Suggesting a Support Centre for Dissertation Writing in EFL at Bejaia University

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Abstract
In the Algerian higher education context, Master students in foreign languages are required to write a dissertation to get their final degree. However, through observation, the author noticed the students' difficulty to get engaged in their r Research from the initial step of choosing a topic to the final research outcome of writing the dissertation according to an academic style. During the supervision process, teachers waste a lot of time on the problem of language adjustment and correction instead of monitoring the learners' research skills, critical thinking abilities and mastery of concepts related to the field of interest. This exploratory study comes to classify the problems both learners and teachers face when working jointly on the final product of the Master. The study took place in the Department of English, Bejaia University. The present research is the result of seven years collaborative work with students preparing their Master dissertations. The author used observation and analysis of students' works, and focus groups to collect data from students. In addition, online journals with ten university EFL teachers were used. Results confirmed the existence of writing problems students face when preparing their research papers. The final product of the ethnographic research is the suggestion of a Writing Support Centre.
Keywords: Dissertation Writing, ELT, EAP, Academic Writing, Tutoring, Language Support Centre.

Introduction

Writing- as a productive performance, synthetic-based ability- remains challenging for English as Foreign Language (EFL) students. Difficulties may result from both the cognitive aspect like lack of an appropriate composing process and the affective aspect such as writing apprehension and negative experiences from instruction and evaluation (Sy-ying Lee, 2005).

The present paper put focus on academic writing as an existing problem in master students at Bejaia University. It is part of an ethnographic research that started since seven years as part of supervising master students working on their dissertations. According to the participant observation, students seem unable to develop their ideas using the appropriate academic style easily. Although they choose topics of interest, they display difficulties in constructing their thoughts correctly.

In a paper presented in the EAP Conference (Idri, 2015), the author focused on the problems Algerian EFL masters face when writing their dissertations. Difficulties students face were classified according to: accuracy, academic style, cultural clues and language interference. A number of recommendations such as teaching EAP, tutoring learners were suggested as parts of the curriculum at its early stages. This present paper comes as a follow up of the paper and suggests a project to diminish such writing deficiencies learners face at an advanced level.

The paper raises four main questions:
- *Q1. How well is the Master students' academic writing performance?*
- *Q2. Do master students possess the required skill to write academically?*
- *Q3. How can teachers and learners collaborate to make dissertation writing fun?*
- *Q4. How feasible is it to create Language Support Centres for EAP in Algerian Universities?*

Academic Writing: the Challenge

Writing is a vital skill that learners need to develop. Hence, understanding the nature of writing and the processes it involves helps students develop their writing proficiency. Writing is also an important predictor for academic success, this is why many attempts were made in the area of teaching writing to explore and develop the effective strategies that should be followed in order to achieve practical writing instruction.

Focusing on academic writing implies EAP learning and teaching in higher education. That is why; the center comes to: focus on challenges students meet, find out the differing styles of student writing, assess writing proficiency, and address these in class (EAP conference, 2015). Models of analysis of academic and scientific discourse already exist such as register, discourse and genre. Hence, needs analysis can help design syllabi specific to ESP/EAP and taught in the centers. Writing centers is not a novice idea in the world; many internationally accredited universities have already established such centers. However, though writing centers have developed an array of programmess and strategies for providing writing support (Lawrence & Zawacki, 2015), Bejaia University still does not provide such services.

Tutoring and Accompaniment as a Pedagogic Activity

Tutoring is essentially a mission of pedagogical support and consists not only of accompanying the student in aspects of reception, information, orientation but also helping him realize his personal works and construct his formation course. This will facilitate the matter for the learner in his learning enterprise. Tutoring is, then, an innovative pedagogical task introduced in education. Its philosophy is based on handling individual learning through tasks students will

make. The instructor here is far from being the leader, the manager, but a guide, a coach, an evaluator, a supervisor, a facilitator. In this concern, Pothier (2003, p. 94-97) attributes three major roles to the tutor. He [the tutor] is the mediator (at the level of the placement of didactics), a facilitator (at the level of the specific knowledge which leads to learning) and an evaluator of progress. Therefore, when the evaluator is the tutor, difficulties learners face can be managed. Moreover, Demazière (2003) relates tutoring to a number of forms of guidance which co-exist in a given device. For him, each system where tutoring is integrated, a number of constituting points is crucial. These concerns are:

- The importance of the students taking of responsibility and initiative to reach the level of self-formation. Here, there will be less self-negative evaluation and center scan help develop this quality in the learners.
- Individualizing the course and giving more time to individual work using the available materials and resources. In the project we present, learners will choose what to learn in writing and get individualized support.
- Usual supervision and coaching under the form of interviews. We also add focus groups, support groups and counseling in the center.

These are a few points related to the term tutoring as explained by a number of researchers elsewhere. In Algeria, the notion of tutoring is still novel and remains unclear for many people although it makes one of the core elements of the LMD system introduced since 2004. At this level, conferences of universities held since January 2008 reported:

> every student should take profit from a reception device, accompaniment and support which promotes his success and helps him assure a coherence in his pedagogical course as well as his orientation (National Conference of Universities: LMD Vocabulary, March, 2004: 37)

The tutor, hence, becomes an important actor in this educational system and in the learning process as a whole. Moreover, the tutor can also be a guide, a companion, but never a problem-solver; his skill should and must be acquired by the student himself as the Socratic Method dictates. That is to say, he should develop the students' problem-solving capabilities, their communicative skills with the diverse partners of formation. In other words, the tutor is not to be an expert in the content, but rather a companion of the student in collecting appropriate data in a maximum of autonomy. Again, it is vital to find out equilibrium between the student's supervision and the necessity to develop his sense of initiative, his autonomy and his ability to face novel, complex situations. These principles are unfortunately not present in teaching practices. Hence, creating writing support centres would complete the LMD mission in Higher education.
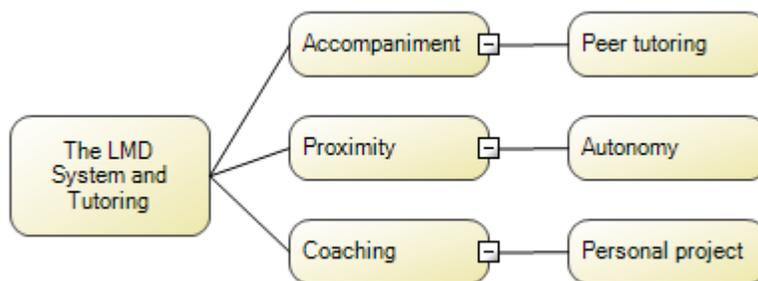
Figure 01. **The LMD System and Tutoring**

The main objective of tutoring is to reduce failure in university by providing learners with the needed support to make them able to:

- Integrate with the university milieu;
- Have their personal works supervised ;
- Have a good knowledge and insertion of the professional world.

The Writing support centers can help learners with difficulties in writing get engaged in learning, integrated in the university context, have positive attitudes towards assessment and evaluation (promote self-assessment and peer-reviewing).

Methodology

The research work aims at identifying the challenges behind academic writing performance in English and suggests a writing center as a space of collaboration and tutoring. Such centres would, then, support learners and link between academic writing performance and writing dissertations at the master level.

The paper is part of a long ethnographic research that started in 2008/2009 when the first master students in Algeria started their theses. With the adoption of the LMD[1] system in Algeria in 2004/2005, the reform aimed at adjusting the educational system to international standards. Our ethnographic study was based on our supervision of master works and on the analysis of their texts. In addition, an online journal with ten instructors from diverse universities was used. Its aim is to collect data about the difficulties both learners and teachers have when preparing their master theses. The final technique was three focus groups we held in 2014 and 2015 with Master I and Master II Applied linguistics and ELT option. This seven years ethnographic research is qualitatively driven. The used techniques are:

- Analysis of the students' performance (Teacher-correction of the learners' products).

- Participant observation (Learners' experiences, their enquiries, their fears through permanent contact with them either in the classroom as an instructor or outside the classroom in tutoring sessions).

- Three focus groups in the research methodology sessions.

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[1] LMD : Licence/Master/doctorat

- Online journals with ELT instructors who supervise master students. Ten   T ELT instructors from different universities in Algeria (5 females and 2 males, having between 1 and 32 years of experience took part in the study (Idri, 2015; online EAP Conference).

Results

During the supervision period of students' works, we could notice that a number of students struggle with language accuracy.

Examples of such language deficiencies can be presented:

Student 1: *"The present work is conducted in nearly six months and the problem tackeled in this research needs an experiment so as to prove our hypodissertation"*

This student for instance has mis-spelt the word "tackled" and mi-used the word "prove". The first is a spelling problem and the second is a methodological and lexical inaacuracy.

Student 02: *". so the problem that can be introduced here is, if the negative feedback that the teacher may give to his learners can limit their relationship which is in main the interaction between them."*

One can notice problems in bold red summed up in: capitalization, punctuation, language transfer, subordination, redundancy and style.

This student has serious problem in writing. All of his reprts are inaacurate. Here are two examples:

Student 03: *Q8: Does teaching academic writing to 3ʳᵈ year students leads them to write better essays?*

Q9: What are the specific techniques should be based by the teacher during teaching academic writing in classroom?

Many other examples

Student 04: statement of the problem and research questions

My research questions are the following :

- *Is negative transfer a cause of errors in the writings of EFL students?*
- *What types of errors? common in the writings of EFL students, in other words which of these errors are due to the influence of the students' first language?*

Student 05: *This lead us to ask some questions are: Why EFL students at university of Bejaia find difficulties for producing a logical meaningful writing especially in exams? And how can use vocabulary development as a mean for providing a good thinking process, in order to develop accuracy and fluency in their writing skill (2015).*

These were some examples of the learners' errors. At a master level, a learner is supposed to have acquired the necessary skill to write accurately. This kind of observations and common errors made the job of the teacher complicated. Focus shifted from guiding the learner on methodological bases to correcting language errors.

After the analysis of the learners' works all along the seven years and the teachers' responses, the following difficulties are drawn:

Classification of Writing Difficulties

According to the observation of Master students writings and the ELT teachers' responses, the following difficulties have been enumerated:

- The use of non-effective transitions (problem of coherence).

- Quotations from the literature are not clearly referred to, copy-paste mechanisms are often used by the learners.

- Grammar deficiencies in English and mistakes in surface features: inappropriate use of tenses, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. Errors in subordination and paragraph organization. This makes the essay's paragraphs do not adhere to the main idea of the research topic.

- The wording of the statement is most of the time neither clear nor precise. In addition, some information are not relevant to the dissertation statement (this causes a problem of unity).

- Lack of genre knowledge related to dissertation writing: text structures, language functions, coding conventions, etc. This leads to a limited mastery of the academic language and style

- *Content and* discourse problems: Coherence, clarity, redundancy, repetition, long sentences.

- Problems of interference from French, Arabic and Berber to English are all found in the learners' writings (Bejaia is a multi-lingual and multi-cultural region),

Methodological Problems
- One teacher wrote: "Well, the first difficulty I notice is the methodology, the students for sure have learnt by heart the different steps of research, I always ask them about it and they answer, but I think that they did not understand how to put it into practice. So, when it comes to application, big questions arise as: how to start, how to make review of literature, how to quote a critic , whether/when to quote or paraphrase" (Idri, 2015)
- The rhetorical sections making up those moves are mixed up and inconsistent. Take the example of the abstract, many students do not know what to be put in it.

- Research methodology problems such as formulating hypotheses, narrowing down a research problem, choosing an appropriate research design and/ research tools, discussing the research results, explaining their implications in their research context, etc.

- formulating hypotheses, narrowing down a research problem, choosing an appropriate research design and/ research tools, discussing the research results, explaining their implications in their research context, etc. proved to be common problems as revealed by the teachers.

In terms of the classification of academic writing problems, the following figure summarizes them in relation to accuracy, academic style, cultural clues and language interference:
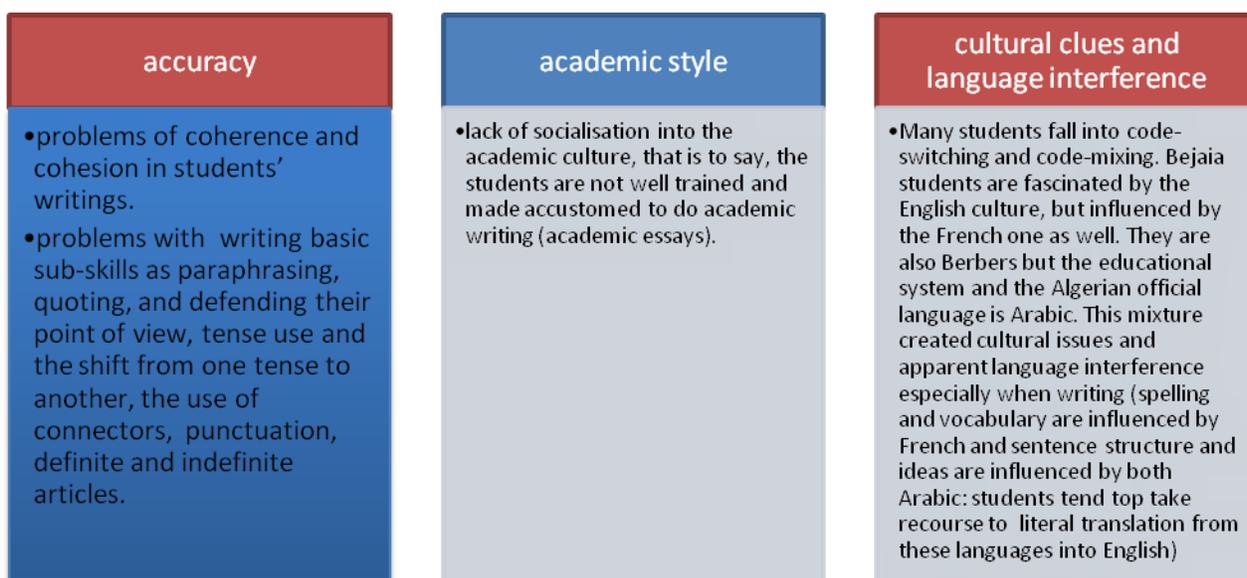
accuracy	academic style	cultural clues and language interference
• problems of coherence and cohesion in students' writings. • problems with writing basic sub-skills as paraphrasing, quoting, and defending their point of view, tense use and the shift from one tense to another, the use of connectors, punctuation, definite and indefinite articles.	• lack of socialisation into the academic culture, that is to say, the students are not well trained and made accustomed to do academic writing (academic essays).	• Many students fall into code-switching and code-mixing. Bejaia students are fascinated by the English culture, but influenced by the French one as well. They are also Berbers but the educational system and the Algerian official language is Arabic. This mixture created cultural issues and apparent language interference especially when writing (spelling and vocabulary are influenced by French and sentence structure and ideas are influenced by both Arabic: students tend top take recourse to literal translation from these languages into English)

Figure 02. **Students' common problems (accuracy, academic style, cultural clues and language interference (Idri, 2015).**

As concerns the focus groups adopted from last year until now, three focus group were adopted as a new way to teach research methodology. The master entitled: Applied linguistics and ELT was designed by Dr. Nadia Idri and accepted in 2014. The Department of English started the first group with 12 students. This year, 22 students are taking part in the courses. In the following table, a numbers of observations are summarized as a result of the focus group method:

Table 01. *Focus Group results (Master 1 and Master 2 levels, 2013-2014 and 2014-2015)*

Group 1, Master 1: AL&ELT, 2013-2014	Group 2, Master 2: AL&ELT, 2014-2015	Group 3, Master 1: AL&ELT, 2014-2015
1. First year of this new master. The pioneers were not accustomed to project-based instruction. 2. Students faced the problem of writing many projects in a short period of time with oral presentations. They expressed their inability to manage. Focus groups helped them manage this problem. 3. Choice of the topic for the methodology assignment was	1. First year of this new master. The pioneers were not accustomed to project-based instruction. 2. Students faced the problem of writing many projects in a short period of time with oral presentations. They expressed their inability to manage. Focus groups helped them manage this problem. 3. Choice of the topic for the methodology assignment was	1. Choice of the topic was required from October, 2014. Students started choosing ideas, but not topics by May, 2015. Students discussed the difficulty of finding up a research topic during the focus group session. 2. Students find PBI challenging but beneficial. This can help them develop their academic thinking. 3. Students could not respect the deadline. They negotiated

made during the focus group sessions. This facilitated the task.	made during the focus group sessions. This facilitated the task.	deadline extension with even the administration.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Teaching academic writing

- The solution is to design a new writing curriculum based on these objectives, and to focus on writing skills'
- Teach academic conventions related to dissertation writing (hedging, in-text citations& APA/MLA referencing systems. Since students possess a poor knowledge about academic English, a support team at university should be created to tutor learners and make them aware of the characteristics of academic English and explain the "How" and the "Why" to write academically.
- Assessing foreign language writing in an academic context should not only focus on content assessment, but the emphasis should be only on evaluating sentence level features such as grammar, punctuation and spelling and on the structure and organization of the students' essays. Teachers should also think of varying assessment techniques to well accompany the learner on an ongoing basis: (authentic assessment, peer-assessment, self-assessment and portfolio assessment).

Accuracy and coherence

There is a need to put more focus on teaching text structures, grammar and language functions, writing process right from the first two years of graduation. This is available in the schedule of the subject "Writing a Research Paper" at the Master 1 level, but needs more emphasis, especially practice.

Cultural clues and language interference

- Teach academic culture, make learners aware about language interferences,
- Motivate and push learners to read intensively to expose them to academic writing, develop their thinking in English and help them avoid language transfer.
- Motivate and push learners to read extensively chosen texts of British and American cultures and on academic writing. This is more likely to help learners discover the cultural clues and avoid language interference.

Teaching EAP (to reduce problems in academic writing)

- EAP is also necessary for students of other departments. For English Master students, topics meant to be covered superficially in EAP are dealt with extensively in methodology units (study skills, research methodology, bibliographic research, writing a dissertation, etc.) and writing subjects (academic writing.)

Implications: Language Support Centre for EAP (LSC-EAP)

LSC-EAP's Role and Description. These support centers will be based on teams and group of advanced learners (Master students and post-graduate students) as well as ELT professionals, who will be engaged in meeting learners with difficulties, accompany them and tutor them in order to cope with their problems.

LSC-EAP's main goal is to develop academic writing in English and offer innovative ideas to help learners follow the international standards in academic writing. It also aims at fostering tutoring and accompaniment and bridging the gap between learners and teachers.

Project Objectives

- Help learners with linguistic and writing difficulties diagnose their problems, share them with other students, develop appropriate writing strategies through focus groups (These proved efficient tools during the ethnographic research).
- Train learners develop their critical-thinking, autonomy, logic and do-it-myself spirit.
- Promote tutoring and accompaniment through counseling and support teams as a follow up of the tutoring within the LMD system.
- Focus on language skills, research skills, communication skills and English use in specific contexts and use of specific genre in writing.
- Strengthen the notion of team work, cooperation and introduce learners to peer-reviewing.
- Strengthen the link between learners and teachers through writing scaffolding tasks and common projects they can share within the center.
- Foster out-of-class language learning and use.
- Adopt Project Activities
- Design a program of workshop series to help define learners' difficulties, needed content for trainings, create support teams, etc. This will help train learners on an ongoing basis to write a successful piece writing.
- Create a team of tutors and counselors that can work in the center and online.
- Organize competitions on a regular basis based on academic achievement, successful writing.
- Set a website to network with the ELT community engaged in research.
- Create a magazine for learners and publish students' writings on a regular basis.
- Teaching EAP (to reduce problems in academic writing). EAP is also necessary for students of other departments. For English Master students, topics meant to be covered superficially in EAP are dealt with extensively in methodology units (study skills, research methodology, bibliographic research, writing a dissertation, etc.) and writing subjects (academic writing.)

Conclusion

This attempt revealed many of the difficulties EFL learners face at Master levels when trying to write academically. The paper is two-fold; finding out learners' writing difficulties and classifying them on the one hand; and suggest the creation of a writing support centre on the other.

To conclude, suggestions need to be made and a word about the centre needs to be addressed.

Students are encouraged to identify the challenges behind writing in a second or a foreign language and to reflect on the diverse effects which are attained based on different linguistic decisions. Both learners and teachers should, then, collaborate together to successfully learn and teach writing. This will lead learners to make the right decision about making the adequate linguistic structures, the right stylistic choices, the right cross-cultural variations to convey the

meant writing communicative purpose. In addition, the EFL community is required to develop critical thinking in the learner and enhance autonomy.

Such centers, if created and facilitated by stakeholders, can host learners and teachers to solve many of the problems learners meet not only at the level of writing but also at the level of interaction, motivation, learning strategies, critical thinking, learner autonomy and many other positive outcomes related to both content and context .

Finally, such support centers become a need to cope with writing problems learners face when required to fulfill a salient writing task as a dissertation.

To end, a question is asked and wad under debate during the conference to follow up the current paper:

> How can such support centres be funded and adopted? Is it possible to address stake-holders to facilitate such projects?

About the Author

Nadia Idri has been teaching at Bejaia University for twelve years. Specialized in educational psychology, ELT and Applied Linguistics, she is interested in conducting research on affective factors, applied linguistics, learner autonomy, basic and higher education, technology education and LMD Reform. Nadia masters four languages and translates in three of them (English-French-Arabic). She has published in many national and international journals; she has been a member of various scientific committees and chairing sessions in national and international conferences and chaired many of them in her university and now at international levels. She has a reviewing and editing experience with many journals. Actually, she is the chair of the scientific committee in her Department and a chair of the master she created: Applied Linguistics and ELT. Nadia is also a founding member in BEST student association to develop autonomy, creativity and sense of initiative in her students. She is the founder of the Creative Writing Days event in Bejaia University in partnership with BEST. Nadia is an active member of the Algerian English Language Teacher Training (AELTT) team; a winner of the Alumni Engagement Innovation Fund Project Proposal funded by the US embassy in 2015-2016. Nadia is also in charge of development and training in Abp El Djazzeir Private School. Nadia's main focus is to promote ELT and make change in the way English is taught and conceived through strengthening the learner's role and place in the class and outside it as a citizen.

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Appendixes

Appendix A. Online Journals designed for ELT Instructors

In order to contribute in this research, your teaching experience is quite salient for us to enumerate the problems Algerian masters encounter when writing academically.
The following questions are addressed to university teachers who taught academic writing or supervised masters when writing theirs theses.
Q1. Profile information
Job Title, affiliation, years of experience teaching at university,   years of experience teaching/supervising EFL masters
Q2. How do you assess your EFL masters' academic writing?
Q3. Do EFL masters possess the required skill to write academically?
Q4. To what extent do Algerian EFL masters face problems when writing up their research papers?
Q5. Would you enumerate the difficulties Algerian EFL masters encounter when writing their research works?
Q6. Suggestions concerning:
- Learners' academic style
- Accuracy and coherence
- Cultural clues and language interference
- Teaching EAP (to reduce problems in academic writing)

Thank you for your attention

Suggesting a Support Centre for Dissertation Writing   Idri

Appendix B Writing for Academic Purposes Suggested Support Courses

The program will be based on continuing sessions all along the acdelic year for learners with difficulties. Each session will involve a mixture of tutor input, group discussion and small-group practical activities. Students will be

expected to read selected parts of the core texts or selected articles before each

session and post reflective comments on a class blog.

1. Introduction and overview of academic writing

2. English for Academic Purposes

3. Academic Literacy and academic integrity

4. Critical thinking and argumentation

5. Accuracy in academic writing: grammar and vocabulary

6. Critical Reading and writing

7. Subjectivity and Voice in Academic writing

8. Writing genres and discourse communities

9. Needs analysis

10. Assessment and feedback in EAP

11. The Final product: participation in academic events