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Writing The Preliminary Draft Of A Master's Dissertation In French As A Foreign Language: Between Representations And Field Practices

1 SOUAD BENABBES #1, *2* DALEL ARAICHE
1 Département of french, University of Oum El Bouaghi, Algeria
Email: souadbenabbes@yahoo.fr

2 Département of french, University of Khenchela, Algeria
Email: dalel_araiche@yahoo.fr

**Corresponding author: souadbenabbes@yahoo.fr*

Abstract

This article addresses the problem of scientific writing among university students, particularly those specializing in French as a Foreign Language at the University of Oum El Bouaghi (Algeria), focusing on the challenges encountered when preparing the preliminary draft of a master's thesis. The article also underlines the specific difficulties faced by these students, and highlights the crucial need for appropriate support, combining the teaching of theoretical and technical knowledge with in-depth scaffolding, to facilitate this acculturation. The aim is to consider ways of improving the scientific writing of FLE students, focusing on their relationship with scientific writing and the support they receive from their teacher-supervisors.

Key words: *scientific writing, preliminary draft of a master's, acculturation, FLE, representation*

1. Introduction

University students encounter various writing genres demanding specific linguistic skills and techniques. Scientific writing, in particular, serves as a gateway to "scientific literacy" (Grossmann, 2012), whether in comprehension or composition, marking a significant departure from other genres students encounter. Many students, especially non-native French speakers, struggle with scientific writing, underscoring the crucial need for language and writing training (Bordo, Goes & Mangiante, 2016). As noted by Monballin and Legros, students' difficulties often stem from the unfamiliarity of communication contexts and their associated demands, which are intricately tied to a specific scientific framework and require complex discursive abilities (Monballin & Legros, 2000: 62). As noted by I. Delcambre and D. Lahanier: Today, writing difficulties are more often thought of in terms of relationships with the contexts in which students write, or even in terms of ways of entering into new cultural universes (2010: 5).

M-C. Pollet, C. Glorieux, and K. Toungouz (2011) identify three pivotal stages in acquiring genuine university literacy: acclimatization to the nuances of academic discourse, initiation into scientific research writing, and preparation for the culminating research project, typically the dissertation. Effectively navigating scientific writing requires instructors to assume dual roles: that of a facilitator imparting theoretical and technical knowledge and a mentor providing ongoing support.

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Similar to what is described as the initiation into writing for young children, here we address the theme of integrating into academic writing and scientific research writing. This involves considering the integration into a specific cultural world, that of writing practices specific to the university, academic disciplines, and scientific research. In the context of the initial stages of learning to read and write, acculturation to writing is identified as:
appropriation and familiarization with written culture, its works, linguistic codes and social and social practices: in particular, it aims to help pupils discover the power of action and the power of action and reflection conferred by mastery of the written language. teachers talk about building a reader's "status" or "posture"). This acculturation enables the acquisition of new knowledge, new attitudes and new uses that go far beyond language learning alone. (Goigoux ed., 2016: 39)

Extensive research in Algeria (Ammouden, 2012; Ammouden and Cortier, 2016; Amour, 2019) has concentrated on undergraduate academic writing, predominantly focusing on linguistic aspects and often limited to specific research text genres, neglecting other forms of academic discourse students encounter. In this context, our study delves into the challenges faced by students specializing in French as a Foreign Language (FLE) when crafting the initial draft of their Master's dissertations. Our examination focuses on students' engagement with scientific writing and the types of assistance they seek from their teacher-supervisors.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Academic Literacy and Advanced Literacy

The term "literacy" initially emerged in English as the opposite of "illiteracy," with "literate" denoting someone educated or cultured. The term "literacy" was added to the dictionary in 1924, and it was defined as the ability to read and write (Jaffré, 2004). Over time, its meaning has expanded to encompass proficiency in various domains, such as computer literacy, economic Literacy, and information literacy. Academic Literacy specifically aims to characterize students' scientific writing within a university setting, encapsulating "the genres and modes of academic discourse as well as the challenges encountered by students in their application" (Lafontaine, Emerey-Bruneau & Guay, 2015).

Jaffré (2004) provides a widely referenced definition of Literacy: "Literacy encompasses all human activities involving writing, both in reception and production. It encompasses a range of fundamental linguistic and graphic skills serving technical, cognitive, social, and cultural practices. Its context can vary across countries, cultures, and periods" (Jaffré, 2004).

Barré de Miniac, Brissaud, and Rispail defined Literacy in 2004 as encompassing diverse reading and writing practices, varied contexts of use, and the required skills. This field, firmly established in the French-speaking world, has been extensively explored through significant collective publications. Delcambre and Lahani-Reuter (2010) acknowledge the necessity of transcending merely instrumental or technical aspects of academic writing to enhancing students' writing proficiency and address their deficiencies in this domain. Achieving this requires an integrative approach that intertwines research and teaching, emphasizing writing and reading practices specific to the academic milieu while considering disciplinary contexts appropriately.

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In the context of advanced literacy, it is necessary to consider the role of university writing education beyond mere academic writing instruction. Some academic texts play a crucial role in the professionalization of students. Furthermore, universities also offer writing programs that go beyond the strictly academic framework, such as creative writing, which is often associated with literary studies (Petitjean, 2019).

2.2. Scientific and research writing

Scientific writing is a subject of instruction and a means to acquire knowledge. Understanding it involves considerations of academic literacies, which encompass the objects of knowledge, the discursive genres in which they manifest, the methods of their acquisition in education, the norms governing their presentation in text, and the writing challenges associated with their development and validation in academia (Dabène & Reuter, 1998; Rinck, 2006; Hyland & Bondi, 2006; Donahue, 2008; Delcambre & Lahanière-Reuter, 2009). Ducancel and Astolfi (1995) view scientific writing as a component of scientific communication: a set of practices encompassing oral, written, and multicode forms to construct or disseminate knowledge and concepts within socially recognized scientific domains.

On the other hand, Reuter defines research writing as the constellation of writing practices revolving around the production of various textual genres such as theses, dissertations, and research papers. These practices straddle two socio-institutional realms: education, where the primary objective is to demonstrate the acquisition of knowledge and skills requisite for a particular academic degree or diploma in formats adhering to disciplinary standards, and research, where the primary goal is to generate knowledge in forms and standards accepted by the scientific community governing the relevant field (Reuter, 2004: 10).

Within higher education, academic writing, including essays, reviews, proposals, and dissertations, plays a pivotal role in evaluating students' acquired competencies. These writing tasks necessitate a comprehensive grasp of content and the development of sophisticated writing abilities. These encompass clear and precise expression, effective communication of viewpoints and reasoning, problem posing, hypothesis formulation, document analysis, coherent idea structuring, argumentation, synthesis, and proposing novel avenues for exploration.

Cavalla (2007) notes that learners face the dual challenge of mastering both French as a foreign language and the specialized scientific knowledge of their field. Their needs encompass scientific, methodological, terminological, and linguistic domains. Scientific knowledge pertains to discipline-specific content, while methodological concerns focus on academic text structuring. Terminology addresses specialized vocabulary, and linguistic considerations encompass grammatical and syntactic structures facilitating comprehension.

2.3. Content of Master's courses (foreign language didactics)

At the University of Oum El Bouaghi, the Master's program in foreign language didactics, established since the 2014 LMD (Licence, Master and Doctorat) reform and spanning two years, offers a comprehensive curriculum to nurture future experts in teaching FLE. Throughout this program, students engage with diverse disciplinary courses focused on the fundamentals of didactics and language sciences, laying the groundwork for a robust theoretical understanding crucial to their forthcoming professional endeavours.

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Complementing these foundational courses are specialized methodological modules, including an introductory course on research methodology. This methodological component assists students in formulating and executing a preliminary research project during the third semester (S3), followed by the composition and defence of a Master's dissertation in the fourth semester (S4), marking the pinnacle of their academic journey.

Furthermore, the program incorporates interdisciplinary instruction on topics such as interculturality, ethics, and professional conduct, thereby enhancing students' educational experience and equipping them with the critical and ethical acumen necessary to navigate the complexities of language instruction within a globalized, multicultural milieu.

Table 1: Course content in the Master's program (Didactics of Foreign Languages)

First semester	Second semester	Third semester
Fundamental Units		
Notions and didactic concepts	Teaching of writing	The teaching of language culture
Didactic methods in FLE	Oral didactics	Evaluation and testing in FLE
Semantics of language	Psychopedagogy	Didactics and scriptural practices
Teaching/learning strategies in FLE	Discourse analysis and didactics	Verbal interactions in the FLE classroom
Applied linguistics to FLE	Pragmatic theories	Sociolinguistics and multilingualism
Methodological Units		
Introduction to scientific research	Methodology and dissertation	Methodology and dissertation
Linguistic reinforcement	Linguistic reinforcement	ICT (Information and Communication Technology)
		Classroom techniques
Discovery Units		
Text grammar	Interculturality	Writing techniques
Transversal Units		
Legislation	Ethics	Deontology

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3. Methodoloy

To fulfil our research objectives, we have conducted a questionnaire survey among 80 students enrolled in the second-year Master's program specializing in FLE didactics at the University of Oum El Bouaghi (Algeria). We successfully collected 60 responses, resulting in a 75% return rate. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions divided into three sections. The first section addresses students' perceptions of FLE writing in general, with a focus on scientific writing. The second section delves into students' training in research methodology during their first and second years of the Master's program. The final section allows students to express their needs and suggestions regarding challenges when writing their research papers.

4. Analysis and discussion

The results we present below concern a few questions designed to identify students' representations of and relationship to scientific writing and their difficulties.

Table 2: Characteristics of students observed

Baccalauréat stream	**Woman**	**Men**	**Total**
Foreign languages Literature and Philosophy Experimental Sciences	14 16 10	4 8 2	18 24 12
Technical math	6	0	6
Number	**46**	**14**	**60**

Table 2 presents the breakdown of students by field of study and gender. Of the 60 students surveyed, 46 are women, and 14 are men, indicating a predominance of women in the sample. Upon examining the distribution of students by stream, we observe that the Humanities and Philosophy stream is the most represented, with 23 students. 15 enrollees closely follow the Foreign Languages stream. The Experimental Sciences and Technical Maths streams attract less interest from students, with 12 and 6 students, respectively.

4.1. Representations of writing and scientific writing in FLE

Upon analysis of the questionnaire, it is evident that most surveyed students (42) hold positive perceptions of writing in FLE. However, for nine students, French presents a significant challenge, requiring a deep understanding of various linguistic and discourse skills. The inadequate assimilation of these rules within the educational system continues to impede their ability to express themselves accurately in French, even at the university level. One respondent elaborates, "*I have maintained an average level of French since secondary school, so writing in French appears quite daunting*."

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Regarding perceptions of scientific writing, noteworthy responses were obtained from participants who referenced academic genres, such as oral presentations and note-taking, rather than providing genuine representations. Some argue that this form of writing demands logic and reasoning, thus being highly difficult and necessitating comprehensive training. This perspective underscores the significance attributed to the skill of articulating complex ideas clearly and succinctly, which poses significant challenges even for seasoned writers.
This viewpoint highlights the necessity for thorough training in the fundamentals of writing and the application of research methodologies, data analysis, and coherent and persuasive presentation. Indeed, mastery of scientific writing is not achieved overnight; it is the outcome of continuous learning involving practice, reflection, and dedication.

4.2. Training students in scientific writing

When questioned about their exposure to training in scientific writing, particularly in pre-projects and Master's dissertations, most students indicated that they acquired pre-project skills during their second year of the Master's program (M2). This further underscores the absence of any introduction to this form of writing during the first year of the Master's program (M1) or at the undergraduate level.

The fourth question inquires whether students have received instruction in writing various research instruments, including questionnaires, observation grids, and pre-projects. Most respondents (36 students) affirm that they have indeed been introduced to writing research tools. Specifically, the majority (36 students) state that they have practised writing questionnaires during their first year of the M1.

Scientific writing, a cornerstone of academic communication, necessitates early exposure to enable students to cultivate proficiency in structuring their ideas, constructing arguments, and presenting their research. To address this deficiency, it would be prudent to integrate modules or workshops dedicated to scientific writing starting from the undergraduate or early Master's level. Such initiatives would enhance students' research calibre, confidence and autonomy in managing intricate research projects, preparing them for future academic or professional pursuits.

4.3. Difficulties encountered by students

In assessing the difficulties encountered by students in writing their pre-projects, we assigned points to each rank (First rank = 7 points, second rank = 6 points, third rank = 5 points, fourth rank = 4 points, fifth rank = 3 points, sixth rank = 2 points, seventh rank = 1 point). Subsequently, we calculated the average points, ranging from 1 to 7. The table below illustrates the most significant challenges while narrowing the research problem and formulating hypotheses. The selection of research methodology, positioned at the third rank, is followed closely by considerations regarding authorial positioning and scientific writing techniques. Determining the research topic appears less problematic for the interviewed students than formulating the conceptual framework for the pre-project, which ranked lowest.

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Table 3 : Difficulties Experienced by Students

Difficulty	Average Points
Elaboration of the problem	6.02
Development of hypotheses and research objectives	5.96
Choice of research methodology	4.31
Positioning as a research author	3.82
Scientific writing techniques	2.56
Determining the research topic	1.48
Development of the conceptual framework	0.75

These findings suggest that while students encounter various challenges throughout the pre-project writing process, particular emphasis should be placed on providing support and guidance in narrowing down research problems and formulating hypotheses, as these areas appear to be the most daunting for students.

4.4. Needs and suggestions declared by Master students

Regarding the expressed need for assistance with academic writing, students have articulated their requirements on various fronts. The most prevalent needs included follow-up support and methodological guidance, with 27 students highlighting this aspect. Additionally, ten students sought assistance with language-related issues, such as syntax and spelling. Following closely, eight students indicated a need for support in acquiring "academic scientific vocabulary." When questioned about their recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of their introduction to scientific writing, several suggestions emerged:

1. Providing students with references to literature addressing the nuances of scientific writing.
2. Organizing workshops explicitly dedicated to scientific writing to address and surmount the challenges students face.
3. Regularly involving students in scientific writing endeavours from the undergraduate level, thus preparing them early on to engage in critical analysis and formulate analytical frameworks.

In response to these needs, students proposed various strategies for enhancing their initiation into scientific writing. Firstly, they suggested providing literature references that delve into the intricacies of scientific writing. Such resources would aid in comprehending the norms and expectations prevalent within their academic discipline. Secondly, establishing workshops tailored to scientific writing is seen as a practical approach to addressing and overcoming student difficulties. These workshops could provide an interactive and hands-on learning environment, allowing students to refine their writing skills with the guidance of experienced professionals. Finally, students advocated for the early integration of scientific writing into the undergraduate curriculum. This entails acquainting students with research methodologies, including problem formulation and the development of analytical frameworks, from the outset of their university studies.

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Conclusion

Despite the limited number of questions in the questionnaire, it provided valuable insights. While supervision and follow-up are commonly available, the absence of practical preparatory workshops or seminars is lamentable. The allocated time dedicated to research methodology is insufficient, considering the many challenges students face. Moreover, student suggestions indicate a lack of awareness regarding the nuances of research writing, with a predominant focus on language assistance.

To enhance our comprehension of the specific challenges associated with scientific writing and broaden our observations, conducting comparative research involving students from diverse disciplines or specialities would be pertinent. Such an approach will help ascertain whether the identified difficulties are unique to the field of FLE didactics or if they represent broader issues in higher education.

Furthermore, analyzing actual documents, such as pre-projects submitted by students, would yield valuable insights into prevalent writing problems. This analysis could encompass issues related to the author's stance, articulating a persuasive argument, or the critical synthesis of previous literature. A comprehensive examination of these documents would facilitate a deeper understanding of the obstacles encountered in scientific writing and aid in formulating targeted intervention strategies to support students in their academic endeavours.

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