The Benefits and Drawbacks of Writing a B.A Thesis as an English Major

Mejreme Ymeri[1] and MA. Arta Sejdiu[2]

Abstract

Students across universities research so they become competent professionals in their field. In most of the universities, English Majors must write a research paper, or else known a diploma paper, in order to graduate. However, students studying English Language find many benefits and drawbacks while writing a diploma paper.Using a mixed approach, the aim of this paper is to identify the benefits and drawbacks of writing a Bachelor of Arts paper. 51 students from "Fehmi Agani "University, Kosovo, were asked to fill a questionnaire, and 8 others to participate in a focus group, as a part of this study. The results show that the benefits of writing a thesis are continuous feedback from the mentor, a well-written paper to add in one's portfolio as it is reviewed by the committee members, and you get to pursue your own interests. Nevertheless, there are also some drawbacks that students face while writing a paper, such as managing information, the use of generalization, and not having enough time to write it.Finally, this study suggests that having a course which prepares students to write a thesis in the end of their studies is beneficial to students as it mentors them and teaches a step-by-step writing thesis.

Keywords: *Diploma Paper, B.A, English Majors, Benefits, Drawbacks.*

INTRODUCTION

Students in Kosovo practice academic writing very little or not-at-all while in high school. This is one of the main reasons why they have problems when they shift to college with writing, as they don't have prior knowledge on writing to transfer. However, English Majors are obliged in a way to do lots of writing, including a Bachelor Paper in the end of their studies (Xueyun, 2004), as it reflects their academic knowledge (Xuewen, 2009). While English Majors study English, the academic writing process they get involved can be knowledge-telling and also knowledge-transforming process (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2013; Csizér & Tankó, 2017). All of the skills that students get from these years has a lot to do with self-regulation. Czizer and Tanko highlight the importance of self-regulation in their paper, as it is increasingly seen as a key variable in L2 learning in many foreign language learning contexts because students may not receive enough input from classroom-centered instructional language training.

Many studies also discuss whether English Majors should write B.A papers or use portfolios as a vehicle to offer a way of minimizing the pile of papers students have to read to compose a research paper (Baume, 2001; Bookshelf, 1979; McMullan et al., 2003). On the other hand, studies show that a teaching experience as a pre-service teacher, is more important (Gerrish, 1993; Sharma et al., 2006), and students do not need either of them.

This study will closely listen to students of "Fehmi Agani "University, as they will be participating in one of the focus groups, about their beliefs on writing a B.A research paper.

With all that being said, for this study, research questions will fall under two distinct categories:

How do composition classes help English Majors to write academically?

Do students prefer the traditional research or the modern portfolios, and why?

[1] "Fehmi Agani" University-Gjakove-Kosove, ORCID ID no. 0000-0002-7994-1932, Email: mejreme.ymeri@uni-gjk.org

[2] "Fehmi Agani" University-Gjakove-Kosove ORCID ID no. 0000-0001-9261-9991

METHODOLOGY

Participants

8 students of "Fehmi Agani "University (1 male, 7 females) from different regions of Kosovo were invited to a focus group and have voluntarily agreed to partake on the study. Students were aged between 20 to 25 years old, and 51 other students filled an online questionnaire.

Materials

For this study we have devised a 11-item questionnaire which does not take more than 5-7 minutes to complete. We have chosen a mixed-methods approach, including both quantitative method as an instrument, as it is easier to analyze data, and also a qualitative method as an instrument as students will freely talk about their experiences through the focus groups. Focus groups have an origin in social sciences (Twinn, 1998) which utilize open-ended questioning with inductive probing of responses (Namey et al., 2016), and are generally described in the literature as being more appropriate for gathering information on group norms, dynamics, or processes and for brainstorming activities (Knodel, 1993; Krueger & Casey, 2015). In the other hand, questionnaires have many advantages, as they are efficient use of time (Munn & Drever, 1990), and they offer anonymity for the respondent (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2006).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research papers take a lot of time to write, from the starting point of identifying the main problems or research questions, to the last step, publication, or defending of thesis. Žindžiuvienė (2009) points out that there are two important points that students should keep in mind while writing their B.A thesis: validity and reliability. Two main aspects are particularly important in research: validity and reliability. Furthermore, Žindžiuvienė (2009) clarifies that in testing, validity refers to statements about the reliability or trustworthiness of qualitative or quantitative data obtained for the purpose of making judgments or inferring conclusions. Studies show that student's accountability for validity is very high. Similarly, Cho et al. study in 2006 suggest that the aggregate ratings of at least 4 peers on a piece of writing are both highly reliable and as valid as instructor ratings.

Furthermore, students are able to bring evidence in their papers as an interaction between an audience, a claim, and other facts in general (Altheide & Johnson, 1998). Porter (2011) in his paper makes a great point on how many institutional databases have limits, hence, college student surveys have become one of our largest and most often used data sources. Furthermore, he says that college student surveys are becoming increasingly significant in assessing the performance of college and university programs and regulations. On the other hand, Chen's study in 2012 implies the fact that in order for English Majors in China to finish their research in the final year, they have to be monitored all the time, so reliability and validity are present in their paper.

Moving further, Bell's study in 1997 reconfirms that student's research can and is reliable. However, students should be careful with data collection, for example questionnaires, interviews, diaries, or other methods, as they are not important until they are analyzed. When analyzing data, students should be really careful with the risk of generalization, which is one of the drawbacks of our study. Studies as Bell (1997), Payne and Williams (2005), Bassey (1981) and others, pay very much attention to generalization in student's research. Payne and Williams (2005) give a terminology of the word generalize as it follows "to generalize means to assert that what is true in one place or at one time will be true in another place or at another period (p.296). Their study shows that words like "suggest", "tend", "illustrate", and "some of" are mostly used in a way that rendered claims unclear. Žindžiuvienė (2009) also highlights that in small research papers, generalization may be unlikely, but relatability may be entirely possible.

Moreover, some of the difficulties that students mostly face as shown in our study is the challenge to get started with the research and find a good tittle. Bogdan and Biklen's study in 2003 advice students to adopt the principle of "writing-as-you-go" throughout the study, as students will already have some drafts; and, even if they are rough, it is always preferable to confront a blank page or screen than a badly written and incomplete manuscript. Similarly, Miles and Huberman (1994) say that they have learned the hard way that preserving notes, transcripts, references, and rough drafts is essential, or as they call it "alpine collection of information".

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The Benefits of Writing a Thesis

Continuous Feedback from the Mentor

During our focus groups, all of the students said that one of the benefits of writing a thesis is that you cannot do it wrong, as it is being continuously reviewed by the mentor, who wants the thesis to be perfect. Apart from mentoring, teachers also help students facilitate personal development, encourage them to make wise choices (Zachary, 2002, 2005), and help them transfer these skills into career (Zeeb, 1998). By using praise, students' motivation can change for good, as shown in many studies (Ames, 1992; Koestner et al., 1987).

Fitore, one of the focus group students, asserted the necessity to empower learners:

If it wasn't for my mentor, who helped me understand thesis better, but at the same time, didn't let me stress out, but motivated me throughout the process, I wouldn't have finished my thesis on time. I was overwhelmed by the name thesis, and I never thought that a little support and motivation from my mentor will makes things this easy.

Similarly, Shi's study on empowering motivation also shows that a little motivation can go a long way, and even lead students to take responsibility for their own learning (2005). As we can see, the mentors in this case used the Achievement Goal Theory (Skaalvik, 2004) to motivate students in order to graduate on time. Similarly, Simpson (2008) thinks that for teachers, in order to enhance the motivation of their students, they will be to use an eclectic mix of other theories, not only the Achievement Goal Theory. He further suggests that depending on the personality and learning style of the student, different theories can be used within classroom.

A Well-Written Research to Add to the Portfolio

Students in this study listed portfolio as a part of the thesis, as they thought it is a way to see your own progress, it allows you to come back and improve your own work, and it offers the possibility for the potential hiring committee different spheres and interests of your work. Aroma, one of the participants in the focus group said:

Portfolio gives us a chance to list our best work, including thesis, to places that we are looking forward to applying for job. Furthermore, the employees have a chance to see our best interests, not only in one paper as thesis, but numerous other projects showed in different multimodalities.

Similarly, students from the online questionnaire showed that the majority of them would write a B.A paper, rather than just present a portfolio at the end of their studies.

Table 1. Preferences of students

	Percentage
B.A thesis	71
Portfolio	29

In the other hand, teachers also agree that it's easier to assess students through portfolios as it keeps them engaged throughout the course (Hirvela & Pierson, 2000; Murphy, 1994), and as Belanoff (1994) pointed out, "We are forced to face the writer, not just the writing (p.23).

Pursuing Your Own Interests

The University "Fehmi Agani "allows student to choose the topic they want to research as it shows students' interest. It is known that students use writing to engage with a range of different communities often by producing many different texts for diverse purposes (McMullan, 2019), to acknowledge other scholar (Hyland, 2003), or sometimes just to follow their interest.

Jon, one of the students in our focus study, said:

My thesis topic was something I wanted to research a long time ago, but I just couldn't find the time for it. Now that I'm finished with it, I'm happy as I have worked on something that really shows my own interests, my viewpoints, and my suggestions in the future.

By this, we understood that, giving students freedom to choose their topics, their work will be much better as they are working with passion.

The Benefit of Composition Classes

All of the students in our focus group and from the data in our questionnaire showed how the composition class named "Thesis" in the last semester helped them to work academically better, be able to find the right articles, use the right methodology, etc.; in other words, 96% of the students who filled out the questionnaire showed that the course Thesis helped them do better in their final draft.

Table 2. The benefit of composition class (Thesis)

	Percentage
Yes	96.8
No	0
I don't have an opinion on this	3.3

The Drawbacks of Writing a Thesis

Stress

Many studies show how writing a thesis is a lot of stress. Stress and anxiety can be found while not being able to find a good tittle, not having enough time to write your thesis, not being able to find articles for the literature review, etc. Many scholars think similarly, as Bazrafkan et al., study in 2016. Their study shows that stress was one of the major results that was found in students while writing the thesis. Furthermore, they highlight how students were overwhelmed with finding a good tittle as it would determine his or her future research approaches.

Generalization of Ideas

Generalization can be understood as a "cognitive process involving classification and categorization, an element of macroprocessing through which the reader abstracts gist." (Friend, 2001, p.6). Many students misunderstand the idea of generalization while writing a thesis. Students in our focus group discussed how generalization was a problem in their thesis. By not having enough time to research and find what other scholars think in different topics, they would generalize the data, thinking they are doing a summary (Dole et al., 1991).

Managing Information

Vesa, one of the participants in the focus group, said:

I had lots of articles in my hand and sometimes it would get messy, and I wouldn't know how to manage this information. I found it hard to combine author's ideas in one or two sentences, or sometimes, if I didn't write where I read something, I would forget the author and publication. What helped me was to keep track of what I was reading and applied the principle of "writing-as-you-go".

Bazrafkan's et al., highlights that writing a thesis requires both short-term and long-term time management skills because it is a lengthy project that should be done without artificial deadlines (2016). Furthermore, students' answers from the online questionnaire showed that they had a hard time finding the right literature for their research, as shown below.

Table 3: The most difficult part of thesis

	Percentage
Introduction	3.3
Finding a good thesis	16.1

Finding the right literature	67.7
Analyzing the data	12.9

CONCLUSION

Many studies confirm that students feel more academic when they have a portfolio in the end of their Bachelor studies, however, they also think that composition classes and a research paper helps them if they want to join the academia later in their lives. Similarly, students from Fehmi Agani "University", take a composition class in their last semester to prepare them to write academically and majority of the students in our focus group and from the data in our questionnaire showed that the course Thesis helped them do better in their final draft (see the table 2 above).

To sum it up, students prefer writing a B.A thesis over a portfolio as they get continuous support from their mentor, prepare themselves for academia, and they further pursue their own interest by researching the topic they want. There are also drawbacks listed from students as they were writing a thesis, such as not being able to find the right material, not having access to some journals, the idea of generalizing information, stress, etc. As a recommendation from this study, we recommend Higher Education in Kosovo and abroad to add classes, such as Thesis, in the last semester or even before which would help and prepare students to write better.

REFERENCES

Altheide, D. L., & Johnson, J. M. (1998). Criteria for assessing interpretive validity in qualitative research. In Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials (Denzin N.K. & Lincoln Y.S. eds), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 283-312.

Ames, C. (1992). Classrooms: Goals, structures, and student motivation. Journal of Educational Psychology, 84(3), 261-271. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.84.3.261

Bassey, M. (1981). Pedagogic research: on the relative merits of the search for generalization and study of single events, Oxford Review of Education, 7 (1): 73–93.

Baume, D. (2001). A Briefing on Assessment of Portfolios. LTSN Generic Centre Assessment Series no. 6. Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN), York. Retrieved from: https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/teaching/files/2016/09/No6abriefingontheassessmentofportfolios_6_.pdf

Bazrafkan, L., Shokrpour, N., Yousefi, A., & Yamani, N. (2016). Management of Stress and Anxiety Among PhD Students During Thesis Writing. The Health Care Manager, 35(3), 231–240. doi:10.1097/hcm.0000000000000120

Belanoff, P. (1994). Portfolios and literacy: Why? In L. Black, D. A. Daiker, J. Sommers, and G. Stygall (Eds). Portsmouth, NH.

Bell, J. (1997). Doing Your Research Project. A guide for first-time researchers in education and social science. Bristol: Open University Press. ISBN: 0335215041

Bereiter, C., & Scardamalia, M. (Eds.). (2013). The psychology of written composition. Routledge.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods (4th edn). New York: Pearson

Bookshelf. (1979). Medical Teacher, 1(3), 167–168. doi:10.3109/01421597909023839

Chen, Z. (2012, July). Educational policy-making in managing undergraduate English majors' graduation thesis writing. In 2012 7th International Conference on Computer Science & Education (ICCSE) (pp. 1792-1796). IEEE.

Cho, K., Schunn, C. D., & Wilson, R. W. (2006). Validity and reliability of scaffolded peer assessment of writing from instructor and student perspectives. Journal of Educational Psychology, 98(4), 891–901.

Csizér, K., & Tankó, G. (2017). English majors' self-regulatory control strategy use in academic writing and its relation to L2 motivation. Applied Linguistics, 38(3), 386-404.

Dole, J. A., Duffy, G. G., Roehler, L. R., & Pearson, P. D. (1991). Moving from the Old to the New: Research on Reading Comprehension Instruction. Review of Educational Research, 61(2), 239. doi:10.2307/1170536

Friend, R. (2001). Effects of Strategy Instruction on Summary Writing of College Students. Contemporary Educational Psychology, 26(1), 3–24. doi:10.1006/ceps.1999.1022

Gerrish, K. (1993). An evaluation of a portfolio as an assessment tool for teaching practice placements. Nurse Education Today, 13(3), 172–179. doi:10.1016/0260-6917(93)90099-n

Hirvela, A., & Pierson, H. (2000). Portfolios: Vehicles for authentic self-assessment. Learner-directed assessment in ESL, 105-126.

Hyland, K. (2003). 'Dissertation acknowledgements: The anatomy of a Cinderella genre', Written Communication, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 242-268.

Knodel, J. (1993). The design and analysis of focus group studies: A practical approach. In Morgan, D. L. (Ed.), Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art (pp. 35–50). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Koestner, R., Zuckerman, M., & Koestner, J. (1987). Praise, involvement, and intrinsic motivation. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 53(2), 383–390. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.53.2.383

Krueger, R., & Casey, M. (2015). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McMullan, J. (2019). *"The writing is part of a new life': An investigation into the academic writing practices of sixteen women pursuing research degrees in a university in the UK *(Order No. 27529255). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2297414016). Retrieved from https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/writing-is-part-new-life-investigation-into/docview/2297414016/se-2?accountid=11667

McMullan, M., Endacott, R., Gray, M. A., Jasper, M., Miller, C. M. L., Scholes, J., & Webb, C. (2003). Portfolios and assessment of competence: a review of the literature. Journal of Advanced Nursing, 41(3), 283–294. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2648.2003.02528.x

Michaelidou, N., & Dibb, S. (2006). Using email questionnaires for research: Good practice in tackling non-response. Journal of Targeting, Measurement, and analysis for Marketing, 14(4), 289-296.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). Qualitative Data Analysis (2nd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Munn, P., & Drever, E. (1990). Using Questionnaires in Small-Scale Research. A Teachers' Guide. Scottish Council for Research in Education, 15 St. John Street, Edinburgh, EH8 8JR, Scotland, United Kingdom.

Murphy, A. A. (1994). A model for authentic assessment utilizing portfolios (Doctoral dissertation, Northern Illinois University).

Namey, E., Guest, G., McKenna, K., & Chen, M. (2016). Evaluating bang for the buck: a cost-effectiveness comparison between individual interviews and focus groups based on thematic saturation levels. American Journal of Evaluation, 37(3), 425-440.

Payne, G., & Williams, M. (2005). Generalization in Qualitative Research. Sociology, 39(2), 295–314. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038505050540

Porter, S. R. (2011). Do College Student Surveys Have Any Validity? The Review of Higher Education 35(1), 45-76. doi:10.1353/rhe.2011.0034.

Sharma, U., Forlin, C., Loreman, T., & Earle, C. (2006). Pre-Service Teachers' Attitudes, Concerns and Sentiments about Inclusive Education: An International Comparison of Novice Pre-Service Teachers. International journal of special education, 21(2), 80-93.

Shi, X. (2005). What Matters?: the full-time graduate students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness.

Simpson, O. (2008). Motivating learners in open and distance learning: Do we need a new theory of learner support?. Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning, 23(3), 159-170.

Skaalvik, E. (2004). Achievement goal theory: Classroom applications. Paper presented at the International Conference on Motivation 'Cognition, Motivation and Effect', Lisbon, Portugal.

Twinn, D. S. (1998). An analysis of the effectiveness of focus groups as a method of qualitative data collection with Chinese populations in nursing research. Journal of advanced nursing, 28(3), 654-661. Retrieved from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1998.00708.x?casa_token=EtideYkVPwoAAAAA%3AaxrQHiP34nwyls604lfcNN9eN-XIlUlM6uzzSSr6MH2FrFzQR8gxFafLmC9DSqGNi_-DDJcYwZGdjH4

Xuewen, W. (2009). Quality Analysis and Measures about BA Thesis for English Majors. Read and Write Periodical, 5.

Xueyun, Z. (2004). A Guide to Graduation Thesis Writing for College English Education Majors [J]. Journal of Shandong Education Institute, 5.

Zachary, L. J. (2002). The role of teacher as mentor. New directions for adult and continuing education, 2002(93), 27-38.

Zachary, L. J. (2005). The mentor's guide: Facilitating effective learning relationships. John Wiley & Sons.

Zeeb, P. A. (1998). Teaching through mentoring. Richmond: Virginia Commonwealth University. Retrieved from http://coe.sdus.edu/et640/popsamples/pzeeb/pzeedb.html

Žindžiuvienė, I. E. (2009). Writing on EFL methodology: essays, term papers, research papers, BA/MA thesis: mokomoji knyga.