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PROBLEMS FACED BY MASTER'S LEVEL STUDENTS IN WRITING THESIS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: A CASE STUDY OF VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY AND ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY, PAKISTAN

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Abstract:

This research is about the investigation of the problems faced by the Masters in English Language Teaching and Masters in Teaching of English as a Foreign Language students of Virtual University, Pakistan and Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan in writing thesis. This study would help the students and the supervisors as well to discuss the problems of the students and give solutions to the universities for facilitating the students and expanding the area of language and language teaching. The data for this study is based on the close ended questionnaire filled by the students who are writing thesis, completed writing thesis or have failed to write thesis. The collected data has been analyzed with the help of figures and their descriptions. It has been found that the students remain trapped in the constructing the link between one chapter and the other. Lack of proper guidelines leaves them demotivated which results in the failure of understanding the importance of research in their future. Absence of topics related areas like teaching innovations, linguistics, stylistics and discourse analysis narrows their areas of study. They suggested that they should be given an open chance to select area of research or field of study which are related to language. This study recommends that both of universities should facilitate the students in solving thesis writing issues so that majority of the students remain successful in the compilation of the degree.

Key words: ***ELT, TEFL, Thesis, Linguistic, Students, Masters Level, Problems***

Introduction

A thesis can be defined as written product of a study which is done under a supervisor at university level. This written product reflects originality, appropriate organization of writeup or format of writing, independent thinking and the research works already done by the researchers. Hari Parsad Tiwari (2019, p. 45-52) says that a thesis is the most important writeup in a researcher's life. Writing of thesis is the last assignment done by students to complete their master's degree. The students who remain unable to bear the pressure of thesis writing opt for proposed courses offered by university in place of writing thesis. The research phase involves a candidate to generate a topic; to plan and execute a research activity investigating the generated topic; and to write-up a report on what they did and the findings of the study (Komba, Sotico 2015). But the problem comes when the universities announce thesis writing compulsory for the compilation of the masters' degree. The students of English Language Teaching (ELT or TEFL) are supposed to go in the field or educational

institutes and search for the solution of existing drawbacks in the field of teaching English language. Some of the students work on developing inputs (Listening & Reading) of language and others study outputs (Speaking & Writing) of English language. On the other hand, majority of students do error analysis and case studied of curriculums of different classes.

The questions which arises in the minds of the students is something about linguistics and English language teaching courses offered to them. Almost 50% syllabus of their masters' degree was consisting of linguistic subjects. They studied Psycholinguistics, Sociolinguistics, Syntax, Semantics, Pragmatics and Phonetics and Phonology. The study these courses for the scientific study of language. During their course work, they think that they are going to applied linguists or language experts. They believe that they are going to analyze the languages and their different properties. Their expectations turn towards distinguishing languages with one another on the basis of their linguistics differences. No doubt, these chapters help them in learning about the complexities of languages and their functional properties as well. They also understand that why some languages become more successful and why some are struggling for their survival. They analyze the discursive practices of people and the reasons behind their selection and mixing of languages (code mixing). But when the stage of research comes, these students are not allowed to study or write on the areas of related to linguistic subjects. They are not motivated to study languages and their discursive properties. So, they are tended to think that why the subjects of linguistics were taught to them.

The students are very less aware of construction of paragraph to paragraph data and creating link between them. They often get stuck in writing points like significance of study, limitation of the study, background of the study and hypothesis. They are not well aware of these items of research writeup. They often question their supervisors that what actually these elements are and what they need to write in them. They fail to develop coherence and cohesion in these paragraphs.

The students of ELT and TEFL are not aware of the softwares like SPSS and MS Excel. They face problems when they have to present diagrams in their write ups. If they are doing qualitative research as they have to do when they work in the educational institutions, they face issues in representing their collected data in the form of tables and diagrams. On the other hand, they face difficulty in building diagrams of the theoretical frameworks and models selected by them for their data analysis. The same difficulty comes in front of them when the try to prepare a questionnaire. At this stage, majority of the students fail in constructing questionnaire keeping in view the different variables. They fail to set the questions at different places.

The students feel problem in understand their topic. They fail to understand that how to introduce their topic and which methodology they need to adopt for

answering the research questions. It is very difficult for them to do sectional division for writing literature review related to their topic. Almost all the students fail to present their research in diagramed format. They remain unclear for a long time that which research tools they need to use for collection of data which may answer the questions related to their topic. Another issue, which stops the students further is often face by the students is the development of hypothesis relevant to their study.



Figure: i Elements of Research in ELT and TEFL

Description of Figure: 1

Figure one shows the different sections and topics which are shared in the thesis of master's level related to English teaching. Different sections of thesis and different headings are mentioned here to facilitate the reader to understand that through which procedure or steps the students of ELT and TEFL have to cross.

The students fail to develop the questionnaires which can search for answers of their research questions. They sometimes fail to understand the difference between the questionnaires of qualitative and quantitative researches. They find it very difficult to construct a link between the questions which are asked to the respondents. They need to learn that how they should find the answer of their research questions. Interview is another source of collection of data and views of the respondents regarding the area of the research. They students are very less aware with the development of interview questions. They find it very difficult to transcribe the questions. Most of the students just summarize the answers of the respondents.

Rationale of the Study

This research is needed as the students of master's level for the programs of ELT and TEFL are not completing their degrees. The reason behind is their failure to complete their thesis. They find it very difficult to complete their write up in a systematic way. Going in the field for the collection of data is also an issue for them. That's this study is needed to highlight the issues faced by them.

Objectives of the study

1. To highlight the problems faced by the students of ELT and TELF programs in writing thesis.
2. To point out the reasons behind their failure to complete their write up and get the degree.

Significance of the study

This study will help the students and their research supervisors as well to help the students of ELT and TEFL programs to broaden the scope of research for teaching English language in Pakistan. It will also prove to be a help to the universities to understand that why students delay their thesis writing and their struggle about the selection of the topic. They will pave the way of students to learn a lot from their research and go for higher studies with a broad mind-set as well.

Delimitation of the study

This study is limited to the master's level students of Virtual University and Allama Iqbal Open University. Only the students of ELT and TEFL have been selected for the collection of the data. The results of the study are for the students who are working in the field of English language teaching. The responses of questionnaire are given only by the students of ELT and TEFL.

Literature Review

Overview of the chapter

In this section, from the previous studies existing in the literature, we introduce the significant challenges faced by the masters' level researchers while writing about English language teaching. The existing studies done in the field of research which are relevant to the topic of this study have been presented in the form of commentary on them. The views of researchers collected to present in literature review throw light on different sections of a thesis. It has been kept in view that the existing studies will help the researcher to find the gaps which are needed to be filled. The remaining gaps will be helpful in making the work of upcoming generation of researchers to work more effectively in the field of teaching English as a language.

Fawaz Ali Ahmed (Qasem, Elrasheed Ismail and M. Zayid 2019) analyzed the problems faced by the students in writing thesis through qualitative method of study with 60 students of different disciplines and found that students face difficulties in

composing and writing proposals and research projects. They face problem in the selection of topic for their research and remain unclear about the topic even while starting thesis writing. They don't find a solution to choose right methodology to find the answers of their research questions. They lack good knowledge specialization about the field of study. They find less time to explore past researchers which are relevant to their topic and remain in stress of submission dates. Their supervisors give them less time and they fail to clear about some of the terms while writing their thesis. He suggests that the teachers can adopt the L1 for teaching about the research writing methods so that the students may easily understand the terms used in writing thesis. The students should be made clear about the research ethics. They should be motivated and facilitated for going in the field for the collection of the data to present real-life findings.

(Javid & Umer 2014) investigated about the research writing problems faced by the students of EFL in Saudia Arabia. They found that the undergraduate students need improvement in writing skills. They face problem in using appropriate lexical items, organization of ideas and grammar as well. They are weaker in the areas of preposition, spelling and correct syntactical construction of sentences. The students commit serious grammatical errors of various syntactic categories even at sentence level. The English departments need to provide them with general language skills and writing skills in particular. There should be activities for developing writing skills so that they may improve their ability to write thesis for their degrees. On the other hand, Al-Qadri I. (2006) also examined the challenges faced by undergraduate students in Ibb University, Yemen when they try to write their graduation research projects. He states that in Yemen students face problems in writing as English is taught there as a foreign language and they remain week in writing their thesis in English language. They students are not well equipped with the open source libraries, e resources and websites. They have to face difficult circumstances because of their negative attitude towards research projects.

(Wang and Linda 2008) conducted a study to explore the thesis writing experiences of a small group of international postgraduate research students at one Australian university. In this study, the author identified the challenges faced by the students of postgraduates. The findings indicated that the students face a lot of problems regarding the construction of thesis with all technical requirements of thesis writing. They believe that there is pedagogical implication in teaching research. The reason of facing problem in writing thesis is the difference in cultural background. They have to do a lot of effort in developing competence and confidence in writing thesis. They state that the teachers and research supervisors must think about the unique pedagogical needs and develop intercultural sensitivity in their pedagogical practices. On the other hand, (Bitchener and Basturkmen 2005) found that the students are not well aware like their supervisors about the data analysis techniques. They fail to put their data in different computer software's for to find good results. They find it very difficult to elaborate the computational results which are found by them with the help of computational analysis. They also face difficulty when the fail

to establish same understanding of data as their supervisors have. It is very hard for them to negotiate the findings with the supervisors or to understand the explanations given to them by their supervisors.

(Mohammad A Matin & Mohammad A W Khan 2017) investigated about the common problems faced postgraduate students during their thesis work in Bangladesh. The study done is helpful to give an idea to the current study to investigate some of the reasons behind the failure of the students in writing thesis. In their study, they found that 71.7% students did not have adequate knowledge on the research work. The supervisors are also of the view that the remain unclear about their research topics and spend a long time in pressure of how to conduct a research. They fail to do extensive reading related to their topic and complain that it is very hard for them to reflect much about their topic. On the other hand, lack of meetings with supervisor also adds to their problems regarding selecting the criteria of doing research. The waste lot of time to discuss about the complicacies related to their writeup. They suggest that there should enough number of workshops on writing thesis. They should be given enough knowledge of data interpretation and statistical data analysis. There should be funds from the universities to facilitate the students to go in the field for the collection of the data. One of the very important point made by them is that there should be proper checklist meetings between students and university to keep an eye on the progress of the students. It would keep them active and serious about their writeup.

Action research is better than the traditional research. The students of universities should search for those topics or areas of research which are more practical in bringing some improvements. The traditional researches which are just to done to elaborate or find explanation to certain topics are not found more practical and result oriented. The postgraduate students of social science or human science should clearly differentiate between core action research and thesis action research. They should clearly define that how their research is helpful in bringing some change or improvement in their relevant fields. This will also help their readers to understand that how fields of social sciences need to fill the gaps of needed improvements. They will learn to select practical topics in their future to conduct research studies. (Zuber-Skerritt, O. and Perry, C. 2002).

(Li 2013) studied the efficiency of teacher feedback for a school year in a university. The result presented that both error feedback and non-error feedback can help recover the exactness of language use in students' compositions, and the latter is more favorable to arouse students' awareness of the deep structures of the content and structure of the text. Su (2014) selected five cases of effective feedback and ineffective feedback respectively from 49 English majors to analyze causes for the efficacy of feedback, noticing that intellectual factors regulate the effectiveness greatly, such as grammatical compassion and language skill determine whether errors can be found, while thinking style and rule implication ability control the attention or

dispensation depth to feedback and other linguistic forms. Through analyzing the written feedback of an experienced English writing teacher and the multi manuscript compositions of four non-English majors' English writing, Yang L. (2013) found that the influence of teachers' written feedback is not only limited to composition modification, but also had a certain positive impact on the cultivation of students' writing habits and writing attitude.

It is vibrant that there are variances in the way supervisors comprehend their roles. (Gatfield and Alpert 2002) categorize four different types of supervisory styles as "laissez faire, pastoral, directorial and contractual". If a supervisor assumes a laissez faire style, s/he shows low support and "non-directive and not dedicated to high levels of personal interaction" (Gatfield and Alpert, 2002). If a supervisor adopts a pastoral style, s/he shows personal care but trusts that the candidate can do the tasks by themselves. In directorial style, "supervisor has a close and regular interactive relationship with the candidate, but avoids non-task issues" (Gatfield and Alpert, 2002). In contractual style, supervisor shows high support in terms of tasks and personal issues. This style is "the most demanding one in terms of supervisor's time" (Gatfield and Alpert, 2002). It should be pinpointed that these are not rigid, clear-cut categorizations. A supervisor can show shifts from one style to another throughout supervisory practices. Rather than rigid categorizations, as de Kleijn et al. (2012) claim "a supervision relationship is intimate in nature, and thus can be best judged by the participants themselves." No matter what kind of approach a supervisor has, in Määttä's words (2015), a supervisor shouldn't leave or abandon his/her student in trouble "not even when experiencing that the value of the supervision has not been appreciated at all".

Summary of Literature Review

It has been observed that a lot has been written on the issues which are faced by the researchers in the field of English language teaching. Generally, the researches talk about the common issues which are faced the students of almost all fields of study. But the issues faced by the ELT and TEFL students are touched very less by the researchers. The problems which are faced by ELT and TEFL students of master's level are very specific assessment of issues. The ELT and TEFL students have issues relevant to teaching English at school and college level. They need to address the issues faced by teachers and students in English learning classrooms. Their problems are related to Language teaching and Linguistics. They are offered with subjects which are from the area of linguistics but they are generally restricted to write on only those issues which occur in English language teaching. So, this research is a practical step in this regard. It will identify that why students should be allowed to write on different languages and their properties. Secondly, it is step to make students to explore the phonetic and syntactic properties of a language. Thirdly, it is a motivation to make the students of ELT and TEFL write on the issues faced by English learning students who have different mother tongues and live in different parts of the country.

It is to be notified here that both of the selected universities have students from almost all parts of the country as the offer DNFE and Virtual education.

Methodology

The Research

This is a quantitative and descriptive research based on the responses of the students of Virtual University and Allama Iqbal open University, Pakistan. The data has been collected through close ended questionnaire in which the students have expressed their views about their experience of thesis writing with the above-mentioned universities. The rationale behind the selection of these universities is that the students of these universities don't have that much access to their supervisors as the students of other universities have. I selected fifteen students from each university to get their views. The questionnaire was emailed to the students and the sent it back after filling it via email. Some of these students have failed to write their thesis as they say that they failed to understand how to do it. They were not clear about the construction of a thesis technically.

Research Design

The research is quantitative in nature. The data collected has been presented in the form of diagrams which are explained by the researcher in form of paragraphs. Every diagram contains a set of questions which includes five questions each.

Population

Total 30 students were selected in total to get their opinion for this research. The students were randomly selected from VU and AIOU masters' level programs. All the 30 students were in their final semester and were doing their thesis work under their supervisors.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The selection of participants or respondents for this research is random. The students have been selected from different areas of Pakistan keeping in view their availability. The students were from fourth semester and were working under their supervisors.

Research Instrument

The researcher has used close ended questionnaire for this study. The questionnaire was based on Likert scale with five options for each question. Total 15 questions were asked to the students to know about their experience about researching in the field of

English language teaching. The questions were divided in three parts related to the nature of the questions.

Data Analysis

The researcher described the data on the basis of the answers collected from the students of VU and AIOU. The researcher has presented their answers in the form of diagrams made on the basis of responses from the students. When I myself was the student of these two programs, the researcher observed these issues with the students and thought about writing on this issue. The researcher has presented my research design in the figure given below.

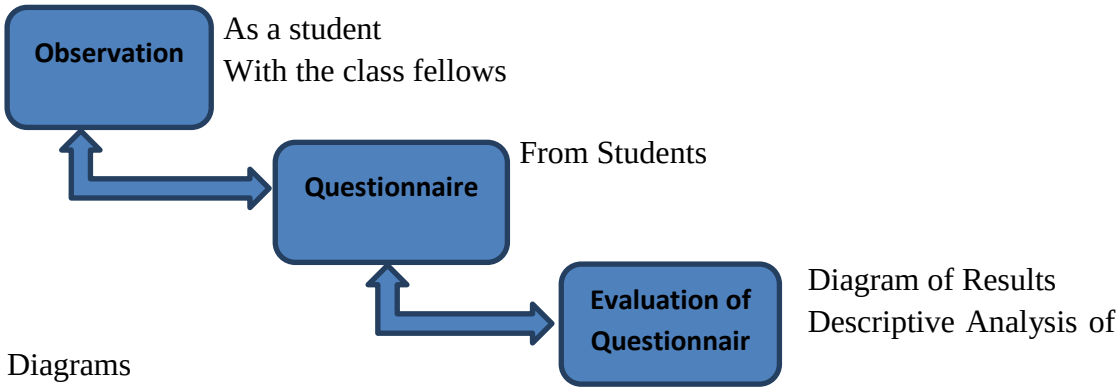


Figure No: ii The procedure of research.

Data analysis method

The questionnaires have been filled by my class fellows and new students who enrolled after our class in the next session. Thirty students have filled the questionnaire to give their opinion about thesis writing issues. Total fifteen questions were asked from the students. The questionnaire has been divided in three major parts and every part contains five questions each. The findings through the questionnaire have been presented in the form of diagram developed with the help of MS Excel. The description of the diagrams gives us a clue behind the answers of the students.

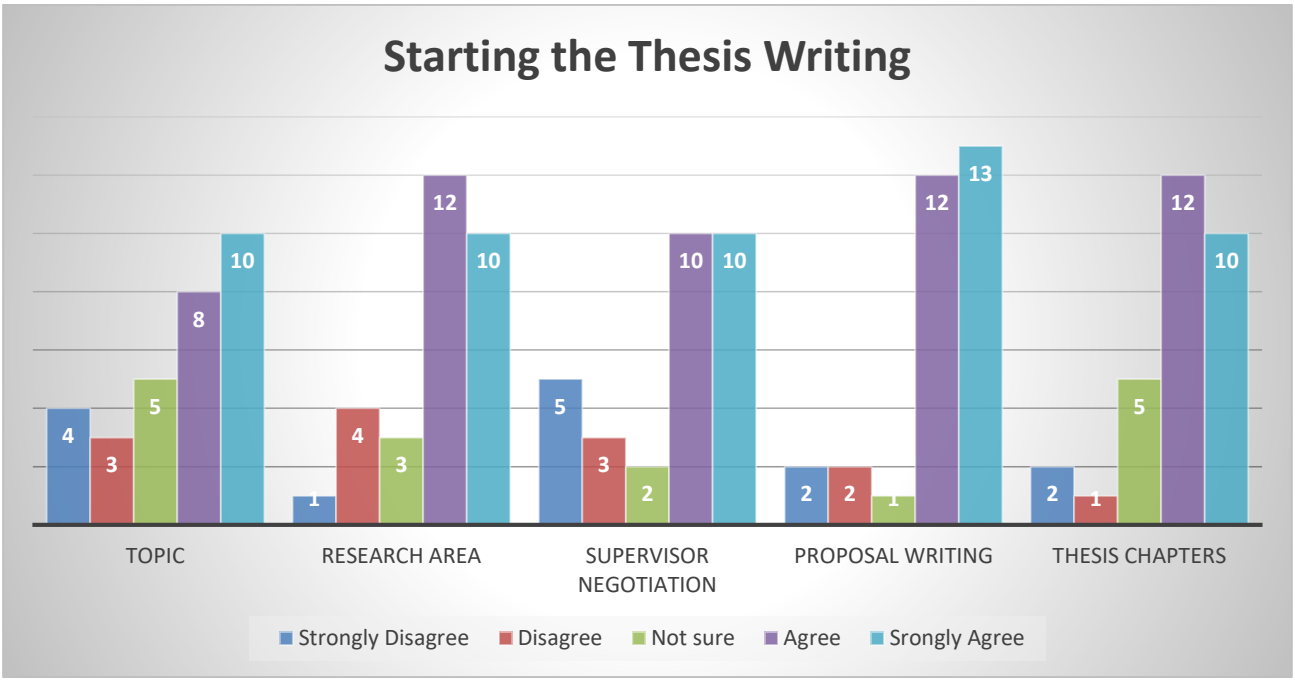


Figure No: III Starting the Thesis Writing

The diagram shows the difficulties which the students face at the time of starting thesis writing. the first section of the diagram has been divided in five different sections. The first section is about the topic of the thesis. The majority of the students responded that they face problems related to the topic of the thesis. They remain unclear about the topic and the research area. They also fail to realize the population and the field of the research. Gaps are found by them in their topic. The other problem faced by them in to understand their research area e.g. input or outputs of language. Very less students opt for the area related to linguistics. The problem gets worst when the students find it difficult that which class or level of students they should select for their experimental studies. The next question is about their consultation with the supervisor regarding the issues of topic and research area. In VU the supervisors only remain in contact via skype and other virtual resources. The students complain about their availability of time and clarity after discussion. On the other hand, the students of AIOU don't remain in a good connection with the supervisors as there is discussion between the supervisors and the university. They supervisors accept the requests of students with a heavy heart and if they accept, they find it very difficult to spare time from their busy routines. The next stage comes of proposal writing for thesis. The students have to submit it in a very short amount of time. They don't get time from the supervisors. Many proposals are rejected by university and they find themselves demotivated to start their thesis. At the time of starting research, the students are not well aware of the chapters of the thesis. They get confused that what next, they need to write. They don't know that how many chapters they need to write and what should be length of the chapters. Here again they find themselves demotivated.

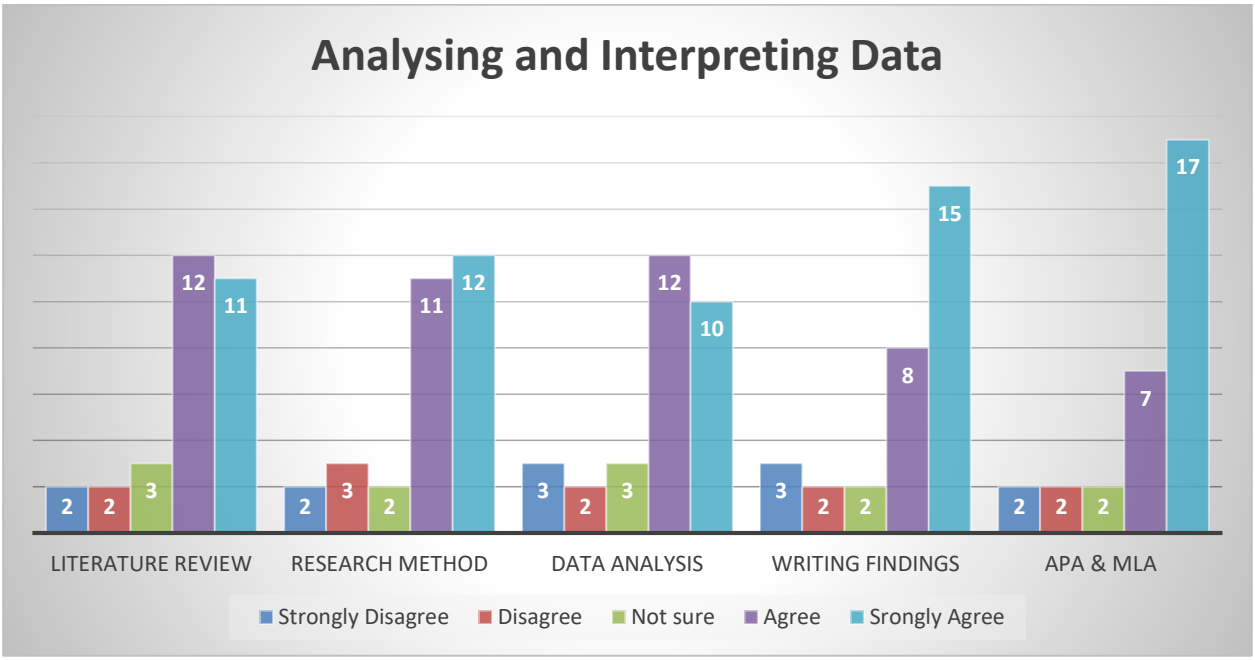


Figure No: IV Analyzing and Interpreting Data

The students find the literature review chapter most difficult one. Most of them are not aware of the search engines on internet. They don't know how to sectional decision and find gaps in the previous studies. The word limit of the literature review chapter becomes scary when the start searching research articles and fail to do commentary on them. They also fear the issue of plagiarisms while writing literature review. Then comes the issue of writing research methods. The students are not well aware of the research designs and theoretical frameworks related to their topic. Data analysis is an issue as the students don't learn SPSS and other social sciences data analysis softwares. After the data analysis the writing of findings and recommendations becomes a big hurdle in their way. They get confused about the link between their hypothesis, research question and results of the study. Students often feel shy to give suggestion to the future researchers. Next comes the issue of writing references. They students get their thesis rejected or get it back because of wring APA referencing. They use online referencing resources but fail to maintain the sequence of referred articles. In the second section of questionnaire, the students expressed their problems while writing thesis. The diagram shows the high level of agreement from the side of the students. They need a lot of understanding about thesis writing.

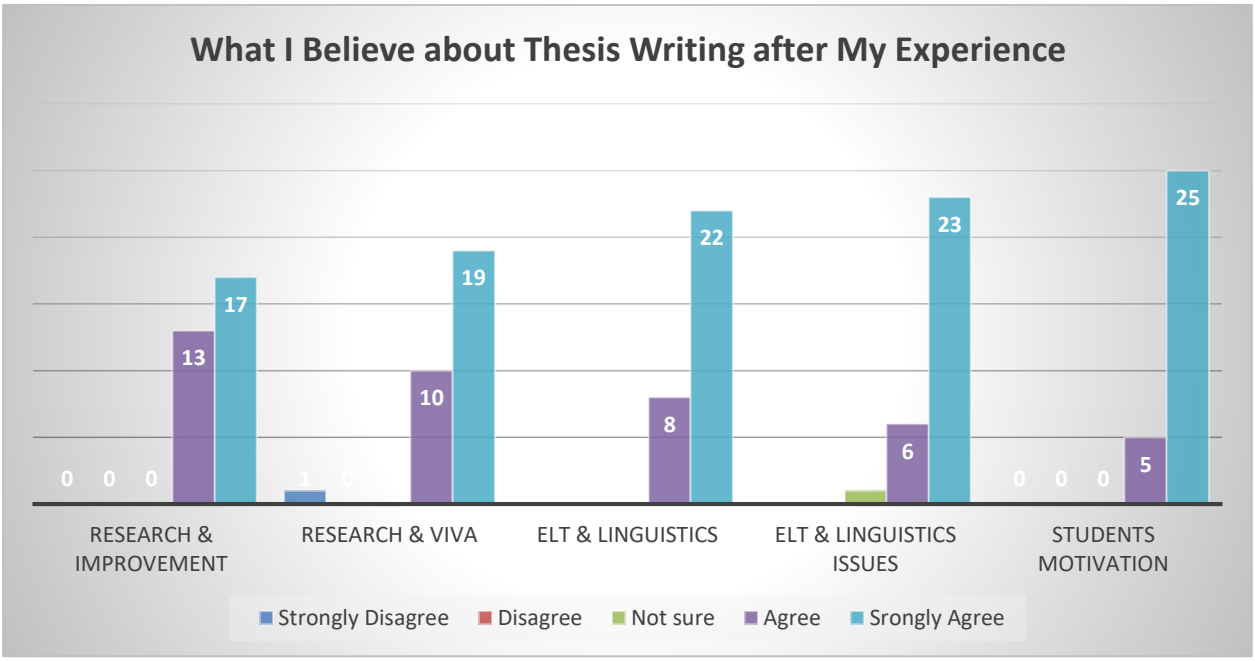


Figure No: V What I Believe about Thesis Writing after My Experience

The last section of the questionnaire is about the suggestion taken from the students. After the completion and review of their write up, they feel that they need certain level of improvement. They guess that their write up is not matching their topic and research objectives. At this stage, they wish to add to the knowledge expresses by them in different chapters of the study. They also believe that research is a source of bringing improvement in the world ELT and existing teaching methods. Their study of the field work gives them different clues about brining improvement in teaching strategies and they want to express these ideas in their write up. Then comes the stage of Viva which is a compulsory step of research paper. The students think about the questions which can be raised by their external examiners. At this stage, they again think that there is still room for bringing rigorous improvement. The issue of ELT and Linguistics is felt by the students at a great extent. The students suggest that they should be given a change of do research in the field of linguistics as well. They are offered the subjects of linguistics during their course work. Many of them, who want to go for Masters in philosophy in Applied Linguistics in their future suggest that they should be given a chance to do research in the areas of linguistics. The students suggest that they should be motivated by their supervisors to select the fields of phonetics & phonology, semantics and pragmatics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and critical discourse analysis. These studies can help them in becoming linguists in their future.

Discussion on Results

The students who take DNFE (Distance and formation education) and Virtual education face problems in thesis writing as compared to those students who take regular interactive classes. The students who work on their thesis during their course work under the supervision of those who have been teaching them find the task of thesis writing easy. They remain in good connection with their supervisors and take benefit of regular meetings. They get their write up checked with regular intervals and make corrections with wasting their time. Most of them complete their task during the given time. They get guidelines for the Viva exam from their supervisor and defend their thesis in their presence. On the other hand, the students of VU and AIOU don't enjoy this facility. They get demotivated at different stages and fail to cope up with their work. They lack proper guidelines and tend to waste a lot of time. A vital number of students have to take extensions for their thesis submission or have to enroll again. They get confused that why they are just limited to research about teaching styles or strategies. They get confused that why there is no or very less chance in doing research in the field of linguistics as they have been offered these subjects during their course work. Finding the area of research, absence of research areas from linguistics, lack of guidance for thesis writing techniques and lack of investigation of language teaching methods are the main problems shared by the students. So, this study suggests that there should be proper guideline system for students for their help in thesis writing. They should be made responsible for adding something new to the existing knowledge in the field of ELT and Linguistics. Innovation in language teaching methods can help them to bring diversity in the field of research in language teaching.

Recommendations

The universities should offer courses like thesis writing or writing on linguistic issues. They should be given short trainings for using data analysis applications e.g. SPSS or MS Excel. They should be clearly introduced with the terms like chapters of thesis and especially theoretical frameworks. The art of constructing questionnaires should be clearly explained to the students so that they may answer the research questions. Motivations should be given to them to complete their degree and proper correspondence should be kept with them in this regard. It is a better idea to guide them chapter by chapter and provide with them with the sample thesis. The students of ELT and TELF should be given a chance to do research about the issues of languages or characteristics of language. The universities should provide them with the opportunities and resources to research about the innovation in language teaching methods.

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