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## Examining the Cultural Adjustment Experiences of International Students in Writing Dissertations in a UK Campus

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## Examining the Cultural Adjustment Experiences of International Students in Writing Dissertations in a UK Campus

### Abstract

This qualitative study drew on a larger study which was to explore and understand the experiences of non-native speaker postgraduate students in writing dissertations at one university in the United Kingdom. In this qualitative study, we interviewed four international students from different countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Japan. We identified two main themes pertaining to the challenges in writing dissertations. The first included student-related challenges (technical writing matters, thinking in English, identifying research topics, writing literature review, lack of communicative competence and boredom) and the second focused on s-related challenges (meeting supervisor). To cope with those challenges, the participants have applied a multitude of strategies, such as self-management strategies (reading articles/books, translation strategy, key-point drafting and entertainment) and getting-help strategies (asking supervisor[s], hiring proof-readers and online proofreading service). As an implication of this study, we suggest that the postgraduate students could identify their own challenge as non-native English speakers in writing a good quality dissertation in English and find their own effective strategy to overcome it.

### Keywords

international students, overcoming-strategies, qualitative study, students' voices, writing challenges

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## Examining the Cultural Adjustment Experiences of International Students in Writing Dissertations in a UK Campus

Mukhlash Abrar<sup>1</sup>, Amirul Mukminin<sup>1</sup>, Nur Fitriani<sup>2</sup>, Failasofah<sup>1</sup>, Nunung Fajaryani<sup>1</sup>, Hadiyanto<sup>1</sup>, Rafiza Abdul Razak<sup>3</sup>, Herri Mulyono<sup>4</sup>, and Sri Kusuma Ningsih<sup>4</sup>

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This qualitative study drew on a larger study which was to explore and understand the experiences of non-native speaker postgraduate students in writing dissertations at one university in the United Kingdom. In this qualitative study, we interviewed four international students from different countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Japan. We identified two main themes pertaining to the challenges in writing dissertations. The first included student-related challenges (technical writing matters, thinking in English, identifying research topics, writing literature review, lack of communicative competence and boredom) and the second focused on s-related challenges (meeting supervisor). To cope with those challenges, the participants have applied a multitude of strategies, such as self-management strategies (reading articles/books, translation strategy, key-point drafting and entertainment) and getting-help strategies (asking supervisor[s], hiring proof-readers and online proofreading service). As an implication of this study, we suggest that the postgraduate students could identify their own challenge as non-native English speakers in writing a good quality dissertation in English and find their own effective strategy to overcome it.

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### Introduction

Academic writing plays a critical role in socialising students into the discourse at the university level, including master's program students. In the United Kingdom (UK) universities, for instance, postgraduate master students are required to conduct a research project that contributes to a better understanding of the issues in the relevant field and to report its results in a piece of academic writing called a dissertation or a thesis in the context of American and Australian universities. Writing a dissertation or a thesis is undoubtedly not easy (Bitchener, 2009; Meloy, 2002; O'Connell & Jin, 2001; Sadeghi & Khajepasha, 2015) either for native speakers or non-native speakers (NNS) of English as it is not only required the theoretical structure and the context of the text, but also discipline and genre-specific knowledge of the academic language. In addition, producing a dissertation can be the most daunting process because the students need to spend much time and effort to accomplish their work. Rudestam and Newton (2007) assert, "the process requires discipline, independent initiative, creative thinking, working with others, and the surmounting of self-doubt" (p. 9).

These indicate how complicated and tough the process of writing the dissertation to pass through.

This qualitative study attempted to uncover the experiences of four NNS of English students in writing the dissertation, most notably the encountered challenges and strategies for solving the challenges. The purpose is to help academics in the UK universities understand better the challenges and actions of NNS of English in dissertation writing. The results of the study fill the gaps that exist in previous studies as, until recently, there has been a lack of literature and/or information published in relation to NNS writing, particularly in the UK context. In line with its purposes, this study was intended to answer these two research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by NNS of English during writing a dissertation?
2. How do NNS of English address the encountered challenges during writing a dissertation?

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **Writing vs. Academic Writing**

Similar to speaking, writing is conceived as a medium for communication (Fajaryani et al., 2021) between writer(s) and reader(s). It is a process of using written symbols, such as the letter of the alphabet and punctuation, to communicate thoughts, ideas, and even emotions in a readable form. In the context of learning, writing is a complex productive language skill that is not easy to acquire (Myles, 2002). This skill is not naturally acquired by someone when (s)he was born, but it does need to practice and learn through experience. It includes skills to obtain, construct and develop ideas and to write them in a well-structured piece of work. The more frequently someone practices his/her writing, the better manuscript s(he) will eventually produce. It suggests that writing is a continuum of activities that range from the simpler aspects of writing, for example, technical matters, to the more complex act of composing (Mukminin et al., 2015) and is admittedly not as easy as it seems. It is indeed more difficult when someone must write a text in academic context.

Academic writing is not just ordinary writing. It refers to a particular type of writing – for example., essays, articles, thesis, and/or dissertation - which academics use to explain the intellectual boundaries of their discipline and their area of expertise (Hartley, 2008; Navracsics & Molnár, 2017) and has some distinctive characteristics, including a formal-tone, use of the third-person perspective (mostly), precise lexicon, and a clear focus on the research problem. It is evident that academic writing is structurally different from other types of writing and is closely related to the academic world, such as university and/or college students, tutors, and researchers. The process of producing an academic writing text is arguably complex and complicated. Myles (2002) outlines that academic writing does require continuous practice and effort in constructing, developing, and analysing ideas. Grami (2010) asserts that writing an academic paper requires careful thought, planning, discipline, and concentration as it is a complex mental production. Furthermore, Kelder (1996), Kinsler (1990), and Perin et al. (2003) separately argue that good quality academic writing is expected to reflect the writers' ability to read, interpret, analyse, and synthesise critically. These imply that the way ideas are well developed and critically presented is a critical element in academic writing, apart from its language matters.

The overall discussion on the concepts of writing and academic writing suggests that academic writing is a particular type of writing itself and is indeed distinct from another

writing type (non-academic). Compared to non-academic one, academic writing is a formal, rigid, objective, and well-structured writing which focuses only on a specific field and/or an academic category. Despite these differences, both academic and non-academic writings need writers' willingness and consistency to practice as the skill is not naturally required.

### **Academic Writing Challenges**

As it has been mentioned, academic writing is a rigid, logical, and well-structured article and/or text in a specific academic field. Owing to its distinctive style, academic writing, for instance writing a thesis and dissertation, has long been regarded as a difficult skill (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2015; Bitchener, 2009; Hidalgo & Razo, 2014; Meloy, 2002; Myles, 2002; O'Connell & Jin, 2001; Paltridge, 2002; Pineteh, 2013; Sadeghi & Khajepasha, 2015; Stapleton, 2002; Tang, 2012) for writers especially novice writers and NNS of English. With regards to its challenges, much of the literature demonstrate that writers' lack of domain knowledge and certain required skills for academic writing becomes one of the major problems for them to write academically (Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Komba, 2015; Lee & Tajino, 2008; Singh, 2015; Tang, 2012). They argue that many writers, especially university students, cannot properly apply some of the required skills in academic writing, including how to organise and/or develop the ideas, paraphrase, summarise and cite. In other words, students merely concern with the content of writing and do not really use the appropriate discourse. These challenges obviously preclude the writers from producing a good quality written work.

Some researchers (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2015; Chabaya et al., 2009; Ezebilo, 2012; Grant & Graham, 1999; Nyawaranda, 2005) highlighted that supervision-related matters can be challenges and even failures for graduate students in completing their works. Some of the challenges include too few meetings with students, long delays feedback from supervisors, no interest with students' topic, lack of supervisory support, and too little practical help given and direction. This implies that effective supervision is critical as it has empirically proven as one of the successful keys for research students to do their work (Abiddin, 2007; Buttrey & Ritcher, 2005; Cullen et al., 1994). Without good supervision, a student may find it very challenging to write academically and it admittedly affects his writing progress.

To novice and/or NNS of English writers, in specific, poor language proficiency remains a typical issue in their academic writing (Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015; Latif, 2007; Mulyono & Artarini, 2021; Sadeghi & Khajepasha, 2015; Strauss, 2012). Many researchers ascertain that most NNS of English writers struggle to deal with language issues either in theoretical or practical practices. For instance, many NNS of English writers finds academic writing challenging in terms of sentence structure and/or appropriate word choice. It is not surprising as English is neither their first nor second language. For NNS of English, the language issue is not only related to writing skills but also to other language skills, including listening, reading, and speaking (Abrar, 2019; Abrar & Mukminin, 2016; Gebhard, 2012)

### **Studies on Writing Dissertation and/or Thesis Challenges**

Over the years, many studies on the related issue have been undertaken. Sadeghi and Khajepasha (2015), for instance, explored non-native M.A. students' writing challenges by comparing 60 random master's theses from three Iranian universities. They had a descriptive design with corpus analysis involving both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The results of both approaches indicated that selected theses from three universities suffer mostly from style and language problems apart from organisational and methodological matters. With similar results, Singh (2015) carried out her research which aimed at investigating the

challenges faced by non-native English-speaking international graduate students in their academic writing practices at a Malaysian university. She employed quantitative design by administering academic literacies questionnaire to 131 participants. She found that using an appropriate academic style and expressing ideas in correct English are ranked as the top six difficulties faced by NNS of English in academic writing practices.

Komba (2015) qualitatively examined the challenges of writing theses and dissertations among postgraduate students in Tanzanian higher learning institutions. He employed a documentary research method by analysing the content of 103 research reports in total, including 39 theses and 64 dissertations which were randomly selected from the libraries of three universities in Tanzania. He, in his analysis, compared what the students had written in their documents with the ideal details in each chapter of documents. He concluded that Tanzanian postgraduate students appeared to have challenges in writing all chapters that range from inappropriateness in presenting different chapters of the report to lack of academic writing skills. With a rather similar topic, Hidalgo and Razo (2014) specifically explored the difficulties of two Mexican novice writers in writing the literature review of their thesis. The researchers, in this case, employed a mixed method study to investigate the problem. Besides examining the writers' literature review section quantitatively by using Hyland's model, they conducted semi-structure interviews to uncover writer's challenges in constructing literature review part. They revealed that the novice writers find it difficult to write literature review as it requires more time to collect sufficient information and more efforts to select and organise it a well-structured composition. They also found that both writers are inclined to use attitude markers over hedging in their literature review section with almost the same percentage.

Azila-Gbettor, Mensah, and Avorgah (2015), from a different research viewpoint, did a study to explore students and supervisors' perceptions on writing dissertation challenges in a Ghanaian Polytechnics. They focused on the interplay of institutional-student-supervisor related factors. The study was quantitative by distributing a closed-ended questionnaire to 501 participants comprising lecturers/supervisors and 411 final-year students from 10 departments of affiliation across the institution. The results of the study indicated that all participants agreed that students experienced considerable challenges in writing their dissertations, including difficulties in accessing scholarly journals, inadequate funding, and delayed feedback from supervisors. The study also showed that both students and supervisors, regarding student-supervisor related factor, exhibited self-serving bias in their perception. Moreover, Bitchener, Basturkmen, and East (2010) explored supervisors' main concern when giving thesis/dissertation's feedback to their students. They conducted their study descriptively by administering questionnaires and conducting interviews to 35 supervisors across three disciplines – Humanities, Science/Mathematics, and Commerce – at six New Zealand universities. The study revealed that the area of content appeared to be the issue that both L1 and L2 students have to deal within their dissertations, while the issue of linguistic accuracy seemed like another challenge for L2 students.

Some studies above (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2015; Bitchener et al., 2010; Hidalgo & Razo, 2014; Komba, 2015; Sadeghi & Khajepasha, 2015; Singh, 2015) imply that there is a growing number of research in the related issue. They unquestionably have provided valuable information regarding to students' challenges in writing theses/dissertations and/or academic writing from different perspectives and settings. Most study reports, however, tended to compare the students' writing and/or analyse the data quantitatively. This study is purposed to deeply explore the lived experiences of diverse international students in writing their dissertation. By carrying out phenomenological study on the same issue, it is expected to get in-depth information and details on challenges in writing dissertation and the strategies to deal with from the students' perspectives.

## **The Context of the Study**

In qualitative inquiry, a researcher's background, his or her personal connections to the participants, issues being studied, and the standpoints that he or she brings to the subject (Patton, 1990) should be incorporated in the study. This suggests that a qualitative researcher should "explicitly identify their biases, values, and personal interest about their research topic and process" and access to the research participants (Creswell, 2012, p. 184). The first author for this study is a lecturer in one public university in Jambi. He holds a doctoral degree from a United Kingdom university, and he focuses his research in qualitative and higher education. The second author holds a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from a United States public university. He had experience and training in qualitative research by taking various courses at a graduate level, including qualitative research methods, qualitative data analysis, and research methods in education. The third author obtained her master's degree from TESOL program from United Kingdom University. The fourth author is a teaching staff member in one public university, and she got her a Ph.D. in one University in Hungary. The fifth author is a teaching staff member in one public university in Jambi, Indonesia. She obtained her Ph.D. from one university in Indonesia. The sixth author is a professor in education in one public university in Jambi, Indonesia. He focused on fixing the method and references. The seventh author is an associate professor in Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She helped a lot regarding the data, grammatical, and citation issues. The eighth author is a teaching staff member at University of Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. HAMKA, Indonesia. He obtained his Ph.D. from one of the Universities in UK in Education. The last author is a teaching staff member at University of Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. HAMKA, Indonesia.

The authors' interest in exploring NNS' experiences in writing dissertation was initiated by the initial sharing with some NNS about their final project. They shared that they faced many expected and unexpected challenges to complete their master's degree. We decided to do this study as an attempt to provide information for policy makers at the university and faculty level to help NNS succeed in accomplishing their study. The results of the study may also benefit for other NNS to anticipate the encountered challenges they may face when they are in the stage of writing master's dissertation.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The main purpose of this inquiry is to spell out the challenges faced by NNS in their writing dissertation in a UK university. To achieve the purpose of research, we employed a qualitative research method. Qualitative study seems appropriate to be used since it emphasises a comprehensive exploration, explanation, and description of the phenomenon of interest (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Muazza et al., 2018; Mukminin, 2012).

### **Sampling Procedures and Research Participants**

In selecting the participants of the study, the authors used a purposive sampling with a convenience case strategy. Creswell (2007) outlines "The concept of purposive sampling is used in qualitative research. This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for the study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of research problems ..." (p. 125), and "convenience cases, which represent sites or individuals from which researchers

can access and easily collect data” (p. 126). The underlying reason of using this strategy was the availability to access the participants and to collect data from them. The participants of this study were four international students who had already completed their dissertations at one public university in the UK. These four participants came from four different Asian countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Japan. They were (pseudonym) Ayu, Liza, Woody, and Cathy.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In collecting the data, the authors - guided by interview protocol - used semi-structured interview. Before the process of interview, all participants were told about the interview procedures, including setting, time, and language. The authors interviewed the participants individually in their preferable interview location and lasted for about 15-25 minutes. In order not to miss any information from the respondents, the authors recorded the interview via a voice recorder and wrote notes under the various interview prompt headings/probes about what was discussed. The interview protocol comprised questions challenges and coping strategies in writing dissertations. The gathered data were firstly transcribed. Then, the authors meticulously read each line and marked relevant respondents' responses with highlighter in different colors. Subsequently, the authors, to reduce repetitive data, compared and contrasted the relevant responses to get their similarities and differences, and to categorize them into a small manageable set of themes and sub-themes.

### **Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness**

In terms of ethical considerations, we did not coerce the participants to participate in the research. A consent letter informing the nature and purpose of study was initially sent to them and they agreed to voluntarily get involved in this study. To ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the study or to verify the interview data (Creswell, 1998), member checking was purposely done. For this purpose, we returned the interview transcription to get feedbacks and comments from participants and analysed the data together. These were worthwhile for us to not misinterpret the results in final report. In addition, we used pseudonym throughout the manuscript to protect participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality.

## **Findings**

### **Challenges in Writing Dissertation**

The authors, by using thematic analysis, identified two major interrelated themes and sub-themes concerning to the challenges in writing dissertation faced by NNS of English, including (1) Student-related challenge (technical writing matters, thinking in English, identifying research topics, writing literature review, lack of communicative competence, and boredom); (2) Tutor-related challenge (meeting supervisor).

### **Student-Related Challenge**

All participants acknowledged that writing dissertation is arguably challenging for them. One of the most apparent challenges, from the interview results, is student-related challenge. This associates with the factors specific to students that either positively or negatively affects them on the conduct and completion of their research work. Of the six sub-



themes found, technical writing matters appear to be the most challenging issue that the participants had to deal with. In this sense, all participants reported that they faced difficulty with the language structure and vocabulary. Liza, for instance, stated, "... I have to write in English. English is not my first language in my country, so basically the [barriers] to write [are] grammar [and] vocabulary. The most challenging is how to write and organise my writing so that I can [present] my report in simplest way and at the same time precise, accurate, and correct English." Moreover, Ayu commented "I had some problems, like vocabulary. Somehow it is like something difficult for me because it is all about chemistry and the topic is so hard." Beside structure and diction issues, under the same sub-theme, one participant specifically mentioned that referencing is challenging for him. Woody said, "we need to pay attention to reference system here and it is very difficult for me." These clearly indicate that lack of knowledge in technical writing may become the major problem in writing, especially in non-native language.

Some participants highlighted that thinking in English becomes one of the most challenging factor in composing their dissertation. They argued that they were often influenced by their first language when they started writing the sentences. To illustrate, Cathy voiced "One of the most difficult thing for me [is] to think and write the dissertation in English way. It is hard because I always think in Japanese." Similarly, Woody asserted "my skill of [English] writing (hmm) I think (hmm) maybe not good enough, especially thinking in that language." These show that first language can affect the progress of writing in another language. Some other participants argue that identifying research topic and/or title is also challenging. A participant from Malaysia, Liza, revealed "I think my challenges when I wrote my dissertation [can be divided] into few things. First is the project itself, I mean the title [of the project]." Likewise, Woody told the interviewer, "Before writing up my dissertation, I felt difficult to conduct good research and to identify the topic. Sometimes, I am not sure that this is the good way to research." The participants' statements explicitly suggest that finding ideas and/or title for the research is not easy as it seems because it needs a lot of considerations.

The three last sub-themes of student-related challenge are writing literature review, lack of communicative competence, and boredom. For writing literature review section, two participants confessed that this dissertation part is tremendously complicated for them. They, further, stated that they had to spend much energy and time to write the section. Woody ascertained, "I think it's hard to [write] literature review [section] because it took much time. I need to read a lot before I [write the section]. I think I am not good [at] reading and it's hard." Cathy, in a similar vein, reported, "It is difficult for me to write literature review part. Now, I have no exact structure for my dissertations. So, I do not [know] which literature is useful and which literature is not so useful and it [takes] so much energy to decide." Their comments obviously denote that writing literature review can be very challenging as it requires them to previously read and comprehend many literatures. One participant, Cathy, raised another issue that is lack of communicative competence as her difficulty in writing her dissertation. She said "When I talk to my supervisor, there are lots of difficult words and complicated topics. I simply cannot understand what [he is] talking [owing to] my lack of speaking skill." She then added "Talking to supervisor is not like talking to other people. Daily conversation is not so difficult because there are no complicated sentences and no specific vocabularies." It indicates that communicative skill is needed in accomplishing the degree as the students must consult their works with their tutors. Lack of communicative competence may obstruct their writing progress. Concerning with boredom issue, Woody expressed, "I feel [bored] doing my dissertation everyday ...haha (laughing)...hmm...because I have to do the same things [reading and writing] for almost four months. I think everyone [feels] it." Woody's comment shows that tedium seems to be a prevalent issue that every

student must deal with while writing dissertation because doing repeated activities for a quite long period of time.

### **Tutor-Related Challenge**

Aside from student - related challenge, the information gathered from the interview showed that tutor - related challenge appeared to be another factor which influences the participants' writing dissertation process and progress. About this, there is only one sub-theme that is meeting supervisor. A participant from Japan, Cathy, commented:

Because there are not enough teachers in my school. There are [previously] two teachers in my course, but a teacher left because she is pregnant and back to [the] United State. Now, there is only one teacher in my course, so he is really busy and a bit difficult to meet him. I sometimes have to wait [a little] bit longer time to consult my writing and I don't [any] have ideas what to write.

The respondent's perspective implicitly means that delayed time to meet supervisor(s) causes the confusion in writing dissertation.

### **Strategies to Overcome Writing Dissertation Challenges**

The result of interview indicated the participants did do some strategies to overcome the encountered challenges in the process of writing their dissertation. Going through thematic analysis, the authors classified two main interrelated themes and sub-themes, including: (1) Self-management strategy (reading articles and books, translation, constructing the outline, and fun activities), and (2) Getting-help strategy (asking supervisor, hiring a proof-reader, and online service).

#### **Self-Management Strategy**

Self-management appears to be the most common strategy used by the participants to overcome their challenges in writing dissertation. Within this theme, the authors identified four interrelated sub-themes. First, all participants revealed that reading articles/books is significant during the writing process, developing the research ideas and writing literature review. Ayu, for instance, stated, "To overcome the difficulties [developing ideas and understanding the writing format], I read many journals. I read and read again, and I learn the format of them. And I tried to [write] the same [as the journal format] that I have read." Woody, a participant from Thailand, told the interviewer that, "To [overcome] my problem in writing literature review, I just need to read the articles and books because it's useful although it's very difficult [for] me." Their responses clearly indicate that reading articles/books can be a fruitful strategy to keep updating ideas or to find the appropriate writing format. Secondly, one participant mentioned that translation strategies can be very helpful in writing her dissertation. Cathy commented, "To cope [with] my problem (thinking in English), I start thinking and writing in Japanese and I translated them. Translation is useful for me, but [not always]." It is evident that translation can be used as an alternative way if the writer has problem with thinking in target language.

Thirdly, some participants shared that key-point-drafting is a handy strategy to do before the actual writing. Ayu said, "Before I start writing, I have to make a point about what should I write. So, whenever I read the paragraphs [and] I think [they are not coherence], I

look back to my notes and find the solution for it.” Along similar line, Woody mentioned, “I wrote the structure of my dissertation before writing the complete one.” Outlining some important points prior to the process of writing, in some respects, makes the writer easier to write coherently. Lastly, Woody enthusiastically revealed that entertainment/fun activity is sometimes effective to get rid of pressure and boredom in writing dissertation. He told the interviewer “I sometimes watch movie or hang out with friends when I [get stuck] with my dissertation.” The participant’s response suggests that doing fun activity – for example, watching movie(s), listening to music, and hanging out - can be a worthwhile option to do whenever the students feel tired and bored of writing the dissertation.

### **Getting-Help Strategy**

Getting help is another strategy that the participants have done to face their encountered challenges whilst the process of writing dissertation. This strategy is distinct from the previous one in a way that it requires the third party, including expert, professional, and tool in overcoming the challenges. The researchers, based on the participants’ interview transcript, identified three interrelated sub-themes. First, all participants admitted that asking supervisor(s) is hugely rewarding because supervisors are the ones who provide guidance and assistance to them during the writing process. Liza asserted, “My supervisor is [a very experienced professor]. His schedule is quite tight [and] I have to make appointment to meet him. He is very open, and he welcomed Febby and me to contact him anytime if we have problem and it’s very helpful.” Likewise, Cathy ascertained, “The meeting with my supervisor is very useful. During the meeting, I tried to ask my supervisor what I can’t [clearly] understand although the time is limited.” The participants’ transcription palpably shows that asking supervisor is a relieving strategy to cope with dissertation issues.

Second, most participants mentioned that they hired professionals, proof-readers, to help them with their dissertation, particularly with the grammar, dictions, and writing technical matters. Woody kindly shared, “I asked a proof-reader to check my writing, such as the grammar. Besides, my supervisor [acts] as another proof-reader. He [commented] on my writing mistakes.” Further, Ayu recounted:

I [hired] a proof-reader for my final submission...it is so hard to find the proof-reader that master my topic since [it] is so rare. That is why he was not reviewing the content and the logical flow [of my dissertation]. He just reviewed the grammar.

The last sub-theme is online proofreading service. One of the participants, Liza, confessed that she used an online proofreading service due to the limited time she had in accomplishing her dissertation. She said:

I did plan to use a proof-reader service for my dissertation, and I did ask [the service]. But unluckily I [couldn’t] manage to finish my dissertation earlier so I did not manage to get help from the proof-reader. So, I just used the online service [to check my writing structure].

These indicate that both hiring native proof-readers and using online proofreading service are helpful strategies for NNS of English writer to encounter the technical issues in writing dissertation, in particular the grammar.

## Discussion

As indicated before, academic writing has a pivotal role at the university level and the students are required to be capable of producing the text within the expected standard. All participants in this study admitted that they had tried their best in accomplishing their dissertation as the requirement to graduate from their master programmes. Nevertheless, no matter how serious they were with their writing, they had to face both expected and unexpected challenges during the process, including student-related and tutor-related challenges. From the two themes, student-related challenge (technical writing matters, thinking in English, identifying research topics, writing literature review, lack of communicative competence, and boredom) appeared to be the most common issue for the participants in completing their dissertation. All participants revealed that their biggest issue is to write the dissertation with the correct English. They specifically mentioned that lack of competence in technical writing, i.e. vocabulary, grammar, and referencing, made them frustrating. This finding confirms many other research and literature (Al-khasawneh, 2010; Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015; Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Latif, 2007; Sadeghi & Khajepasha, 2015) in finding that language barriers predominantly challenge the foreign language writers in producing a good piece of academic writing. As a matter of fact, this finding is not surprising because the language itself, English, is neither the participants' first nor second language for most of them. Some of them, moreover, pleaded that they had never written any English essay before studying in the UK. Aside from the language issues, some of them argue that thinking in target language while writing is assuredly difficult. This finding concurs with the result of Al-Shboul and Huwari (2015) study which highlighted that thinking in native language is one of EFL learners' challenges in writing English essay. Although the use of native language is beneficial in language learning target language, including writing (Cohen, 1995; Kern, 1994), it possibly causes the errors to occur in target language when the two languages are by nature distinct. Therefore, it is advised to think in the language they are writing although most non-natives, especially non-proficient, rely on their native language structure to produce a response/text in target language (Bhela, 1999; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002).

Another prominent sub-theme of student-related challenge is the difficulty in identifying research topic. Some participants admitted that they could not easily decide the topic of their research from the beginning. They kept changing their writing ideas until they had adequately read the appropriate literature. This finding supports the result of a study (Al-Murshidi, 2014) in that generating ideas of the writing topic could become a barrier for the writers, and it may severely affect the flow of their writing process. The finding seems reasonable as identifying topics or generating ideas is the first step to do in writing process (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). The next sub-theme is related to writing organization, which is the difficulty in constructing and developing literature review section. Some participants conceded that writing literature review was difficult for them as they spent much time to read the related sources texts and synthesis them into a concise and detail piece of information. It is no wonder that the participants find it challenging to write this section because it comprises extensive reference to the related research and theory; it also shows the research and writers' position among the sources texts that they draw on (Ridley, 2012). It also involves a complex range of analytical, rhetorical, and academic writing skills (Turner & Bitchener, 2008). The result of this study is in line with the study result of Hildalgo & Razo (2014) and Singh (2015) in finding that writing literature review section poses a significant challenge for the writers, especially non-native and novice writers.

The last two emerging sub-themes of student-related challenge are lack of communicative competence and boredom. One participant pledged that she struggled to

communicate with her supervisor due to her lack of communicative competence. At glance, communicative competence has nothing to do with writing dissertation process, but it certainly does. In writing dissertation, the students are given supervisors or supervisory team who are regarded as the experts in the research field to give advice and feedbacks for the students' works. Communicative competence is deemed necessary for the students to have to support their writing progress.

Another emerging theme from the interview is tutor-related challenge. Regarding this theme, one participant reported that she found it quite difficult to meet her supervisor, and therefore, the meetings were frequently delayed and not regularly arranged. This situation sometimes led her to confusion and, at some points, slowed down the progress of her dissertation writing. Hence, effective supervision plays a significant to support students' writing because it has been proven in many literatures as one of the successful factors for research students (Abiddin, 2007; Buttrey & Ritcher, 2005; Cullen et al., 1994).

Given the above challenges, the participants tried their best to overcome their writing challenges by applying some strategies, including self-management and getting-help strategies. Self-management strategy is participants' self-initiative strategy without getting help from others. Within this theme, the researcher identified four interrelated sub-themes. All participants reported that reading articles/books is the most prevalent activity for them to deal with their writing difficulties, particularly in identifying research topic and constructing literature review. Reading is generally defined as a process of building, creating, and constructing meaning from the written texts (Anderson et al., 1985). The participants' strategy to read before write is arguably makes sense because reading and writing are interdependent skills (Kirin, 2010; Stotsky, 1983). Stotsky (1983) further argues that "better writers tend to be better readers" (pp. 636). This indicate that reading activity, before the act of writing, can support and shape the way writer writes the text as it is not merely fruitful to enrich the ideas of writing, but it also provides the writer the knowledge of vocabularies, sentence structures, and rhetorical features of text. Besides reading, translation is another strategy that the participant(s) frequently did to cope with writing problems. This is a process of transferring meaning, thoughts, and ideas from one language to another. One participant mentioned that this strategy is helpful when she had the problem with thinking in target language during writing and/or sentence structures issues. Translation strategy may be easier and more useful for non-native writers to begin their writing in target language, but it can also be problematic. The issues of ambiguity, lexical and cultural mismatches and multiword units between the languages possibly impact the writing progress.

The other two sub-themes of self-management strategy are key point drafting and fun activities. Some participants stated that key-point drafting/outlining is a good and helpful start before writing. Oshima and Hague (2007) in their book underscore that outlining is one of the steps in writing. This is an effective way for the writers to ensure that the ideas come across in a clear, coherent, and logical structure. Additionally, this strategy aids the writer save their time in writing process. In terms of fun activities, one participant said that he occasionally did the activities, for example watching movies, to get rid of his boredom in writing his dissertation. It is no doubt that writing in an academic style is a daunting activity (Normore, 2011) in that it requires the writer to write-in-seemingly-a-whole-new-language and to do repeated activities.

Getting-help strategy is another identifiable strategy for the participants to cope with their writing challenges. This strategy, in practice, involves help from other individuals and/or tools. The researchers identified three interrelated sub-themes, including asking supervisors, hiring proof-readers, and using online-proofreading services. Firstly, most participants acknowledged that they got much support from their supervisors because they could ask their supervisors' help whenever needed. They also had effective consultation with

their supervisor, and, therefore, the writing process was considerably smooth. This finding of this study suggests that the role of supervisor is pivotal to the success of students in writing their dissertation and confirms much literature on the roles of supervisors and supervisions for research students (Abiddin, 2007; Buttrey & Ritcher, 2005; Cullen et al., 1994). Secondly, most participants hired the professionals, proof-readers, to check the language uses in their writing. They claimed that this strategy is worthwhile as English is not their first language.

This study has effectively explored the experiences of international graduate students in writing their dissertations, mainly on the challenges they encountered and strategies they used to overcome the challenges. However, this present study has some limitations. Firstly, since this study employed a case study approach and the participants were limited to four international master students, the results are unable to be generalised. Further research may include a larger sample of international students from different degree levels, which may provide different perspectives of international in writing academic works. Secondly, this study focused on the students' perspectives only, so the further related study could explore the faculty's perspective in supervising the international students.

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