Mascara University's master didactics students' anxiety about research topic choice

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Abstract

It is argued that the most critical moment in performing research work is the topic choice. This challenging step comes before undertaking any research work. Almost, the most common researcher's anxiety that comes to his/her mind is about the success or on the contrary, the failure of the topic choice. This research aims to tackle the common challenges and difficulties while choosing one's research problem. The study targets a group of postgraduate students of the English language Department at the University of Mascara. Around 25 subjects representing Master II 2021–2022 promotion participated in this study. The research tools include a questionnaire with students and a teacher's experience in teaching Research Methodology Module at Mascara University. Most participants prefer the topics proposed by their future supervisors. Also, the study tempts to give recommendations for developing students' research topics and titles.

Keywords: Methodology, research work, students, topic choice;

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1. Introduction

In this section, and from the previous studies existing in the literature, we introduce the significant challenges and difficulties facing researchers while choosing their topics. What is most important, the challenges facing postgraduate students in developing their research titles are the lack of knowledge in identifying the relevant literature review, and also the absence of good and adequate feedback from the part of supervisors (Manchshi et al., 2015). Widagdo (2017) raises an interesting problem faced by postgraduate students linked with grammatical weakness, and sometimes lack of motivation.

Meanwhile, the first step of any research paper is undoubtedly, to understand the assignment. Otherwise, the student will often waste time and energy. It is said that a clear understanding of the assignment will allow students to focus on the other aspects of the research such as the most primordial one, choosing a topic. Dawson (2002) suggests these four questions that the researcher may ask him/herself before starting to think about the project:

- Why have I decided to do some research?
- How can I remain interested in my research?
- What personal characteristics do I have which might help me to complete my research?
- What skills and experience do I have which might help me in my research?

Meanwhile, asking students what to do before undertaking research work provides these two issues: either having a strong opinion and knowledge about the subject without taking into consideration the availability of documentation or preferring to tackle a topic with a large variety of sources even if the student has no deep knowledge about the subject. These two options are dealt with later as a research tool when the Master II at Mascara University was given a questionnaire. According to Kothari (2004): 'Defining a research problem properly is a prerequisite for any study and is a step of the highest importance'. The formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution (Kothari, 2004, pp. 26–27).

Since the student undertakes research when it comes to facing a problem. In real daily life, and at home, for example, any human being starts to search for a solution when encountering a domestic problem such as the door's lock which does not work, a washing machine that seems to have a breakdown, and so on. Then, in its academic view, Kumar (2011) illustrates that students first decide what to do, or in other words, what research questions they want to find answers in Figure 1. After, they undergo these three phases.

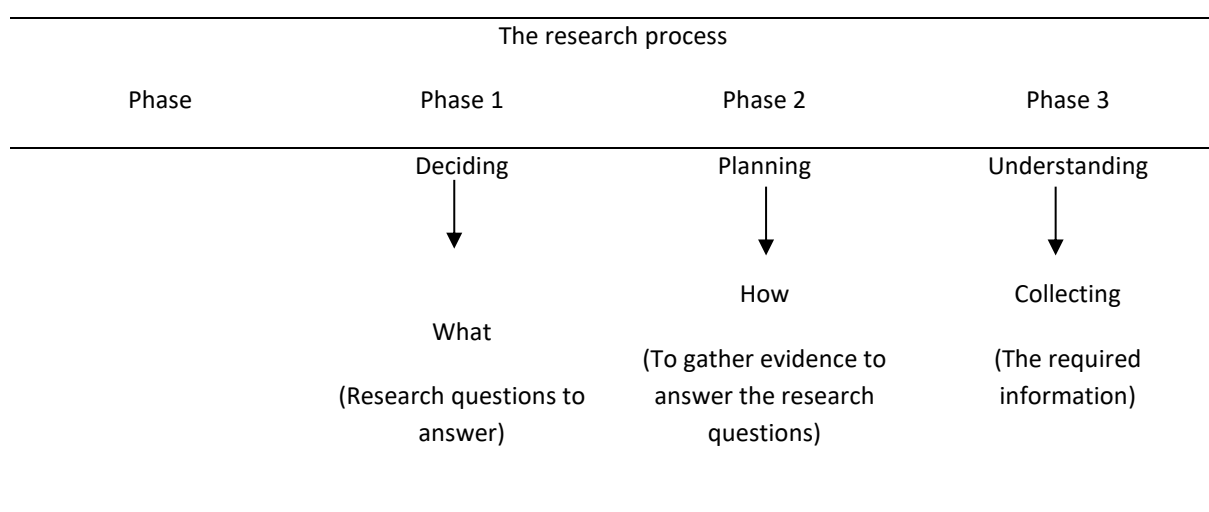| The research process			
Phase	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
	Deciding	Planning	Understanding
	↓	↓	↓
		How	Collecting
	What	(To gather evidence to answer the research questions)	(The required information)
	(Research questions to answer)		

Figure 1
The Research Journey. [Source: Kumar (2011, p. 37)]

1.1. Purpose of study

Choosing one's research topic is an enterprise that is often difficult for researchers. Students of the Master's degree are faced with their first and new challenge: which topic to work on. It is important to note that one of the main factors leading to success in research work is topic selection. This suggests a case study performed at the University of Mascara with Master Students who are currently preparing their future theses. The core aim of this research paper refers to the importance of research topics and to what extent the literature review contributes to removing students' anxiety about their research topics. There should be enumerated that students face two main instructions, an administrative protocol, and pedagogical implications.

1.2. Research questions and hypotheses

Students are supposed to learn Research Methodology starting from their first year at university. They learn the basic research work rules and principles. At Mascara University Master level, students are supposed to choose their topics according to the order of merit, i.e., the first ones in the promotion are the first served to choose their thesis topic. This way stands to motivate students who assume an early review of the literature. This method boosts them in designing their research titles. Meanwhile, students still find difficulties in starting their Master theses.

The significance of this paper lies in its attempt to reconsider the topic choice procedure. This research sheds light on the extent of the employment of the official university chart. The official chart dictates the relevance of the topic choice and its objective to prevent any sort of plagiarism. Yet, this study attempts to answer these two research questions:

1. What is the topic choice procedure at the English department of Mascara University?
2. How does topic choice affect Master students' research challenge?

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Data collection instrument

To reach successful results, one research tool was administered for the purpose to collect the data. It consisted of a questionnaire designed for a group of 27 master students representing the didactics branch promotion of the present academic year 2020–2021. The questionnaire used in this survey has two parts. Section A focuses on students' information about their research methodology studies and their topic choice procedure. Section B gathers information about students' attitudes toward their topics and the supervisor's choice. The researcher modeled them to enumerate their subsequent behavior toward the topic choice.

The items in this study might conclude that when students are confronted with choosing teachers' proposed topics; they are frustrated and think that topics are imposed on them. This proportion compels a methodological instrument to verify if students think they are (or not) imposed topics. The questionnaire gives successful results describing master students' attitudes toward topic choice. Moreover, describing the elements in both Sections A & B results in an analysis reflecting students' behavior just before undertaking their theses.

2.2. Participants

To have real feedback, some 27 Master's students preparing their master thesis in didactics are involved in this research. All students of the Master II Didactics branch took part in this research. The advantage that needs to be mentioned is that the researcher was in permanent contact with the teacher of the Interview Research Tool Module during the academic year 2020/2021. This close contact with participants facilitated the researcher's task. This group has a total of 27 students, 06

males, and 21 females. These students have been classmates for at least 2 years, and they are preparing their Master theses in pairs. The 25 participants were told to express their points of view on what is being instructed by the master team and what they expect from their supervisors concerning their research title choice. Students' motivations were to undertake their first university degree thesis. It's a value that brings us pride and personal satisfaction, would answer the students when they were asked about their master research work. As follows, Figure 2 represents three values when doing research work.
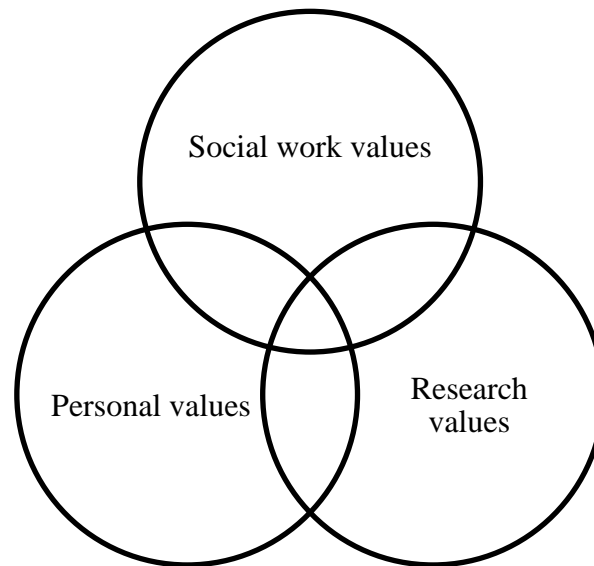

Figure 2

Value Congruence. [Source: Lyons & Doueck (2010, p. 11)]

So far, these three-value equivalences require awareness of the role and influence of all decisions made during the research process. It brings the potential to realize the end, a significant quantitative and qualitative written output. In other words, planning is the core basis of succeeding in a thesis. Research has shown that experienced writers plan extensively (Morley, 2017, p. 138), by establishing what can be called a territory, which means the need for establishing the importance of one's topic by reviewing previous works.

Despite its importance, the research methodology module was not taught at Algerian universities. Yet, it could be noted that students had the chance to discover this branch just when preparing for a post-graduate level such as the magister.

3. Results

In this section, the researcher presents the main results obtained through the questionnaire data collection method. The forthcoming three sections present the outcomes of the survey. The first section deals with the students' topic choice procedure and if they did not do a literature review taking into account that they did not have an idea about their research subjects. The next section describes students' behavior toward their topics. At last, the third section describes what is prescribed as academic rules from the point of view of laws and instructions.

3.1. Section one: topic choice procedure

In this first section, the questionnaire aims at defining the procedural step engaged by students before starting to write their theses. The results obtained reflect what is practiced in reality concerning the topic choice. Five questions were administered to the subjects and the results are shown in Table 1. The participants were asked to rate each of the five statements about the reasons for their subject choice procedure. All questions in this first questionnaire are closed-ended ones except for the third question which gives another expected alternative. For example, a student coming late and the topic might be imposed on him/her.

Table 1
Topic Choice Procedure

Questions	Yes answers	No answers	Other possible answers
1	02	25	
2	10	15	02, Yes, but with individual efforts
3			27 students find it interesting
4			Peer work for all students
5			After for all students

3.1.1. Question one

The results concluded that nearly all students are unanimous in declaring that they were not satisfied with the learning methodology during their theoretical academic year at the university. They justify their answer by providing what they did with their teachers of methodology. They did not do enough practice. What they only practiced was preparing a project and their evaluation marks were based on their participation.

3.1.2. Question two

As a consequence, the participants announce they did not develop positive research attitudes because their teachers' feedback relied only on discussing handouts texts without being tested practically.

3.1.3. Questions three, four & five

The results bring an overview of the time when the literature review is undertaken (see answers 3, 4 and 5). The research works are done in pairs, and each peer shares half of the task. What strikes is the common answer for the fifth question. Even if the participants say that their topics are interesting, they did not do any kind of literature review before they received their research titles. The reason is that they were first busy with ending their third-semester courses and preparing for the exams. Henceforth, they were given titles late (last October) and it would be preferable to receive topics in the summer to do a better literature review.

3.2. Section two: students' attitudes

According to students' attitudes vis-à-vis their topic's choice, three questions were administered in this second questionnaire. The results obtained are illustrated in pie charts 1, 2 and 3. Students in the majority (90%) agree that they had a certain freedom in choosing their master theses subjects.

The rest (only 10%) disagree that they were limited in choosing their topics. This might reflect the order of merit given to students who had better averages in their theoretical academic year. The last classified students are given less chance to choose their topic from the proposed list of titles. Meanwhile, most students share the same opinion in the second question answer saying they find this method of topic choice positive. Finally, and referring to the third question, half of the participants assert they were independent in choosing their supervisors. This avows is contradictory to the local academic directives which dictate that students have no right to choose their supervisors.

In addition, students show their disagreement with working in couples. They prefer performing alone their Master theses to reach a personal pride. However, their wishes are not realized since both the administrative and the scientific committees of the English Department take into consideration the increasing number of students and the limited teacher's number. Figure 3 denotes that student is in favour of being given more freedom in choosing their topics.
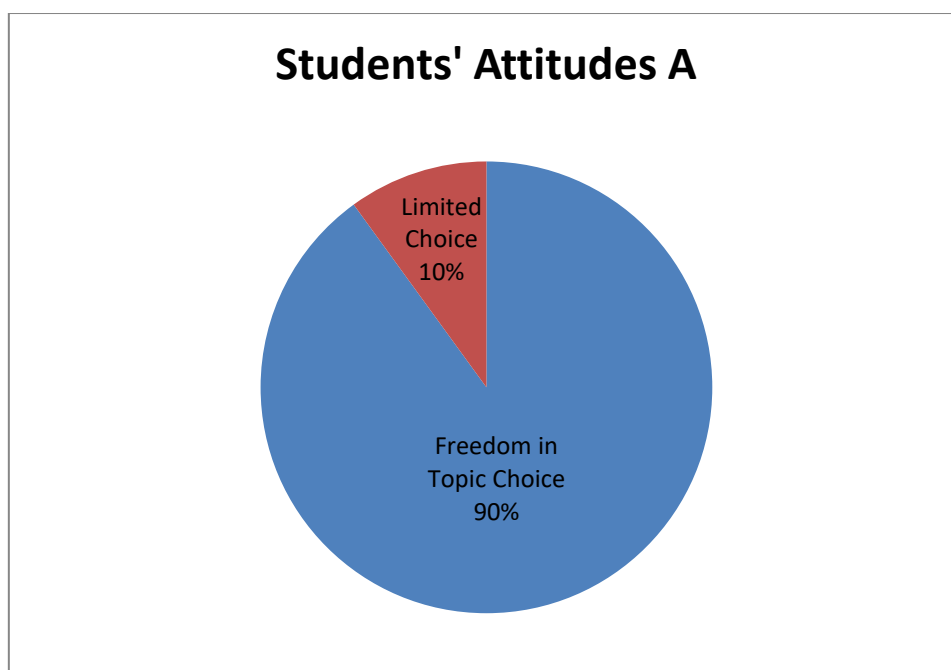

Figure 3

Students' Attitudes Towards Limited or Free Topic Choice

As is the case at the department of English Language and Literature at Mascara University, the Master research topics are offered according to the order of merit. Figure 4 shows that the majority of students find it a positive method.
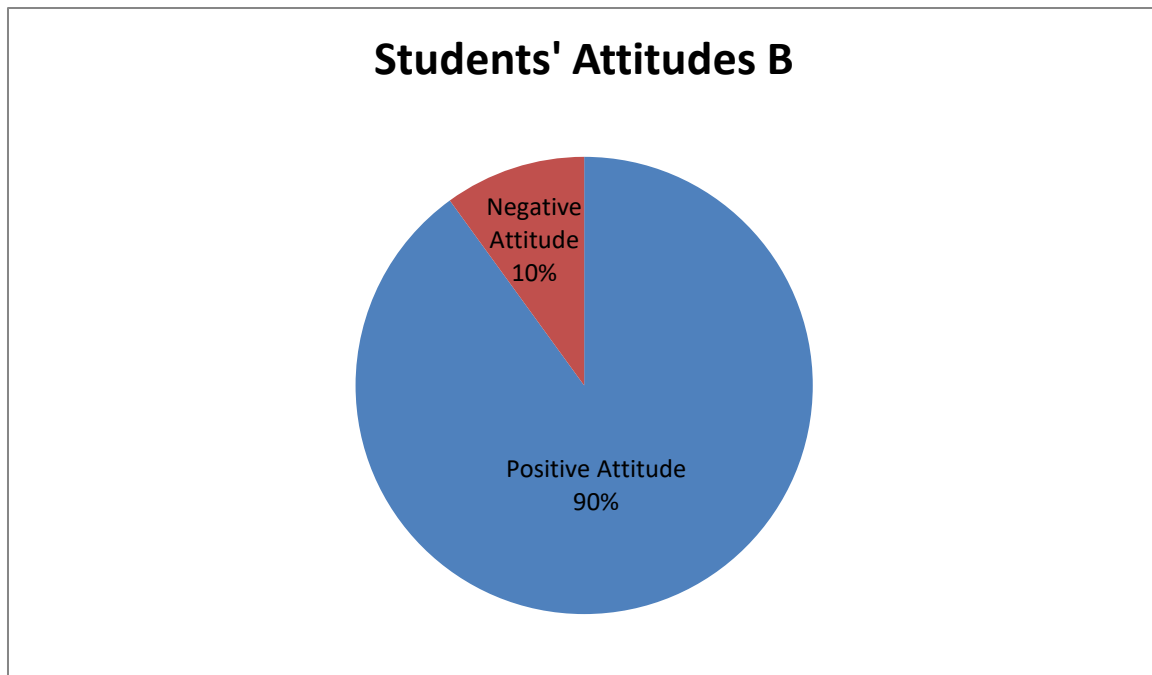
Students' Attitudes B

Negative Attitude 10%

Positive Attitude 90%

Figure 4

Students' Attitudes Towards Positive or Negative Topic Choice

The following Figure 5 illustrates that nearly half of the supervisors make early contact with their future students, even if this is not the case for the rest of the teachers, who simply wait for their engagements coming from the Master committee president (responsible).
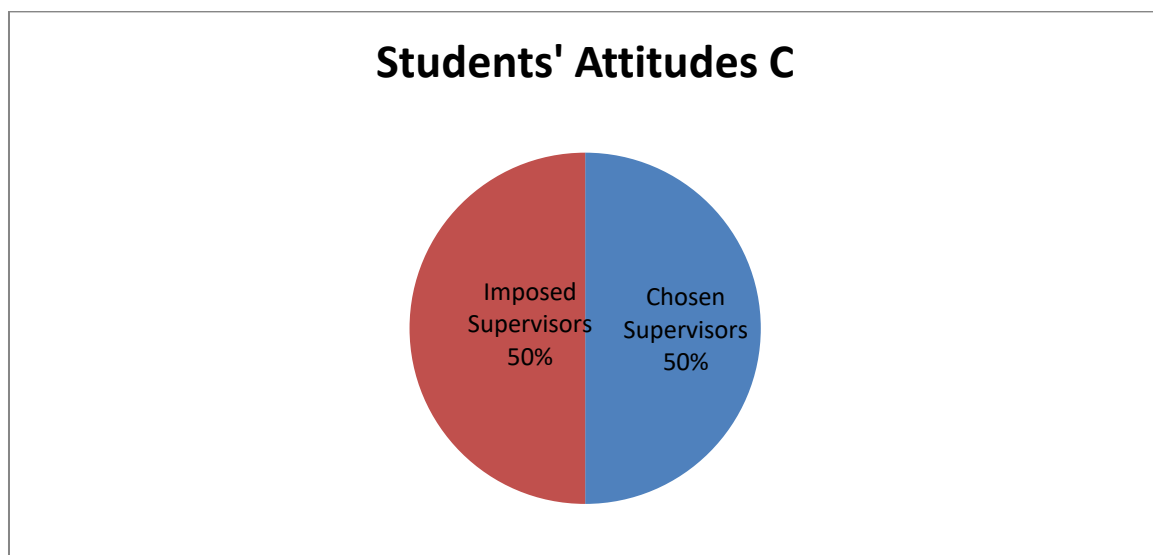
Students' Attitudes C

Imposed Supervisors 50%

Chosen Supervisors 50%

Figure 5
Supervisor's Choice Procedure

4. Discussion

This study aimed to understand the extent of topic choice influence on master students' anxiety. In general, the results indicate reasonable anxiety about their theoretical studies, mostly when citing the research methodology studied modules (questionnaire 1). Students point out the difficulties they encountered in their research work achievements. The participants also show a prominent factor

related to the lack of their teachers' feedback. They are against being evaluated only on their attendance and classroom participation. Perhaps the most striking finding is when students appeal for being evaluated about their practical tasks (Diaz, 2020).

The other intriguing finding (in the second questionnaire) may be related to students' satisfaction with both their topics and supervisors' choices. This satisfactory factor has extremely lessened their anxiety and sped up their motivation. No significant relationship was found since the administrative and the rules in vigor do not stipulate freedom in topic choice. These rules are measures aiming at avoiding plagiarism concerning the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education chart (Appendix 3: MESRS, 2020, Chapter II, 5th Article). In this sense, a realistic situation is proposed occurring when the instructors provide a list of topics from which the student may choose. These topics have been deemed by the instructor. Thus, the student should be confident in the topic he chooses from the list.

The present study has led to the following recommendations for choosing one's Master Thesis topic. It is recommended then, that it should be a database reference containing titles and topics of memoirs and theses already defended to prevent plagiarism from the internet. It is therefore assumed that each Master's student must declare that his/her dissertation was not a subject of any previous research. As mentioned in the first questionnaire students' responses, they were waiting a long time to meet their supervisors, and after, they started with the literature review. This is a wrong route students took because conducting a thorough literature review flows naturally into the process of developing your research question congruence (Lyons & Doueck, 2010, p. 57). The researcher is usually advised to choose topics of interest so that he/she continues being motivated to successfully overcome problems encountered in the course of the study (Adhikari, 2020, p. 28). While choosing their topics, Didactics Master students at Mascara University say they seek four criteria: relevance, specificity, importance and originality.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate the importance of topic choice. The case is about the Master II Didactics option at the English Department of Mustapha Stambouli Mascara University, Algeria. The answer to the research questions represents a deep study of both juridical and pedagogic procedures added to students' questionnaire investigation. Despite what is given as arguments by students, the topic choice order of merit was not completely followed by their Master's responsible since some questioned students announced their freedom in choosing the titles.

Moreover, as far as the theoretical academic year is concerned, students seem to rely only on their Research Methodology teacher's courses. This is a false device because learners should be engaged in their Maser formation by processing continual self-research. An arrangement between researchers and instructors is appreciated because it eliminates the topic choice stress.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

1. Are you satisfied with the learning methodology during the theoretical academic year at the university?

2. Have you developed positive research aptitudes?

3. How did you find your Master thesis research topics?

4. Is your research a peer or individual task?

5. Did you undertake any literature review before being given the title?

Appendix 2

1. How do you qualify your research topic choice?

a) Free   b) Limited   c) Imposed

2. Do you find this method of topic choice......?

a) Positive   b) Negative

3. Did you have the independence of choosing your supervisor?

a) Yes   b) No

Appendix 3

Order No. 933 of July 28, 2016, lays down the rules relating to the prevention and fight against plagiarism.

Chapter I: General provisions Chapter.

II: definition of plagiarism.

Chapter III: preventive measures against plagiarism.

The follow-up to Order No. 10 of December 27, 2020, lays down the rules relating to the prevention and fight against plagiarism (MESRS Official Bulletin, 2020).