

Master's Thesis Writing: Cinderella of Iranian ELT Education

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Abstract

For the vast majority of the Iranian M.A. students of TEFL, thesis writing is the first individual engagement with research. Despite having some pedagogical merits, such as an academic activity generally poses some intellectual and affective challenges to such students. During thesis completion, if students are not effectively scaffolded by supervisors and not supported by universities, they are likely to encounter serious problems that might result in their disengagement, frustration, and withdrawal from doing their theses themselves. This study was an attempt to explore the factors that dissuaded some Iranian M.A. students of TEFL from carrying out their theses themselves. In effect, the study aimed to shed light on the reasons why some Iranian M.A. students of TEFL go to other agents to do their theses in exchange for money. Adopting a purposive sampling procedure, we found 13 M.A. graduates who did not do their theses themselves, but they paid some agents to do so in their stead. Semistructured interviews were used to gather the data. Findings revealed 3 dominant themes including supervisor-related, supervisee-related, and higher education-related factors responsible for the issue under investigation.

Keywords: Thesis Supervision; Supervisors; Supervisees; TEFL

1. Introduction

Thesis writing can be discussed as a stage in educational development (Day, Grant, & Hounsell, 1998) that can open up possible avenues for further academic progress and achievements. Thesis writing is different from coursework in terms of teacher-student interaction, focus, duration, and objective (de Kleijn, 2013). Unlike the coursework in which the focus is to learn the content, and the outcome of the course is usually expected and determined by teachers; however, thesis writing involves empirical engagement with issues, and neither students nor supervisors know what the outcome of the research might be. The teacher-student interaction in courses is of one-to-many. That is to say, the teacher interacts with many students, whereas in thesis writing, with the exception of group supervision, the pattern of interaction changes to one-to-one interaction. In terms of duration, a course does not last more than 4 months, whereas thesis writing may take 9 months or even 1 year and a half. The most significant difference lies in the objective. Although the

objective of both courses and theses is for learning and development to happen, the way in which this happens is not the same, that is, on the one hand, thesis writing and completion is more challenging and in need of more scaffolding and, on the other, it entails a great deal of independent learning.

Such defining features of thesis completion have some pedagogical values associated with it, although it may be fraught with some intellectual and affective challenges. One of the considerable pedagogical merits that accrues to students is independent learning. To complete a thesis, it is expected that students have the prolonged engagement with the issue under investigation. This involves a substantial personal involvement that, in turn, creates an opportunity for independent learning. Thus, ideally, thesis completion is a vehicle for self-directed learning, understanding, and exploration, with students taking on much more responsibility for their own learning (Todd, Bannister, & Clegg, 2004). In addition to students' involvement in experiential and discovery learning, thesis writing and completion can enhance and promote cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Marshall, 2009). Moreover, successful completion of a thesis can increase the chance of a student to further studies in postgraduate programs or prepare him or her for a career (Semeijn, Velden, Heijke, Vleuten, & Boshuizen, 2006). Besides its pedagogical advantages, however, such an academic activity generally poses some intellectual and affective challenges. As Sachs (2002) pointed out, thesis writing can be the source of great anxiety for many students of higher education. Familiarity with the nuances and subtleties of qualitative/quantitative research and with the psychometrics of research, including validity and reliability of the instrumentation and research designs, are intellectually challenging and can influence students' motivation and disposition toward theses and research.

Therefore, despite its pedagogical values, thesis completion, due to its challenging and sometimes cumbersome nature, needs support from supervisors and other stakeholders. As a matter of fact, successful completion of a thesis relies upon a number of factors. The most noticeable one is the role played by supervisors. Wisker (2005) held that through scaffolding and empowering students, supervisors can help them become independent learners. The role of a supervisor can be best explained by analogy with the role of a good waiter. As pointed out by Murray (1998), a good waiter is around enough to provide you with things you need and then leaves you, so you can enjoy yourself. Thomas (1995) emphasized the importance of effective supervision as an important domain of thesis writing. He argued for providing technical support, giving regular feedback on students' performance, and establishing a supportive social network as the essential supervision practices. Arguing in the same line, Semeijn, Semeijn, and Gelderman

(2009) found supervisor responsiveness highly effective in enhancing the quality of theses.

The role of supervisors can fall into a structured/unstructured continuum (Marshall, 2009). At one end of the continuum, prescriptive or structured supervision is favored, in which supervisors lay down the research topic along with the necessary steps and then monitor the student's progress. At the other end of the spectrum, they adopt a constructivist approach in which students are given choices and more freedom. In the structured approach, students feel more secure because their supervisors prescribe topics, research questions, methods, and the data collection procedures and analysis they need to go through during thesis completion. In the unstructured or semistructured approach, the role of supervisors is more of a facilitator than a prescriber. That is to say, they assist students in choosing topics, formulating research questions, choosing methods, and data collection and analysis. Underlining both social-emotional and cognitive domains of thesis supervision, de Kleijn, Mainhard, Meijer, Pilot, and Brekelmans (2014) argued that establishing friendly and working relationships with students as well as providing feedback on their performance should be an integral part of supervision carried out by supervisors during thesis project completion. Powles (1992) held that the quality of supervision students receive is positively correlated with their success.

In Iran, M.A. in TEFL includes of a number of taught modules and a thesis. The thesis project is conducted under the supervision of a supervisor and an advisor. As Hasrati (2013) pointed out, in Iranian universities, "there are very little institutional guidelines on Masters degrees supervision and assessment. In addition, the scope of and the rationale for thesis writing are often not quite clear" (p. 457). As a result, a wide range of variations occur in such areas in terms of choosing research topics, writing proposals, supervising theses, giving feedback, and publishing papers. Much of the decision in such areas is negotiated or personally made by professors. Investigating the case of authorship among Iranian M.A. students of TEFL, Rahimi and Askari Bigdeli (2015) found that there remains a paucity of explicit and detailed guidelines addressing authorship. In other words, some of Iranian TEFL professors apply their own personal criteria when assigning authorship to the students who made contributions to research papers.

As a matter of fact, thesis writing and completion is the first individual engagement with research for the vast majority of Iranian M.A. students of TEFL. During thesis completion, if students are not effectively supported by supervisors and universities, they are likely to face serious problems that might lead to students' disengagement, disillusionment, demotivation, and withdrawal from doing their theses themselves. The present study was an attempt to explore the factors that dissuaded some Iranian M.A. students of TEFL from carrying out their theses

themselves. In effect, the study aimed to shed light on the reasons why some Iranian M.A. students of TEFL appeal to other agents to do their theses in exchange for money. The study aimed to answer the following research question:

- Why do some Iranian M.A. students of TEFL avoid carrying out their theses themselves, but instead ask others who are paid to do so?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Through the purposive sampling procedure, 13 Iranian M.A. students of TEFL (6 men and 7 women) were chosen to participate in the study. All the participants, ranging in age from 26 to 37, graduated and held M.A. in TEFL from state universities at the time of the study. They all acknowledged that their theses were not written by themselves, but rather by others who were paid to do so.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected through semistructured interviews. Because the area the present study addressed was of high sensitivity and might adversely influence the participants' future life if their identities were revealed, pseudonyms were used throughout the paper when reference was made to the excerpts from the interview transcripts. Some of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, whereas others through phone and Skype. Each interview lasted approximately 30 min. The interviews took place in Persian (i.e., the participants' L1) in order to avoid any misunderstandings that might occur by talking in English. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for further analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis that, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), "is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). The steps employed in thematic analysis encompassed transcribing verbal data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

3. Findings

The analysis of the interviews revealed three dominant themes that, according to the participants of the study, can be counted as the main reasons why some Iranian M.A. students of TEFL avoided carrying out their theses themselves. The themes are associated with supervisors, supervisees, and higher education policies.

3.1 Supervisor-Related Factors

The first factor associated with supervisors is lack of enough academic support from supervisors that lead to M.A. students failing to complete their theses

on time. Most participants asserted that the supervisors were not available, so they could not seek academic advice associated with their theses. This is partly due to the supervisors' inadequate or even lack of commitment and work load, and partly due to their supervision of a large number of theses at different universities. Thus, there is little time, if any, for each student to receive feedback and guidelines for his or her work. In this regard, Reza (note: All names used in the excerpts are pseudonyms), one of the participants, said:

- *Hardly ever could we meet. His office was closed most of the time. I remember waiting long time behind the office door and returned empty-handed. They teach many hours while leaving us on our own.*

Along the same lines, Masoumeh stated:

- *My supervisor was supervising a lot of theses in both state and Azad universities. It was hard to find him free. To get feedback on a chapter or a piece of writing, I had to stand in line as other students' works were pending.*

The second factor concerns faulty communication practices and interactions between the students and supervisors. M.A. students need to be extremely careful about their behaviors towards supervisors because a mistake may be interpreted as a blatant misconduct or rudeness and can negatively influence the subsequent relationship. It appears that supervisors working with the students lay down some strict communication and behavior codes that do not help establish a working relationship and create anxiety on the part of the students. Fatemeh who complained about her supervisor's communication practices stated that:

- *It was hard for me to communicate with my supervisor. She got angry if I asked several questions. For this, I felt stressed out to the extent that sometimes I totally forgot my questions. Reply to my e-mails was ignored a number of times and when I asked the reason, she said that she forgot to reply back. I was not allowed to call on her mobile to ask questions about my thesis.*

It is obviously noticed that the power relations between supervisors and students influence their interaction, with students being subordinate and followers of the patterns of communication established by supervisors.

The third factor pertains to some supervisors' insisting on publishing papers. Some participants argued that the supervisors would not allow them to defend their theses without writing and submitting papers, extracted from theses, to journals for publication. In other words, there was an excessive and unjustified pressure and coercion imposed on the students to publish themselves in journals

prior to their viva session, irrespective of their scanty experience in conducting research. Sepideh pointed out the conditions his supervisor laid down 1 month after she started her thesis:

- *The condition that I needed to meet before defending my thesis was to write and publish a paper in a journal. It was unbelievably difficult to do. I did not know how to do my thesis, let alone write an academic paper. The expectation was unrealistic, but I had to do it.*

Arguing in the same line, Vahid asserted that:

- *Writing a paper and submitting to a journal before the defense session was a must for my thesis. Although this was not regulated by the university, my supervisor personally set it out as a condition I had to meet. There was no other way than asking and paying others to do so.*

The fourth factor is related to lack of clear and definite scaffolding during thesis production. Supervisors' responsibilities are not regulated and determined by universities. This results in the supervisors acting freely and sometimes irresponsibly toward theses they are committed to supervise. Lack of regulation creates unawareness on the part of M.A. students and, because of this, they do not know whether or not their rights are violated in the thesis supervision process. This is even worse for M.A. students who need more help due to either the scope of their research or their weak competence in doing research. Regarding this point, Morteza stated:

- *I do not know where I should stop and where I should pursue my rights in thesis supervision. This situation leaves my supervisor free to the extent that he can impose many activities*

The fifth factor deals with a prescriptive approach some supervisors take by assigning particular areas of investigations to the students without taking into account their voices and interests. This problem is more critical with the departments where supervisors were imposed to the students rather than chosen by students themselves. In this regard, Fariba said:

- *The supervisor I worked with was designated by the department. I had to work on the topic he assigned. I was not interested in the topic and did not know and study much about it. I had my own interest and topic, but they were ignored.*

In the same way, Maryam stated:

- *I could not force myself doing something in which I was not interested at all. The area and topic of my thesis were given by my supervisor, whereas I myself had my own areas and wanted to work on them for my thesis.*

Pooling together, one part of the participants' motivation for paying others to do their theses can be ascribed to supervision practices and behaviors adopted by the supervisors. As far as the findings of the present study are concerned, such issues as lack of academic support from the supervisors, faculty interactions with the students, pressure on the students to publish papers, lack of rules and regulations for supervision responsibilities, and imposing topics on students regardless of their interests were reported as the reasons for the participants' disillusionment and withdrawal from doing their theses themselves.

3.2 Supervisee-Related Factors

The first frequently reported factor associated with supervisees was the participants' negative attitude toward research. The participants believed when the future is so bleak and worrisome in terms of employment, there is no use in committing themselves to some strenuous demanding task of doing research and writing theses. Furthermore, uselessness and irrelevance of the task of thesis writing dissuaded the participants from engaging in thesis writing. In addition, theses are apparently archived in libraries and rarely ever referred to afterwards. As a result, the participants tried to get rid of thesis writing by turning to the agents outside the university—those who write theses in exchange for money. Mohsen who was not keen on doing the thesis said:

- *I wish I only had some courses to study and pass for the M.A. degree, without a thesis. I wonder how doing research and writing the thesis can influence my future employment. I think thesis writing must be optional, and those who are not interested in research do not have to complete it.*

Mina who cultivated a negative attitude toward doing the thesis stated:

- *I need to spend money to gather the data. Making copies, travelling to other cities, and sometimes paying others to analyze statistical parts need money. University does not financially support the students. Going through all these stages leads to a thesis which won't benefit me, but occupies space in the university library.*

The second factor is related to the participants' low proficiency in academic writing. This leads to their avoidance from thesis writing and their confrontation with massive emotional traumatic experiences. Parisa acknowledged that one of the main reasons why she did not write the thesis was her weak academic writing:

- *When I entered the M.A. program, I did not have an acceptable level of academic writing and, during the two years of studying, I failed to develop my writing ability. As you know, a good and acceptable academic writing is required for writing a thesis. Without it, I think it was impossible for me to write my thesis.*

In the same line, Saeed said:

- *Writing is really challenging and difficult, especially when it comes to thesis writing. Reading the literature and paraphrasing what others had written were things beyond my capability. The fear of writing something and being disapproved by my supervisor compounded the problem of my thesis writing.*

As the findings revealed, the participants' negative attitude toward research and their low proficiency in academic writing were reported as important factors accounting for their disinclination to thesis writing.

3.3 Higher Education-Related Factors

Some of the reasons why M.A. students refrained from carrying out their theses themselves can be ascribed to the policies developed by the Iranian higher education. Over recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of students entering higher education, especially for obtaining M.A. or M.S. degrees. A class of five M.A. students has tripled to 15 students or so. Such policies that are not accompanied by the necessary infrastructures have decreased the quality of education. Supervision and thesis writing are no exception. This policy leads to teachers' supervision of a large number of theses at different universities, with the consequence of not having enough time for each thesis. Many students, especially those who need more help because they are not good at academic writing and familiar with procedures of doing research, feel isolated when their supervisors are tied up and do not have time for them. In this regard, Mazeyar asserted:

- *Our class was too crowded, with 18 M.A. students and only four faculty members. Taking the number of previous generations into account, you will find how many students each teacher needs to supervise. Teachers sometimes cannot manage the number of theses they are supervising and, as a result, the quality of supervision decreases.*

Moreover, there is no balance between the increase in the number of students of higher education and employment and job creation policy of the government. For instance, M.A. graduates in TEFL are hardly ever able to find jobs relevant to what they have already studied in university. This creates a feeling of worry and sadness about a gloomy future in which research and other activities like

thesis writing are not valued at all. Such a situation can lead to the business of selling and purchasing without any penalization. Najmeh pointed out:

- *I am a graduate now and working in a company where my job is not related to what I have studied at university. When thesis writing and doing research were not going to play a role in my job, it was logical and realistic not to commit myself to it.*

4. Discussion and Conclusion

As far as the findings of the present study are concerned, there are three factors (supervisor-related, supervisee-related, and higher education-related) that dissuaded the participants from doing their theses themselves and further encouraged them to ask some other people to do it in exchange for money. According to James and Baldwin (2006), “supervision involves the fundamentals of good teaching, among them, concern for students, interest in their progress, and the provision of thoughtful and timely feedback. Good supervisors exemplify the characteristics of good teachers in any setting” (p. 3). Crucial to the success of supervision is the development of a good and caring relationship between the supervisor and the student (Ketteridge & Shiach, 2009). The relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee is of adult-adult relationship that needs to be worked out and discussed, so the two parties reciprocally reach an agreement with regard to the expectations and responsibilities involved in the supervision process (Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 2001). Whereas thesis supervision entails teaching, scaffolding, supporting, and caring and it is more than transferring information, in the present study, lack of enough support by the supervisors was reported by the participants as one of the factors responsible for their avoidance from thesis writing. Whereas assistance and constructive feedback and advice of the supervisors were valued by the students in helping them go through the challenging steps of these writing, the supervisors failed to do so because of supervising many students at the same time at different universities. This problem can be rooted in the current policies of the Iranian higher education in which an increase in the number of students of graduate and postgraduate studies has been prioritized.

In addition, M.A. students’ interest and ownership will decrease when the topics and areas are prescribed and imposed on them by supervisors. According to Todd et al. (2004), “ownership and interest positively motivated the student to spend more time” (p. 341). It is true that proposing and determining areas, topics, and research questions can help some M.A. students to overcome their uncertainty and bafflement, but this should not be exercised to the extent that their interests are ignored and their voices are suffocated. It seems that there is a power abuse exercised by some Iranian professors who are supervising M.A. theses. Rahimi and Askari Bigdeli (2015) found that there is a power difference inherent in student-

faculty relationship in Iranian universities. They argued that some Iranian professors of TEFL apply inadvertent use of power when assigning authorship to the research papers in which the students make significant contributions. Such an uneven power relationship is further facilitated by the dependency of M.A. students on supervisors for mentoring and supervising.

The task of thesis writing can sometimes be more demanding due to the fact that some supervisors are unrealistic in their expectations of what M.A. students should achieve during the thesis completion period. One of the reasons why the participants shied away from doing their theses themselves was the unmanageable expectation of their supervisors: to publish a paper before defending theses. Publishing academic papers is a tough task and needs great experience in reporting voluminous theses in a concise way. This, in turn, needs high proficiency in academic writing, which is the most challenging part for most M.A. students. We found that linguistic difficulties M.A. students encounter during thesis writing negatively influence the supervisory relationship (Reynolds & Thompson, 2011; Strauss, 2012). For Iranian graduate students, thesis writing is not free of challenges, due to the fact that such students have very little or even no experience in academic writing, and they are mostly assessed through paper and pencil examinations without being required to write term papers (Hasrati, 2005). The study also found that the supervision responsibilities of teachers are not specified, and most decisions are made personally and vary from one supervisor to another. Hasrati (2013) argued that roles, responsibilities, and obligations of various stakeholders are not specified and transparent with regard to managing different aspects of M.A. theses in the context of Iranian universities.

To sum up, the present study shed light on the reasons why some Iranian M.A. students of TEFL shrink from engaging in thesis writing and ask other agents who take care of it in return for money. We found that supervisors, supervisees, and higher education policies each play its own role in preventing M.A. students from entering the territory of thesis writing. It can be concluded that students are in need of social support by their supervisors. Rahimi and Askari Bigdeli (2014) found that a higher level of the perceived social support including social support of significant others such as teachers will most likely enhance M.A. students' resilience, competence, and personal control in the face of stressful situations. In other words, through social support, supervisors can help their students overcome the unwelcoming stressful task of thesis writing. Students also need support in academic writing. It is recommended that students perform a great deal of academic writing tasks before they start their theses. Students can get familiar with specific rhetorical features of academic writing through insightful feedback from their teachers.

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