

Exploring some Libyan EFL Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Undertaking Graduation Projects.

**Aiesha Ali E Emhammed, Hind Mohammed
and Zamzam Ahmed**

Department of English, Faculty of Arts,
University of Sirte, Libya

Abstract

This study explored Libyan undergraduate students' perceptions of undertaking their graduation projects at the department of English at Sirte University. 9 undergraduate students who were in the process of conducting their projects formed the sample of the study. The multiple semi-structured interviews used in order to gather the data which was analyzed thematically. The results of the present study revealed that students had difficulties while conducting their graduation projects. The most identified challenges were related to the academic writing aspect, working within groups, data collection, applying research methods, and insufficient time. However, for most of the students, the experience with the supervisor was positive. Thus, at the end of their graduation projects, students found that it was a challenging but worthwhile learning experience. Finally, the findings of this study have vital implications for improving the process and quality of graduation projects of the English Department students at Sirte University.

Keywords: Graduation project, undergraduate students' experiences, academic writing, multiple interviews.

Introduction

The graduation project has been one of the requirements of the undergraduate degree program for many years in the Department of English (DOE) at Sirte University. While it has been named in a variety of ways around the world, in which the terms 'dissertation', and 'project' are used interchangeably within many institutions. However, for all students in different countries, it is typically undertaking a substantial learning activity. In addition, an undergraduate project is a significant form of assessment in the curriculum of a Bachelor's degree in the DOE at Sirte University. Moreover, it is often the first major piece of independent research that undergraduate students undertake for their educational completion. Significantly, the undergraduate project process impacts valuable learning objectives that have lasting influence as undergraduates prepare for professional service. Consequently, a number of studies in different disciplines covered a wide range of topics that investigate the challenges and other experiences while conducting the graduation project, such as, the topic selection, access, and data collection problems (I'Anson & Smith, 2004), factors affecting the completion of research projects (Thondhlana, Mawere & Weda, 2011), problems associated with the undergraduate research supervision process (Simuforosa & Makuvaro`s, 2015), and the challenges in research teaching and writing, (Ibrahim & Alsied, 2017). Although there has been an interest in the

problems of undertaking the graduation project, the undergraduate student's experiences of undertaking research projects seem to receive less attention. Hence, according to the researchers' best knowledge, no previous research has examined the experience of the undergraduate students in the DOE at Sirte University. This fact gives the current study the significance of being a unique one in the department. Hence, the present research focuses on undergraduate students' experiences while conducting their graduation projects.

The Background/Context of the Study

It has to be mentioned here that in the past graduation projects weren't given as much attention as should be; however, in recent years the academic staff tended to give more importance to the projects for various reasons: one of which was the restructure of the faculty from the faculty of Arts and education to faculty of Arts. Most prominently, many strategies have been made specifically in regard to improve the graduation project process by giving opportunities for project 1 students to present their research work and receive primer feedbacks on what they have done. In addition, students are not allowed to undertake the graduation project unless they have studied research methodology and academic writing courses to be more familiar with the process of writing a research project. As it has been indicated to in the yellow guidebook (2010, p. iii) of DOE that the undergraduate

project must be carried out during the 7th and 8th semesters, also students who are ready to get along with their research work, they are anticipated to have a complete background of two components- i) research methods, and - ii) research writing process. The first component designed to introduce students with some theoretical background as well as the key issues and concepts in research, whereas research documentation is given to ensure that students can (practically) utilize all the theoretical knowledge and the skills they have learned about research. In addition, students must take the academic writing course that is one of the essential requirements to attain good academic research skills. Baily (2011) argued that writing good academic English is one of the most demanding tasks students face. Thus, developing academic writing is a crucial skill for completing research degrees. Therefore, the course aimed at raising awareness of practicing and reflecting upon the conventions of written texts. In addition, it helps students "to use effectively the discourse patterns of academic English, improve critical reading and thinking skills, generating ideas." (Hand Book, 2014, p. 22) In fact, undergraduate students are more significantly carrying out their research projects for assessment and evaluation. Therefore, it is expected to be comprehensible, logical, and up to standard.

Besides, it is also required for students who are ready to undertake their BRP to select their supervisors to be

guided. Supervision is a critical element, which contributes immensely to the successful and timely completion of research projects. A research project supervisor advises the student in the management of the project, guides the student through the research process, and provides the required emotional and psychological support when needed (Mouton, 2001). Furthermore, undergraduate students are required to conduct their research projects in groups to be allowed by the DOE to undertake the research project. This is not only because it is a compulsory strategy; however, also it helps students in conducting their projects in cooperation with other students would facilitate the research progress. In addition, it mostly due to the lack of teachers who are supervising the graduation project`s students in the DOE.

3. Theoretical Review

3.1 Definition of Graduation Project

The project referred to as first-degree research also is a defining element of an undergraduate degree. It is the culmination of the degree which gives students an opportunity to demonstrate and apply the knowledge they have gained during their undergraduate program (I' Anson & Smith, 2004). The current research adopts the classification offered by Clewes (1996), with 'project' refers to first-degree research, 'dissertation' to masters'

degrees, and 'thesis' being reserved for only higher research degrees. The assessment of the dissertation/project constitutes a piece of academic research (primary and/or secondary), varying in length from 5,000-12,000 words (I'Anson and Smith, 2004). This study also adopts the identification of four objectives given by Hussey and Hussey (1997) of the undergraduate research project:

- developing students' analytical problem-solving skills;
- promoting active learning through the identification of a problem to be explored and completed;
- developing independent research skills;
- offering opportunities for students' application of their academic knowledge.

The Role of the Undergraduate Research Project

Conducting undergraduate projects enables undergraduate students to experience what is beyond their abilities and expectations. Thus, it renders students to expand their knowledge and to show that they understand the rules of the academic community, also encompass both intellectual and skills development. Moreover, the undergraduate project holds a special value for both the teacher and the student (Webster et al., 2000). For many students, it provides the first opportunity to plan and carry out academic research, and it is often the most substantial and independent assessment that they will undertake during their degree (I'Anson and Smith, 2004). In addition, Magwa, Makuvaro and Ngara (2015, p. 58) viewed that the aim of writing up the research

project is to "prompt students to investigate, analyze and articulate findings in ways that help them understand the methods used in the field to generate new knowledge and creative thinking".

Review of Previous Studies on the Challenges of Writing Graduation Projects

The available literature indicates that a good number of studies have been conducted worldwide on either postgraduate or undergraduate research projects experience. Some of the undergraduate research studies focused on specific aspects of the graduation projects (e.g., academic writing and supervision challenges) while others explored non-linguistic issues related to undertaking projects (e.g., topic selection, data collection, etc.). For example; a study conducted by Alheshe, Mustafa and Makhlof (2018) to find out the problems that students at the department of English at Sirte University face in English academic writing, and the factors that may cause these difficulties. A total of 23 students participated in this study, in which both the questionnaires and semi-structured interview approach used to collect the data. The findings revealed that cohesion and coherence were the most difficult areas the students faced in academic writing, followed by paraphrasing, reference, and citation. Then, finding relevant references and choosing a significant topic. And the last one was expressing own voice. Moreover, the most prominent factors in which students attributed those difficulties were related to low

language proficiency, lack of confidence in their writing output and they pay less attention to the cohesion and coherence of their writing.

Ibrahim and Alsied (2017) conducted a study to investigate the major challenges in research writing faced by Libyan EFL learners at Sebha University and also to explore the Libyan teachers' attitudes towards their students' work. A total of 42 students and 4 teachers participated in the study, which used mixed data collection methods, namely, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The findings of the study revealed that Libyan EFL learners had some challenges with identifying the area of interest, selecting a topic, formulating research problem and writing the literature review. In addition, they had difficulties in collecting and analyzing the data and found that academic writing was the most challenging. It was also found that Libyan teachers had negative attitudes towards their students' research due to the following reasons: lack of motivation, inadequate background knowledge about research, insufficient number of courses correlated to research, and the lack of library and Internet sources in the college.

Magwa, Makuvaro and Ngara`s (2015) qualitative study 'challenges encountered in scaffolding undergraduate research projects' was set to explore problems associated with the undergraduate research supervision process from both views of supervisors and students undertaking undergraduate research projects over three universities in

Zimbabwe. The population of were selected purposefully with the use of focus group discussions and questionnaires tools. The findings of their study revealed that many challenges effected undergraduates` research projects facilitation were related to supervision: the supervisors' inadequate research skills and expertise, students' research in-competencies, non-supportive relationships of supervisors with students, and negative feedback from supervisors which hindered students' research progress.

Another study was conducted by Alshehry (2014) to find out the factors affecting female students' research skills at the College of Education at Najran University in developing their understanding and confidence in academic writing of research and strengthening the relationship between the students and teachers. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 female undergraduate students and four female teachers in the Department of Science. The results revealed that a lack of writing research knowledge and experience hindered the students to not specify a time for research. Also, the departmental and college environments in the study did not facilitate conducting research, and the teachers did not use different methods in their teaching that linked research with teaching. Additionally, as a result, most, of the students considered their background research skills and development to be weak even prior to completing the course, and these

factors contributed to making obstacles in producing original and successful research projects.

Thondhlana, Mawere, and Weda (2011) conducted a study to find out undergraduate students and research supervisors' views on factors affecting the completion of research projects by Zimbabwe Open University students. Student, supervisor and institutional related factors were the focus of their study. A descriptive survey method was used for students who had failed to complete their research projects on schedule as well as research project supervisors. The researchers used questionnaires and interviews to collect data, their research discussion focused on the given period of the completion of the research project schedule. Their research findings were that the time given to students to do their research project was inadequate. The lack of libraries, Internet and typing facilities as well as finance for traveling to and from the supervisor hindered students' research progress, which those factors contributed to the failure by students to complete their research projects on schedule.

In the same vein, Tan (2007) carried out a study in which she employed narrative inquiry to permit the undergraduate students involved in an undergraduate research course to relate their experiences in their research undertakings in the University of Santo Tomas in Manila, Philippines. The researcher also conducted a semi-structured interview with a total of four focus groups that experienced a variety of activities and mixed

feelings, which were clustered in this study in three phases: Grouping, Developing, and Accomplishing. Furthermore, this study described the research experiences of a selected group of the undergraduates who had defended their research results. The study revealed that the students who were under competent and supportive mentors had successful research experience. At first, the undergraduate students were lacking confidence and uncertain of undertaking a project. However, by the end of their research, they felt satisfaction and excitement about what they had accomplished. The students gained many benefits such as gaining confidence, improved communication, writing and research skills.

I'Anson and Smith (2004) conducted a study to explore undergraduate students' experiences of undertaking a research project, focusing on challenges encountered at the topic selection, access, and students' responses to data collection problems. Data collected through interviews and surveys with fifty final year BA Tourism Management students at the University of Greenwich, UK. In the findings of the researchers' study, the main difficulties encountered by students were concerned with access, collecting sensitive data or being faced with unwilling respondents.

To sum up, the related previous research reviewed above was carried out to investigate specific aspects of the

graduation project process of foreign undergraduates in general and to the Libyan context in particular. However, most of the research done in this regard is restricted to investigating the problems encountered by the undergraduate students when conducting the graduation project, and the factors that affect the problems. They almost all have their own limitations in terms of the context of the methodology used. Very few studies, if any, focused on the experiences of undergraduate students and the differences and the similarities that they may have in common while conducting their projects. Thus, such a research gap is worthy of giving explicit attention and a deeper understanding of the undergraduate students in the Libyan context in general and at the department of English in Sirte University in particular, regarding their experiences of conducting the graduation project. The following section will present the methodology used in the current research.

Methodology

4.1 Research Design & Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach to accomplish its aim. As qualitative research allows for exploring "a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences, and imaginings of our research participants" (Mason, 2002, p. 1). Dawson (2002) believes that qualitative research explores attitudes, behavior, and

experiences through such methods as interviews. It attempts to obtain an in-depth opinion. Since this study was conducted to explore the experience of the undergraduate students who were in their process of conducting the graduation project, a qualitative design was found appropriate for it. This study was conducted to explore the experience of the undergraduate students who were in their process of conducting the graduation project.

In the present study, semi-structured multiple interviews were employed, because they offer the opportunity for researchers to use "a written list of questions as a guide, while still having the freedom to digress and probe for more information" (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 173). Moreover, multiple interviews entail interviewing the participants on multiple occasions during the process of conducting their research projects. It offered a means to obtain rich and deep accounts of study participants' experiences and challenges that they faced during the process of their research project writing. For these reasons, the semi-structured multiple interview formats were chosen for the current research.

4.2 Participants

As our interest is in the undergraduate students' experiences that are in the process of conducting their graduation projects. The sample of our study was chosen from the DOE language at the faculty of Arts at Sirte

University. The sample size for the interviews was 9 students mixed in gender(8 females and 1 male). It is important to mention that there were a small number of male students who were undertaking their graduation projects during the time of conducting the present study and.

one of them was willing to participate in the study. So the target participants were initially selected based on their willingness to participate. The participants were selected using random sampling. Therefore, to give the chance for any student who was in the process of conducting his/her graduation project of being selected, as for Gillham (2002, p.18) "In a random sample each individual in a given population has an equal chance of being selected".

To answer the current research question which is ' What are the perceptions of undergraduate students about their experiences of conducting the graduation projects in the department of English at Sirte University?' The semi-structured multiple interview data were analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis was described as a tool for categorizing and identifying patterns of themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and it also delineates a reiterative process as to how to go from massive, huge and messy data to a map of the most essential themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5. Results and Discussion

In this section, the results of the data analysis are presented together with discussions to interpret the results and address the central issues of the study. During the analysis, a group of themes had emerged which will be discussed and linked to the literature as the following:

5.1 Challenges Encountered while Conducting the Undergraduate Project

The results of the current study revealed that all participants had challenges or hindrances while conducting their graduation projects, which affected negatively the process of conducting their project. According to the participants' views, the challenges can be divided into five types including 'academic writing challenges', 'working in groups', 'data collection', 'applying research methods' and 'insufficient period of time'. These challenges are discussed in detail in the following subsections.

5.1.1 Academic Writing Challenges

The results of the study revealed that academic writing skill was the most challenging aspect facing the majority of the participants. 8 of the participants reported that they had weaknesses and poor background knowledge at the practical part of the academic writing course, and it was a hard task and could not be easily achieved through those students who had undertaken this course previously. Actually, for the undergraduates, the ability to write

academically while conducting their research projects is indeed complex and confusing. Furthermore, the most common challenges in writing academically were related to the use of language that suits the academic standards, finding relevant topics and sources, and referencing. 3 of the interviewees` statements were as:

"The most prominent problems were how to form a good paragraph that fit the academic standards, how to write references and some grammatical mistakes and about overcoming these problems I call my project partner and if she couldn't help, I tell my supervisor and we discuss the problem together."

"As a start, writing a graduation project is not an easy thing, it needs time, as well as, efforts... once it gets a bit serious and this before even you start writing, of course, the time you start searching for previous and connected studies to yours, this is one of the hardest difficulties that could face us all, you literary get lost."

"Unfortunately, I faced a lot of problems such as lack of resources, unprepared libraries but definitely, this did not ruin my work I tried harder to get books and resources from Tripoli so I think all students will go through such issues."

The above findings showed somehow similarities to other studies in literature, as in a study conducted by Ibrahim and Alsied (2017) who confirmed that one of the biggest

challenges of research writing is the lack of resources in the library and the accessibility to the authentic database and the individuals cannot easily have access on them. Furthermore, for Al Badi (2015), in which the focus of the study was about the academic writing difficulties, it was reported that the postgraduate students had similar difficulties in academic writing in spite of their previous educational background. In addition, most difficulties were related to language use in addition to coherence and cohesion. While, other challenges were related to finding relevant topics and sources, and the less challenging ones for the students were referencing and citations.

5.1.2 Working within Groups Challenges

To achieve such a long piece of research, "support" is needed the most. However, some of the participants (5 out of 9) stated that they lacked the peer support. Either for the reason that their group members were not motivated to work and just relied on one member or as for others who were from different educational background levels, which caused the difficulty in having the team spirit or in working as a supportive group. As a consequence, they had negative experiences in working within groups. For example, one of those participants (S4) emphasized that as the following:

"There is no cooperation between me and my mates at all, the work lays on one of us only, and one of them was most of the time absent, it would be better to let us work

individually because there is no interaction between students. But if it kept within groups so the work must be divided equally."

"I hate that part, I don't feel comfortable to work in a group, especially because I don't know them and we are all at different academic levels. And the outcome is that there is no team spirit."

It seems that the result of 'working within groups' as a challenge for the students is in agreement with the results that have been revealed by many researchers (Isaac & Tormey, 2014 & Ford & Morice, 2003), who found that working with groups can become very problematic for students. Nevertheless, the reasons behind that somehow differ from those in the current study. According to Isaac and Tormey (2014), the differences in personality and communication style were the most common and severe types of tension experienced by students while working with group members. However, the reasons behind the negative experience of working with groups in the current study were due to relying just on one person in the group and the different educational levels.

5.1.3 Data Collection Challenges

The results indicated that the questionnaire was the most common research method used by the participants of the current study in order to gather the information that enables them to answer their research questions.

However, some of them had encountered difficulties in collecting the data for their projects even though such a method is commonly used in their research context. Thus, it was mostly due to the uncooperative respondents and to the difficulty of being selected as the participants found it a little bit risky to collect the data that will not affect their research results. Here is more elaboration with the participants' statements:

"One of the problems was the participants weren't cooperative, there was no response from them even when we asked them to participate some were saying no, others were just answering randomly we had no objectivity from their responses"

"Ok to be honest, nothing was easy especially in collecting data a very inconsiderable fault will damage the results that are the way I found somehow difficult to collect data."

The above findings of the difficulty in the data collection phase are similar to another study conducted by Huang (2007) who found that students had difficulties in collecting the data due to the un-cooperation of the respondents. Nevertheless, the context of Huang's study differs from the context of the current research, where Huang investigated the perceptions of postgraduate students towards undertaking their dissertations. Also, the students in his research seemed to have no obstacles in being selective regards their data; whereas, the

participants of the current study were indeed facing such a problem.

On the contrary, other participants attributed the ease of collecting data to the use of questionnaires, where they dealt more with percentages. In addition, the participants stated that the selected respondents for their projects were cooperative because of the research topic which involved the respondents to answer questions interestedly. Here is more elaboration with the interviewees' statements:

"As I used a questionnaire which is the most common method between the others so I didn't find difficulties in this. [And], it was ok as our quantitative study helped us to deal more with numbers rather than words and explanations and the participants were so cooperative as they fill the questionnaires and return them on time."

"Actually, the participants were cooperative because of the topic. I guess something new and interesting."

5.1.4 Applying the Research Methods Challenges

Although a few participants stated that they faced challenges in applying the knowledge that they have learned about research, specifically the research methods. It was important to shed light on such an issue to know the reasons that made this a problem for them. Despite the fact that the preparatory research courses such as research methodology and research proposal are one of the important strategies that the English department in Sirte

university is following for the undergraduate students to be ready to start with their graduation projects. However, students still found it difficult to apply the research methods even if they were adopted; one of the interviewees' statements was as the following:

"Although, the questionnaire in our research was adopted, we had difficulty in picking up the questions that suit our research' aims. And, when we finally decided upon the questions, we just listed them and asked the participants to answer without dividing them according to specific criteria, which caused a problem when we started analyzing the data. So, we had to rewrite the questionnaire and divide each group of questions to suitable criteria."

The result of the difficulty in applying the knowledge of research methods was supported by Edwards (2002), who argued that although preparatory research methods courses are common for project and dissertation students, many, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, find the transfer from learning about research to actually doing their own research difficult.

However, applying research methods was an easy task for others. And according to those participants, that referred to the adoption of such methods and nearly with the same questions and criteria. One of the interviewees' statements about that was:

"We adopted a questionnaire from a study and we used it with the same questions and so it was easy to apply."

5.1.5 Limited Period of Time

Time pressure is one of the challenges that the students had encountered while conducting their graduation projects. As has found in the study findings, some participants complained that the time located for project completion is inadequate. Moreover, perhaps they lack some technical skills such as time management skills. Thus, the lack of such skill could affect negatively either the progress of their work or in including enough participants who were under pressure and hesitated to take a part in research since they had exams. Two of them stated that:

"The most prominent problems were that the time to finish and submit the project was so limited and the participant had final exams in the time that we wanted them to share us their answers especially that we selected them from specific semesters and about the process of writing itself there were a lot of errors or grammatical mistakes."

"We are supposed to finish within this month, the time is so short. We have exams, assignments, and projects we cannot manage between these things. I think it is a little bit hard for us to finish on time"

The findings are in agreement with those of Thondhlana, Mawere, and Weda (2011) that the time of two semesters given to students by the university to do research work is inadequate. As students have poor time-management skills, they leave a lot of work undone until the end of the research period and only rush to try and complete it at the last minute. In addition, it is obvious from the findings in the current study that "Unfortunately, not many students know adequate time management" (Bocar, 2013). According to Todd, Smith, and Bannister (2006), the most challenging problem that students might face is time management. Students tend to allocate everything to the last stage where they find it difficult to accomplish their research on time.

5.2 Factors that Caused the Challenges

As it has been mentioned earlier that the participants faced a variety of challenges during the process of conducting their graduation projects. Students attributed these difficulties to some factors which reflected negatively on their projects` progress such as lack of previous experience and high knowledge of the project process and insufficient skills regard the research proposal practical part that it was helpful only in terms of theoretical aspect. More clarification is with the interviewees` statements:

" Most of the students find difficulties in knowing the research project process in other words how to start and this [how it] should be done."

"As it is a new experience the most difficult and stressful and fatal one to us as students in the English department in Sirte university and [we are] not familiar with that length of such piece of writing."

"Actually, as the proposal was theoretical, it can help you a little about what are the steps that you`re going to follow, but practically it cannot help you a lot. We did not take the practical part; you distribute your questions to participants and do analysis."

According to the above findings, it could be stated that the unfamiliarity with the requirements and expectations of how the undergraduate project should be written, done and organized had caused preliminary issues for the undergraduates. This finding is in agreement with the results of previous research (Alshehry, 2014) which revealed that the students had little knowledge and understanding of how to design and write the research. Though all students of the present study were open to the idea of doing research but did not know the first thing about attaining a student research position as they were experiencing, for the first time, the longest piece of research they had ever undertaken during their study program.

5.3 The Experience with the Supervisor

This is one of the main themes which some of the interview questions based on. As it revealed that the experience with the supervisor is an important part for the students at different stages of conducting their graduation projects. In addition, the results of the experience showed that it was positive for most of the students, who participated in this study. For the reasons that, their supervisors were very cooperative specifically in arranging meetings with their students and giving adequate feedback as well as suggesting topics for their graduation projects when could not decide about any. As a consequence of this good relationship, most of the students welcomed their supervisors' comments and took them into consideration. One of the participants stated that:

My supervisor was helpful from the beginning of the journey. In fact, he drew the whole picture clear for me and my project mates as well. This means to say, he elaborated on the process as it should be. Though, my supervisor did his job and more than his efforts even when he passed a very difficult health problem. However, he kept cheerfully helping us and was beside us till we submit the project successfully. In addition, we set a plan of meeting from the moment we decide to be a group. That is, we used to meet every Monday from 12 to 1 p.m. Besides this, we created a messenger group for urgent

discussion and interpretations also sending files as well. Furthermore, [the reason for choosing the topic] was my supervisor`s decision. And I welcomed it; also he gave us instructions on how to write the project.

On the other hand, there was just a single case among the participants who stated that she had a negative experience with the supervisor. In addition, the relationship with her supervisor was somehow good and even the topic was suggested by her. However, the negative part was as a consequence of having insufficient time during their meetings, as the participant complained that " We met just for 10 minutes every Monday" so that was not enough for her to receive adequate feedback. Furthermore, she clarified about the way in which she received her supervisor's comments and stated that:

"I was negative towards my supervisor`s comments because any work we do, she doesn't like and then she edited the work by herself because she was not flexible. [In addition]...we only read without understanding. She does not accept our ideas and work."

These findings seem to agree with Simuforosa & Makuvaro`s (2015) as it had revealed in their study results that many challenges affected on the undergraduates` research projects facilitation were related to supervision: non-supportive relationships of supervisors with students, and negative feedback from supervisors hinder students' research progress.

5.4 Benefits Gained from Conducting the Graduation Project

Even though all the participants faced many challenges while conducting their graduation projects, all of them agreed that they gained benefits as a consequence of accomplishing their work. The benefits were related to the improvement of academic writing, research and language skills, in addition to the communication skills specifically in terms of working with a collaborative group. Furthermore, it revealed that gaining such benefits was due to some of the assisting factors which helped them to make such experience positive. For example, selecting their own project's topics and the feedback of the previous courses of writing. The participants declared their positive experiences like the following:

"I found the answer to my personal question which was the reason to search about such a topic or to do this research and it was about why don't students interact in the class using English. And I learned more about how to research and to write academically. I also become familiar with the meaning of the research project itself I mean if anyone asks me I can give him/her the helpful information about writing the project."

"Yes a lot, firstly I learned how to cooperate with a group [...] this technique improves one's ability to communicate and come out with thoughts that been never spoken about and also it is more interesting to be acquainted with new

information from your mates. And [I learned] how to push up myself to perform my thoughts and also I became more aware of the suitable language used in academic writings [also] I can observe my language improvement after doing the research, my spoken language became better than before."

The above findings showed some similarities which were supported by Tan (2007) that the students gained many benefits such as improving communication, writing and research skills by the end of their research as they were satisfied and excited about what they had accomplished. In addition, it found that the participants of the current study had also improved other language skills and sub-skills such as reading, spoken and grammar, where such benefits were not found in Tan`s results. It revealed that the participants` own choice for topics motivated them to work harder and seek for answering their research questions.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, this study aimed to answer the current research question about the Libyan undergraduate students` perspectives regarding their experiences towards conducting the graduation projects in the English department at Sirte University. The findings of the study showed that the Libyan undergraduate students have encountered challenges while conducting their graduation projects, regardless of the preparatory

research courses such as research methodology and research proposal they had in order to be ready for this phase. The most challenges from their own experiences were related to academic writing, working within groups, data collection and applying the research methods challenges, in addition to the insufficient period of time. Moreover, it was found that the students attributed their challenges to some factors which were the lack of previous experience and high knowledge of the graduation project process, and the insufficient skills regarding the research proposal practical part. Furthermore, it was found that the majority of students had positive experiences as a result of the good relationships with their supervisors, who were very supportive at different stages of the graduation project. On the other hand, it was the opposite of just one of the participants who had a negative experience due to some reasons. Therefore, it can be said that the students faced many challenges and had some negative experiences while conducting their graduation projects. Nevertheless, at the end of doing their own research, they gained benefits and improved all of the writing, research and communication skills.

6.1 Recommendations and Limitations

Based on the findings of the current study, some recommendations were made: (1) To help students overcome the research and writing difficulties, more practical and advanced seminars and workshops on academic writing and

research methodology should be provided and taken more seriously. Thus, that could help them to improve and produce a satisfying piece of research. (2) Students should also learn how to manage the available time, and set a plan previously to avoid the difficulties attributed to the lack of time management skills. Therefore, they would accomplish the task in due time with satisfaction. (3) It would be better to avoid pairing students on one topic because students have different learning styles and abilities level. Hence, joining these students through groups in the research process can make it a difficult task and the department shall rethink to make this practice optional. (4) No research is complete. Hence, some recommendations were made based on the limitations of the current study. First, a larger sample would probably enhance the reliability of the research. So, this research could be extended so that more undergraduate students were involved either by answering a questionnaire or interviewing them to see if these results report the same evidence to draw generalizations. Second, multiple research designs and methods could strength the study findings with more accuracy and credibility. Finally, the context was limited to the students of the English department at Sirte University. Thus, the results cannot be generalized over the other students' experiences of undertaking their graduation projects in different contexts. Selecting participants from various contexts, for example, the faculty of Arts fields could probably enrich studies with different experiences.

References

- Alheshe, M., Mustafa, S., & Makhlof, S. (2018). Undergraduate students' perspectives of difficulties in academic writing: A case study in the English Department at Sirte University. Unpublished undergraduate research project. Sirte University, Libya.
- Alsied, S. M., & Ibrahim, M. W. (2017). Exploring challenges encountered by EFL Libyan learners in research teaching and writing. *Journal of Language Learning*, 3(2), 143-158.
- Al Badi, I. A. H. (2015). Academic writing difficulties of ESL learners. *WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings*. 65-76.
- Alshehry, A. T. (2014). Teaching research writing to female undergraduates in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Education Learning and Development*, 2(4), 15–25. Retrieved June 17, 2017, from <http://www.eajournals.org/wp-content/uploads/Teaching-Research-Writing-To-Female-Undergraduates-in-Saudi-Arabia.pdf>
- Bocar, A. C. (2013). Difficulties encountered by the student-researchers and the effect on their research output. acd502011 @ yahoo. com
- Baily, S. (2011). *Academic writing: A handbook for international students*. [e.book]. (3rd .ed.). London and New York: Routledge.
- Berg, B. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. USA: Pearson.
- Boyatzis, R.E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: thematic analysis and code development*: Sage Publications.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2). pp. 77-101. ISSN 1478-0887
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London, UK: Sage.
- Cadman, K (1997). Thesis writing for international students: a question of identity? *English for Specific Purposes*, 16(1), 3-14.

- Clewes, D. (1996). Multiple perspectives on the undergraduate project experience. *Innovations – The Learning and Teaching Journal of Nottingham Trent University*, 27-35.
- Coffy, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data*. London, UK: Sage.
- Dornyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dawson, C. (2002). *Practical research methods: A user-friendly guide to mastering research techniques and projects*. Oxford, UK: how-to books Ltd.
- Eldokali, S., & Agila, M. (2010). *DOE Style sheet (1st ed.)*. Sirte, Libya: Sirte University.
- Edwards, R. (2002). Enhancing learning support for Masters Dissertation students: a role for action learning online? Paper presented at the BEST Conference 2002, Edinburgh. Available from: <http://www.business.ltsn.ac.uk/publications/>
- Ford, M., & Morice, J. (2003). How fair are group assignments? : A survey of students and faculty and a modest proposal. *Journal of Information Technology Education Research*, 2(1), 367-378.
- Gilham, B. (2002). *Developing a questionnaire: Bloomsbury academic*.
- Handbook. (2014). Sirte, Libya.
- Huang, R. (2007). A challenging but worthwhile experience: Asian international student perspectives of undertaking a dissertation in the UK. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education*, 6(1), 39-38. doi: 10.3794/johlste.61.130
- Hussey, J. and Hussey, R. (1997). *Business Research: a practical guide for undergraduate and postgraduate students*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Isaac, S., & Tormey, R. (2014). Undergraduate group projects: Challenges and learning experiences, *QScience Proceedings*, 19. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.5339/qproc.2015.elc2014:19>

- I'Anson, R.A., & Smith, K.A (2004). Undergraduate research projects and dissertations: issues of topic selection, access and data collections amongst tourism management students. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education*, 3(1), 19-32.DOI:10.3794/johlste.31.54
- LeCompte, M. D., & Goetz, J. P. (1982). Problems of reliability and validity in ethnographic research. *Review of educational research*, 52(1), 31-60
- Magwa S., Makuvaro, V., and Ngara, R. (2015). Challenges encountered in scaffolding undergraduate research projects: the case of three universities in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Educational Policy and Entrepreneurial Research (JEPER)*, 2(10), 58-65.<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301793879>
- Murray, G. (2009). Narrative inquiry. In J. Heigham& R. Croker (Eds.), *Qualitative research in applied linguistics: A practical introduction* (pp 45-65). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mackey, A., &Gass, S. (2005). *Second language research: Methodology and design*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Mouton, J. (2001). *How To Succeed In Your Masters and Doctoral Studies: A South African Guide And Resource Book*. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.
- Miles, M. B., &Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Shuttleworth, M. (2018). Qualitative assessments and inter-rater reliability. Explorable. Retrieved from <http://explorable.com/interrater-reliability>.
- Thondhlana, S., Mawere, D., &Weda, Z. (2011). Factors Affecting Completion of Research Projects by Students: A Study of Three Zimbabwe Open University Regions. *Zimbabwe International Journal of Open & Distance Learning*, 1(1), 71-78.
- Tan, E. B. (2007). Research experiences of undergraduate students at a comprehensive university. *International Journal of Teaching*

and Learning in Higher Education, 19(3), 205-215.<http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/>

Todd, M.J., Smith, K., & Bannister, P. (2006). Supervising a social science undergraduate dissertation: staff experiences and perceptions. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(2),161–173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510500527693>

Todd, M., Bannister, P. and Clegg, S. (2004). Independent inquiry and the undergraduate dissertation: perceptions and experiences of final-year social science students, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 29 (3), pp.335-355.

Trimmer, J. F. (1992). *Writing with a Purpose*. Ball State University: Houghton Mifflin.

Wu, H. D., & Badger, R. G. (2009). In a strange and uncharted land: ESP teachers' strategies for dealing with unpredicted problems in subject knowledge during class. *English for Specific Purposes*, 28(1), 19-32.

Webster, F., Pepper, D., & Jenkins, A. (2000). Assessing the Undergraduate Dissertation, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 25 (1), 71-80.