Difficulties Faced by UK-Based Saudi Doctoral Students in Writing Theses

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Abstract :

This paper examines the writing difficulties of UK based Saudi doctoral students. It is framed around Wenger's (1998) concept of participation in a community of practice (CoP). Using a qualitative methodology, the paper reports the results of an open-ended survey of 61 Saudi PhD students, across various UK universities, and closely examines the cases of 6 of those students and their supervisors through interviewing both students and their supervisors, focusing on their interactions with their theses topics, the English language, the supervisory relationship and their new academic environment. The findings reveal that academic language is the principal impediment to students thesis writing development. However, a key to the improvement of academic language was active participation in scholarly communities of practice. In conclusion, the paper underlines the value of qualitative studies, underpinned by authentic voices from the participants, in helping educators develop new insights about the thesis writing process. Additionally, it provides direction for research and practice in thesis writing curricula design and supervisory support both within the UK and the Saudi Arabian academic contexts.

الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلبة الدكتوراة السعوديين في الجامعات البريطانية في كتابة الأطاريح
الدكتور عبدالعزيز الفهيد
قسم اللغة الإنجليزية / جامعة الإمام عبدالرحمن بن فيصل / المملكة العربية السعودية

ملخص :

تبحث هذه الورقة العلمية في صعوبات الكتابة التي يواجهها طلبة الدكتوراة السعوديين الدارسين في الجامعات البريطانية، وتستند نظريا لمفهوم المشاركة في مجتمعات العمل والممارسة. استخدم الباحث المنهج النوعي في البحث العلمي من خلال تطبيق الاستبيان المفتوح الذي أجاب عليه 61 طالبا وطالبة من جامعات بريطانية مختلفة، ودراسة حالة لـ 6 طلاب ومشرفيهم من خلال مقابلة الطلبة ومشرفيهم، مع التركيز على تفاعلهم حول كتابة مواضيع أطاريح الدكتوراة، والكتابة باللغة الانجليزية، والعلاقة الاشرافية والبيئة الاكاديمية ذات العلاقة. بينت النتائج أن اللغة الانجليزية هي العائق الرئيس الذي يواجه الطلبة السعوديين الدارسين في الجامعات البريطانية في كتابة أطاريحهم، رغم أن المشاركة الفاعلة في مجتمعات الكتابة العلمية هي المدخل الرئيس لتحسين اللغة الأكاديمية. وخلاصة القول، تعظم هذه الورقة أهمية البحوث النوعية، وتدعم فكرة الوصول للأصوات الحقيقية للمشاركين، لمساعدة التربويين في تطوير رؤى جديدة حول عملية كتابة أطاريح الدكتوراة. كما تمهد الطريق أمام الباحثين والممارسين في تصميم مناهج مناسبة في كتابة الأطاريح والخدمة الإشرافية في السياقات الأكاديمية في المملكة المتحدة والمملكة العربية السعودية.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Writing at postgraduate level is not a straightforward process, and for many writers particularly at the PhD stage is fraught with challenges and several "new starts and unexpected adjustments" (Swales, 2001, p.52). The difficulties encountered by L2 student writers, in particular, have been the focus of much research and has identified difficulties ranging from linguistic problems to collaboration between the supervisor and student (Belcher, 1994; Braine, 2002; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Dong, 1998; Gosden, 1996; Jenkins, Jordan & Weiland, 1993; Riazi, 1997; Strauss, Walton & Madsen, 2003).

With English being the universal language of science for many disciplines such as engineering and medicine, it is increasingly used by scientists not only from Anglophone countries but from several

other language backgrounds (Wood, 2001)**.** PhD students inevitably are required to have gained aptitudes in skillfully using this 'international scientific language' to access scientific, medical and technological advances and to be part of discipline-specific communities after graduation. In China, for instance, Li (2016) explains how PhD students are required to publish several articles in English within international journals before they are conferred with a doctoral degree and allowed to graduate. Li (ibid.) explores not only the academic and employability pressure this creates on students but also the role of the supervisor in helping students develop publishable English academic articles. Although there are many research studies on this and doctoral writing in general, "we still understand relatively little about how doctoral students actually learn research writing, how supervisors "teach" or develop the writing of their students and what happens to students and supervisors during this process" (Aitchison, Catterall, Ross & Burgin, 2012, p. 2).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify challenges Saudi PhD students studying in UK universities face during the thesis writing process, shed light on their experiences and ability to cope with the new academic, social and pedagogical demands they encounter, and examine the extent to which these experiences impact their ability to complete their theses. Saudi Doctoral students were selected for this study partly due to the authors own background as a Saudi educator, and the authors wish to help enhance the thesis writing process and experience for future students in general, and Saudi students in particular.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1 THE THESIS WRITING PROCESS: A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

Numerous studies refer to the various hurdles doctoral students face with thesis writing (James, 1984; Cooley & Lewkowicz. 1995; Wellington, 2010). Considering the thesis writing learning process as participation in an academic research-based CoP suggests that successful thesis writing hinges on the action of writing itself, and

importantly the relationships people develop with the audiences and communities for which the writing is intended. Participation, as argued by Wenger (1998), is crucial to how people construe meaning in the world and the processes that people engage with, such as writing, and implies both action and connection.

CoP perspectives suggest therefore that doctoral writers can develop their expertise in thesis writing by seeking out experts in their academic disciplines who they can apprentice under, either directly or indirectly through access to their written work, and by engaging in the act of writing itself. Whilst many studies refer to the various hurdles many doctoral students face in writing (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Horowitz, 1986; Jenkins et al., 1993; West & Byrd, 1982), it could be argued that these 'hurdles' go back to what they learn about academic writing (or don't learn) long before they even begin their doctorate. For instance, how much essay writing or academic writing do they do before or during their bachelor's or master's degrees?

2.2 Academic Language

Having a good command of academic English language is central to not only thesis writing, but writing in general. Where students have had difficulties, much research has been done to examine these difficulties and categories them. Categories of difficulties have included, amongst others, those: a. at the sentence and structural level e.g. grammatical accuracy, lexical choice and punctuation (Dong, 1998); b. at the level of the argument e.g. it's coherence and structure (Thompson, 1999); and c. at the level of the genre requirements for individual chapters of the thesis (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006).

Firstly, at the sentence level, mistakes in English grammar and incorrect usage of academic English, or lack thereof, were identified by Kamler & Thomson (2014, p. 89) as issues often found in the written work of novice doctoral writers. Lumadi (2011) mentioned that supervisors showed great displeasure concerning what they termed as students' poor language skills, something which compelled them to spend extra hours editing and correcting the students' work.

For L2 doctoral students, these issues were even more apparent (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992). Dong (1998) found that areas such word usage, grammar and mechanics were amongst the most frequent areas where students sought assistance during their thesis writing.

While grammatical mistakes and difficulties at the sentence level were problematic, Cooley & Lewkowicz (1995), Thompson (1999), and Jenkins et al. (1993) found that a greater difficulty for doctoral students was developing an academic argument. How do students learn how to develop an argument over an extended piece of scholarly writing such as a thesis genre? It appears that part of the answer lies within the student themselves, and their willingness to critique and develop their own positions and claims within the scholarly discourse of the communities that they participate in.

Another area of academic language examined in the literature is writing difficulties with the thesis genre itself, and specifically the type of language used within individual chapters. Whilst a lot of guidance is available for students on the structure of a thesis, from university resources such as libraries, Paltridge (2002) found that such resources provided very little guidance on the writing of individual chapters themselves. Studies such as that from Bitchener & Basturkmen (2006) found that there does not appear to be a one-size fits all approach for all of the chapters in the thesis, and that students appeared to struggle more on some chapters like the literature review and discussion where they had to formulate ideas, link them and be analytical in their writing.

2.3 Western Culture, Discipline-Specific Cultures and University Rules and Expectations

Aside from the ability to use academic language, ideas of identity and culture increasingly feature in the literature as integral factors that impact the overall thesis writing process. Parry (1998, p. 273) argues that the thesis writing process required not only knowledge of English language but also "discipline-specific knowledge shaped by the norms and conventions of a particular disciplinary culture". Examples Parry gives of conventions include: conventions for citation and

conventions for reporting knowledge, e.g. through concrete, technical and objective language in scientific writing versus abstract, metaphorical and interpretative language in humanities. Becoming accustomed to these conventions, along with the rules and regulations of new academic environments takes time, especially for L2 doctoral students who may not have had much exposure to such conventions, rules and regulations in their home countries.

Another challenge for L2 doctoral students who were newcomers to universities in English speaking countries is the intense pressure they put on themselves to adjust to their new environment (Fotovatian, 2012). Ryan and Viete (2009) found that one impediment was students feeling a sense of exclusion partly due to the perceived gap between themselves and their new local peers and communities. Helping students overcome this sense of exclusion, and develop an identity (Casanave, 1998), both social and academic, that allows them to develop and grow as thesis writers is therefore vital. The supervisor can play a central role in socializing the student into the rules and expectations of the new academic environment, and difficulties related to the student-supervisor relationship are explored next.

2.4 Supervisory Relationship

As Lee (2008, p. 267) succinctly argues "we know that the supervisor can make or break a PhD student". In examining the literature on the supervisory relationship and the difficulties that have been reported both by students and supervisors in regards to it, and its impact on thesis writing, three central areas of relevance to this study emerge: Mismatch between supervisor expectations and student requirements, misunderstanding of the linguistic and cultural differences that L2 doctoral students face, and misalignment in what supervisors and students perceive to be the actual writing difficulties of L2 doctoral students.

In regards to expectations and requirements, Woolhouse (2002), Philips and Pugh (2000), and Exley and O'Malley (1999) calls for clear guidelines to regulate the process of supervision, so that both 'expectations' and 'needs/requirements' can harmoniously align.

McCormack (2004) revealed in his study that there is the vast gap between what supervisors expected of their students and the latter's academic abilities. Further, Dong (1998) found that supervisors and students differed in their expectations of the degree of support the latter should expect. A compromise thus needs to be arrived at to clarify the situation and make supervisors' expectations and students' requirements more explicit (Belcher, 1994; Bitchener and Basturkman, 2006). In addition to tackling the sensitive issue of trust, Armitage (2006) suggests the importance of both parties discussing their expectations and requirements early in the relationship. The degree to which students and supervisors do this, therefore, appears to be vital in helping doctoral students become successful thesis writers.

In an ESL context, Allison et al. (1998) notes that potential problems may arise from the differences in linguistic, academic and cultural backgrounds between student and supervisor, and the lack of mutual understanding of the various aspects of the supervision process. How are supervisors and students encouraged to recognize these differences and learn to manage them? A factor that complicates the student-supervisor relationship is the presumption on the part of some supervisors that students are fully aware of the various academic and disciplinary conventions required of them, resulting in them not being discussed with students (Bitchener and Basturkmen, 2006). Anderson et al. (2006, p. 165) argue that supervisors can help students not only recognize the differences between the students own academic background and that of the UK but they can also help students adhere to the "established values and practices of the research community". Whilst a balance needs to be struck between the level of coaching that students receive in writing and the amount of space given to them to develop it independently, for L2 doctoral students, this balance perhaps should tilt more towards coaching especially during the early part of the supervisory relationship.

However, coaching and providing detailed feedback to students takes time, and given that supervisors have many other duties can lead to delays in providing direction to students (Aspland et al., 1999). Lumadi (2011) touches on the related issued of contact time where

students' complained about not being able to contact supervisors and waiting long periods of time for feedback. Armstrong (2012) and Fan (2013) look at the problem from the supervisors' perspective. They highlighted that a major concern for supervisors was the growing number of students they had to supervise and the lack of time assigned to them to provide proper supervision. Despite this, they noted that the supervisors they studied went to great lengths to support their students.

Finally, a key issue that appears in the literature is the misalignment in what supervisors and students perceive to be the students' actual writing difficulties. Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) found that while students were more prone to view their difficulties in terms of their limited English proficiency, their supervisors, on the other hand, seemed to be more worried about the students' lack of understanding of the rhetorical and structural requirements of the thesis genre. Todd et al. (2006) further found that concerns also existed in regards to how analytical and critical students were in their work. Belcher (1994) argues that such issues appeared to be partly due to students being relatively new to their "discourse community". Becoming familiar with academic discourse communities, therefore, and knowing how to actively participate in them appear to be vital.

3. Method and Instruments

The overriding research question for this study is: what challenges and difficulties do Saudi doctoral students encounter during their doctoral degrees in the UK? The approach adopted for the study is qualitative and utilized two instruments: open-ended survey and interviews. Thesis writing is undoubtedly a complex endeavor. Exploring the difficulties that students face with this endeavor, how they overcome them and the impact those difficulties have on thesis completion required not only considerable interaction with students themselves but also with a rich body of data that could allow intricate details and themes to emerge.

Qualitative research allows for phenomena related to areas such as thesis writing to be explored in great depth (Neuman, 2014). It allows

researchers to record information using instruments that are self-designed and enables them to deeply explore the central phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2012). Neuman (2014) goes further to argue that it allows researchers to deeply understand how participants create meaning in their everyday lives. It is for these reasons that the qualitative approach is deemed to be the most suitable for the purposes of this study. It should be noted that the data was collected in accordance with the standards and guidelines of the human subjects required by the Research Ethics office at the university where this study was conducted.

3.1 Open-ended Survey

The survey instrument used for this study consists of open-ended questions. A key benefit of this approach was that it did not place any limits on the type of difficulties that students could raise. This is in contrast to closed questions which restrict the type of difficulties that students may pinpoint. Participants for the survey were selected using a combination of homogenous criterion, and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2012). The study is interested in participants from Saudi Arabia who had either completed their doctoral studies, and obtained their doctorates, or were in the process of doing so within a UK university. The author initially located a few students from the Saudi community within the UK who met the criteria and asked them to forward the open-ended survey to other doctoral students.

The open-ended survey began by asking for the participant's name, gender, degree, field of study, and the university at which the participant was enrolled including their department name. It then asked for details on the challenges and difficulties participants had experienced in writing their theses and how they dealt with and overcame them. Further, it asked to what extent such challenges had impacted or could impact (for those who had not yet obtained their doctorate) on their theses completion, and whether they were willing to be interviewed to talk about their overall writing experience.

3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Students who agreed to be interviewed were requested to confirm if their supervisors would also be open to be interviewed. As such, the interviews took the form of two-fold forms: student interviews and supervisor interviews. The students' semi-structured interview schedule consists of 12 questions. The questions focused on the challenges associated with writing a PhD thesis. It also probes students about the various writing techniques they had adopted in their writing process and in their various chapters, and which part/task in their theses was found to be most challenging, e.g., analyzing and examining assumptions, criticizing (structuring arguments), presenting a point of view, using relevant sources, constructing or expressing and linking ideas, organizing paragraphs, etc.

The supervisors' semi-structured interview schedule consists of 7 questions. It initially asked supervisors about their main research interests, and on average, how many non-native PhD students they usually supervise each academic year. It elicits supervisors' perceptions of the extent and nature of students' writing difficulties and which part they, the supervisors, think students find more demanding/challenging in the writing process of their PhD thesis. Other questions include the amount of help supervisors offered to students to enable them to cope with research difficulties.

In total, 6 doctoral students and 3 supervisors agreed to be interviewed. Of the doctoral students and supervisors interviewed, 2 were dyads i.e. supervisor-student pairs. The benefits of interviewing both parties instead of just one enabled the study to not only explore the difficulties that doctoral students faced from more than one perspective but also enable the study to explore the supervisory relationship in more depth.

3.3 Participants

In total, using snowball sampling, the survey reached over 140 Saudi doctoral students at different British universities between September and December 2015. 61 completed, usable responses were returned. All the participants were in different phases of their doctoral studies.

The six students who agreed to be interviewed were then requested to contact their supervisors to invite them to also participate in the study. Two supervisors agreed to be interviewed, and a third supervisor unrelated to students surveyed, but who had experience supervising Saudi doctoral students also agreed to an interview.

3.4 Data Analysis Approach

The open-ended survey and the transcribed interviews were analyzed by the author using traditional content analysis. Content analysis allows researchers to investigate and discover features of large amounts of data that might otherwise go unnoticed (Neuman, 2014, p. 49). The system employed involved classifying the data from both the survey and the interviews into themes. Through extensive and multiple readings of the data, the author systematically recorded all the themes and began to identify how often certain themes appeared within the data using frequency analysis.

The emergent themes that came out of the collected data include:

1. Academic English language issues
2. Western/UK culture as opposed to students' home culture
3. UK universities' rules and expectations
4. Supervisory issues: supervisors' and students' relationship
5. Students' familial issues/concerns

4. Results

The results of both the open-ended survey and the interviews suggest several common problems/difficulties that doctoral students face while conducting their research projects. The survey in particular invites students' comments on specific challenges and difficulties they faced during the thesis writing process, and the findings were then categorized around the five themes identified for the study. Table 1 below provides a summary of the responses organized by the five themes.

Table 1: A Summary the Findings of the Survey.

Main Themes	Number of Responses
1. Academic English language issues (reading and writing in other than students' mother language, academic style)	71
2. UK universities' rules and expectations (research and academic skills)	27
3. Supervisory issues: supervisors' and. students' relationship	9
4. Western/UK culture as opposed to students' home culture	8
5. Students' familial issues/concerns	2

In addition to the themes above, an additional issue that presented itself during the interview stage was the concern the doctoral students had regarding the viva. It was clearly a major worry for many of the interviewees, but interestingly did not feature in the survey responses. The themes from the survey are now discussed in turn below, drawing upon interview data.

4.1 Academic Language

The predominant concern from the survey (71 responses) related to students who struggled with their level of English language. This group of participants revealed difficulties in writing their initial proposals, constructing ideas in convincing language, structuring their argument in a cohesive way and expressing themselves clearly:

"Challenges related to finding the best words and terminologies to convey ideas" (Survey Student 8)

"The main ideas were in mind but putting everything together in very consistent way was challenging" (Survey Student 12)

This issue of academic language, and students' command of it, had ramifications for their writing abilities not only during their

PhD's, but even at the PhD proposal stage where some students noted:

"When I started as a fresh PhD student, it was extremely difficult to crystallize a coherent proposal." (Survey Student 1)

To overcome these hurdles, students who were surveyed and those who were subsequently interviewed resorted to seeking proofreading help, attending extra courses of English and studying the language used in journal publications to compensate for their lack of proficiency in English:

"I try to write and give it to proofreaders" (Survey Student 6)

"I attended courses to overcome my difficulties." (Interview Student SA)

It's unsurprising that a key issue for many of the doctoral students, whose first language was not English, was their capacity to express ideas clearly in English. This appeared to be connected not only to students' ability to construct sentences in English, but also to a lack of familiarity with vocabulary and discourse styles that were unique to their scientific disciplines and that perhaps had no direct or exact equivalents in their home languages. Whilst language courses assisted in expressing ideas, it was in the area of scientific English where students found many abstract scientific concepts and vocabulary that rendered direct translation, a strategy that some students mentioned they used, ineffective in helping them understand texts and in turn deploying similar language in their own writing. While academic language directly impacts writing, the theme explored next was found to be just as important but on a more personal level for students.

4.2 Western Culture, Discipline-Specific Cultures and University Rules and Expectations

A major theme from the survey, which was further emphasized by those interviewed was what has come to be known as "culture shock". Students commented on struggling to familiarize themselves with the new life style thrust upon them by their new environment. Students noted the following as challenges:

"Adapting with the new culture" (Interview Student NK)

"..cultural issues that caused problems which supervisors were not aware of" (Survey Student 49)

This idea of adapting to the new culture appeared to comprise two aspects. It appeared to involve not only adjusting to the new surroundings and the patterns of life needed to help students progress with their research, but also becoming accustomed to new academic rules, expectations and conventions; these related to areas such as research ethics, time management and plagiarism. For the purposes of clarity, the first aspect is referred to as social culture and the latter as academic culture.

While culture in a social sense is a broad term, it was viewed by students to include many common things such as the types of foods people eat and when they eat them, how people view religion, and the way people shake hands or even whether they shake hands at all. In this context, it was interesting how some of the students recorded an initial sense of 'estrangement' to their new study locations. Whilst estrangement takes different forms such as powerlessness, the sense that one cannot influence important problems, and self-estrangement in work, the sense that one does not enjoy their work but must do it in order to obtain other things (Wallimann, 1981), the type that seemed to be expressed most by students was of a cultural kind - social and academic.

Students found it somehow frustrating, even at times demoralizing, as they tried to bridge the gap separating the two different cultures: the UK and their home country cultures. Developing social networks and integrating, despite wanting to, was also perceived to be difficult; something that further alienated students from social life and negatively impacted on their academic life. Two of the surveyed students added that a factor that made this situation worse was the strains of being away from family and friends (some described themselves feeling extremely 'homesick'). One student noted the following:

"Stress, family responsibilities and feeling homesick" (Survey Student 40)

This overall frustration relating to culture shock was overcome by most of the students who identified it as a challenge. However, it took a lot of time for some. Despite initially having a culture shock, one student noted that:

"with time, things became normal" (Survey Student 46)

Strategies that these students used to overcome culture shock ranged from learning about British culture to networking with native speakers and creating opportunities for cultural exchanges. Survey Student 28 noted:

"Meet English native speakers in through a trips, and Voluntary work"

Academically, another cultural adjustment was grasping the new rules and conventions that shaped academic life within UK universities. Students commented on the stark differences in this area as compared to their home universities in Saudi Arabia. Survey Student 8 noted:

"English is not my 1st language; and the dissertation's (thesis's) writing style in my country is totally different than the one in the UK"

This perceived gap in academic culture, between the UK and Saudi Arabia, in areas ranging from research conventions to student autonomy was attributed to differences in methodology by students, and this led them to question their research skills, study techniques and preparedness for their doctoral studies. Survey Student 15 noted:

"the research skills which I obtained during my BA and MA studies in Saudi were not sufficient"

Whereas students may have been used to more direction and clearer timelines in their home countries, particularly in their BA and MA studies, in their UK doctoral studies they often found themselves having to manage their own time efficiently. Students noted:

"There is no clear timeline" (Interview Student SL)

"Some candidate will spend more than three years for data collection and analyses and starting writing up in the last 6 or 7 months" (Survey Student 14)

It is suggested that the cultural difficulties, both social and academic, that students faced in general were exacerbated by two factors. The first is linked to the idea of social culture and being a foreigner in a

new country where one has had no orientation or prior experience. L2 students who fell into this category, often found themselves being confused in areas ranging from how to settle into the new environment to how to build relationships. The second is in L2 students' understanding of UK academic culture, its rules regarding plagiarism, research conventions, and its customs when conducting research such as ethics and consent when collecting data. Whilst much of the rules and conventions that students need to learn can be found in university handbooks, it is only as useful insofar as students internalize it; something which UK bound L2 doctoral students may struggle with if using the handbook as their sole means of support. The next theme analyzed will explore the supervisory relationship and the role of the supervisor in this regard.

4.3 Supervisory Relationship

The supervisory relationship theme was raised by 9 survey participants. Six responses expressed some sort of unease as to the role their supervisors played during their studies and perceived the relationship akin to a rollercoaster with ups and downs. A lower number (3 participants) expressed their overall satisfaction with the relationship and acknowledged the help they received from their supervisors (good advice/guidance/support) which, they noted, was fundamental in the completion of their studies.

> "My adviser (supervisor) did a great job" (Survey Student 9)

> "The supervisor was so helpful" (Interview Student SR)

Those who expressed unease talked about feeling a sense of discomfort in terms of not enough support received from their supervisor, the supervisor being strict, not approving of their research particularly where a supervisor changed, not caring and miscommunication among others. Students noted:

"From my personal experience, I do not like focusing on details while my supervisor was strict about them" (Survey Student 27)

"Difficulties were related to the supervisor who can make it easier or harder when it comes to writing and the related activities in the study" (Survey Student 30)

Supervisors in general, some students claimed, were slow in responding to students' queries, and the feedback they provided was simply not sufficient. In addition, a few students claimed that intervals between supervision sessions sometimes extended for longer than two to three months which slowed their progress down. One student noted:

"The availability of supervisors can also be an issue, as sometimes one or both of them are not present due to academic work or trips which lead to long periods of 2 to 3 months of general neglect without any contact between us" (Survey Student 57)

Students also claimed that some of their supervisors, especially when they had more than one supervisor, were occasionally not aligned in their opinions and the academic direction provided, and that the supervisor's personality/mood had a negative influence on their academic dealings. Interview Student SL noted:

"The big problem is that (there) are many contradictions between the supervisors (primary and 2nd supervisor) and they have different styles"

Turning now to data from the supervisors' perspective, some of the concerns voiced by the students were acknowledged. On the issue of contact time, for example, supervisors mentioned that a defined amount of time is allocated to all students. One supervisor noted:

"We have workload management system where we allocate certain amount of time for students. For example, the time that a PhD student has is eight days per year" (Interview AD's Supervisor)

This could perhaps suggest that the perceived neglect felt by some of the students in terms of the limited time that they had with their supervisors may have been due to misaligned expectations.

In addition, some supervisors responded to claims that their contact time with supervisees was inadequate by advising them to fully utilize their own time in the best possible way through activities such as greater independent reading. Linked to the theme of expectations, supervisors noted that:

"The whole idea of where the knowledge comes from or the source of knowledge is different.   For example, some students did not understand that they have to do some reading before they come to the seminar discussions. They just sat there waiting for me to say anything" (Interview NK's Supervisor)

"Students should think of how to use that time to the best effect with the supervisors" (Interview AD's Supervisor)

On the challenge of writing, two of the supervisors said that the fundamental problem that they faced in their supervisory duties was that a good number of theses were predominantly written in a descriptive rather than critical or analytical way; something that drastically weakened the students' writing. Interview AD's Supervisor noted:

"The concept of academic writing or academic literacy and getting people to write and think in that way is always a challenge. For example, writing a literature review in a critical way is the most challenging thing that all our students have, particularly those from non-Western background."

One way to tackle this phenomenon, supervisors added, was to advise students to not be afraid of constructively challenging ideas and to utilize university writing support services that could help enrich their academic skills and improve their analytical writing techniques. Interview AD's Supervisor noted:

"For example, we do have a center of academic writing and a library that provides many resources to help. One of the things I always do with my initial meetings with doctoral students… whether they are English speakers or English is a second language for them, is to remind and inform them of support services that we have at the university".

The supervisory relationship, in some respects, is linked to the theme of culture raised in the survey responses. For the students surveyed, it was clear that knowing what is expected of them at doctoral level was not something intuitive. Initially, students expected their supervisors to almost be like teachers who would direct them at every step only to realize that their supervisors expected them to know or at least partly

self-discover what was expected and be independent thinkers. This mismatch in expectations (Belcher, 1994) and the steps that both students and supervisors take to address it early within the doctoral relationship clearly can have a significant bearing not only on the health of the relationship, but also the success of the doctoral student during the thesis writing process.

4.4 The viva: Success/failure decider?
Interestingly enough a concern that did not feature in the surveys was the one related to the viva: the final oral exam evaluating a student's thesis. In fact not one single surveyed student registered his/her reaction to their viva. However, when some of the surveyed students were interviewed, viva-related issues surfaced consistently. Of the 6 students interviewed, 4 had completed their PhD's at the time of the interview and all of them reported experiencing a very hard time during the viva. The bombardment of questions from external as well as internal examiners created a very tense atmosphere for them. One student, who successfully completed his viva, recalled some of his memories:

"Once I started my PhD the viva was like a nightmare for me. I have been thinking of it every single day…. I was always thinking how I am going to answer questions. I know some students who were smart and they didn't pass the viva." (Interview Student NK)

The students who had gone through the viva, and almost all of those that had not yet completed their PhD but were anticipating the viva, feared it and felt a sense of injustice that the hard labor of 3 to 4 years of study would be decided within 2 to 3 hours. Interview Student SL noted:

"It makes me feel insecure…Imagine that your future is determined by 2-3 hours. This is unreasonable…you cannot ignore this. I am not sure how can I prepare for it… it is subject to two people, and they will read my work in different ways for different reasons... it is unpredictable… I live under pressure"

Another perceived concern was with the examiners themselves who, as two interviewees claimed, were not actually close, or in some

cases, anywhere near their own specializations. This, students believed, had an adverse impact on the ultimate results of the viva and it put their academic future in jeopardy. One student questioned the following:

"Are they (examiners) experienced in my research area? The relationship between my supervisor and them. Some examiners have certain agenda" (Interview Student AD)

The anxiety behind the viva perhaps can partly be explained by students not engaging early enough with the right experts within their chosen disciplines. Interview AD's Supervisor noted:

"I remind students that the main audience that they are writing for is the university and the examiners. They are the people that matter in terms of evaluating or assessing their work"

To summarize, the majority of the PhD students who were surveyed and the six that were subsequently interviewed managed to overcome most of the challenges reported in this paper and later progressed to successfully completing their theses including the two interviewees that had not finished their studies at the time of data collection. Many put this down to extensive reading as well as their strict adherence to academic lists/rules and procedures their universities asked them to follow. Viva problems, for most of the students, were dealt with by subjecting themselves to mock viva exams offered by their supervisors or colleagues. Other helpful strategies included consultation with friends abroad, who had already been through the experience of doctoral studies and supervision, and through students' unions as well as attending useful conferences. While a good number of students resorted to extra English courses to further equip themselves with a decent level of English, others, sought improvement by emulating the style and methodological approach of highly qualified experts in their respective fields of study. They started to read reputable journals/periodicals known for attracting big names in the world of academia and later imitated their academic methods of presenting materials to the public.

5. Discussion

The experiences of students in this study correlated with many aspects of Wenger's (1998) concept of participation in CoP in terms of the students' engagement with the thesis writing process, their relationship with their supervisors, and their ability to understand and reproduce what Wenger refers to as the shared repertoire, including discourse and styles, of their chosen academic disciplines.

Drawing on a constructivist approach to learning, the role of supervisors in helping 'teach' or develop the writing of their students has gained much traction in the literature (Grant, 2008; Li, 2016). Not only has the supervisory process emerged as a powerful determinant of doctoral students writing aptitude, but as Grant (2008) found, it has the potential to transform both the doctoral student and the supervisor. Connecting the results from the theme of culture and the supervisory relationship suggests that supervisors can play a central role not only in helping students become better thesis writers, but also helping them negotiate doctoral identity and cultural meaning in their new academic settings (Wenger, 1998)."Today, doctoral students have professors who give them entry into academic communities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 101). The results from this study suggest that a key enabler influencing the degree within which the supervisors could do this was their ability to make explicit the tacit knowledge that they had of the rhetorical forms of their discipline.

It appeared that the relationship that many of the students had with their supervisors typified what Grant (2008) refers to as the Master–slave dialogues in supervision. However, those that managed the relationship well learnt, sometimes forcibly due to limited contact time with their supervisors that they had to quickly become authorities themselves. Strategies that some supervisors used were to get their students to read extensively, a process that researchers have conceptualized as helping a writer find their own voice (Hirvela and Belcher, 2001); a neo-romantic sense of discovering one's authentic self and then deploying it within one's writing (Yancey, 1994).

Notions of discovery (Yancey, 1994), transformation (Grant, 2008) and indeed identity (Casanave, 1998), appeared from the results to hold some explanatory value in helping shed light on how doctoral students were learning and, knowingly or unknowingly, changing and developing their writing during the thesis writing process.

Linking these notions to the idea of participation as community of practice suggests, in the context of the theme of academic language, that interactions with other people and text hold a great deal of value in helping students overcome their theses writing difficulties generally. More specifically, Casanave (1998) argues that what holds the greatest value is the local interactions with individual faculty, classmates and particular writing tasks. The majority of students in this study noted the currency of participating and interacting with others in this way especially for certain chapters of their theses. While participation and interaction with text and academic colleagues, both formally and informally, had helped students overcome some of their academic language difficulties, there were others who interacted with texts, faculty and classes to help improve their academic language, yet when it came to writing their theses still had difficulties. This could partly be due to students not internalizing the characteristic features expected of the different sections of their theses (Bitchener and Basturkmen, 2006). Wenger (1998) refers to this idea of internalization through the term 'reification' and argues that to successfully negotiate meaning, participation had to be coupled with reification to create the conditions for meaning to emerge. Some students found the process of writing, getting feedback and then re-writing as being the most useful in helping them internalize the features of the different sections of their theses.

A frustration that was expressed by several students was that writing was significantly more difficult for them, as L2 doctoral students, as compared to their counterparts who had English as their first language. Casanave and Hubbard (1992) also observe this during their study of the writing problems of native and non-native speakers. While supervisors have a role in providing mentorship (Li, 2016) in

negotiating these kinds of difficulties, a question that can further be explored is the extent to which educational institutions in the L2 students' home countries can help better facilitate a smoother transition for those who plan to conduct doctoral studies in L1 environments.

Overall the experiences of this study show the importance of not only supervisors in helping students improve their theses writing experiences, but also students desire and ability to participate in the communities of practice of their chosen disciplines. While the outcomes of this study underline the view that the theory of participation in communities of practice can broaden our understanding of how students learn to write, it also acknowledges that it has some limitations. Given the role that individuals such as supervisors have in providing novice researchers (Sommers and Saltz, 2004) both entry into academic communities and insights into the discourse of that community, a principal limitation of the theory is in the scenario where students feel excluded from fully participating in the practices of a community (Lea, 2005) due to difficulties in understanding its literacy practices (Lillis and Scott, 2007). In this context, three interview students expressed how they consistently considered withdrawing from the doctoral program due to such difficulties.

If our understanding of how doctoral students learn to write is still relatively limited (Aitchison et. al, 2012), it can be argued that the results of this study support the view of researchers such as Lea (2005) who maintains that what holds the greatest value for policy-makers and educators in higher education is examining and finding ways to better support doctoral students who are at the boundaries of participation in academic communities of practice.

Not participating in communities of practice early during the doctoral degree impacts thesis completion on multiple levels. Firstly, students do not gain sufficient exposure to the discourse styles of their chosen academic disciplines and therefore do not acquire the academic conventions and writing styles that they otherwise would have, through repeated exposure to texts and discourse. Secondly, students

do not get the opportunity to have their ideas critiqued, which the findings of this study show has significant implications for students' ability to construct arguments during their theses and crucially defend those arguments during their viva. Finally, as doctoral students are required to develop expert-like identities over the course of their degrees, lack of participation in communities of practice could also impact the quality of their thesis and their ability to position their claims within the wider body of literature.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this qualitative study was to identify challenges Saudi PhD students studying in UK universities faced during the thesis writing process, shed light on their experiences and ability to cope with the new academic, social and pedagogical demands they encountered, and examine the extent that these experiences impacted their ability to complete their theses. Whilst academic language, and student's command of it, emerged as the biggest factor that directly impacted students' theses writing, when all the difficulties explored were considered alongside Wenger's (1998) concept of participation in CoP, it led to significant questions on how L2 doctoral students can be better supported in their theses writing especially when at the boundaries of participation. If participation in academic CoP's is accepted as being central to a student's thesis writing development, then some of the difficulties found in this study in the areas of academic language, culture and the supervisory relationship can be viewed almost as barriers to entry to those communities of practice. Conceptualizing these barriers to entry, and finding ways to reduce them clearly are exciting areas to further explore in the future.

To end with implications, it is suggested that an opportunity exists in the midst of the thesis writing difficulties that have been explored in this paper: namely the prospect of helping doctoral students improve their doctoral writing through a set of practical recommendations. This paper suggests three recommendations relating to L2 doctoral students themselves, UK universities and classroom curricula in student's home countries.

Firstly, L2 doctoral students can set themselves up for success by exhibiting what Sommers and Saltz (2004) refer to as expert behaviors. While thesis writing development can be painstakingly slow, L2 doctoral students from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere can prepare themselves by: a) seeking greater instruction and practice in academic writing before their doctoral studies in the UK; b) developing a greater understanding of the social and academic culture within the UK including research conventions; and c) identifying experts within their disciplines whose arguments they can rehearse, investigate and engage with as part of participation in their chosen academic communities of practice.

Secondly, UK universities can help accelerate the thesis writing development of the new L2 doctoral students through: a) encouraging early participation in the writing process particularly through fostering more informal communities of practice that include senior L2 students with greater writing expertise; b) offering extra support on a cultural level for L2 speakers whose needs can vary markedly from their native counterparts; and c) helping students negotiate successful roles with their supervisors during the doctoral supervisory process that can help them not only with their writing, but also with their confidence in subsequent years and their final viva.

Finally, classroom curricula in L2 students' home countries such as Saudi Arabia are obliged to: a) expose students on an ongoing basis to more written academic genres such as thesis writing during students' bachelor and master's studies; and b) provide opportunities for students to practice and evidence the skills needed to replicate the academic styles found within thesis writing genres.

There were two principal limitations of the study. Firstly, due to the sensitivity in the student-supervisor relationship, only 2 supervisory dyads agreed to be interviewed. The remaining 4 students interviewed along with the remaining supervisor were not related to each other from a supervisory perspective. Secondly, because the focus of the study was exclusively on Saudi doctoral students in the UK, the demographic and context specificity of the findings may limit its

generalization to situations where students are from other geographies or studying outside of the UK.

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