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Voice of Struggle: Portraying Students' Experiences in Master's Thesis Writing

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Abstract:
This study explored the experiences of postgraduate students in preparing a master's thesis in the English Education Study Program at Pattimura University. The research aimed to investigate students' perceptions, feelings, challenges, and coping strategies during thesis writing. A qualitative design with a single case study approach was applied. Three postgraduate graduates who had completed their theses were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews based on Seidman's (2006) three-series interview model and analyzed using thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings showed that thesis writing was a complex academic and emotional process. Three major themes emerged: individual perspectives, psychological aspects, and time management perspectives. Students viewed thesis writing as both meaningful and difficult because it improved their academic skills, emotional resilience, and personal growth. They experienced anxiety, stress, and overthinking, fear of failure, emotional exhaustion, and physical fatigue. Internal and external challenges included low self-confidence, academic writing difficulties, limited communication with supervisors, lack of academic resources, technical issues, and environmental distractions. To overcome these problems, students applied coping strategies such as self-regulation, emotional control, time management, goal setting, social support, and maintaining consistent writing habits, which contributed to successful thesis completion and enhanced academic persistence.

Keywords: Coping strategies; Emotional challenges; Master's thesis writing; Postgraduate students' experiences; Students' perspectives.

Introduction

Experiences are a good source of information that influences people's understanding and views on something. According (Paulsen, 2020) argues that experiences are created intrapersonal through the interaction between individuals and their environments. They include social, cultural, natural and pragmatic contexts that influence people's thoughts and behaviors. In human consciousness experiences are conceived as conceptions of events and objects in real and imaginary worlds. Thus, the experiences are meaningful for they are based on facts and realities encountered in the lives of the people. Experience in educational research is closely related to learning theory.

According to (Jarvis, 2006) explains that experience is an important part of the learning process as individuals learn through interaction, reflection and adaptation to their environment. In this study experience is defined as the experience of postgraduate students in writing their master's thesis from the beginning of the process until graduation. As a major academic requirement for postgraduate students, writing a master's thesis indicates their capacity to do research and present ideas academically. (H. Douglas Brown (2019, as cited in Irwandi, 2019) proposes that writing can be divided into three types: academic writing, job-related writing, and personal writing. One of the forms of academic writing is thesis writing. It

is considered to be more difficult than other types of writing because it is governed by formal rules of academic writing. Students are expected to utilize academic language, logically organize ideas, and correctly cite sources. According to (Oshima et al., 2007) say that academic writing is formal writing which does not use slang and spoken language. Hence, postgraduate students should not only develop writing skills but also research and analytical skills in the process of writing thesis.

But many postgraduates still find it difficult to write a master's thesis. Students often face problems in background of the study, review of literature, methodology, data collection and analysis, and writing findings and discussion in a logical way. This research is significant because many postgraduate students still have difficulty in writing their thesis. Preliminary interviews with postgraduate students of English Education Study Program, Pattimura University showed that students had difficulties in organizing ideas, finding references, determining research methods and analyzing data. Additionally, they also experienced emotional issues such as anxiety, stress, low motivation, and lack of confidence. These challenges may hinder the completion of the thesis and impact the students' academic achievement. Therefore, understanding students' experiences is necessary to recognize the factors affecting thesis writing and to offer better academic support to postgraduate students

Previous studies have reported various problems in thesis and proposal writing (Saptenno, 2023) found that students had difficulties maintaining motivation and organizing ideas in thesis proposals. (Ruslan et al., 2025) reported writing anxiety, revision procrastination, and fear of negative evaluation among undergraduate students. (Susanti & Mahaputri, 2022) found difficulties in developing research backgrounds, literature reviews, methodologies, and academic language.

However, most previous studies focused on undergraduate students, proposal writing, or specific issues such as anxiety. Limited research has explored postgraduate students' experiences in writing master's theses, particularly regarding their perspectives, emotional challenges, and coping strategies throughout the thesis-writing process. This gap is especially evident in the context of Pattimura University. Therefore, this study aims to explore postgraduate students' experiences of writing their master's theses and identify their perspectives, emotional conditions, challenges, and coping strategies.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Students' Experiences:
    a. What are students' perspectives during the master's thesis writing process?
    b. What are students' emotional experiences during the master's thesis writing process?
2. How do students face challenges and overcome problems during the master's thesis writing process?

Study Literatur

Academic writing

Academic writing is an essential skill for university students because it enables them to communicate knowledge, evaluate previous research, and contribute new ideas to their academic field (Swales & Feak, 2012). Unlike personal or journalistic writing, academic writing requires critical thinking, logical organization, and the use of evidence-based arguments (Oshima & Hogue, 1998). Previous studies have consistently shown that academic writing is challenging for students. While some studies emphasize linguistic difficulties such as grammar and vocabulary, others highlight problems related to critical analysis,

argument development, and research organization. These findings suggest that academic writing involves not only language proficiency but also cognitive and research skills.

Masters' Writing Thesis

Master's thesis writing is a major academic requirement for postgraduate students. Compared with undergraduate thesis writing, a master's thesis requires a deeper engagement with theory, methodology, and independent research (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). Previous studies have found that postgraduate students face various challenges, including academic pressure, time management difficulties, supervisor-related issues, and emotional stress. However, most studies tend to focus on specific aspects of thesis writing, such as writing anxiety or academic performance. Less attention has been given to understanding postgraduate students' overall experiences, including their perspectives, emotional conditions, challenges, and coping strategies during the thesis-writing process. Therefore, a more comprehensive exploration of these experiences is needed.

According to Sadeghi & Shirzad Khajepasha, (2015) revealed several problems in their thesis work. Apart from methodological problems, the style and language used in thesis writing were also some of the difficulties experienced by master students in writing theses. Then, (Khozaei Ravari & Tan, 2019) found useful strategies for non-native master students to adopt and to overcome challenges in the thesis writing process.

Challenges in writing skill

"Writing is a crucial skill in language learning process and also academic achievement"(Aloairdhi, 2019). "Writing skills cannot be separated from academic activity, writing is important because it is used extensively in higher education and in the workplace" (Klimova, 2012). Writing came in two different forms: formal and informal. The use of Standard English, more sophisticated sentence structures, limited utilization of personal pronouns, and the absence of slang or colloquial words are characteristics of formal writing. Other hand, the usage of nonstandard English forms, common terminology, and typically short sentences were characteristics of informal patterns.

According to Hedge, (2003), there are a few things that students should keep in mind when using the product writing method. These include:

1. Structure and format
2. Correct spelling
3. Vocabulary variety
4. Proper grammar
5. Intense punctuation
6. Cohesive devices
7. Different sentence types.

In the writing process, there are some obstacles that

Emotion in masters' thesis writing

According to Darwin in 1872 cited in (Ekman et al., 1972) They pointed Emotion was firstly brought by him and emotions are considered to be relatively short-duration of intentional states that causes changes in behavior, physiological, and cognitions" (Hess & Thibault, 2009). It means that emotion is shot feeling. It can changes someone personality, mental, phycology factor and also impact to cognitive. So the emotion will show in this stage. There are so many types' emotions that will shows by someone. It can be happened when they will start to write their master thesis writing. Recently, According to (Mahfoodh, 2017) discovered that students' emotional responses towards teacher written feedback included acceptance of written feedback, rejection of written feedback, surprise, happiness, dissatisfaction, disappointment, frustration, and satisfaction.

Addition according to Kindermann & Valsiner, (1995) as cited in (Mahfoodh, 2017) pointed out "an emotional response refers to the feelings to which an individual responds when an object is evaluated". According to Similarly, (Coon & Mitterer, 2013) An emotional response refers to feeling some positive or negative emotion, such as happiness, fear, or anxiety, when experiencing a stimulus".

Self-Regulation in writing thesis

Self-regulation will talk about how someone can manage themselves related about their cognitive, emotion, attitude to reach the purpose. Self-regulation will talk about of the cognitive, metacognitive, behavioral, motivational, and emotional or affective aspects of teach someone (Panadero, 2017). It can say that self-regulations seem like someone able to control them. It deepens on their purpose. Self-regulation refers to self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals (Zimmerman, 1990). According to Pintrich, (2000) explain self-regulation is an active, productive process in which learners set goals for their purpose and then try to track, monitor, and ménage their cognition, motivation, and actions, driven and limited by their environmental objectives and contextual characteristics.

There is also other opinion about self-regulation. It shows a similar idea about self-regulation is a way that helps someone in managing their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions to successfully navigate their purpose (Zumbrunn et al., 2015) .Self-regulation can be an essential aspect of the learning process and performance (Mukti, 2017) and it also provides several advantages (Ariyanti et al., 2018).There are several phases that should be followed in self-regulation. According to Pintrich, (2000), there are four steps in self-regulation such as forethought planning and activation, monitoring, control, and finally reaction and reflection. Beside, according to Zimmerman, (2000), there are three phases namely forethought, performance or volitional control, and self-reflection. Those opinion have frameworks are generally imparting with same concepts. It is refers to essential processes that initiate attempts to perform and set the stage for it. Based on the explanation above self-regulation can be rule for collage students' to finish their thesis. Because post graduate students' can set their mind related with motivation, cognitive, and action that students will focus on their purpose. Students' also can track and evaluate their progress as long as they write their thesis. So self-regulation was crucial in the process of post graduate students to write master thesis writing process.

According to Abadikhah et al., (2018), writing is primarily a process rather than a final product, requiring writers to engage in continuous planning, monitoring, and revision. Because writing develops through a series of stages, students need self-regulation strategies to manage their learning and writing activities effectively (Mitchell et al., 2019). One important component of self-regulation is self-monitoring, which allows students to evaluate their progress, identify difficulties, and maintain motivation throughout the

writing process. In the context of master's thesis writing, self-monitoring helps students stay focused on their goals, manage challenges, and improve the quality of their academic work.

Methodology

Research Design

This project applies a qualitative research design with a single case study. Qualitative research is used to understand the significance of a social issue, and to explore and understand the experiences of people(Creswell, 2014). The case study method was used because it enables the researcher to know the students' experiences during the writing of their master's theses. The purpose of this study is to know students' views, feelings, challenges and strategies in understanding their thesis.

Research Setting and Participants

The project took alumni from post graduate students' English Education Study Program Pattimura University's. Three postgraduate grads who had finished their master's theses participated. Purposive sampling was used to choose the participants since they had personal experience of the subject of the study. The following were the requirements for inclusion:

1. Postgraduate alumni of the English Education Study Program.
2. Participants who voluntarily agreed to join the study.
3. Participants who had completed their thesis writing process.

Data Collection

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were used to explore participants' experiences, emotions, challenges, and coping strategies during thesis writing. The researcher applied a three-series interview model proposed by Irving (Seidman, 2006)

1. Focused life history.
2. Details of experience.
3. Reflection on meaning.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

To analyze the result of this project, we were using thematic analysis proposed by(Braun & Clarke, 2006)). The analysis involved six steps:

1. Familiarizing with the data.
2. Generating initial codes.
3. Searching for themes.
4. Reviewing themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.

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Trustworthiness

We used the credibility, dependability, conformability and transferability suggested by (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to establish the trustworthiness of the study. Member checking and triangulation established credibility. Dependability and conformability were maintained by audit trail and peer discussion. Transferability was supported by thick description of the research context and experiences of participants.

Research Procedures

This project had some procedures that should be followed. the case study steps proposed by Stake's (1995), cited in (Creswell & Creswell, 2007) including identifying the case, selecting participants, collecting data through interviews, analyzing the data, and reporting the finding.

Result

R1. Students' Perspectives during the Master's Thesis Writing Process

Based on the thematic analysis of the interview data, three major themes emerged regarding students' perspectives during the master's thesis writing process: individual perspectives, psychological factors, and time management perspectives.

Individual Perspectives

Participants perceived thesis writing as a demanding yet meaningful academic experience. Although the process required considerable effort, they viewed it as an opportunity to develop academic knowledge, research skills, and personal maturity. Students reported difficulties in selecting research topics, narrowing research problems, organizing ideas, constructing arguments, and responding to supervisors' revisions. These challenges often made the writing process feel overwhelming, particularly during the early stages of thesis development.

Despite these difficulties, participants described thesis writing as a valuable learning experience. Many reported becoming more patient, persistent, and independent as they progressed through the research process. They also developed greater confidence in their ability to conduct research and solve academic problems. Overall, students viewed thesis writing not only as a graduation requirement but also as a process that contributed to their academic and personal growth.

Psychological Factors

Psychological challenges were frequently reported throughout the thesis-writing process. Participants experienced anxiety, stress, fear of failure, self-doubt, perfectionism, and mental exhaustion. These emotions were often triggered by uncertainty regarding research quality, repeated revisions, and concerns about meeting academic expectations.

Several participants explained that extensive corrections from supervisors sometimes led to frustration and emotional pressure. However, they gradually learned to manage these emotions and became more open to feedback. Through persistence, self-discipline, emotional regulation, and positive thinking, students were able to continue making progress despite experiencing psychological difficulties.

Time Management Perspectives

Time management emerged as another significant aspect of students' perspectives. Participants reported difficulties balancing thesis writing with coursework, work responsibilities, family commitments, and other

personal activities. As a result, many struggled to maintain consistent writing habits and frequently worried about deadlines.

The findings showed that ineffective time management often increased stress and delayed thesis completion. Nevertheless, participants gradually improved their ability to prioritize tasks, organize schedules, and allocate time more effectively. These experiences helped students develop greater discipline, responsibility, and commitment toward completing their academic work.

R2. Students' Emotions during the Master's Thesis Writing Process

The analysis identified three themes related to students' emotions during thesis writing: psychological factors, physical factors, and managing time.

Psychological Factors

Participants described thesis writing as an emotionally demanding experience. Feelings of anxiety, stress, overthinking, fear of failure, emotional pressure, and lack of confidence were frequently reported throughout the process. Concerns about research quality, data analysis, revisions, graduation deadlines, and supervisors' expectations often affected students' emotional well-being.

Overthinking emerged as one of the most common emotional responses. Participants often worried excessively about possible mistakes, weak arguments, and the overall quality of their work. These concerns sometimes reduced motivation and made it difficult for students to start or continue writing. Emotional pressure also contributed to procrastination, particularly when students faced complex tasks such as writing methodology, analyzing data, or revising chapters.

To cope with these challenges, students adopted various emotional management strategies. These included taking breaks, listening to music, praying, engaging in recreational activities, focusing on small goals, and seeking encouragement from family members, friends, peers, and supervisors.

Physical Factors

The findings revealed that emotional stress during thesis writing was frequently accompanied by physical symptoms. Participants reported experiencing fatigue, headaches, eye strain, sleep disturbances, neck pain, back pain, and rapid heartbeat, particularly during intensive writing and revision periods.

Many students noted that spending long hours reading, writing, and revising contributed to physical exhaustion. These physical conditions often reduced concentration, productivity, and motivation, making it more difficult to maintain consistent progress. The findings suggest that emotional stress and physical well-being are closely related during the thesis-writing process.

Managing Time

Managing time was another important factor influencing students' emotional experiences. Participants often found it difficult to balance thesis responsibilities with other academic, professional, and personal obligations. Time pressure became more intense when deadlines approached or when revisions accumulated.

The findings indicated that poor time management frequently increased stress and emotional exhaustion. However, students gradually developed strategies such as setting daily targets, breaking tasks into smaller

goals, prioritizing important activities, and maintaining structured schedules. These strategies helped them become more organized and emotionally prepared to deal with thesis-related demands.

R3. Students' Challenges and Solutions during the Master's Thesis Writing Process

The findings identified two broad categories of challenges and solutions: internal factors and external factors.

Internal Factors Influencing Students' Challenges and Solutions

Participants reported various internal challenges, particularly psychological difficulties and academic writing problems. Feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, fear of failure, pessimism, and emotional exhaustion frequently emerged during topic selection, proposal preparation, data analysis, and revision stages.

Students also encountered difficulties in organizing thesis structures, developing coherent arguments, analyzing data, paraphrasing sources, and maintaining appropriate academic language. These challenges often slowed progress and reduced confidence in their academic abilities.

To overcome these problems, students employed self-regulation strategies such as setting achievable goals, creating writing schedules, dividing tasks into smaller sections, and monitoring their progress. They also improved their academic writing skills by reading journal articles, practicing regularly, and seeking feedback from supervisors and peers. These efforts contributed to increased confidence and better academic performance.

External Factors Influencing Students' Challenges and Solutions

External challenges included work commitments, family responsibilities, limited time, communication difficulties with supervisors, inadequate academic resources, technical problems, and environmental distractions. Participants reported that delayed feedback, unclear instructions, and conflicting suggestions from supervisors sometimes created confusion and uncertainty.

In addition, limited access to references, unstable internet connections, software problems, and non-conducive study environments negatively affected concentration and productivity. To address these issues, students adopted several coping strategies, including effective time management, the use of online academic resources, regular file backups, seeking technical assistance, and creating more supportive study environments.

Overall, the findings indicate that successful thesis completion requires both individual effort and external support to manage the various academic, emotional, and practical challenges encountered during the process.

Discussion

R1. Students' Perspectives during the Master's Thesis Writing Process

The findings indicate that students perceived thesis writing as a complex experience involving academic, emotional, and personal dimensions. Although participants faced numerous challenges, they also recognized thesis writing as an important opportunity for learning and self-development. This finding supports Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, which emphasizes that challenging learning experiences can encourage critical reflection and personal transformation.

The development of persistence, independence, and confidence reported by participants suggests that thesis writing functions as more than a research activity. It also serves as a process through which students strengthen their ability to solve problems, make decisions, and manage academic responsibilities. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies, which identify thesis writing as an important context for developing autonomy and critical thinking among postgraduate students.

The psychological challenges experienced by participants further highlight the emotional demands of postgraduate research. Anxiety, stress, and self-doubt often emerged as natural responses to academic pressure. However, students' ability to gradually adapt to these challenges demonstrates the importance of resilience in academic success. This finding is consistent with Resilience Theory, which suggests that individuals can develop stronger coping capacities through exposure to challenging experiences.

Time management was also identified as a critical factor influencing students' perspectives. The findings support previous research emphasizing the importance of self-regulation and organizational skills in academic achievement. Students who successfully prioritized tasks and maintained consistent writing schedules were generally better able to manage stress and sustain progress. Therefore, thesis writing can be understood as a developmental process that strengthens academic competence, emotional resilience, and self-management abilities simultaneously.

R2. Students' Emotions during the Master's Thesis Writing Process

The findings demonstrate that thesis writing is closely associated with students' emotional well-being. Anxiety, stress, fear of failure, and overthinking were among the most common emotional experiences reported by participants. These findings are consistent with studies showing that postgraduate students frequently experience psychological pressure due to high academic expectations, uncertainty about research outcomes, and concerns regarding thesis completion.

The prevalence of overthinking and self-doubt among participants can be explained through theories of academic anxiety, which suggest that excessive concern about performance may interfere with concentration, decision-making, and productivity. In this study, emotional difficulties often contributed to procrastination and avoidance behaviors, particularly when students encountered complex or demanding academic tasks.

Another important finding is the relationship between emotional and physical conditions. Participants reported various physical symptoms, including fatigue, headaches, sleep disturbances, and muscle discomfort. These findings support the biopsychosocial perspective, which emphasizes the interaction between psychological stress and physical health. When students experienced prolonged stress, their physical well-being was negatively affected, which in turn reduced academic performance and motivation.

The findings also highlight the importance of effective time management and social support. Students who established clear goals and maintained structured schedules appeared better able to manage emotional pressure. Similarly, support from family, peers, and supervisors played an important role in reducing anxiety and sustaining motivation. These findings suggest that emotional well-being during thesis writing is influenced by both individual coping mechanisms and the availability of supportive social environments.

R3. Students' Challenges and Solutions during the Master's Thesis Writing Process

The findings reveal that thesis writing involves the interaction of internal and external factors that influence students' progress and overall experience. Internally, psychological challenges and academic writing

difficulties represented significant barriers to thesis completion. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that postgraduate students often struggle with confidence, motivation, and academic writing demands.

The role of self-regulation emerged as particularly important in helping students overcome these challenges. Consistent with Self-Regulated Learning Theory, students who engaged in planning, goal setting, self-monitoring, and reflection were more capable of maintaining motivation and productivity. These strategies enabled students to manage both emotional and academic demands more effectively.

Academic writing difficulties were another prominent challenge. Problems related to organization, argument development, language use, and data analysis often delayed progress and increased emotional pressure. However, students' efforts to improve their skills through practice, reading, and feedback demonstrate the importance of continuous learning in postgraduate education.

External factors also significantly influenced students' experiences. Communication with supervisors, access to academic resources, technical support, and environmental conditions affected both research progress and emotional well-being. These findings support social constructivist perspectives, which emphasize the importance of interaction, guidance, and learning environments in the educational process.

Overall, the findings suggest that successful thesis completion requires the integration of academic competence, emotional resilience, self-regulation, and environmental support. Consequently, universities should provide not only academic supervision but also psychological and institutional support to help students navigate the complex challenges associated with master's thesis writing.

Conclusion

This study concludes that writing a master's thesis is a complex process involving academic, emotional, and personal challenges. Despite difficulties such as stress, self-doubt, time-management issues, and supervisory constraints, the experience helps students develop resilience, independence, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills.

The findings imply that universities should provide stronger academic and emotional support through effective supervision, mentoring, and counseling services to facilitate students' thesis completion. Future research is recommended to examine thesis-writing experiences in different disciplines and institutions, as well as to explore the effectiveness of support programs in improving students' academic and emotional well-being.

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