
Bite the Bullet: Experiences in Writing Undergraduate Theses during the Covid-19 Pandemic

BUNGA AYU WULANDARI¹, AHMAD RIDHA^{2*}, AND AULIA AZZAHRA³

Abstract

This research took a closer look at data from an Indonesian public university database that showed that, as of November 2022, 14,44% of English department final-year students from 2017 in a teacher training and education faculty were still working on their theses. Data was gathered through qualitative research using document analysis and interviews to examine the topics, methodologies, and students' experiences writing an undergraduate thesis. The findings showed that the students' theses covered seven topics: teaching and learning, English skills, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, translation, content analysis, and research and development (R & D). This research found factors contributing to students' challenges in completing their thesis writing during the COVID-19 pandemic, including students' relationships with supervisors, failure to focus, lack of motivation, and difficulties locating relevant references. Additionally, the students used several strategies to help finish their theses on time, for example, setting specific goals, having a study partner, and reading various related sources. This research adds to the body of knowledge on undergraduate students' difficulties and the strategies used in completing their theses during the pandemic. This research is expected to provide insight into possible interventions to assist students in overcoming the difficult task of writing a thesis, primarily when most of the research process is still online.

Keywords

Challenges, research method, research topic, strategies, thesis writing

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¹Universitas Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia, Corresponding author: bungaayu.wulandari@unja.ac.id

^{2,3}Universitas Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia.

Introduction

In addition to listening, speaking, and reading, one of the fundamental English skills is writing. The complexity of writing skills required increases with an educational degree. The final task for undergraduate students enrolled in universities is writing a thesis. One of the most challenging academic assignments an undergraduate student can have is writing a thesis, which calls for high self-efficacy or confidence in one's ability to accomplish goals (Bandura, 1997). In Indonesian universities, for instance, undergraduate students are required to write a thesis before graduating. According to Indonesian Presidential Regulation No. 8 of 2012 concerning the National Framework for Indonesian Education, which forms the basis of the Indonesian Qualifications Framework, an undergraduate thesis is a scientific investigation in which students must apply theory and knowledge to solve a social problem. Therefore, a thesis is a work of scientific writing founded on the results of a literature review, scientific investigation, or work that advances a particular field of study. Students' comprehensive abilities, including literature review, data analysis, critical thinking, and communication skills, can be evaluated while completing a bachelor's degree thesis.

Students of teacher training and education faculty who take thesis units can potentially transfer their research skills to classroom practices. Furthermore, research indicates that completing a bachelor's thesis can enhance students' communication abilities, both oral and written (Donnelly, Dallat & Fitzmaurice, 2013). Students are aware of the difficulties and complexities encountered when writing their theses and employ various perspectives and mindsets. Students might also rely less on formal supervision and more on their experience and intuition (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009). Students' sense of competency concerning tasks confronting them in various settings can be promoted by spaces facilitating dialogue and active student engagement in studied topics (Dysthe, Samara, & Westheim, 2006).

Students of the bachelor's degree program in Indonesia write a thesis in the final year of their study. It is a partial requirement in completing the bachelor's degree. Most course syllabi state that the final undergraduate thesis is expected to be completed in six months. Through undergraduate research projects, students can conduct real-world studies of topics related to their fields of study. Thus, students must carefully consider the topics, sources, and research methods before writing their thesis. Students must define their research topics, typically derived from observing social phenomena, create research questions, and devise action plans for addressing them. These plans include developing a research design, gathering, and analyzing data, and presenting the findings. These tasks push students to use all their research and writing abilities.

This research investigated data from the university database record of an English education study program at a public university in Jambi in November 2022, revealing that there were still 19 out of 76 students from the year 2017 who had not completed their theses per October 2022. It means the students had undertaken more than four years of study completion or more than two semesters allocated for thesis writing unit. Therefore, this research tried to look comprehensively into the students' experiences writing their undergraduate theses to shed light on their experiences. This research investigated topics and research methods chosen by the year 2017 students of the English Education study program

at a public university in Jambi, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they utilized to complete the thesis during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research provided significant insight into the subjects and research methods students frequently choose for their theses. Even though the data for this research was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is still relevant because online procedures in thesis writing, such as supervision and data collection procedures, have become commonplace today due to the rise of online learning during the pandemic. The information will help the study program identify the difficulties that students encounter when writing their theses so that it can provide them with the appropriate level of support. Since this research provides numerous helpful ways utilized by the students for completing thesis units, the research findings are equally beneficial for students who write theses.

Literature Review

The thesis is the compulsory academic writing that undergraduate students in Indonesian universities must write. Although recent thesis writing for students in university has received challenges, research has demonstrated the potential advantages of writing a bachelor's thesis, which primarily manifests as increased interest and positive attitudes towards research and development along with the potential for additional practical application of research findings (Fernández-Cano, Marañón, & Feijoo-Cid, 2021). While these projects can be highly demanding, they can offer undergraduate students some of the best learning opportunities. Kuh (2008) argued that undergraduate research is a high-impact practice that involves students in actively contested questions, cutting-edge technologies, empirical observation, and the excitement of working toward essential questions. Furthermore, undergraduate research projects are highly effective instruction that helps students become persistent, engaged, and self-aware, in addition to honing their communication and research skills (Kuh, 2008).

Thesis writing is a complex pursuit because students' perseverance, engagement, and motivation are essential for finishing it on time (Rauf, 2016). Students have to utilize all the prior knowledge they have acquired (Dong, 1998). Due to its high demands (such as time constraints and supervisor feedback), students are more likely to experience stress (Wardi & Ifdil, 2016). According to Ursia, Siaputra, and Sutanto (2013), students must schedule their time effectively to write reports, read articles, schedule meetings with supervisors, and discuss with peers and supervisors. Students' undergraduate thesis writing time is contingent not only on their efforts but also on the availability of their supervisors and research participants. As a result, the ability of supervisors to assist students in finishing their theses on time determines their success. In addition, the research participants' willingness to participate is also a crucial factor in completing their research. Paltridge and Starfield (2017) added that writing a thesis in English is even more difficult for people for whom English is a second language. Despite good grammar skills, graduate-level writing is daunting for native and non-native speakers. Limited writing support and a lack of research and professional development programs contribute to this issue. According to Jeyaraj (2018), students must be proficient in English, conversant with academic writing norms, and knowledgeable in their respective fields. The list of issues facing students now includes grammar, word choice, appropriate structure,

translation, and conjunctions, to name a few (Çetinkaya & Ylmaz, 2017). Therefore, it is common for students to experience challenges in finishing the task. They commonly find thesis writing challenging because they have never written one before. Therefore, students must have strategies to complete it before the deadline.

According to Stainer (1979), strategy relates to fundamental directional choices, goals, and objectives, and developing a thesis plan is necessary to complete the assignment on time and stay on course. The plan must account for potential issues that might develop during the writing process. Mintzberg (1994) explained that a strategy is a plan, a "how", or a way of moving from one place to another. Thus, a student needs a plan to complete the thesis writing process from beginning to end. Therefore, research on examining university students' thesis writing experiences related to their chosen topics, research methods, and their experiences completing the thesis unit, including the challenges they faced and the strategies they employed, is worth pursuing. The findings are expected to help other students anticipate what they will go through in the thesis writing process. Accordingly, they can plan the strategies to carry out the task of writing the thesis.

However, the fact that students must be adequately prepared to proceed to the last stage of earning a higher degree is a crucial reality that universities have neglected (Lessing & Schulze, 2003). Most students say that one of the hardest things they have to do for their academic work is to write a thesis (El-Freihat, 2021). Students' main issue when writing theses is that they are not focused enough during the writing process. Tiwari (2019) summarized students' challenges when writing theses or dissertations and indicated that writing academic work is not simple. Students must overcome several obstacles, starting with deciding on their area of interest for research and continuing to collect and analyze the findings before attempting to discuss and develop implications and recommendations. According to Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006), students lack sufficient knowledge of several of the thesis's key sections, including discussing the findings and how to conclude with both theoretical and practical applications. Al-Qaderi (2016) listed the most common difficulties graduate students in Arab had, such as the absence of well-stocked libraries that make it challenging to obtain the materials and references, they need to finish their writing. Turmudi (2020) posited the most significant challenges students face when writing their theses or dissertations categorized these challenges into academic language selection challenges, time management, choosing appropriate research methodologies, identifying understudied problems, student demotivation, and lastly, relationship with the supervisor. Wang and Li (2008) also hypothesized that students face a variety of challenges when writing their theses, such as choosing a title that reflects their interests and various issues with the supervision process, like communication breakdown. Additionally, students lack the language proficiency to speak in coherent sentences. Thus, they struggle to choose the best approach for crafting a cogent thesis and cannot address the dissertation's primary subject (Kikula & Quorro, 2007).

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach. The researchers gathered information about the 2017 English Education study program students' thesis topics and research methods from the university database record. The year 2017 students were chosen as the subject of this

research because they were supposed to complete their thesis unit at the end of the 2021 academic year. After reviewing the database, the researchers discovered 76 registered students (60 females and 16 males). In November 2022, 19 students had not accomplished their theses, so they could not graduate from university, while 57 students had completed their studies.

The researchers then proceeded to the in-depth interview stage. The researchers selected six students to be interviewed, from those who completed the thesis on time and those who procrastinated for more than two semesters. Four female and two male students ranged in age from 22 to 23 years old. Due to concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted individually with each participant in Zoom meeting rooms and via WhatsApp. About 30 minutes were allotted for each recorded interview. One interviewee requested to talk in English, and five interviews were performed in Bahasa Indonesia.

The interview data were transcribed verbatim and sent back to the participants. It aimed to allow participants to see what information they wanted to exclude. Two participants requested that some of the information they had provided be deleted. After settling the information that could go further to the data analysis process with the participants, the researchers began the translation process. The researchers then read the whole data three times to become familiar with it. Next, the researchers coded the data based on emerging patterns related to students' challenges and strategies in writing their theses successfully. The developing patterns and the relevant quotes were arranged in a table to highlight essential themes relating to difficulties and strategies in completing the thesis unit. After discovering themes, the researchers presented the data in an interpretive analysis procedure following [Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, and Palmér \(2019\)](#), who noted that the results are presented and discussed in reverse order (beginning with the themes and descriptive text, accompanied with quotes) so that the themes that emerge from the experiences of the participants are explained in a meaningful text.

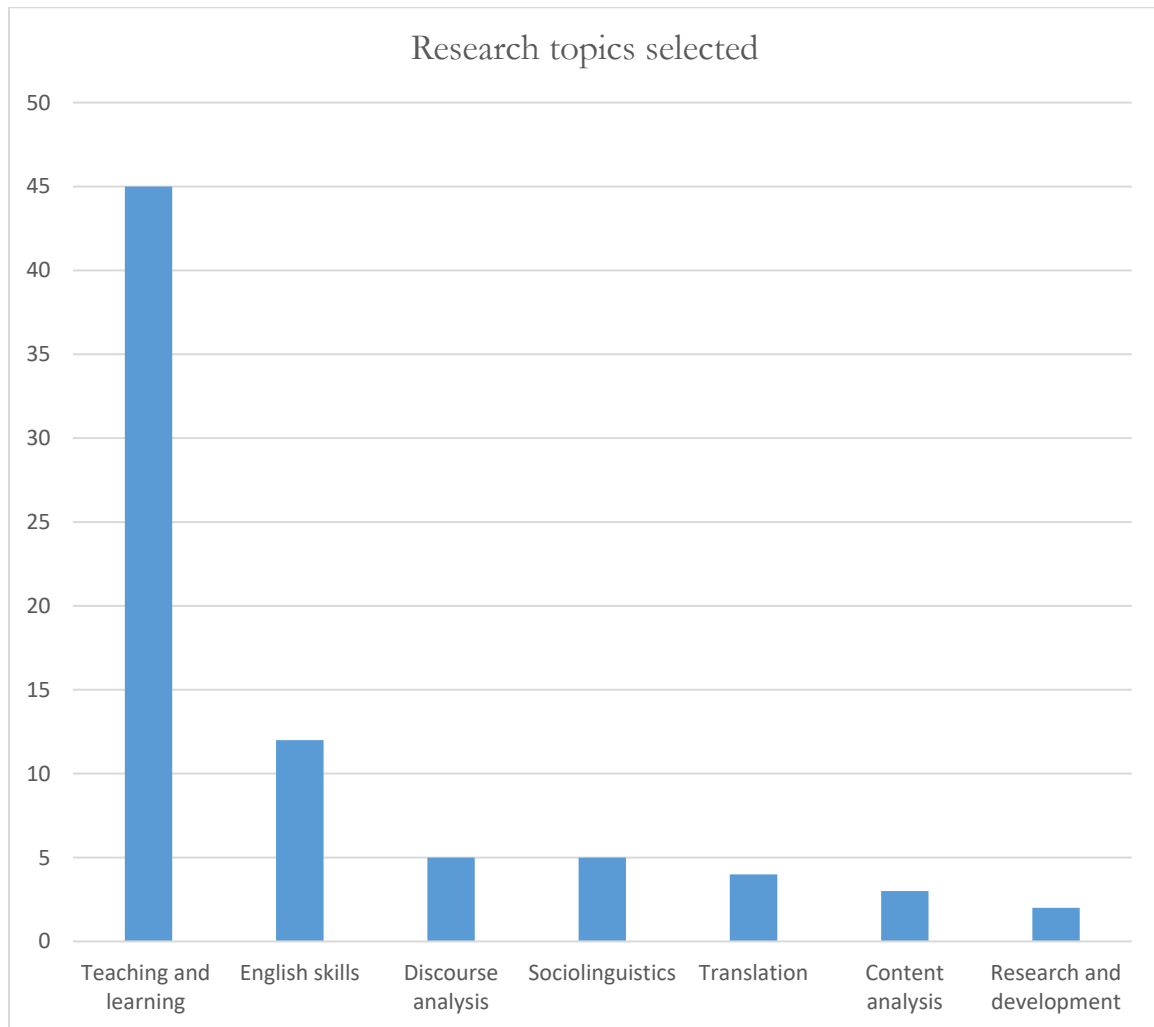
Findings and Discussions

This research investigated the topics and research methods selected by final-year students of the English Department in a teacher training and education faculty of an Indonesian public university. This research also explored challenges experienced and strategies used by the students during the thesis writing process.

Topics and research methods chosen by students

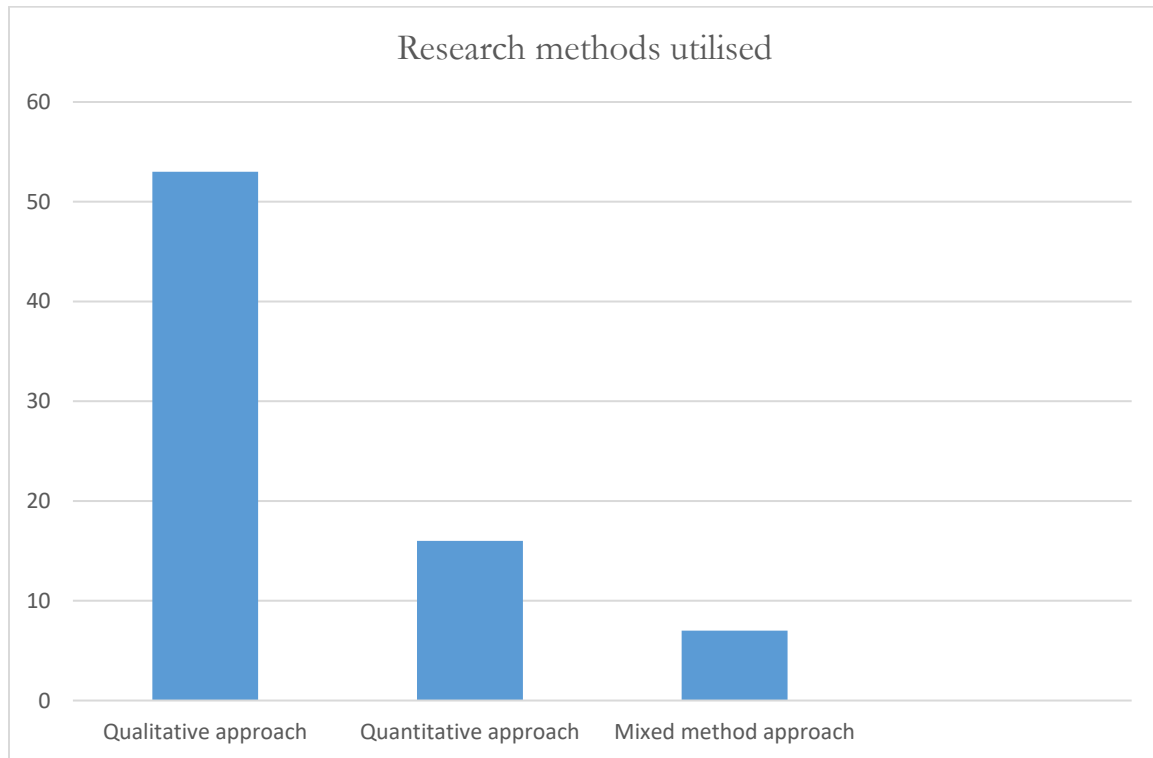
Data gathered in October 2022 showed that 57 out of 76 students finished their thesis units. Thus, 19 students were still working on their theses. The graph that follows shows the research topics that the students selected.

Chart 1. *Research topics selected by the students*



According to Chart 1, students in the English Education study program most frequently chose to focus their research on the teaching and learning domain. There were 45 research subjects related to teaching and learning. The second most popular research topic was the subject of English language skills, conducted by 12 students. Discourse analysis and sociolinguistics came in third among the research topics the students chose, with five students for each area. Four students focused on translation study, and three worked on content analysis projects. Research and Development (R & D) was the least popular research topic, selected by two students. Regarding the research methodologies picked by the students, out of a total of 76 students, 53 selected the qualitative approach, 16 chose the quantitative approach, and seven used the mixed method approach.

Chart 2. *Research methods utilized by the students*



As shown in chart two, it can be inferred from the data that students in the study program mainly chose qualitative over quantitative or mixed methods. The participants also indicated that they decided on the research approach used to achieve their studies' objectives by considering the accessibility of the participants and reading relevant references and previous research. As investigated, the participants in this research selected their research topics by searching the topics in Google Scholar, taking part in lecturers' research, drawing ideas from the teaching practice program, and reading seniors' theses.

Challenges experienced by students in completing their thesis during the pandemic

Three students were selected to share their experiences related to their difficulties in finishing their thesis writing process. The participants will be named S1, S2, S3.

Research participants issues

The first issue raised by the participants related to their research participants has rarely been mentioned in other studies investigating thesis writing challenges. S3, for example, said

that she had trouble getting responses from the participants in her quantitative investigation. She was forced to wait longer for the responses from the participants than she expected.

“Not many people are willing to complete my research survey, so I need more time to obtain sufficient data” (S3)

It has been proven challenging for S3 to draw respondents to respond to her research survey immediately. Due to their busy schedule, few people can donate their time to research studies. However, they are more likely to agree to participate if researchers can explain the significance of the research and how it relates to them personally or to issues that are important to them. Furthermore, the researchers can also send reminders to the potential participants to remind them about the invitation to participate.

Meanwhile, S1 said she felt uncomfortable doing interviews by phone, Google Meet, or Zoom.

"I cannot meet the participants directly during the interview, so I had to interview phone calls, which affected the nature of the interview." (S1)

She added,

"It was challenging to communicate with the participants because of the need to maintain social distancing measures."

S1 noted that it was challenging for her to contact participants because of the social distance. As previously mentioned, to invite participants to participate in our research, researchers must persuade potential participants of the significance of the research. It is unlikely that a potential participant will be interested in joining unless the researchers write a concise and clear explanation about the significance of the research that will be sent to them online. The drawback of conducting online interviews, as noted by S1, is related to the nature of the interviews. It is advised that an interviewer use cues from the interview to elicit more profound questions from the respondent during a qualitative interview. The delay of the real-time connection that most online communication experiences will pose a challenge to the interactive conversation-like interview format.

Administrative process issues

S3 mentioned that she found it difficult to contact the academic staff during the COVID-19 lockdown to request a letter of authorization so that she could conduct her data collection phase. She said:

"Usually, requesting an authorization letter to collect research data simply takes one day, but it took me three weeks to receive one".

Even though students do not need approval from an ethical body to carry out their research, they need an official cover letter to collect data at schools. The research participant indicated that administrative issues were problematic during the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps due to the lockdown, which has never been addressed in any research examining students' difficulties in finishing their thesis. It is an interesting finding because students interact with participants, supervisors, and university administrators. The administrative service for students organizing their official letters regarding their theses should be considered, as the participants in this research have expressed concern about it.

Supervisor-related issues

In this research, S3 mentioned she could not build rapport with her supervisor due to online communication.

"I don't have close relationships with my supervisors because we barely met in person. We only communicated through WhatsApp messages. I had to accept that if my supervisors did not respond to me immediately or provide feedback, I felt less motivated to continue writing".

The finding showed that students want approachable supervisors willing to provide feedback. In addition to acting as mentors and establishing open and transparent communication channels, good advisors also offer advice on the project and support the emotional needs of their students. Any verbal cues from the supervisors also impact students' performance. S3 also mentioned how her supervisor only cared about the grammar of her thesis draft.

"The examiners completely questioned me during the exam. My supervisor hardly provided feedback regarding the content of my thesis, only focusing on vocabulary and grammatical errors."

One participant reported that her supervisor had been infected with the Coronavirus, which delayed their supervision.

"Unfortunately, my supervisor caught the coronavirus. She needed some time to recover from the infection" (S1)

The participants also shared their internet connection issues. During the COVID-19 outbreak, the students were compelled to return to their hometowns. The internet connection occasionally experienced issues due to their hometown being rural.

"The signal in my hometown was feeble, while during the pandemic everything was managed online" (S2)

The usage of Internet communication made the supervision process more challenging. S2 also claimed that she did not obtain proper supervision from her supervisor.

"To be honest, I didn't feel like I had adequate supervision from my supervisor. As a result, during my proposal seminar, the examiners put me to the test".

Most students desire a good supervisor-supervisee relationship, but most fall between reasonable and fair. A good relationship benefits the student and positively impacts the supervisor's reputation through work quality. A combination of pedagogical and interpersonal skills is needed for supervision in higher education. Encouraging students to become self-sufficient researchers is as essential as writing a solid thesis. Supervisors guide research progress and thesis writing, and students gain from these intellectual exchanges.

Focus and motivation issues

Due to the various academic and non-academic barriers imposed during research, students must possess perseverance, willpower, and endurance to complete the long and arduous final thesis writing project. Many students, though, are unable to persevere. For example, S3 said,

It seems as though I'm working by myself. The pandemic policy prevents me from having direct meetings with my supervisors. Supervision over WhatsApp or Zoom doesn't feel the same as offline meetings. I must develop my drive. If I meet with the supervisors, I anticipate they will assign me a deadline to adhere to.

Dependency on lecturers causes procrastination, as exemplified by the participant. It is destructive for students because they waste time and do not get much done. Procrastination can also lead to stress and psychological dysfunction because once the students realize, they have approached the due date to complete their thesis. Students can finish their theses on time if they adhere to the requirements of the curriculum. Students may also postpone their graduation if they disregard the curriculum's requirements. The participant in this research, S2, mentioned she could not focus on completing her thesis because, at the same time, she had to undertake a pre-service teaching program. She said,

"It was my fault. During my teaching practice, I put off writing my thesis."

This participant claimed another important program was happening simultaneously, preventing him from managing his time effectively.

Locating relevant references

When writing their theses, students need to use high-quality references. Supervisors and librarians can help, as they will direct students to accessible and pertinent resources. The research participants, who were still working on their theses, talked about how hard it was to locate reliable references because they had restricted access to credible online journals.

"We struggled to locate and compile relevant references because of our limited access to them or our inability to determine which of our free options is the most trustworthy" (S1)

S3 said,

"I found it difficult to obtain high-quality articles from respected journals because most required university access."

It is evident from the participants that they had difficulty locating reliable sources due to their lack of access to reputable online journals. Credible online resources should ideally be made available to university students. Nonetheless, supervisors or librarians can assist in directing students to open-access sites like Google Scholar or Research Gate if the university cannot provide them with paid online resources. In some instances, researchers are happy to provide a complimentary copy of their publications upon request.

Strategies utilized by students in completing thesis unit

The three students interviewed to share their experiences related to their success in completing the thesis unit earlier in this research are named S4, S5, and S6. The participants identified their strategies for finishing on time as having definite objectives, a study partner, reading relevant sources, and conducting preliminary research.

Having definite objectives

All participants agreed that setting a clear goal would make the thesis more likely to be completed on schedule. They found that they needed internal structure to help them complete their theses. The examples of structural components were setting aside time for thesis work and adhering to more manageable, regular deadlines. S4 said,

"I wrote at least one page every day. I've set goals for myself; for instance, I need to finish chapter 2 today. I just need to stay committed to it and have faith in my ability to reach it".

S5 mentioned,

“We should work to make even a tiny improvement. You have to turn on your laptop daily, even if only to write one paragraph. You must make progress every day and every week. I completed my thesis on time in this way.”

Regular writing is crucial to completing a thesis amidst their struggles to find the perfect time due to personal and social limitations. Although the participants in this research did not mention that their supervisor assigned them a deadline, they established their deadline to help them stay focused and inspired to write.

Having a study partner

A support system was essential for managing the stress of finishing a thesis and the actual thesis work. S4 explained that having a study partner motivated her, and they could support one another. S4 and her study partner reviewed each other's theses and gave constructive criticism. This strategy allowed her to write effectively regularly. S6 suggested that,

"We require a study partner to help us write our thesis."

S5 said,

"You need someone to give you motivation to keep writing. I'm not talking about a boyfriend here; I'm talking about a friend who might also be writing a thesis, so you're in the same situation, and they can relate to you."

It is clear from the participants' responses that having a companion to talk to or understanding that their friends were experiencing similar things made the students feel less alone. The advantages of having a study partner are numerous, but previous research has not often discussed this tactic. Students can benefit from one another's insights and support one another in meeting deadlines and writing objectives.

Reading relevant resources

A participant in this research mentioned the importance of reading relevant resources for her thesis writing process. S4 said that,

"I read many materials, for example, books and journal articles relevant to my thesis. I searched these sources for ideas, which I incorporated into my thesis. However, I didn't just copy; I used the ideas as models to expand into my thesis context." (S4)

The participants' comprehension of their writing concepts was deepened by spending many hours reading papers published in reputable journals.

Conclusion

The investigation revealed seven research topics selected by the participants: teaching and learning, English language skills, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, translation, content analysis, and research and development (R & D). As the nature of the study program is teaching and learning, it can be understood if students mainly chose teaching and learning topics. Furthermore, students usually undertake the teaching practice unit before or while taking the thesis unit so that they might find issues they want to investigate more at school. Additionally, the research shows that students favored qualitative research over mixed or quantitative approaches. Due to the convenience of participants' accessibility and from reading literature, students thought qualitative research was more convenient for them. Students usually choose qualitative methods over quantitative ones, assuming it is easier to conduct qualitative research and analyze the interview data. However, this assumption is misleading because, using a qualitative approach, the researcher should anticipate exploring rich data and working with abundant data from the interview. When this research was conducted, the participants who did not complete their theses reported several challenges: research participants' issues, administrative issues, supervisor-related issues, focus and motivation issues, and locating relevant references. The participants who completed their study on time mentioned several strategies they utilized to finish their thesis. The strategies are having definite goals, having a study partner, and reading relevant resources.

The researcher can anticipate challenges to research participants' issues by providing information sheets for participants and direct explanations for potential participants. Although consent forms are rarely provided by students, it is still advisable that they do so because, in some way, it will reassure participants that their privacy will be protected and that their requests to have any information removed or to stop participating will be honored. Meanwhile, faculty can assist students in providing any necessary letters they need by improving the student service center online even though the students cannot arrange it directly to the office. The research reveals that students often lack research autonomy and motivation, leading to reliance on supervisors. Supervisors can help students cultivate an inquiry mindset, instill a love for learning, and encourage their interests. They can also teach students about disciplinary requirements and provide emotional support. Supervisors play a critical role in students' research experiences, ensuring they provide a fulfilling and enjoyable experience beyond scholarly knowledge. However, supervisors should emphasize the importance of self-regulatory skills in undergraduates to boost self-efficacy, manage time effectively, and prepare for deadlines. They should also encourage students to prioritize their work early, set smaller goals, and divide research assignments into manageable chunks. Supervisors and university librarians can also assist students in locating resources to locate appropriate articles for use as references. While the university does not always subscribe to credible online journals, students can still access a wealth of free resources like Research Gate and Google Scholar. The research participant indicated that having a specific goal broken down into manageable chunks would help her finish the thesis on schedule. Additionally, the results of this research imply that students may gain from having study partners. Study programmes can help peers form

supportive networks that encourage one another, arouse positive emotions, and serve as models for effective writing and research methods. These encouraging peer networks serve as a helpful reminder to students that they are not alone in their endeavours and that help is available to overcome challenges.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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Biographical Notes

BUNGA AYU WUANDARI, PhD. is working at the English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Jambi, Indonesia.

AHMAD RIDHA, MA. is working at the English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Jambi, Indonesia.

AULIA AZZAHRA was a student at Universitas Jambi, Indonesia.