

## **Exploring Challenges Encountered by EFL Libyan Learners in Research Teaching and Writing**

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### **Abstract**

Research is conducted all over the world to solve problems or to answer questions of significance to humanity. Academic writing or writing to report research is not easy because it requires adequate background knowledge, interest, motivation and hard work. This study investigates the major challenges in research writing faced by Libyan EFL learners at Sebha University and also explores Libyan teachers' attitudes towards their students' work. A total of 42 students and 4 teachers formed the sample of this study. The present study used a mixed method approach. The findings of the study revealed that Libyan EFL learners have difficulty developing a research project and reporting the findings. The former requires them to identify the area of interest, choose a topic and formulate a researchable problem while the latter typically involves writing a literature review, the methodology, results and discussion sections. Between the two tasks, the students found academic writing the most challenging. It was also found that Libyan teachers had negative attitudes towards their students' research due to the following reasons: lack of motivation, insufficient background knowledge about research, lack of library resources, inadequate number of courses related to research, and the unavailability of Internet in the college.

**Keywords:** Libyan university; research challenges; research production; EFL learners

## Introduction

This article illuminates some problems regarding research writing within an undergraduate degree program. Aitchison and Leeb (2006) have pointed out that within degree programs in universities, writing significantly remains under-theorized. As a result, research writing has come onto the agenda with possibilities for pedagogical development and challenge.

In general, research seeks to answer certain questions which so far have not been answered. Singh (2006) defines research as Re and Search: where “Re” implies “again and again” and “Search” implies “to come up with something”. Research is conducted to investigate and address a certain issue. This can be done in a systematic and precise manner to seek new knowledge, attitudes, skills, and values, or to re-interpret existing knowledge. The task of researchers is to collect, analyze and interpret data, and assess whether their findings apply to their environments (Bocar, 2013).

In degree programs, writing a term paper that reports on a research project involves not only writing per se, but requires extensive learning and reading (during and prior to the writing process). This also applies to undergraduates’ dissertation writing where understanding and learning of the topic will improve in the dissertation writing process (Rita, 1999).

## Research Problem

As stated by Street (1984), writing, either deliberately or not, is generally seen to be “autonomous” or separate from knowledge production work and by extension, research practices, being understood instead in terms of deficits or individualized skills. Some Libyan EFL learners find it difficult to write a fruitful piece of research. Their difficulties range from identifying and thinking of the area of investigation to the process of analyzing the collected data and reporting the findings. This paper seeks to address the problem students encounter when reporting their research in writing.

Engaging students in research is a complex undertaking. Researchers must be cautious in conducting research and plenty of time must be allocated for the completion of each stage of the activity. They must be careful and specify a number of hours each week to work in the library. Before the scheduled deadline, they need to spend additional hours or weeks dealing with issues that arise in the project. In short, there are unexpected problems and difficulties that student researchers and researchers encounter when engaging in research (Trimmer, 1992).

Todd, Smith and Bannister (2006) have identified other key challenges that include the intellectual challenges faced by students such as problems with time management, how to choose and then narrow down a research topic. The most challenging problem that students might face is time management. Students tend to allocate everything to the last stage where they find it difficult to accomplish their research on time. Dombeck and Wells-Moran (2006) claim that time management skills boil down to organization, commitment and awareness and may be applied to a number of tasks in life one might decide to take on. In the context of student researchers, this might mean that they have to become conscious to write down everything, to stay focused especially when something more momentarily interesting occurs, and to be committed to keeping to a set schedule.

Another challenge that EFL learners face, in terms of research writing, is that they may not know their areas of interest. Furthermore, they may find it difficult to identify an appropriate scope for the topic under investigation. They often need to narrow down the topic if it is to be accomplished in the time given for the completion of the research.

In terms of research writing, students find it hard to connect and organize ideas and to write in their own words. Cooley and Lewkowicz (1995) have reported on the difficulties faced by students in structuring and arguing their research writing in a balanced and consistent manner. Moreover, Bitchener & Basturkmen (2006) looked at students' difficulties in writing research and highlighted challenges with the language, and how to express and link ideas. They also identified that these problems sometimes go beyond the stipulated time given for accomplishing the research.

### **Research Questions**

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges that Libyan EFL learners face in research writing?
2. Which part of research writing is more challenging?
3. What are the teachers' attitudes towards their students' work?

### **Research Objectives**

This study attempts to achieve the following aims:

1. To find out the challenges that Libyan EFL learners face in research writing
2. To figure out the most challenging aspects of research writing
3. To identify teacher's attitudes towards their students' work

## **Literature Review**

### **What is Research?**

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

### **Importance of Conducting Research**

According to Rajasekar et al. (2013) research is significant in scientific and unscientific fields. In this world, different problems, activities, and methods happen daily. Scientists carry out research to find out causes, answers and justifications. Thus, research helps us comprehend nature and normal phenomena. Research is also important because it offers

strategies and guidelines for finding solutions. In addition, social research assists us to discover solutions for social problems because it describes social phenomena and searches for answers to social problems. Research also creates a new way and style of life and makes it enjoyable. Research on current theories and notions can assist us in recognizing and finding out the applications of these theories.

### **Problems that Face Libyan EFL Learners in Writing Research**

The task of writing research is not a simple one as it involves hard work and effort. It also needs much time and good background knowledge. When it comes to Libyan students, there are many obstacles they encounter during their research. One of the biggest challenges is the lack of resources in the library. Students spend their time searching for the books they need but most of the time they do not find what they want. Hence, this tends to delay the completion of their project and make them less encouraged to proceed in their work. According to Taskeen, Shehzadi, Khan, and Saleem (2014) the library is not organized systematically and students spend most of their valuable time searching for books and reports instead of looking for related information from these books. Some catalogues in the library are not available and researchers find the data related to their topic by looking at each item one by one which wastes the researchers' time and make it very hard for them to focus on the basic theme of the research. Baldwin (2005) argues that most students encounter some hindrances when doing research such as issues related to ethics, knowing how to invest the time required and finding resources they need.

Among the difficulties that Libyan students have is their difficulty to express themselves in their own words. So, they copy from other works and represent it as their own writing without acknowledging the sources. Furthermore, some students do not have any background in research. Taskeen et al. (2014) state that majority of novice researchers copy related studies and some advisors do not have enough experience in different methodologies. Thus, they allow their students to copy from studies which are conducted by other researchers. Moreover, most Libyan learners are hesitant in selecting a topic and they take a lot of time for that. This can be attributed to a lack of training in research, less confidence about the topic they want to write about and not reading widely. Thus, selecting a topic is not easy because the student researchers are not very aware of how to choose a topic and on what standards or basis they have to select it. Hence, choosing a topic depends on the researchers' interests in the field of study that he/ she intends to write about but because of insufficient or no experience and inadequate background about selecting their topic, the students spend most of the time selecting useless and uninteresting topics. (Taskeen et al., 2014).

In conducting research, Libyan students may face problems with their supervisor. For example, they may not know who to select and after some time they tend to change their supervisors for unknown reasons. In addition, some supervisors may not be interested in working with students who choose less interesting topics or students who are not active and not motivated to cooperate with his/ her supervisor. Some supervisors do not frequently follow up with the students because they are not available all the time in the college. Another obstacle is that when students ask for help or advice from the supervisor, the supervisor does not always offer or give any help or direction. As a result, he/ she lets the students work most of the time on his/ her own without even having a look at the student's work. And even if they give any comments some students find it difficult to understand and meet the requirements. Some students do not know how to write their project and most of the time depend on their supervisor to do the work for them. All these problems make it very hard for

learners to conduct good research and he or she will end up with a very poor piece of work. According to Nyawaranda (2005), Shumba (2004), Chabaya, Chiome and Chabaya (2009) and Pearce (2005), some learners encounter hindrances with their advisor when writing their research. Some of these obstacles include: supervisors do not see their students regularly, the supervisors are not interested in their students, they do not give so much guidance and direction to their students, they do not return the students' work on time and they do not give the students much practical help.

Concerning the gathering information from different sources, Libyan students face some difficulties. One of these challenges is that the Internet is not always accessible to some students. When the students need some sources for the research he/she usually uses the Internet, but this is not the case for Libyan students. When Libyan students search for any information they cannot find anything because of the slow and weak internet connection at home or college which delays the completion of their research. Students also encounter some challenges with regard to college such as unavailability of the Internet, students are not exposed to computers and there is a lack of materials related to research. Furthermore, some supervisors impose topics on their students which in turn influence their interest and success in writing a research paper (Mawere & Weda, 2011). Other problems related to students include: not enough time, lack of or not adequate resources in the library, little or no motivation in writing research, not meeting the supervisor every time, not having any knowledge about theory related to research (Bell, 2000; Pearce, 2005; Sidhu, 2001; Anderson, Day, & MacLaughlin, 2006; Aspland, Edwards, O'Leary, & Ryan, 1999).

### **Related Previous Studies**

This section reviews relevant studies related to challenges and difficulties facing English learners while conducting their research. It is noteworthy that such studies are not addressed in the Libyan context that is to say, there are not any studies related to the problems of research writing in Libyan universities. Exploring such topics can help identify the major difficulties which impede students from conducting good research, provide guidance on how to deal with these difficulties and generate solutions to overcome these obstacles.

Dwihandini (2013) conducted a study to investigate the factors influencing undergraduate students in writing research at the University of Mahasaraswati in Indonesia. The result of the study revealed three main factors that influenced students' writing of research. The first factor is the psychological one that included little or no confidence in choosing a title of the research, having poor prior knowledge of the research topic and research writing. The second factor is the sociocultural factor which involves students' ability to understand and meet the demands and standards of academic communicative practices. The last factor is the linguistic one, which included problems in diminishing grammatical errors and difficulties in knowing when to delete, replace and reorder grammatical items. A study was carried out by Alshehry (2014) to examine the challenges that female undergraduate students and their teachers face at Najran University in Saudi Arabia. The researcher conducted a semi structured interview with 20 students and 4 lecturers. The result of the study revealed that students faced some difficulties including time, looking for resources and creative procedures. The findings of the study also showed that students encounter obstacles in research writing such as having no time to conduct research and issues related to ethics. Students found it hard to decide on appropriate topics with adequate references. Moreover, they had difficulty in finding libraries where they can search for books. Students in some towns had a very weak internet connection and some books that students need were not available in the library. Another problem was a

lack of experience and knowledge about research. Concerning the students' knowledge and experience about research, teachers pointed out that the majority of students had no idea of how to search for information on their own.

Mapolisa and Mafa (2012) conducted a study to explore challenges that undergraduate students encounter in conducting research at Zimbabwe Open University. Questionnaire, document analysis and focused group discussion were used in their study. The findings of the study showed that students faced three categories of challenges, namely supervisor, relationship with supervisor, and students' challenges. Supervisor's challenges included little or no interest in research, absence of supervisor from work, and not coming to work punctually. Challenges related to students comprised of unavailability of money, problems related to time, library references, and problems connected to family. Moreover, there were also challenges connected to college such as unavailability of the Internet, no library resources, no computer knowledge, no workshop, unavailability of course related to research. All these challenges influenced negatively on students' abilities to conduct research. In addition, Mahammoda (2016) examined factors that influence the quality of undergraduate research at the University of Bahir Dar in Ethiopia to find out the difficulties faced by teachers in supervising their students' research. The result of the study showed that students faced academic problems which included students' inability to the research course, advisors showing no commitment, students not having any analytical skill and low motivation in their topic of research. The finding also showed that students faced some social and personal factors which included little or no relationship between students and supervisors, no skill for time management and lack of financial support. Factors related to the institution involved lack of material and books in the library, students' incapability of conducting research, unavailability of open assessment system of research and little or no research assisted environment. All these factors were the main obstacles and challenges that supervisors faced during research supervision.

The current study emphasizes the hindrances in conducting research among Libyan learners at Sebha University. As mentioned earlier, there is a lack of such studies in the Libyan context. Even though this is a very important issue, no attention has been paid to tackle such problems so far and that is why this study was conducted. Therefore, there is a need to do more research on this issue.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants of this study comprised of 42 Libyan EFL undergraduate students who study English at the Department of English, Sebha University. Those students are currently in their 4th year and they have been learning English for more than 7 years. There were 36 females and 6 males and their ages range between 20-23. The sample was selected using purposive sampling. In addition, 4 teachers participated in this study and 3 of them are Master holders except for one teacher who has a doctorate. There are 3 females and 1 male whose ages range between 31–39. These teachers have more than 15 years of teaching experience.

### **Instruments**

This study used two instruments: a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire aimed to explore challenges that Libyan EFL learners face while conducting their research. The

questionnaire involved two parts. The first part included information about the students and the second part included questions which comprised of 25 items. The participants were asked to choose their answer from a four point Likert scale. In addition, a semi-structured interview was used to find out teachers' attitudes and opinions towards their students' work. The interview was conducted with 4 teachers and it consisted of two sections. The first section included demographic information about the teachers while the second section involved 12 questions which are about teachers' attitudes towards students' work. Questions 1–9 focused on teachers' perceptions about the problems related to Libyan EFL students in conducting their research whereas questions 10–12 emphasized teachers' opinions about challenges facing them during supervision and the ways in which they teach the steps of research in the class.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The following procedures were carried out during the data collection stage. With regard to the questionnaire, first, an appointment was made with teachers to allow researchers to administer the questionnaire to the students. Subsequently, the researchers met the students and the purpose of the study was explained to them. Then the questionnaire was distributed to them at class time and they took 10 minutes to complete it. Concerning the interview, teachers were informed of the aim of the interview and they were told that it would be recorded. The interview was conducted with each teacher face-to-face and it took 15 minutes. It was audio recorded and transcribed.

### **Data analysis**

#### **Questionnaire Analysis**

The data of the questionnaire was analysed and divided into the following sections:

1. Problems related to research methodology
2. Problems related to research phases
3. Problems related to the background knowledge about research
4. Problems related to the organization of references and resources.

The following figure represents participants' responses to the item "selecting the samples of my research is not an easy task."



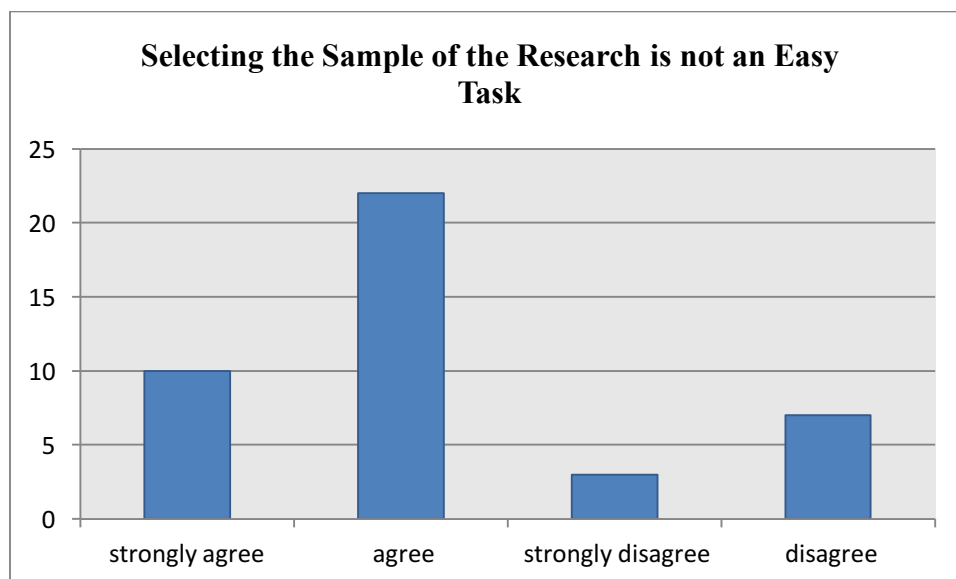


Figure 1: Problems related to research methodology.

As shown in Figure 1, one of the common problems that students encounter in terms of research methodology is how to select the sample of research. More than 20 participants agreed that it is not an easy task to select the sample either randomly or purposively. With regard to problems related to phases of conducting research, figure 2 shows the results.

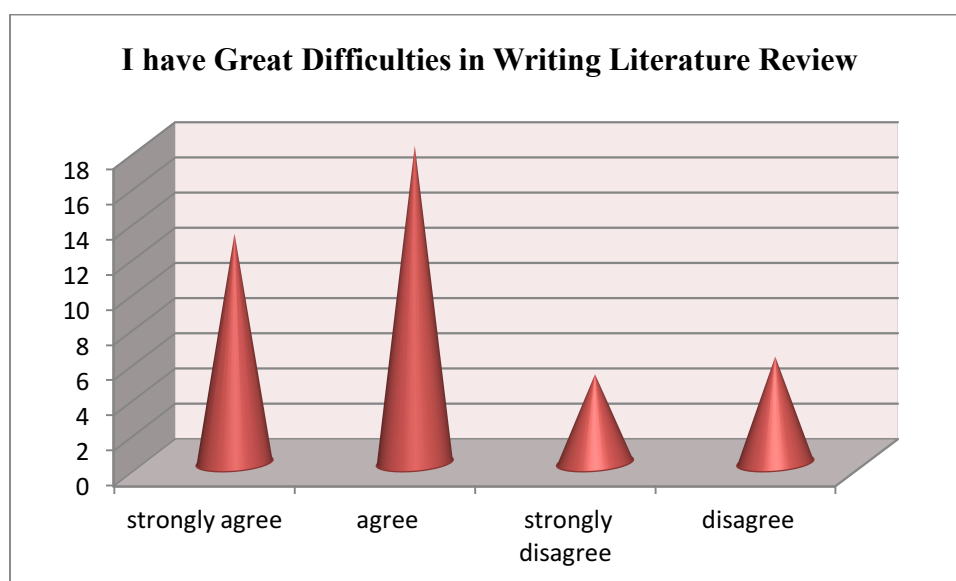


Figure 2: Problems related to phases of conducting research.

Reviewing the literature is the back bone of any study conducted and verifying past studies done by other scholars justify the research and make it fruitful. As can be seen in figure 2 writing literature review is difficult according to the vast majority of the participants. Problems related to background knowledge about research are shown in Figure 3 as follows:

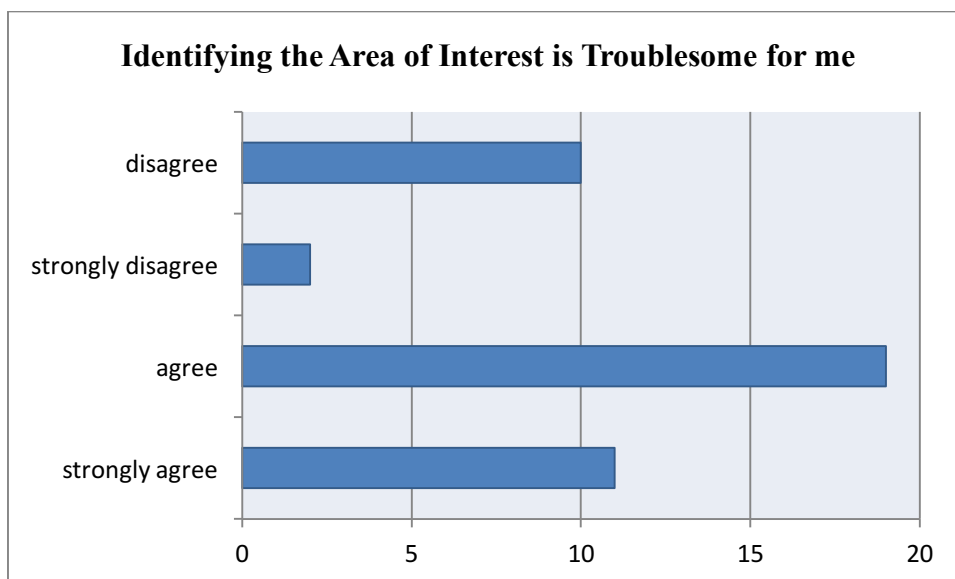


Figure 3: Problems related to background knowledge about research.

As can be seen in Figure 3, when it comes to start thinking of the research, students take a lot of time identifying the area of interest due to different factors. They undertake different subjects but they are in two minds which field to take. As a result, this can reflect negatively on the process of a research. Problems related to the organisation of references and resources are shown in Figure 4 as follows:

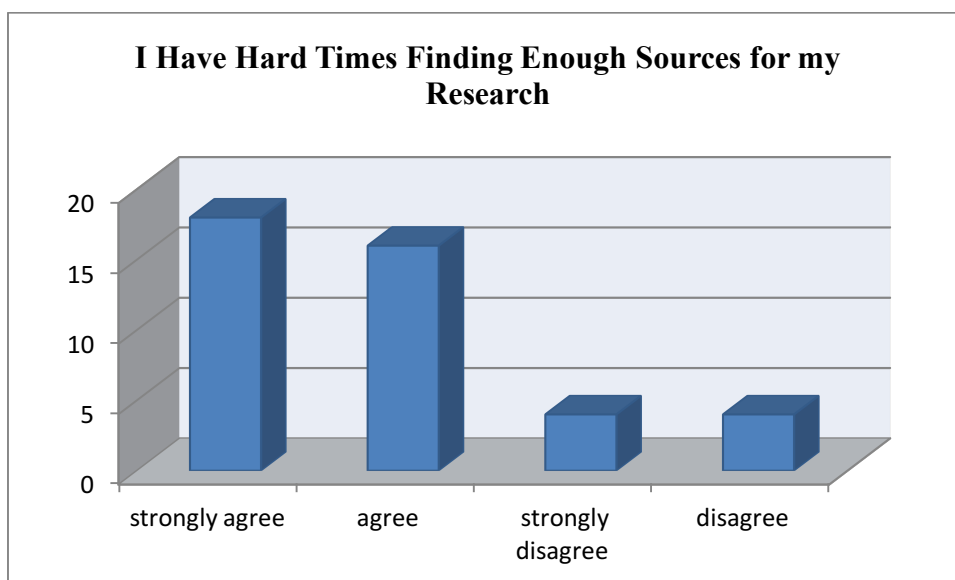


Figure 4: Problems related to the organisation of references and resources.

Relatively, Figure 4 represents the number of participants who find it difficult to find references or past studies for their study especially those who undertake an exploratory study. More narrowly, organising references vary from one school of thought to another. Therefore, it is very troublesome for them to organise references accordingly.

## Interview Analysis

The aim of the interview is to find out teachers' attitudes towards students' work. The interview was analyzed qualitatively and during the analysis three themes emerged. The first theme relates to teachers' opinions towards students' performance in research. The second theme is about challenges facing teachers while supervising their students' research and the last theme pertains to the ways teachers teach the steps of research in class. When asked whether students are motivated to do research, all the teachers agreed that students are not motivated and they attributed students' lack of motivation to several reasons: first, students do not have any background knowledge about research. Secondly, they do not know what research is and how to do it and they are not able to select a topic. In addition, they consider research writing a hard task to do and they do not practice doing research. Students do not read and they just depend on the lecture notes given to them. These opinions are supported by the result of a study carried out by Mahammoda (2016) which showed that Ethiopian university students do not have any motivation in the topic of research which influences the research quality and makes it hard for them to do good quality research.

With regard to students' background knowledge about research, three teachers pointed out that students have basic background knowledge about research because they study research as a course from 5th, 6th and 7th semesters. The problem however, is that they do not understand and revise their lessons and do not practice research writing. On the contrary, one teacher holds the opinion that students do not have any background in research because they do not know what research is and they are not taught how to write research reports. The result of this study is similar to another study conducted by Alshehry (2014) which revealed that Saudi Arabian students lack experience and background in research writing because the majority of them do not have any idea of how to search for information by themselves.

When asked whether the library provides students with books they need for doing research, teachers' responses were almost similar except for one teacher. Three teachers agreed that books are not available in the library and the library does not include all the books that are required for students and most of these books focus only on language skills, reading, writing and grammar. Also, there is a lack of up to date resources needed for research. So, students waste their time looking for the books and at the end they find nothing. This result is consistent with another study by Mapolisa and Mafa (2012) which showed that Zimbabwean students face challenges relating to the lack of library resources. On the other hand, the fourth teacher reported that the library contained all the books students need and the problem is not with the resources but with the students themselves because some of them do not know how to search for books.

Regarding whether students have access to the Internet where they can search for resources in the college, all of the teachers agreed that the Internet is not available in the college and if it is available, the connection is very slow. In addition, some students can have access to the Internet only if they have their own network in their mobile phones. One teacher stated, "No, because the Internet connection is not always available and if it is available the connection is too slow. So, this is also another obstacle that most students face while doing their research."

When asked about evaluating students' ability in writing research, teachers' responses differed. One teacher opines that students' ability in writing research depends mainly on their level and motivation. Whereas the second teacher states that students have very strong desire to do research but the problem is that there are not enough resources for the topics that

students are interested in and also students need practice on how to do research. In addition, the third teacher holds the opinion that most of the Libyan learners are not good at writing research because they do not know how to write in English, they have no idea of how to cite references and they do not see their supervisor regularly. On the other hand, the fourth teacher reported that if the students are asked to write a proposal or make PowerPoint presentations, they tend to be lazy, lack confidence about that, and they will not be able to finish any task on time.

Concerning the difficulties that students have while conducting research, teachers reported that one of the challenges that students face is the lack of resources and access to E-journals and articles. Students also have some problems choosing a topic, they do not know how to formulate research questions, are not able to structure correct sentences in English, are not knowledgeable about the difference between qualitative and quantitative data, are not active in their work and have no idea of how to collect and analyze data. Furthermore, some students do not know the area that interests them, they do not like to work and find new information, they do not like questions which need clarification and explanation and they prefer using yes/no questions. One teacher reported:

They don't like to work or even find anything new. Some of them have difficulty in formulating research questions or find a researchable problem. On the other hand, some prefer yes/no question so the answer will be yes or no. The questions that require clarifications or difficult analysis methods, they do not prefer. This happened with me last semester.

Regarding the reasons behind students' weakness in research, some teachers agreed that students do not practice research writing and they do not have background knowledge about research. In addition, they do not study well, they do not read widely in English and they do not have any motivation. Other reasons ascribed to their weakness are that students do not start writing research on time and they put off their work. One teacher reported:

I think lack of practicality, lack of resources, different resources, and their background knowledge they don't have strong background knowledge about doing research and this might relate to the courses available to them. They only have two courses in the sixth seven semesters and these are not enough to develop strong researchers.

When asked whether the academic atmosphere in the college encourages students to write research, three teachers agreed that the academic atmosphere is not good for doing research due to the following reasons: lack of resources, not having courses for analyzing qualitative data, not having statistics for analyzing quantitative data, not having enough research courses, labs are not provided with enough equipment, classes are not enough for students because of their large numbers, students do not work together in groups to exchange ideas and discuss different topics. On the contrary, one teacher reported that new subjects about research have been taught to students which emphasize the significance of research. A teacher said:

The department tries and recently a new subject for research has actually been added, so I think this adds or emphasizes the importance of doing research; teachers themselves maybe have to keep talking about the importance of doing research to their students.

Concerning whether students cannot finish their research due to the short time given to them, all of the teachers agreed that students are given ample time to do their research because they start writing their research from 5th semester and by 7th semester they start doing their proposal. Therefore, they have plenty of time to write research. But the problem is that they do not know how to benefit from the time. As a result, they end up doing very poor research. One teacher states:

They start taking research from 5th semester so if they have anything in mind by the way by the 7th semester, students are asked to do these proposals; actually, we are supposed to prepare them for their graduation project when they reach or when they get to the 8th semester, so they have plenty of time ahead to think and prepare and plan, so yes I think they don't have any excuse.

With regards to the main challenges that teachers face as supervisors, one teacher points out that students' level is one of the challenges. If they are good, she will be happy. While the other teacher states that time is big challenge for him because he advises five or six students at the same time, which is more challenging for him. Whereas the other two teachers agreed that they have many challenges which are students do not work hard, they do not do what they are asked to do, they copy from other works, their writing is very poor, they do not see their supervisor regularly and the Internet is not available to make contact with the students.

When asked whether teachers practice the steps of research with their students in the class, all of the teachers reported that they give their students practice. One teacher stated that she teaches them how to write research questions, statement of problem, research objectives and at the end of the semester, she asks them to bring the whole work. Whereas the other teacher points out that he recommends that students should keep practicing what they are doing:

Yes, I keep actually recommend students practicing what they are doing and this is very important to determine the quality of their research and students are having very good opportunity in practicing they are doing and they are writing they are doing for example the steps that they are taking in the course practically. For example, if they are taking some ideas about analyzing qualitative data I keep telling them to give an example, to go home and try to bring some data to analyze and to bring them back to the class, to discuss them with their colleagues in order to have a very good idea on how to analyze these types of data.

Concerning whether teachers teach steps of writing research individually or all together, all the teachers hold the opinions that they teach research writing step-by-step and they start teaching section-by-section starting from introduction up to the conclusion. "I start section by section and in the section I teach the subsection and I make sure that they get their meaning and they understand how to do it." One teacher reports that she writes the steps first on the board and after she explains in the lecture, she asks her students to prepare PPT presentation to see if her students understand everything. Another teacher states that if she teaches them the steps of research writing as whole, her students will not understand very well. "I teach them the steps of writing individually [section-by-section] because if I give them all of the steps in one lecture, they will not understand everything and they will get confused."

## Conclusion

This study investigated challenges faced by Libyan EFL learners in conducting research and it also aimed to find out teachers' perceptions towards students' work. The study used qualitative and quantitative approaches. The participants consisted of Libyan teachers and EFL Libyan learners at Sebha University. Data was collected through questionnaire and interview. The result of the study showed that Libyan EFL Learners have some problems with identifying the area of interest, choosing a topic, formulating research problems and writing a literature review. They also have difficulties collecting and analyzing data with the most challenging obstacle being research writing. Moreover, Libyan teachers' attitudes towards their students' work were negative due to several factors such as weak background knowledge about research, lack of motivation and lack of resources in the library. Based on the result of this study, it can be inferred that Libyan students encounter a lot of shortcomings in doing research because they are not sufficiently aware of the importance of research and conducting research is regarded as a laborious and daunting task for them.

Consequently, those learners will produce a very poor-quality research. To help learners overcome such obstacles, teachers must encourage their students to read widely to enrich their knowledge and students should take intensive writing courses to help them write accurately and correctly. Moreover, learners should also be involved in doing real empirical studies and new and more advanced research courses should be taught in Libyan universities. Furthermore, efforts should be made to promote the practicality of the steps of research in the classroom. It is recommended that more emphasis should be given to the investigation of difficulties of research writing in the Libyan context to find out the area of research in which students have weaknesses. By doing so, it would be possible to be more aware of, and avoid, these problems in the future. Further research should also focus on large number of participants to achieve generalization of the findings and more practical studies should focus on specific areas of research. Finally, it is hoped that the findings of the current study will add more to the literature and help practitioners, teachers, and curriculum designers develop their teaching methods with regard to research. It is also hoped that this study will make a great contribution to the field of language teaching and learning in higher education.

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