

## **Exploring Challenges Encountered by EFL Learners in Research Writing and Ways to Overcome Them: A Case Study at YUFL and MUFL**

**Aung Myo Hein<sup>1</sup>, Wai Yan Min Oo<sup>2</sup>**

**aungmyohein465@gmail.com**

### **Abstract**

Academic writing or writing research is not an easy task as it requires an adequate background knowledge, interest, motivation and hard work. This study investigates the major challenges in research writing faced by EFL learners studying at Yangon University of Foreign Languages and Mandalay University of Foreign Languages. A total of 106 EFL learners participated in this study. A mixed method approach is applied. The findings revealed that EFL learners are highly motivated in research writing projects. However over half of the learners have difficulty in developing a research project. Another challenge they face is reporting the findings including writing a literature review, research methodology, results and discussion sections. The results from the interview reveals that EFL learners have insufficient background knowledge about writing a research project, insufficient library resources and the unavailability of Internet in the university campus. This study also explored various and common challenges during writing the research projects such as: difficulty in deciding the topic for research, lack of good knowledge of the methodology, inability of finding related references, lack of time, and research guiding. This study also attempts to give some suggestions for developing the process of writing research projects.

**Key Words: Research Challenges, EFL Learners, YUFL, MUFL**

### **Introduction**

Singh (2006) defines research as Re and Search: where “Re” implies “again and again” and “Search” implies “to come up with something”. Research is conducted to investigate and address a certain issue. In general, research seeks to answer certain questions which so far have not been answered. The task of researchers is to collect, analyze and interpret data, and assess whether their findings apply to their environments (Bocar, 2013). This paper finds out EFL learners attitude towards writing research projects and some problems regarding research writing within an undergraduate degree programme at YUFL and MUFL. Some EFL learners find it difficult to write a fruitful piece of research. Their difficulties range from identifying and thinking of the area of investigation to the process of analyzing the collected data and reporting the findings. This paper seeks to address the problem EFL learners at YUFL and MUFL encounter when reporting their research in writing.

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Lecturer, Department of English, Yangon University of Foreign Languages

<sup>2</sup> Tutor, Department of English, Mandalay University of Foreign Languages

## **Literature Review**

### **What is Research?**

Neville (2007) states that research is a remarkable characteristic of any degree course because it provides students with an amount of control and independence on what they learn. Research also offers students a chance to approve, explain, follow and find out new features of a topic they are keen on. Pandey and Mishra (2015, p. 7) suggest that the “word “Research” is comprised of two words = Re+Search. It means to search again. So, research means a systematic investigation or activity to gain new knowledge of the already existing facts.” Research can also be defined as rational and methodical search for new and beneficial information about a certain topic (Rajasekar, Philominathan, & Chinnathambi, 2013). Neville (2007, p. 1) defines research as “a process of enquiry and investigation; it is systematic, methodical and ethical; research can help solve practical problems and increase knowledge.”

### **The Importance of Conducting Research**

According to Rajasekar et al. (2013), research is significant in scientific and unscientific fields. In this world, different problems, activities, and methods happen daily. Scientists carry out research to find out causes, answers and justifications. Thus, research helps us comprehend nature and normal phenomena. Research is also important because it offers strategies and guidelines for finding solutions. In addition, social research assists us to discover solutions for social problems because it describes social phenomena and searches for answers to social problems. Research also creates a new way and style of life and makes it enjoyable. Research on current theories and notions can assist us in recognizing and finding out the applications of these theories.

### **Aim and Objectives**

This study attempts to find out the challenges that EFL learners at YUFL and MUFL face in research writing. The objectives are as follow:

1. To find out EFL learners' attitude towards writing research paper writing
2. To figure out the most challenging aspects of research writing
3. To give suggestions to overcome the challenges

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the challenges that EFL learners face in research writing?
2. Which part of research writing is more challenging?

### **Research Methodology**

This study was part of a larger study on challenges faced by EFL students who study English language at YUFL and MUFL.

## **Participants**

There are 106 EFL undergraduate students who study English language at the Department of English Language from YUFL and MUFL participated in this research. YUFL and MUFL are the only two language universities in Myanmar where students can learn English as a foreign language. The participants are currently in their final year and in order to get the degree, writing a term paper is one of the requirements. There are 96 females and 10 males and their ages range from 20-23.

## **Instruments**

This study used two instruments: a questionnaire and an informal interview. The questionnaire aims to explore challenges that EFL learners face while conducting their research. The questionnaire includes two parts. The first part is demographic information about the students and the second part includes 18 items to get information about the challenges that EFL learners face. The questionnaire covers five different areas:

- i. Motivation to write research proposals and projects
- ii. Students views about Research methodology
- iii. Time and Guiding responses
- iv. Challenges related to the references in writing research
- v. Other Challenges

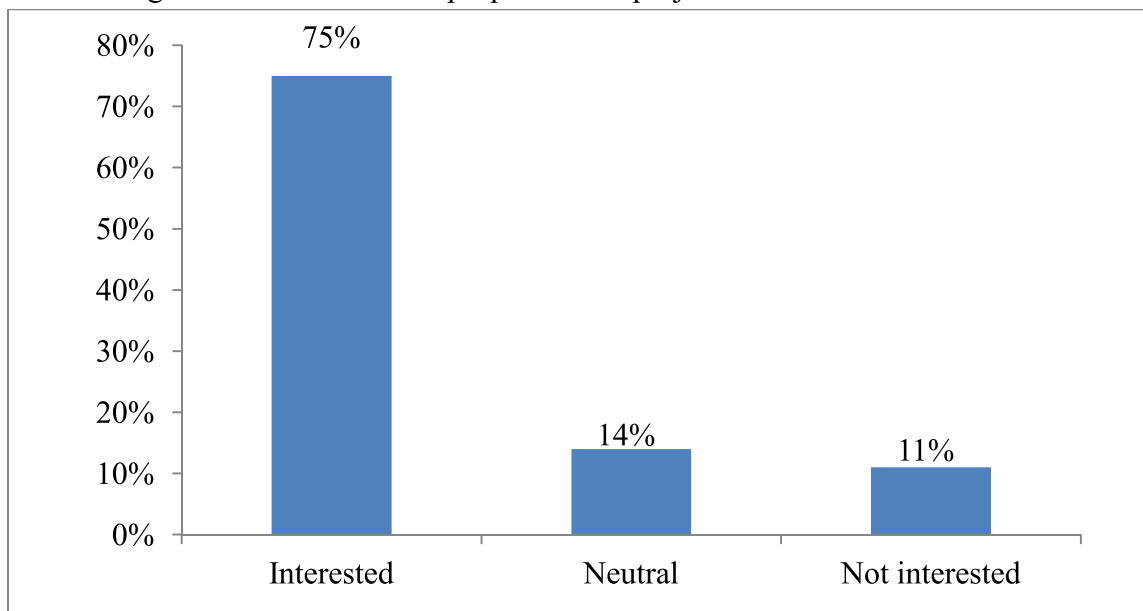
Each area includes several sub parameters. In addition, an informal interview was used to find out more problems related to EFL students in conducting their research and the steps of research in the class.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The questionnaire was distributed to the students by the classroom teacher during a regular class period. The full descriptive instructions regarding to the procedures of administration were provided and the instructor discussed with the students before administration. The students were told that there were no right or wrong answers to any question and their confidentiality was secured and their response would be used for research purposes only. They were also informed that their participation would not affect their grades. Concerning the interview, participants were informed of the aim of the interview and they were told that it would be recorded. The interview was conducted with each participant face-to-face and it took 10 minutes. It was audio recorded and transcribed. Data analyses included the computation of descriptive statistics (frequencies) to compile information about demographics of the participants and to know the challenges they faced in conducting a research paper.

## Results

Quantitative findings from the questionnaire survey in the following figure shows EFL learners' willingness to write research proposals and projects.



**Figure 1: Attitude of EFL Learners towards Writing Research projects**

Although writing research paper is mandatory as part of their study, as shown in figure 1, 75% of EFL learners are interested in writing research projects, 11% are not interested in writing the research projects whereas 14% are having neutral views in this regard.

It is noticed from the interview that over half of the participants agreed that they conduct their research because it is obligatory in their study/curriculum, 46% of the participants are neutral to conduct their research however only 4% of the participants disagree. However students replied that they are interested in writing research project. The reasons are listed in the following:

- (i) It can create a good academic atmosphere
- (ii) Students feel that they can gain good experience in new findings and they feel that they have achieved something crucial and substantial.
- (iii) Students can acquire in depth knowledge about the subject area while conducting research projects
- (iv) After it has been done, they become motivated to do further studies according to their interest
- (v) They get more teamwork among peers
- (vi) Teachers are helpful to identify the Area of Interest
- (vii) Teachers can give good guidance and supervision through the research.

On the other hand when students are asked about the reasons behind not being interested and motivated in the research process, they gave various reasons as follows:



- (i) They are lack of previous experience in writing the research so they need enough time.
- (ii) They find it difficult to put 100% attention on research as they have to emphasize on lessons in the class, tutorials and presentation.
- (iii) They feel that teachers are lack of providing awards.
- (iv) Some students are lack of contribution so they have some chaos.
- (v) They have narrow scope to choose according to their interest.
- (vi) The last reason is that writing research is mandatory in their course study.

Table (1) summarizes the challenges and the issues the participants face during writing research projects with respect to research methodology. It includes: Lack of knowledge of research methodology in general, facing obstacles in formatting research proposals and projects, having a good skill in selecting research tools, data collection, and data analysis, following research ethics including plagiarism, and having a problem and challenges in writing and reporting the results.

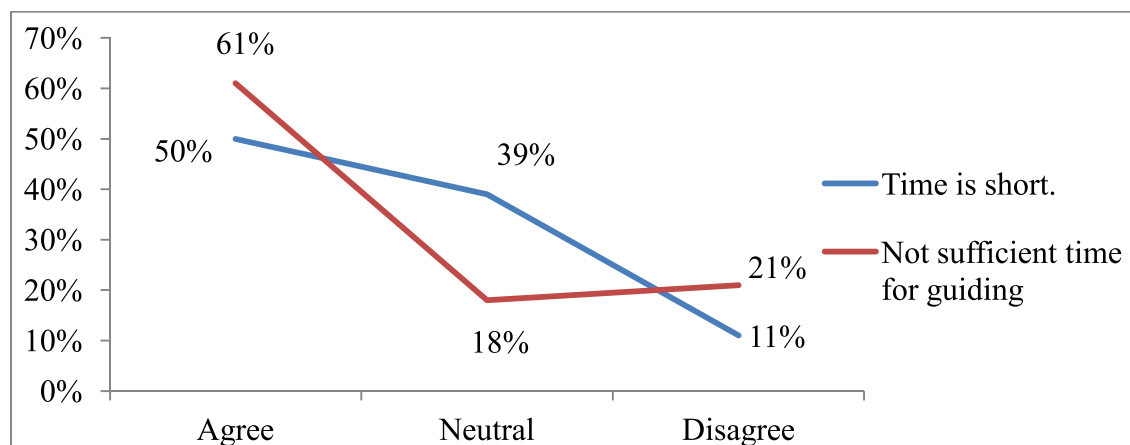
**Table 1: The challenges participants faced with respect to research methodology**

No.	Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
<b>The challenges participants face with respect to research methodology</b>				
1.	Lack of knowledge of research methodology	18%	32%	50%
2.	Facing obstacles in formatting research proposals and projects	57%	36%	7%
3.	Having a good skill in selecting research tools, data collection, and data analysis	50%	32%	18%
4.	Not following research ethics including plagiarism	0%	11%	89%
5.	Having a problem and challenges in writing and reporting the results	54%	42%	4%

As shown in the above table, most of the participants face challenges in formatting their research projects (57%). They do not have adequate knowledge in selecting research tools, data collection, and data analysis (50%) Because of such prior challenges faced by students, the predominant challenge is to report the results (54%). Surprisingly the participants show that they don't have problems in understanding the research ethics and plagiarism (89%).

In addition to the fact given in Table 1 about the methodology issues, the informal discussions and interview highlighted for not doing well in writing research with reference to methodology include: difficult to analyze and evaluate the results, weak guidance for the students. There are not enough simplified research books and scholarly theories that can help students know well the research methodology and good steps to write research.

Challenges with regard to time are another factor to be considered in writing research papers. The following figure explores the challenges facing students with regard to the duration or the time given for writing and conducting research projects.



**Figure 2: The challenges with regard to the time**

As shown in figure 2, 61% of the participants agreed that they do not have sufficient time to do their research projects, half of the participants believed that they are not getting enough time to discuss with their supervisors. Some students reported that they feel disappointed and lack the motivation to do the research because their supervisor cannot spare enough time.

Table 2 examined the challenges of the undergraduate students faced with reference to the way how to quote and to get good references and resources.

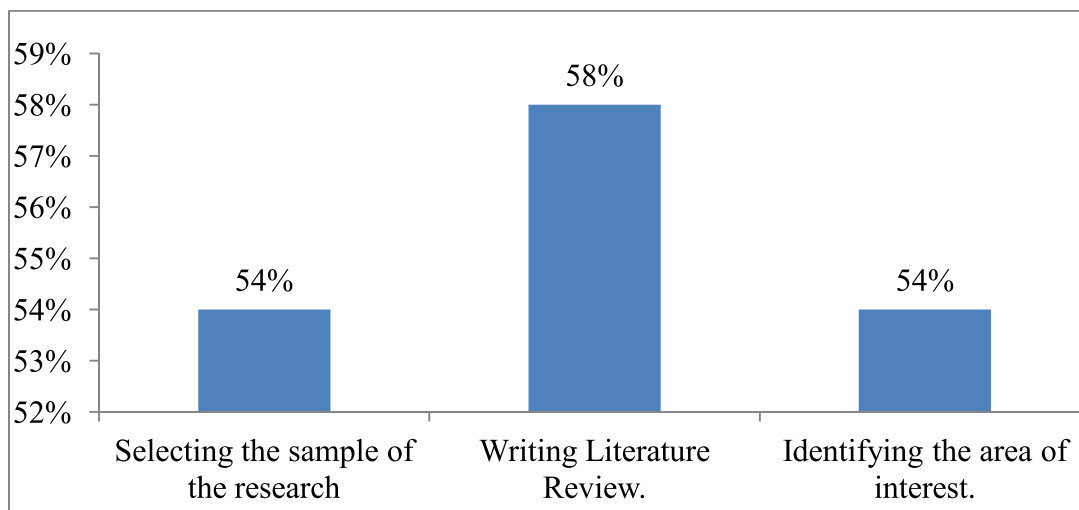
**Table 2: Challenges related to the references in writing research**

No.	Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
<b>Challenges related to the references in writing research</b>				
1.	Having knowledge how to quote from references	82%	11%	7%
2.	Being able to make use of online references and resources	75%	14%	11%
3.	Having knowledge of the well-known, modern, and specific references which help in writing research proposals and projects	50%	39%	11%
4.	Lack of references and resources in the surrounding libraries	50%	43%	7%

Table 2 shows that around 7% of the participants said that they do not know how to quote from the references and 82% of the participants do not face challenges when they quote from references. The rest of the participants took the neutral position (11%). Not surprisingly, with the spread of technology in hand, majority of the students (75%) they make use of the online references rather than hard copy references and less number of the students use hard copy

references while writing their research projects. The third question in Table 2 shows that 50% of the participants have knowledge about of the well-known, modern, and specific references which help them in writing research proposals and only 11% are not familiar with the famous references to help them do well in their specialization. Most of the participants (50%) agreed that there is a lack of the references and resources in the surrounding libraries where they are studying. From the discussion of the participants' responses, the interview, and research tools, it can draw conclusion that they do not face a lot of challenges in reference to the way how to quote and to get good references and resources. However they want to have good internet access as the connection is very slow in the university campus.

The following figure shows other the other challenges faced by the participants.



**Figure 3: Other challenges faced by the participants**

As shown in figure 3, one of the common problems that students encounter is how to select the sample of research. Over half of the participants agree that it is not an easy task to select the sample either randomly or purposively. Writing literature review is difficult according to the vast majority of the participants (58%). Moreover, students (54%) take a lot of time identifying the area of interest due to different factors. According to the replies from the interview that they are in two minds which field to take.

### Findings and Discussion

Based on the quantitative findings, students are highly motivated to conduct research project although it is mandatory. The result is different from other research because Qasem (2019) and Alsied & Ibrahim (2017) reported that students are interested and motivated to conduct research projects. However one study shows that students reply that they are really glad that they had the opportunity to complete a research project. It is an excellent tool for learning

how to perform research, but also it has taught them skills they can use to complete any task.” Therefore doing research may be the primary goal of undergraduate students. By carrying out the research, students can learn how to perform research, they also learn problem-solving skills that translate to arenas beyond the classroom or laboratory.

The participants surprisingly show that they don’t have problems in understanding the research ethics and plagiarism (89%). However, Mhute (2013) showed that one of the common mistakes committed by students is plagiarism and it is better to avoid it as it is unethical and it’s a standards issue.

The participants agreed that they do not have sufficient time to do their research projects, half of the participants believed that they are not getting enough time to discuss with their supervisors. The result is in line with Al-Qaderi (2016). Al-Qaderi (2016) found in his study on the challenges facing undergraduate students while conducting their research projects that the students have short period of time to finalize their own their research projects. Students are worried about scoring good grade in all the subjects including their research projects. Therefore, possible solutions to motivate the participants to do well in writing their research proposals and projects in this stage are making them feel secured about grades (evaluation). Several studies show that grades increase and at the same time decrease students' anxiety in writing research projects. For instance, Rungruangthum (2011) explored similar findings during conducting an investigation study on writing anxiety for EFL postgraduate students while writing Research Papers in English. The data analysis of the interviews revealed that the factors leading to writing anxiety were teachers and grading. One possible explanation was that all the first-year postgraduate students were required to earn a GPA of 3.25 or higher to avoid academic probation. For the writing difficulties, these EFL participants reported that they were worried about how to organize written texts and how to present their ideas in the research papers.

The participants do not face challenges regarding to references. It is not surprising that the spread of technology in hand can help students make use of the online references rather than hard copy references. The problem is only library resources. Similarly, Al-qadiri (2016) found that the most needed references and recourses do not exist in the libraries and students have difficulties in finding them. Another challenge noticed is that students are not able to report from sources during writing process. Cumming, Lai, & Cho (2016) found that many studies in L2 or in English as Foreign language (EFL) contexts show that learners feel confused with the complex processes of writing from sources. However, most of the participants (50%) agreed that there is a lack of the references and resources in the surrounding libraries where they are studying. This result is consistent with another study by Mapolisa and Mafa (2012) which showed that Zimbabwean students face challenges relating to the lack of library resources. In addition, although the Internet is available in the university campus, the connection is very slow. Therefore students have to rely on their own network in their mobile phones.

Furthermore, they do not know what research is, how to do it and they are not able to select a topic. In addition, they consider selecting the sample of the research is a hard task to do

and they have never participated in doing research. These opinions are supported by the result of a study carried out by Mahammoda (2016) which showed that Ethiopian university students do not have any motivation in the topic of research which influences the research quality and makes it hard for them to do good quality research. The result of this study is similar to another study conducted by Alshehry (2014) which revealed that Saudi Arabian students lack experience and background in research writing because the majority of them do not have any idea of how to search for information by themselves.

### **Recommendation**

Based on the analysis of students 'views and the interviews of the teachers, it is found that there are many challenges and difficulties students face while writing research projects. The broad challenges can be summarized as the following:

- (i) Selecting the right topic
- (ii) Not enough skill in selecting research tools, data collection and data analysis
- (iii) Having a problem in writing and reporting the result
- (iv) Lack of time and insufficient time given from supervisors
- (v) Majority of findings and results cope with many previous research works

There are many recommendations and suggestions to curtail challenges and help them do well in writing research projects. There should be more focus in the academic writing of English with more activities and tasks and training workshops. The group works or research groups make the participants less stressful and make them feel more secure and motivated to do well in writing research. Supervisors should give more time to discuss, provide students with good guidance and help them in selecting the topics which have good materials and resources. Prizes and incentives can motivate students to do well in writing good research projects. To make the research process successful and training workshops should be conducted. This process would make the participants more secured and less stressed in writing research projects. Conducting special lectures in research will make the participants familiar with the process of research and help them face fewer difficulties. Such task from teachers will motivate students to do well and make them familiar with research. There should be research based teaching to develop students writing and make their cognitive abilities ready for research. Training students by doing activities would enhance the students to think critically and creatively. Furthermore, the authority should pay too much attention to have good internet connection in the university campus. Therefore, solving these challenges and bringing awareness together can overcome the challenges.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigates challenges faced by EFL learners in conducting research projects. The result of the study shows that EFL Learners have some problems with identifying the area of interest, choosing a topic. They also have difficulties collecting and analyzing data with one of

the most challenging obstacles. Moreover, students are weak in background knowledge about research, lack of resources in the library and poor internet connection can reduce motivation in doing research. Based on the result of this study, it can be inferred that students are very interested in doing research but they encounter a lot of shortcomings in doing research. To help learners overcome such obstacles, teachers must encourage their students and create intensive writing courses to help them write accurately and correctly. Furthermore, efforts should be made to promote the practicality of the steps of research in the classroom. It is recommended that more emphasis should be given to the investigation of difficulties for other subjects areas in which students have weaknesses. By doing so, it would be possible to be more aware of, and avoid, these problems in the future. Further research should also focus on large number of participants. Finally, it is hoped that the findings of the current study will add more to the literature and help practitioners, teachers, and curriculum designers develop their teaching methods with regard to research. It is also hoped that this study will make a great contribution to the field of language teaching and learning in higher education.

### **Acknowledgments**

We are grateful to Dr. Kyi Shwin (Rector of YUFL) and Dr. Tint Tint (Rector of MUFL) for their support to conduct this study. Special Thanks go to Dr. Ni Ni Aung (Professor and Head of English Department, YUFL) and Dr. Zaw Tun (Professor and Head of English Department, MUFL) for giving us time and supervision. We express our sincere gratitude to all the participants from YUFL and MUFL. Without their patience in answering the questionnaire and the interviews, this study cannot be fruitful.

### **References**

- Alshehry, A. T. (2014). Teaching research writing to female undergraduates in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Education Learning and Development*, 2(4), 15–25.
- Alsied, S. M. & Ibrahim, N. W (2017). Exploring Challenges Encountered by EFL Libyan Learners in Research Teaching and Writing. *IAFOR Journal of Language Learning*. Volume 3 – Issue 2.
- Bocar. A. C. (2003). Difficulties encountered by the student-researches and the effects on their research output. *Proceeding of the Global Summit on Education*. Kuala Lumpur.
- Mahammoda, S. A. (2016). Factors affecting the quality of undergraduate research work in Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. *International Journal of Innovative Research & Development*, 5(12), 23–27.
- Mapolisa, T., & Mafa, O. (2012). Challenges being experienced by undergraduate students in conducting research in open and distance learning. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 2(10), 1672–1684.
- Neville, C. (2007). *Introduction to research and research methods*. University of Bradford School of Management.

- Pandey, P., & Mishra, P. (2015). Research methodology: Tools and techniques. Bridge Center.
- Qasem, F. A. A., &Elrasheed, I. M. Z. (2019), The challenges and problems faced by students in the early stage of writing research projects in L2, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia , European Journal of Special Education Research ISSN: 2501 - 2428 ISSN-L: 2501 – 2428Volume 4 | Issue 1 | 2019
- Rajasekar, S., Philominathan, P., &Chinnathambi, V. (2013).Research methodology.