
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Barriers to Undergraduate Project Writing in EFL Contexts: Student and Faculty Perspectives

Ali Falah Hasan AL-Zurfi¹ and Hussein Ghanim Abed Al-Shammari²

^{1,2} *Department of English, Faculty of Education, University of Kufa, Iraq*

Corresponding Author: Ali Falah Hasan AL-Zurfi, **E-mail:** alif.alzurfi@uokufa.edu.iq

| ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study investigated the primary barriers encountered by Iraqi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduates in writing graduation research projects, incorporating dual perspectives from students and faculty. Quantitative data were collected from 126 final-year students using an adapted 29-item questionnaire, while qualitative insights were gathered from 10 faculty members via written interviews. The findings reveal a complex, interconnected web of challenges. The most significant barrier is a profound deficiency in academic writing skills, with students struggling severely to express ideas clearly in written English. This linguistic hurdle underpins and exacerbates other key obstacles: practical deficits in research methodology (e.g., selecting methods, formulating questions), a critical gap between knowledge and practice in academic integrity (leading to unintentional plagiarism), and systemic curricular shortcomings identified by faculty as overly theoretical and misaligned with practical needs. Notably, the study diverges from some regional research by finding that these struggles occur despite high student motivation and positive perceptions of supervisory support, pointing squarely to gaps in foundational training rather than a lack of guidance or interest. The study argues that successful completion of graduation research projects among Iraqi EFL learners is less dependent on final-year supervision and more dependent on the cumulative development of academic writing skills throughout the undergraduate program.

| KEYWORDS

Research Writing Challenges, Academic Writing, EFL Undergraduates, and Plagiarism

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 15 March 2026

PUBLISHED: 26 March 2026

DOI: 10.32996/jeltal.2026.8.5.2

1. Introduction

Proficiency in writing is considered a core competency in English. However, it poses a significant challenge for most second-language learners. The composition of a coherent text demands not only advanced linguistic command but also considerable cognitive skill in the systematic organization of ideas and data (Khan, 2011)

Neville (2007) defines research as a structured, ethical process of inquiry aimed at solving real-world problems and expanding understanding. This idea of seeking new knowledge is echoed by Pandey and Pandey (2015), who note that the word "research" itself implies a diligent search for novel information. Further elaborating on its communicative purpose, Krause (2021) describes research writing as the practice of building a persuasive argument on a topic by synthesizing evidence from diverse sources such as scholarly publications, digital media, and expert opinions. Kumar (2011) emphasizes the cognitive dimension, viewing research as a disciplined mode of thinking and investigation that deepens comprehension of a subject, evaluates existing theories, and ultimately fosters professional progress. Similarly, Leedy and Ormrod (2015) characterize research as a systematic procedure for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to enhance one's insight into a subject of interest or concern.

Copyright: © 2026 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

In the context of academic research, Alsied & Ibrahim, (2017) defines it as a systematic process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation to determine the applicability of findings. As Adamu (2020) explains, completing a research project is a fundamental requirement for final-year students across institutions, typically undertaken over a full year or the final semester. This project is essential for meeting bachelor's degree requirements. Dillon (2013) further highlights that an undergraduate research project often represents the most substantial work a student will produce. Written in the final year and carrying significant weight in grading, it is commonly used to distinguish between standard and honors degree classifications.

Even though project writing is a critical academic requirement, students, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, frequently view it as demanding. This is largely due to the extended timeline, financial costs, and sustained effort associated with the research process. In the specific context of Iraqi universities, students encounter numerous difficulties when completing their graduation research projects. These challenges may stem from issues with their supervisors, the complexities of the writing process, inadequacies in research methodology instruction, or students' own limited prior knowledge and practical experience.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this study is pioneering in its attempt to comprehensively explore the challenges faced by undergraduate students within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, specifically within the English Department, from the dual and comparative perspectives of both students and faculty members. While existing literature has documented various obstacles in research writing across different regions and specializations, no prior study has simultaneously integrated the EFL disciplinary context of an English Department, which presents unique linguistic and pedagogical dynamics, with a triangulated methodological approach that directly compares and contrasts student experiences with faculty perceptions. This investigation seeks to fill this void by providing a holistic understanding of where student-reported difficulties align with or diverge from faculty awareness and expectations, thereby offering nuanced insights for targeted interventions in similar EFL academic environments.

Research Questions:

- 1- What are the main challenges that Iraqi EFL university students face in writing a graduation research project?
- 2- What difficulties do teachers see Iraqi EFL university students face in writing a graduation research project?

2. Literature Review

Research writing constitutes a dynamic and systematic process, underpinned by established scientific methodologies. It demands a specific set of competencies from students, requiring not only adherence to the linguistic conventions of the English language but also a rigorous application of formal research procedures. A prevalent challenge among students is apprehension toward writing, which often manifests as a reluctance to engage in writing practice itself. This anxiety stems from the dual demands of the task: a proficient command of the language and the capacity to present concepts in a logically coherent and scientifically sound manner. While all language skills present difficulties, studies indicate that productive skills, specifically writing and speaking, generate disproportionate concern for learners compared to receptive skills like reading and listening (Atay & Kurt, 2006; Aydin, 2008).

2.1 Previous studies

Numerous works explore the challenges that university students encounter while undertaking and completing their final graduation projects, with particular relevance to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. A foundational study by Al-Khairi (2013) in Saudi Arabia explored major academic writing difficulties among undergraduates, finding that students struggled significantly with composing research projects and demonstrated a limited understanding of appropriate writing methodologies, highlighting early procedural and conceptual deficits.

Research in similar regional contexts reveals consistent linguistic and procedural challenges. In Yemen, Al-Qasari (2016) identified core linguistic weaknesses among undergraduate students at Ibb University, including difficulties in constructing grammatically correct sentences, limited vocabulary, and poor application of English language skills in a research context. Similarly, Manchishi, Ndhlovu, and Mwanza (2015), focusing on postgraduate students at the University of Zambia, concluded that students' primary challenges involved developing English writing proficiency, with a key issue being the transfer of stylistic features from their first language, resulting in discursive writing, overly long sentences, and repetitive ideas.

Studies have also documented challenges across specific stages of the research process. Villanueva (2017), using a descriptive survey with education students in the Philippines, identified difficulties in formulating research titles, aligning studies with theory, validating instruments, interpreting data, and citing references correctly. In Palestine, Abu Khalaf and Nader (2018) employed a descriptive-analytical approach with students at the Open University of Jerusalem, assessing administrative, technical, and linguistic problems. Major obstacles included inadequate library access, limited research experience, heavy workloads, confusion over research types, and challenges in producing grammatically correct writing.

More recent research in the Arab world continues to identify systemic issues. Qasem and Zayid (2019), focusing on the early stages of L2 research writing at the University of Bisha in Saudi Arabia, highlighted challenges such as topic selection, methodology, motivation, and time constraints. A key finding was that 70% of participants struggled with writing in English, with many preferring to conduct research in their native language. In Jordan, Altikriti (2022) investigated English Language and Literature undergraduates at the University of Jordan, identifying core struggles including an insufficient grasp of the writing process, limited access to reliable resources, difficulties with research methodology, and inadequate academic writing training.

Recent studies in Iraq provide specific insights into the local context. Kareem and Abdulrahman (2023) specifically targeted Kurdish senior EFL students across four universities in the Kurdistan Region, finding that key obstacles included a lack of interest in research, insufficient experience and practice, poor understanding of methodology, and ineffective supervisory feedback. The study recommended enhanced feedback, practical opportunities, and explicit instruction in academic writing and in avoiding plagiarism. Wali (2024), studying English majors at Diyala University in central Iraq, identified key obstacles, including an unclear topic scope, insufficient subject knowledge, weak application of methods, difficulty locating references, and low intrinsic motivation. Most recently, Hatim (2025), examining challenges among 288 fourth-year students at the University of Garmian's College of Education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, identified primary obstacles as limited access to scientific resources, inadequate supervision, time-management conflicts, and low research confidence stemming from insufficient prior training.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design. The first research question was explored quantitatively using a questionnaire, while the second question was explored qualitatively using a written interview.

3.2 Participants

This study employed a mixed-methods research design and involved 126 Iraqi EFL learners (80 males, 46 females), aged 22 to 39 years, enrolled in morning and evening programs at the Department of English, College of Education, University of Kufa, Najaf, Iraq. Additionally, 10 university instructors specializing in English Language Teaching (ELT), Linguistics, Literature, and Translation participated in a written interview component.

All participants were native Arabic speakers. Student participants were selected using convenience sampling. They were fully briefed on the study's objectives, procedures, benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Senior Students Participants (N = 126)

Table	Participant	No.	Gender	Age	Type of study	2:
	Senior students	126	80 males 46 females	(22-390)	Morning & Evening	

Demographic Information of Teacher Participants (N = 10)

Participant	Academic Field	Years of Experience
1	ELT	15
2	Linguistics	4

3	Linguistics	18
4	Linguistics	13
5	Literature	4
6	Literature	6
7	Linguistics	6
8	Linguistics	12
9	Translation	11
10	ELT	5

3.3 Instrument

3.1.3 Questionnaire by Kareem and Abdurrahman

The researchers used an adapted 29 item questionnaire developed by Kareem and Abdurrahman (2023) for this study. The questionnaire that investigates difficulties in six domains: research design, paraphrasing and plagiarism, citation and referencing, academic writing, supervision, and the course on research methodology. A pilot study of the questionnaire On a cohort of 10 students The content validity of the questionnaire was verified by two experts having PhD degrees in English Language Teaching from Kufa University, College of Education, with more than 10 years' experience in teaching. They evaluated items for clarity, applicability to the Iraqi EFL context and demonstrated overall coverage of research writing related issues. Whereas for reliability Cronbach's Alpha to estimate the reliability of the test.

Table 3: The Value of the Alpha Cronbach's Coefficient

3.2.3	Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
	Challenges Related to Research Design	7	0.876
	Challenges Connected with Paraphrasing & Plagiarism	4	0.951
	Challenges Relevant to Citation & Referencing	3	0.923
	Challenges Relevant to Academic Writing	7	0.907
	Challenges Relevant to Supervisor	2	0.933
	Challenges Relevant to Research Methodology Course	6	0.926
	Total (Full Questionnaire)	29	0.919

Written Interview Questions

The researchers made the questions for the written interview. The questions were validated by two experts from Kufa University, College of Education, English Department, to assess the appropriateness of the written interview questions.

Interview Questions:

1 -Based on your experience, what are the top three difficulties students encounter when writing their graduation research projects?

2 -Which of the following skills do students most urgently need to improve?

- **Research design and methodology**
- **Academic writing (style, grammar, vocabulary)**
- **Paraphrasing and avoiding plagiarism**
- **Citation and referencing (e.g., APA, MLA)**
- **Data analysis**
- **Time management and research execution**
- **Other (please specify): _____**

3- What has been your most significant challenge as a supervisor of graduation projects?

4- How would you rate the effectiveness of the current "Research Methodology" course in practically preparing students for their graduation projects?

- **Excellent**
- **Good**
- **Average**
- **Weak**

Please briefly explain your rating:

5 -What is one practical recommendation you would suggest to improve the quality of graduation projects?

6- Do you have any additional comments or observations regarding student research challenges?

4. Procedure

Following approval from the English Department, College of Education, University of Kufa, students were briefed on the study's aims and benefits. A translated Arabic questionnaire was shared via a Telegram group after a pilot test (n=10) confirmed its clarity and timing. Students had three days to respond. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS.

Faculty members received a written interview form via link with a one-week response window (10/11 responded). Their qualitative answers were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5. Results

What are the main challenges that Iraqi EFL university students face in writing a graduation research project? (First question)

A total of 126 valid responses were collected via an online questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree=SA, Agree=A, Neutral=N, Disagree=D, Strongly Disagree=SD). For analytical clarity, responses were grouped into three categories: Positive (SA+A), Neutral (N), and Negative (D+SD). Descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentages) were calculated for each item to identify areas of pronounced difficulty. The challenges are categorized thematically based on the questionnaire structure.

Analysis of Core Research Competencies

The first six items assessed students' self-perceived competency in fundamental research tasks. The results reveal significant challenges in the initial and final stages of research writing. Table 1 provides self-perceived competency in core research tasks' results.

Table 4: Self-Perceived Competency in Core Research Tasks (N=126)

Item No	Research Task	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Primary Challenge
1	Choosing a research topic independently	49.2	30.2	20.6	Moderate
2	Selecting a methodology without the supervisor's help	14.3	27.0	58.7	Major
3	Discussing results & drawing conclusions	66.7	19.0	14.3	Minor
4	Analyzing collected data	47.6	23.8	28.6	Moderate
5	Formulating clear research questions/hypotheses	28.6	27.8	43.6	Major
6	Writing a concise, accurate abstract	33.3	27.0	39.7	Major

Note: The “Primary Challenge” column is interpreted wherever the Negative (D+SD) percentage is significantly high (>35%) or lowest compared to the three competency items.

As shown in Table 4, three major domains of the types of research writing and their obstacles are reported by Iraqi EFL learners as signed: firstly independent choice for a proper methodology (the highest disagreement—58.7%), secondly, developing clear research questions and hypotheses (43.6% negative responses), and thirdly composing a research abstract (39.7% negative responses). In contrast, students reported being somewhat more confident that they can engage with research findings (66.7% positive answers) and formulate a given research question (49.2% positive answers).

Four Tables show important differences between Declarative and Procedural knowledge among Iraqi EFL learners. Students show confidence performing descriptive output behaviors like talking about results (66.7%) and topic choice (49.2%), yet experience challenges with analytical decision-making tasks, specifically methodology selection (58.7%) and question development (43.6%). These sound like students who have been told what research is but not how to do it by themselves. They can describe results because those are visible and concrete, but — when it comes to the hidden, mental processes that produce those results — they make no sense. The 39.7% difficulty of writing abstracts reinforces this pattern: the abstract must condense an entire study’s logic into a limited space, while requiring not only an understanding of content but also of its structure. Taken together, these findings suggest that current pedagogy prioritizes research products over processes and locks students into reliance on supervisor-led higher-order thinking skills integral for self-directed inquiry.

Most citations have linked items on plagiarism awareness or citation practices swagger. The results from of data on factors related to academic integrity and citation are provided in table 5.

Table 5 : Challenges Related to Academic Integrity and Citation (N=126)

Item No.	Statement	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Key finding
7	Aware of different research types (qual/quant)	57.9	23.0	19.1	High Awareness
8	Know how to paraphrase correctly	57.1	23.0	19.9	High Knowledge
9	Sometimes plagiarize due to difficulty expressing ideas	44.4	19.0	36.6	Prevalent Practice
10	Belief that instructors don't pay enough attention to plagiarism	57.2	22.2	20.6	Prevalent Belief
11	Copying is quicker than original writing	46.0	23.8	30.2	Prevalent View
12	Use proper citations to avoid plagiarism	77.0	11.1	11.9	High Reported Use
13	Know how to use in-text citations appropriately	73.0	15.1	11.9	High Knowledge
14	Familiar with major citation styles (APA, MLA, etc.)	66.7	19.0	14.3	High Familiarity

Looking at Table 5 reveals a troubling gap between what students know and what they do. On paper, their knowledge looks good. A strong majority say they understand citation rules, know how to paraphrase, and are familiar with styles like APA. They've been taught the *what*, but the reality of writing under pressure tells a different story. A striking number of students, nearly half of the students, admit that they sometimes resort to plagiarism, not because they don't know it's wrong, but because they feel stuck. The real hurdle is the *how*: the struggle to take complex ideas and rewrite them in their own, original English words. It's a skill gap that feels urgent and practical. This pressure is amplified by two perceptions that shape the environment in which they write. First, many students believe that their instructors don't prioritize plagiarism, which can subtly lower the perceived stakes. Second, in the crunch of deadlines, copying can simply feel like the faster, easier path. So, the core challenge here isn't ignorance of the rules. It's the immense difficulty of applying those rules in practice translating knowledge into ethical action while facing linguistic strain, time pressure, and a sense that the system might not be watching closely.

Analysis of Linguistic and Writing-Specific Challenges

Items focusing on the mechanical and linguistic aspects of English academic writing point to severe difficulties. Table 6 illustrates linguistic and mechanical writing challenges.

Table 6 : *Linguistic and Mechanical Writing Challenges*

Item No.	Specific Challenge	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Severity
15	Difficulty selecting appropriate academic vocabulary	61.1	19.8	19.1	High
16	Difficulty spelling certain English words	44.4	27.0	28.6	Moderate
17	Create and follow a writing plan	66.7	19.8	13.5	Low
18	Challenged to express ideas clearly in written English	69.0	15.1	15.9	Very high
19	Difficulty using punctuation correctly	54.0	23.0	23.0	High
20	Easily find academic resources	69.8	19.0	11.1	Low
21	Grammatical difficulties due to L1 interference	61.9	19.0	19.0	High

The findings from Table 6 point to the very core of the writing struggle: the language itself.

For these students, the single biggest hurdle is a feeling of being lost in translation. Nearly 70% find it a major challenge to simply get their thoughts onto the page clearly in English. It's not a lack of ideas, but a profound struggle with expression.

This core problem is magnified by several specific linguistic walls they hit daily:

- Over 60% grapple with finding the "right" academic words, feeling their vocabulary isn't up to the formal task.
- A similar proportion feels the constant pull of their native language grammar, which interferes and leads to errors.
- More than half find even the mechanics of English, like punctuation, to be a consistent difficulty.

Together, this paints a clear picture: before students can even tackle the complexities of research methodology or analysis, they are first wrestling with the fundamental tool of the task, proficient academic English. This linguistic barrier is not a side issue; it is a primary, foundational challenge that affects every sentence they write.

Analysis of Perceived Preparation and Support

Students' perceptions of their preparation and the support system reveal gaps in practical training, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Perceptions of Preparation, Supervision, and Interest

Item No.	Area	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Implication
22	Meet supervisor ≥1 hour/week	73.8	15.1	11.1	Adequate Access
23	Supervisor feedback is useful	81.7	11.1	7.2	Valued Support
24	Previous writing courses prepared me adequately	38.9	30.2	30.9%	Inadequate Preparation
25	The previous academic writing course prepared me sufficiently	41.3	30.2	28.5	Inadequate Preparation
26	Research Methodology course too theoretical, not practical	49.2	31.0	19.8	Preference for Individual Work
27	Prefer working individually rather than in group	57.9	23.0	19.1	Preference for Individual Work
28	Genuinely interested in writing a research project in English	69.0	19.1	11.9	High Motivation
29	Can use software (e.g., SPSS) to analyze data	52.4	23.0	24.6	Moderate Competence

But the results also speak to how poorly students evaluate their own academic abilities. While the support was reported as being supportive (questions 22 and 23), however, many students (49.2%) felt that "Research Methods" course was too theoretical and not enough applied wisdom based (question 26). I try to show how this perception is relevant to the previously mentioned problem of resistance when choosing own methodologies. Also, very few of the respondents believed that their old writing courses could prepare them for academic writing (Questions 24 and 25) because only a small minority of students answered "yes" to each question: 38.9% and 41.3%, respectively indicating poor basic writing preparation for the work in the course. The deficits in training did not affect the interest of the students where as a significant proportion (69.0%) showed keen interest to do research in English language (q28). In addition, over half of the participants(52.4 %) thought that they could work with an analytical tool like SPSS (item 29). Taken as a whole, these findings indicate that although students are motivated and have some basic technical skills, they do not perceive their previous educational experiences to have provided them of the means to undertake substantial research papers on their own.

What difficulties do teachers see Iraqi EFL university students face in writing a graduation research project? (Second question)

Data Analysis Method: Thematic Analysis

The analysis followed the **six-phase thematic analysis approach** by Braun & Clarke (2006):

1. **Familiarization with the data** – Reading and re-reading responses.
2. **Generating initial codes** – Identifying key phrases related to difficulties.
3. **Searching for themes** – Grouping codes into broader themes.
4. **Reviewing themes** – Refining and merging themes.
5. **Defining and naming themes** – Finalizing theme labels.
6. **Producing the report** – Writing up findings with supporting extracts.

Table 8 gives identified themes and subthemes of student difficulties.

Table 8: Identified Themes and Subthemes of Student Difficulties

Themes	Subtheme	Illustrative Quote
Research Process Deficits	Lack of research understanding	"The student lacks understanding of the scientific study."
	Inability to design research	"They are unable to outline or use their own words."
	Poor literature review skills	"Thesis statement, methodology, literature review."
Academic Writing Weaknesses	Weak paraphrasing & plagiarism avoidance	"They don't know how to paraphrase."
	Poor academic style & vocabulary	"Academic writing, paraphrasing, and data analyzing."
	Citation and referencing issues	"Find resources, write the complete citation."
Methodological and Analytical Challenges	Research design & methodology difficulties	"Identifying the research problem and formulating research questions."
	Data analysis weaknesses	"Data analyzing."
Motivational and Psychological Barriers	Lack of motivation & confidence	"Lack of motivation to conduct research."

	Dependency on ready-made works	"They search to find it ready made."
	Poor time management	"Time Management & Research Execution."
Systemic and Preparatory Gaps	Inadequate prior training	"They lack prior skills in writing research papers."
	Weak foundational knowledge	"Cumulative knowledge over previous years."
	Ineffective academic writing course	"The course provides theoretical foundation... practical impact remains limited."

Detailed Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Research Process Deficits

Teachers kept coming back to a core issue: many students seemed lost about what research actually is and how to do it. One teacher put it bluntly, saying students simply "lack understanding of the scientific study." Another observed that they often "did not have any idea about how to write a research." In essence, there's a missing foundation. Without this basic roadmap, students feel overwhelmed and unsure of where to even begin designing, organizing, and carrying out their own projects.

Theme 2: Academic Writing Weaknesses

By far, the biggest headache for teachers was students wrestling with paraphrasing and avoiding plagiarism. Eight out of ten brought it up. The core problem, as they saw it, was that students couldn't really "write" from sources they were often unable to digest a complex idea from a published paper and then explain it in their own, simpler words. This struggle showed up everywhere: in clunky academic phrasing, in shaky grammar and limited vocabulary, and in messy or incorrect citations. It was a universal issue, cutting across every subject they taught.

Theme 3: Methodological and Analytical Challenges

Teachers also saw students having trouble with the actual *mechanics* of doing research figuring out how to design a study, choosing the right methods, and analyzing the results. One teacher explained that students often can't pin down a clear "research problem," which makes it nearly impossible for them to shape good research questions. Another pointed out that students seem unable to develop "their own style" in this process. This goes beyond just writing; it means they're following steps without truly understanding or taking ownership of their methodological choices, as if they're just filling in a template rather than building their own investigation.

Theme 4: Motivational and Psychological Barriers

Beyond the technical skills, teachers also pointed to a deeper struggle with motivation and confidence. They observed a lack of drive, shaky self-belief, and difficulty coming up with original ideas. One teacher connected this directly to skills, noting a "severe weakness" in reading and research ability that, when paired with low motivation, creates a major roadblock. Another captured the resulting mindset simply: students "did not want to try to write." This reveals the psychological hurdle at the heart of the issue a sense of disengagement and defeat that can stop the process before it even begins.

Theme 5: Systemic and Preparatory Gaps

Teachers attributed many difficulties to systemic educational shortcomings, such as an ineffective Academic Writing course. One explained: "The course itself wasn't the direct cause, but rather the lack of seriousness in studying the course" (one responses of the instructors) Others noted inadequate cumulative preparation over students' academic journeys.

In general, Iraqi EFL teachers identify core difficulties in students' graduation research writing that are both technical and systemic. Thematic analysis underscores the need for integrated interventions combining course redesign, practical workshops, early research socialization, and continuous mentoring to enhance research writing competence in EFL university settings.

The teachers pointed the finger not at the students themselves, but at a broken system. Many saw the required Academic Writing course as a missed opportunity. As one teacher put it, the problem wasn't the course outline, but the "lack of seriousness" students brought to it a symptom of a larger issue. They stressed that students arrive at their final year simply unprepared, having not built the necessary skills step-by-step throughout their education. In the end, the teachers paint a picture of a problem with two sides: students lacking specific skills, working within an educational structure that hasn't properly equipped or motivated them. The clear takeaway is that fixing this requires more than a single new textbook or workshop. It demands a complete shift, redesigning core courses to be more engaging, offering hands-on practice, introducing the idea of research much earlier, and providing consistent guidance from start to finish. It's about building a supportive culture around research, not just teaching it as a last-minute requirement.

5. Discussion

The results strongly agree with and reinforce the body of existing literature on research writing challenges in EFL contexts, particularly those studies conducted in the Arab world. The most prominent convergence is in the area of academic writing and linguistic competence. The severe difficulty students reported in expressing ideas clearly in written English (69.0%, Table 6) and the corresponding faculty identification of weak paraphrasing and academic style as a top challenge directly mirror the core findings of studies from diverse regional contexts. This confirms the work of Al-Qaseri (2016) in Yemen on grammatical and vocabulary weaknesses, Abu Khalaf & Nader (2018) in Palestine on grammatical correctness, and Manchishi, Ndhlovu, and Mwanza (2015) in Zambia on L1 interference and discursive writing. The persistence of this linguistic barrier across different countries underscores it as a fundamental, almost universal obstacle for EFL learners transitioning to academic writing.

Furthermore, the study's findings on methodological and procedural deficits are consistent with prior research. Students' major struggle with selecting a methodology (58.7% negative, Table 4) and formulating research questions (43.6% negative), coupled with teachers' observations of poor research design understanding, directly corroborate the challenges identified by Al-Khairy (2013) in Saudi Arabia (limited understanding of methodology) and Villanueva (2017) in the Philippines (difficulties in formulating titles and aligning with theory). The perception that the research methodology course is overly theoretical (49.2% agreement, Table 7) provides a plausible explanation for this procedural gap, a point also implied in the recommendations of Kareem & Abdulrahman (2023).

The issue of academic integrity under pressure presents another area of strong alignment. While students reported high theoretical knowledge of citation rules (Tables 5), the admission by 44.4% that they sometimes plagiarize due to difficulty expressing ideas reveals a critical practice-knowledge gap. This finding powerfully echoes and provides quantitative support for the qualitative concerns raised by Kareem & Abdulrahman (2023), who recommended explicit instruction in plagiarism avoidance. It also aligns with the ethical and practical challenges surrounding source use noted in other contexts.

Finally, the identification of systemic and preparatory gaps by faculty members such as ineffective prior training and a lack of cumulative skill-building resonates with the conclusions of Altikriti (2022) in Jordan (insufficient grasp of the writing process, inadequate training) and Hatim (2025) in Iraq (low confidence due to insufficient prior training). This suggests a recurring structural weakness in research socialization within EFL curricula.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Iraqi EFL students face major barriers in writing graduation projects, primarily due to a foundational crisis in academic writing. Students struggle to express ideas clearly in English, which worsens other challenges like research design and avoiding plagiarism. A key finding is the gap between knowing the rules and applying them in practice.

Surprisingly, students are highly motivated and value their supervisors, shifting blame from individual attitudes to systemic failures in preparatory training. Faculty point to overly theoretical courses and a lack of cumulative skill-building.

Therefore, isolated fixes won't work. A complete overhaul of research pedagogy is needed: making courses more practical, teaching writing step-by-step from earlier years, and building a supportive research culture throughout the degree. In short, the

problem isn't unwilling students or poor supervision, but an educational system that doesn't build the essential bridge between theory and practice.

References

- [1]. AbdulMoghni, N. (2009). The problems that face students who study the graduation project course in the education program at Al-Quds Open University from their perspective. *Palestinian Journal for Open Learning & e-Learning*, 2(3), Article 11.
- [2]. Adamu, A. (2020). Final year student project allocation achieving and management system. *FUW Trends in Science & Technology Journal*, 5(3), 837–840.
- [3]. Al-Khairiy, M. A. (2013). Saudi English-major undergraduates' academic writing problems: A Taif University perspective. *English Language Teaching*, 6(6), 1–12.
- [4]. Al-Qaseri, I. (2016). *How to write a research paper: Exploring the challenges faced by Yemeni undergraduate students in writing their graduation research projects*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.
- [5]. Alsied, S. M., & Ibrahim, N. W. (2018). Exploring challenges encountered by EFL Libyan learners in research teaching and writing. *IAFOR Journal of Language Learning*, 3(2), 143–158. <https://doi.org/10.22492/ijll.3.2.06>
- [6]. Altikriti, S. (2022). Challenges facing Jordanian undergraduates in writing graduation research paper. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 18(1), 58–67. <https://doi.org/10.52462/jlls.166>
- [7]. Atay, D., & Kurt, G. (2006). Prospective teachers and L2 writing anxiety. *Asian EFL Journal*, 8(4), 100–118.
- [8]. Aydin, S. (2008). An investigation on the language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation among Turkish EFL learners. *Asian EFL Journal*, 31(1), 1–35.
- [9]. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- [10]. Dillon, A. (2013). Completing an undergraduate dissertation: The student perspective. In R. Donnelly, J. Dallat, & M. Fitzmaurice (Eds.), *Supervising and writing a good undergraduate dissertation* (pp. 50–77). Bentham Science. <https://doi.org/10.2174/9781608051762113010009>
- [11]. Kareem, S. M., & Abdulrahman, B. S. (2023). An investigation into the challenges of writing research project at the departments of English in Iraqi Kurdistan Region universities from the students' perception. *The Scientific Journal of Cihan University–Sulaimaniya*, 7(2), 169–186. <https://doi.org/10.25098/7.2.26>
- [12]. Khan, I. (2011). Learning difficulties in English: Diagnosis and pedagogy in Saudi Arabia. *Educational Research*, 2(7), 1248–1257.
- [13]. Krause, S. (2021). *The process of research writing*. LibreTexts Project.
- [14]. Kumar, R. (2011). *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners*. SAGE Publications.
- [15]. Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2015). *Practical research: Planning and design*. Pearson Education Limited.
- [16]. Manchishi, C. P., Ndhlovu, D., & Mwanza, S. D. (2015). Common mistakes committed and challenges faced in research proposal writing by University of Zambia postgraduate students. *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education*, 2(3), 126–137.
- [17]. Medhat, K. (2025). Challenges in completing graduation research projects: A descriptive study of the experiences of college of education students at University of Garmian. *Journal of Education for the Humanities*, 5(20), 649–684. <https://doi.org/10.33899/jeh.2025.189680>
- [18]. Neville, C. (2007). *Introduction to research and research methods*. University of Bradford Publishing.
- [19]. Pandey, P., & Pandey, M. M. (2015). *Research methodology: Tools and techniques*. Bridge Center.
- [20]. Qasem, F., & Zayid, E. I. M. (2019). The challenges and problems faced by students in the early stage of writing research projects in L2, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. *European Journal of Special Education Research*, 4(1), 32–47. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2557036>
- [21]. Villanueva, J. (2017). Identifying problems of undergraduate students in writing research: Basis for scaffolding. *SSRN*. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3187793>
- [22]. Wali, N. H. (2024). Difficulties face students in writing a research project. *Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities*, 31(8), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.25130/jtuh.31.8.2024.21>