# DIFFICULTIES IN RESEARCH WRITING AMONG COMMUNICATION STUDENTS IN A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

**RHODA G. CAMPILLAN**

Academic Supervisor AB Communication, University of San Agustin
E-mail: rcampillan@usa.edu.ph

**Abstract** - Thesis Writing is the culmination of a curriculum. To produce a thesis, the students need to undergo processes and in the course of immersing in these stages, difficulties arise that may either hinder or motivate them to finish their respective researches. This qualitative paper delved into the challenges experienced by the students in writing their undergraduate thesis through an analysis of the reflections/narratives submitted by students currently enrolled in Thesis Writing. Results revealed that students had difficulties in formulating their research problem, writing their review of related literature, sampling of their respondents, crafting the research instruments, transcribing interviews, video production delays, among others. They also had problems in coordination, plagiarism processing, and other difficulties such as time constraints, absence of research partner, personal issues, and other conflicts. Further, this paper explored approaches to assist the students in overcoming such challenges.

**Index Terms** - Thesis Writing, Difficulties in thesis writing, College Students, Private university.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The climax of the curriculum in the case of the AB Communication program is thesis writing. This subject teaches the students to choose an appropriate problem, write the different chapters, and in the end defend their papers. Before a student could take this subject, he needs to pass first subjects such as Communication Theories and Introduction to Communication Research. These two courses prepare the students in thesis writing.

Apart from these, there are also language courses, which develops the writing skills of the students. Moreover, in the course of completing the research and reaching the final stage, which is hardbound submission, difficulties arise. This paper highlighted the experiences of AB Communication students in writing their thesis. Through their narratives/reflections, the were able to share their difficulties and impart approaches on how cope with these challenges.

## II. THE PROBLEM

This study determined the difficulties encountered by Communication students in writing their thesis. Specifically this addressed the following questions: 1) What are the difficulties faced by Communication students in the conduct of their research? 2) What are approaches the students recommended to overcome these challenges?

## III. DIFFICULTIES IN THESIS WRITING

Most of the literature on research writing utilized quantitative methods such as perception and survey and some qualitative methods such as ethnography and content analysis. Reflective research was not much explored. Hence, this study served as an impetus to the researcher to focus on this method through analysis of the reflections/narratives submitted by students currently enrolled in Thesis Writing during the second semester of academic year of 2018-2019.

There are studies which discussed the difficulties of students in academic writing or thesis writing. Ling (2013) stated that not much is known regarding the challenges encountered by students in writing academic papers or perhaps on thesis writing. His paper entitled, “Exploring First-Year Undergraduates’ Difficulties in Writing the Discussion Section of a Research Paper: A Singapore Study enumerated problems in research writing. These are selection of content, organization of content, demonstration of appropriate stance, grammar and choice of words. This particular study utilized the qualitative approach. This paper highlighted the experiences of four undergraduate students in writing the discussion part of their research papers vis-à-vis the comments of their instructor in their papers. Since the participants are first year students, difficulty in writing is inevitable. However, for Communication seniors, who had been in college for four years already; problems discussed in Ling’s research could have been minimized but it seems that they too had similar experiences.

Kotamjani,et.al ( 2018), in their study “ International Postgraduate Students’ Perception of Challenges in Academic Writing in Malaysian Public Universities,” cited several difficulties experienced by post graduate students. These are reviewing and criticizing the literature, writing introduction and research gap. This study had 128 international post graduate students of Universiti Putra Malaysia and Universiti Technology Malaysia as respondents. This paper further revealed that these difficulties could somehow be attributed to

methods and curriculum of teaching English in their respective countries.

Aside from the common problems of writing the different parts of the research paper, Dubicki ( 2015) revealed in her study "Writing a research paper: Students Explain their Process," that students likewise experience difficulty in writing long research papers and identifying relevant materials for inclusion. Furthermore, same study revealed, that students experience struggle in terms of poor writing skills; inability to make a good argument; summarizing, rather than synthesizing sources; lack of critical thinking skills and defining a topic. The researcher analyzed 76 essays submitted for the Monmouth University Library Research Awards during academic years 2008-2015. This research further disclosed the difference of the experiences of graduate and undergraduate students. Undergraduate students, who are part of this research, reported lack of confidence and initial anxiety when they first write their research papers. Both groups felt a sense of success and pride after their researches were completed.

Mukdad (2019, in his study "Investigating English Academic Writing Problems Encountered by Arab International University Students" revealed that respondents find academic writing difficult in general. The participants are students of Arab International University who take the AWR course. 46 % of students approved that they could brainstorm especially if the topic is of great interest for them while 92 % had difficulty in organizing their thoughts.

Common problems cited by different researchers centered on the organization and structure of the papers, defining topic, and literature review. Most researches reviewed, correlates language skills with academic writing. Not much is written on the challenging experiences of students in completing the different parts their thesis.

## IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted at the University of San Agustin, Iloilo City, Philippines to fourteen AB Communication students enrolled in thesis writing during the second semester 2018-2019.

The AB Communication students' reflection about thesis writing totaled to 42 were used as data to reflect their experiences, difficulties, and approaches, in writing their thesis.

In this paper, the reflections/narratives of the participants submitted during the end of the semester were the only research instrument qualitative data were taken from the narratives/reflections of the students using thematic analysis.

This study adopted qualitative research using the reflective research approach. Alvesson & Skoldberg (2000) defined reflection as looking at one's view and compare it to others perspective. They further noted that reflective research involves two levels. These are researching and paying much attention to own suppositions about practices. This kind of research, according to them, is aimed at knowing the core of practitioners, of narrative, and of the context. In short, using this approach gives the researcher an opportunity to know the innermost feelings of participants through their reflections and applying to education, knowing the experiences of students will improve the teaching strategies and pedagogies of faculty members. Hence, delivery of instruction is improved and developed.

## V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table I Difficulties of communication students in thesis writing**

| ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES | EXTERNAL FACTORS | PERSONAL DIFFICULTIES |
|---|---|---|
| Idea to study | Coordination | Time constraints |
| Writing of the literature review | Low plagscan results | Absence of research partner |
| Unavailability/finding of respondents | Printing schedules | Personal Problems |
| Crafting of research instruments | Availability of binding slots | Other activities and conflicts |
| Transcribing of interviews | | |
| Delay and conflicts in video production | | |

Three (3) themes were extracted from the reflections/narratives. These are academic difficulties, external factors and personal difficulties. These themes were further broken down to specific difficulties. Student identified the following as their academic difficulties: 1)idea to study, 2) writing the literature review, 3) unavailability/finding of respondents, 4)crafting of research instruments, 5) transcribing of interviews, and 5) delay and conflicts in video production. In addition, the participants, also shared their external challenges. These are: 1) coordination, 2) low plagiarism results, 3) printing schedules and 4) availability of binding slots. Furthermore, aside from academic and external difficulties, they likewise experience personal struggles. These are: 1) time constraints, 2) absence of research partner, 3) personal problems, and 4) other activities and conflicts.

### Academic Difficulties

1) One of the difficulty that was identified is looking for a topic or idea to study. One of the participant discussed that:

I think being a research student (it) is hard to come up with an idea on what study. Also the signing and the revising of the papers are always pending. It is hard to undergo a new method, it is hard for me to adjust but I will make it.

Topic identification is the beginning of research. This is where students brainstorm on possible topics they could study. The idea of brainstorming and finalizing the topic to be researched on take a lot of time.

2) Literature review is chapter two in a thesis. This is where students look for conceptual and related literature. When reviewing the literature, students should have the skills in comparing and differentiating data, choosing information which are relevant in the study, among others. One of the participant shared that he keeps on revising his literature review because of changes in his respondents.

   We've been through a lot literally…we have come to a point of re-editing our research especially the review of related literature due to the lack of animators ( participants).

3) Majority of the students wrote in their reflections their struggles in looking for respondents/participants. Likewise they aired out that it is very hard for them to conduct their data gathering because most of their data sources are unavailable.

   As a student (one of) the difficulties that I have experienced in the preparation and conduct of our research is those respondents who don't respond and you have to follow them up from time to time. Another participant shared his hardship in the course of looking for respondents.

   I struggled trying to find teachers who would be willing to lend me their class time so I would say that finding respondents was a big challenge. What really counted was the availability of the respondents and willingness to let me conduct my survey.

4) In order to gather data, research instruments are needed. Research instruments must be standardized and it should be able to answer the research questions. The students had a hard time aligning the questions in their instruments and in their problem.

   I had difficulties making my questionnaire since I had to revise it. One of the experts said that my questionnaire was one sided.

5) In qualitative studies, transcribing the interviews is one of the most time consuming tasks. The more participants you have ,the longer it will take for one to finish this stage. This endevour also requires a lot of patience and demands keenness on the part of the researchers. They must make sure that they hear correctly the interviews and write these faithfully according to what the respondents is trying to share.

   The transcription is one of the hardest task because every word, thought, phrase, sentence and what was done during the interview must be exact. So I have to careful, as much as possible…

6) Writing the research document is just one requirement for an AB Communication student. There are students, who go beyond and produce a video to better explain their results. One of the students, wrote in his reflection, the anxiety that he felt because his interviewee for his video output does not respond to his calls.

I have no issue with the nature of my research because I am well guided by my adviser and I have positive suggestions from my panel to improve my work. The only problem I have encountered so far is the delay of my video production because I don't have the enough opportunity to schedule it with my subject and because of his unavailability. Every time I send him a request for an interview on this day, sometimes he would say he is not available but most of the time he would reply late and by the time he would agree I am no longer available. Another student disclosed her problem with her director, that cause the delay of her production.As a student my only biggest challenge is the time and time of my director. I have been ready ever since January but I couldn't shoot on my own since I am not the director of the film.

**External Factors**

1) Aside from academic difficulties, the students, had also a hard time coping with external problems and issues. They experienced hardships, in terms, of coordinating with their respondents.

   As a research student, we encountered a lot of difficulties especially in processing our letters because we had to go back and forth just to be sure that our letters were signed.

   (One of ) the difficulties that we encountered as a researcher is the processing of letters. Since inmates were the respondents involve in our study we should ask permission from the regional office to allow us in conducting our study.

2) One of the requirements for thesis writing students is to make sure that their outputs undergo plagiarism scan. The challenge here is they must make sure that their results are low and not above the threshold. Hence, adding to their anxieties.

   We also had difficulty in the plagscan (results) because we got 24% which is the highest among those who subjected their researches into plagiarism scan.

3) Some students have computer printers in their homes. Hence, they could print their thesis without so much hassle. But for those who do not have these, they need to to go to computer shops and wait for their turn in the counter and even pay a hefty amount.

If you don't have a computer, thesis will take a lot of your time and money. In my case, I don't have a group, I work alone.

Looking for a computer shot with affordable printing price is one of the challenges I had to go through. Plus, if you're lucky enough, the shops are full and the time of the year (March) is the time that college people make their research studies. So you really have to be there as early as you can at the shop.

I even had to befriend the computer guy so I can at least go first in line. The line during printing is very long usually takes 30 minutes to 1 hour before we print our papers. The printing fee is worth 3 pesos per page so it really cost a lot for us and there was a time when we spend almost 1, 500 pesos just for the printing.

4) After the final defense and final corrections, the students need to bind their thesis. During March, which is the "thesis season" majority of the graduating students are busy looking for printing shops which could bind their thesis. There are cases where these shops could no longer accommodate all orders. Hence, students are forced to go around the city to look for available printing shops.

We looked for the shop, which has a cheaper price for hardbound. We asked our friends if where did they hardbound their thesis…We traveled 15-20 minutes from school to get to the place.

It was my fault I had my revisions submitted late, reason I had to look for a shop that can do a rush work..I did pay a little higher than the original price.

**Personal Difficulties**

1) Lack of time is one of the difficulties experienced by students. Most of them needs to juggle a lot of activities and so the time intended for thesis is sometimes compromised.

We are academically prepared in conducting our study yet due to time constraint, that made us having a hard time doing it. But in one way or another we still got the time even just 30 minutes to talk and plan regarding our research

Another problem that we had was time constraint and the time differences that we have due to the fact that my groupmate and I were irregular students and have minor subjects that we need to cope.

2) Some work individually on their thesis but there are those who work with partners or group mates. There are cases where their partners or groups mates no longer cooperate and exert effort.

I consider the absence of my research partner as a difficulty. If both of us cooperate and is willing to fill the work that the other partner cannot do then things would be much easier.

3) It is inevitable that personal problems may impede in the conduct of research writing. One student shared his experience:

I experience personal problems including health issues which affected our family members and even ourselves.

4) Most of the students also have extra-curricular activities, hence, their attention are divided. Thesis writing is a rigorous activity and it demands focus.

Another difficulty that we encountered I think is the conflicts that we are facing, since we have a lot of things that we are going to do in school that may be a barrier in conducting the study.

…being an officer of the council added to our work so we really had to manage our time and double our work.

**Table 2 approaches to help students overcome the challenges**

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|---|
| Personal Contact with the Respondent |
| Developing an attitude of optimism |
| Flexibility |
| Dedication and Determination |
| Building of Self Confidence |

Based on the reflections, the approaches highlighted by the students in order to overcome such challenges were reflected in Table 2.

One student shared that instead of waiting for his respondent to contact him, he find ways to reach out to him.

Now to solve this problem I went to him personally and I am glad it worked.

Despite being subjected to these difficult circumstances, the undying spirit of positivism, willingness to adjust to difficult situations, strength of character and confidence still radiate.

I still have a long way to go but I am staying positive that I can meet the deadlines.

Even though we experienced a lot challenges we are molded to be strong and confident at the same time.

The topic is very close to my heart and it gives me motivation and determination to finish it.

We are confident with our work and we know that we can pull off everything from Chapter 1 to the last chapter and our documentary.

I have been waiting for this time and what makes me hold on to my study its because I love it and I want it.

Since these are reflections, the approaches shared by students are personal. There are several studies,which gave insights on how students could overcome their challenges. In the study of Dubicki (2015), she

suggested different ways to help faculty members assist their students improved their research papers and likewise helped students cope with challenges. These are: collaborating with librarians on assignments; scaffolding assignments for early intervention of any problems that may arise; bringing classes to the library for instruction; and encouraging students to meet with librarians for one-on-one coaching.

Another study suggested, to include activities that make use of critiquing writing samples to help the students decipher the correct way of writing e.g. discussion part ( Ling, 2013). Teachers also have a very important role to play. Mukdad ( 2019), emphasize that teachers must motivate their students to write well and they should believe in the ability of the students to create a change. This is likewise supported by the study of Buckley (2010 ) which states that faculty mentors were a primary source of support during the undergraduate research experience. Support is what the students need in this particular journey. Students, who were participants, in her study appreciate the care that their research mentors gave them.

This is in the form of suggesting literature and discussing readings, training them to collect data, advising their analysis and interpretation of results, and providing feedback. The students also emphasized the importance of emotional support of their mentors. They value the regular meetings in which they could listen to their adviser's discussions.

## FINAL WORDS

The results of the study showed that AB Communication students had academic and personal difficulties in writing their thesis. Their academic difficulties include idea to study; writing the review of related literature; unavailability of respondents; transcribing interviews; video production delays. Personal difficulties are focus on time constraints, absence of research partner, personal problems and other conflicts. They likewise highlighted that they have problems with coordination and low plagiarism results. Approaches were also suggested by them to overcome these challenges. One of the most important factors is the dedication and commitment of the faculty mentor in making sure that the needs of the students are taken care of. Her/His time and guidance are needed by the students to complete their undergraduate thesis.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This study could be further improved in terms of:

1) Reflective studies can be conducted in other academic programs not just in AB Communication program;
2) Other research methodologies can be explored to further validate the results of the study;
3) Further studies in research teaching, methodologies, and approaches can be considered by other researchers.

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