

## **Students' Difficulties in Writing Literature Review Section of Postgraduate Students of Two State Universities in West Java**

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### **ABSTRACT**

It takes a lot of work to write an effective thesis in an academic context in order to graduate. Writing a thesis is a unique genre with its own rules, guidelines, and conventions. In the case of graduate and master degree students, they are not only have to meet the requirements of this genre, but also the language used which different with their first language, in this case is English. Therefore, this study aimed at analyzing difficulties in writing literature review sections of English major master's thesis written by Indonesian EFL learners. This study applied qualitative descriptive as research method with six interviewees. The results of this study found that there were five difficulties. The difficulties were deciding subtopic of literature review section, finding relevant and reputable journal that support the research, synthesizing skill in completing literature review, formulating pattern or move in writing literature review section, and constructing argument and knowing the function of literature review. Addressing these difficulties requires following actions. They are enhancing training in research methods, better access to academic resources, and providing a guidance book especially in writing literature review.

*Keywords:* Literature Review Sections, EFL Postgraduate Students, Difficulties

### **Background**

In writing process, there are three main forms. The forms are personal writing, work related writing and academic writing. From those kinds of writing, academic writing is a certain writing style which prescribes its own rules and practices (Bowker, 2007). It takes a lot of work to write an effective thesis in an academic context in order to graduate. Writing a thesis is a unique genre with its own rules, guidelines, and conventions. In the case of graduate and master degree students, they are not only have to meet the requirements of this genre, but also the language used which different with their first language, in this case is English.

Completing a thesis, researcher or writer should take into account some elements. The elements are abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion (Halifudin, 2012). Literature review is one of the elements that describes the theory handled in the study.

Reviewing the literature entails evaluating it and incorporating earlier discoveries into a strong case that clarifies the research gap and, thus, supports the importance of the study. It goes beyond just summarizing the body of research (Rewhorn, 2018). In order to gather, organize, summarize, analyze, relate, assess, and synthesize the literature, this process calls for the application of higher cognitive skills (Rewhorn, 2018). In line with Huang and Zhang (2016), the literature review can also be interpreted as a measure of an individual's academic ability and comprehension of the body of literature related to the subject of study. When a literature review is included in another piece of study, like a section of a thesis or research article, it might be considered a sub-genre. It also pertains to a stand-alone piece of writing, such a book or review article, it can also be considered as a genre.

In writing literature review, some researchers found out difficulties linked with it. Most of them focus on bachelor degree students. Irwandi and Arisanti (2017) and Puspita (2019) tend to explore internal and external factors during the process of writing literature review. Puspita (2019) found out the difficulties from three factors. They are personality, sociocultural, and linguistics factors. This study obtained especially for linguistics factors that students were difficult in paraphrasing sentences from the source to the thesis writing. The similar study using three factors were also conducted by Muliani (2020). Meanwhile, Thahirah et al. (2023) focus on finding difficulties on thesis background. They revealed that the difficulties are on writing and organizing ideas, finding novelty, lack of vocabulary, and grammar.

Their studies mostly focused on bachelor's degree students. The current study investigates the difficulties of writing literature review in the scope of postgraduate studies. This study also focuses on six postgraduate students of two state universities at Bandung.

## **Literature review**

### **1. Writing**

Thesis is a work that has been undertaken by students in the form of a written record (Chandrasekhar, 2008). It is an obligation that must be undertaken by students as evidence has been doing a research as final project and as a requirement obtaining a college degree. Thesis is the results of field research and compiled by a student according to their field of study, as a requirement for obtaining a college degree. In thesis writing, there are some processes which must complete.

In this section, there are two main ideas described. The ideas are process in writing thesis and major elements of thesis. It is started with some stages in making a proper thesis, such as planning and prewriting, starting to write, editing, and publishing (Lipson, 2005). Prewriting is the step while the writer creates mindmap or lines up the categories in order. Then, the step of starting to write. In this stage, the writer could elaborate each section of mind mapping or supporting ideas. After that, in every writing process, the writing result is not only one finish process. On the point of that, editing should be considered. The last is publish or present the writing result. Nevertheless, the writing should be clear, informative, and straightforward.

After process of writing thesis, there are major elements of thesis should be considered. These elements are introduction, literature review, methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion. The statement is supported by Swales and Feak (2012). They mentioned that the organizational pattern of academic writing is the IMRD format. The IMRD format stands for Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion (Swales & Feak, 2012). Despite the elements, literature review section is also attributed to a number of reasons.

## **2. Kinds of Writing**

In writing process, kinds of writing are important to fulfill various purposes and serve different audiences effectively. Brown (2003) stated that there are three kinds of writing consist of personal writing, job related writing, and academic writing. First is personal writing. This type of writing is writing based on personal opinions or feelings rather than facts or evidence. The content of writing is based on personal observation, experience, or opinion. The kinds of personal writing such as email, diary, and messages.

The second is job related writing. Job related writing is considered well paid work (Brown, 2003). They are memo, letter, advertisement, and announcement. The last is writing type which related with research. It is academic writing. Whitaker (2009) mentioned that academic writing means writing for university program. It means that the writing handled especially for students who aimed at finishing their study. The

instructor may have different names for the tasks of academic writing such as essays, report research papers such as research proposal and thesis.

### **3. Literature review**

The literature review is not only one of the most important sections to be written in a research article and in academic writing in general (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013; Swales & Feak, 2012), but it is also one of the most challenging tasks (Badenhorst, 2018). Although there are several textbooks and research articles that have discussed its different aspects (e.g., meaning and purpose), developed taxonomies for classifying it, designed rubrics for evaluating it (Boote & Beile, 2005), and divided it into types (Swales & Feak, 2012; Fink, 2014), the literature review has been rarely discussed from genre analysis perspective because it was not dealt with as a separate section (Hsiao & Yu, 2012; Kwan, 2006). The literature review has rarely discussed from a genre analysis perspective, despite the fact that numerous textbooks and research articles have discussed its various aspects (e.g., meaning and purpose), developed taxonomies for classifying it, designed rubrics for evaluating it (Boote & Beile, 2005), and divided it into types (Swales & Feak, 2012; Fink, 2014). This is because it was not addressed as a separate section (Hsiao & Yu, 2012; Kwan, 2006).

### **Research Methodology**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative as a research method. In line with Taylor et al. (2000), qualitative methodology as a research procedure produces descriptive data in a form of written or oral words from people and observable behaviour. Data collected from open ended interview. Interview is a method of collecting data with a question and answer system. Moleong (2002) states that this research instrument is a conversation with a specific purpose. Interview guidelines were used to obtain the answers of the interviewees. The interview guidelines focused on a main questions, then elaborated. It was finding out students' difficulties. There were six postgraduate students as the interviewees. The participants were postgraduate students who already finished their master degree in English education major of two state universities at Bandung, West Java.

### **Findings and Discussions**

The findings of this research highlighted students' difficulties in writing thesis literature review. The data outlined in this section were taken from interview to six postgraduate students of two

State Universities in Bandung. This research found five difficulties while students deal with literature review writing process. The difficulties cover deciding subtopic of literature review section, finding relevant and reputable journal that support the research, synthesizing skill in completing literature review, formulating pattern or move in writing literature review section, and constructing argument and knowing the function of literature review. Then, the aforementioned difficulties are described below.

**a. Deciding subtopic and framework of literature review section**

In the writing process of thesis literature review, choosing subtopics for a literature review is crucial for organizing and presenting a comprehensive, relevant, and coherent review of existing research. This research found that S1 mentioned that deciding subtopic of literature review section is difficult. It can be seen in the following interview transcription:

*In the postgraduate studies or master degree. I felt that deciding subtopic for each literature review section is not easy. Because, the information obtained is broad and should be specified. (S1) (Interview, translated version)*

It is obtained that the difficulties could be related with overwhelming amount of literature volume and changing perspectives. Overwhelming amount of literature volume can make difficult to determine which subtopics are the most crucial and how to categorize them effectively. Then, changing perspective could be emerged while new research conducted and shift focus of what is considered important or relevant.

*The most difficult step on literature review writing is formulating theoretical framework. Although, in the beginning before I got the articles, I created mind map. But, still difficult to deciding framework related with grand theory and supporting theory. (S2) (Interview, translated version)*

*Perhaps, theoretical framework. Because I still do not understand, what should I write on theoretical framework. Then, what is the big umbrella that can be used as the focus of our research (S4) (Interview, translated version)*

From those transcripts of students' interview, it is also similar with deciding framework of theory on the literature review. The students stated that theoretical framework is another important element in writing literature review.

**b. Finding relevant and reputable journal that support the research**

After the difficulties in deciding subtopics, obviously the data shown some students found that finding relevant and reputable journals that support their research is challenging. The challenging can be seen through some following reasons, such as the use of webbased machine and articles from reputable journal which match with the topic taken.

The first is in line with limited webbased application that can help students to find out the references.

*While in the postgraduate study, I only familiar with Google Scholar as the media to find references or articles. Nevertheless, I found difficulties in obtaining the theory. Besides that, offline library is also as another alternative in getting the theory (S1) (Interview, translated version)*

Then, another difficulty is on finding articles from reputable journal which match with the topic taken. It can be because of limited articles or references that linked with the research. The prove of previous statement can be seen through the data of interview transcription below.

*A lot of articles provided, but in finding the reputable journal that match with our research is not an easy task. (S2) (Interview, translated version)*

*Related with literature review, the difficulties is on limited articles in credible journals that match with my research. Because of I took autonomy as my research topic, the issue still limited. (S3) (Interview, translated version)*

*I found the difficulty is on finding out the resources, especially for engineering because my research focus is on engineering. (S6) (Interview, translated version)*

Based on the results, it is shown that quality or reputability and availability are the concern. Evaluating the credibility and impact of a journal can be challenging,

particularly with the rise of predatory journals that may not adhere to rigorous peer-review standards. Besides that, understanding and accessing reputable journals often involves checking metrics such as citation indexes and journal indexes. Related with availability, subscription barriers are one of challenges. It is because many reputable journals are behind paywalls, making it difficult to access full-text articles without institutional access or individual subscriptions.

**c. Synthesizing skill in completing literature review**

Writing a literature review is a complex process that extends beyond merely summarizing existing research. It demands a refined skill set in synthesizing. Synthesizing skill is one of the heart to give clarity and impact of literature review. This process ensures that the review is not only a repository of knowledge but also a compiling argument that guides readers through the complexities of the research.

*I as a researcher, while conducted research. I haven't got the skill to synthesize a framework of a literature. Then, how to deal with that. For example, I talked about dynamic assessment or assessment. Then, from where should I start writing the literature? So that, guidance is needed. (S4) (Interview, translated version)*

The statement supported by Rewhorn (2018). He said that reviewing the literature entails evaluating it and incorporating earlier discoveries into a strong case that clarifies the research gap. Thus, supporting the importance of the study. It goes beyond just summarizing the body of research. In order to gather, organize, summarize, analyze, relate, assess, and synthesize the literature, this process calls for the application of higher cognitive skills (Rewhorn, 2018).

**d. Formulating pattern or move in writing literature review section**

Crafting an effective literature review involves more than just compiling research findings. It requires a strategic approach to present these findings in a coherent and compiling manner. One crucial aspect of this process is the formulation of patterns or moves that guide the structure and flow of the review. It is in line with Abduganieva's (2024) statement. He said that literature review usually follow the same rhetorical structure and the markers of voice and stance. The proves of interview transcriptions are shown below.

*Actually in literature review or previous studies, we have a lot of choices to create new design. It can be similar or different with the provided design. The difficulty is while we do not know how to organize the ideas or the move in writing literature review. (S4) (Interview, translated version)*

*In writing literature review, I really helped by the organized pattern. So that, I only follow step by step the guidance. Then, guidance is importance. (S6) (Interview, translated version)*

Those proves are also supported by Islami et al.'s (2019). They mentioned that in order to understand structural forms and functional types to the literature review's move structures in accomplishing its communication goal. Then, the statement is also linked with genre analysis because focuses on overall text structure. It means that a text passes through stages to a point of closure. Each stage contributes to the overall meaning that a text will achieve (Van Dijk, 2017).

**e. Constructing argument and knowing the function of literature review**

The distinctive and recognisable conventions, rules, organization, and constructs of this type of text analysis lead to a traditional practice among its users. Thesis writing is a genre with unique and identifiable divisions, functions, material, and organization. Usually, these discursive techniques are connected to one another. Supported by Swales (2004) and Kwan (2006), considering the goals or functions of the target genre (theses chapter) in order to control its propositional content, organizational composition, and choice of register is a crucial first step for a move analysis, also known as the analysis of the units of content.

*The way we constructing the arguments is really close with literature review section. Then, the constructing argument also connected with the real function of literature review. (S4) (Interview, translated version)*

*How to construct one and another theory into a clear sentence. Then, here the time for really apply paraphrasing skill.. (S6) (Interview, translated version)*

Then, knowing how each subgenre works, students need also be aware of the functional relationship between the theses' structure and content.



## Conclusion

This research aimed to identify and analyze the challenges faced by postgraduate students at a state university in West Java when writing the literature review section of their thesis. The findings revealed five primary difficulties encountered during the literature review writing process. The difficulties are deciding subtopic of literature review section, finding relevant and reputable journal that support the research, synthesizing skill in completing literature review, formulating pattern or move in writing literature review section, and constructing argument and knowing the function of literature review.

The first deals with deciding on subtopics. Some students struggled to determine the appropriate subtopics to include in their literature review, leading to a lack of coherence and focus in their writing. Second is finding relevant and reputable journals. Students found it challenging to locate and select relevant, high-quality journal articles that adequately support their research objectives. Then, synthesizing skill is also as another difficulty. A significant difficulty was the ability to synthesize information from various sources effectively, resulting in literature reviews that were more descriptive than analytical. The forth is formulating patterns or move. Students also faced challenges in structuring their literature reviews, particularly in creating logical patterns and rhetorical moves that enhance the flow and connectivity of their arguments. Lastly is constructing arguments and understanding the function of a literature review. Many students struggled with constructing well-founded arguments and comprehending the fundamental purpose and role of the literature review in the broader context or their research.

Addressing these difficulties requires following actions. They are enhancing training in research methods, better access to academic resources, and providing a guidance book especially in writing literature review.

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