

Unblocking Practical Stumbling Hurdles in writing Master's Dissertation Abstracts

Caroline Linyor Tata 

PhD., Department of African Languages and Linguistics, University of Yaounde 1, Cameroon

✉ **Corresponding Author:** Caroline Linyor Tata, **E-mail:** caroline_linyor@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

This study set out to identify the practical difficulties masters' students face when writing their dissertation abstracts. Students in their final year of the masters' programme were the participants. They were randomly selected using random purposive sampling from four different Cameroon state universities that were easily accessible (Universities of Buea, Douala, Dschang and Yaounde 1). Equally, some selected samples of the abstracts extracted from already defended dissertations were used for the study. Even though academic writing is a dynamic form of writing, its importance extends from educational to applied linguistics. Students have often therefore taken measures to see to it that they write abstracts that are acceptable, but they face difficulties doing so. Students in the course of writing master's dissertation abstracts pause for a while to make sure they are doing the right thing. Findings show significant measurable challenges that students face in writing master's dissertation abstracts for academic achievements. Solutions are proposed in that light to overcome the practical difficulties.

1. Introduction

It has been observed that students face practical difficulties when writing master dissertation abstracts. These difficulties were identified at specific writing dimensional properties especially at the levels of grammar, vocabulary, organization of ideas, orthography, content and texture. Each level will be examined subsequently for in-depth analysis and discussion. Many students think that writing is not as easy as putting words on papers. It is important to note that it is the duty of the writer to write something meaningful in the abstract so that any reader can deem it useful to read.

Furthermore, in more precise terms, an abstract in the context of master's dissertation is a brief digest that summarizes the essential information of the entire dissertation. It may be described as the shortest section of the dissertation. It is the succinct summary of the research and an important element of the thesis that is often written on an independent page. A dissertation abstract stands alone, representing why and how the researcher did what he/she did and what the results and implications are. Jennifer et al. (2002) report that an abstract is condensed writing that provides a potted history of the necessary information of research work. Master's dissertation abstracts are written by postgraduate students mostly when they have completed their dissertations. It is a very brief overview of the entire study that tells the reader what was done, why it was done, what was found and what it means. Writing it accordingly, therefore, needs peculiar attention. However, it has been noticed that students face stumbling hurdles that need to be unblocked.

2. Literature Review

Considering the dissertation as a format for reporting research which graduate students write, (Herbert and Shohamy 1995) see it as part of fulfilling the requirements for obtaining an advanced academic degree. To them as far as the structure of a dissertation is concerned, it is written in chapters with well-established parts such as the abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology and conclusion. His main concern in this work is examining the general structure of a dissertation which is different from the present work that focuses on one of the sections that are the abstract particularly and explore its structure and content.

A dissertation consists of three main sections: Introduction, theory/literature review and analysis/conclusion, according to Nkemele (2011). This means that the macrostructure of a dissertation is made up of the introduction, literature review, methods, results and discussion. The present study is concerned with the preliminary section (the abstract) which is the summary that transpires convincingly in the whole research, in order to attract the reader, especially the examiner who examines and evaluates the entire work carefully.

Elaborating on the importance of good writing, it may be useful to echo that the developments of Philosophy, Science and Literature are fostered by the acquisition of written language. The emphasis is on the need for the readers to get detailed information correct. Besides, the "repetition" of what is already apparent to the reader through the use of other words is what Day (1995:44) calls "the most common fault" in writing. This study is similar to the above-mentioned work in that it dwells on the importance of writing following a particular genre but specifies on writing a good abstract that fosters the impression of the whole dissertation.

After examining texts written by English-speaking students of the University of Yaounde 1, Jikong (2003:62) draws the conclusion that students have great difficulties with the norms that govern written English. According to him, these students write as if English is not governed by norms. Yet, there are rules that must be respected in order for what is written to be meaningful in communication. Meaning is communicated beyond the use of lexical items. He observes that 98 different arrangements of words in a sentence produce different meanings.

This work shares Jikong's view about the written texts of students. They write with great difficulty as regards the norms governing written texts. The present study further goes beyond a mere description of rules governing writing a text and also focuses on dissertation abstracts. Interest is also laid on finding out the way students present the structure, include content items, use lexicogrammatical strategies to realise master's dissertation abstracts.

Furthermore, given that a textual study is an inside-out approach to the study of meaning, some texts are written to be read, some read as written and some produced after they have been spoken. This work examines texts produced within a period by different students yet linked together by their common desire to contribute to new knowledge for a better education. The topic under study is not new in the field of Applied Linguistics though aspects and methods of analysis used may vary. Considering that enough may never be said about text analysis because every new discourse comes along with new analyses, a change in the methods of analysis, will in turn lead to a change in results obtained. This view is in line with our primary conception that the same analysis done on two different groups of people of a similar class may yield different results.

3. Methodology

The methods used for this study were interviews and documentation. Interviews were also reliable and were addressed to the postgraduate students, Research Methodology lecturers and dissertation supervisors. The interview consisted of six sections. Section one was on general information, while each of the other five sections corresponded to the research problem. Each section was made up of a number of questions which the respondents were required to answer in a more natural and relaxed manner. Generally, the interview questions aimed at throwing more light on issues related to the practical difficulties in writing abstracts.

Furthermore, interview questions were designed for master's two students, Research Methodology Lecturers and master's dissertation supervisors. Those for the postgraduate students were directed to students finalizing their dissertations and those who had finished writing and were waiting to defend. The interview questions addressed to students mainly focused on the way they organized their abstracts, what they included in the abstracts, the specific problems they faced in writing abstracts that they deemed necessary for pedagogic intervention and also eliciting information on the relationship their abstracts had with the entire dissertations.

On the whole, 16 bilingual Research Methodology lecturers, 24 master's dissertation supervisors who were all bilingual and 48 master's two students, both French-speaking and English-speaking who were writing their dissertations in the English Language, were interviewed. The table below captures the different informants from each university.

Table 1: Distribution of informants interviewed

Universities	Departments	Students interviewed	Research Methodology Lecturers Interviewed	Master Diss. Supervisors interviewed	Overall Total
Buea	English and Linguistics	12	04	06	22
Douala	English and Linguistics	12	04	06	22
Dschang	English and Linguistics	12	04	06	22
Yaounde 1	English and Linguistics	12	04	06	22
Total		48	16	24	88

A close view of the table above shows that there was an overall of 88 informants interviewed: six students were interviewed from the departments of English and Linguistics respectively in each of the universities under study resulting in twelve students per university and giving a total number of 48. Four research methodology lecturers from each university, four per university (two per department) were interviewed summing up to sixteen. A total of 24 master's dissertation supervisors were interviewed. Six master's dissertation supervisors were interviewed from each university, three from the departments of English and Linguistics, respectively.

The pre-structured questions addressed to the lecturers and master's dissertation supervisors were also intended to obtain many responses to research questions on practical difficulties students faced in order to facilitate the assessment of the validity of responses concerning specific issues on writing master's dissertation abstracts. The interview was used as a tool to gather information because respondents were contacted directly and a great deal of information was got which could not have been possible with other research tools.

Though the agreement on the appropriate time and venues to meet were really demanding, it was quite interesting at the end to notice the enthusiasm most of the respondents exercised in providing the information needed. The study was conducted by the researcher after obtaining permission to work in the universities selected and with the desired participants. It was also realized that questioning respondents directly on topics and areas that were vital to their experiences gave them the first positive thought that some of their challenges in that area may be solved.

4. Findings and discussion

The analysis of data on the practical difficulties postgraduate students face when writing master's dissertation abstracts is presented in this section. The quantitative and qualitative data analyses were based on information from informants and extracts from selected abstracts. The proposed solutions to the difficulties which came from the informants are discussed in this section as well.

4.1 Grammatical

The findings equally show that students face problems in grammar. It is generally believed that grammar is extremely important in conveying accurate messages. There are key grammatical forms which are essential in the understanding of what is written such as tenses, voices, modals, articles, nominalization and logical connectors, according to Dudley-Evans and John (1998). Considering the set of structural rules that students use to compose their clauses, phrases and words in their abstracts critically, it is evident that there are some lapses. During our observation, some students kept on writing and cancelling in the course of writing their abstracts. We deduced that it was because they were not sure of what they were writing or they did not understand what they wrote well too, so they used wrong forms. This was confirmed by some of the students during interviews, as noticed in their use of language. Grammatical errors in selected master's dissertation abstracts were minimal, probably because the supervisors took time to read between the lines. The reason was simply that students did corrections after defence before submitting. This explains why there were no examples for grammatical difficulties. They were very few reflected in the abstracts. However, the grammatical difficulties validate the conception that students need extra efforts in order to overcome them. It is therefore advisable to create or refer students to material that could enable them to progress in their writing of the abstract section and also other sections of the dissertation by making good use of the correct forms. This way, they will not depend totally only on lectures but do some extra reading that can help them.

4.2 Vocabulary

The major problem traceable in students' abstracts and also mentioned during the interview is vocabulary related issues. This is because a reasonable vocabulary is needed for students to write their abstracts effectively. This is in line with Rabab'ah (2003) who pointed out that students often lack the necessary vocabulary when they are engaged in authentic communicative situations such as writing and speaking. As a result of this lack of appropriate vocabulary, the students find it difficult to express their ideas freely and accurately because of their limited vocabulary. In order to write good abstracts, students need a rich vocabulary to function effectively but they lack the appropriate words to use. The example sentences below extracted from document number 21 of the University of Buea (UB#21), the University of Dschang (UD#52) and document number 80 of the University of Yaounde 1 (UY1#80) are used to justify this assertion:

- a. Other **findings** include the fact that Mokpe makes use of multiple wh-questions which require more than one piece of information at the same time UB#21.
- b. In this investigation, it was **discovered** that, this institute had no well-developed programme for the English language UD#52.
- c. In fact, the obtained **results** prove that determiners in general are independent and can occupy a higher position than nouns UY1#80.

The words in bold suggest that students tend to use certain words in place of the other. In the case of the use of **findings** above, it is supposed to be "results" because the sentence suggests an outcome of processed raw data which is different from new emerging patterns from discussed results. The use of **results** too, is actually pronouncing the finding so we think the appropriate word there should be "finding". In a similar manner, we think that the use of the word **discovered** is too ascertained and it could have been better to use "realized".

4.3 Organization

The organizational difficulty was identified where some of the abstracts studied moved away from the normal macrostructure as well as the internal structure. In the examination of the abstracts, it was realized that students tend to write any number of the paragraph that they deemed comfortable for them meanwhile it is supposed to be in one paragraph. Some abstracts had just one paragraph each and others had up to nine and ten paragraphs. This is a clear indication that they need knowledge on paragraphing abstracts and the number of paragraphs a master's dissertation abstract requires because the disparity is very wide.

Moreover, the inconsistency of the text length noticed confirms that students face organizational difficulties. It is also important to signal that text methodology, which shows the arrangement of content items in master's dissertation abstract were variable even within the same university, and across universities.

4.4 Orthography

In presenting the orthographical difficulties in the writing endeavour of students, it may look minimal because of the level of the students but it is of importance to note that the grammar and vocabulary of writing depend on the apron strings of orthography. If not, what is written may be qualified as communicative or not communicative. Therefore, the ability to write well entails a good knowledge of orthography in the language used. Since students write abstracts and expect that readers should read, they would make an effort to write well too to show seriousness. This is closely related to the view of The Reader's Digestive Association (1972:3) which maintains that the more painstaking the effort to write, the more effective and rewarding it is. Though we noticed orthographical difficulties, they were not thoroughly scrutinized because the focus of this study is not on error analysis. However, a few were short listed as seen in the excerpts below:

- 1 English speaking journalists of the **audio-visual** media in Cameroon have been said to make mistakes in the use of the English language in their programmes. UB#3.
- 2 The study of constraints reveals that NP and IP are bounding nodes and that wh-movement obeys **subjacency** UY1#88.

The word 'audio-visual' is usually spelt without a hyphen and 'subjacency' is a coinage from the adjective subjacent. The students did their best to reduce orthographical errors. This implies that to a greater extent, they master the writing system of the language used in master's dissertation abstracts.

4.5 Content

The content of an abstract presents what prompted the study, the problem identified, how the work is carried out, what was found and the conclusions made. Taking into consideration the abstract checklist put forward by Koopman (1997), he presents it as follows:

- 1 **Motivation:** why do we care about the problem and the results?
- 2 **Problem statement:** What problem are you trying to solve? What is the scope of your work (a generalized approach or for a specific situation)?
- 3 **Approach:** How do you go about solving or making progress on the problem?
- 4 **Results:** What is the answer?
- 5 **Conclusions:** What are the implications of your answer? (Previous results are useful). Are your results general, potentially generalizable, or specific to a particular case?

To him, the body of the abstract should state the purpose of the research (**motivation**), the problem to be solved (**problem statement**), how the problem was studied (**methods**), the principal findings (**results**), what the findings are and what the findings mean (**conclusion**). It should be concise with only what is essential. Our stand in this work is that of Koopman (1997) because we are of the opinion that the focus of the brief overview is on the important information that the abstract paints the picture of the work to the reader.

This work found out that not all the abstracts analysed realized all the five components of the content proposed by Koopman above, which this study refers to them as moves. The averages of the moves show that only 92 (92%) of the abstracts contained all the five move types. It was realized that the most frequent was move 2, statement of the problem which was present in all 100 abstracts studied. This implies that the number of abstracts lacking at least one move is 8 (8%). Here the discussion on the level of essentiality for each move type reflects the necessity of these five moves. Abstracts are highly condensed, so the high frequencies of moves 2, 4, 3 and 1 indicate the importance attached to them by postgraduate students. Students give particular prominence to these four moves. This may result from the students' desire to promote their studies. That is, they believe that, because readers expect the abstract to explain their motivation, state their problem, describe the methodology, and report the results, in the course of including these four moves in their abstracts, it would increase the chances of getting their dissertations to be read. Move 5 was disproportionately low and this might be interpreted as that its value is minimized by students. It may also be indicating a diachronic change due to abstracts becoming more informative, thus neglecting the conclusion, which is move 5. However, this move is expected by readers as it specifically requires students to state their "major conclusions". Surprisingly, the absence of conclusions recorded up to 21%.

4.6 Texture

In this section, some textual challenges faced by students who construct the texts are presented. For the students to build firm foundations for research, they have to know clearly that the construction of any corpus should be made with clear goals in mind. This is not excluded in the writing of an abstract. Failure to perceive this before writing the abstract is what probably gives students the challenge to come up with text that can be suitable for analysis. At this point, the question on how do we know whether a sequence of sentences is, in fact, a text — that the sentences relate to one another and collectively form some larger whole — rather than a random collection of unrelated bits? The answer to that question can be answered using the knowledge of the kind of structure 'above the sentence'. Texts would have this structure, whereas random collections of sentences would not. The challenges with texts range from thematic choices, organizational structure to other textual choices. When the students master all the above-mentioned texture, textual analysis becomes less challenging. The example below shows an abstract with organizational structure issue:

UB#10

The focus of this study is to ascertain how linguistic dominance and politeness contribute to enhance group objectives among academic and non-academic staff. Using questionnaire, focus group discussion and observation, data were collected and analysed using frequency tables, charts, the chi-square test of relations and content analysis. The study revealed that ways of speaking, modes of disseminating information and pragmatic values are essential to workplace communication. It points up that irrespective of category, the way reproach is handled could be critical to personnel relations as well as performance and productivity. Bosses and subordinates need to be aware of this and fashion communication in such a way as to minimise conflict at the workplace.

The abstract above represents a text whose sentences relates to one another and collectively forms some larger whole rather than a random collection of unrelated sentences because the reader is able to understand the message in it. Also, the abstract is

written in one paragraph as the APA style sheet demands. However, there is a problem with the way the content items are structured. Though the purpose of the study is stated at the beginning, the reader expects to identify the problem. It is only towards the end that the reader 'suspects' that the problem identified must have been 'conflict at the workplace' which as the abstract states, can be minimized through linguistic dominance and politeness.

The fact that master's dissertation abstracts often contain multiple and parallel issues reported making them appropriate for the reconstruction of coherent texts for analysis. Also, the fact that the abstract texts do not necessarily follow the same order to present the content material is a challenge. For example, while some students in the course of reporting their research in the abstracts started with introductions in which they state what the research was about, moving to the methods used, discussing the findings and coming out with the results and conclusion, some wrote in any order they chose and even sometimes neglected some of the essential components such as the results and the interpretations. This, in a way, deforms the texture of master's dissertation abstracts. When the presentation of ideas is mixed up, that leaves negative marks on the abstract as it is the first text that gives the reader an idea about the rest of the work.

The text (abstract) has its own texture and context, and analyzing it has to take that nature into consideration. However, analyzing an abstract text containing embedded discourse without complete information expected may look erroneous but that is the reality. Analyzing the text as it is, the textual context used to frame abstracts to an extent contributes to the construal of language. By this, it means that the master's dissertation abstract mode of writing as seen in the analysis adds a whole new series of textual choices to the writers (students) which denotes a new series of choices for the linguist to analyze.

Moreover, with regards to the type of challenges students face in presenting the content of their abstracts and from what they said during interview, we gathered that they do not make effective use of the knowledge they get from Research Methodology lectures and also the fact that they are negligent. Some students were ignorant about knowledge of the abstract components and their objectives. This makes it difficult for them to write in a way that can lead them to attain their goals.

From the interview conducted with 40 students in the light of the practical challenges they face in writing master's dissertation abstract, their responses confirmed that they face grammatical, vocabulary, organizational, content, orthographical and textual challenges. This shows that no discourse operates merely in language, but rather in institutions and practices and this is in line with Fairclough's (1995) discursive practices model to examine master's dissertation abstracts' stance and codes of conduct and the practice of dissertation as a whole in order to provide more insight into the conditions of abstract production. This is manifested in the challenges that accompany the practices as presented in the table that follows.

Table 2: Challenges students face in abstract writing across Universities

Problems	Universities					
	UB	UD	UDS	UY1	Total of Students	Total %
Grammatical	2	2	2	2	8	20%
Vocabulary	2	2	1	1	6	15%
Organization	1	3	3	3	10	25%
Content	2	1	1	2	6	15%
Texture	1	1	1	0	3	07.5%
Orthography	2	1	2	2	7	17.5%
Total	10	10	10	10	40	100%

The table above shows that students face problems in grammar, vocabulary, organization, content, orthography and textual presentation at the universities of Buea (UB), Douala (UD) Dschang (UDs) and Yaounde 1 (UY1). The organizational difficulties 10(25%) are the highest, followed by grammatical problems 8(20%). For orthography, it shows 7(17.5%) meanwhile vocabulary and content show 6(15%) challenges and finally the textual nature of the abstract where 3(07.5%) students testified that they have problems sometimes to determine what an abstract is. The implication of this finding is that the postgraduate students get confused with writing an "abstract" with writing a "summary". Most of them (25 out of 40) admitted that they took the abstract for summary and since the summary was longer in length, more difficulties were encountered during writing. This is to further confirm that the problems identified are genuine.

The postgraduate students of the four universities understudy have problems in academic writing. This implies that lecturers ought to set motivations that will lay a good foundation for students to write well. Maybe due to lack of motivational strategies, students fail to develop an interest in writing, especially from the base and it becomes apparent in the abstract section of the dissertation.

Furthermore, in order to overcome the problems encountered, suggestions came from the informants that to improve on writing skills, the universities have a role to play. They should come out with concrete teaching-learning programmes that will target writing thoroughly. Others emphasized that they themselves, as students have greater roles to play. The table below throws more light on this.

Table 3: Proposed solutions to problems in abstracts writing

Suggestions from informants	Universities					
	UB	UD	UDS	UY1	Total of Students	Total %
Role of Students	5	3	4	4	16	40
Role of Universities	4	3	3	3	13	32
Role of Lecturers	2	3	3	3	11	28
Total					40	100

A greater percentage (40%) of the informants admitted that students have greater roles to play in order to overcome the difficulties that they face in writing abstracts. This revelation was found interesting indeed because it shows that postgraduate students are conscious of the fact that they ought to make personal efforts in order to improve on their writing challenges. Some informants concentrated on the lecturers' roles and 28% of them were of the opinion that the lecturers got to play important roles in the writing development process. They admitted that what they received as lectures, directives and instruction practices were insufficient and needed to be revisited. The bar chart below further demonstrates the range of suggestions from the 40 students interviewed on how some of the problems in writing a master dissertation could be prevented:

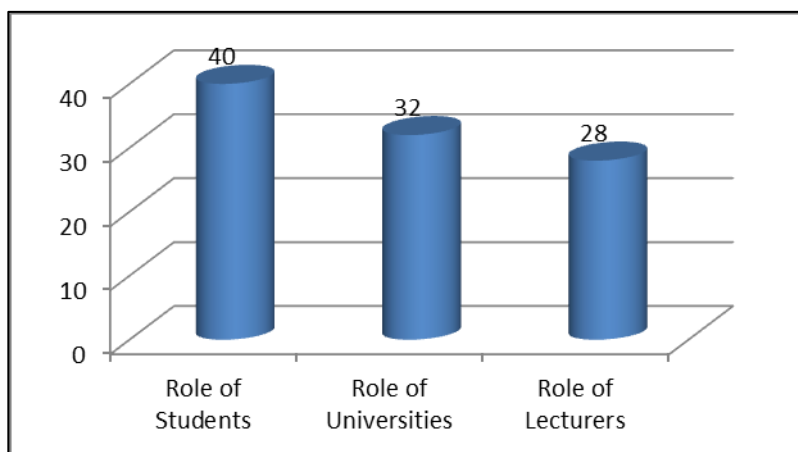


Chart 1: Proposed solutions to problems in abstracts writing

Suggestions from postgraduate students to overcome problems in abstracts writing from the bar chart above shows that a majority 16 (40%) of the students interviewed suggested that students themselves ought to take the challenge more and make personal efforts to overcome writing problems they face with abstracts. Upholding that the university has a role to play, 13 (32%) postulated that if priority is given to courses that will encourage academic writing, it could solve the problem to an extent given that students will have the opportunity to become conscious of many writing practices especially those that will enhance their writing skill. Considering the students who attested that it all depended on the role of the lecturers, they were 11 (28%) of them. To remedy the situation, they pointed out that lecturers can help them improve on the writing of abstracts in particular and the writing skill in general by building their awareness very often, on the different types of language usage problems that can be problematic and result in poor writing. In this light, they can often pinpoint different types of errors, for example, vocabulary

issues, organizational and structural procedures, to name a few and, most importantly, by encouraging students to use good grammar handbooks.

From the interviews with students and lecturers, we noticed that procrastination is a common obstacle that students face in writing good dissertation abstracts. Also, students through this method revealed that each time they write, they have a kind of internal fear of failure and critics and this erects barriers that prevent writing. These findings are closely in line with that of Lee and Boud (2003) that negative thoughts about our writing capability can block our confidence. They hold that our internal editors can prematurely shut down thinking, resulting in staring at a blank space, unable to begin. The suggestions to this problem were mostly given by the lecturers that students can start by writing regularly, in small amounts and they would subsequently develop to bigger ones.

Moreover, the students suggested that lecturers could employ multiple lecturing techniques in order to improve academic writing. This might be possible through means such as engaging them in more writing activities that will cause them to grasp the ability to write well, given that they can only write well by practising to write as often as possible.

They believe that by so doing, students would strengthen their abilities to write especially if tasks assigned to them were accompanied by lecturers' feedback. Through this, students will be aware of their weak points and try to work on their own. This is closely in line with Russell (1991) who suggests that including more writing in discipline-specific courses will be of great importance because each discipline has its own terminologies of language use and style that can best be taught to students in specific contexts of courses in the disciplines concerned. Through this approach, there will be an attempt to solve the problem of lack of adequate vocabulary when the students get to the level of writing their master's dissertations and the abstract section in particular.

5. Conclusion

The suggestions of the postgraduate students above could to an extent, provide opportunities for more critical detachment and review of the ways in which abstract discourse could be better constructed. This cannot be done in any better way than through textual practices in the context of master's dissertation abstract which can open the way to other academic writings.

5.1 Implications

In order to become a good dissertation writer, especially coming out with good abstracts, students have to become sensitive to content, organization, language and difficulties when writing. As seen in this work, academic discourse includes specific lexical and grammatical features. The writing of master's dissertation abstract, in particular, is marked by distinctive textual features. Engaging and learning to write in the academic context means learning a set of skills that give the students the command.

This study holds the view that, students who write well in one context would write well in any other settings. This contrasts the views of some educators who have argued that instruction in general writing strategies is preferable to discipline-specific instructions (Fagella-Luby et al. 2012) and (Yancey, 2009). However, according to the result of the present study, it can be seen that the degree of practical difficulties faced by students depends on their knowledge of the area of study, mastery of lexicogrammatical items, the ability to organize content items when writing. The way the content and overall organization of the master's dissertation abstract is taught needs to be reviewed.

Through abstracts, it has been seen how master's dissertation writing and writing in educational settings, in general, can be improved. It has been realized that the main concern should be on the instructional material and the pedagogic approaches which are appropriate for practice.

5.2 Recommendations

This work recommends that there should be close monitoring of what young researchers write, why they write and the difficulties they face on what they write so that they can be empowered to be better internationally as far as writing is concerned. The putting in place of the continental plan of action of educating Africans on the importance of their written works to be recognized across continents could come into play through sustaining the interest of young writers by encouraging them to write accordingly. This could be of great importance to Africa as a continent because when writing in education is contextualized, it, first of all, builds the young African writer's interest in writing before it extends to the contribution of this cherished skill

(writing). International mobilizations are pushed by the interest in writing and possessing good writing skills that can facilitate this wonderful global dream.

5.3 Conclusion

This study was set to bring together information on the practical difficulties that student face in writing their master's dissertation abstracts. This study was carried out with the use of quantitative and qualitative methods and some solutions were proposed at the end by respondents.

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