Common Mistakes Committed and Challenges Faced in Research Proposal Writing by University of Aden Postgraduate Students

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the common mistakes committed by the postgraduate students as well as the challenges they faced during writing their proposals. The study obtained a convince sampling in which 15 postgraduate students of English Department, University of Aden were recruited. In this study, the data was collected by using the students' proposals, and their correction forms, as well as using focused group discussion. The researcher analyzed the data and used qualitative analyses i.e., content-based analyses by highlighting the main themes. The findings of the study indicated that the majority of the postgraduate students committed common mistakes such as the choice of an appropriate title, unclear statement of the problem, writing irrelevant literature review, choosing inappropriate methodology, references system was not clear and some plagiarism issues. Moreover, it was investigated that the postgraduate students generally had some challenges in using standard proposal format, writing literature reviews, methodology skills and other supervision issues. These findings are of great importance for instructors at postgraduate program.

Keywords: Challenges, Mistakes, Postgraduate Students, Proposal.

الأخطاء الشائعة والتحديات التي تواجه طلاب الدراسات العليا في كتابة اقتراح البحث بجامعة عدن

الملخص:

الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو التحقيق في الأخطاء الشائعة التي يرتكبها طلاب الدراسات العليا، والتحديات التي واجهوها في كتابة العرض الموجز. شارك في العينة الموجودة والراغبة بالمشاركة (١٥) طالبًا من طلاب الدراسات العليا، في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، في جامعة عدن. وقد جُمعت البيانات هذه الدراسة بأمرين:

1- المناقشة الجماعية المركزة. 2- استعمال خطط عرض الطلاب ونماذج التصحيح بعد النقاش.

حلل الباحث البيانات باستعمال التحليلات النوعية؛ أي: التحليلات القائمة على تحليل المحتوى بتسليط الضوء على الدراسة الرئيسة. خلصت نتائج الدراسة إلى أن أغلب طلاب الدراسات العليا ارتكبوا أخطاء شائعة؛ منها:

عدم اختيار عنوان مناسب، عدم توضيح مشكلة البحث، عدم كتابة مراجع أدبية متصلة بالبحث، عدم اختيار منهجية مناسبة للبحث، نظام المراجع لم يكن واضحًا، بعض قضايا الانتحال؛ أي: أخذ مراجع دون ذكرها بالدراسات. وقد تحققت الدراسة من التحديات التي تواجه طلاب الدراسات العليا عمومًا؛ منها:

ضعف تنسيق وترتيب خطة البحث، كتابة المراجع، تحديد منهجية وأدوات البحث، بعض الإشكالات المتعلقة بالإشراف والمشرفين. أهمية نتائج هذه الدراسة كبيرة للمعلمين في الدراسات العليا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحديات، الأخطاء، طلاب الدراسات العليا، خطة البحث.

1. Introduction:

Writing proposal is a challenging issue for postgraduate students. The postgraduate students are learning during the courses how to write. However, they still make some mistakes and face challenges in the process of writing. Al-Khairy (2013) in his study investigated the academic writing problems of the Saudi students and he stated that there were many problems in their writing and he provided some suggestions to develop the writing of the students. As Javid & Umer (2014) and Widagdo (2017) supported that the major reasons for the low proficiency level of the students in writing contexts is due to some reasons such as low level in grammar, less practice in writing, weak educational background and weaknesses in choosing and using appropriate lexical items. Qasem & Zayid (2019) on the other hand, explained that writing in English is one of the most difficult skill Arab students faced during learning; this is because of the different system of writing in English. Thus, when the students write a research in English, they will face many various challenges such as the proficiency in second language and the experience of understanding research methodology. The master program started in the English Department, Faculty of Education, University of Aden in 1994. It comprises three semesters of coursework. After finishing these three semesters, the students should write a thesis to complete the requirement of the master's degree. The postgraduate students at the English Department, University of Aden must present their proposals in an internal discussion with the panellists whether they are from English Department or from the other Departments of other Universities. If the students pass the proposal discussion and do the modifications, the Department will sign on the proposal correction form as a declaration of their passing. After that, the students will be allowed to start writing their theses. According to Krathwohl, (2005) it is important to present a proposal in order to justify the key elements of the work and convince the readers with evidence of choosing this research. The proposal should present details of the literature review and the methodology of the research. In addition, the effective proposal is known by the quality of the writing and presenting the important ideas. This is why the postgraduate students are provided with two courses of research methodology, which prepare the students to learn and to know about writing proposals based on the guidelines that were assigned in the manifest of the higher studies of English Department. The following section presents the steps of writing the proposals at English Department- University of Aden:

Steps of Writing Proposals at the English Department
  1. Introduction
- Background
- Statement of the Problem
- Research Objectives
- Research Questions/Hypothesis
- Significance of the Study
- Limitations of the Study
- Definitions of the main terms

  2. Literature Review
- Presenting the related literature of the study

  3. Methodology
- Research Design
- Sample of the study

• Research Instruments
• Data Collection Procedure

4. References

Statement of the Problem

Over years, many researchers talked about the problems the postgraduate students faced while writing their proposals due to the weak knowledge of their topics (Baker, 2000; Ellis & Levy, 2009; Iqbal, 2007, Blanco & Lee, 2012). At the English Department, it was noticed that some postgraduate students faced challenges; this was in the line of Komba's (2016) study who found in his study that the postgraduate students faced challenges in writing their chapters. In additions, the postgraduate students took long time in writing their proposals and found it problematic. Moreover, based on the researcher experience and observation in the discussion of the postgraduate students, when the students submitted and discussed the proposals with the panelists; some mistakes occurred and repeated by the majority of them especially in the part of the statement of problem and that was repeated in each batch of the postgraduate students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate the common mistakes committed by the postgraduate students, in the master program during writing their proposals; since some mistakes were repeated in each batch. In addition, the limited knowledge of the challenges the postgraduate students faced in writing their proposals encouraged the researcher to check on these issues in order to help the postgraduate students to overcome these problems and challenges.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the common mistakes committed by the postgraduate students when writing their proposal?

2. What are the challenges the postgraduate students faced when writing their proposals?

Limitation of the Study

The study only conducted on the postgraduate students at the English Department, University of Aden. Therefore, the findings of the study will not be generalized to the other English departments of other universities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Ross (2005), the researcher through the process of writing proposal should be able to put evidence to convince others that he/ she knows all the issues about the study. A number of researchers such as (Baker, 2000; Rainey, 2000; Garcia & Nelson, 2003) pointed out that students are not adequately prepared or unaware of the difficulties of preparing and writing their proposals. (Iqbal, 2007; Ellis & Levi, 2008) on the other hand, explained that some students are also not sure how to organize the content of their proposals and this is due

to the lack of actual research experience. (Kikula & Quorro 2007; Kombo & Tromp, 2011) in their study supported that students had weakness in organizing the content of proposals, not clarifying the problem of the research they wanted to write about and not take literature review writing seriously. In addition, some of them may delete or forget to mention the important sections of the proposals as well as fail to provide sufficient information about important sections of the research (Wong, 2002; Nyika, 2014). The study conducted by Manchishi, et al, (2015) also reported that students should know more information about how to write a proposal because they have some deficiencies in writing the sections of the proposal and providing adequate information about its critical issues.

Paul & Psych (2012, P.5) summarized the common mistakes committed by students when writing the proposal as follows:

- Failure to provide the proper context to frame the research question.
- Failure to delimit the boundary conditions for your research.
- Failure to cite landmark studies.
- Failure to accurately present the theoretical and empirical contributions by other researchers.
- Failure to stay focused on the research question.
- Failure to develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research.
- Too much detail on minor issues, but not enough detail on major issues.
- Too much rambling — going "all over the map" without a clear sense of direction.
- Too many citation lapses and incorrect references.
- Too long or too short.
- Failing to follow the APA style.
- Slopping writing.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study is a descriptive study, and it was conducted on the postgraduate students (the master students) of English Department, University of Aden. The researcher tried to gather in depth information about the common mistakes committed by the postgraduate students as well as the challenges they faced during writing their proposals.

Sampling

The targeted convenience sampling of the study was the postgraduate (15 students) who finished their three courses of preliminary stage of the master study at English Department, University of Aden.

Instruments & Data Collection

The study employed a qualitative method and used two instruments: first, the proposal and the correction forms of the students as documents to know the common mistakes and correction made by students after correcting their proposals since this method used as a primary source in the qualitative research as Patton (2002) explained. Second, the focused group discussion, for collecting data, the researcher asked the students to participate in the

focused group discussion, by writing their notes about the difficulties they faced in writing their proposals.

Ethical Issues

For ethical consideration, the researcher hided the names of students who submitted their proposals, the correction forms and the focused group discussion. The students were informed about the purpose of the study.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

According to Creswell (2003), collecting information in depth and analyzing them as themes is done by using qualitative analysis. Qualitative data from the two instruments: the proposals with their correction forms and the focused group discussion were analyzed by using the content-based analysis; the qualitative data were categorized into themes; and then interpreted.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented according to the research questions as following:

The common mistakes committed by postgraduate students when writing a proposal:

- According to the analysis of the proposal correction forms of the postgraduate students, the researcher noticed that students did not understand the nature of their topics and not providing sufficient information, they found difficulties to present clear proposal due to the lack of knowing what they want to write about. This result was similar to findings of (Pietersen, 2014; Manchishi, et al, 2015) studies.

- The choice of the title also was one of the common mistakes. The students chose titles that did not directly connected the research topics, problems, objectives and questions; this is because they only focus on choosing a title without linking it with the content of the proposal. This result was in line with the findings of (Manchishi, et al, 2015) study. On the other hand, the length of the title considered as a mistake because some titles were long and did not provide the functional words of the purpose of the research; this result was similar to the findings of (Paul & Psych , 2012) study.

- Another common mistake for the student was the choice of the statement of problem; the majority of the students stated that finding studies that are similar and contain relevant statement of problems is confusing. In addition, a mistake, which is related to the statement of problem, was that the students were not providing the source of the claim they presented. These findings were similar to the findings of (Kikula & Quorro, 2007; Kombo & Tromp, 2011; Manchishi, et al, 2015; Firza & Aisiah, 2018) studies.

- Furthermore, research objectives and questions were also from the common mistakes that students made during writing their proposals. Some students did not link the objectives of the research with the research questions. The researcher noticed that the questions sometimes were different from the research objectives. These findings were in line with the findings of (Manchishi, et al, 2015; Firza & Aisiah, 2018) studies.

- Using fillers i.e., writing a lot in literature review considers as a mistake the students made. The literature review of some students was full of irrelevant terms and sections; it seems that the students just wanted to write without linking the topic with the main variables of the research in the title of the proposal as well as the research objectives and questions. These results were in line with Paul & Psych (2012) study. Likewise, a mistake, which was related to literature review section, was the use of out of dated studies. These findings were similar to the findings of (Kikula & Quorro, 2007; Kombo & Tromp, 2011; Manchishi, et al, 2015; Firza & Aisiah, 2018) studies.

- Quoting technique and citing the source were also serious mistakes; some students used long quotations in one page of the literature review section. Some of them used the quotation without mentioning the page number, because they could not differentiate between quotation and paraphrasing. These findings were similar to the study of Purnawan (2017).

- Regarding plagiarism issue, few students did not paraphrase the work they read, they just wrote the same phrases, sentences and expressions of the authors without mentioning their names and the year and that was detected based on the panelist experience of discussion of postgraduate proposals and the viva discussions. These findings agreed by the studies of (Mhut, 2013; and Manchishi, et al, 2015) who admitted plagiarism as a common problem among researchers.

- Regarding the methodology and research design, some students did not differentiate between descriptive, exploratory and experimental research. Some studies need to be investigated by using experimental research. However, they used descriptive research. In addition, some students did not use the appropriate instruments of the research or clarified the sampling or the choice of the sampling.

Roland (2000) explained that the methodology should be intensive and should include all elements such as sampling, instruments and the methods used to collect data. These findings were in respect to the findings of (Roland , 2000; Kikula & Quorro, 2007; Sharkawi, 2008; Shah, Shah & Pietrobon, 2009; Manchishi, et al, 2015; and Firza & Aisiah, 2018) studies.

- Some students did not mention the techniques of data analysis such as SPSS, content-based analysis; they just highlighted the results without clarification. The findings of this study were similar to the studies established by (Feng, 2006; Purnawan, 2017 and Firza & Aisiah , 2018).

- For references, some students did not understand the APA style, and some not applying it at all. Besides some of them did not order the references based on the alphabetical order. These findings were similar to the findings of (Pietersen, 2014; Komba 2015; Purnawan 2017; and Firza & Aisiah 2018) studies.

- The quality of the proposal depends on the student's proposal writing and the use of appropriate language. However, the most common mistakes found in some proposals were related to the poor language mechanisms such as the grammatical mistakes in tenses, articles and punctuations. Another mistake was the wordiness; the student writing should be straightforward to the point and informative. Moreover, using irrelevant vocabulary also hinder the quality of the proposal. The findings of the study were in respect to the studies presented

by (Blanco & Lee, 2012; Balakumar, et al, 2013; Pietersen, 2014; Purnawan, 2017; and Firza & Aisiah 2018).

The challenges the postgraduate students faced when writing their proposals:

The researcher collected the data through focused group discussions. The postgraduate students were asked to mention the challenges, which they faced when writing their proposals. The following points were their responses:

- The first challenge was that there was not a standard format for writing the proposal. Some of the postgraduate students stated, "One of the challenges I faced that there was no common format because each supervisor used his/her own preferred format". They indicated, "It was confusing, and they did not know how to organize the parts of a proposal or how use one style of formatting such as APA style".

Another explained, "Whenever that when they tried to write anything, their supervisors said change it without clarification". Because of what mentioned, and of this confusion, during the time of the internal discussion of the proposal the students received critical comments from the panelists. This result was supported by the findings of studies of (Krathwohl, 2005; and Manchishi, et al, 2015).

- Choosing the title was one of the challenges the postgraduate students pointed out. Students explained, "They did not know what the graduated master students chose or wrote about before". Therefore, some of them chose similar areas or same topics as previous students and they were surprised of these similarities. Thus, they had to change their titles. These findings were in respect to the findings of Kombo & Tromp (2011) study.

- Some postgraduate students stated, "They had challenges in collecting and writing the literature review due to the lack of enough sources and studies". Moreover, the students had difficulty in identifying the relevant literature, which should be included in the literature review section. This result was in line with the findings of (Manchishi, et al, 2015; and Firza & Aisiah, 2018) studies.

- Another important challenge highlighted by the postgraduate students was the methodology section. Students reported, "They really missed the guidance from their supervisor for choosing the appropriate methodology for their study". Therefore, they were disappointed in the internal discussion of their proposals from the committee members who suggested to change the methodology into experimental, case study or descriptive. These findings were in line with (Roland, 2000; and Pietersen, 2014; Firza & Aisiah, 2018) studies.

- The main challenge faced by the majority of the postgraduate students was supervision problems. Supervision problems are not a new area to search about; some studies conducted on postgraduate supervision issues by (Hartley & Jory, 2000; Murray, 2002; Taylor & Beasley, 2005; and Mafa & Mapolisa, 2011). In this study, the postgraduate students reported. "We are still learning how to write our proposals and we were in keen need to receive the valuable comments from our supervisors about how to write the sections of the proposal and what we

should avoid". However, the fact was shocking to some of them because they did not receive an adequate guidance or comments from their supervisors.

They added, "Most of the time supervisors said they were busy or unable to meet us or even they do not have time to read the work sent to them by emails or as a hard copy. Therefore, the students lost the right direction of writing an appropriate proposal. The findings were similar to Manchishi, et al, (2015) study.

Postgraduate students also highlighted another challenge, which was the unclear or negative comments from supervisors. They explained, "Sometime supervisors wrote comments to them in the pages of the proposal or the margin of the word file sent to them, and these comments lack details". For example, students stated "Sometimes, supervisors just "underlining statements", "writing rephrase", "question mark" or X mark in the whole page".

As a result, students were confused and discouraged from the lacked guidance because they were interested to know what the supervisors meant by these comments, especially if supervisors were busy to sit with them to tell them why they wrote this. The findings of this study were in line with Richard & Gabrielle 1999 in Manchishi, et al, (2015:134) study that clarified that supervisors should be responsible for their supervision, and assured the importance of getting feedback from supervisors in order to establish the work in an effective way as well as encouraging the students in their comments and avoid ambiguity.

Another challenge the students mentioned is the availability of supervisors, some supervisors were vacant and some were not. Thus, they will take long time to write and to finish because of supervisors' busy time. This finding is in line with Manchishi, (2015) study.

- Lastly, accessing to the references was also mentioned as a challenge for the postgraduate students during their proposal writing stage. This was because of the lack of updated books from the library. Thus, the students used the internet to be able to search for the references. However, another challenge raised during using the internet to search for reference. "Some websites asked money or subscription to download the papers, books or theses; that is why they still in need to have available sources such as books in library or a subscription at least in the websites that ask for money". This finding agreed with the studies of (Manchishi, et al, 2015; Purnawan 2017; and Firza & Aisiah, 2018).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study suggested some recommendations to improve the process of proposal writing as well as solving the challenges faced by the postgraduate students as following:

- It is recommended to provide a fixed template of how to write a proposal for the postgraduate students of Master/ PhD studies of English Department, University of Aden. There is a template and recently was updated by adding the instructions of the PhD students and the format of the cover paper of the proposal.

- It is recommended to send this template to all supervisors who supervised the students and asked them gently to follow the template and not use any other templates.

- It is recommended for the Department to ask supervisors to send their progress reports each three months to check on the students' performance and progress as well as to know if these supervisors are following their students or not.

- It is recommended for the Department to update the proposals' correction form to be more exclusive to the mistakes the students made during the proposal stage.

- It is recommended to enhance the course of research methodology to be more practical by adding more practice or activities of how to write the sections of the proposal.

- It is hoped if there will be an updating for the books of the library of English Department.

- It is recommended that the main library of Faculty of Education provide the Department of an online service for postgraduate studies to check the works carried out, the titles of the work had done from the postgraduate students, this will be beneficial for the students to avoid repetition.

- It is recommended to provide the Department with a database of the work had done of the postgraduate students in case the library of the Faculty of Education did not provide the list of the titles.

- It is recommended from Postgraduate Studies Office to provide the Department with a list of supervisors' names and their students. In this way, the Department will know the available supervisors for supervision and to avoid the pervious problems of banned supervisors.

7. CONCLUSION

Writing a proposal is not an easy task, students should take in their consideration that they should produce systematic work with evidence as well as with good organization of the proposal elements. Regarding research questions and from the findings, there were some common mistakes committed by the postgraduate students and challenges faced by them. The postgraduate whose research proposals were reviewed in this study seemed to commit common mistakes and faced numerous challenges in writing different chapters of their research proposals. Most of the observed challenges seemed to have pedagogical orientations. The results of current study is similar to the studies mentioned in literature review, in view of the observed mistakes and challenges, some researchers (Baker, 2000; Rainey, 2000; Garcia & Nelson, 2003; Jabloski, 2003; Iqbal, 2007) stated that the postgraduate students are not prepared enough for the real intricacies of drafting their research proposals. Thus, many of them are unaware of the real complexities of proposal writing.

Some of postgraduate students delete the important section or do not know how to organize the sections of proposals (Przeworski & Salomon, 1998; Wong, 2002; Ellis & Levi, 2008; Nyika, 2014). Because of all mentioned, it is crucial and important that the Department of English follows the above mentioned findings to produce an effective research proposals with good quality. This will culminate into a good research because a proposal is the foundation of a thesis of students. A weak foundation will lead to a bad thesis. In addition, the Department of English should provide from time to another workshops to the postgraduate students about academic writing training as well as how to write a research proposal.

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