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## Writing the preliminary draft of a master's dissertation in french as a foreign language: Between representations and field practices

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### Abstract

*This article delves into the multifaceted challenges associated with scientific writing among university students, with a specific focus on those specializing in french as a foreign language (FFL) at the University of Oum El Bouaghi in Algeria. The research primarily examines the hurdles these students face when preparing the preliminary draft of their master's thesis, a critical component of their academic journey. One of the central issues highlighted is the complexity of scientific writing itself, which often requires students to master a range of skills, including critical analysis, synthesis of information, and the ability to articulate complex ideas clearly and concisely. For FFL students, these challenges are compounded by the fact that they are working in a language that is not their native tongue, making the task of producing high-quality scientific writing even more daunting. Additionally, the article emphasizes the critical need for appropriate support that integrates both theoretical and technical instruction with comprehensive scaffolding, to aid in their academic adaptation. The objective is to identify strategies to enhance the scientific writing skills of FFL students, with a focus on their relationship to scientific writing and the guidance provided by their teacher-supervisors.*

**Key words:** preliminary draft of a master's, writing, Challenges, FFL

### 1. Introduction

Academic literacies are a prolific field of research concerned with questions of writing at university and the kinds of writing produced there. This so-called "continued learning" of writing at university helps students with difficulty become autonomous in their academic careers and cope with the problems they encounter. Thus, "Higher education is a space where writing and scripture multiply. This multiplicity is not only abundant, it is also heterogeneous, diverse and singular". (Delcambre & Lahanier-Reuter 2012: 03). Indeed, university students find themselves exposed to different genres of writing involving specific knowledge, skills and abilities, which promotes a process of acculturation (Deschepper, 2010) to the world of knowledge and academic writing through communication, interaction and contact with others.

Today, in the case of literary practices at university, students' difficulties with writing go far beyond the stage of language deficit. The latter can be defined as either cross-disciplinary writing instruction (1970), considered a prerequisite for first-year university studies (knowing how to write an introduction, how to articulate arguments, how to establish logical links, etc.),

or instrumental language instruction, focusing on the mastery of "linguistic micro-literacies" (Laborde-Milaa, Boch & Reuter, 2004, p.6), and cross-disciplinary writing skills.

That said, the focus is more on difficulties arising from the contexts in which students write and the kinds of academic discourse produced than on purely instrumental or technical dimensions. Research from this perspective generally focuses on identifying the specific features of such writing, the relationships between practices and uses of language and discourse in context, and the particular language needs of higher education. Furthermore, the many types of writing that students must produce as part of their introduction to academic research have specific characteristics that need to be analyzed to adapt teaching to the requirements of each situation or context.

Like academic writing (the report, commentary, dissertation, etc.), research writing in training (Reuter Y. 2004) introduces research and has a training dimension. Academic writing thus targets a specific type of writing. The aim is to encourage students to analyze data drawn from their personal experience to enter into a scientific approach that distances them from their subjectivity and prepares them for the breaks involved in acculturation to scientific discourse: The challenge of scientific discourse is to produce knowledge using language and propose a (linguistic) construction of the object that says something new (if only slightly) about what has already been said (or what we know about it). It is a matter of developing an intellectual, coherent and relevant construction and showing that it can be defended. (Deschepper & Thyriion, 2008:66).

However, as Lehnen, Katrin, Dausendschöen, Ulrich, and Krafft, Ulrich (2000) point out, learning to write in a discursive community is difficult, not to mention complex. Thus, writing competence requires a combination of writing and scientific know-how, which are interdependent and interact. Indeed, scientific writing is a complex process requiring teachers to accompany and guide their students to facilitate the task. The latter often experience alarming difficulties, particularly in foreign languages. According to Delcambre and Lahanier- Reuter (2010):

[...] these difficulties are often linked to new discursive genres (internship reports, dissertations, etc.), to new practices (research writing), to the distance between students' written culture and university writing practices (Delcambre & Jovenet, 2002), or even to characteristics of scientific writing (polyphony and the practices of citation or reformulation, for example, see Boch & Grossmann, 2001).

Faced with these difficulties, training in language and writing is essential, even mandatory, especially when it comes to a "certain scientific model" that requires "complex discourse skills" (Monballin & Legros 2000: 62). While this training remains necessary insofar as it offers students the opportunity to appropriate theoretical and technical knowledge and resources, we must maintain sight of the teacher's role. The latter should create and design didactic situations that give a significant place to scaffolding and accompanying the subject-writer (Barré-De Miniac, 2000; Lafont-Terranova, 2009).

So, the question of acculturation to academic writing seems interesting, and this can be justified through the numerous research studies that have been carried out in this perspective, notably in Algeria (Ammouden M., 2012; Ammouden M. and Cortier C., 2016; Benberkane, 2015). These have focused on the two dimensions that characterize research writing, linguistic

and discursive, without considering the other types of academic discourse that students have already experienced.

Moreover, few researchers have analyzed the relationship with scientific writing, so we have chosen to reflect on the various difficulties and forms of support that can be provided to students specializing in FLE when writing the preliminary draft of their Master's thesis.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Academic Literacy: what is at stake?**

Compared to oral language, the written word plays a crucial role and enjoys a remarkable status in university discourse since all student work and assessments are done in writing. Thus, the field of research on writing at university (academic or research writing) should clarify a number of its dimensions and the different contexts in which it is situated: teaching, research training (master's and doctorate), and research itself (scientific articles, extracts from didactic and linguistic works, etc.). He is interested in describing the practices and genres of writing in university contexts, whether in reception or production.

It should be noted that the term "literacies" can be used in both singular and plural forms. The term "literacies" (in the plural), used by the field of Anglo-Saxon research, focuses on the plurality of social and cultural practices of reading and writing in different contexts to dismiss and depart from any conception of literacy (in the singular) as the result of individual and singular cognitive activity (Lea, 2008). We speak of academic literacies, which are concerned with written academic discourse. This field is also present in France in the area of French as a Foreign Language (see the work of F. Mangenot). As a result, French research adopts both quantitative (corpus of texts or questionnaire) and qualitative approaches. The latter involves the analysis of texts that are representative of a given situation. In short, the French field attempts to articulate the linguistic analysis of written productions and the analysis of the discourse of actors, students and teachers. Indeed, the theoretical roots of the French field lie at the crossroads of Language Sciences and French Didactics.

In other words, academic literacies are based on student and teacher representations and the analysis of academic discourse. As for the AcLits (Academic Literacies) movement focuses on the analysis of writers' practices and neglects the analysis of texts, something that some researchers have regretted (Lillis & Scott, 2007). It aims to address the problems associated with academic writing practices to support new and international students. In short, the field of academic literacy considers the analysis of students' resistance to academic acculturation (Léa, 2008).

That said, as defined by Barré de Miniac, Brissaud and Rispaïl in 2004, the term "literacies" can refer to the analysis of various reading and writing practices, the different contexts in which they are used, and the skills they engage to improve students' scriptural skills and overcome their shortcomings in this area. Delcambre and Lahani-Reuter (2010) recognize the importance of going beyond the purely instrumental or technical aspects of academic writing. This requires an integrative approach, linking research and teaching with a focus on writing and reading practices specific to the academic environment while considering the appropriate disciplinary contexts.

## 1.2. Types of academic writing: academic writing vs. research writing

When we inventory or talk about genres of academic writing, we reflect on the contexts and disciplines in which they are produced. Thus, the disciplinary specificity of writing enables us to consider both the transversal and the specific dimensions of writing (Decambre & Lahanier-Reuter, 2010). In addition, several studies (Pollet & Boch, 2002, Boch, Laborde-Milaa & Reuter, 2004) have sought to elucidate the relationship between writing(s) and academic disciplines:

[...] Taking these relationships into account makes it possible to shift the analysis of students' writing difficulties [...] [and] opens up new theoretical perspectives that are now being developed by researchers in dialogue with the American WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) and WID (Writing in the Disciplines) currents and the British AcLits (Academic Literacies) university network. (Delcambre and Lahanier-Reuter,2010)

Thus, this research aims to highlight the nature of the difficulties reported by students, taking into account disciplinary variations and the progress of curricula dedicated to writing and imposed by the supervisory authorities throughout their course of study. Naturally, the writing students are exposed to differs from one level to another and from one discipline to another. For this reason, they are analyzed as discourse genres influenced by the contexts of exchange, which in our case are the university disciplines.

Based on this principle, academic writing as a studied genre occupies a prominent place in written production activities: the essay, the literary dissertation, the quotation or passage commentary, the composed commentary, the reading and critical review, the reading sheet, the presentation, the document synthesis (M'Hand Ammouden and Claude Cortier, 2016). They involve learning the kinds of texts that students are confronted with throughout the Curriculum and also introduce them to academic writing (taking notes and transcribing, producing a summary, producing a synthesis, producing a report, giving a presentation, etc.).

It is also a training objective for university or scientific research writing, which mainly targets university literature and its status as a training tool. It is practised by officially certified researchers and up-and-coming researchers, in this case, Masters and PhD students. With this in mind, Delcambre (2009) distinguishes between different "university writing practices":

- genres required by the institution, such as internship reports, dissertations, text commentaries, theoretical texts, case studies, etc. ;
- research-related genres, such as proposals for papers and articles.

For his part, Cavalla (2008) defines it as a sub-category of scientific discourse produced by specialists in a field dealing with a formulated problem to which they are trying to provide answers. Ducancel and Astolfi (1995) consider it part of scientific communication: practices, oral or written, periodic forms, whose aim is the construction or dissemination of knowledge and concepts belonging to fields that are socially accepted as scientific. (p.57).

In other words, academic writing, regardless of complexity, form, function or use, remains an asset that prepares students for research or any other profession (Barré-de Miniac, 2009). Indeed, they should enable students to adopt an apprentice-researcher posture, developing advanced writing skills by helping them to pose a relevant problem, formulate hypotheses, analyze various documents and information, structure and articulate their

arguments coherently, and finally, synthesize and compare their results to open up new avenues of reflection.

### 3. Methodology

A questionnaire on the process and difficulties of writing the preliminary draft of a master's thesis in higher education was self-administered by the researchers to 80 2nd-year Master's students specializing in FFL didactics at the University of Oum El Bouaghi (Algeria). 60 master's students completed the questionnaire between October, January, and March 2022. The questionnaire comprises 18 items divided into three main areas.

The first deals with students' opinions on graduate programs in french language teaching and academic writing. The second deals with students' training in research methodology and scientific writing during the first and second years of the Master's program. Finally, the third section enables students to express their needs and make suggestions concerning the difficulties they encounter when writing their research papers.

For the thematic content analysis, we first read the responses to the open-ended questions; then, based on data interpretation, we classified the answers into different categories after determining which were dominant. One aim was to highlight the factors identified by Master's students as obstacles to writing the preliminary draft of their dissertation.

### 4. Analysis of results

#### 4.1. Student profile

**Table 1: Profile of students observed**

Woman	Men	Total
14	4	18
16	8	24
10	2	12
6	0	6
<b>46</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>60</b>

Of the 60 students who participated in the survey, 46 were women, and 14 were men, showing a marked predominance of women in the sample. This distribution suggests a notable trend towards more excellent female representation among all respondents.

#### 4.2. Opinions on programs and skills expected in the second cycle

When asked about the graduate programs, most students (82%) said the Master 2 program was highly motivating. They provided an opportunity to discover several concepts and methods specific to language teaching. The subjects in the "Didactics of Foreign Languages" specialization are considered relevant and in line with the exit profile as they respond to the current demands and challenges of language teaching.

Regarding expected skills, 86% of students consider it essential to communicate correctly in writing and master the codes and discursive genres specific to the disciplines taught. Only 14% of students consider oral communication the most critical skill. As for the participants' belief in their writing skills in the French language, the majority consider themselves good writers. More than half (58%) consider themselves good or excellent, 30% average, and only 12% poor writers.

### **4.3. Conceptions of writing and scientific writing in FFL**

Upon analyzing the questionnaire, it becomes clear that most of the surveyed students (42) have a positive view of writing in FFL. However, nine students find french to be a significant challenge, as it requires a deep understanding of various linguistic and discourse skills. The insufficient assimilation of these rules within the educational system continues to hinder their ability to express themselves accurately in french, even at the university level. One respondent noted, "Writing scientific documents in french is particularly difficult. I often struggle to structure my ideas logically and adhere to the required methodological standards."

In terms of perceptions of scientific writing, participants provided notable responses, often referencing academic genres like oral presentations and note-taking rather than offering true representations of scientific writing. Some argue that this type of writing demands logic and reasoning, making it particularly challenging and requiring extensive training. This perspective highlights the importance placed on the ability to articulate complex ideas clearly and succinctly, a task that even experienced writers find difficult. This viewpoint underscores the necessity for comprehensive training in the basics of writing, as well as in the application of research methodologies, data analysis, and the coherent and persuasive presentation of ideas.

### **4.4. Design and learning academic writing**

All students have been trained in academic writing since their first year at university. They generally conceive of it as productions produced in specific contexts, often scholastic or academic, and governed by established rules and norms. However, academic writing is exclusively linked to higher education. They see it as a practice reserved for advanced university levels (note-taking, book reports, critical reviews, presentations, dissertations). Most students recognize that academic writing has a special status in their academic career, as it is a fundamental skill to be developed throughout their studies, which testifies to the importance of this form of writing in their academic training.

### **4.5. Training in scientific writing**

When asked about the possibility of having received training in scientific writing (pre-project, Master's thesis, etc.), most students indicated that they had learned to write pre-projects in the second semester of the 1<sup>ère</sup> Master's year. This underlines the absence of any introduction to this type of writing during the bachelor's degree. One student wrote, "I struggled to structure and write my pre-project at the start of M2. If I had been introduced to scientific writing earlier in my degree, I think I would have been much more comfortable with this type of exercise".

The fifth question asked students whether they had been introduced to writing various research tools, such as questionnaires, observation grids or preliminary drafts. A majority (36 students) answered affirmatively, specifying that they had already practised writing

questionnaires in the first year of their Master's degree. One student replied, "It's only in M1 that we've seen the writing of questionnaires and other research tools."

In reality, scientific writing, as an essential pillar of academic communication, requires early acculturation so that students can develop fluency in structuring their ideas, argumentation and the clear presentation of their research. To remedy this shortcoming, it would be appropriate to integrate modules or workshops dedicated to scientific writing as early as the bachelor's degree or the beginning of the Master's degree, thus fostering the development of academic literacy skills. Such initiatives would improve the quality of student's research work and boost their confidence and autonomy in managing complex research projects, effectively preparing them for their future academic or professional careers.

#### **4.6.Choice of subject and thesis supervisor**

Question 6 asked how participants chose their dissertation topic. Of these, 38% indicated that their topic fell within their supervisor's research areas, while 62% said it did not. This disparity between the subjects chosen by students and the fields of expertise of their supervisors raises several points for reflection. On the one hand, it testifies to students' autonomy in choosing their subject, which can be seen as a sign of scientific maturity. When they choose a subject that does not necessarily correspond to their supervisor's areas of research, students can explore fields of research that interest and excite them personally.

On the other hand, students who choose a topic outside their supervisor's research areas may need help related to mentoring, as their supervisor may need more expertise or resources to guide them profitably. One student explains: "I chose a subject I have been passionate about since Master 1, but I realized that it could complicate mentoring. It would be much better if I had chosen a subject closer to my director's field, but I do not regret my choice." Participants were also asked how they chose their topic. Twenty-one participants said they had chosen their topic with their thesis supervisor, 18 said they had chosen it themselves, and 11 chose their topic by chance or randomly.

Question 8 asked whether students had chosen their thesis supervisors. 76% said they had chosen their supervisors, while 24% did not. Another question asked whether students were satisfied with their supervisors. 64% of participants said they were satisfied with their supervisors, while 27% said they were not. Nine % of participants should have given a direct answer.

Question 13, which asks students about the possibility of changing their dissertation topic, aims to identify any shortcomings in the choice of topic and to adjust pedagogical support. According to the responses, 36% of students expressed a strong desire to change, stressing that their dissertation topic had to be adjusted two or three times due to insufficient verification of research feasibility and availability of the necessary dissertation literature. On the other hand, 64% of students declared themselves satisfied with their subject from the first contact with their research supervisor, who validated their choice. These results highlight the need for more personalized support to help them make informed choices from the outset, thus reducing the need for adjustments.

Question 14 asks students to respond if they had the opportunity to change their dissertation topic to identify any shortcomings and adjust the pedagogical support to meet students' needs better. 36% of students answered in the affirmative: the dissertation topic had undergone several adjustments because they had yet to initially check the research's

feasibility and the literature's availability. 64% of participants were satisfied with their topic from the first contact with the research supervisor.

#### **4.7. Drafting the Master's thesis and the difficulties encountered**

When students were asked if they had received any outside help when writing their pre-project, 69% of participants replied that they had not, while 21% said fellow students or even other teachers helped them. One student revealed, "When I was writing my pre-project, I didn't get any outside help, so I had to search for templates online on my own to get it right". Another student added: "One of my teachers took the time to reread my work and give me constructive advice to improve the content and methodology before submitting my pre-project to my supervisor."

Question 16 focuses on the difficulties they encountered when writing their pre-project. The answers can be divided into two themes: problems related to writing and problems related to time and personal issues. It was found that some students encountered problems related to time and personal issues. One student replied: "By the way, I was working simultaneously, so it was hard to find an interesting theme and write my pre-project". Another student says: "We have many courses, and we needed more time to take care of courses and the dissertation simultaneously."

The difficulties reported mainly concern the formulation of the research problem and hypotheses, as well as the choice of methodology and challenges related to taking a position as an author and using scientific writing techniques. On the other hand, determining the research topic and developing the conceptual framework of the pre-project pose fewer problems, these aspects being cited last by the students interviewed. As one student said, "The biggest difficulty for me was clearly defining my problem and hypotheses. I had a general idea of what I wanted to explore, but formulating a precise problem and solid hypotheses was very complicated."

#### **4.8. Forms of support desired by master students**

In terms of support for academic and scientific writing, students identified several areas where they need intervention and support. First and foremost, follow-up and methodological guidance are the most frequently expressed needs, with 27 students underlining this. In addition, ten students expressed the need for specific help with language, particularly syntax and spelling. Improving "academic scientific vocabulary" is also a concern for eight students. Similarly, they express the need for more time for writing assignments to practice methodology in workshops to improve their scriptural skills. Students recognize the importance of academic writing as a communication, learning and assessment tool in foreign language learning.

They would like to make available books on the specifics of scientific writing to help them better understand the conventions and expectations of academic writing. They propose the creation of workshops specifically focused on scientific writing. These workshops provide an interactive and practical framework for addressing and resolving difficulties encountered, with guidance from experts in the field. The students suggest involving students from the undergraduate level in scientific writing activities, such as problematization and the design of analytical grids. This approach would enable early familiarization with research processes, facilitating better preparation for later academic requirements.



Question 18 on feedback from supervisors asked whether students received regular feedback. The results showed that 72% of participants said they had received corrections and comments from their supervisor. On the other hand, 28% of students said they had yet to receive any feedback or comments on their pre-projects, which were nevertheless validated and submitted. One student's excerpt: "I was fortunate to have a research supervisor who gave me constant feedback throughout the drafting process. His comments and corrections were essential in fine-tuning my work and making sure I was on the right track."

### **Conclusion**

The opinions gathered from our questionnaire underline that scientific writing is a challenging task requiring high commitment and support. Good supervision plays an essential role in the success of this writing alongside the programs provided as part of graduate training. The students interviewed agreed on the need to offer undergraduate-level scientific writing courses, which would greatly help at the Master's level and prepare students to undertake scientific research as part of their dissertation.

Research methodology courses should be redesigned in line with student needs. Given the many difficulties students encounter, the hourly volume allocated to the research methodology course needs to be improved. Student suggestions also reveal a need for more understanding of the specifics of academic writing. It was observed that the emphasis was mainly on language assistance. Research supervisors should support students in conducting their research independently and effectively and must consider the nature of the feedback students need throughout the dissertation process.

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