WRITING THE GRADUATION PROJECT: A CONCISE GUIDE FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Academic research is a scientific investigation aiming at finding facts, answering questions, identifying gaps in knowledge, and verifying what is already known. It has become a science on its own right. Several books and articles have been written on the subject in an attempt to alleviate the work of the researchers, especially those who are new to the field. The current paper focuses on the process of writing the graduation project. It is designed to meet the needs of the students who are writing their graduation projects and have little or no research experience. It is written for, but not limited to, the students at the English Language Department. It guides students step by step during their research journey. It focuses on the parts of the graduation project highlighting the second language research methods for gathering and analyzing the data. It also addresses the ethical dimension of the research projects and the issue of plagiarism.

Keywords: graduation project, undergraduate students, research methods, plagiarism, referencing.

1. Introduction

The graduation project is commonly a four credit research paper on a topic related to the student's field of specialization. It is generally a demanding and challenging task for the students. The journey does not always run smoothly and students frequently get stressed and baffled from the very beginning. It does not always seem to be an enjoyable activity for the students especially when they have no experience and they have little help from the university staff. Furthermore, during the research methods module, the emphasis is more on theory than practice. As a result, students start their research projects convinced that they have the ability to carry it on whereas the reality on the ground is quite different and they appear to realize that they are embarking on a rather muddled journey.

The university generally provides the students with the guidelines of the graduation project. There are several outlines accepted; each university has its own requirements. By and large, the graduation project consists of 4-5 chapters (roughly 45-50 pages).

In Chapter 1 –introduction - the researcher introduces the importance of the subject, presents a brief review of the research, states the problem of the research, the need for the research (by establishing the clear need for the information that the researcher wishes to provide), questions and hypothesis, the purpose and the main objectives, research methodology, the participants, research design, research instruments, and defines the key terms used in the research.

In Chapter 2 –literature review - the researcher looks into the previous research (sources related to the topic), presents different points of view on the topic and analyses the past studies.

In Chapter 3 - methodology of the study - the researcher presents the research methods adopted to conduct the research, reports about the participants, and about the research instruments constructed for the research and carried out during the research.

Chapter 4 – data analysis and results - is concerned with presenting the gathered data and analyzing and discussing the results.

In Chapter 5 – conclusions and recommendations – the student-researcher reviews the purpose of the study, draws the conclusions of the research and makes recommendations for the addressed audience (e.g teachers, learners, test designers etc). It is also in this chapter that the researcher identifies any gaps in the researched topic and generates recommendations for future projects.

All the aforementioned parts must be connected reasonably to ensure the success of the study as a whole.

The vast majority of research projects have an acknowledgment and dedication part preceding the presentation of the contents. In the acknowledgment part, the student-researcher expresses his thanks and appreciations to people who shared their time, experience and resources, thus contributing to the research project: the research supervisor, the participants, and other people involved. The dedication part usually consists of one or two sentences where the student - researcher dedicates the project to someone that backed him during the journey.

1.1. Choosing a research topic

The vast majority of universities provide students with a list of topics so that they can choose one that best suits their interest, yet frequently it is the students' responsibility to find a topic. Choosing the research topic is probably the most challenging decision students have to make at the beginning of their research journey. In Blaxter, Hughes and Tight's (2006, p. 25) words 'one of the key skills involved in choosing a topic is to be able to pick one of the right size: not too big, not too small, but do-able within the time, space and resources available'. Therefore, students are encouraged to avoid overly challenging topics as the time provided for the research is rather limited (usually two semesters (during the 7^{th} and 8^{th} semester)). Moreover, the researched topic must contribute constructively to the field of research. Some useful websites that could help students generate topic ideas and provide them with a reasonable amount of resources on the topic are https://www.questia.com/writing-center#!/generator and https://www.questia.com/writing-center#!/topic-ideas/.

Once the students have determined the topic, the next step is to think of a good title for their project – an extremely significant aspect of the paper. Investing time in thinking about the title is unquestionably worth as it is the title that creates the first impression of the research paper. Based on the title, people may decide whether to read the paper, therefore, judging the entire project by its title. The title of the research paper has to be concise, easy to understand, presenting a clear understanding of what the research is all about.

1.2. The abstract

Although all research projects commence with an abstract, the abstract itself is written at the end of the process as it represents a summary of the project. It provides the reader with a very succinct representation of the information enclosed in the research project. Based on the abstract, the reader decides whether the research project is relevant and deserves reading. A good abstract is well-organized. It starts with a lead sentence that presents a brief description of the project's topic, followed by a concise but dense summary of the research including the main purpose, the problem addressed, the methodology employed, primary findings and the fundamental conclusions/implications. A good abstract attempts to persuade the reader about the usefulness of reading the paper. The abstract of the research project does not normally exceed 150-200 words, although the length of the abstract may be dictated by the university based on the approved research guides such as APA, Harvard etc.

1.3. The keywords

A research project usually consists of five keywords. The key words are words/concepts that mirror the content of the research. Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight maintain that defining the key concepts of the research project should assist the researcher in focusing his work, as well as being of great help to him later on in his project. It establishes the territory for the research, indicates the needed literature and suggests the methods and theories that might be applied (Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight, 2006, p. 35).

1.4. Statement of the problem, research questions, and hypothesis

The research problem is the milestone of the research project. According to Kumar, the main function of formulating a research problem is to decide *what* the researcher wants to find out *about*. It identifies the destination of the researcher: it should tell him, his research supervisor and his readers *what* he intends to investigate. Formulating a research problem is the first and most important step in the research process (Kumar, 2010, p. 40).

The author argues that the formulation of the problem determines almost every step that follows in a research including design, the sampling strategy, the research instruments, and the analysis of the data, depending on the complexity of the problem (Ranjit Kumar (2010, p. 57).

Kothari C. R. (2004, p. 27) suggests the following steps when stating the research problem: (i) statement of the problem in a general way; (ii) understanding the nature of the problem; (iii) surveying the available literature (iv) developing the ideas through discussions; and (v) rephrasing the research problem into a working proposition.

According to Mackey & Gass, research problems are usually stated in terms of research questions and/or hypotheses. Research questions are the questions for which answers are being sought, whereas research hypotheses can be used to express what the researcher predicts the outcomes of the study to be (Mackey& Gas, 2005, p. 36).

In the light of the above, students should research questions that are researchable, taking into consideration the available time and available resources. The research questions are based on the research purpose and highlight exactly what the researcher is trying to investigate. The hypothesis is a prediction made by the researcher regarding the addressed questions; is an attempt to provide an explanation to a problem under investigation; it is a supposition, a temporary solution for a problem. In Alison Wray and Aileen Bloomer's (2006, p.1) words, a good research question is one that you can envisage finding an answer to. The authors suggest that students should always imagine the possible answers and ways they can find them out.

1.5. Need for the Study

At this stage, the researcher, through arguments, seeks to persuade the reader of the worthiness of investigating the problem under research and its impact on the local and/or international academic community.

1.6. The aim and objectives of a research project

Listing the aim(s) and objectives of the research project represents the clearest way to communicate expectations to the readers. By specifying the aim of the research, the student-researcher describes the general purpose of the study, and by listing its objectives, he informs the reader about the specific description of the purpose and also clarifies how the aim of the research is to be achieved. Thus the aims and the objectives must be stated as clearly and as concisely as possible using strong statements with the help of specific action verbs such as: investigate, analyze, determine, study, measure, identify, elaborate, develop, collect, synthesize. the objectives of the researcher project are related to the aim(s). By setting the objectives, the researcher breaks the aim down into researchable parts. Therefore, the objectives are steps the researcher takes in order to achieve the aim. For instance, if the aim of the research is to determine the technologies in the communicative teaching of the English idioms, the research objectives are as follows: to study the history and theory of the communicative technologies in teaching the English idioms; to systematize the communicative technologies in teaching the English idioms; to establish the characteristics and the levels of the students' idiomatic vocabulary development; to identify the communicative value of the English idioms from the perspective of the communicative competence. Therefore, the aim of the research has been broken down into researchable parts making the attainment of the aim a step-by-step process.

2. Research methodology

Research methods are instruments that researchers use in order to collect and analyze the data. There is a range of research methods used in the field of language education. It is indispensable

for the students to be aware of all the methods and adopt the method they consider the most appropriate for collecting and analyzing their data.

As stated by Bell, the importance of being familiarized with diverse approaches applied in academic research is imperative as it gives the researcher insight into different ways of planning an investigation, and, incidentally, will also enhance the researcher's understanding of the literature, although it is perfectly possible to carry out a worthwhile investigation without having detailed knowledge of the various approaches to or styles of research (Bell, 2005, p. 7).

2.1.Types of research

According to Mackey& Gass, there are several research approaches. Two of the most common are known as *quantitative* and *qualitative.* The authors argue that quantitative research (e.g., a study comparing student test results before and after an instructional treatment) usually commences with an experimental design in which a hypothesis is followed by the quantification of data and some sort of numerical analysis is carried through. Qualitative studies (e.g., a diary study in which a student keeps track of her attitudes during a year-long Japanese language course), on the other hand, normally are not set up as experiments; the data cannot be easily quantified and the analysis is interpretive rather than statistical (Mackey& Gass, 2005, p. 2).

In McKay's words, (as cited in Nugrahenny (2012. p. 9), quantitative studies usually start with a (written) hypothesis that needs to be "tested" by conducting the research. In contrast, qualitative studies start with the assumption that the research topic must be understood "holistically". Nugrahenny (2012. p. 10) presents a summary of the differences between qualitative and quantitative methods drawn from different sources based on the works of Bryman, (2001), McKay, (2006).

Table 1. Qualitative versus quantitative research

No		**Qualitative**	**Quantitative**

1.	**Purpose**	To understand a phenomenon or individuals	To generalize, to predict, and to show a causal relationship
2.	The research question	On-going, dynamic (can change) and can be changed	Static: fixed, decided prior to collecting the data.
3.	Participants	Tend to be a small number, even one person.	Large number
4.	Length of study	Short-term	Long-term
5.	Data display	Participants' words and stories (narratives).	Using numerical figures, percentage and/or table
6.	Language	Descriptive	Technical
7.	Data analysis	Interpretative analysis by categorizing data according to, for example, emerging themes.	Statistical analysis

Under these circumstances, undergraduate students are recommended to undertake qualitative research, as it requires a short period, has the purpose of understanding a phenomenon, is descriptive, doesn't ask for an impressive number of participants, doesn't demand the handling of figures, percentage, nor does it require a statistical analysis. Students can also adopt a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research, known as mixed research design, thus, except from understanding a phenomenon, they can also have exploratory experiments (e.g. in form of tests) which will shed more light on the investigated problem.

2.2. Conceptualizing a research design

Kumar (2010) believes that an extremely important feature of the research is the use of appropriate methods. Research involves systematic, controlled, valid and rigorous exploration and description of what is not known and the establishment of associations and causation that permit the accurate prediction of outcomes under a given set of conditions. It also involves identifying gaps in knowledge, verification of what is already known and identification of past errors and limitations. The strength of *what* you find largely rests on *how* it was found. The main

function of a research design, according to Kumar, is to explain *how* you will find answers to your research questions.

According to Wray & Bloomer (2006, p.152) questionnaires, interviews, and focused groups can help the researcher to find out about the people's linguistics and social behavior and perception. (p. 152). These are the most prevalent techniques used in graduation projects in the field of social studies.

2.2.1. Interviews

The interview is one the most commonly used instruments in qualitative research. It is a conversation between at least two people where the interviewee is asked questions related to different issues the interviewer is concerned with and wants to elicit. What makes a good interview and to what extent it produces accurate information, has been a matter of debate.

An interview encompasses the following stages: developing an interview, conducting an interview and analyzing the data. It is crucial for the researcher to have interviewing skills, questioning skills, the competence to establish a rapport with the interviewee, and social skills. There are two types of interviews: Structured interviews and unstructured interviews. According to Mackey and Gass, structured interviews (also known as standardized) resemble verbal questionnaires and permit researchers to compare answers from diverse subjects. In structured interviews researchers generally have an identical set of questions for all respondents. Less fixed are semi-structured interviews, in which the researcher uses a written list of questions as a guide, while still having the freedom to deviate. In unstructured interviews, on the other hand, the researcher does not have a list of questions to use. He formulates and adapts his own questions helping respondents to express themselves at their own pace and their own terms. They resemble natural conversations, and the outcomes are not limited by the researcher's assumed views about the investigated topic (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p.173).

Accordingly, students are suggested to focus on structured interviews. Undergraduate students will feel much more confident when having a set of ready-made questions. This situation is less stressful for the students and also enables them to compare the answers from different participants. They can also use semi-structured interviews, but this will demand a higher ability to build rapport with the interviewees, in addition to interviewing and social skills.

2.2.2. Questionnaires

One of the most widely used research technique in social sciences is the questionnaire (Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight, 2006, p. 179). A questionnaire consists of a series of questions that are designed in order to gather information from individuals. In order to uncover the answers to the problems that interest the researcher, the idea of questionnaire comes handy as the researcher can formulate precise written questions.

The stage of designing a questionnaire is reached not before determining specifically what is called for in the research, as solely at this stage, the researcher can realize whether a questionnaire is more reasonable to his research than other research instruments such as interviews or observation.

To design a good and reliable questionnaire is not an easy task. A questionnaire starts with an addressing formula, followed by a short introduction that aims at informing the participants about the primary purpose of the questionnaire and some additional data such as the time required to complete the questionnaire and whether it will remain anonymous.

Before designing the questions, the researcher has to consider the objectives of the questionnaire, namely what he wants to achieve through the questionnaire. The questions can take different forms: open-ended questions, closed questions, ranking questions, ranting questions. Open-ended questions require the respondents to formulate their own answer whereas in closed questions the respondents choose an answer from a number of options. Students are encouraged to avoid double-barreled questions and use simple language to formulate the questions. The questionnaires can be administered on paper or online. A useful website to design questionnaires

is www.surveymonkey.com. On this website, students can design questionnaires that ask the right questions, reach the right people if they want to administer it online and get meaningful insights.

2.2.3. Case studies

The Case study is a qualitative research method that requires the participant to be directly confronted with a real, authentic situation**.** Mackey & Gass state that case studies generally aim to provide a holistic description of language learning or use within a specific population and setting. They argue that case studies have been used in a wide variety of second language research studies and support their viewpoint by presenting a well-known longitudinal case study investigating the development of L2 communicative competence conducted by Schmidt's (1983) – the study of Wes, an ESL learner. Wes was a 33-year-old native speaker of Japanese who had little formal instruction in English. Schmidt studied Wes' language development over a 3-year period when he was residing in Japan but visited Hawaii, the research site, regularly on business. The study focused on a small number of grammatical features, including plural *s,* third-person singular, and regular past tense. Schmidt transcribed conversations between Wes and friends and also transcribed monologues that he asked Wes to produce while at home in Japan. Although Wes attained relatively high levels of pragmatic ability and acculturation (e.g., in the use of formulae such as "So, what's new?" and "Whaddya know?"), he had very limited improvement in terms of linguistic accuracy for the grammatical forms over the 3 years of the study, thus providing evidence for the separability of linguistic and pragmatic competence (Mackey & Gass , 2005, p. 171).

Therefore, in Language Education, the case study approach to research is believed to provide the researchers the opportunity to go deeply into a certain issue. One main advantage of case studies is that they allow the researcher to focus on the individual in a way that is rarely possible in group research (Mackey & Gass, p. 171). The main disadvantage of this research technique is the fact that it requires a long period of time and on that account, case studies are not usually used by undergraduate students for their graduation projects.

3. Participants

The participants of a research project are the subjects that partake in the research. In this part of the project, the researcher has to stipulate how many subjects took part in the research, the gender, approximate age, the institution they work for, etc.

4. Defining the Key Terms

The student researcher has to define the most important concepts used throughout the research. These concepts, if defined, will shed light on the research topic and mirror the main points addressed in the research. Students have to use reliable sources (e.g technical dictionaries - dictionaries which cover the terminology of a particular discipline) in order to provide accurate and scientific definitions of the terms.

5. Literature review

In this chapter the researcher demonstrates knowledge of the discipline as a whole and of the topic of the research; seeks to correlate precious facts to current ones; presents any inconsistencies in opinions; tries to identify preceding studies on the same topic and presents the previous findings. In order to do this, the researcher presents the theories and the key players in the field. This part of the research is imperative to the graduation project as it serves the student to evaluate how existing research contributes to answering the research questions and validating the research hypothesis. It is during this step that the researcher can spot some unanswered questions and may try to find an answer himself. It is during this part of the research that the student may identify some other gaps in the research topic, tries to locate an answer himself or suggests future project around the same subject.

6. Fundamental principles of the graduation project

6.1. Choosing the supervisor

Choosing a supervisor for the research project is apparently the most delicate decision for the student to make. When choosing a supervisor, the students have to take into consideration the following aspects:

- They have to choose a supervisor who is interested and is an expert in the chosen topic;
- It is not the supervisor's responsibility to figure out a research topic, write the research questions, or the hypotheses for the project (if there is one);
- The supervisor's primary task is to supervise, give advice, and guide the students throughout the journey, but he is not to tell the students what to do. The students can always welcome or turn down the supervisor's suggestions.
- The supervisor will not proofread the project.
- The supervisor is not a plagiarism detector. The student holds total responsibility for the veracity of the information presented in the research project.

6.2. Using resources

Due to the abundance of information of the internet, it is essential for the student researcher to be able to handle the information in a correct manner, as well as to thoroughly distinguish between credible, reliable sources and doubtful ones. Wray & Bloomer suggest the usage of the following resources: textbooks, readers, edited collections, monographs, journal articles, encyclopedias, abstracting databases, and unpublished MA and Ph.D. dissertations (2006, p. 5). Given the fact that not all the students have access to libraries in their communities, the only alternative they have and can rely on is the internet. There is a wide array of online libraries and numerous websites that provide unrestricted access to thousands of edited collections, monographs, articles. Below is the list of websites students can use to locate the resources they need for their graduation projects:

www.academia.edu; www.pdfdrive.net; https://books.google.com/ ; https://library.lums.edu.pk/free-e-books-library; https://library.lums.edu.pk/free-e-books-library; https://www.questia.com/library/free-books; http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Language_Education_(Bookshelf)

6.3. Avoid plagiarism

Plagiarism – professional cheating - is a growing phenomenon. It is the most common problem in research writing. Due to bountifulness of information on the internet, students are usually tempted to copy someone else's work and claim that it is their own. In Mackey& Gass ' words (2005, p. 243) 'you are plagiarizing if you copy someone else's words and claim them as your own and you cannot use other people's data or their ideas unless you provide adequate attribution. According to a statement made by the University of Manchester (1997:2) as cited in Bell (2005, p. 243), 'it is not acceptable to put together unacknowledged passages from the same or from different sources, linking these together with a few words or sentences of your own and changing a few words from the original text'.

In it stipulated on the University of Oxford website that avoiding plagiarism is about deploying the researcher's academic skills to make his work as good as it can be; it is not merely a matter of making sure the references are all correct or changing enough words so the examiner will not notice the paraphrase. The best way of avoiding plagiarism is to learn and employ the principles of good academic practice from the beginning of the university career (www.ox.ac.uk).

6.4. Editing the project

The graduation project is edited according to the standards established by the university. The following format is usually accepted: it is printed on white paper, A4 format, on one side of the sheet. It is edited using the 12-point Times New Roman font. The space between rows is 1.5 intervals. The text is aligned with both justified fields. The pages of the project usually have the following fields: left - 30 mm, up - 25 mm, right - 15 mm, down - 25 mm. Chapter headings are

written in capital letters (12 pt, bold, centered), of the paragraphs - in lower case letters, except for the first letter (font 12 pt, bold, left alignment).

The title page generally consists of the following information: the name of the university and the name of the department, the topic, the level of the project, the year, the name of the students and the name of the supervisor.

In the table of contents, the researcher indicates the chapters, subchapters, shows the pages, as well as the references and appendixes.

References are presented at the end after the Conclusions and before the Appendixes. The references are presented as per different style, depending on the university requirements. The most frequently accepted styles are the APA style (American Psychological Association) and Harvard referencing style.

The appendices are presented at the very end and they can include tables, scales, figures, and all the relevant material used in the research (questionnaires, interview questions, tests, etc).

6.5. Referencing

The Abridged Guide to the Harvard Referencing Style stipulates that:

> In academic work, you are expected to research specific topics by reading about those topics using a range of different sources. Referencing is how you acknowledge the sources of information you have drawn on in your research. References must be provided whenever you use someone else's opinions, theories or data. This enables you to:
>
> - support your work with the authoritative work of other authors;
> - avoid plagiarism by giving credit to the original source of an idea or piece of information;
> - demonstrate your knowledge of a topic and show that you have researched, read, thought about and come to a point of view on it.

You need to reference information from books, articles, DVDs, the World Wide Web, other print or electronic sources and personal communications. A reference is required if you:

- use a direct quotation
- copy or reproduce (e.g. use figures, tables or structure)
- paraphrase (put another person's ideas into your own words)
- summarize (give a brief account of another person's ideas). (Abridged Guide to the Harvard Referencing Style, 2017, p. 1)

References is an indispensable part of the project and it is done according to the standards established by the university referencing guides. In the reference list, only titles that have been consulted and referenced in the text can be used. It is not allowed to indicate titles that have not been consulted. On the other hand, all the in-text quotes should be found in the reference list. For the graduation project, the reference list must consist of an average of 15-25 titles. It is written in the alphabetical order of the author's surnames, and in the absence of their surnames, in the alphabetical order of the titles. The perfection of the bibliography is performed according to accepted standards/ APA style (American Psychological Association) or Harvard referencing style - two mostly used reference styles in social sciences research. The links below provide detailed information on each style. https://www.cqu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/151126/APA-Abridged-Guide-Edn-Study-Period-2-2016.pdf

https://www.cqu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/179954/Harvard_Guide_T1_2017_final_update.pdf .

There are other styles of referencing used in academic papers. The following website provides links to the referencing guides used worldwide.

https://www.cqu.edu.au/student-life/services-and-facilities/referencing/cquniversity-referencing-guides

For more information regarding referencing, students are encouraged to consult *The Abridged Guide to the Harvard Referencing Style* which can be found on http://www.cqu.edu.au/referencing

Conclusions and recommendations

As students generally have limited time to undertake the research projects, they have to organize themselves. If the graduation project is done in groups, the groups should agree how they will work so that everybody contributes to the project. The projects should be written using academic vocabulary must be free of errors and must catch the reader's attention. It must be creative and bring novel ideas to the field. The methods and procedures must be consistent with the styles required by the university.

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