

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

AN INVESTIGATION INTO GRADUATE STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN COMPLETING MA THESES IN TEFL

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ABSTRACT: Conducted in a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, this study aimed to investigate MA students' difficulties in completing their theses in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). The data were collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Fifty five graduate students from three consecutive cohorts of the TEFL MA program from 2020 to 2024 responded to the questionnaire. Six students participated in the interviews. The results indicated that participants' difficulties included lack of knowledge and experience in doing research, topic selection, searching the literature, writer's block, academic writing, administering research instruments, and constraints caused by requirements and the implementation of the program. However, a slight difference could be observed in participants' perception of the degree of difficulties they faced.

KEY WORDS: difficulties; thesis; graduate students; students' perception; TEFL.

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1. Introduction

Research which is conducted to discover or confirm facts or to investigate a new problem of topic plays an important role in science (American Psychological Association, 2014). In education, research makes a significant contribution to quality education and effective teacher education (Brindley, 1992). This could explain why promoting research and improving its quality has become a main focus of worldwide education systems; Vietnamese higher education does not stay out of this mainstream (Pham, 2006). In the Vietnamese context, carrying out a research project leading to a graduation thesis is mandatory for all candidates enrolling in MA courses in TESOL at universities in Vietnam. A master's thesis is an academic research output that required to give students a scholarly and research foundation they need in pursuing further education and professional work. According to the current master's training regulations of the Ministry of Education and Training, the content of a master's thesis must demonstrate theoretical and practical knowledge in the specialized field, and methods for solving the problem. The results of the thesis must demonstrate that the author knows how to apply research methods and knowledge acquired during the learning process to handle the project (The Ministry of Education and Training, 2008). In the Master's program in TEFL where the study was conducted, thesis work accounting for 10 credits (20% of credits in the curriculum) is scheduled at the last stage of the program. Doing thesis, therefore, is considered as the most crucial part of the program and the most presumably demanding task assigned to graduate students. The study aimed to shed light into difficulties faced by students incompleting their theses, from which proper pedagogical actions could be taken to accommodate the improvement of the quality of research by Master students.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Design

This research was designed as a descriptive study on a master program in TEFL in the Mekong Delta. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected to find out students' difficulties in doing MA theses.

2.2. Research participants

Fifty five graduated MA students in three consecutive cohorts of the program, from 2020 to 2024, were randomly invited to participate in the study. 46 of whom were female and 9 were male. Their

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ages ranged from 25 to 44. 47% of the participants conducted descriptive studies while 53% of them did experiment studies. At the time they were doing theses, 29% of the participants were high-school teachers, 24% were college and university teachers, 33% worked in language centers in the Mekong Delta and the rest 14% devoted their time to only thesis work. Approximately 24% of these MA students did B.A theses in the field of English education.

2.3. Research instruments

2.3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire included two sections. The first section sought some personal information of the participants such as name, age, gender, cohort number, and the participants' experience in doing theses. The second one consisted of 40 items, each of which was a statement manifesting a difficulty facing students in doing MA theses. All items were designed in a 5-point Likert from 1 - Strongly Disagree to 5 - Strongly Agree. The items were grouped into nine categories: *Lack of knowledge and experience of doing research, writer's block, topic selection, searching the literature, supervision, administering research instruments, writing, thinking, and oral defense*. The participants answered the questionnaire in Vietnamese version online through a link to Google doc or from email.

2.3.2. Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews were carried out with student participants so as to gain more in-depth information about difficulties faced by students in doing MA thesis. They were interviewed in person one by one in 30 minutes.

Table 2.1. Selection of student interviewees

Type of study Level of difficulty	Descriptive study	Experimental study
Highest	Student 1	Student 2
Moderate	Student 3	Student 4
lowest	Student 5	Student 6

3. Results

3.1. Students' perception of difficulties in doing thesis

3.1.1. Level of difficulty in doing thesis

The results of the *Descriptive Statistics Test* on students' perception of difficulties in doing thesis were displayed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Level of difficulty in doing thesis

Conditions	N	Min.	Max.	Mean (M)	SD
Level of difficulty	55	1.95	3.92	2.85	.47

The *One-Sample T-Test* was run on the mean score of students' perception of difficulties in doing thesis ($M=2.85$, $SD=.47$) and the test value was 3. The results show that the mean score of students' perception of difficulties was different from 3 ($t=-10.31$, $df=54$, $p=.00$). The level of difficulty of doing thesis in students' perception was low.

3.1.2. Level of difficulty according to categories

In order to identify students' noticeable difficulties in doing theses, the Descriptive Statistic was run on the mean score of nine clusters in the questionnaire. The results were briefly reported in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Level of difficulty according to categories

	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Lack of experience and knowledge	55	1.00	5.00	3.50	.99
Searching the literature	55	1.00	4.75	3.22	.97
Writing	55	1.33	4.83	3.11	.72
Writer's block	55	2.00	4.83	3.08	.62
Administering research instruments	55	1.50	4.75	3.05	.69
Thinking	55	1.00	4.33	2.72	.68
Supervision	55	1.00	4.75	2.54	.84
Oral defense	55	1.00	4.33	2.36	.82
Topic selection	55	1.00	4.00	2.23	.60

As can be seen from the table, the mean scores of students' perception of difficulty of variables ranged from 2.23 to 3.5 with high standard deviations among participants' responses to variables especially in *lack of experience and knowledge in doing research and searching the literature* ($SD=.99$). The One-Sample T-Test was run on the mean score of students' perception of the difficulty of each variable and the test value was 3, the average scale. The results indicate that difficulties in doing theses were distributed at three different levels in students' perception.

Regarding the variable of lack of experience and knowledge, the results show that the mean score of students' perception of its difficulty ($M_L=3.5$, $SD=.99$) was different from 3 ($t=3.76$, $df=54$, $p=.00$). The level of difficulty of the variable of lack of experience and knowledge was high.

For the variables of searching the literature, writing, writer's block, administering instruments, the results show that the mean scores of students' perception of their difficulty ($M_S=3.22$, $SD=.97$; $M_W=3.11$, $SD=.72$; $M_{WB}=3.08$, $SD=.62$; $M_A=3.05$, $SD=.69$ respectively) were not different from 3 ($t=1.68$, $df=54$, $p=.10$; $t=.91$, $df=54$, $p=.37$; $t=.49$, $df=54$, $p=.63$). The level of difficulty of these variables was moderate.

For the variables of thinking, supervision, oral defence, and topic selection, the results show that the mean scores of students' perception of their difficulty ($M_T=2.72$, $SD=.68$; $M_S=2.54$, $SD=.84$; $M_O=2.36$, $SD=.82$; $M_{TS}=2.23$, $SD=.60$) were different from 3 ($t=-3.10$, $df=54$, $p=.00$; $t=-4.05$, $df=54$, $p=.00$; $t=-5.78$, $df=54$, $p=.00$; $t=-9.48$, $df=54$, $p=.00$). The level of difficulty of these variables was low.

3.1.3. Discrepancies in perceptions of difficulties in doing thesis between two groups of researchers: descriptive and experimental.

An analysis of data from the questionnaire revealed discrepancies in perceptions of difficulties in doing thesis between two different groups of researchers: descriptive and experimental. The Paired Samples T-Test was run on the mean scores of the perceptions of difficulties in doing thesis of these two groups of researchers. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the two mean scores ($t=3.50$, $df=53$, $p=.00$). It could be concluded that the mean score of perceptions of difficulties of researchers doing descriptive study ($M_D=3.06$, $SD=.44$) was higher than that of their counterparts ($M_E=2.66$, $SD=.42$). This means that the formers perceived a higher level of difficulty in doing thesis than the latter.

3.1.4. Discrepancies in the level of difficulty between descriptive researchers' and experimental researchers' perceptions of other variables.

Discrepancies in the level of difficulty between descriptive researchers' and experimental researchers' perceptions of other variables were revealed from the results of Independent Samples T-Test run on the mean scores of their perception of variables of research background ($t=2.12$, $df=53$, $p=.04$), writer's block ($t=2.45$, $df=53$, $p=.02$), topic selection ($t=2.67$, $df=53$, $p=.01$), oral defense ($t=2.04$, $df=53$, $p=.05$).

Figure 3.1 below summarizes discrepancies in the level of difficulty of variables between two types of research reported in the questionnaire. It was noticeable that in each variable, researchers of descriptive studies were reported to perceive higher level; of difficulty than their counterparts.

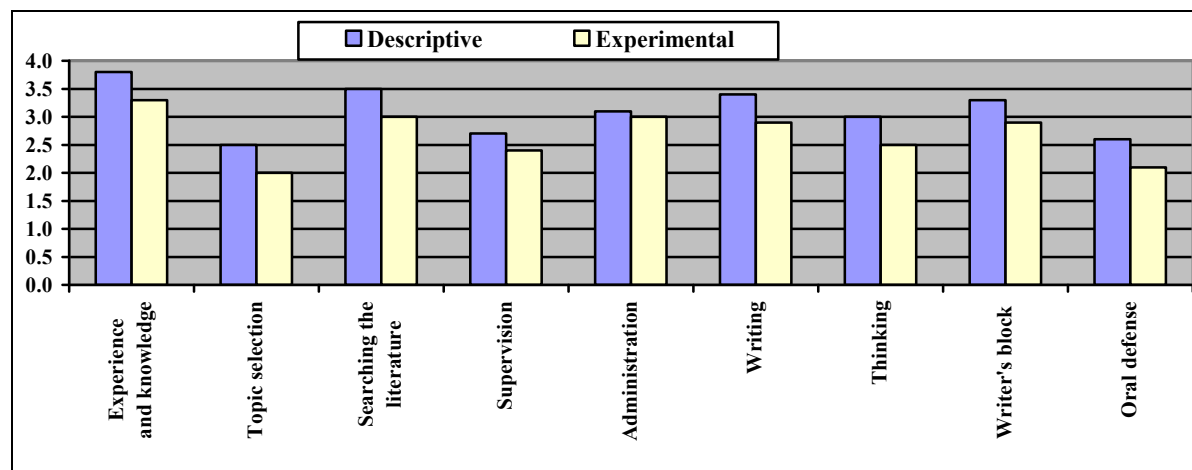


Figure 3.1. Level of difficulty of variables between two types of research

3.2. Insights from interviews with students

Student interviewees reported shared difficulties including inexperience, topic selection, searching the literature, writer's block and writing as well as individual difficulties such as thinking, administering research instruments and further concerns.

3.2.1. A lack of experience and knowledge in doing research

Among difficulties encountered by all six student interviewees was a lack of experience in doing thesis. These inexperienced researchers felt anxious and difficulty figured out what to do in each phase of their research project, spending a lot of time and devoting much effort for the study without efficiency. Even those who did undergraduate thesis elaborated that they found theses at graduate level unfamiliar.

When I was a senior undergraduate student, I had to complete an essay, gathering various information and viewpoints from several articles on a certain issue. So I was like a fish out of water when I did research. I had no idea of what to do from the beginning... I had no idea of what it concluded, and what I was supposed to do to get it done. (Student 4)

Four of the interviewees said they had trouble with the matter of knowledge. Theories taught from courses in the program turned vague or even blank in students' mind at the time they started of working on thesis. In another case, a mismatch between theory and practice was recognized.

...When I was doing courses like research methodology, data statistics, I understood the lessons, completed assignment and passed all exams, but I forgot much later on. (Student 2)

Doing courses in the master program, I knew how to do research in theory, but it turned out more complicated in practice. Sometimes, the theory did not match the real tasks in my case. Or maybe I did not gain enough knowledge from courses in the program. (Student 3)

3.2.2. Topic selection

The initial phase in the process of doing thesis, topic selection, was reported to be most troublesome to a half of the student interviewees. Participants perceived that they had to change their research topics many times since they could not find literature related or the topic was not accepted by their supervisors.

Selecting the research topic was the hardest part. I remembered that I changed it three times. For the first research topic, I had prepared a theoretical framework already, but the teacher whom I wanted to be my supervisor did not like my research topic. (Student 6)

3.2.3. Searching the literature

Finding literature related to the research topic played an important role to the whole study. However, some difficulties arising were limited database of the school and unreliable resources online.

Honestly, I did not find the school database useful. I hardly found any article related to my research. The majority of articles there were written in the field of science and business... (Student 1)

...The problem was the database of school was sometimes inaccessible. Some articles could be downloaded while the others could not... For the online encyclopedia, I did not feel confident whether the information was reliable or not. (Student 3)

3.2.4. Writer's block

This was reportedly problematic among most of student interviewees. Students interviewed faced up distraction from their work or family duties or both of them. Some procrastinated, spending all-nights to get the thesis done.

I experienced so many difficulties during the time I did my thesis. I was teaching at school and teaching further classes. And I got pregnant at the time. I got headache and felt sick whenever I concentrated on writing thesis, so I could not work on it much... (Student 2)

At the time I was preparing the draft of my full thesis, there was something wrong at work hitting my nerve, putting me under much pressure. I suffered from depression for several days and could not write anything... (Student 5)

3.2.5. Writing

Most of student interviewees were in agreement that this was a really big challenge with strict requirements of APA standard, grammar and vocabulary especially academic words. All interviewees said that chapter of literature review was the hardest to write.

I myself was not good at writing. I myself did not feel satisfied with the words and structures I used. I did learn about APA standard, yet my thesis could not avoid mistakes related... I completed chapter 2 in struggle... (Student 1)

I read a lot of articles and tried to use highly academic words of experts. It was hard to write like a native-speaker. Writing literature review cost me much time and effort. (Student 6)

3.2.6. Thinking

All of the interviewees did not mention the problem of thinking until when a direct question about this variable was raised by the researcher. The answers were different among the groups. Students 1 and 2 were not aware of the need to show their argument, explanation, or evaluation after reviewing the literature. Students 3 and 4 conceded that they had to pay much attention to paraphrase and summarize, making inferences from the literature. Therefore, they did not have time to consider raising their own voice in thesis writing. For the final group, the students said they showed their agreement and disagreement towards the literature and the relation between the previous studies and theirs.

I did not criticize, explain, or argue with what was said in the literature. I thought it would lengthen my thesis. In conclusion, I could not relate my findings to the literature since I could not find any study related to mine. (Student 2)

I did not think my thesis could reflect my own thinking as expected. Critical thinking, right? Paraphrasing and summarizing cost me so much time and effort. I tried to figure out what the authors mean. Then, I did not consider bringing up my evaluations or comments to the chapter of literature review. (Student 3)

I showed my agreement or disagreement towards the viewpoints of writers after citing. In some parts, I pointed out strengths and weaknesses of approaches proposed by educators in the field. (Student 6)

3.2.7. Administering research instruments

Researchers either doing descriptive or experimental studies met with difficulties in designing and administering research instruments. Their difficulties varied due to their own specific research contexts and specifications of their research categories.

In my study I needed to observe listening- speaking classes at elementary level. It was very hard for me to find proper classes for observation. The teachers I knew were not teaching that type of class at that time... Another difficulty lied in the responses to the questionnaire. My participants were not enthusiastically responded to the questionnaire, leaving a lot of questionnaires incomplete. (Student 1)

I did not expect that the test I designed was too hard for the participants. After a pilot, I realized the test did not reach the standard Cronbach's alpha. Then, I had to design the test again. It was hard to increase the cronbach's Alpha. (Student 2)

3.2.8. Other difficulties

During the research work, some external factors caused difficulties for graduate students. The first one was a stringent rule imposed upon graduate theses. Specifically, any change to the research topic after the thesis proposal defense was not allowed. The second factor was unexpected changes in the schedule of the thesis oral defense. These two problems were said to make students stress out.

Some rules and regulations placed me under pressure... As I knew, the research topic was required to be fixed while so many changes happened during my process of doing thesis. (Student 2)

There was a sudden change in the schedule of oral defense, which was shocking to me. I had to present my thesis earlier. I found it uneasy. I could not perform as well as I expected in the oral defense. (Student 5)

4. Discussion

Analyses of quantitative and qualitative data identically show five main difficulties perceived by graduate students, including (1) a lack of students' experience and knowledge in doing research, (2) searching the literature, (3) writing, (4) writer's block and (5) administering research instruments. Among these five difficulties, a lack of experience and knowledge in doing research was proved to be the most considerable difficulty as it reached the highest level of difficulty in student's perception. This was in line with the findings of related studies conducted by Divsar (2018), Mizany et al (2012) and Nguyen (2008). Between insufficient experience and insufficient knowledge the former was perceived to be more challenging than the latter. This could be explained by the fact that over three fourths of participants did not do undergraduate thesis since this task was optional in undergraduate curriculum. Even the ones who did thesis reported through the interview that there was a big gap between theses at two different levels, so their experience did not help much.

Different from five difficulties above, topic selection reached the lowest rate of difficulty in questionnaire data analysis. This difficulty, however, was considered as the most serious difficulty by half of student interviewees. The three student interviewees said the difficulty they encountered was to change the research topics many times. Whenever they changed the topic, they had to start off reviewing abundant sources of literature in boredom, tiredness and worry. Such information was not presented in any item in the questionnaire, clarifying why students did not show their agreement towards this variable. In other words, though the questionnaire failed in an attempt to measure this variable, topic selection was truly a big problem faced by students in doing thesis. This finding was consistent with that of the studies by Alyan (2022) and Hashim (2022) which found that topic selection formed a first barrier for graduate students in thesis writing process.

Along with topic sentence, graduate students perceived six difficulties totally, but there could be seen differences among students' perceptions towards these difficulties through analyses of quantitative and qualitative data. In terms of quantitative analysis, the low level of difficulty perceived and the high standard deviations in variables showed that there was a significant variation among students' perceptions. Such a variation was also consistent with opinion of book writers in

educational research (Biggam, 2011; Eco, 2015). Another possible explanation was that graduate students with relatively subjective point of view could hardly recognize some of their problems. When students get involved in research, they cannot recognize difficulties as clearly as the surrounding people. However, when the outside people mention about difficulties, they do not accept that. So, one difficulty is that students cannot be aware of their difficulties.

Regarding types of research, the qualitative analysis showed various obstacles obstructing both researchers of descriptive and experimental study in administering their research instruments. The quantitative analysis, however, revealed that students who conducted descriptive study perceived more difficulties than their counterparts. Taken into account, characteristics of individual participant could explain the reason. Answering the questionnaire, 27 among 29 researchers of experimental study worked full time at colleges, universities, and language centers. In the interview, all the student interviewees in group of experimental researchers conducted the experiment at their workplace. It could be understood that the researchers of experimental wisely took advantage of their work place as the research context so the problems with finding sufficient participants, management, and external factors could be much eased. On the other hand, those who did descriptive study perceived high level of difficulty of searching the literature according to the quantitative analysis. Qualitative data also proved this point with the evidence of descriptive researchers' elaboration of difficulties in finding theoretical sources.

With regards to thesis writing, most of students interviewed asserted that chapter of literature review was the hardest to write. Specially, the matter addressed by graduate students was technical writing, referring to problems with APA style, vocabulary, and grammar, which was found in previous studies in the same field (Al-Khasawneh et al, 2010; Alyan, 2022)

For difficulties in relation to oral defense, it was reported from both quantitative and qualitative analyses that students found this matter unproblematic. This could be explained that during undergraduate and graduate studies, students were familiar with presenting, viewpoint defending and problem solving, so defending a thesis could be considered as a normal learning task. The student were confident with the way they presented their study.

Finally, mentioning other difficulties in doing thesis, students interviewees believed external factors such as their learning curriculum, restriction of database at school, distractors from work and life, the research contexts, and participants, constraints caused by the regulations and arrangement of the master's program were one of the main reasons of the difficulties facing their thesis work. The occurrence of such external factors could lead to students' stress. However, students should partially get a blame for their problems and make every effort to tackle the problems because the schedule of doing thesis was set up balancedly and appropriately in the program they enrolled. So, the reason why they were stressful could be their lack of a sense of responsibility, a thorough consideration, and a preparation before and during the time they worked on their theses.

5. Implications

For students in the MA program

Gaining insights into difficulties encountered by students in doing thesis from the research findings, students enrolling in the program could notice probable difficulties they may run into. Considering the case of researchers of experimental study, graduate students may find it necessary to take advantage of their own capabilities to select a suitable research topic along with the research category, and research context.

For supervisors: It is expected that the research findings could enrich supervisors' understanding of their supervisees' difficulties as well as limitation in supervisees' perceptions about the matters. In order to make the thesis project worthwhile and fruitful, the recommendation to be made is that supervisors come up with explicit instructions and requirements in the supervisee-supervisor interactions. In other words, supervisors should articulate their guidance, advice, evaluation and demand so that graduate students' ambiguity of the thesis project could be eliminated.

For administrations: It is recommended that flexibility in governing and imposing rules and regulations be taken into consideration in order that MA students' learning and doing thesis could be greatly facilitated. Moreover, it is essential that national and international research databases be established and continuously updated so as to meet the need of graduate students in doing research.

In addition, to achieve the best outcome of coursework promoting student's research competence, there are some issues necessary to focus. Firstly, courses especially the ones related to research methodology and academic writing should be arranged appropriately in the curriculum so that learners have time to read course books and reference documents, gaining more insights into the subjects. Also, these courses should offer students opportunities to get exposed to studies, theses, research articles, and journals in related fields and to experience in doing research. Another great need is lecturers' explicit instructions and timely feedbacks to students' practicing research work and academic writing in the courses. Besides, to enhancing graduate students' academic skills, it is significant to regularly offer workshops on searching the literature, following field-specific writing conventions and research experiences from course instructors, teaching assistants, or senior students.

6. Conclusion

The research indicated that lacking research knowledge and experience, selecting a topic, searching the literature, getting writer's block, writing academically, administering research instruments, and being under constraints caused by requirements and the implementation of the program were the common difficulties encountered by students in doing MA thesis. The result also revealed the slight difference in participants' perception of the degree of difficulties. Though this research has achieved its aims, one also has to acknowledge limitations in this research work. Within the limited amount of time allotted, students' difficulty with critical thinking was not comprehensively examined. It was probable that many students were not even aware of the concept of critical thinking in thesis writing. This difficulty could have been recognized better by analyzing the written theses of participants along with the instruments employed in this study. Another limitation was that the study did not interview supervisors about their students' difficulties in doing MA doing thesis. The results of the study will be more reliable if there is the combination of students and supervisors' perception.

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**Khảo sát khó khăn của học viên cao học khi làm luận văn thạc sĩ về
Giảng dạy tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ**

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện tại một trường đại học ở Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long, Việt Nam, nhằm tìm hiểu những khó khăn của sinh viên học thạc sĩ khi hoàn thành luận văn về TEFL (Dạy tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ). Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua bảng câu hỏi và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc. Năm mươi lăm học viên cao học từ ba khóa liên tiếp của chương trình đào tạo thạc sĩ TEFL từ năm 2020 đến năm 2024 trả lời bảng câu hỏi. Sáu học viên tham gia phỏng vấn. Kết quả chỉ ra những khó khăn của đối tượng tham gia bao gồm thiếu kiến thức và kinh nghiệm nghiên cứu khoa học, lựa chọn đề tài, tìm kiếm tài liệu, bị tắc ý tưởng, viết học thuật, áp dụng công cụ nghiên cứu và những hạn chế do yêu cầu và việc thực hiện chương trình. Tuy nhiên, có thể nhận thấy sự khác biệt nhỏ trong nhận thức của người tham gia về mức độ khó khăn mà họ gặp phải.

Từ khóa: Khó khăn; luận văn; sinh viên sau đại học; quan điểm của sinh viên; TEFL.