| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Moroccan EFL Undergraduates Monographs: Perceptions, Practices, and Challenges

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| ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to investigate the way Moroccan EFL undergraduate students perceive monographs, their practices, and the challenges they face in the process of administering a monograph. The researchers of the present study opted for a convenience sampling approach to select the sample. This latter consists of 28 females and 25 males whose age ranges between 21 and 46 years old. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire of 19 items was digitally distributed to the participants. Statistically speaking, Cronbach's alpha test was utilized to assess the questionnaire's reliability, bivariate correlational test to measure the questionnaire's validity, and descriptive statistical test to analyse the collected data. The findings of this survey indicate that the participants hold a variety of opinions when it comes to their perceptions. Concerning their practices, the findings show that the informants' practices are, somehow, appropriate and have an impact on their challenges. It was also found that the participants' attitudes and practices impact the challenges they face.

1. Introduction

Academic writing can be defined as a written task produced by students for scholastic purposes. It is a piece of writing in which students share their ideas, opinions, and observations applying their "linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies'' (Barkaoui, 2007: p. 35). According to Zhu (2004), in order to compose an academic piece of writing, students are required to demonstrate the following skills: "audience awareness, logical organization, paragraph development, clarity, sentence structure, grammar, and mechanics'' (p. 37). This task is challenging not only to EFL undergraduates, but also to EFL graduate students (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007, as cited in Noortyani, 2016). Surprisingly, it is also reported that even native speakers of English face some difficulties producing pieces of academic writing (Al Fadda, 2012).

The above-mentioned view of academic writing might lead students to believe that academic writing is no more than a written piece through which they unacademically share their beliefs. Indeed, academic writing, in most of its forms, should be seen as a multidimensional task which is accomplished through a process of reading and questioning, hypothesizing, collecting and analyzing data, interpreting the results of the collected data, and providing an unprecedented or a better solution to an unsolved problem. Technically speaking, academic writing can take the form of essay, project, report, thesis, or paper. However, none of these forms permit the authors to include their personal feelings (Monippally & Pawar, 2010). Even when students are eager to share their own opinions and idea, it is essential that they academically do so.

One of the main purposes of academic writing is to fill gaps that exist in literature. The nature of research gaps plays a crucial role in determining the form of academic writing a researcher would opt for. Miles (2017), in his taxonomy, suggests seven types of gaps in research: (a) Evidence Gap; (b) Knowledge Gap; (c) Practical-Knowledge Conflict Gap; (d) Methodological Gap; (e) Empirical

Gap; (f) Theoretical Gap; and (g) Population Gap. Each gap as highlighted in literature enables researchers gain a deeper understanding of the world around us and generate new knowledge. It also expands the scope of inquiry by revealing additional gaps that require investigation.

Since the early 1970s, Moroccan researchers (e.g., Meziani, 1984; Ennaji, 1987; BenMhamed, 2013, Et Ghouati *et al.,* 2018 among others) have been persistent and put in a lot of effort in order to surround the issue of EFL writing, in the Moroccan context, from different aspects. This includes error analysis (Meziani, 1984), feedback (Bouziane, 2019), integrated-skills (BenMhamed, 2013), assessment (Ennaji, 1987), Critical thinking (Hallelat, 2021b), to name but a few. It was statistically proven that Moroccan undergraduate students significantly score lower in writing compared to the other three language skills (El Ghouati *et al.,* 2018). Hallalet (2021a) argue that organization is the main challenge Moroccan undergraduate students face in their writing tasks. Whereas, Aknouch & Bouthiche (2022) reveal that overgeneralization and interference are the main sources of problems in Moroccan learners' academic writings. Critical thinking in EFL writing is proven to be one of the weaknesses of Moroccan EFL learners as they are not able to have an opinion and argue for it (Hallelat, 2021b).

The most challenging form of academic writing tasks undergraduate students face is administering a monograph. This latter is the longest and most systematic piece of writing students compose during their Bachelor journey. Besides length and systematicity, what makes monographs more challenging is the fact that students, somehow, independently go through this process (Biggam, 2015). Unlike academic writing types EFL students deal with during their first five semesters, research papers have a different format. They follow a structural consistency of title, abstract, introduction, methodology, result, discussion, conclusion, and references (Hengl & Gould, 2002).

Monographs are submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a certain degree. That is, students do not conduct research for the sake of research per se; rather, they administer it in order to obtain the degree they study for. However, their aim cannot be achieved without realizing the purpose for which academicians developed research norms. According to Hengl & Gould (2002), the main function of a research paper is "to transfer a new knowledge on a research topic" through a "clear, coherent, focused, well-argued and a language that does not have ambiguous or equivoque meaning" (p. 6).

According to Oliveira (2017, as cited in Obeso, 2019), a very limited number of studies have tackled the issue of monograph production the majority of which shed light on the problems undergraduate students face in the production of general academic pieces of writing (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007; Nolan & Rocco, 2009; Al Fadda, 2012; Noortyani, 2016). The reasons behind these problems are to be reported as follows: (1) the complex nature of academic writing (Alfaki, 2015), (2) the lack of academic reading (Gorzycki *et al,* 2020), (3) the lack of research writing practice (Cahyono & Amrina, 2016), (4) the lack of motivation (Rabab'ah, 2003), and (5) the lack of research production knowledge (Nolan & Rocco, 2009).

In fact, Al Fadda (2011) attempts to determine King Saud postgraduate students' perspectives of the problems they face in learning academic writing. Her study's 50 informants consist of male and female students. The findings of Al Fadda's survey show that postgraduate students, in an EFL context, face major problems that can be stated as follows: (1) confusion between spoken and written English, (2) designing outlines before draft writing, (3) identifying successful writing skills, and (4) avoiding plague words and phrases. Al Fadda's participants also reported, as a solution to some of the challenges they face, that computer-assisted academic writing instructions and interactions with native speakers might help them improve their academic writing outcome.

In an interesting study, Al-Mukdad (2019) investigates the way in which Arab students perceive their academic writing problems. The results of this study show that the problems Arab students face can be classified as compositional and linguistic problems. First, informants consider all aspects of academic writing to be difficult. Second, this survey's participants reported that they encounter major problems in the linguistic elements they are supposed to master. The most interesting finding in this study is that the participants are not even aware of the fact that they commit numerous mistakes and errors.

1.1 The Objectives of the Study

This paper intends to investigate Moroccan EFL students' perceptions towards research papers writing, their practices, and the challenges they face. The first issue this paper is meant to tackle helps professors formulate an idea about the way in which students conceive research papers; whilst, the second and the third helps supervisors predict the weaknesses of undergraduate EFL students in monographs production. According to (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007), students' achievement in academic writing gives an idea about their academic success. Therefore, the findings of this study will contribute to the development of EFL students' academic writing achievements. All in all, this paper is a positive reaction to Bouziane & Abouabdelkader's statement claiming that "writing in Morocco needs more improvements" (2016, p. 41).

1.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses
Based on the objectives of the study, the present research paper is meant to answer the following questions:

Q1: How do Moroccan university students perceive monographs?
Q2: What are Moroccan university students' practices in administering a monograph?
Q3: What challenges Moroccan university students face in the process of conducting a monograph?

1.3 Research Hypotheses
RH1: Moroccan university students misperceive monographs.
RH1: Moroccan university students' practices in administering a monograph are inappropriate.
RH1: The challenges Moroccan university students face in the process of conducting a monograph are related to methodology.

2. Methodology
Apart from the target sample, this section specifies the research data collection tools, the data analysis procedures, and the research findings and discussions. More than that, the paper has looked into the statistical techniques used in the process of data analysis as well as the related methodological issues of the study's validity and reliability. It is worth noting that the mixed method approach is used in the present study. The researcher in the present study opts for integrating both quantitative and qualitative data as measured by both close-ended and open-ended items in the questionnaire. The main purpose of incorporating the mixed method research design is because the strengths of each method compensate for the weaknesses of the other so that together they give a more comprehensive and complete set of data (McMillan, 2004).

2.1. Participants
The target sample of this study includes 53 undergraduate students who are currently working on their monographs at the Department of English at the Faculty of Letters, Languages, & Arts in Kenitra, Morocco. This sample consists of 28 females and 25 males whose age ranges between 20 and 46 years old. All informants are currently administering their monographs tackling issues related to applied linguistics, theoretical linguistics, or translation. Convenience Sampling method was applied to select the participants. Indeed, convenient informants are available and willing to take part in the survey (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, they are more likely to seriously take the questionnaire.

Table (1): The Distribution of Participants in Term of Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender					
Valid	Female	28	52,8	52,8	52,8
	Male	25	47,2	47,2	100,0
	Total	53	100,0	100,0	

2.2. Instruments
To collect data, a questionnaire of 19 items is designed. It consists of four sections devoted to: demographic data, students' perceptions toward monographs, students' practices in monographs production, and the challenges students face while administering a monograph. The items included in this questionnaire took forms of Likert-scale ranging from "never" to "always". It includes 15 close-ended items and 2 open-ended questions. Google Form was the platform on which this questionnaire was designed and distributed.

In order to assess the internal consistency, we calculated Cronbach's alpha value coefficients for each section of the questionnaire. As shown in the Table 2, the results indicate a higher level of reliability for the first section (α=0,946), and an average level of reliability for the second (α=0,721) and third sections (α=0,710).

Table (2): The Questionnaire Reliability Based on Cronbach's Alpha Values

	Cronbach's Alpha Value	Number of Items
Attitudes	,946	5
Practices	,721	5
Challenges	,710	5

2.3. Data Analysis

To answer the research questions highlighted in the present paper, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences program (SPSS), version 19.00, is used to analyze data. Put differently, different statistical methods, namely a) frequencies and percentages, b) independent t-tests, c) analysis of variance (ANOVA), and D) correlation tests are employed to achieve the research purposes in terms of analysis and interpretation of the data obtained.

The data of this survey was collected using a Google Forms questionnaire. Then, it was imported into the 26th version of IBM SPSS for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics is applied to analyze the demographic data, as well as the Likert-scale data. The Table (3) below illustrates the interpretation of our five-point Likert-scale measurement.

Table (3): The Values and Interpretations of our Five-Point Likert-Scale Measurement

Likert-Scale Description		Likert-Scale	Likert-Scale Interval
Strongly disagree	Never	1	1.00 - 1.80
Disagree	Rarely	2	1.81 - 2.60
Neutral	Sometimes	3	2.61 - 3.40
Agree	Often	4	3.41 - 4.20
Strongly agree	Always	5	4.21 - 5.00

3. Findings and Discussions

The present study discusses the research findings derived from the research questions. It also reveals the implications and contributions arising from the research results in the related field of study. Finally, a general conclusion is provided summarizing the general content of the paper's findings as well as its limitations. What follows is the discussion of the results.

3.1. Perceptions

Table (4) reveals the participants' perception towards monographs. The score means of the five items range between (M=2,68) and (M=2,94). These means would be interpreted as if the informants show some sort of disagreement with the five items below or reveal unclear or uncertain opinions. However, the standard deviation values ranging between (SD=1,718) and (SD=1,833) indicate a high level of variability. This means that the subjects have different perceptions towards monograph writing. Possibly, As Hallelat (2021b) argues, students' perception of writing is shaped by their previous experience.

Table (4): Perception of Moroccan EFL Undergraduates towards Monographs.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Monographs should not be necessary to obtain a university degree	53	1	5	2,68	1,718
Monographs prevent S6 students from focusing on the other subjects	53	1	5	2,85	1,833
Monographs require skills and knowledge which are beyond S6 students' level	53	1	5	2,89	1,772
It is better for S6 students to work in groups to produce a single monograph	53	1	5	2,94	1,759
It would be better if supervisors could assign topics to their supervisees	53	1	5	2,83	1,773
Valid N (listwise)	53				

In response to a question about the elements the respondents have found difficult in monographs production, more than half of participants claim that the hardest aspects of a monograph are research methodology with (N=30, 56,5%) and academic writing skills (N=29, 54,7%). These results go in hand with Qasem & Zayid (2019) findings. Their informants are reported to find problems in research methodology and in writing and reporting.

Figure 1: The Distribution of the Hardest Aspects of a Monograph According to the Informants
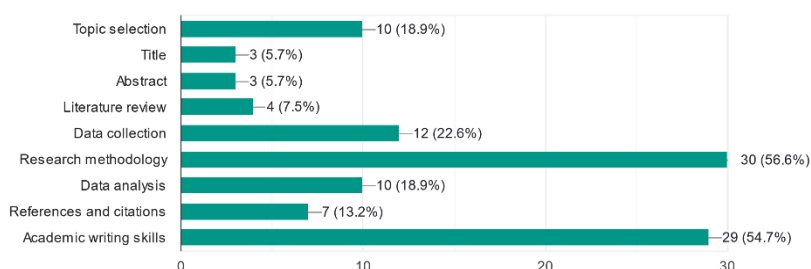
3.2. Practices

Table (5) sheds light on the practices of Moroccan EFL undergraduate students while approaching their monographs. The first and the third items' mean scores are (M=3,15) and (M=3,49) suggesting a slightly moderate proportion of informants claiming that they had read some monographs before they started conducting their own. The Standard deviation scores of (SD=1,769) and (SD=1,728), respectively, suggest that there is a variety of responses. The informants also report that they selected a topic they are familiar with (M=4,13 & SD=1,468) and they paraphrase citations to avoid plagiarism (M=4,40 & SD=1,198). It was also revealed that a moderate number of subjects who reported that they asked their peers to proofread their writings (M=3,36 & SD=1766). Worth mentioning that the five items' standard deviation values range between (M=1,198 & M=1,769). These values suggest that the responses of this survey's subjects are various.

Table (5): Practices of Moroccan EFL Undergraduates in Producing Monographs.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
I read many monographs before approaching my own	53	1	5	3,15	1,769
I chose a topic I am familiar with for my monograph.	53	1	5	4,13	1,468
I read about research methodology before conducting my own research	53	1	5	3,49	1,728
I ask my peers to proofread my writings	53	1	5	3,36	1,766
I paraphrase citations to avoid plagiarism	53	1	5	4,40	1,198
Valid N (listwise)	53				

3.3 Challenges

Table (6) shows that the means of the five items are slightly below the midpoint (M=2,70 & M=3,21). That is, the informants disagree with all the statements devoted to implicitly identifying some of the challenges they face. In other words, a slightly moderate proportion of informants find it difficult to find interesting and feasible research topics (M=2,70 & SD=1,648), to find credible resources (M=3,02 & SD=1,681), to balance between coursework and monographs production (M=2,92 & SD=1,730), to stay motivated to complete their monographs (M=3,00 & SD=1,519), and to receive feedback from their peers and supervisors (M=3,21 & SD=1,657). To sum up, the standard deviation values indicate that there is a variety in the informants' responses.

Table (6): Challenges Faced by Moroccan EFL Undergraduates in Producing Monographs

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Mini	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
It is easy to find a research topic that is both interesting and feasible.	53	1	5	2,70	1,648

It is easy to find credible and relevant sources for my research.	53	1	5	3,02	1,681
It is easy to balance coursework and research time commitments.	53	1	5	2,92	1,730
I am losing motivation to complete my monograph.	53	1	5	3,00	1,519
I receive feedback from my supervisor and peers on my monograph.	53	1	5	3,21	1,657
Valid N (listwise)	53				

4. Discussion

As shown above, there is a number of items which are interrelated. We can assume that there is a correlation or a cause/effect relationship between some items. In order to dive into more details, we opted for selected cases to identify the relationships' natures between some items. For instance, the informants who either agree or strongly disagree that monographs prevent students from focusing on the other S6 modules or subjects disagree with the statement that it is easy to balance coursework and research time commitments (N=25; M=2,16; SD=1,573).

The participants who expressed their agreement with the item stating that supervisors should assign topics to their supervisees also reported that they find it difficult to find a research topic that is both interesting and feasible (N=24; M= 1,96; SD=1,459). These findings are consistent with those reported by Alghizzi (2021) who found that Saudi female undergraduates have a preference for being assigned research topics by their supervisors. Alghizzi's participants also reported that they prefer to co-author papers with their supervisors instead of their peers or classmates. Yet, this proclamation is superfluous as supervisors are co-authors by default.

The subjects who proclaimed that they had read some monographs and some research methodology resources before they started to conduct their own monographs also revealed that it is somehow easy to find credible and relevant resources (N=26; M=4,08; SD=1,324). These results go in alignment with the assumption put forward by Cárdenas *et al.* (2005) claiming that reading research papers is a prerequisite for approaching monographs, without which students will not have an understanding of the topic and the related literature. In the same vein, some of their paper's interviewees revealed that reading research papers and research methodology resources prepare undergraduates to effectively conduct their own monographs.

The respondents who reported that they do not ask for feedback are the ones who proclaim that they do not receive feedback from their peers and professors (N=18; M=2,28; SD=1,447). These results make sense as the more students request feedback, the more likely they are to receive it. As a matter of fact, asking for feedback shows the willingness to learn. However, the missing point in this survey is that it does not investigate why supervisees do not ask for feedback. Is it because they are afraid of negative feedback? Are they shy to do so? Or are they not satisfied with their work? It should be noted that feedback is so effective in the process of writing, especially when it is written and detailed (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Alvira, 2016). In this regard, Bouziane (2019) suggests six ways of delivering feedback, namely (1) commenting, (2) treating errors, (3) peer reviewing, (4) reformulating, (5) conferencing, and (6) scoring.

The informants who declared that they selected their topics themselves disagree with the statement stating that they were losing motivation to complete their monographs (N=42; M=2,90; SD=1,543). These results do not clarify whether the informants lose motivation because they were assigned a topic they are not interested in, or they did not select their topic because they were not motivated. Nevertheless, it should be taken into account that motivation is a necessary element to engage students in any learning setting and there is a correlation between motivation and academic achievements (Law, Elliot, & Murayama, 2012; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012).

5. Conclusion

The paper in hand aims at investigating the way in which Moroccan undergraduates perceive monographs, their practices, and challenges they face. The findings of this survey reveal a variety in the informants' responses when it comes to their perceptions. They also show that Moroccan undergraduates' practices in the process of producing a monograph are appropriate. However, the respondents indicate that they face many challenges related to research methodology, organization, feedback, and academic writing skills. It should be noted that it was found that the three investigated elements are interrelated in a way or in another. In other words, the informants' attitudes and practices can either enable them to overcome the challenges they face or generate challenges they cannot handle.

As a matter of fact, the sample size is very limited. Therefore, the results of this survey should be considered ungeneralizable. Also, the standard deviation values of most of the questionnaire's items indicate a relatively high amount of variability. That is, the informants of this survey proclaimed different responses. Consequently, these results do not represent a larger population and cannot be extrapolated to other contexts. This paper is no more than an attempt to shed light on the issue of monographs production in Moroccan universities and to open the door for more studies to dive into the details of this issue as writing in Morocco requires more improvements (Bouziane & Abouabdelkader, 2016).

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