucial to everyday communication and which enable speakers not

only to convey information to each other but also to maintain social relationships in the sense of both transaction and interaction (**Ferguson**, **5**. **Lge meaning context and**).

As for writing the list of references, two students (ST 5 & ST 9) reported that this section was very difficult; they could hardly follow the APA style's rules to write their list of references. For example, ST 5 noted: "I faced many difficulties…The complexity lies in the variety of sources we had…We had journal articles, books and dissertations…. For example, I couldn't make the difference between types of articles…How to reference these different types though we have studied them…. I couldn't distinguish the volume and page numbers from other numbers…."

3.3.5.4. Synthesizing knowledge claims to establish a theoretical position

Synthesizing knowledge claims is one of the most important criteria that makes a good review of the literature. This strategy involves showing relationships between relevant works (i.e. similarities and differences), explaining why such relationships are significant and introducing new knowledge and perspectives based on the works cited and the identified relationships. Nevertheless, three students (ST 1, ST 2 & ST 3) concurred that synthesizing others' ideas was a difficult writing technique. They found difficulties to combine sources and infer possible relationships among them. For instance, one student (ST 1) stated: "synthesizing is another problem, but I think I have encountered this because in some titles or sections in the literature review….the number of sources was so limited. For instance, I have included a title about theory of ethicality and since the sources were limited about this title, synthesizing was a bit difficult." In fact, the content analysis demonstrated that establishing a theoretical position through synthesizing was something hard to do for six students not only three. That is, in their literature reviews (LRs 1, 3, 5, 6, 7 & 10), the students just listed what others said and did without critically examining points of convergence and divergence between scholarly sources and how they are connected to their (i.e. students) own research.

3.3.5.5. Language, coherence and cohesion

Maintaining a good academic writing style, where there is a clear, honest and an objective presentation of ideas, logical progression from one idea to another, and careful choice of language, should be the focal aim of writers when producing any academic paper. However, during the interview, three students (ST 2, ST 4 & ST 7) said that they had difficulties in making smooth connec-

tions between sentences and ideas which in turn resulted in incoherent and incohesive writing. In this regard, ST 2 stated: "I had difficulties with writing mechanisms in general….For example, when moving from one idea to another, we ignore the transition between sentences, so our supervisor was so unhappy (laughing)….lack of cohesive and coherent ideas…". Another student (ST 7) further added that writing the introduction of each section in the literature review chapter was challenging. In this vein, she noted: "I had problems in coherence and cohesion…. For example, I was struggling in writing the introduction of each essay, how to start it and what I should include in it!!…"

In fact, the results of the content analysis demonstrated that almost all the literature reviews suffer from weaknesses related to language, coherence and cohesion. For example, the reference words which aim at avoiding repetition in writing were inaccurately used in four literature reviews (LRs 1, 3, 6 & 7) as shown in the following examples:

> **LR 1:** When an excellent competent student who scores always As and Bs shares the same grade with less able ones…, this may discourage him from accomplishing his goal and achieving his dreams because his opportunities and chances in having a good job or completing his studies in respectable universities will decrease (Lackey and Lackey, 2006). **He** adds "grade compression is most unfair to the very best students…" (p.137)

As can be seen from the example above, the writer is presenting the authors' point of view (Lacky and Lackey) with regard to the topic under discussion. She presented the first idea followed by a quotation by the same authors. Hence, she should have used the pronoun 'they' instead of 'he' because she is referring to two persons (Lackey and Lackey).

> **LR 3:** According to Akbasli et al. (2017), 'Absenteeism' and 'Truancy' are utilized interchangeably. However, they have different connotations, where **they** used the term Truancy to refer to the learners who intentionally miss school without authorization.

In this case, it is not clear which word the pronoun 'they' refers to. We do not know whether the writer is referring to the authors (Akbasli et al.) or the two terms 'absenteeism and truancy'

> **LR 6:** Literary texts with **its** unique touch and vitality of style.

In this example, the writer should have used 'their' instead of 'its'.

In addition to inaccurate use of reference words, many incomplete sentences (fragments) were identified in some literature reviews (LRs 1, 5, 7 & 10).

Some of these sentences lack verbs while others are dependent clauses that do have subjects and verbs but do not express complete thoughts for they need independent clauses to be complete. This can be illustrated by the following examples:

> **LR7:** The American Council of Teachers of Foreign Language (AC-TFL) **(? verb missing)** "different kinds of speaking activities (and consequently assessment task) are appropriate at different levels of proficiency" since as it is asserted by O'Malley & Pierce (1996).
> **LR 1: Despite the fact that** Juola (1980) claims that "Although there is some evidence that the rate of grade inflation is lessening" (as cited in Millman et al., 1983, p.423). **(dependent clause)**

Using incorrect and inconsistent verb forms is another issue we identified in some literature reviews (LRs 6, 7 & 10). The following examples are given for illustration:

> **LR 7:** Students try to send messages, share information and **exchanging** ideas.

In this sentence, the coordinating conjunction **'and'** is used to join three verbs (actions) performed by the same subject (students). Hence, the verb that comes after the conjunction 'and' should follow the same form of the verbs that precede it. In this case, the student should have written 'exchange (infinitive)' instead of 'exchanging (gerund)'

> **LR 10:** Many researchers **have been investigated** students' reasons behind using L1 in their EFL writing.

We use the passive voice to emphasize the action (the verb) and the object not the subject. In the sentence above, the object is (students' reason behind using LR 1) and the subject is (researchers). Hence, the verb tense in this sentence requires the student to start the sentence with the object as follows: '**students' reasons** *behind using L 1 in their writing* **have been investigated** *by many researchers.*' However, in case the student's focus was on the doer of the action (active voice), the verb form should be 'have investigated'. That is*, many* **researchers have investigated** *students'*….

Considering clarity of the terms used, there are some vague terms and expressions that were used in three literature reviews (LRs 1, 3 & 6) as in the following examples:

> **LR 3: Some** scholars focus their attention to absences that are not justified by a convincing reason.
> **LR 6: Some** scholars noticed that disciplines that have been

tackling the issue of language have neglected the fact that language and society are inextricably linked.

In the examples above, using the word 'some' makes the statements vague. The students should have given names of the scholars.

> **LR 1:** Hunt and Gardin (2007) conceive grade inflation in terms of **GPA** rather than individual grades.

Further, one of the things that make the content of any piece of writing unclear and confusing is the use of abbreviations and acronyms without mentioning what they stand for. This was the case in the example above where the student introduced this acronym 'GPA', which was later defined in another separate section, without any further explanations or examples. Rather, she should have written the full name at the very beginning followed by its corresponding acronym between round brackets. That is, '*Hunt and Gardin (2007) conceive grade inflation in terms of* **Grade Point Average** *(GPA) rather than individual grades.*'

Turning now to the issues that were not reported by the students during the interview but emerged from the content analysis of the seven literature reviews, the results revealed the following:

3.3.5.6. Asserting formative claims about knowledge or research practices surveyed

In the literature review, it is expected to highlight the value of relevant theories and approaches and contributions made by the works cited as two students (ST 5 & ST 8) did. This can be illustrated by the following example extracted from LR 5 where the student stressed the importance of the competency-based approach:

> **The CBA** is **important** in education as it calls the learners to make into action their values, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors independently and personally to cope appropriately with challenges they might be exposed to….**The CBA strongly denies the traditional root learning** and memorization but it seeks to **foster a high order of cognitive skills and life skills including**, communication, social, emotional and other sorts of skills.

Nonetheless, this step is absent in the remaining reviews (LRs: 1, 3, 6, 7 & 10). The writers just defined the relevant theories/approaches, their characteristics and principles but did not demonstrate their significance in relation to their (students) own research and how they (theories) could help them gain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study.

3.3.5.7.Indicating theoretical positions/theoretical frameworks

In their academic papers, including theses and dissertations, authors are required to establish a valid theoretical framework to demonstrate the significance of their research. However, as noted above, the fact that students failed to synthesize and establish relationship between relevant works resulted in the absence of this step in their literature reviews (LRs 1, 3, 5, 6, 7 & 10).

3.3.5.8. Interpreting terminology used in the dissertation

In addition to the previous step, we believe that interpreting terminology also cannot be achieved without a good synthesis of the literature. This is due to the fact that writers are required to develop their own definitions of key terms in their research through integrating many sources and analyzing the various definitions provided by scholars. That is, writers are expected to give operational definitions of terms in relation to their own research purposes. This step, however, is absent in almost all the literature reviews we analyzed (LRs 1, 3, 5, 6, 7 & 10). In each of these reviews, the students just listed other researchers' definitions of a particular construct without interpreting what the terms used mean in their own research context.

3.4. Reasons for the difficulties

The interview's results revealed the following reasons:

3.4.1. Lack of practice in writing the literature review (more focus on theory)

Almost all the students (9) explicitly referred to lack of practice as a major cause behind their difficulties in writing the review of the literature chapter. Some of them noted that because they had little experience in academic research, they really wished if teachers of academic writing and research methodology, in particular, gave them more opportunities to apply what they have studied in theoretical courses. However, that was not the case. For instance, ST 10 stated: "we did study how to write the literature review, but not too much! Just an overall idea…We didn't practice unfortunately…. I think It is better if M1 teachers of methodology and academic writing give more time to the practical side which means allowing the students to practice a certain topic to improve their dissertation writing!"

Moreover, ST 5 noted that lack of practice resulted in unfamiliarity with the different styles of writing. He also added that even in theory, they were not

taught how to write the review of the literature in details. Instead, they were only introduced to some basic related concepts. In this vein, he said: " we were only taught that in the literature review, you have to make a balance….opposing theories and theories of agreement…But the literature review was much bigger than that bare expression…It was about researching and digging deeper in the researchers' theories, comparing and contradiction, understanding views from different perspectives, giving our understanding to the theories of others and drawing our own conclusions of others' works."

3.4.2. Rules of in-text citations are confusing

Four students (ST 2, ST 3, ST 5 & ST 6) argued that in-text citations' rules were confusing. This particularly resulted in difficulties to cite secondary sources as reported by ST 3.

3.4.3. Some necessary elements of a bibliographic entry are missing

In addition to the complexity of rules which made in-text citations and the list of references difficult to write, one student (ST 7) pointed out that most of the documents she used to write her literature review chapter lacked some necessary elements that should be included in the bibliographic entry. In this regard, she says "it was clear how to write the list of references because we have followed the teacher's guidelines, but sometimes we don't find all the elements of the reference…. For example, the number of the issue and the number of pages."

3.4.4. Working in pairs

Two students (ST 1 & ST 5) indicated working in pairs as major reason for the difficulties they experienced in writing the literature review chapter. These students noted that differences between them and their co-workers in terms of skills, abilities (ST 1) and seriousness (ST 5) have negatively affected their performance in writing the target chapter. For instance, ST 5 describes his binomial's seriousness as follows: "Procrastination of tasks by my binomial. For example, she prefers to do everything by the last few days before the deadlines…She promises to finish the work at a high degree of accuracy, but then she fails…. Wow! that's horrifying miss! To a great extent… I suffered nearly 7 months… Imagine 7 months calling and trying to reach someone, then when reaching her, I spoil my airs persuading her of deadlines…..She was taking a very long time doing little work…..doing 50% of the literature review in 4 months!!"

4. Discussion

Our study focused on Master's students' difficulties in writing the literature review chapter of their dissertations. With regard to the first research question, the results of the students' interview and the content analysis showed that although they knew what it meant, its function and content, the review of the literature is a challenging task for graduate students. As already noted in the results' section, the students had serious issues in summarizing and restating researchers' ideas using their own words. This issue was reported in other studies such as Yeh (2010) and Loan (2017). Moreover, absence of students' critical stance was another issue identified in all the reviews we analyzed. The latter were no more than descriptive summaries of what others said and did. The students did not show any attempt to critically evaluate what they read. These findings are in accordance with Peng's result (2018) that there was no relationship between students' literature reviews and their own research questions and design. These findings also seem to support Mafa and Mapolisa (2012) observation that students were not able to make critical use of materials. Instead, "they tend to summarize all they had read instead of highlighting major points showing strengths and weaknesses and how their present research fills the gap in research." (p. 1690). In addition to the aforementioned issues, students had problems in synthesizing and establishing theoretical frameworks for their research. This finding is supported by the studies of Loan (2017) and Peng (2018) which showed that students failed to identify areas of similarities and differences between relevant sources and establish relationships between previous works and their own work. With regard to the other issues that were reported in the results' section, namely issues related to language, citing and referencing, they were not tackled in previous related studies.

As for the second research question, which aimed at investigating the factors behind students' challenges in writing the literature review chapter, given the paucity of research on this aspect (i.e. factors), our research findings cannot be discussed in relation to previous studies. Rather, our explanations relied exclusively on the students' answers during the interview. According to the students, the issue they had in summarizing, paraphrasing and synthesizing materials was due to the fact that they did not understand the source text in addition to the lack of chances offered to them to practice these important skills. In fact, this is not surprising given the little amount of feedback that students received from their teacher of academic writing. This lack of feedback resulted from the issue of large classes and the amount of time devoted to academic writing classes. That is, having only three hours per week with a class of 90 students minimum

would not allow the teacher to manage the class, design practical exercises and give feedback to each student. These findings support Peng's view (2018) that "teachers did not want to correct students' writing assignments because bigger classes meant a heavier workload…. only a few occasions for writing corrections were available during one semester. Therefore, students' opportunities for writing and language improvements were meagre." (p. 100). In addition to this issue, students' carelessness, laziness and over-reliance on their teachers play a significant role in damaging their research and critical thinking skills and, thus, quality of their work. As a teacher, I noticed that the majority of the students, if they are not forced to do an assignment, do not make any extra efforts to improve their writing skills. As for the problem of citing and referencing, we have already mentioned that the students also related it to lack of practice and the complexity of the referencing rules they have seen in the lecture. Indeed, the content analysis of the literature reviews reinforces the idea that the students did not clearly understand the appropriate use of the referencing styles they have seen in academic writing classes. It also demonstrates that the students misunderstood the rules of summarizing and paraphrasing when citing others' ideas. They thought that they had to acknowledge the source only when direct quotations were used. Whereas, according to them, referring to the author is not necessary when they change the actual words of the original author and restate them using their own words. In simple words, they believed that paraphrasing and summarizing what others have said made them the owners of the idea. As a result, this insufficient knowledge of paraphrasing and appropriate referencing would inevitably result in students being accused of plagiarism.

Conclusion, Implications, limitations and recommendations for further research

To conclude, this study explored graduate students' difficulties in writing the literature review chapter of their dissertations. To this end, two research instruments were used namely a students' semi-structured interview and content analysis of MA dissertations. As shown in the results' section, the findings of the study are in accordance with those of the few studies we referred to in our literature review section. In addition, our study revealed other new important findings regarding the challenges experienced by Master's students. This involves:

- Challenges in critical evaluation of previous related studies and research gap identification.
- Challenges in indicating theoretical position/framework.
- Challenges in citing and referencing.
- Challenges in achieving coherence and cohesion in writing.

According to the majority of the students, lack of opportunities provided in academic writing classes to practice writing the literature review chapter was the primary cause behind the difficulties they experienced in producing a good quality literature review.

Therefore, in light of the study's results, we believe that the following suggestions would help both students and teachers overcome the aforementioned challenges:

- Workshops and seminars on dissertation writing, more specifically writing the literature review, should be organized by academic experts to train students to produce a good review of the literature section/chapter and acquaint teachers with the schematic structure of this chapter. For instance, the program of such workshops and seminars may revolve around:

  - The different purposes served by the literature review in academic papers.

  - Searching for relevant literature and evaluating its academic quality.

  - Note-taking strategies. This may include practical exercises on summarizing, paraphrasing and synthesizing.

  - Using standard approaches to cite sources in texts and write the list of references.

  - Content and structure of the literature review (i.e. the main elements to be included).

  - Critical analysis and evaluation of previous studies' strengths and weaknesses.

  - Connecting the literature review chapter to other sections and chapters in the dissertation such as discussion of the results' chapter.

- Encouraging peer-feedback. That is, supervisors are recommended to encourage their supervisees to exchange their writings with their peers for proofreading. This would help them improve their work based on their peers' comments and suggestions before submitting the final drafts to their supervisors.

- As part of their academic writing assignments, teachers are recommended to ask their students to read and analyze samples of literature review chapters from dissertations written by EFL and native students. This would give them a clear idea about the content of this chapter.

- Due to the issue of large classes and the insufficient amount of time (3 hours per week) devoted to teach academic writing, students can

rarely practice what they learn. Therefore, it is recommended that the administration considers adding at least one hour and a half so that more opportunities to give feedback on students' writing and put theory into practice will be offered to teachers.

- Because the time devoted to academic writing classes is not sufficient, students are recommended to practice writing at home in order to improve their skills in summarizing, paraphrasing and synthesizing. Also, students should not rely on the teacher/supervisor as the only source of knowledge. Rather, they should also consult universal guidelines and published books and handbooks on dissertation writing to develop their understanding of the main requirements to write a good literature review chapter.

Our preliminary research, however, suffers from a number of flaws that should be considered by future researchers who would like to replicate the study. One limitation is the limited literature on the topic under study. As a result, we found difficulties in discussing our research findings in relation to previous studies' results. Another shortcoming is related to the number of students (10 students) who took part in our study. We believe that a study with a larger sample could have had more convincing and reliable results. Thus, a further research needs to be done to examine the results of this study with a larger population including students' perceptions from different Algerian universities. Last but not least, the focus of our research was mainly on investigating the problem from students' perspectives only. Future research should consider comparing between both students and supervisors' points of view to reach more valid results and interesting conclusions.

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Appendix A: Students' Interview

Dear student,

In this interview, I am particularly interested in the difficulties you experienced in writing the literature review chapter of your Master dissertation and the possible reason for each difficulty. I would be very grateful if you accept to voluntarily take part in this research as the information you provide will be of great help to me. You are welcome to ask the researcher any questions you might have about this study.

1. How do you define a review of the literature?
2. What is the purpose of the literature review?
3. What is meant by a gap in the literature?
4. Could you identify the gap in your research?
5. Can you list the main elements that should be included in the literature review chapter?
6. How difficult was it to write the literature review chapter?
7. Extremely difficult, **b)** very difficult, **c)** difficult, **d)** slightly difficult, **e)** not at all difficult.
8. What kind of difficulties did you experience in writing the literature review chapter?
9. What could be the reason(s) for each difficulty?

Abstract

The present study aims at exploring the challenges encountered by didactics' students, from the department of English at Blida 2 University, in writing the literature review chapter of their Master's dissertations. Data for our research were based on two data collection tools namely a semi-structured

interview with 10 students and a document analysis of their literature review chapters. The results revealed that writing this chapter was a hard task to do especially that the students were still novice researchers. Examples of the generic difficulties identified in this study include synthesizing, paraphrasing, summarizing, identifying research gaps, and language writing issues. According to the students, these issues were mostly caused by lack of opportunities to practice writing the literature review chapter. In response to these challenges, some pedagogical implications are provided. This involves organizing training workshops and seminars for both students and supervisors on writing the literature review chapter.

Keywords

Didactics, Dissertation, EFL Master Students, Literature Review, Writing Challenges

ملخص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى البحث في التحديات التي تواجه طلبة الماستر تخصص تعليمية اللغة من قسم اللغة الانجليزية بجامعة البليدة 2، عند كتابتهم للفصل الأول المخصص للدراسات السابقة ذات الصلة بموضوع مذكرات تخرجهم. قامت عملية جمع المعلومات لإثراء هذا البحث على إجراء حوار شبه منظم مع عشرة طلبة، إضافة إلى تحليل ما تمت كتابته. وكشفت النتائج التي توصلنا إليها على الصعوبات التي واجهها الطلبة وخاصة أنهم يحضرون لبحث علمي لأول مرة. وتشمل تلك الصعوبات توليف المعلومات، وإعادة الصياغة، وتحديد نقائص البحث، ومشاكل لغوية. ويرجع الطلبة سبب هذه الوضعية إلى نقص التمرين في كتابة مثل هذا الفصل. ولمواجهة هذه التحديات، نقترح بعض الحلول البيداغوجية المستقبلية مثل تنظيم ورشات تكوينية وملتقيات يشارك فيها كل من الطلبة والأساتذة المشرفين، وهي تتناول موضوع كيفية إعداد هذا النوع من الفصول مع التشجيع على مراجعة العمل المنجز من قبل الزملاء والاستفادة من آرائهم.

كلمات مفتاحيّة

مذكرة، طلبة الماستر في الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، فصل الدراسات السابقة ذات الصلة، تحديات الكتابة، تعليمية اللغة.

Résumé

Cette étude se fixe pour objectif l'examen des défis rencontrés par les étudiants du Master option didactique de l'université de Blida 2 lors de la rédaction du chapitre relatif à la revue de la littérature. La collecte des données s'est basée sur deux outils : un entretien semi structuré avec 10 étudiants et l'analyse d'un document représentant l'analyse de ce chapitre. Les résultats obtenus révèlent que la rédaction d'un tel chapitre est une tâche difficile essentiellement parce

que les étudiants sont encore à leur début dans le domaine de la recherche. Selon ces même étudiants, cette situation est principalement causée par le manque des opportunités qui leurs sont offertes pour pratiquer la rédaction du chapitre consacré à la revue de la littérature. Pour faire face à ces défis, quelques suggestions pédagogiques futures sont émises. Celles-ci incluent l'organisation d'ateliers de formation et de séminaires pour les étudiants et les directeurs de recherches. Ils sont formés à la rédaction du chapitre de la revue de littérature et encourager à soumettre leur travail à des collègues pour révision et avis.

Mots-clés

Didactique, Mémoire, Étudiants de Master Anglais Comme Langue Étrangère, Revue de la Littérature, Défis de la Rédaction.