

Students' Conceptions of Challenges in Writing Thesis: A Case of Postgraduate Context

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ABSTRACT

The ability to apply correct and appropriate academic writing becomes a crucial requirement in composing scientific papers. Many researchers suggested that the intensity of reading and writing habits have a significant impact and determines students' ability to put ideas in writing. This study aimed to identify the main challenges faced by postgraduate students of Universitas Terbuka in writing and finalizing their thesis, including difficulties in creating good and correct written Indonesian language. This research employed mixed method research (MMR) with three research instruments for data collection, namely questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. There were 165 students participated in answering the questionnaire, and 24 students and 16 lecturers from 7 study programs were involved in the interviews. Thirty proposals for master's thesis were analyzed by using a document analysis method. The research participants were purposefully selected using purposive sampling. The research findings showed that the aspects that were considered the easiest to write the thesis were the literature review section and the conclusions and suggestions section. While the most difficult parts of the thesis were the introduction and discussion sections. The research also found that students were still very constrained in terms of good and correct written Indonesian language skills.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to use good and correct written language is an absolute prerequisite in writing scientific papers (academic writing) in accordance with the required standards. It is because written language is a means of expressing scientific ideas in writing (Al-Marwani, 2020; Rohmah & Huda, 2016). Academic writing itself is considered very important for students for several reasons: (1) to accustomed students to read effectively; (2) to create a writing culture among students; (3) to build a systematic mindset; (4) to familiarize students with expressing opinions/ideas based on sources; and (5) to familiarize students

with the world of literature. Therefore, the ability to write well academically is closely related to the ability to use good and correct written language.

Many researchers propose that the degree of engagement in reading and writing practices plays a crucial role in shaping student's ability to express their ideas in written form (Hajar, 2019; Ravari & Tan, 2019). This is also based on the fact that writing scientific papers, especially thesis, must be done by following and meeting the academic standards. Thesis and/or scientific work must be written based on rules of writing that are academically and universally applicable (Fatoni, 2020; Rahmiati, 2015). The rules and standards of writing must be followed and obeyed by anyone who wants to write. Scientific writing is a paper produced from research that is expected to meet at least three main scientific characteristics, namely: rational, empirical, and systematic (Fitriyah, 2019; Juniarti, 2019). Therefore, scientific writing can be interpreted as work that has scientific principles, is based on certain scientific studies, and is methodologically ready to be accounted for. In addition, the preparation of scientific papers must be systematic so that readers can easily understand them. Systematic here means that the sequence is regular, directed, flowing, and adheres to a predetermined method of preparation (Al-Marwani, 2020; Fitriyah, 2019; Syafriani et al., 2023). From these views, scientific writing is believed to play a vital role in communicating research, documenting findings, facilitating the peer review process, promoting professional development, and supporting career advancement in the scientific field.

The improvement of graduate-level academic writing has been the focus of several researchers (Sidman-taveau & Karathanos-aguilar, 2015; Singh, 2015). Academics have questioned the efficacy of teaching generic writing for genre-specific writing reasons (Wingate & Tribble, 2012). Ravari and Tan (2019) indicate that it is naive to see writing as a cognitive talent that can be learned without discipline-specific information. According to them, in order to grasp the norms of the discourses and transfer them to other settings, the communication-critical language form need to be accompanied by membership in a certain academic community. In addition, they underline that the process of meaning-making in academic texts is related with epistemological concerns and social identities that underpin this process. There is unanimity that various types of academic writing should be seen as a process of meaning-making grounded in the sociocultural framework of the disciplines (Åberg et al., 2016; Wingate, 2015; Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

For the case of Universitas Terbuka (UT) Indonesia, a thesis is a scientific work required for final year students as a requirement for graduation at the master level. A clear concept is needed when formulating the main problem in writing the thesis. The previous research has shown some of the fundamental problems faced by master students in designing, compiling, and completing final projects (Hajar & Mhamed, 2021; Lio & Sembiring, 2019; Rahmiati, 2015). In the context of writing thesis among the students of UT, some elementary challenges and problems exist, include difficulty in determining titles, stringing words into paragraphs, and using good and correct language skills. Another problem was that the supervisors realize that UT students come from diverse backgrounds such as disciplinary backgrounds that sometimes cross study programs, jobs that are less directly related to writing activities, socio-culture based on domicile.

Based on the phenomena mentioned above, it can be concluded that the reading habits of students and the role of supervisors are two keys to success in writing final assignments or theses. This is in line with the results of research conducted by Damanik (2018) which shows that three things directly affect the success of students in completing their final assignments. These three things are: (1) reading interest has a positive and significant effect on the success of student final projects; (2) the role of the supervisor partially has a positive and significant effect on the success of the student's final project; and (3) reading interest and the role of the supervisor simultaneously have a positive and significant effect on the success of the students' final project (thesis).

Although many studies have been conducted in relation to challenges and strategies in writing scientific papers and thesis, including for master students (Benzie & Harper, 2020; misalnya: Defazio et al., 2015; Khozaei Ravari & Tan, 2019; Patterson & Gilkison, 2020; Shahsavar & Kourepaz, 2020; Tsoufias, 2021; Zotzmann & Sheldrake, 2021), the studies are mostly carried out outside Indonesia,

which of course culturally, facilities and educational systems are different from the challenges experienced by Indonesian students. The study void becomes clearer when it is brought into the context of the teaching and learning process with the distance education mode as applied at Universitas Terbuka (UT). To fill the gap, this study attempted to identify the main challenges that postgraduate students of UT faced in relation to their thesis, including difficulties in writing good and correct written Indonesian language. In addition, this research was also intended to find out the strategies applied to enhance UT postgraduate students' comprehension in writing their thesis. To answer these objectives, this study tried to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the main challenges faced by postgraduate students of UT in completing their thesis?
2. To what extent of the effectiveness of writing the thesis were carried out by postgraduate students of UT in terms of using appropriate strategies, and good and correct written language?

2. METHODS

This study used mixed methods research (MMR). The concept of MMR has been defined in several concepts. Åkerblad et al. (2021) and Bachtiar (2022a) define mixed methods research as an emphasis on science (both in theory and practice) that tries to consider various perspectives, points of view and positions that always include quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Mixed methods research is also described as an approach to complement the strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches because these two approaches can provide stronger evidence for a conclusion (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2016; Sela et al., 2022).

This research was conducted in five regional UT (Regional UT was formerly called UPBJJ; Unit Pengelolaan Belajar Jarak Jauh – Distance Learning Management Unit). Researchers specifically selected five regional UT that are 'rich in information' (Bachtiar, 2022b; Sunubi & Bachtiar, 2022). This study used three research instruments: a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview, and a document analysis. The questionnaire respondents consisted of 160 graduate students with representation of each master study program in UT (7 master study programs). For semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling was used to identify thirty-four postgraduate students and fifteen lecturers/tutors. To deepen the data obtained and to triangulate data from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, thirty initial proposals of the postgraduate students were selected and analysed using document analysis method.

The questionnaire consists of three parts: (1) Part A contains of the participants' demographic data; (2) Part B consists of 35 closed questions covering aspects related to writing thesis, language/linguistic matter, and language clinic; and (3) Part C consists of five open-ended questions to explore student perceptions in relation to thesis and linguistic aspects. For the semi-structured interviews, open-ended questions were used with three main categories: (1) the students' perceptions of their thesis; (2) obstacles in using written language properly and correctly; and (3) perceptions (experiences) in their thesis mentoring process. Meanwhile, document analysis was done by external expert and used to evaluate the quality of thesis proposals that have been made by the students with scoring criteria and guidelines based on Table 1.

Table 1. Key items to be scored in the students' thesis proposal

No	ITEM	Very Good	SCORE			Remarks
			[Good	Enough	Less	
1	Topic development (Ideas/content)	8 - 10	6 - 7	3 - 5	1 - 2	60
2	Background development	11 - 14	8 - 10	4 - 7	1 - 3	
3	Literature review	11 - 14	8 - 10	4 - 7	1 - 3	
4	Methodology	11 - 14	8 - 10	4 - 7	1 - 3	
5	Refences	7 - 8	5 - 6	3 - 4	1 - 2	

6	Paragraph	12 – 15	8 - 11	4 - 7	1 – 3	
7	Words and sentences	12 – 15	8 – 11	4 - 7	1 – 3	40
8	Spelling and punctuation	8 - 10	6 - 7	3 - 5	1 – 2	

Quantitative data that were collected from participant’s responses to closed questions using five-point Likert scale on the questionnaire were transferred and analyzed using descriptive statistics. To determine students’ perceptions and experiences in preparing their thesis and the guidance process (results from open-ended questions in questionnaires and semi-structured interview results), thematic analysis was used. Meanwhile, the results of document analysis in relation to the student’s thesis proposal were carried out using content analysis.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study employed three research instruments, namely questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. Figure 1 presents data of the respondents of the questionnaire.

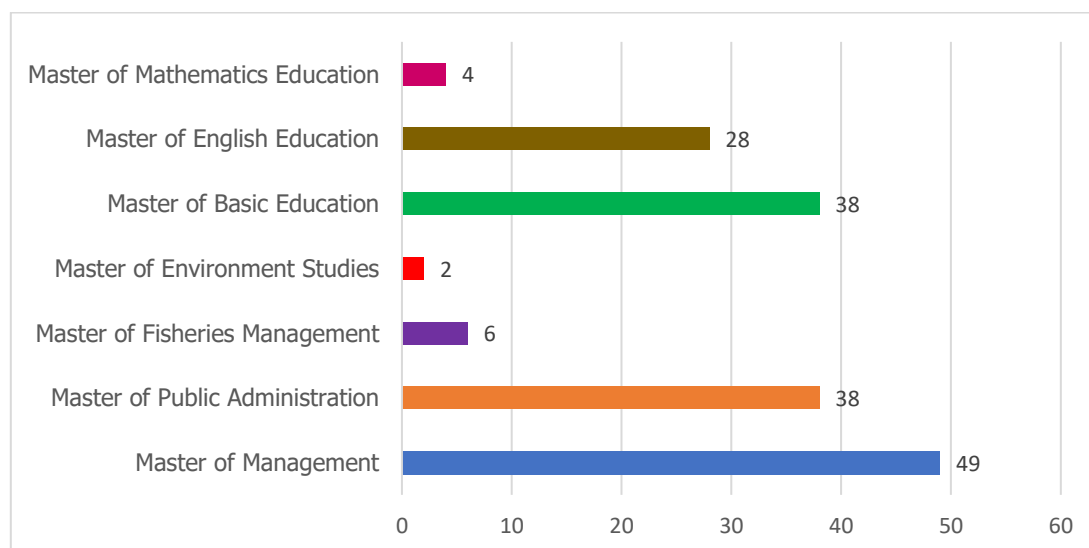


Figure 1. Respondents of the questionnaire

Figure 1 shows that the majority of students who responded to the questionnaire came from the Master of Management Study Program (49 students), followed by the Master of Public Administration Study Program and Master of Basic Education with the same number of students who responded to the questionnaire, namely 38 students. The distribution of students who responded to the questionnaire was directly proportional to the number (percentage) of students in the Master study program at Universitas Terbuka (UT), where the three study programs have a larger number of students compared to other study programs.

To double check the findings of the questionnaire, several students and supervisors from each postgraduate study program of UT were involved in the interview. The distribution of interview respondents for students is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. The number of the students' respondents in the interview

Study Program	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Master of Management (MM)	7	4	11
Master of Public Administration (MPA)	4	4	8
Master of Fisheries Management (MFM)	0	1	1
Master of Environment Studies (MES)	1	1	2
Master of Basic Education (MBE)	1	6	7
Master of English Education (MEE)	1	3	4
Master of Mathematics Education (MME)	1	0	1
Total	15	19	34

Table 2 shows that the majority of the students who involved in the interviews came from the Master of Management (11 people = 32.35%), followed by the students from the Master of Public Administration (8 people = 23.53%), and students from the Master of Basic Education (7 people = 20.59%). The number of the students involved in the interview were asked to be a representation of the number of postgraduate students of UT.

3.1. Aspects of thesis writing

Some aspects that were asked in the interview, both to the students and supervisors, were the easiest and the most difficult parts in thesis, the main obstacles in the preparation of thesis, and the role of supervisors in completing the thesis.

3.1.1. The students' conceptions of the easiest part of the thesis

In general, the results of the questionnaire show that participating students in this research thought that the easiest parts of the thesis were the conclusion and suggestion section (Chapter V), and the literature review section (Chapter II). This is illustrated in Figure 2.

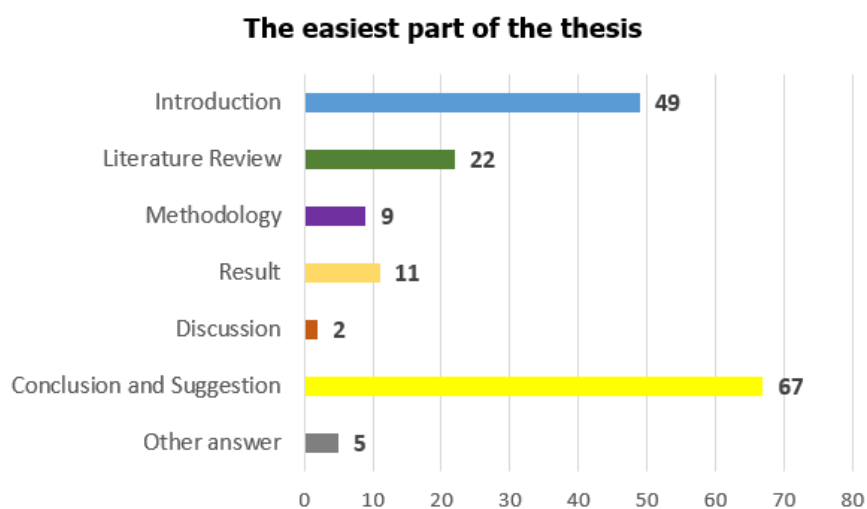
**Figure 2.** The students' perceptions of the easiest part in the preparation of thesis

Figure 2 shows that most respondents (30.30%) considered that the Conclusion and Suggestion section was the easiest part in preparing thesis, followed by the Literature Review section (26.67%). This is interesting because the findings of the questionnaire are in line with what was revealed by most of the participating students in the interviews where they stated that the part of thesis that they considered as the easiest for those who were still on the proposal preparation stage and/or have not yet collected data was the Literature Review. This is slightly different from those students who were already in the finalization stage of their thesis, where they considered that the Conclusions and Suggestions section was the easiest part.

What was revealed by the participating students in relation to the Literature Review section as the easiest part was based on their understanding that there were many theoretical research and studies that have been done previously related to the topic they were searching. In addition, they assumed that in the Literature Review, they only need to explain what the theory says and what has been found in previous studies. The opinions of the participating students are represented by the following statement.

Chapter II (Literature Review) in my opinion is the easiest part. In this section, as far as I understand, it is more of a theoretical basis because we as researchers can see what will be discussed and/or studied in the research studies we are doing. For example, for my study, the theoretical study that I would study was about performance. It was unlikely that I would create a new theory, but it would certainly be based on existing theories (Int.Student04).

Based on my experience so far, the easiest part is the Literature Review in Chapter II. This is because there are quite a lot of studies that have been done before in relation to the research I am doing. In addition, the theories that support my research are also quite numerous. Just need to make sure that the studies and theories are really suitable for the needs and context in my research (Int.Student12).

Interestingly, some of supervisors in the interview justified what was perceived by the students. Three of them said that in some cases, their guidance students found it easier to create a literature review section compared to other sections such as the findings and discussion chapter (Chapter IV), and the introduction chapter (Chapter I). However, two supervisors in the interview emphasized that in many cases, the students formulated the literature review chapter not fully in accordance with the required standards. This is related to the formulation of the concept that the literature review is not only a collection of theories and findings of previous studies, but actually describes similarities and differences from the findings of previous studies related to the topic discussed. The findings from the review of the student's proposals also found that the general score for the development section of the literature review is 4.57 (Enough). This means that the students' ability to formulate the literature review section is still at an unsatisfactory level with the "Enough" category.

The findings of this study are in line with those indicated by Defazio et al. (2015) that writing effectively is a skill based on cognitive mastery of the topic under study. It involves the process of learning, understanding, applying, and synthesizing new knowledge. However, this is contrary to what has been indicated by Ching and Khemlani (2015) and Shahsavar and Kourepaz (2020) where in every study, literature review must be written effectively to facilitate the reader's understanding and awareness of the approach and study undertaken. This is also to ensure that an appropriate literature review part will make it easier to elaborate on research results (Wee & Banister, 2016). Musa and Khamis (2015) argue that the main aim of the literature review part is to figure out the limitation in someone's works and open opportunity for other researchers to explore further of the limitation. Therefore, a literature review needs not only state a personal judgment's statement, but also an opportunity to discuss worthy ideas and values. Literature review should not only describe what has been published by other researchers in summary form. Instead, literature review should be a critical discussion that also requires and involves critical analysis. On that basis, Ching and Khemlani (2015)

stated that the literature review part is one of the most important sections in writing a thesis for master students.

3.1.2. The students' conceptions of the most difficult part of the thesis

The findings of the questionnaire showed that students involved in this study perceived that the most difficult parts of thesis were the Introduction (Chapter I) and Discussion (Chapter IV). This is illustrated in Figure 3.

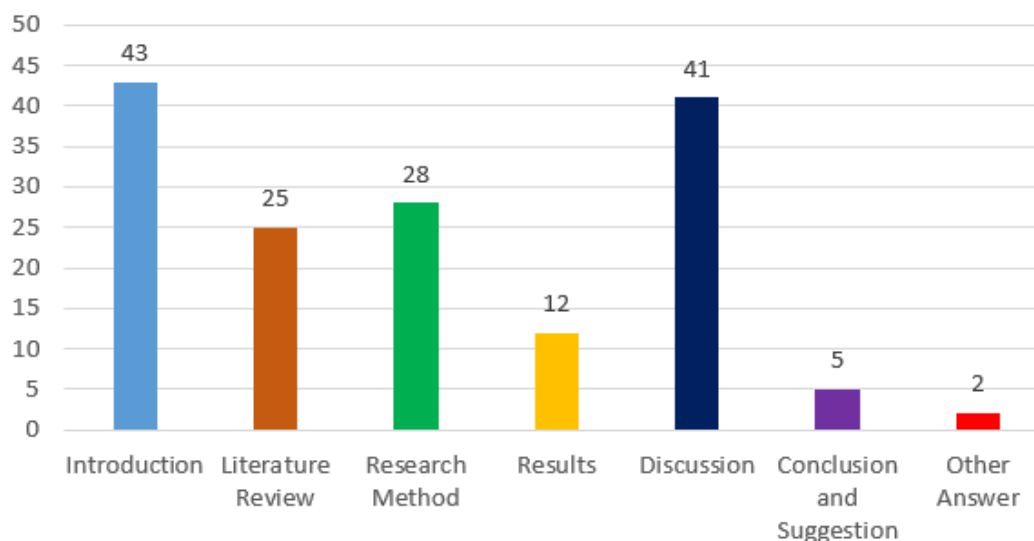


Figure 3. The students' perception of the most difficult part of thesis

Figure 3 shows that most of the student respondents (29.09%) consider that the introduction section (Chapter I) is the most difficult part in preparing TAPM. The student's perception is based on the fact that the introduction section contains the problem statement, research objectives, and research gap. In the problem formulation and research gap, most of the students have difficulty in finding aspects that become the main basis for reason why they do or choose the topic they are researching. This happens especially when they are linked to existing theories and the findings of previous studies. On that basis, based on information from the respondents, they generally found it difficult when asked what is the novelty of the studies they do. What was expressed by student respondents is illustrated by the following statement.

For me, the hardest part is in Chapter I (Introduction). This is because we must ensure that the research problem we present is indeed in accordance with the purpose of the research, supported by previous theories, and must be able to show research gap from previous studies.... In short, in Chapter 1, we must determine what is the problem? Does it fulfil the requirement as a research problem? What purpose? etc.

Interestingly, what was revealed by the respondent was also conveyed by most of the student's advisors. Five of them stated that at the beginning of the formulation of the thesis's proposal, most of the students had difficulty in formulating their research problems, research objectives, and especially the research gap of the thesis they are working with. The following statement represents most of the supervisor's perceptions regarding the most difficult part of thesis.

Based on my experience in guiding the students at the beginning of proposal writing, the most difficult thing I noticed was when they developed an introduction. This especially happened when they wrote background, formulated research problems.... I noticed that most students repeatedly revise the introduction.... The students find it difficult to find research gaps, they develop assumptions and are not based on data.... Students tend to write backgrounds without scientific patterns, for example developing variables in the title and explaining why they are interested in researching the topic, what the appropriate research topic (Int. Supervisor08).

The findings of this study show that most of the participating students considered the introduction section which contains problem formulations, research objectives, and research gaps as difficult parts. It seems that the students struggled when they formulated their research problem, research objectives, and research gap which caused by their lack understanding of the strategy in formulating these parts. Some experts have suggested that to formulate a good thesis, it is important to recognize areas or topics that have not been explored or have inadequate information (Ching Hei & David, 2015; Tsoulfas, 2021). In addition, a well-defined research problem formulation is the key to success in research. While unclear research problems are the weakest point in conducting research (El-Freihat, 2021).

Another interesting point from the research findings is that all of the participating students who have done research proposal seminar agreed that the most difficult for them was the discussion section (Chapter IV). There were 8 (eight) of them (23.53%) who indicated this. This view is based on the fact that the discussion part in the thesis is to discuss what has been found in the field and in previous studies and related it with our findings. The students realized that the discussion section is a true reflection of what they were doing in their research. In the following statement is one of the respondents' comments in the interview.

In my opinion, the most challenging section is the discussion section in Chapter IV. This part of the discussion represents our own contributions and showcases the accomplishments of our research. According to my supervisor, the discussion results reflect the studies we conducted. On the other hand, Chapter II pertains to other researchers as it relates to previous studies, theories, and the findings from the respondents.... That is my understanding of it.

The perception of the participating students is in line with what was conveyed by the supervisor. All supervisors indicated that their guidance students, in general, were concerned in relating their research findings to the findings of previous studies. This also illustrates that these students have not fully formulated the Literature Review correctly. One of the supervisors said, "... they pour their findings and relate them to previous studies but are not substantially related" (Int. Lecturer04). While the other two supervisors said that in many cases, students cited the main references in their literature review, but they were not shown in the discussion section.

The findings of this study that show that the discussion section (Chapter IV) is the most difficult part are generally due to the inability of students to relate the findings of their research with previous studies (Safnil, 2018). The same has been expressed by Rahmiati (2015) and Shahsavar and Kourepaz (2020) they found that students tend to ignore notes made by lecturers as revisions to student writing, students tend to imitate the writing style of previous students. They feel that they do not have enough knowledge in the results section of writing and discussion. This finding also has been indicated by Defazio et al. (2015) who state that the cognitive aspect is the most dominant aspect of writing skills because writing is stated to be one of the most difficult skills to learn compared to other skills such as reading, listening, and speaking. That is why there are still many students who have not been able to produce research reports in the appropriate way and write it completely.

3.2. Linguistic Aspects

In the linguistic aspect, three aspects were investigated, namely paragraphs, sentences and words, and spelling and punctuation. The research findings show that most of the participating students still have difficulty expressing their ideas after following the rules of writing good and correct sentences/paragraphs. These obstacles are generally caused by two things, namely unfamiliarity in writing scientific papers and their lack of understanding of linguistic aspects such as: discourse, spelling, paragraph, and pouring the main idea into paragraphs.

In relation to the mentoring process, the majority of them stated that their mentors did not always emphasize the language aspect. Even if it was done, it was generally done at the beginning of the preparation of the proposal and emphasized by their 2nd supervisor. Two examples of statements from the participating students as following.

There is an emphasis but more on the systematics of writing the final thesis. This was generally done by my second supervisor. So specifically, the use of the improved Indonesian spelling in writing is rarely emphasized, but rather the focus is on the flow and comprehensibility of the written ideas, as well as adherence to the thesis writing system (Int. Student.13).

The findings of this study showed that most of the student respondents still have difficulty in expressing their ideas by using Indonesian language according to the rules of writing. Generally, it was caused by students' unfamiliarity in writing scientific papers and their lack of understanding of linguistic aspects such as: discourse, spelling, paragraph, and the main idea that must be stated in paragraphs.

The findings of this study support the findings of Rahmiati (2015) who also found that one of the obstacles faced by students in writing their final assignments is the difficulty in finding ideas, including problem formulation. The student's difficulties were caused by their lack of reading and not usually writing scientific papers. On this basis, Irwandi and Arisanti (2019) and Syahida et al. (2022) have emphasized the importance of good and correct language skills. Irwandi and Arisanti stated that good and correct written language skills are an absolute requirement to carry out scientific activities because language is the main means of scientific communication. Without the ability to use good and correct written language, it will be difficult for someone, including students, to communicate and/or convey their ideas to readers. Rahmiati (2015) stated that the standard rules of writing scientific papers were neglected, one of them being the lack of awareness of students in applying these standard rules. Even though the use of these standard rules reflects of which students have the mentality to follow what is an agreement and/or provision related to the use of good and correct written language.

Related to the technical aspects of writing, some of the supervisors informed that the aspect that most often occurred was errors in the linguistic aspect of discourse. There are several aspects or problems faced by students in analyzing discourse, including: (1) the students' lack of mastery of cohesion and coherence; (2) the students' lack of understanding in analyzing discourse textually and contextually; and (3) the students' lack of appropriate supporting books as a reference for students in analyzing discourse. In addition, the study findings also confirmed that the mistake that often occurred was the sequence of writing sentences. Often students were incomplete in conveying language elements such as no subject, or there was a subject, but the choice of words was not right or without predicates.

Furthermore, the participating students' conceptions of the technical aspect in writing was also confirmed by three supervisors. The three supervisors said that the discussion aspect was sometimes emphasized to ensure that the ideas expressed by students in their thesis could be well understood by readers. However, the opposite statement was expressed by two supervisors, they said that they paid less attention and emphasized less language aspects to their guidance. This has more to do with their focus on the content and context of their student's topical studies. Here is a statement that represents what was expressed by the supervisors in the interview.

When I guide the students, I generally direct the language to be considered, but not constructively like when the language lecturers guide them. The important thing is that their ideas can be understood. And usually, I also leave it to the second supervisor to help students in ensuring the language aspect (Int.Lecturer05).

Regarding to the linguistic aspects namely the use of good and correct spelling, I sometimes corrected the students. This means that I saw or read the contents first. If there were things that I found inappropriate, then I asked the students to correct those mistakes. The direction was natural only. However, it is the main task of the supervisor to ensure that the content of the student's writing can be easily understood and that they are accustomed to writing well (Int.Lecturer12).

Based on the findings of the study above, it is illustrated that linguistic aspects both in terms of spelling, paragraph preparation, discourse understanding, and pouring the main idea were still big challenges for students. These challenges have a significant effect on the formulation of the thesis proposals they make, including the ease with which readers understand the ideas written in their thesis. Based on the research conducted by Irwandi and Arisanti (2019) and Saihu and Abdushomad (2021), it is known that students did not have writing skills on how to make paragraphs that have unity of ideas, how to elaborate on problems, how to use transitional expressions cohesion and coherence), and how to conclude content. Similar ideas were also expressed by Nisa et al. (2017) of the positive and significant relationship between mastery of cohesion and coherence aspect with the ability to analyze student discourse.

4. CONCLUSION

In general, the postgraduate students of Universitas Terbuka (UT) were still very constrained in writing their thesis. There were two parts that were considered the most difficult ones, namely the introduction (especially the formulation of problems and novelty of study) and the discussion section in Chapter IV. In the problem formulation and research gap, most of the students have difficulty in finding aspects that become the main basis for reason why they do or choose the topic they are researching. For the discussion part, the students mostly struggled to link their findings to what had been found by previous studies and existing theories. The students realized that the discussion section was a true reflection of what they were doing in their research. In addition, the majority of student respondents still experienced difficulties in expressing their ideas in their thesis according to the rules of good and correct Indonesian writing. This was due to the students' lack of mastery of cohesive and coherent devices, and their understanding in analyzing discourse textually and contextually.

The results are highly likely to provide useful suggestions for lecturers, tutors, postgraduate program executives, and other institutions that need to find solutions to similar problems. The formulation of research problems, research gaps, and discussion sections could receive more attention in the thesis's supervision process by thesis advisors, so that students do not encounter too many obstacles in completing these sections. It is recommended for the further research to involve a larger population to ensure a more representative population sample. Research that will investigate the challenges in writing thesis due to students' gender and geographic location are also highly recommended to see if there are significant differences in the results. Finally, the use of research methods that include Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with broader language aspects and thesis components is also recommended to obtain more comprehensive results.

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