

Master Students' Challenges and Strategy Uses While Writing a Thesis at an EMI University in Kazakhstan

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This qualitative study investigates the challenges and coping strategies of master's students at an English medium of instruction (EMI) university in Kazakhstan while writing their theses. It explores the difficulties these students face and the methods they use to overcome them. Writing a thesis in English poses a significant challenge, especially for non-native speakers conducting research in English for the first time (De Kleijn et al., 2012). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with male and female master's students to gather data on their experiences. The findings reveal that students struggle to balance their academic work with professional and family responsibilities, which hinders their thesis progress. Future research should investigate specific challenges, such as identifying the causes of burnout and further exploring coping strategies, to gain a deeper understanding of the support needed for EMI graduate students.

Introduction

According to Chandrasekhar (2002), a thesis is a document created by a graduate student demonstrating their ability to perform independent research with the guidance of a supervisor. It showcases the student's skills in analyzing and presenting important findings from their research, serving as a reliable measure of their knowledge and competence in their chosen field. Thomas and Brubaker (2000) posit that master's theses (as well as PhD dissertations) serve two primary objectives. Firstly, they offer students supervised opportunities to engage in and demonstrate research skills. Secondly, they aim to "make a contribution to the world's fund of knowledge or to improve the conduct of some activity" (p. 1). De Kleijn et al. (2012) also point out that writing a thesis in English is challenging for many non-native English speakers because it is probably their first-time conducting research in English. Even having completed the bachelor's degree, master's students often face challenges in writing their thesis, primarily if it is written in a foreign language like English (German & Mahmud, 2021). Thus, in addition to the challenges of thesis writing, there are challenges associated with the English language, its structure and rules, and supervisors who can be local or foreign professors. Hajar (2016) clarifies the distinction between "thesis" and "dissertation," explaining that in different contexts they are used differently. In the UK and Australian contexts, students write and complete a "dissertation," while in the USA context, students produce a "thesis." In the Kazakhstani context, students produce theses as well, which are reports of small-scale research in approximately 20,000 words showcasing the students' compe-

tence. Moreover, the demand for graduate students to write a thesis in English in Kazakhstan is also growing (Hajar & Ait Si Mhamed, 2021).

This study aims to illuminate the thesis writing challenges and coping strategies of master's students at an EMI university in Kazakhstan. Through semi-structured interviews, we explore their experiences to understand the specific difficulties they encounter, the strategies they employ to overcome these difficulties, and potential recommendations for institutional support.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What difficulties do master's students face while writing MA theses in English?
2. What strategies do master's students use to deal with their difficulties in writing a thesis in English?
3. What recommendations can be suggested to the institution concerning students' experiences writing a thesis?

This research is significant because it addresses a critical gap in understanding the unique challenges faced by Kazakhstani students in EMI programs. By amplifying their voices and experiences, we can inform the development of targeted support systems and pedagogical approaches that promote academic success and enhance the quality of postgraduate education in Kazakhstan. Additionally, this research contributes to the broader discourse on multilingualism and academic writing in internationalized educational contexts by offering insights that can be applied beyond the Kazakhstani context.

Literature Review

This study aims to explore Kazakhstani EMI master's university students' thesis writing challenges and coping strategies. This section will discuss two points: first, recent studies on student thesis writing challenges in some Asian contexts, and second, the relevant research conducted in Kazakhstan.

Challenges Faced by EMI Master's Students in Asian Contexts

After analyzing articles exploring EMI graduate student's master's thesis writing challenges in the Asian context, three common challenges emerge: linguistic, research skills, and non-linguistic. It is crucial to examine each challenge separately.

Linguistic challenges include challenges associated with academic writing conventions, citation practices, and using English with precision. According to research conducted by Tiwari (2023) in Nepal and Backhou and Bouhania (2020) in Algeria, students often struggle to use appropriate academic language when writing their theses, which can affect the overall clarity and tone of their work. While some master's students ascribe this challenge to be the result of insufficient preparation and training in academic writing skills (Backhou & Bouhania, 2020), supervisors explain it as improper organization and planning before starting to write a thesis, leading to poor writing and even plagiarism (Ravari et al., 2022). Sometimes, students' plagiarism appears just because they fail to cite and reference properly (Tiwari, 2023).

The second challenge is the lack of research skills, such as problems in identifying and summarizing literature, developing methodology, analyzing data, and interpreting results. For instance, Yunus et al. (2023) discovered that students of Indonesia struggled with problem statements in the introduction and synthesizing previous theories and studies into their works in discussion chapters. Similarly, Backhou and Bouhania (2020) and Sitompul and Antidasari (2022) found that students struggled to determine the sample and instruments and collect data in the methodology chapter.

Another challenge is non-linguistic, such as limited supervisory support, poor work-life balance, and lack of self-learning skills. According to recent studies by Ravari et al. (2022) and Backhou and Bouhania (2020), many students were challenged to complete their theses, mainly because they found it difficult to balance responsibilities associated with their academic study and family. Additionally, some students rely more on their supervisor's

guidance and opinion, losing their authoritative voices and individuality in thesis writing (Tiwari, 2023). Having explored EMI graduate students' thesis writing challenges in Asia and elsewhere, examining existing studies exploring the Kazakhstani context seems essential.

In Kazakhstani Context

Kazakhstani master's students studying in EMI programs also encounter challenges in thesis writing. The few empirical studies conducted in Kazakhstan (Hajar & Ait Si Mhamed, 2021; Hajar & Ait Si Mhamed, 2023; Adilkyzy et al., 2023) highlighted that their challenges were similar to those mentioned above. Students also struggled to find relevant English-language materials, critically evaluate the resources, and integrate them effectively into their thesis (Mukhtarkhanova et al., 2024). Moreover, the supervisory relationship plays a crucial role, as it is essential to avoid misunderstandings and confusion. Some Kazakhstani students prefer to rely on a supervisor, while others prefer to rely on themselves (Hajar & Ait Si Mhamed, 2021; Hajar & Ait Si Mhamed, 2023). These issues demonstrate the importance of addressing the research process and supervision practices for successfully completing thesis writing among Kazakhstani students.

Theoretical Framework

Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System provides a comprehensive theoretical framework to analyze the challenges and coping mechanisms employed by EMI master's students during thesis writing in Kazakhstan. This framework acknowledges the interconnectedness of students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. By examining challenges through this lens, we can explore how students' thoughts, emotions, and self-perceptions influence their writing strategies, time management, and overall well-being. Furthermore, Dörnyei's emphasis on self-regulation allows us to investigate the coping mechanisms students adopt to manage stress, enhance motivation, and navigate the demands of thesis writing.

The framework consists of three main components: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience. The ideal L2 self represents the vision of oneself as a successful L2 speaker, serving as a powerful motivator for language learning. It includes integrative and internalized instrumental motives, driving individuals to align their current abilities with their ideal self-image. The ought-to L2 self involves the attributes one believes they should possess to meet external expectations and avoid negative outcomes. It is associated with

more extrinsic, less internalized motives.

The L2 learning experience focuses on practical motives related to the immediate learning environment, such as teacher influence, curriculum, peer interactions, and experiences of success. It is distinct from the self-guides, and future research is expected to explore these aspects further. Overall, Dörnyei's L2 Motivational self system offers a robust framework for understanding the varied experiences of EMI students as they tackle the challenges of thesis writing.

Methodology

As Creswell (2014) emphasized, qualitative research aims to gain a holistic understanding of a specific issue from the perspective of individuals. This study examines two specific cases of challenges and strategies for EMI students when writing a master's thesis. This qualitative study uses a case study approach due to its unique contribution to providing researchers with a holistic understanding of a problem, issue, or phenomenon within its social context (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). According to Creswell (2014), in a case study, a particular case is studied frequently to investigate a problem, and the case demonstrates the issue's intricacy. Cases can be individuals, events, programs, institutions, or a society. The study is pursuing an exploratory case study design, and according to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010), it enables researchers to gain new insights into their research question and formulate specific ideas or theories they might want to use later to test their ideas on similar cases. Case study research usually relies on one or a few cases to investigate, seeking answers to some particular questions, and they typically take place over a shorter period (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010)

Participants

The sample employed in the current investigation is purposive due to the deliberate selection of participants with a shared experience of a particular phenomenon. In purposive sampling, researchers frequently select cases to be incorporated into the sample based on assessing the typicality or possession of specific characteristics being investigated (Cohen et al., 2018). Purposive sampling has been explored to deliver the most relevant data to comprehend a phenomenon's specific incident. According to Patton (2014), qualitative research often emphasizes examining limited sample sizes, including individual cases, chosen for a particular and defined objective. The criteria for purposive sampling in this study are: 1) Graduate students currently enrolled in a master's program at an EMI university in Kazakhstan, 2) Non-

native English speakers who are writing their master's thesis in English, 3) Participants who are part-time students and full-time employees. This study is focused on two participants, one female and one male, between the ages of 25 and 35. The participants were chosen from two genders to understand any gender-specific challenges. Furthermore, marital status also has a significant impact; specifically, the female participant is married while the male participant is single. Both participants were Kazakhs who studied at an EMI university in Astana and are pursuing their master's degrees in the same educational program but under the guidance of different research supervisors. The female participant was supervised by local authorities, while the male participant was under the supervision of a foreign professor.

The participants used pseudonyms Ayazhan and Miras. Ayazhan is married and has a son. She runs an English language course and works as an English teacher there. She mentioned juggling her studies, professional duties, and family responsibilities. On the other hand, Miras is single and works as a college counsellor in one of the famous educational companies in Kazakhstan. He is also pursuing his master's degree while balancing his professional responsibilities.

Name	Age	Gender	Duration of interview	Marital status
Ayazhan	35	Female	19:35	Married
Miras	25	Male	18:10	Single

Table 1 Demographic Data of The Participants

Data collection and analysis

The data collection process started in the middle of March 2024. The sample for this qualitative study consisted of two master's program students who study at an English medium instruction (EMI) university. The expansion of EMI within various higher education establishments worldwide has played a role in the rise of multilingual students engaging in the composition of a thesis or dissertation in English as a component of their academic curriculum (Hajar, A. & Ait Si Mhamed, A., 2023). Dong (1997) also suggested that "for non-native students, the mismatch of writing difficulties and expectations operating in their home countries compound their writing difficulties" (p. 10). The data collection of this study involved semi-structured individual interviews. According to Creswell's (2014) research, semi-structured interviews can help researchers receive detailed answers from participants, allowing them to adjust

research questions and monitor emerging themes based on the responses. The interview questions were designed to cover various topics such as supervisor support, challenges faced by the participants, and recommendations for future master students. The interviews were conducted in Russian and English, each around 20 minutes long. Following the participant's consent, the interviews were recorded in audio format to facilitate transcription. Regarding the data analysis, the qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed utilizing Clarke and Braun's (2006) thematic analysis. Thematic analysis (TA) consists of six phases: familiarizing ourselves with data, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. TA is a structured approach used to identify, organize, and enhance the understanding of critical patterns (themes) within a dataset (Clarke & Braun, 2006). Firstly, researchers were familiar with the data. Secondly, researchers generalized preliminary codes aligned with this study's objective. Thirdly, the researchers read the transcripts of semi-structured interviews and generated themes, dividing them into main themes and subthemes. The researchers identified themes and utilized an inductive approach closely interconnected with the data (Patton, 1990).

Finally, the themes were defined and named, and the researchers collected data extracts for each theme and organized them into a cohesive and logically sound narrative.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, it is important to note that we were able to keep the participants' identities anonymous. We were committed to protecting the confidentiality of their information at every stage of the research process, from data collection to storage.

During the data collection, we selected a secure and convenient location for interviews to ensure that individuals could comfortably share personal and sensitive information without fear of identity exposure. Moreover, we asked the participants to choose a place where no one could disturb them during the interview; on our side, we did the same so that no one could hear the conversation. We ensured that interview files contained no identifying information or participant names during data storage. Instead, we used pseudonyms and codes. A file connecting participant codes to identifying information was securely password-protected and stored in a separate folder on our personal electronic device, accessible only to us. Contact lists and audio recordings were deleted once

they were no longer needed for the research.

Findings

The findings of this qualitative study revealed the main themes of master students' thesis writing challenges, such as 'challenges in thesis writing' and 'supervision and support.'

Challenges in thesis writing

The analysis indicated that the main challenges of writing a master's thesis were time management, research and analysis skills, writing strategies, and emotional/psychological factors.

Time management and workload

The participants identified time management problems and an increased workload as the primary challenges they face while writing their master's thesis. They noted that they only studied on-campus during intensive courses and that the program was designed to be feasible for students who worked while studying. Furthermore, they emphasized that writing a master's thesis was challenging due to their studies, jobs, and personal responsibilities.

Since I am a mother, I have a family and a life. It was very difficult to combine since I dropped my child off at kindergarten, picked him up, and took care of household chores such as washing, cooking, and cleaning; all this was on me (Ayazhan).

Miras responded, "Still, it's hard to concentrate on my thesis and force myself to sit when I have many deadlines from my main job, and it's really challenging to balance my work and study."

This year, I started my own business, an English language course for children. At the beginning of this journey, I had to put in a lot of effort, which was quite challenging. I had to juggle between three main things: my dissertation, my English courses, and my family life (Ayazhan).

Lack of research and analysis skills

The study participants mentioned that they faced challenges formulating research questions and writing various chapters of their master's thesis, including literature reviews, findings, and discussions. Miras explained his struggles while writing his thesis, particularly with framing the research questions. Ayazhan pointed out that time constraints are a significant obstacle to completing the chapters of a master's thesis.

Finding the right research questions can be challenging, mainly when dealing with abstract topics like college counselling. It can be overwhelming to narrow down precisely what you want to examine and identify the critical research questions that will guide your work (Miras).

Ayazhan replied, “The literature review was tough for me, and to be honest, I read as much as possible, but I can’t say I have a good literature review that I expected.”

Adoption of writing strategies

As mentioned, Ayazhan and Miras have busy schedules and cannot dedicate specific time to writing their thesis. Their strategy is straightforward and depends on their availability. They are utilizing their free time to write their master’s thesis.

During my free time between English lessons in my office, I sit at my computer to read or write my thesis until evening. Then, I pick up my child and take him to their drawing class. While he attends a drawing class, I sit in the corridor and continue writing on my computer (Ayazhan).

Ayazhan responded, “So, one day, I can allocate four hours and write until midnight; another day, I can write for about an hour. In general, I had such a strategy.” However, Miras suggested that he could succeed in meeting his thesis deadlines on time with consistent work. He replied, “I think I should schedule 30 minutes or an hour every day or every week just to concentrate on my thesis.”

Emotional and psychological factors

Ayazhan shared that writing her master’s thesis was emotionally challenging for her. She also mentioned that she was unable to receive psychological support from the EMI university due to the long waiting list. Nonetheless, she recognized that having access to psychological support is a privilege.

Throughout this year, which I dedicated to writing my dissertation, I burned out so many times that I cried so many times. I cried to my husband, and I cried to myself on a pillow.

Well, really, it’s not easy (Ayazhan).

She responded, “I thought about consulting because I was burnt out, fatigued, and crying. Unfortunately, I did not reach out because I heard that there was a huge queue there.”

On the other hand, Miras did not mention any emotion-

al struggles, but based on his responses, he tends to complete tasks overnight. He would be interested in applying a different strategy to improve his productivity. Miras replied, “I’m one of those people who try to finish everything at once on one night or the deadline day, and I wish that I could do it during this period and work little but for a long period.”

Supervision and Support

The data analysis revealed the main sub-themes of a master’s thesis writing: supervision and guidance, academic support services, and recommendations for future master students.

Supervision and guidance

Both participants expressed satisfaction with their supervisors and reported no issues. Miras responded, “I didn’t expect something more about my master’s supervisor, but when I saw that she was ready to help and assist at every point, it was actually surprising for me.”

Nevertheless, Ayazhan had hoped that her supervisor would be a foreigner as she believed they would guide her better than a local one. However, she was assigned a local supervisor, which turned out to be more beneficial due to the supervisor’s familiarity with the Kazakhstani context. Ayazhan was concerned about her supervisor’s professionalism since it was his first-time supervising master students.

This is exactly the person I need because, let’s say, my topic concerns Kazakhstan and the context of Astana, and the person is familiar with this context. He knows this internal kitchen, and it helped me a lot. I think I was wrong because the expat in my topic would not help me much, precisely because of the context of Astana (Ayazhan).

Academic support services

Ayazhan has expressed her immense satisfaction with the academic support she has received. According to her, Academic English Support has made writing her thesis 20-30 percent easier.

Even when everything seems clear and acceptable, the academic English instructions highlight the things she may have missed or left unclear. She believes that these instructions have been invaluable in improving the quality of her work.

Thesis instructors, as a third reader, can tell you what they did not understand, and this helps a lot. Well, not only this but also the fact that they correct mistakes and help with grammar is important

because English is not our native language anyway (Ayazhan).

Miras confirmed that the EMI university fully supports master's students, and he does not anticipate requesting more support. He replied, "I think the university and the supervisors are doing their best, and there is nothing more that I could demand from them. If I ask for support, I'm sure the university or my supervisors will provide it."

Recommendations for future master students

During the study, the participants shared some helpful recommendations to assist future master's students in overcoming the challenges and stress of writing a thesis. One of the suggestions made by Miras was that master's students should be careful when selecting a research topic for their thesis and ensure that the topic is engaging to avoid any confusion or potential changes in the topic later on. In addition, he stressed that a master's thesis should be feasible to accomplish. Miras replied, "I think before coming to the master's and before selecting your thesis topic, you should be sure that you are precisely choosing this topic and that this is your area of interest". He also responded, "You should choose a topic that is reachable and doable and that you're capable of doing." Meanwhile, Ayazhan made a similar point to Miras's and suggested that engaging can help avoid burnout. She replied, "Of course, choose a topic that interests you and will help you avoid burnout."

Overall, the main challenges for the EMI university master students while writing a master's thesis are a lack of time management skills, an increased workload due to a combination of working and studying, and maintaining a balance between them. Thus, the findings revealed that the participants of this study employed a writing strategy depending on their availability from the main job. In addition to academic pressures, emotional factors also played a significant role in participants experiencing burnout and fatigue while working on their thesis. As a result, they stressed the importance of taking care of oneself and managing stress levels while striving to meet deadlines. Furthermore, participants believed that choosing the right topic is crucial for achieving success in their future master's theses, as it can greatly impact their motivation and overall satisfaction with their thesis writing journey.

Discussion and Implications

The objective of this study was to investigate the experiences of master's students at the Kazakhstan EMI uni-

versity while writing their theses. This section presents the study's findings, which are based on semi-structured interviews and support Dörney's (2009) L2 Motivational Self-System theoretical framework. Additionally, the section concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations and provides recommendations for future research.

Time Management and Work-Life Balance

The findings suggest that students struggle to balance work, academic life, and family responsibilities. The findings align with Dörney's (2009) concept of the ideal L2 self, which motivates master's students to pursue a master's degree despite the challenges of balancing commitments. Consequently, dealing with the demands from different life domains hindered their thesis writing progress. This also mirrors findings across Asia and elsewhere, where many graduate students hold part-time/full-time jobs to support their studies and families (Backhou & Bouhania, 2020; Ravari et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2023). Corner and Poi (2017) explain this with the notion that students struggle between completing their thesis successfully and being active family members, especially in a highly collective culture where family needs come before individual needs. Thus, to address this issue and achieve work-life balance, universities should recognize this practice among students and consider part-time learning options or extended deadlines.

Writing Strategies

Participants stated that writing for short periods of time, depending on their availability, worked well for them as a coping strategy for managing the balance between different responsibilities. The findings align with Dörney's (2009) concept of the ideal L2 self, demonstrating that the participants experienced pressure to meet academic standards and were motivated to utilize writing strategies that facilitated meeting important deadlines. However, research shows that structured and sequential thesis writing strategies increase efficiency and reduce student anxiety (Murray, 2013). In this way, students can learn time management techniques and develop a personalized writing schedule to set a special time for work, family, and thesis writing separately.

Research Skills

Moreover, it was found that students face difficulties with research skills like formulating questions, finding potential research gaps, conducting literature reviews, and analyzing data. This is in line with Dörney's (2009) ought-to L2 self, driving master's students to meet high expectations and academic standards in their theses.

These findings also echoed in the study of Turmudi (2017) in Indonesia, where students struggled with the literature review part due to the scarcity of research studies. Moreover, the findings align with findings in similar contexts where students often lack these foundational skills struggling with the other parts of the research, such as introduction, methodology, and discussion chapter, even upon entering graduate programs (Backhou & Bouhania, 2020; Sitompul & Antidasari, 2022; Yunus et al., 2023). In this case, holding workshops on each thesis section, explaining what difficulties might appear in each section, and providing potential solutions would benefit master's students in improving their research skills.

Emotional and Psychological Well-Being

Another problem they face is emotional stress and the risk of burnout during thesis writing associated with lack of time and poor time management, such as not completing an important assignment on time, which is consistent with the experiences of graduate students around the world (Pyhältö et al., 2012). This is consistent with Dörnyei's (2009) ought-to L2 self, which caused stress and anxiety. The participants of this study felt pressured and overwhelmed to meet high expectations, potentially impacting their well-being negatively. Moreover, Yu et al. (2023) highlight that burnout can appear due to academic pressures and cultural expectations from society, especially in the Asian context. Therefore, this challenge can be addressed by counselling services, stress management workshops, and peer support provided by universities.

Supervision and Support

The study also showed that the students had positive experiences with their supervisors. The findings were consistent with Dörnyei's (2009) L2 learning experience and revealed that the participants of this study were satisfied with the level of supervision and support within the learning environment. They were provided with the necessary guidance and feedback to succeed in their academic journey. However, other studies show more varied relationships between students and their supervisors. For example, in the Iranian context, students lacked autonomy and expected supervisors to teach them everything, resulting in "spoon-feeding" (Rivari et al., 2022, p. 1333). Paltridge and Starfield (2020) attribute this to the misinterpreted expectations of students about supervisors' work. In addition, supervisors should find a balance between encouraging independence and providing specific direction (Hajar & Ait Si Mhamed, 2023). Therefore, it is essential that the supervisor and students

talk about what they expect from each other and how they see the thesis writing process.

By integrating Dörnyei's framework with these findings, we gained insight into how the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience collectively impact various aspects of master students' academic and personal lives within the context of an EMI university in Kazakhstan.

Limitations and Future Research

The study has limitations as it involves a specific context and a limited number of participants. To comprehensively understand EMI graduate student experiences in Kazakhstan, further research should include more participants, institutions, and different methodological designs. Moreover, future research could focus on specific aspects of the challenges to gain a deeper understanding, such as the causes and coping strategies of burnout among graduate EMI students during thesis writing.

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