THE CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS FACED BY STUDENTS IN THE EARLY STAGE OF WRITING RESEARCH PROJECTS IN L2, UNIVERSITY OF BISHA, SAUDI ARABIA

Fawaz Ali Ahmed Qasem[1i],
Elrasheed Ismail M. Zayid[2]
[1]Assistant professor,
Department of English,
Bisha University, KSA
[2]Assistant professor,
Department of Computer Science,
Bisha University, KSA

Abstract:
Research, by its nature, is a critical challenging task requires in depth knowledge of the subject matter, planning, care, and hard work. From the students' point of view, this paper attempts to explore the challenges that are faced by undergraduates when they are writing proposals and research projects at the early stages. The study target group comprised undergraduates in the final year in the College of Science and Arts, Al-Namas, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. Around 60 subjects participated in this study and they were from Department of English and Department of Computer Science who conducted their research projects in English as Second Language (ESL). The Research tools of the study include questionnaire and informal interviews with students and teachers of the target groups. Clearly, the results from study showed that around 70 % of the participants who are writing research or conducting research projects in English is one of the predominant challenges for them. Around 50% prefer to conduct their research in L1. The study explored various and common challenges/difficulties during writing the research proposals and projects such as: difficulty in deciding the topic for research, lack of good knowledge of the methodology, inability of finding modern, specialized and related references, lack of interest in research, lack of understanding of the subject matter, lack of time, and research guiding. The study also attempts to give some suggestions/recommendations for developing the process of writing research proposals and research projects.

Keywords: English as Second Language (ESL); the challenges of research writing

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[1] Correspondence: email fawazrajehbu@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Writing skill itself is a difficult process faced by Arab learners who learn English as Second Language (ESL). The main reason for this practical project is to explore the common academic challenges facing undergraduate students in the early stages of writing research projects in English. Students face various challenges in writing research in L2. Some of them might experience internal limitations which includes motivation while for some it would be external, as in related to proficiency in L2, understanding research methodology, experience, motivation. Since the research proposals and projects are in L2 good proficiency and the good knowledge of the specialization helps much in writing good research proposals and projects. This research attempts to explore whether writing research proposal and projects in English as Second Language (ESL) acts as a challenge for students in the earlier stages of conducting research or not. Another aim is to identify the major challenges undergraduate students face when they are writing proposals and projects as new process to them and to check whether the undergraduate students are familiar and aware of the challenges and difficulties of writing and conducting research proposals and projects. In this work, we investigate the issues that motivate the undergraduate students in this stage to do well in writing research proposals and projects and figure out the reasons that de-motivate them.

The paper is classified into various sections. Section 1 introduces the topic of research. In section 2, we cover some relevant studies which explore the various challenges and problems facing students in their earlier step of writing research proposal and projects in L2. Section 3 presents the methodology of the study including, participants, research questions, and data collection and analysis. Section 4 presents the results of the study. Section 5 summarizes the findings of the study and gives recommendations and suggestions to curtail the difficulties and problems facing researchers in this stage.

1.1 Literature Review

In this section, from the previous studies existing in the literature, we introduce the significant challenges/difficulties facing researchers while writing in L2. Manchishi, Ndhlovu, & Mwanza, (2015) investigated the mistakes and challenges faced by postgraduate students in the school of education. Around 100 participants took part in the study among them 80 students and 20 lecturers at the University of Zambia. The study explored that student's mistakes in writing proposals include broad and unclear topics, failure in methodology, terminologies of research, problems in reporting the literature review. Most importantly, the challenges faced students in writing research proposals were absence of standard format, lack of knowledge in identifying clearly relevant literature review, lack of good, adequate, and regular feedback from supervisors, lack of materials related to selected topics, and finally the time arranged for writing proposals was not adequate.

An interesting case study was conducted to investigate ESL postgraduate students' problems and self-initiated strategies they improved to meet the challenges at University in Hong Kong. The data was collected from 150 postgraduate students for the study through questionnaire and interview. The findings of the study explored that the challenges facing participants were mainly related to linguistic, cultural, institutional, and disciplinary issues. The two most dominant challenges were (a) the difficulty in expressing ideas in L2 and (b) the participants were not able to develop confidence in conveying academic voice, Yiu (2009). Al-Khairy, M. (2013) investigated the major academic writing problems Saudi undergraduates make in English as L2 in the University of Taif in Saudi Arabia. He found various problems in sentence-level or at the maximum at paragraph-level of academic writing and gave many suggestions to develop the writing of the undergraduates. The major reasons for low proficiency in writing EFL/ESL contexts is due to various factors such as grammatical weakness, less practice, lack of motivation, educational background, weaknesses in using appropriate lexical items, Javid & Umer (2014 , Widagdo (2017).

Al-Qaderi I. (2016) also examined the challenges facing undergraduate students in Ibb University, Yemen when they write their graduation research projects. English in Yemen taught as Foreign Language (FL) and it is found that the predominant problems the students encountered were broadly (1) the weak academic level of the students might in English as medium of instruction and research or in specialization (2) the lack of well-equipped library with open access to e. resources and websites, and (3) students' difficult circumstances and their negative attitudes towards research projects. Kikula and Quorro (2007), Kombo and Tromp (2011), and Repoa (2007) have consensus to find many crucial problems students face while they are writing their research proposals in Tanzania. Some common mistakes include writing broad titles with no clear and focused content in the introduction. The statements of the problems were not stated clearly to guide the readers and writers were not able to identify the correct research techniques. The literature reviews were not adequate and the research methodology including research questions were not formed well. It is shown that the results were not presented well. Ahmed and Mahboob (2016) presented an indispensable contribution work to analyze the research proposals and challenges faced by a set of 32 postgraduate students in the Department of medicine, Lady Reading Hospital in Pakistan. In this study, they found many challenges including: research methodology, formulating research questions and hypotheses, setting the background and introduction section, gathering information and data collection, objectives and references citation. In this study, the quantitative ground theory approach was implemented. The study concluded that a high rate of graduate students had challenges in preparing research proposals, particularly the lack of proper guiding and supervision, and suggests some points to strengthening supervision and guiding skills.

Writing skill is a difficult skill for most of Arab learners who learn English as L2 because forming a good piece of writing requires not only high proficiency of the Second language' linguistic rules but also demands good cognitive skills in organizing

and presenting ideas. In this part we present some studies exist in the literature which explore the challenges the Arabic-speaking students face while writing in ESL. Arabic-speaking learners usually have difficulty in writing as a productive skill which requires highly good cognitive and linguistic abilities. Rass (2015) investigated the challenges that face Palestinian Arab students, specialized in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in developing their writing in English as L2. The study explored that the learners have a difficulty in presenting the ideas and they usually transfer the stylistic features from their L1. Not only learners are influenced by L1 but it is found that Learners write long sentences and they keep repeating the same ideas around the topic and replicate phrases without targeting the main idea (Al-Khatib, 2001), (Almehmadi, 2013). Writing as process is challenging and writing anxiety is prevalent amidst learners of L2 and they fear from writing process as it requires good command of the language and the ability of put forth the ideas coherently and logical manner. Many studies conducted on writing anxiety which we would like to highlight the challenges of ESL learners and how they receive anxiety. It is found that the productive skills, writing and speaking show high anxiety among learners more than other language skills, (for more details in this regard see, Aydin, 2008; Tsui, 1996 Aydin, 2008; Atay & Kurt, 2006; Mat Daud, Mat Daud, & Abu Kassim, 2005)

Many genuine steps and proposed studies have been done towards developing students' skills in formulating their proposals and research projects in effective way in their early stage of writing research proposals/ projects in Saudi Arabia. Alfakih (2017) investigated the impact of a training program on enhancing postgraduate students' research skills in preparing a research proposal. After designing a training program for improving skills of writing research proposals, questionnaire was used to given for the participants. Pre-test and post-test tool were used to get clear results for examining students skills. The results showed improvement and effectiveness of the training program in enhancing the student's skills and this was clear from the participants' performance between pre-test and post test. The study recommended that students should acquire specific knowledge to prepare research proposals. The courses designers and supervisors should have practical insight and clear identification of the students' skills and attempt to develop students' research proposals through courses content and activities in research methodology. Many interesting works are available in the literature which show clearly the good steps of writing research proposals/projects and can useful for supervisors and researchers in the early stage of writing research, Walsh & Wigens (2003), Kothari (2004), Tayie, S. (2005), Baron, (2008), Rumsey, S. (2008), Hinkel, (2011), Kombo & Tromp (2011), and Bell (2014).

2. Methodology

2.1 The Participants
The study includes sixty undergraduate students (30 students from Computer Science-based, 30 students from English Department) in their early stage of writing research.

They all study in Al-namas, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. The participants have been trained how to write research proposals and projects for one semester. Majority of them have done research proposals and projects.

2.2 Rationale of the Study

Students face many challenges and obstacles during their early stage of writing research proposals and projects in English as Second Language (ESL). The primary reason for this practical project is to address the common challenges in this early stage of writing projects in English. Another reason is to make learners and teachers (supervisors) aware of the various challenges faced by the students in this stage.

Other reasons for this research suggest give good steps for research in this stage. For instance, teachers can make use of L1 environment and can give students tasks and small research projects to conduct in L1 and make them familiar with research process. Therefore, this method would make researchers more secure and motivated to conduct researches in English henceforth. Another reason for conducting such type of the study is to highlight the importance of including research-based teaching that open and enhance student's cognitive abilities and facilitate in comprehending research process.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Questionnaire and informal interviews are used to collect data from the sample of the study. The questionnaire covers five different areas, and each area includes several sub parameters and the main factors are: language challenges; specialization and discipline, methodology, references and resources, and language motivation and interest. The questionnaire has been translated into L1 to get accurate responses from the participants. Also, interview with several supervisors and guiders were carried out to diagnose the problems and reach an ultimate solution.

In the coding process, each variable and question is identified by a name, and is defined by a number of acceptable codes or by a range of valid values. In general the variables are divided and categorized and given values, (Agree=3, Disagree=2, and neutral =1) as in example (1) included in the questionnaire.

(1) I face challenges when I write research proposal and projects in English as a Second Language (ESL).
   a. Agree = 3
   b. Disagree = 2
   c. Neutral = 1

Any variable represents an input to form the desired output in the analysis phase. The dataset also used various independent variables and they are discussed further in Table 1, Table 2, and Figure1 to Figure 4 in the results section 4.

2.4 Research Questions

The study is designed to give answers for the following:
   a) Is writing research proposal and projects in English as Second Language (ESL) acts as a challenge for students in the earlier stages of conducting research or not?
   b) What are the common challenges faced by the undergraduate students when they are writing proposals and projects as new process to them?
   c) Are the learners familiar and aware of the challenges and difficulties of writing and conducting research proposals and projects?
   d) What are the things that motivate the undergraduate students in this stage to do well in writing research proposals and projects in this new stage of being introduced to research?

3. Results and Discussion
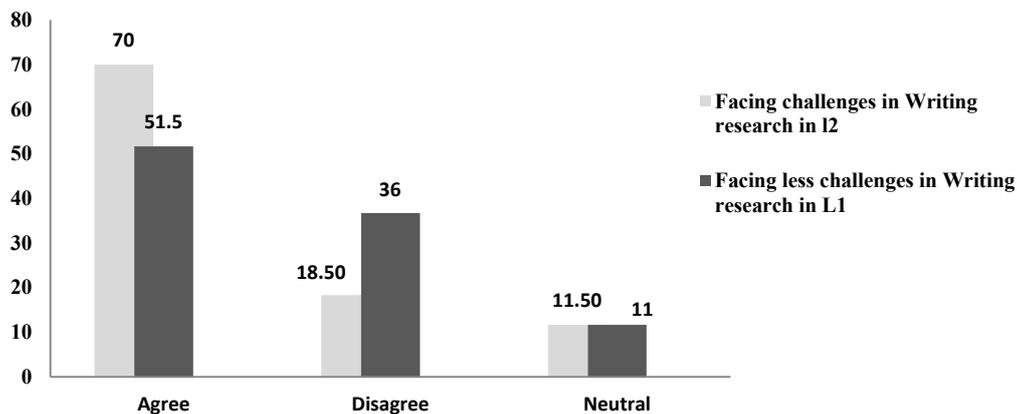
Figure 1: Writing research projects in L2 and L1

Figure 1 shows that students face more challenges when they are writing in L2. Around 70 % of the students experience and encounter challenges when they write in L2 (English as Second Language (ESL) and more than 50 % prefer to write their research in L1 and during discussion with students, they said that they would perform better if the research proposals and projects are in L1. We can infer from Figure 1 that the ability of conducting research proposals and projects itself as not a challenging process in L1 but writing in L2 is the common obstacle facing students in the early stage of writing research.

This shows that some students have low proficiency in English which affects negatively their performance in writing their research projects. The open-ended question in this regard shows that challenges in conducting research in L2 for the undergraduate students is because of the lack of enough vocabulary in L2, not able to form sentences in coherent and correct way, less experience in arranging information in a written texts, lack of understanding of the complex and new terminologies in L2.
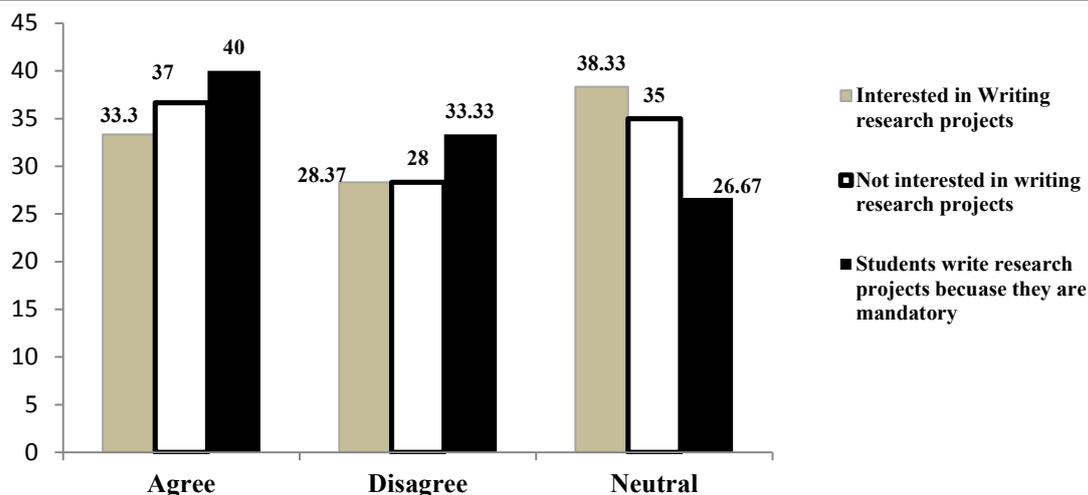
Figure 2: Motivation to write research proposals and projects

Figure 2 comparably shows that students are having different reasons for writing and for their unwillingness research proposals and projects. 33.3% -37% are interested in writing research proposals and projects 28.37% are not interested in writing the research proposals and projects whereas 38.33% are having neutral views in this regard. Figure 2 explores clearly that students are more concerned with writing research proposals and projects because it is mandatory as part of their study. It is noticed that 40% of the participants agreed that they conduct their research because it is obligatory in their study/curriculum. 33.33% of the participants disagree and they are interested in conducting the research. However, 26.37% of the participants are neutral.

When we asked students about the reasons behind not being interested and motivated in the research process, they gave various reasons. (a) Generally, the research is in L2. (b) The participants did not select their research topic early. (c) Research affects concentration on the other subjects. (d) Lack of encouragement and providing awards. (d) Lack of experience in writing the research. Moreover, (e) the students are not interested in writing research projects because they are mandatory in their course study.

On the other hand, some students said that they are interested in writing research due to many reasons. (a) There is a good academic atmosphere to gather participants with teachers. (b) The participants feel they can gain good experience in new things and they feel that they have achieved something crucial and substantial. (3) Acquiring in depth knowledge while conducting research projects is also one of the reasons to motivate the participants. (4) Getting high marks and prizes motivate undergraduates to write proposals and projects. Therefore, teachers should take this into account this and motivate learners by conducting competition and giving awards for the best research proposals or project. Low proficiency in writing in English in general quietly affects students' motivation and many studies have been carried out to highlight the strong relationship between lack of motivation and learning L2, Al-Mutari (2007), Moskovsky and Alrabai (2009), Al-Johani (2009), Fareh (2010). Khan (2011) and Ankawi (2013).
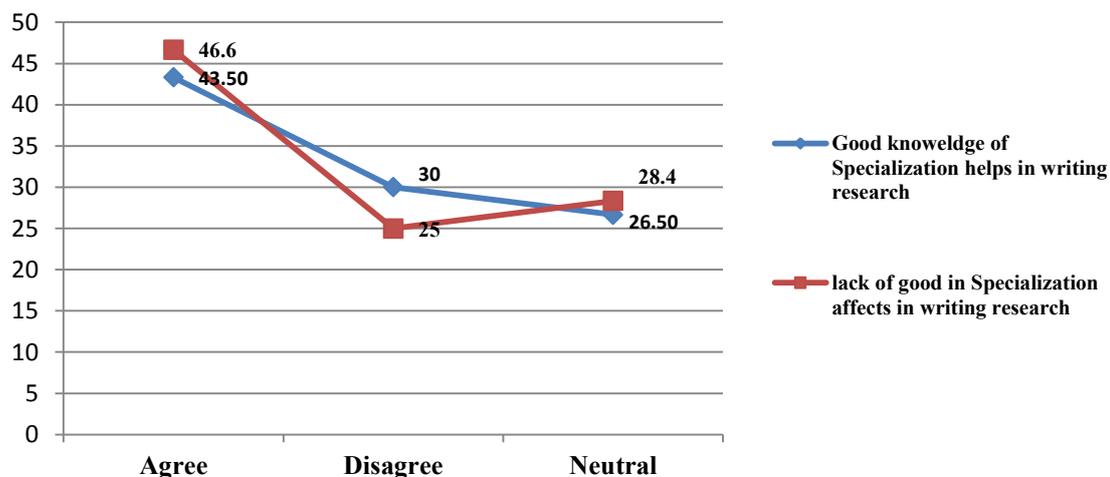
Figure 3: Specialization and its influence in writing research

Interestingly Figure 3 shows that the participants' good knowledge of their specialization helps them to do well while conducting research projects. Majority of the participants (43.50%-46.6%) say that their specialization helps them do well in the research. On the other hand, some other participants (26.50 %-30%) are not with the idea that the specialization help in conducting the research. This is because they have some other reasons like the lack of good knowledge in writing in L2 and the methodology of research. Having deep understanding of specialization's terminologies may help positively also in writing research proposals and projects well.

Table 1: Students views about Research methodology

Research methodology variable		Agree	Disagree	Neutral			
		Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1	Lack of knowledge of research methodology	18	30	23	38.34	19	31.66
2	Facing obstacles in formatting research proposals and projects	36	60	12	20	12	20
3	Having a good skill in selecting research tools, data collection, and data analysis	24	40	15	25	21	35
4	Not following research ethics including plagiarism	31	51.67	12	20	17	28.33
5	Having a problem and challenges in writing and reporting the results	29	49	8	13.5	23	38.5

Table 1 summarizes the challenges and the issues the participants face during writing research proposals and 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 also explores that most of the participants face challenges in formatting their research proposals and

projects (60%), do not have adequate knowledge in selecting research tools, data collection, and data analysis (40%), and because of such prior challenges faced by students, the predominant challenge is to report the results especially coherently in L2 (49%). Surprisingly the participants show that they don't have problems in understanding the research ethics and plagiarism (51.67%).

In addition to the fact given in Table 1 about the methodology issues with regards to the research ethics and plagiarism, the informal discussions and interview show differently of the participants' views in the data and the supervisors say that the participants do not apply the research ethics. Similarly, 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. Some other reasons for not doing well in writing research with reference to methodology include: difficulty to find the research tools to suit the research topic and less and weak guidance for the students. There are not simplified research books help students know well the research methodology/good steps to write research.
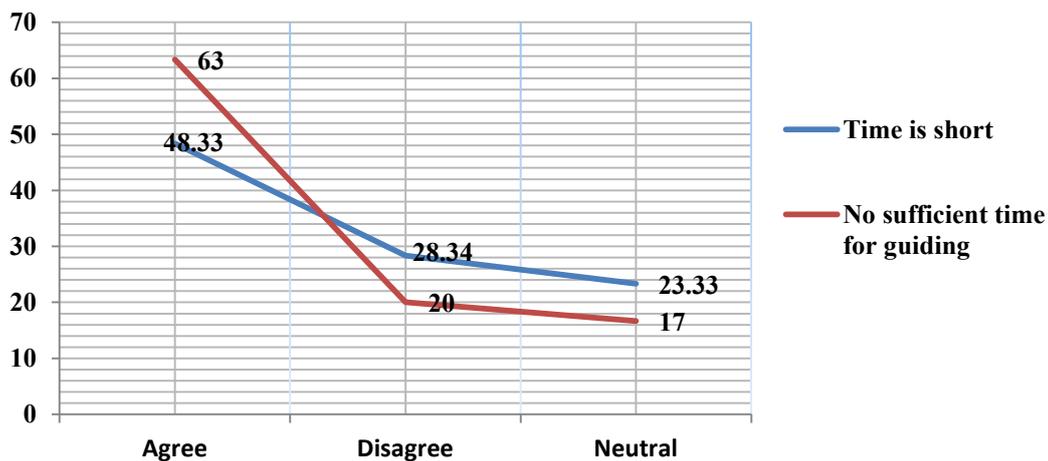

Figure 4: Time and Guiding responses

Figure 4 shows that among the challenges facing students while writing research proposals and projects is the duration or the time given for writing and conducting research proposals and projects is comparatively less and supervisors do not give an adequate time for discussing research proposals and projects. 63% of the participants agreed that they do not have sufficient time to do their research proposals and projects well and 48.33% of the participants believed that they are not getting enough time to discuss their research proposals and projects with their supervisors. Similarly 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. 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 decreases students'

anxiety in writing in L2. 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 semi-structured 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.

Table 2: Challenges related to the references in writing research

Sub-variables		Agree		Disagree		Neutral	
		Freq	**%**	**Freq**	**%**	**Freq**	**%**
1	Having knowledge how to quote from references	20	33.33	21	35	19	31.67
2	Being able to make use of online references and resources	31	51.67	14	23.33	15	25
3	Having knowledge of the well-known. modern, and specific references which help in writing research proposals and projects	24	40	22	36.66	14	23.34
4	lack of references and resources in the surrounding libraries	36	60	10	16.67	14	23.33

Table 2 examined the challenges of the undergraduate students faced during writing their research proposals and projects with reference to the way how to quote and to get good references and resources. Around 30% of the participants said that they do not know how to quote from the references and 35% of the participants do not face challenges when they quote from references. The rest of the participants took the neutral position (31.67%) when they asked of and the challenges while quoting from references. Not surprisingly, with the spread of technology in hand, majority of the students (51.67%) 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 proposals and projects. The third question in Table 2 show that 40% of the participants have knowledge about of the well-known, modern, and specific references which help them in writing research proposals and 36.66% are not familiar with the famous references to help them do well in their specialization. Most of the participants (60%) agreed that there is a lack of the references and resources in the surrounding libraries where they are studying.

Similarly, Al-qadiri (2016) found that the most needed references and recourses do not existed in the libraries and students have difficulties in finding them. Another challenge noticed is that students 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 are met with the complex processes of writing from sources.

From the discussion of the participants' responses, the interview, and research tools, it is shown that all the factors addressed in this study are interrelated as each factor depends on the other.

Figure 5 summarizes the relationship among all the factors affecting either negatively or positively the performance of students' writing research proposals and projects in L2 in the early stage.
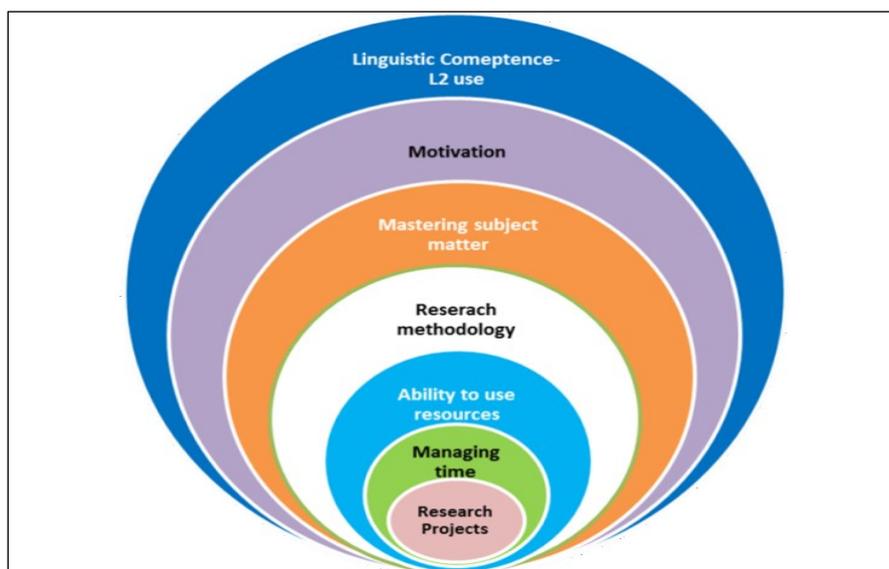
Figure 5: Factors affecting writing projects in L2

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the analysis of students 'views and the interviews of the teachers, we found that many challenges and difficulties students face while composing and writing proposals and research projects. The most common challenge or difficulty students face while writing research proposals and projects in the early stage is writing in L2.

The broad challenges can be summarized as the following:
a) Writing the research proposals and projects in English as Second Language.
b) Selecting the right topic.
c) Selecting the right methodology of writing proposals.
d) Lack of motivation in writing proposals and projects.
e) Lack of good knowledge in specialization.
f) Lack of time and stress chiefly out of their preoccupation with other subjects also.
g) Less time given from supervisors to students.

Majority of findings and results cope with many previous research works in different contexts where English is taught as Second Language or as Foreign Language, Kikula and Quorro (2007), Kombo and Tromp (2011), and Repoa (2007), Rass (2015), Manchishi, Ndhlovu, & Mwanza, (2015), Al-qadiri (2016), Ahmed and Mahboob (2016). The significance of this research is that we highlighted the challenges/difficulties facing

researchers in the earlier stage due to low proficiency in L2 and the use of L1 in this stage can simplify the process of research while writing proposals and projects. This work explored the strong relationship between the good knowledge of specialization and the successful process of writing proposals and projects.

There are many recommendations and suggestions to curtail challenges and help them do well in the earlier stage of writing research proposals and 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 in this stage. Supervisors should provide students with good guidance and help them in selecting the topics which have good materials and resources. Marks can motivate students to do well in writing good research projects.

To make the research process successful starting with/form selecting topic till finalizing the results, teachers can make use of L1 environment and conduct small groups for research and training workshops about research issues in L1. This process would make the participants more secured and less stressed in writing in L2 later. Conducting special lectures in research in L1 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 with writing answers for open questions and activities would enhance the students to think critically and creatively.

Further research can be extended to identify the research challenges in each variable discussed in this study in details as it will be interesting and useful such as research ethics or motivation. Choosing larger sample from various universities in Saudi Arabia or another EFL context would be more fruitful and give plausible results.

Acknowledgments

About the authors

Fawaz Ali Ahmed Qasem is presently working as Assistant Professor at Department of English, Bisha University, KSA. He has done his MA in TESL, and PhD in Linguistics and Phonetics, specialized in psycholinguistics from English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), India. He has participated in various international conferences and workshops and presented and written research papers on his area of interests. He has

taught English in various universities, that of Ibb University, Taiz University, and University of Science and Technology, in Yemen.

Elrasheed Ismail M. Zayid is currently working as Assistant Professor in Department of Computer Science in Bisha University, KSA. He has also worked in Department of Computer Science & IT, University of Elimam Elmahdi, Kosti 11588, Sudan. Al-Rasheed has written many research papers published in international journals and conducted many workshops in the field of computer science, especially, in networks.

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