



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Canvassing the Challenges of the Literature Review for Master 1 Algerian EFL Learners

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Writing an academic research paper at the end of master studies is a hallmark in students' course of study as it testifies to their competency in research and academic writing. Yet, research is an arduous process, above all if the skills have not been internalized properly. Hindrances in conducting a literature review are glaring examples of research difficulties. Many studies have dwelt on those impediments, but no Algerian study has dwelt on this aspect. The present paper tries to canvass students' weaknesses in writing an appropriate literature review. To realize that, a descriptive-analytical method, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, has been used. The sample population consists of the entire population of Master 1 EFL didactics students (31) at the University of Saida. Two research instruments have been selected for that purpose: a students' questionnaire and an analysis of the learners' homework pertaining to the literature reviews. The findings disclose that the major hindrances of the literature review are related, basically, to irrelevant content, coherence, non-use of original sources, and absence of transition markers which are due to poor reading skills, and disengagement of learners. The analysis puts into evidence the need for the consolidation of the reading skills that help to understand inferences and draw conclusions as to the strengths and weaknesses of scholars' views.

Keywords: Hindrances, Irrelevant Content, Literature Review, Poor Reading Skills, Research Paper.

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Introduction

Writing an academic research paper is by far an onerous, challenging task for master students as they have to show their prowess in a number of academic requirements such as appropriate searching, as well as sound analysis and synthesis. More specifically, the elaboration of the literature review proves to be a highly demanding work for learners given the tremendousness of the load required on one hand, and the research incompetency of learners on the other hand (Chen et al., 2015; Churchill & Sanders, 2007; Froese et al., 1998; Galvan & Galvan, 2017; Gay et al., 2006; Isah & Murtala, 2018; Levy & Ellis, 2006; Terry & Terry, 2013). In the Algerian context, no survey has pondered over this issue. Likewise, the purpose of this paper is to canvass EFL learners' impediments in writing an appropriate literature review and propose avenues that could help learners and satisfy instructors. This presupposes, then, the examination of the following elements: the meaning of the literature review, the hindrances encountered by students in conducting it, and the expedients that could be used to countervail those hindrances.

Definition of the Literature Review

A literature review (or literary review) is an intelligent compilation of research done by other scholars that relate to a particular topic. Hart (1998) defines it as a selection of documents pertaining to a particular research problem that targets the unraveling of the solutions. Creswell (2014) adds more precision to this definition by specifying the type of both the documents and the information. In that scope, he says that a literature review is a "written summary of journal articles, books, and other documents that describe the past and current state of information on the topic of your research study" (p. 80). Yet, a review of literature does not simply involve a collection and summary of data, but more importantly, it requires a coherent classification and organization of data. In fact, the purpose of a literature review is to develop an overwhelming idea about a specific issue and identify the gaps. In other words, it facilitates the identification of the points that have been discussed and those that have not. Besides, it enables researchers to set a framework for their research problems. This invokes the exploration of concepts, methods, theories, procedures of data collection, and quality of synthesis. A further significant point about literature reviews is that they help shape public policies and undertake momentous decisions (Chen et al., 2015).

A literature review generally occurs at the beginning of a research paper, forming a chapter on its own. But it can also stand on its own (as an article). It is structured into three parts, namely, the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. The introduction sets the purpose behind the literary review and highlights the route map for that sake. The body comprises the bulk of the work where the results of the existing research are laid in a smooth connected way. It comprises a number of sub-titles (themes) that correspond to the points elaborated in the outline. Paragraphs should not consider sources separately, but they must be discussed altogether. The conclusion summarizes the findings reached.

A literature review is conducted in a number of steps. First, the sources linked to the topic are carefully selected. Next, a focused reading (reading with a purpose) should be undertaken taking into consideration the purpose sought (Skene, 2021).

The third phase is the evaluation of sources which impels that the documents should not be simply summarized but they ought to be evaluated. This evaluation calls for a number of operations such as comparison and contrast of sources, unraveling the strengths and weaknesses of the scholars' views, and judicious integration of the data in the flow of discussion. Figure 1 illustrates the features of the literature review.

Table 1. Features of the literature review

Purpose	"[T]o determine what is known on the topic, how well this knowledge is established and where future research might best be directed" (University of Melbourne, 2013).
Content	Critical review of one or more pieces of literature. May be in response to a stimulus or question to narrow the scope of the literature search and the focus of the review.
Structure	Varies, but usually needs an Introduction, Body, and Conclusion (including if it forms part of a longer text). Ideas are to be organized thematically with main points relating to the topic of the literature review, showing how sources relate to each other and contribute to knowledge about the topic (i.e. don't just write a new paragraph for each source).
Approach to sources/literature	Critical approach. The sources/literature are the subject matter of the writing.

Source: Western Sydney University Library. (2017). Literature review purpose. <https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/studysmart>

Challenges of the Literature Review

Conducting a literature review is an arduous task that triggers confusion, boredom, stress, and fatigue (Galvan & Galvan, 2017; Isah & Murtala, 2018). Most of the literature finds that novice researchers have problems with many aspects of the literature review, including the number of documents to be consulted and the identification of relatable sources (Gay et al., 2006). This is commonly termed *scoping*. Some studies pointed to the strenuousness of identifying the data to be searched and where they can fit (Churchill & Sanders, 2007; Levy & Ellis, 2006; Terry & Terry, 2013). Froese et al. (1998) alluded to students' bewilderment with data collection in case of wide topics. Some demarcated the problem of where to start, above all in the context of abundant information (books, articles, and myriad electronic databases). Students, indeed, find themselves overwhelmed by 'oceans' of data which are quite perplexing in terms of reliability and relevancy. Furthermore, the charge of sifting the information is not at all an easy process, even for able writers and researchers. Chen et al. (2015) identified these difficulties as methodological problems. Other methodological difficulties include analysis, synthesis, and discussion. Granello (2001) mentioned students' hindrances in analyzing data, in other words, extirpating information from documents and

interpreting it. Lundstrom (n.d.) detailed those analysis/synthesis impediments as the simple use of summary (bulleted lists, over-quoting, inconveniency of the material for the study, and lack of immersion in the literature). Further to those hindrances is the non-consultation of original sources and the total reliance, instead, on the interpretation provided by the secondary sources. In fact, in a globalized world where fast communication technologies impress heavily on individuals' lives, students prefer rather fast and easy data.

Another significant problem in writing a literature review has to do with reading and writing skills. Research requires in-depth or close reading that necessitates the mastery of comprehension strategies. The latter encompass three types of strategies: literal, inferential, and evaluative. The former involve skimming, scanning, and self-questioning. The second refer to connecting, comparing, inferring, and predicting. The third category includes synthesizing, determining importance, summarizing, and paraphrasing (Professional Development Service for Teachers, 2012). Evidently, those strategies require time as a "one and done" reading is not sufficient and ultimately calls for more reading and re-reading (Shanahan, n.d.). In this respect, Gall et al. (1996) dwelt on the time constraint as a factor inhibiting thesis writing. Thus, students who have a weak mastery of close reading will, undoubtedly, fail to comprehend literature, decipher the relevant information, and create smooth combinations.

No less significant than the reading competency is the writing competency. Students who exhibit difficulties in writing are, inevitably, unable to meet the requirements of academic writing. Competent writing involves the construction of meaningful sentences, paragraphs, and essays that reflect the conventions of the language, notably vocabulary (word choice), mechanics (spelling, capitalization, and punctuation), grammar, coherence, and cohesion. Furthermore, one's writing should invoke impersonality, relevance, clarity, conciseness, and precision. Researchers ought equally to show dexterity in a number of skills such as expounding one's point of view, using evidence to argue, antagonizing a particular view, and interpreting (Coffin et al., 2003).

Methodology

To ascertain those hindrances, the researcher undertook a field investigation at the Department of English at the author's university.

Participants

The population of the study comprised Master 1 didactics students since they were concerned with the literature review. The entire population (31 students) was selected for that purpose because one of the authors taught those students the course of research methodology on one hand, and on the other hand, the curriculum comprised a chapter about the literary review. The informants' consent was initially sought by clarifying the implications of this research.

Research Instruments

A descriptive method combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches was used. The research instruments adopted were, respectively, a semi-structured questionnaire destined for students, and an analysis of the learners' assignments appertaining to the writing of a short literature review. The questionnaire included

eight-question items regarding students' stand as to the literature review, the nature of the challenges encountered while running a literary review, their data collection procedure, inquisition about the extent of their mastery of comprehension strategies and their momentum for the literature review, their views as to the need for more practice, and their recommendations for promoting the drafting of appropriate literature reviews. The written assignment was related to conducting a brief literature review on grammar teaching strategies.

Discussion of the Results

For organization purposes, the results of the questionnaire will first be considered, then the analysis will hinge into the corpus study.

Analysis of the Questionnaire

All the thirty-one questionnaires sent were returned. With regard to question item one (students' perceptions of the literature review), approximately half of the students (16) consider the literature review a compilation of documents, 5 students view it as an opportunity for unpacking recent developments in specific fields, 4 learners perceive it as the context for starting and locating one's research, while 6 students find it both as the foundation for checking the hypotheses and the context for starting and locating one's research (see table 1).

Table 1. Students' perceptions of the literature review

Students' answers	Number of students	Percentage of students
a) a compilation of different documents	16	51,61%
b) the foundation for checking the hypotheses	/	/
c) the context for starting and locating one's research	4	12,90 %
d) an opportunity for unveiling recent developments in specific fields	5	16,12 %
b & c	6	19,35 %

As to question item two (students' evaluation of the literature review), 19 students asserted that the literature review is a difficult charge, 7 students believed it is an interesting task, whereas 5 learners considered it a stressful work (see table 2).

Table 2. Students' evaluation of the literature review

Students' answers	Number of students	Percentage of students
a) an interesting task	07	22,58 %
b) a stressful work	05	16,12 %
c) a difficult charge	19	61,29 %
d) an advantageous and rewarding activity	00	00 %

With respect to question item 3 (students' views as to the challenges involved in the literature review), 13 students recognized linguistic factors as the main challenges in conducting a literature review, 12 learners found methodological parameters more prominent, while only six learners believed that conceptual matters primed higher than the other factors (see table 3).

Table 3. Students' views as to the challenges involved in the literature review

Students' answers	Number of students	Percentage of students
a) linguistic (lexical and syntactical)	13	41,93 %
b) methodological	12	38,70 %
c) conceptual (perceptions about the functions and advantages of the literature review)	06	19,35 %
d) ontological (low self-esteem)	00	00 %

Hinging to question item 4 (students' procedure for collecting data), all the students asserted that when they found information in a secondary source they consulted the original source with a view to using their own interpretation (see table 4).

Table 4. Students' procedure for collecting data

Students' answers	Number of students	Percentage of students
a) you use the interpretation provided by the second source without consulting the original	31	100 %
b) you consult the original source to use your own interpretation	0 %	0 %

As far as question item 5 (students' mastery of comprehension strategies) is concerned, a large majority of students (23) affirmed that they did not master comprehension strategies, while only 8 students asserted that they had a command of in-depth reading (see table 5).

Table 5. Students' mastery of comprehension strategies

Students' answers	Number of students	Percentage of students
command of in-depth reading	8	25,80 %
poor mastery of comprehension strategies	23	74,19 %

For questions 6 (students' views as to the importance of comprehension strategies for the literature review) and 7 (students' views as to their needs for ampler practice in the literature review), all the students acquiesced that comprehension strategies were important for the literature review, and that they needed ampler practice in that field (see tables 6 and 7).

Table 6. Students' views as to the importance of comprehension strategies for the literature review

Students' answers	Number of students	Percentage of students
Yes	31	100 %
No	00	00 %

Table 7. Students' views as to their needs for ampler practice in the literature review

Students' answers	Number of students	Percentage of students
Yes	31	100 %
No	00	00 %

With regard to the last question (students' recommendations for curtailing the challenges of the literature review), the large bulk of the students (22) recommended more practice; 3 students proposed gradual training that would consider the different stages of the literature review; 4 students suggested more intensified practice on paraphrasing and referencing sources; and 2 students advocated the consecration of more time for the master dissertation writing as one semester was not enough.

Analysis of students' literature reviews

The corpus study comprised the evaluation of students' short literature reviews, which numbered thirty-one. The instruction was sent to learners via the Moodle platform. Students were expected to outline the different grammar teaching strategies in a span of time of two weeks. This homework was to constitute part of the tutorial mark. It should be precised here that students had already finished their in-person classes (eight weeks), which means they had ample time to undertake the assignment. The evaluation of the literary reviews was done through the researcher's evaluation criteria (relevance of the content, use of secondary/original sources, use of general/specific-data sources, and comparison between the number of sources in the in-text citation and those in the reference list) in addition to Akindele's six-criterion guideline (see Figure 1). The analysis revealed a number of hindrances associated with irrelevant content, absence of transitions, non-use of original sources, and other impediments. For illustration purposes, those hindrances are explored below:

Irrelevant content

A large number of papers elucidated the use of irrelevant content. This is displayed through the following points:

- ✓ speaking about the function of grammar, then directly moving to the outcome of implicit grammar instruction
- ✓ enumerating students' learning strategies instead of looking for grammar teaching techniques
- ✓ defining grammar then moving to the description of self-management
- ✓ defining the term strategy then drifting to learners' different learning strategies
- ✓ describing grammar in-context teaching then dealing with the importance of grammar for proofreading
- ✓ speaking simply about language as a system

Absence of transitions/inappropriate transitions

The literature reviews revealed numerous cases where inappropriate transition markers were used. Some examples from students' papers have been selected to elucidate this:

"Grammar is one of the most vital structures in language learning. Thus, it must be taught appropriately. Although, there are many and useful strategies for successful grammar teaching." In this student's draft, the connector although is not suitable. It would have been more convenient to use the transition marker 'in fact'.

In another draft, a student wrote "teaching has always been a subject of controversy, especially when it comes to the communication process (Chaudron, 1988; Van der Walt, 1989). Unfortunately, a great majority of learners are greatly

satisfied with the Grammar Translation Method.” Here again, one notices that the transition marker ‘unfortunately’ does not suit the context. It would have been more appropriate to use the word however.

Non-use of original sources

A third instance of students’ inappropriate literature reviews was marked by the non-use of original sources. In fact, students simply substitute words with their synonyms so as not to be vindicated of plagiarism. This is illustrated by the following passages:

- ✓ Student 1: “Grammar instruction has often been contentious, particularly in light of the communicative approach (Chaudron, 1988; Van der Walt, 1989)”
- ✓ Student 2: “teaching has always been a subject of controversy, especially when it comes to the communication process (Chaudron, 1988; Van der Walt, 1989)”
- ✓ Student 3: “Some researchers (Harmer, 1987; Willis, 1988) believe that the grammar of a language does not aid learners in their use of the language”
- ✓ Student 4: “Some researchers (Harmer, 1987; Willis, 1988) feel that grammar does not primarily help learners for language use”.

Other problems

In addition to the hindrances highlighted above, other problems were prominent. This includes what follows:

- ✓ the list of sources used in the in-text citation is larger than those mentioned on the list of references (10/5; 7/2; 8/3)
- ✓ problem of coherency
- ✓ problem of fragments
- ✓ simple summaries instead of a combination between scholars’ viewpoints
- ✓ absence of the researcher’ voice
- ✓ extensive use of general-data sources at the expense of specific data sources

Those impediments denote, clearly, that students’ inappropriate literature reviews are due, basically, to weak comprehension strategies. Being overwhelmed by different types of material, they find themselves struggling with what to select, where to put it, and how to elaborate it. The sifting of information is a complex task that requires, essentially, a good mastery of the interpretation skill. Handicapped by this obstacle, learners, thus, simply look for the word strategy and insert all the data that allude to it.

Review components
1. Does the review provide synthesis or a set of summaries of each work reviewed?
2. Does it show the relationship of each work to the other under consideration?
3. Does the review shed light on any gaps in previous research?
4. Does the writer resolve conflicts amongst seemingly contradictory previous research?
5. Does the writer show insight and an awareness of differing arguments?
6. Does the writer link the review at all times to the rationale and purpose of the study?

Fig.1. Akindele’s guideline for analyzing a literature review

Source: Akindele, O. (2008). A critical analysis of the literature review section of graduate dissertations at the University of Botswana, *ESP* 7 (20) p.4. <https://studylib.net/doc/8890201/a-critical-analysis-of-the-literature-review-section-of-g...>

Interpretation and recommendations

Both the results of the students' questionnaire and the corpus analysis do, considerably, demystify the distress of the literature review and the stress it incurs on learners exhibiting a weak command of comprehension strategies. The fact that students consider it as a compilation of sources elucidates, conspicuously, their erroneous conceptions of this important part of academic research. Thus, it is not surprising to say that they, totally, ignore the rewards of a literary review. It is even doubtful whether such learners (except for a few) can explore the original sources whose style might be complicated to decipher. The over reliance on the interpretations provided by the secondary sources might be interpreted as a safe refuge for learners when encumbered by weak reading and writing skills.

On the light of this, it can be asserted that the arduousness of the literature review is, primarily, associated with the rate of mastery of comprehension strategies. The incapacity to unveil scholars' views impedes the identification of the relevant data, and the localization of where it could be inserted. The sole outlet for this hindrance is to boost students' reading skills, particularly, in in-depth reading such as interpreting, inferring, and evaluating. In that respect, the educational stakeholders, basically at the level of the campus, ought to reconsider their priorities, and give the course of reading comprehension due consideration. Convenient reading strategies should be used for that sake. Second, more training sessions should be dedicated to concrete context-based literature review instruction. Similarly, students must be coached in the guided writing of a step-by-step literature review. It would be, even, more convenient to design a separate subject termed "literature review."

Conclusion

The findings of the present survey made possible the answering of the research questions regarding students' perceptions of the literature review, the different hindrances encountered, and the possible solutions. In a nutshell, conducting a literature review is, theoretically, a passionate, exciting, and rewarding task; however, reality on the spot displays the opposite image. Master students load this consuming research step as they neither possess the sufficient tools for that, nor the deep engagement and motivation that arm learners with perseverance and devotion to withstand the stress of research. The major hindrances associated with the literature review, in the context of Master 2 didactics students, pertain to a number of weaknesses such as comprehending the literature, extirpating the relevant information, inserting it coherently, and using appropriate transitions. This reveals the learners' conspicuous adversity in close reading and comprehension strategies. Besides, time constraints, de-motivation, and abundant flow of easy information induce them to rely on secondary sources without resorting to the original research. This, inevitably, impresses their advancement as independent researchers capable of voicing their own stands as to the questions raised. A no less significant hindrance

has to do with the elaboration of the suitable combinations between the ideas of scholars. Students here are deficient as they do not know which pieces of information fit together, and how they should be interrelated. Such stumbling blocks of the literature review require decisive resolutions on the part of the educational stakeholders, notably the national board of higher education, teachers, and the administrative staff. More time should be allotted to writing the research paper; in other words, three semesters, instead of one, ought to be consecrated for this academic work. Furthermore, in-depth practice should be provided with a view to mastering comprehension strategies and academic writing. A guided step-by-step of the literary review has to be envisaged by instructors given the immensity of the work required.

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بررسی چالش‌های مرور ادبیات برای دانشجویان کارشناسی ارشد انگلیسی به عنوان زبان دوم الجزایر

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نوشتن یک مقاله پژوهشی دانشگاهی در پایان دوره کارشناسی ارشد، نقطه عطفی در مسیر تحصیلی دانشجویان محسوب می‌شود، زیرا نشان‌دهنده توانایی آن‌ها در پژوهش و نگارش آکادمیک است. با این حال، پژوهش‌فرآیندی دشوار است، به‌ویژه زمانی که مهارت‌های لازم به‌درستی درونی نشده باشند. موانع موجود در انجام مرور ادبیات، نمونه‌های بارزی از این دشواری‌ها هستند. اگرچه مطالعات بسیاری به این موانع پرداخته‌اند، اما هیچ مطالعه‌ای در الجزایر به این موضوع نپرداخته است. این مقاله تلاش می‌کند تا ضعف‌های دانشجویان در نوشتن یک مرور ادبیات مناسب را بررسی کند. برای دستیابی به این هدف، از روش توصیفی-تحلیلی با رویکرد ترکیبی (کیفی و کمی) استفاده شده است. جامعه آماری این پژوهش شامل تمامی دانشجویان کارشناسی ارشد رشته آموزش زبان انگلیسی (۳۱ نفر) در دانشگاه سعیده است. دو ابزار پژوهشی برای این منظور انتخاب شد: پرسشنامه دانشجویی و تحلیل تکالیف نوشتاری مرتبط با مرور ادبیات. یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهد که موانع اصلی مرور ادبیات عمدتاً به مواردی مانند محتوای نامرتبط، عدم انسجام، استفاده نکردن از منابع اصلی و عدم وجود نشانگرهای انتقالی مربوط می‌شود که این مشکلات ناشی از مهارت‌های ضعیف خواندن و عدم مشارکت فعال دانشجویان است. این تحلیل، نیاز به تقویت مهارت‌های خواندن را برجسته می‌سازد تا دانشجویان بتوانند استنباط‌ها را درک کنند و به ارزیابی نقاط قوت و ضعف دیدگاه‌های پژوهشگران بپردازند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: موانع، محتوای نامرتبط، مرور ادبیات، مهارت‌های ضعیف خواندن، مقاله پژوهشی.

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