



AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE CHALLENGES FACED BY ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS IN WRITING MA THESES

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Abstract:

This study investigated the challenges that English-majored students faced when writing their MA graduation theses and explored supervisors' suggestions to improve thesis quality. Writing an MA thesis played a crucial role in developing research skills, yet many students struggled with various components such as referencing, literature review, introduction, and methodology. Data were collected through a thirty-seven-item questionnaire answered by 30 MA students and interviews conducted with 6 experienced supervisors, both face-to-face and via phone. The findings revealed that referencing caused the greatest difficulty, followed by issues with the literature review and methodology sections. In contrast, students rarely struggled with the title and discussion parts. Most students felt confused at the beginning of the writing process and did not know how to start. Supervisors emphasized the importance of early instruction in research methodology, clear guidelines, structured schedules, and ongoing support throughout the thesis process. They also recommended tools like thesis-writing guidebooks and the use of positive feedback to enhance student motivation. The study suggested that universities should provide systematic support, including supervisor training and student workshops, to address these common challenges. These measures helped students meet deadlines, improved writing quality, and made the thesis process more effective for both students and supervisors.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale to the Study

Various methods are used to assess students' academic performance, and the graduation thesis has become a significant tool in this process (Wilbrink, 1997). It allows students to explore a chosen topic in depth and demonstrate their ability to research, analyze, and argue effectively in writing (Hamatani & Pearson, 1997). Thesis writing involves several key stages, from topic selection to drafting and defending the final work. With the rise of international programs and employer expectations, writing theses in English has become increasingly common, including in Vietnam (Huhta, Varttala, & Ervääla, 2007; Miclăuș *et al.*, 2010).

Writing a thesis in English presents major challenges for non-native speakers, who often struggle with limited vocabulary, grammar, paraphrasing, and academic conventions (Dong, 1998; Han, 2014; Gurel, 2010). Common issues include long or vague titles, weak introductions, poor synthesis, and citation errors. Inadequate research skills also affect thesis quality—students may use low-quality sources, overquote, or provide irrelevant background information (Huhta *et al.*, 2007).

Although these challenges are acknowledged in existing literature, they have not been thoroughly examined at the graduate level. This study seeks to investigate the specific difficulties English-majored MA students face when writing their theses in English.

1.2 The Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to investigate the challenges faced by English-majored students in writing their MA graduation theses. It also aimed to provide suggestions to help students improve the quality of their theses.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study focused on the challenges involved in writing a graduation thesis, with the aim of identifying common difficulties that MA students would encounter during the writing process. It was hoped that the findings would help students better prepare themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills before starting their theses. In other words, MA students would gain awareness of the potential challenges they might face. Furthermore, the study would serve as a useful reference for teachers who guide students through the thesis-writing process.

2. Literature Review

2.1 An Overview of a Graduation Thesis

Huhta, Varttala, and Ervääla (2007) believed that a thesis held increasing importance, especially as many companies required it to be written in English. Thesis writing not only contributed to academic development but also supported research and innovation. It demonstrated students' competence in applying the knowledge and skills from their field of study to research as independent scholars (Huhta, Varttala, & Ervääla, 2007). While conducting a thesis, students would often identify specific challenges within their research area, explore possible solutions, and apply the results of their research to real-world or changing contexts. Nguyen (2013) similarly defined the graduation thesis as a reliable tool for evaluating students' academic abilities and competence. Han (2014) emphasized its role in assessing the quality of education in independent institutions. He stated that the graduation thesis served as an essential criterion for evaluating educational standards and could not be replaced by other teaching methods.

In the field of second language writing, Han (2014) conducted a study on the challenges faced by undergraduate students in thesis writing. The researcher analyzed English-major students' graduation theses at Ningbo Institute of Technology (NIT), focusing on areas such as the research proposal and the quality of writing in each thesis section. Similarly, Fadda (2011) explored academic writing challenges faced by postgraduate students. His analysis revealed that English as a Second Language (ESL) students encountered considerable pressure and numerous difficulties in academic writing tasks.

2.2 Requirements of an English Graduation Thesis

Writing a quality thesis involves meeting a range of linguistic, structural, and content-related requirements. According to Huhta, Varttala, and Ervääla (2007), a well-written thesis should be clear, practical, functional, readable, and logically structured. All parts of the thesis must be interconnected and coherent, requiring attention not only to the overall structure but also to the smaller elements such as word choice, sentence construction, and paragraph organization. Wallwork (2011) outlined several important writing requirements for thesis composition. Firstly, every word should be understandable and engaging. Phrases borrowed from other works should be widely accepted and appropriately paraphrased. Secondly, sentences within a paragraph should move from general to specific ideas, while grammatical components like relative clauses, articles, and punctuation must be used with precision to avoid ambiguity. Thirdly, to begin a new paragraph or emphasize a point, writers should use shorter sentences and more dynamic language. Wallwork (2011) also emphasized the importance of writing clearly and concisely. This included using verb tenses appropriately, minimizing direct quotations, avoiding redundancy, and choosing clear, simple vocabulary. Hedging—using cautious language to soften claims—was also encouraged, as it increased the

likelihood of acceptance. Writers were also advised to follow formatting and stylistic guidelines, particularly concerning passive voice and personal tone.

In addition to general requirements for structure and language, specific expectations were defined for different parts of the thesis.

2.2.1 Title

From Wallwork (2011), an effective thesis title must be clear and specific, reflecting the content of the paper. Instead of stringing together multiple nouns, prepositions should be used to clarify relationships between ideas. Vocabulary and punctuation must be used carefully to attract the reader's attention. A period (.) should not appear at the end of the title; however, if the title is a question, a question mark must be included. The title must also satisfy basic standards of syntax, spelling, capitalization, and vocabulary.

2.2.2 Abstract

Wallwork (2011) proposed a five-part structure for writing an abstract:

1. **Background** – Provide brief, relevant context without repeating well-known information.
2. **Aims** – Clearly state the objectives of the research.
3. **Methodology** – Describe how the study was conducted.
4. **Results** – Present the key findings, highlighting how they differ from previous studies.
5. **Implications and Conclusion** – Summarize the broader significance and conclusions.

Wallwork also noted that abstracts should avoid generalizations, unnecessary details such as place names or citations, and overlong explanations. Being concise and logically organized enhances the impact of the abstract. In terms of verb tenses, the present simple is used to describe the content and findings of the paper, the author's opinions, and the conclusions. Present perfect is used to provide background or context from past to present, while past simple is used for reporting the study's specific findings (Wallwork, 2011).

2.2.3 Requirements for Writing the Literature Review Section

The literature review is designed to summarize, synthesize, and critically evaluate previous research related to the topic. Wallwork (2011) emphasized that the review should follow a logical order, grouping studies by themes or methodologies rather than presenting them as isolated summaries. Relevant findings from previous studies must be presented, and their limitations should be acknowledged in a constructive manner. It is also essential to identify gaps in the existing literature that justify the current research. The literature review should not be a list of studies, but rather a discussion that leads the reader toward the rationale for the study. Present simple and present perfect tenses are used to discuss ongoing debates or developments, while past simple is used to describe

specific findings or contributions from past research. Redundancy and excessive quotations should be avoided in favor of original synthesis and critical commentary.

2.2.4 Requirements for Writing the Methods Section

The methods section must be logically structured and provide detailed information to allow others to replicate the study. Wallwork (2011) stated that this section should begin by restating the research problem and specifying the research design. The methodology must include a description of participants or subjects, the location and context of the study, sampling techniques, and research instruments. Researchers must explain what variables were measured, how they were operationalized, and why they were selected. Data collection procedures should be outlined clearly, along with the data analysis techniques used. Any challenges or limitations encountered during the research process should also be briefly discussed. Comparisons with previous research methods can strengthen the credibility of the study. Past simple tense and passive voice are generally preferred in this section to maintain objectivity and focus on the process rather than the researcher.

2.2.5 Requirements for Writing the Results Section

The results section presents the findings of the study without interpretation. According to Wallwork (2011), researchers must clearly report the data collected, including unexpected results that may contradict initial hypotheses. Tables, graphs, and figures may be used to support clarity and allow for easier interpretation. The past simple tense is used to describe the findings obtained by the researcher, while the present simple may be used when referring to findings from other studies in comparison. Care should be taken to present only results in this section—discussion or interpretation should be reserved for the next section.

2.2.6 Requirements for Writing the Discussion and Conclusion Sections

The discussion section interprets the results, compares them to findings from prior research, and explains their implications. Similarities and differences between the current findings and those in the literature should be clearly explained. This section also includes a discussion of the study's limitations and offers suggestions for future research. Active voice is recommended in this section to enhance clarity and engagement. The discussion should not simply repeat results but should provide thoughtful analysis and interpretation.

In the conclusion section, researchers should briefly summarize the key findings and assess their significance. Recommendations for practice, policy, or further study may also be included. The present perfect tense is commonly used to summarize what has been achieved, while the past simple is used for detailing what was done.

2.2.7 Requirements for the Format of a Graduation Thesis

Adapted from Wallwork (2011) and institutional guidelines, the format of a graduation thesis is crucial for maintaining academic standards and ensuring readability. Also, according to Wallwork (2011), as well as common university guidelines, the following elements should be carefully observed:

- **Cover Page:** Includes the title, student's name, department, university, academic year, and supervisor's name.
- **Abstract:** Placed after the cover page, it is a concise summary of the research.
- **Table of Contents:** Lists all chapters, sections, tables, figures, and appendices with corresponding page numbers.
- **Font and Spacing:** Most institutions require Times New Roman or Arial, 12-point font, and 1.5 or double line spacing.
- **Margins:** Standard margins (typically 1 inch or 2.54 cm on all sides) must be used.
- **Headings and Subheadings:** Should be formatted consistently (e.g., bold for chapter titles, italics for subsections).
- **Page Numbers:** Numbered consecutively starting from the introduction or abstract.
- **Citation Style:** The thesis must follow a consistent academic style (APA, MLA, or university-specified), and proper referencing is essential to avoid plagiarism.
- **Appendices:** Supplementary materials like questionnaires, raw data, or detailed tables should be placed in the appendix.

Proper formatting reflects the professionalism and academic integrity of the student and can affect the overall evaluation of the thesis.

2.3 Theoretical Framework for Challenges in Writing an MA Graduation Thesis

The graduation thesis plays a critical role in the academic curriculum and carries substantial weight in a student's overall assessment. It often accounts for the highest percentage of the final grade compared to other coursework. According to Huhta, Varttala, and Ervääla (2007), a high-quality thesis should be understandable, practical, functional, clear, and logically structured. Similarly, Nguyen (2013) considered thesis writing a core component of university education and emphasized that every section of a thesis should be logically connected, with appropriate academic register and consistent structure throughout. Achieving this level of quality requires students to carefully construct each word, sentence, and paragraph with attention to both meaning and form. Pyrczak and Bruce (2011) identified essential structural components of a thesis, including the title, abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and discussion. These elements must work together cohesively to convey the research message. Wallwork (2011) further elaborated on writing criteria that students must meet, such as: appropriate tense usage, limiting direct quotations, eliminating redundancy, using concise and clear expressions, and applying hedging to moderate claims. Additionally, maintaining consistency in voice (e.g., passive vs. active) and following institutional style guides are critical aspects of producing a scholarly thesis.

Meeting these standards presents significant challenges, especially for English-majored students writing in a second language. Therefore, this study explores the key challenges these students face while writing an MA graduation thesis. The challenges are categorized into seven components, corresponding to the standard thesis structure: title, introduction and literature review, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion, references, and formatting.

2.4 Challenges in Writing in English

Language proficiency plays a pivotal role in the academic success of international and non-native English-speaking students. Andrade (2006) emphasized that language barriers significantly affect the quality of academic writing, especially for graduate students. Storch (2009) identified various writing-related difficulties, including grammar, vocabulary, plagiarism, and overall fluency. Although many students can comprehend complex reading materials, they often struggle to produce writing that matches the sophistication of what they read (Hilary, 2010). Ravichandran, Kretovics, Kirby, and Ghosh (2017) found that students experienced challenges in organizing ideas logically, expressing themselves semantically, and avoiding plagiarism—regardless of their academic discipline.

2.4.1 Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a foundational skill for advanced academic writing. Paul (2005) asserted that it can be cultivated through continuous reading, analysis, synthesis, and reflective writing. In higher education, students must engage deeply with content, question assumptions, and construct original arguments (Ravichandran *et al.*, 2017). Many students, however, find critical thinking and the articulation of original ideas particularly difficult. For example, one student in Ravichandran *et al.*'s (2017) study expressed frustration, saying, *"My very first assignment...my professor asked me to reflect on it, and I didn't know what that meant. I didn't want to admit I didn't understand."* Another student explained that the most challenging aspect of academic writing was *"the thinking—critical thinking—how to make a paper sound and meaningful."*

2.4.2 Plagiarism

Plagiarism remains a serious concern in academic writing and is often rooted in differing cultural understandings of intellectual property. According to Ravichandran *et al.* (2017), international students are repeatedly informed about the importance of avoiding plagiarism in Western institutions. One participant stated, *"In France, we only heard about it for major projects, not everyday papers. But here, it's in the syllabus, so you can't say you didn't know."* Another noted that in their home country, citation was not emphasized: *"The professor cared more about the content than the references."* This contrast highlights the need for formal instruction on academic integrity and referencing.

2.4.3 Grammar and Vocabulary

Students frequently struggle with transferring grammatical knowledge from passive memorization to active use in writing. Ravichandran *et al.* (2017) reported multiple examples where students knew grammar rules but found it difficult to apply them correctly in their writing. One student noted, *"We just memorized rules from textbooks. But when we speak or write, we don't know if we're right – no one corrects us."* Another stated, *"My sentences are not right grammatically...I can't put my thoughts together."* Vocabulary was also cited as a concern, with one participant saying, *"What worries me most is using the right words for the situation."*

2.5 Challenges of Writing an English Graduation Thesis

Writing a graduation thesis in English, especially as a non-native speaker, presents numerous challenges across various domains—from writing skills to psychological pressure. These difficulties are often interconnected and can affect both the content and structure of the final product.

2.5.1 Writing Skills

Students frequently encounter challenges in organizing ideas, using cohesive devices, and maintaining academic tone. According to Hamatani and Pearson (1997), problems include the incorrect use of conjunctions, limited vocabulary, inconsistent spelling, and poor coherence. Huhta *et al.* (2007) further observed that many students, influenced by their mother tongue, struggle to conform to academic writing conventions in English. Moreover, not all students have equal exposure to academic writing or a strong foundation in writing techniques. As Han (2014) noted, students often blend informal expressions, phrases from popular media, or colloquial speech into their thesis writing. This results in a style that lacks the formality expected in academic contexts.

2.5.2 Research Skills

Han (2014) highlighted that many students fail to read widely or consult high-quality academic sources, leading to underdeveloped or poorly supported theses. When writing their proposals, students often choose topics that are either too broad or too familiar, lacking novelty and focus. Additionally, some students struggle with synthesizing and analyzing literature effectively, which results in the inclusion of irrelevant information or weak arguments. These issues diminish the academic rigor and originality of their research.

2.5.3 Psychological Factors

Psychological pressures also significantly impact the thesis-writing process. From the beginning to the end of the project, students may experience anxiety, fear of failure, or perfectionism. Many worry that their work may be inadequate or rejected entirely, which increases stress and inhibits creativity. As Paltridge and Starfield (2007) pointed out, such pressures often have a negative influence on students' productivity and writing quality.

Moreover, students tend to over-focus on perfection, which may delay progress or reduce confidence. Constructive feedback from supervisors plays a crucial role in mitigating these psychological challenges and improving both the content and language of students' theses.

2.6 Challenges in Writing an English Graduation Thesis

Writing a graduation thesis in English is a demanding process for English-majored students, particularly when English is not their native language. Each section of the thesis presents distinct challenges related to language use, structure, academic style, and content development. This section outlines the key difficulties students face in each part of a thesis, drawing from existing literature.

2.6.1 Title

Day (1998) defined the title of a thesis as a label, not a sentence, and emphasized that it should concisely reflect the subject of the research. Pyrczak and Bruce (2011) asserted that the title functions as a research tool and must be carefully constructed. Wallwork (2011) even claimed that writing a good title constitutes about 50% of the skill required in academic writing. However, many students struggle to write effective titles. Their titles are often overly long, vague, and fail to capture the main focus of the study. According to Wallwork (2011), a common problem is the incorrect ordering of words and the excessive use of noun strings, which can obscure meaning. Titles should clearly indicate what was studied, not the results or conclusions (Pyrczak & Bruce, 2011), and should be immediately understandable to academic reviewers (Wallwork, 2011).

2.6.2 Abstract

The abstract is a brief summary of the research and should include the purpose, hypotheses or research questions, key methods, main results, and implications (Pyrczak & Bruce, 2011). Despite its short length, it is one of the most challenging sections to write. Wallwork (2011) noted that many abstracts fail to provide a clear understanding of the study. When read in isolation, the abstract should allow readers to grasp the significance and outcomes of the research, yet many student-written abstracts fall short. Han (2014) found that students often write the abstract in their native language and then translate it into English, which results in awkward sentence structures and grammatical errors. Additionally, students tend to overload the abstract with excessive information or omit critical elements such as the results or implications. Some abstracts include abbreviations or informal expressions, compromising academic tone and clarity.

2.6.3 Introduction and Literature Review

The introduction should present the research problem, its significance, and clearly state the objectives or hypotheses (Pyrczak & Bruce, 2011). Yet, students often include too many general statements or unrelated ideas (Wallwork, 2011). The rationale behind the study may be unclear, and there is often a lack of coherence in presenting background

information. Han (2014) observed that many students' introductions are too long, lack a clear background, and fail to establish research questions or argumentation. In the literature review, students often cite irrelevant or unreliable sources without justification (Wallwork, 2011). References are sometimes added only to increase the word count, rather than to support the research. Moreover, students struggle to synthesize previous studies, resulting in disorganized or superficial reviews.

2.6.4 Methods

The methodology section often lacks essential details such as sample size, sampling methods, and justification for chosen procedures (Wallwork, 2011). Statistical techniques are frequently unreported or inadequately explained. Students may also omit necessary steps or describe procedures that are unclear to readers. This lack of transparency weakens the reliability and reproducibility of the study.

2.6.5 Results

Wallwork (2011) highlighted several issues in the results section, including failure to distinguish between major and minor findings, omission of results that contradict hypotheses, and excessive length. Students often duplicate information already presented in tables and figures without interpreting its significance. As a result, the value of the data is not effectively conveyed.

2.6.6 Discussion and Conclusion

In the discussion section, students frequently neglect to compare their findings with those of previous research or explain observed results (Wallwork, 2011). Limitations and implications are often missing or insufficiently discussed. In the conclusion, students tend to repeat content from earlier sections rather than highlighting the contribution of the research. Han (2014) noted that common problems in conclusion writing include exaggeration, digression, excessive brevity, and redundancy.

2.6.7 References

Proper referencing is an essential academic skill. At Can Tho University, students are required to use APA style. Strahan (2013) observed that many students make referencing errors due to a lack of knowledge and poor time management. Common mistakes include failing to cite sources both in-text and in the reference list, misusing conjunctions such as using "and" instead of "&", and incorrect ordering of authors with the same first name.

For example:

- Incorrect: (Smith and Johnson, 2012)
- Correct: (Smith & Johnson, 2012)

When authors share the same surname or first author, APA requires arranging entries alphabetically by the subsequent author's name:

- Wegener, D. T., Kerr, N. L., Fleming, M. A., & Petty, R. E. (2000).
- Wegener, D. T., Petty, R. E., & Klein, D. J. (1994).

Improper citation undermines the credibility and academic integrity of the thesis.

2.7 Review of Previous Studies

Several studies have explored the challenges faced by students when writing graduation theses in English, providing valuable insights into common difficulties and suggesting strategies for improving thesis quality. Hamatani and Pearson (1997) conducted research in Japanese universities to examine the structure and evaluation of graduation theses, as well as students' needs in academic writing. Using questionnaires and interviews with 29 teachers and 6 students, they found that thesis writing plays a crucial role in enhancing students' understanding, critical thinking, and academic writing skills. Key findings revealed that 93% of participants agreed that thesis writing improves reading, analysis, and writing abilities, while 80% stressed the importance of demonstrating originality. However, many students lacked knowledge of citation practices and had difficulty summarizing and paraphrasing. The study recommended offering discipline-specific reading courses and using software like EndNote to support referencing.

A related study investigated the challenges faced by students at universities of applied sciences in Finland when writing theses in English. Data were gathered through electronic questionnaires sent to 15 program managers and 18 language supervisors. Findings showed that students often lacked research skills and struggled with grammar, structure, and cohesion. Many had difficulty formulating or answering a clear research question, and the absence of official thesis guidelines on institutional websites further compounded the issue. Additionally, 67% of respondents believed that students should have demonstrated research and writing skills prior to beginning their theses, while 36% emphasized the need for better resources, more time, clearer guidelines, and stricter anti-plagiarism policies. The study highlighted the importance of improved instructional materials and clear criteria for thesis evaluation.

Similarly, Han conducted an analysis of 414 graduation theses from Zhejiang University and Ningbo Institute of Technology to identify common issues and propose solutions. Through both thesis samples and interviews with students and supervisors, Han found that students frequently chose broad or repetitive topics that lacked originality, gathered insufficient or irrelevant data, and struggled to synthesize literature and articulate ideas clearly. Common problems included overly long or disorganized introductions and literature reviews lacking logical argumentation. Additional issues involved the misuse of abbreviations, informal tone, and structural incoherence. To address these challenges, Han recommended early training in thesis writing, clear supervision, access to high-quality library resources, and peer sharing of effective practices.

Together, these studies underscore the widespread difficulties students face in writing graduation theses in English and point to the need for targeted instructional support, clearer guidelines, and enhanced academic resources.

2.8 Justification of the Study

This study examined the graduation thesis as a crucial tool for assessing academic development but noted limited research on the specific challenges faced by MA students in Vietnam. While most studies focus on undergraduates, MA students also struggle with key thesis components, which can affect both thesis quality and their academic growth. Addressing this gap, the research investigated challenges encountered by English-majored MA students at Can Tho University through a 37-item questionnaire and interviews with six thesis supervisors. It also explored supervisors' views on common student difficulties and their suggestions for improving thesis quality.

The findings offer valuable insights into graduate-level thesis writing and practical recommendations for enhancing supervision, curriculum, and student support.

2.9. Research Gap

Although several studies have explored the general difficulties students face in writing graduation theses, most focus on undergraduate students or non-Vietnamese contexts (e.g., Hamatani & Pearson, 1997; Huhta, Varttala & Ervääla, 2007; Han, 2014). These studies highlight challenges such as grammar issues, plagiarism, topic selection, limited academic sources, and overall writing proficiency. However, little research has specifically addressed English-majored MA students in Vietnamese universities, particularly at Can Tho University. Additionally, few studies have examined how these challenges manifest across all key thesis sections—title, abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, conclusion, and references—especially when written in English as a foreign language. A further gap lies in the lack of contextualized data that considers both student and supervisor perspectives within Can Tho University, where institutional, cultural, and academic factors may significantly influence the writing process. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the specific challenges MA students face across all thesis components, incorporating supervisor insights, and offering context-sensitive recommendations. In doing so, it contributes to the field of EFL academic writing and provides practical implications for improving thesis quality, supervisory practices, and curriculum design in Vietnamese higher education.

2.10. Summary

This part reviewed literature on the challenges of writing an English graduation thesis, highlighting both linguistic and academic difficulties. Common issues include limited vocabulary, grammar errors, weak critical thinking, plagiarism, poor organization, and inadequate research skills. Non-native speakers often struggle with specific sections such as titles, abstracts, introductions, methods, and references. Although writing in English is especially challenging for Vietnamese students, few studies have examined the difficulties faced by MA English majors. Most existing research focuses on undergraduates or general EFL learners, creating a gap at the graduate level. This study addresses that gap by exploring the challenges experienced by MA English-major students at Can Tho University. Its findings aim to support thesis supervisors and inform

improvements in supervision, EFL writing instruction, and training resources, ultimately enhancing thesis quality and academic writing in Vietnamese higher education.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Aims

This research aimed to:

- identify challenges faced by English-majored students when writing an English graduation thesis.
- discover some students' needs during the thesis writing process.

3.2 Research Questions

- 1) What challenges did English-majored students encounter when writing their MA graduation thesis?
- 2) What suggestions were given to improve the quality of MA graduation theses?

3.3 Research Methods and Design

Descriptive studies aimed to find out "what is," so observational and survey methods were often used to collect descriptive data (Borg & Gall, 1989). Quantitative research involved collecting numerical data to interpret or explain phenomena (Aliaga & Gundersen, 2000). Based on these approaches, this study used a descriptive research design to describe challenges faced by English-majored students in writing theses. Numerical data were collected as percentages of participants' responses to each statement. These percentages showed the main challenges students encountered. Also, interviews with teachers were conducted to explore further challenges experienced by students. Therefore, this study combined descriptive, quantitative, and qualitative research designs to answer the research questions.

3.4 Participants

The study included 30 participants (5 males and 25 females), aged 22 to 40, with an average age of 30. Participants held various roles, such as officers and teachers. Besides teachers' questionnaires, 6 teachers were invited to participate in face-to-face and remote interviews via phone and email. The interviews contained six questions related to the second research question. Qualitative data were gathered through these interviews.

3.5 Research Instruments

To collect information on the challenges faced by English-majored students when writing a graduation thesis, two instruments were used: a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire measured students' perceived challenges, while the interviews explored additional issues not covered in the questionnaire.

3.5.1 Questionnaire

A 37-item questionnaire was used to measure challenges in writing the English graduation thesis. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 20. A reliability test showed the questionnaire was valid and reliable, $\alpha = .795$. The first section collected background information such as name, age, gender, and attendance in academic writing and research methods courses. These details might have influenced the results.

The second section consisted of 37 items grouped into seven clusters:

- Cluster 1 (items 1–5): Title,
- Cluster 2 (items 6–10): Abstract,
- Cluster 3 (items 11–17): Introduction and Literature Review,
- Cluster 4 (items 18–23): References,
- Cluster 5 (items 24–29): Methodology,
- Cluster 6 (items 30–34): Analysis and Results,
- Cluster 7 (items 35–37): Discussion.

A five-point Likert scale was used to measure students' attitudes: (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly agree.

Table 3.1: Questionnaire Items by Section

Items	Clusters
1, 2, 3, 4, 5	Title
6, 7, 8, 9, 10	Abstract
11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	Introduction and Literature Review
18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23	References
24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29	Methodology
30, 31, 32, 33, 34	Analysis and Results
35, 36, 37	Discussion

3.5.2 Interview

McNamara (1999) claimed that interviews were especially useful for understanding participants' experiences and gaining in-depth information about a topic. These interviews focused on participants' thoughts, feelings, knowledge, skills, ideas, and preferences (Turner, 2010). Therefore, face-to-face interviews were conducted with five teachers. The interviews took place at convenient and flexible locations such as coffee shops, classrooms, private homes, or via phone calls and emails. Each teacher was asked six questions related to the second research question. Some clarifications and modifications were made during the interviews to ensure a clear understanding and to gain detailed teachers' viewpoints. The interviews were then transcribed and translated by the researchers. The interview aimed to collect additional qualitative data, which were later analyzed using content analysis.

3.6 Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

3.6.1 Administering the Questionnaire

After designing the questionnaire, it was piloted with 30 teachers to test reliability. The pilot results showed the questionnaire was reliable ($\alpha = .795$). Then, the questionnaire, which included 37 items, was distributed to 35 students who had experience writing an English graduation thesis. Out of these, 30 responses were valid and used for analysis. The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and presented in the research findings.

3.6.2 Conducting Interviews with Teachers

The interview contained six questions directed to five teachers, all of whom had supervised students writing English graduation theses. Four teachers were interviewed face-to-face, while one was interviewed by phone. Before starting, the researcher asked for permission to record the interviews and assured confidentiality. The recorded interviews were transcribed and synthesized to identify students' needs and challenges in writing their graduation theses, addressing the second research question.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Challenges in Writing an English Graduation Thesis

The descriptive statistics test was conducted on the mean scores of each cluster of challenges in writing an English graduation thesis. The results showed that students faced several challenges throughout the thesis writing process. Table 4.1 summarizes the main clusters of challenges encountered by English-majored students when writing their MA graduation theses. The statistical data in Table 4.1 indicated that students struggled with various aspects of thesis writing, including the title, abstract, introduction and literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and references.

As shown in Table 4.1, the mean scores for each challenge type differed significantly. The results revealed that English-majored students faced multiple difficulties during their thesis writing. The greatest challenge was writing the references section ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.50$), followed by the introduction and literature review ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.50$), and the abstract ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.48$). Other challenges included methodology ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 0.43$), results ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.59$), and title ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 0.39$). The discussion section posed the least difficulty, with the lowest mean score ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 0.39$).

In conclusion, English-majored students experienced various challenges while writing their MA graduation theses.

Table 4.1: Findings form Challenges in Writing an English Graduation Thesis

Cluster	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Title	30	1.60	3.20	2.31	0.40
Abstract	30	2.17	4.50	3.17	0.49
Introduction & Literature Review	30	2.17	4.67	3.50	0.51
References	30	2.83	4.67	3.79	0.50
Methodology	30	1.50	3.00	2.47	0.44
Result	30	1.00	3.80	2.42	0.60
Discussion	30	1.00	4.00	2.10	0.77

Table 4.1 shows the mean scores and variability of challenges faced by English-majored students in different sections of their graduation thesis. The highest mean scores appeared in the References (3.79), Introduction & Literature Review (3.50), and Abstract (3.17) sections, indicating these were the most challenging areas. The Discussion section had the lowest mean score (2.10), suggesting it was comparatively less difficult for students. The results highlight the specific areas where students encountered the most difficulties during thesis writing.

4.1.2. Frequency of Challenges in Writing an MA Graduation Thesis

Here is the analysis presented in a clear tabular format:

Table 4.2: One-Sample t-Test Results on Frequency of Thesis Writing Challenges

Challenge Cluster	t-value	df	p-value	Compared to Test Value	Interpretation
References	19.56	29	< .001	2.0	Significantly more frequent than low threshold (2.0)
Title	4.24	29	< .001	2.0	Significantly more frequent than low threshold (2.0)
Result	3.86	29	< .001	2.0	Significantly more frequent than low threshold (2.0)
Discussion	0.71	29	= .48	2.0	Not significantly different from low threshold (2.0)
Introduction & Literature Review	-5.38	29	< .001	4.0	Significantly less frequent than high threshold (4.0), but still a major challenge
Abstract	-9.28	29	< .001	4.0	Significantly less frequent than high threshold (4.0), but still a major challenge
Methodology	-19.20	29	< .001	4.0	Significantly less frequent than high threshold (4.0), but still a major challenge

The one-sample t-test results revealed significant variation in the frequency of challenges English-majored students faced while writing their MA graduation theses. Challenges related to the Introduction and Literature Review, Abstract, and Methodology were reported more frequently, as their mean scores significantly differed from the higher threshold value of 4.0. In contrast, difficulties in the References, Title, and Result sections, although statistically significant against the lower threshold of 2.0, occurred less frequently. Notably, challenges in the **Discussion** section did not significantly differ from

the low-frequency benchmark, suggesting that this area posed fewer problems for students. Overall, the findings highlight that students encountered the greatest difficulties in the early and methodological parts of their theses.

Table 4.3: Frequency of Challenges in Writing an MA Graduation Thesis One-Sample t-Test Results

Challenge	Test Value	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
References	2	19.564	29	.000	1.788
Result	2	3.866	29	.001	0.420
Discussion	2	0.712	29	.482	0.100
Title	2	4.246	29	.000	0.306
Introduction & Literature Review	4	-5.385	29	.000	-0.500
Methodology	4	-19.207	29	.000	-1.527
Abstract	4	-9.284	29	.000	-0.827

In Table 4.2, for clusters tested against the value 2, the positive and significant t-values indicate that challenges related to References, Result, and Title appeared significantly more often than this low frequency threshold. The Discussion cluster did not significantly differ from 2, implying a low frequency of challenge. And for clusters tested against the value 4, the negative and significant t-values show that challenges in Introduction & Literature Review, Methodology, and Abstract occurred less frequently than this higher threshold, but still notably.

Moreover, the one-sample t-test compared the average mean scores of each cluster against test values of 4.0 and 2.0. Among the frequencies of challenges in writing an English MA graduation thesis, the references section had the highest mean score. The next most frequent challenges were in the title, result, and discussion sections, followed by the introduction & literature review and abstract sections. The methodology section had the lowest mean score. In summary, quantitative data from the questionnaire showed that English-majored students frequently struggled with seven types of challenges: references, title, result, discussion, introduction & literature review, methodology, and abstract. Among these, the references and title sections were the most commonly encountered difficulties in writing an English MA graduation thesis.

4.1 3 Reasons for Challenges in Writing an MA Graduation Thesis

To explore the underlying reasons for the challenges English-majored students faced when writing their MA graduation theses, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers. The interviewees were first asked to share their perceptions of the thesis writing process, followed by common difficulties observed in their students' work and the causes behind those challenges. The interview data were transcribed, analyzed, and synthesized to identify patterns and insights.

4.2. Teachers' Attitudes Toward Students' Challenges

All six teachers agreed that MA students should undertake a graduation thesis to reflect on their learning process and accumulate valuable academic experience. According to Teacher 1,

"A thesis is a chance for students to look back at their knowledge and their studying process... It provides new and valuable experiences."

Similarly, Teacher 2 acknowledged that even high-performing students encountered difficulties during thesis writing.

All teachers recognized that writing in English posed a particular challenge, especially for non-native speakers. Teacher 3 noted,

"Writing is hard even in your native language. Writing a thesis in English is even harder."

Teachers 4 and 5 emphasized the intense effort required, including the time needed to read extensively before drafting. Teacher 6 pointed out her surprise that students sometimes struggled with basic structures, sentence formation, and tenses.

4.2.1. General Challenges Reported by Teachers

In response to the second interview question, all teachers admitted that students faced a range of recurring challenges:

- **Time Management:** Teachers 1 and 2 mentioned that students often failed to meet deadlines due to external factors such as work commitments or personal issues. While students started strong, they gradually lost focus during the writing period.
- **Writing Structure:** Teachers 3 and 4 reported that many students lacked basic academic writing skills. Some struggled with crafting topic sentences, maintaining paragraph unity, or applying correct grammatical structures. Students often emphasized data analysis over writing coherence, leading to disorganized content.
- **Thesis Length and Literature Review:** According to Teachers 5 and 6, some students failed to meet the expected length of 40–50 pages. In particular, literature review sections were often short or lacked synthesis. Students either struggled to locate relevant sources or merely listed studies without discussing their relevance.
- **Methodology Section:** As Teacher 3 pointed out, many students showed confusion in selecting and justifying their research instruments. In some cases, their research aims and questions were inconsistent or unclear. For example, one student had two research aims but presented three unrelated research questions.

In conclusion, the interviews revealed that English-majored MA students faced common challenges in time management, writing structure, literature synthesis, and methodological design. These issues were rooted in a combination of limited academic writing experience, insufficient reading, and a lack of research training.

Table 4.4: Reasons for General Challenges in Writing an MA Graduation Thesis

Teacher	Reported Reasons
Teacher 1	- MA students had to manage multiple responsibilities (jobs, family, etc.), leaving little time for thesis writing. - They lacked sufficient foundational knowledge before starting their thesis.
Teacher 2	- Students were overwhelmed by external commitments, affecting their ability to focus on academic writing. - They were underprepared academically for the demands of thesis work.
Teacher 3	- Supervisors did not provide enough clear guidance or consistent support during the writing process.
Teacher 4	(No additional reason specifically recorded)
Teacher 5	- Students lacked awareness and responsibility in managing their thesis progress. - Poor time management caused them to rush near the deadline.
Teacher 6	- Students lacked genuine interest and motivation in their chosen research topics, leading to weak engagement with the thesis.

4.2.2 Specific Challenges in Each Part of the MA Graduation Thesis

When asked about specific challenges students encountered in each part of the MA graduation thesis, all six interviewed teachers agreed that it was common for students to struggle with various sections due to the complexity of the thesis-writing process.

4.2.2.1 Title

Opinions on the title section varied. One teacher believed this part was relatively easy, but noted conflicts between different council members' expectations:

"Sometimes, the thesis proposal and the final report councils have different opinions. For example, one accepts the word 'motivate,' while the other prefers 'inspire,' or students are asked to change a verb to a noun." (Teacher 1)

Other teachers disagreed, emphasizing the title's importance.

"A poorly constructed title can confuse readers. Some students use too many words, making the thesis purpose unclear." (Teachers 2 & 3)

"Students often struggle with arranging words properly, leading to vague or overly long titles." (Teachers 4 & 5)

"A well-written title can greatly influence a reader's first impression of the thesis." (Teacher 6)

4.2.2.2 Abstract

Two teachers reported minimal difficulties in the abstract section, especially when supervisors provided clear guidance.

"I usually instruct students on what to include—title, background, aims, methods, findings, and implications—so they don't struggle much." (Teachers 1 & 2)

However, others highlighted issues:

"Students often write the abstract without a clear understanding of the main content, leading to incomplete or overly long abstracts." (Teachers 3 & 4)

"Even after taking academic writing courses, some students are unsure what to include in the abstract." (Teachers 5 & 6)

4.2.2.3 Introduction and Literature Review

Most teachers agreed this section posed the greatest challenge.

"Students often fail to show the connection between previous studies and their own work, possibly due to time constraints or limited reading." (Teachers 5 & 6)

4.2.2.4 Methodology

Teachers had mixed opinions on the methodology section.

"This section is usually manageable, but sometimes the research questions do not align with the instruments used." (Teacher 4)

4.2.2.5 Results

Some teachers believed students found the results section straightforward:

"They mainly report findings based on research questions, so it's easier for them." (Teacher 4)

Others pointed out specific difficulties:

"Reliability can be an issue—for example, small sample sizes may limit comparative analysis." (Teacher 6)

4.2.2.6 Discussion

Nearly all teachers identified the discussion section as highly challenging:

“Students need to compare their findings with previous studies. This requires extensive reading and analysis.” (Teachers 1, 2 & 3)

“Due to time constraints, many students rush and only produce one or two pages with limited insights.” (Teachers 4 & 6)

4.2.2.7 References

Although often viewed as a simple task, writing the reference list also posed challenges:

“Many students are unfamiliar with APA style, despite having been introduced to it in subjects like research methodology and reading.”

Table 4.5: Reasons for Specific Challenges in Writing an MA Graduation Thesis

Section	Reason for Challenges
Title	Students were confused about word choice and structure when forming the thesis title.
Abstract	While students seldom had major issues, some neglected to proofread or check for grammatical errors.
Literature Review	Students lacked sufficient time to invest in their thesis and struggled to demonstrate the connection between their study and previous research.
Methodology	Students often misunderstood their research, leading them to select inappropriate instruments for answering their research questions.
Results	Students had difficulty ensuring the reliability of their results and distinguishing differences between research groups.
Discussion	Students did not read or analyze related literature carefully, preventing them from identifying similarities and differences between their work and previous studies.
References	Students may have failed to properly examine materials sourced from the internet, books, or articles, resulting in inaccurate or inconsistent references.

4.3. Suggestions for Improving MA Students' Graduation Thesis Quality

In response to the final interview question, six supervisors provided several practical suggestions for improving the quality of MA graduation theses. Firstly, it was strongly recommended that the Research Methodology course be offered earlier in the program. Teachers noted that students often begin working on their theses in January but do not study research methodology until April, with submission deadlines in May. This timeline leaves students confused and underprepared. As Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 suggested, early exposure to research methodology would help students better understand the thesis-writing process and allow more time for preparation.

Secondly, supervisors emphasized the importance of providing students with a clear and structured timeline. Teachers explained that a schedule outlining deadlines for submitting different sections of the thesis would help students manage their time and take greater responsibility. Teacher 3, Teacher 4, and Teacher 6 agreed that many students are busy with work and family obligations and may neglect their thesis without regular

reminders. A structured timeline would prevent last-minute efforts and improve thesis quality.

Finally, several teachers suggested that teachers should share their experiences by creating supportive materials, such as guidebooks or manuals on thesis writing. Teacher 5 and Teacher 6 further recommended enhancing teaching quality, updating the curriculum, and improving assessment methods to better support students throughout the thesis-writing process.

4.4 Summary of Findings

The quantitative data were collected through a 37-item questionnaire designed to identify the challenges English-majored students face in writing their MA graduation thesis. The results revealed seven main areas of difficulty: title, abstract, introduction and literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and references. Among these, the references and literature review sections were the most challenging, while the title and discussion sections appeared to be less problematic based on students' responses. The qualitative data, gathered from interviews with six experienced supervisors, provided deeper insights. Supervisors confirmed several challenges identified by students but also highlighted additional difficulties, including time management, structural issues in writing, thesis length, and research methodology. Interestingly, while students rated the discussion section as the least challenging, supervisors viewed it as the most difficult part due to the requirement for critical analysis and comparison with existing literature.

These findings show both overlapping and differing perceptions between students and teachers, underlining the need for better preparation, clearer guidance, and improved support systems throughout the thesis-writing process.

4.5. Discussions

The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data reveal a multifaceted view of the challenges faced by English-majored students in writing their MA graduation theses. The questionnaire results indicated that students struggled the most with the references, introduction and literature review, and abstract sections. Surprisingly, the discussion section, which typically requires critical thinking and synthesis of results, was perceived by students as the least challenging. This discrepancy suggests a possible misunderstanding of what is expected in that section, or a lack of depth in their writing, which they may not have recognized.

On the other hand, interviews with six supervisors provided a more comprehensive understanding of these challenges. Teachers pointed out that the discussion section is often the most difficult for students, as it requires deep engagement with prior research, analysis of similarities and differences, and drawing meaningful conclusions. This contrast highlights a gap between students' perceptions and actual performance, indicating a need for clearer instruction and more guided support, especially in interpreting and integrating research findings. What's more, supervisors identified broader issues such as time constraints, lack of responsibility, insufficient

preparation, and poor understanding of research methodology as key reasons students struggle. Teachers also noted that structural issues, such as sentence formation and paragraph development, were common. These challenges were compounded by students' personal and professional commitments, which often limited their time and focus.

The analysis emphasizes the importance of early preparation, timely feedback, and academic support. Adjustments in curriculum planning, particularly offering the Research Methodology course earlier, and providing a structured timeline could help students manage their workload and improve the quality of their theses. Moreover, enhancing supervisors' roles in guiding and monitoring students consistently throughout the thesis process could address many of the identified challenges.

5. Conclusion

This study addressed two main research questions: the challenges faced by English-majored MA students in thesis writing, and supervisors' suggestions for improvement. The data revealed that students encountered difficulties across all thesis sections, especially in referencing, followed by the introduction, literature review, abstract, methodology, and results. Interestingly, students found the discussion section less challenging, contrary to supervisors' views, who considered it one of the most difficult parts. Supervisors strongly recommended that the Research Methodology course be taught earlier in the program to give students more time to shape their research direction and develop necessary skills. They also emphasized the importance of clear guidelines and structured timelines to support students throughout the writing process.

While institutional support is essential, the findings highlighted the importance of student responsibility, consistent effort, and early engagement. Additional needs identified by students included more time, improved access to information, more research-focused writing courses, and stricter plagiarism policies. Supervisors also suggested developing a reference book with common challenges, examples, and practical strategies. These insights are expected to improve supervision practices, EFL writing pedagogy, and training materials, ultimately enhancing the thesis-writing experience.

5.2 Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study had limitations. The questionnaire sample was limited to 30 students, as many were unavailable or unable to recall their writing process in detail. Some interview responses were brief due to time constraints, especially those conducted via email, which limited opportunities for clarification. Nevertheless, thesis writing remains a preferred and valuable experience for English-majored students, allowing them to consolidate their learning. Continued teacher support through structured schedules, clear guidelines, and timely feedback is vital to student success.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies should explore the effectiveness of structured support mechanisms such as timelines, feedback systems, and training workshops. Early and clear guidance from teachers can enhance student motivation and performance. Implementing standardized timelines may help students manage their progress and meet deadlines more effectively. Furthermore, current supervisory practices lack consistency and often rely on individual experience. Professional development programs for supervisors focused on academic writing and supervision strategies are recommended to improve support quality and student outcomes.

5.4 Implications for Teachers

Teachers play a key role in helping students navigate thesis-writing challenges. They should provide clear guidelines, detailed schedules, and section-specific deadlines from the beginning. Step-by-step guidance and regular support can reduce student stress, build confidence, and lower the need for repeated error correction. Currently, much of the support provided depends on supervisors' personal experience rather than formal training. Introducing standardized training for thesis supervision would equip teachers with the skills needed to address common student challenges more effectively. This approach will contribute to improved thesis quality and better academic writing outcomes at the graduate level.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

Both authors strongly agreed on the publication of this paper, and there was no contention or rivalry during the finishing of the work. In other words, the authors declare no conflicts of interest in this article. Both authors are fully and equally responsible for the benefits and harms after this article is published. The authors, moreover, declare that the material presented by us in this paper is our original work and does not contain any materials taken from other copyrighted sources. Wherever such materials have been included, they have been clearly indented or/and identified by quotation marks, and due

and proper acknowledgements have been given by citing the source at appropriate places.

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