The benefits and drawbacks of writing a thesis as an English major student

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Abstract

To graduate from most colleges, English majors are required to complete a research paper, also called a diploma paper. However, when writing a diploma paper in their last year of study, English language learners discover several advantages and disadvantages. This article sought to determine the advantages and disadvantages of writing a Bachelor of Arts thesis for English majors upon completion of their studies, as well as the extent to which composition classes provided during the final semester aid them. As part of this study, eight additional university students participated in a focus group, and thirty-one students were invited to complete a questionnaire. The findings indicate that writing a thesis allows you to follow your interests, get ongoing input from your mentor, and build your portfolio with well-written work that the committee members will study. Nevertheless, there are also some drawbacks that students face while writing a paper, such as managing information, the use of generalizations, and not having enough time to write it. Finally, this study suggests that having a course that prepares students to write a thesis at the end of their studies is beneficial to students as it mentors them and teaches a step-by-step writing thesis.

Keywords: Composition course; diploma paper; English majors; thesis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Kosovo, high school students rarely, if ever, engage in academic writing. This is one of the primary causes of their writing difficulties in college since they lack transferable writing experience. However, English Major students are obliged in a way to do lots of writing, including a Bachelor Paper at the end of their studies (Xueyun, 2004), as it reflects their academic knowledge (Xuewen, 2009).

While English Major students study English, the academic writing process they get involved in can be a knowledge-telling and also knowledge-transforming process (Bi & Tan 2024; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2013; Csizér & Tankó, 2017). All of the skills that students get from these years have a lot to do with self-regulation (Hajar & Mhamed 2021). Czizer and Tanko (2017) and Huang, (2024) highlight the importance of self-regulation in their paper, as it is increasingly seen as a key variable in L2 learning in many foreign language learning contexts because students may not receive enough input from classroom-centered instructional language training.

Many studies also discuss whether English Major students should write Bachelor Papers or use portfolios as a vehicle to offer a way of minimizing the pile of papers students have to read to compose a research paper (Baume, 2001; McMullan et al., 2003). On the other hand, studies show that a teaching experience as a pre-service teacher, is more important (Gerrish, 1993; Sharma et al., 2006; Kelleci Alkan et al., 2024), and students do not need either of them.

Research papers take a lot of time to write, from the starting point of identifying the main problems or research questions to the last step, publication, or defending of the thesis. Žindžiuvienė (2009) points out that there are two important points that students should keep in mind while writing their B. A thesis: validity and reliability. Two main aspects are particularly important in research: validity and reliability. Furthermore, Žindžiuvienė (2009) clarifies that in testing, validity refers to statements about the reliability or trustworthiness of qualitative or quantitative data obtained to make judgments or infer conclusions. Studies show that student's accountability for validity is very high. Similarly, Cho et al., (2006) suggest that the aggregate ratings of at least 4 peers on a piece of writing are both highly reliable and as valid as instructor ratings.

Furthermore, students can bring evidence in their papers as an interaction between an audience, a claim, and other facts in general (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). Porter (2011) in the paper makes a great point on how many institutional databases have limits; hence, college student surveys have become one of our largest and most often used data sources. Furthermore, he says that college student surveys are becoming increasingly significant in assessing the performance of college and university programs and regulations. On the other hand, Chen (2012) implies the fact that for English Majors in China to finish their research in the final year, they have to be monitored all the time, so reliability and validity are present in their paper.

Moving further, Bell (1997) reconfirms that student research can and is reliable. However, students should be careful with data collection, for example, questionnaires, interviews, diaries, or other methods, as they are not important until they are analyzed. When analyzing data, students should be really careful with the risk of generalization, which is one of the drawbacks of our study. Studies such as Bell (1997), Payne and Williams (2005), Bassey (1981), and others, pay very much attention to generalization in student research. Payne and Williams (2005) give a terminology of the word generalize as it follows "To generalize means to assert that what is true in one place or at one time will be true in another place or at another period. Their study shows that words like "suggest", "tend", "illustrate", and "some of" are mostly used in a way that rendered claims unclear. Žindžiuvienė (2009) also highlights that in small research papers, generalization may be unlikely, but relatability may be entirely possible.

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Moreover, some of the difficulties that students mostly face as shown in our study is the challenge to get started with the research and find a good title. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) advise students to adopt the principle of "writing-as-you-go" throughout the study, as students will already have some drafts; and, even if they are rough, it is always preferable to confront a blank page or screen than a badly written and incomplete manuscript. Similarly, Miles and Huberman (1994) say that they have learned the hard way that preserving notes, transcripts, references, and rough drafts is essential, or as they call it "alpine collection of information".

1.1. Purpose of study

This study closely listened to students of Universum College, as they participated in the focus groups, regarding their beliefs on writing a B. A research paper. For this study, research questions fell under two distinct categories:
1. How do composition classes help English Majors to write academically?
2. Do students prefer traditional research or modern portfolios, and why?

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

2.1. Participants

Eight (8) students of Universum College (1 male, 7 females) from different regions of Kosovo were invited to a focus group and voluntarily agreed to partake in the study. Students were aged between 20 to 25 years old, and 31 other students filled out an online questionnaire.

2.2. Data collection instrument

For this study, the researchers devised an 11-item questionnaire that does not take more than 5-7 minutes to complete. The study chose a mixed-methods approach, including both a quantitative method as an instrument, as it is easier to analyze data, and also a qualitative method as an instrument as students will freely talk about their experiences through the focus groups. Focus groups have an origin in social sciences (Twinn, 1998) which utilize open-ended questioning with inductive probing of responses (Namey et al., 2016), and are generally described in the literature as being more appropriate for gathering information on group norms, dynamics, or processes and for brainstorming activities (Knodel, 1993; Krueger & Casey, 2015). On the other hand, questionnaires have many advantages, as they are efficient use of time (Munn & Drever, 1990), and they offer anonymity for the respondent (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2006).

3. RESULTS

3.1. The benefits of writing a thesis

3.1.1. Continuous feedback from the mentor

During the focus groups, all of the students said that one of the benefits of writing a thesis is that "you cannot do it wrong, as it is being continuously reviewed by the mentor, who wants the thesis to be perfect." Apart from mentoring, teachers also help students facilitate personal development, encourage them to make wise choices (Zachary, 2002, 2005; Almossa & Alzahrani 2022), and help them transfer these skills into careers (Zeeb, 1998). By using praise, students' motivation can change for good, as shown in many studies (Ames, 1992; Koestner et al., 1987).

Fitore, one of the focus group students, asserted the necessity to empower learners:

If it wasn't for my mentor, who helped me understand my thesis better, but at the same time, didn't let me stress out, and motivated me throughout the process, I wouldn't have finished my thesis on time. I was

> *overwhelmed by the name thesis, and I never thought that a little support and motivation from my mentor would make things this easy.*

Similarly, Shi's (2005) and Kang & Chen's (2024) studies on empowering motivation also show that a little motivation can go a long way, and even lead students to take responsibility for their learning. The mentors in this case used the Achievement Goal Theory (Skaalvik, 2004) to motivate students to graduate on time. Similarly, Simpson (2008) thinks that teachers, to enhance the motivation of their students, will use an eclectic mix of other theories, not only the Achievement Goal Theory. He further suggests that depending on the personality and learning style of the student, different theories can be used within the classroom.

3.1.2. Well-written research to add to the portfolio

Students in this study listed portfolio as a part of the thesis, as they thought it is a way to see your progress, it allows you to come back and improve your work, and it offers the possibility for the potential hiring committee different spheres and interests of your work. Aroma, one of the participants in the focus group said:

> *A portfolio gives us a chance to list our best work, including a thesis, to places that we are looking forward to applying for a job. Furthermore, the employees have a chance to see our best interests, not only in one paper as a thesis but numerous other projects shown in different multimodalities.*

Similarly, students from the online questionnaire showed that the majority of them would write a B. A paper, rather than just presenting a portfolio at the end of their studies (table 1).

Table 1

Preferences of students

	Percentage
B.A thesis	71
Portfolio	29

On the other hand, teachers also agree that it's easier to assess students through portfolios as it keeps them engaged throughout the course (Hirvela & Pierson, 2012; Murphy, 1994), and as Belanoff (1994) pointed out, "We are forced to face the writer, not just the writing.

3.1.3. Pursuing your interests

Universum College allows students to choose the topic they want to research as it shows students' interest. It is known that students use writing to engage with a range of different communities often by producing many different texts for diverse purposes (McMullan, 2019), to acknowledge another scholar (Hyland, 2003), or sometimes just to follow their interests.

Jon, one of the students in our focus study, said:

> *My thesis topic was something I wanted to research a long time ago, but I just couldn't find the time for it. Now that I'm finished with it, I'm happy as I have worked on something that shows my interests, my viewpoints, and my suggestions for the future.*

By this, we understood that, by giving students freedom to choose their topics, their work will be much better as they are working with passion.

3.1.4. The benefit of composition classes

All of the students in our focus group and from the data in our questionnaire showed how the composition class named "Thesis" in the last semester helped them to work academically better, be able

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to find the right articles, use the right methodology, etc.; in other words, 96% of the students who filled out the questionnaire showed that the course Thesis helped them do better in their final draft (table 2).

Table 2
The benefit of composition class (Thesis)

	Percentage
Yes	96.8
No	0
I don't have an opinion on this	3.3

3.2. The drawbacks of writing a thesis

3.2.1. Stress

Many studies show how writing a thesis is a lot of stress. Stress and anxiety can be found while not being able to find a good title, not having enough time to write your thesis, and not being able to find articles for the literature review, among other things. Many scholars think similarly, as Bazrafkan et al., (2016) study. Their study shows that stress was one of the major results that was found in students while writing the thesis. Furthermore, they highlight how students were overwhelmed with finding a good title as it would determine his or her future research approaches.

3.2.2. Generalization of ideas

Generalization can be understood as a "cognitive process involving classification and categorization, an element of macro processing through which the reader abstracts gist" (Friend, 2001). Many students misunderstand the idea of generalization while writing a thesis. Students in our focus group discussed how generalization was a problem in their thesis. By not having enough time to research and find what other scholars think about different topics, they would generalize the data, thinking they are doing a summary (Dole et al., 1991).

3.2.3. Managing information

Vesa, one of the participants in the focus group, said:

> I had lots of articles in my hand and sometimes it would get messy, and I wouldn't know how to manage this information. I found it hard to combine the author's ideas in one or two sentences, or sometimes, if I didn't write where I read something, I would forget the author and publication. What helped me was to keep track of what I was reading and apply the principle of "writing as you go".

Bazrafkan et al., (2016) highlight that writing a thesis requires both short-term and long-term time management skills because it is a lengthy project that should be done without artificial deadlines. Furthermore, students' answers from the online questionnaire showed that they had a hard time finding the right literature for their research, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
The most difficult part of the thesis

	Percentage
Introduction	3.3
Finding a good thesis	16.1
Finding the right literature	67.7
Analyzing the data	12.9

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4. CONCLUSION

Many studies confirm that students feel more academic when they have a portfolio at the end of their Bachelor studies, however, they also believe that composition classes and a research paper help them if they want to join academia later in their lives. Similarly, students from Universum College, take a composition class in their last semester to prepare them to write academically and the majority of the students in our focus group and from the data in our questionnaire showed that the course Thesis helped them do better in their final draft (see the table 2 above).

To sum it up, students prefer writing a B. A thesis over a portfolio as they get continuous support from their mentor, prepare themselves for academia, and further pursue their interest, by researching the topic they want. There are also drawbacks listed by students as they were writing a thesis, such as not being able to find the right material, not having access to some journals, the idea of generalizing information, and stress, among other things. As a recommendation from this study, we recommend Higher Education in Kosovo and abroad add classes, such as Thesis, in the last semester or even before which would help prepare students to write better.

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