

Lecturers' Views towards the Importance of Research Gap in Master Theses: The Case Study of Lecturers at the English Department-University of Khenchela

Les Points de Vue des Conférenciers sur l'Importance de la Lacune de la Recherche dans les Thèses de Master. Etude de cas des Conférenciers du département d'anglais de l'université de Khenchela

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Abstract

The present study was carried out to explore lecturers' views towards the importance of research gap in master theses in the department of English at the University of Khenchela. The main objectives were to explore lecturers' views towards the importance of finding research gap in scientific research and to characterise methods used for identifying gaps in research. Qualitative data from lecturers' interview were collected to answer the research questions. The findings revealed that all lecturers consider finding a research gap as the most important criterion in judging the value of research as it contributes and adds quality and scientific value. In addition, they hold that extensive reading of previous studies, recommendation and limitations of the studies' sections in theses and research articles is important predictor of research gap and contributes to the enhancing and enrichment of the scientific research.

Keywords: Research gap; Master thesis; Scientific value; Contribution to knowledge

Résumé

Cette étude a été menée pour explorer les points de vue des conférenciers sur l'importance de la lacune en matière de recherche dans les thèses de master au du département d'anglais à l'Université de Khenchela. Les principaux objectifs étaient d'explorer les points de vue des conférenciers sur l'importance de trouver la lacune dans la recherche scientifique et de caractériser les méthodes utilisées pour l'identifier. Des données qualitatives ont été recueillies à partir de l'entrevue des conférenciers pour répondre aux questions de recherche. Les résultats ont révélé que tous les conférenciers considèrent la lacune de la recherche comme le critère le plus important pour juger de la valeur de la recherche, car elle contribue à l'ajout de qualité et de valeur scientifique. En outre, ils estiment que la lecture approfondie des études précédentes, et les sections recommandations et limites des études est un indicateur important de la lacune de la recherche et contribue à la promotion et à l'enrichissement de la recherche scientifique.

Mots clés : Lacune de la recherche ; Thèse de master ; Valeur scientifique ; Contribution à la connaissance

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1. INTRODUCTION

Research at universities plays an important role in the advancement and the development of educational practices. Ssempala (2020) stated that high schools deliver existing knowledge, however university generate new knowledge by engaging the student in original research (pp.4-5) . He concluded that the core activity in any university is research and innovations. In fact, spotting a knowledge gap and setting out to address it is generally what makes research worthwhile. Thus, the purpose of conducting research mostly is to close an existing research gap by providing a new body of knowledge. Miles(2017) stated that one of the most prevailing issues in the craft of research is to develop a research agenda and build the research on the development of the research gap (p. 1). Hence , research attempts to contribute to knowledge rather than duplicate what already exists. In

this premise, it is important for researchers to identify research gaps prior to venturing into research.

Identifying a research gap is one of the crucial parts of many research projects. Nenty (2009) argued that in the first one or two years of PhD research, the main problem has been how to find research gap or how to logically and convincingly establish and defend the research gap. Unfortunately, some research students who are not properly guided or supervised get frustrated and drop out of their programs because of these problems (p. 19). Bambale(2014) stated that without problem there will not be research (p. 118). Thus, research gap provides the basic foundation for any systematic and credible research. It is said to exist when there is a real, identifiable conceptual connection between the problem in the literature and the research being conducted to address that problem Creswell (2005). In the same vein, Manchishie et al (2015) stated that when it comes to research, students face numerous barriers among them and the most important is identifying research gap. Similar remark made by Kikula & Quorro(2007) who conducted a similar study and found that 84% of the statement of problems showed problems ranging from no problem statement, lack of clarity and focus to covering irrelevant issues (p. 16) . Manchishi et al (2015) in their research concluded that unclear statement of the problem is one of the common mistakes committed by students, and identification of gaps in literature review one of the major challenges (p.136) . Nyanchoka, (2019) maintained that identifying research gaps can help inform the design and conduct of research, practice and policies by providing a better understanding of the current body of evidence (p.1).

Thus, identifying a research gap shows you are not just duplicating existing research; it shows you have a deep understanding of the status of the body of knowledge in your chosen field; and finally it shows that you have conducted a research which fulfils that gap in the literature.

Consequently, this paper is an attempt to shed light on the importance of finding a research gap , ways to identify it ,and how to address it clearly in order to enable novice researchers to find original and innovative topics that can contribute to the existing body of knowledge and produce findings that are more likely to be published.

2. Research questions

The main research questions addressed in this study are the following:

1. What are lecturers' views on the importance of finding research gap in scientific research?
2. What are the methods used for identifying gaps in research?

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Choice of the Method

In order to answer the research questions, a qualitative research design was employed. According to Wood (2006) qualitative research is concerned with life as it is lived, things as they happen, and situations as they are constructed in the day-to-day, moment-to-moment course of events (p.3). Similarly, Creswell (2014) holds that information gathered by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context is a major characteristic of qualitative research (p.234). Thus, the use of the qualitative research is an attempt to gain in-depth information and ensure that the data reflect what is happening.

3.2 Population

Participants in the research study will be sampled through purposive sampling. Purposive samples are non-randomly selected based on the objective of the study and through their characteristics. According to the study, we have purposively selected five (05) advisors who have enough experience with supervision.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

The study used unstructured in-depth interview in obtaining data from the research participants. It has several advantages. First, it is administered individually

to members of the sample to ensure that all questions be answered by all informants. Second, the interview allows for personal explanations of questions, in case any point(s) need(s) to be clarified. These interviews, as stated by Creswell (2014), involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants (p.294). In the same vein, Borg & Gall (1996) stated "an interview permits open-ended explorations of topics and elicits responses that are couched in the unique words of the respondents". These advantages help researchers to develop a real sense of a person's understanding of a situation.

4. Significance of the Study

This study provides important insights on one of the biggest problem students suffer from which is finding and establishing a research gap. This study may be useful to universities interested in improving the quality of research of current students.

5.Results and discussion

Theme 1 : What are the criteria for judging the worthiness of a research paper?

Lecturers, who are also supervisors for PhD and masters' students, were interviewed and asked about the criteria for judging the worthiness of a research paper. They stated that plenty of factors may intervene. The researcher's personal contribution to the field of study, novelty of the research topic, quality of writing and mechanics of style, adequate documentation, and mastery of the research methodology. The following were their responses:

Lecturer-B

The criteria are the following: the researcher's independent contribution to the field of study, novelty of the research topic, quality of writing and mechanics of style, adequate documentation, and mastery of the research methodology.

Other lecturers highlighted:

Lecturer-C

Sound research is that tackles new phenomena, offers new insights or solves problems in the world. Thus, for the latter criteria to be effectively met, the researcher must successfully identify the research gap.

Lecturer-D

Plenty of factors may intervene. These include the newness of the topic, the logical organization of ideas, the appropriate selection and formulation of the research problem, and the careful handling of the investigation tools.

Thus, as stated by Mullins & Kiley (2002), examiners look for originality, a good understanding of the problem, and at the quality of the literature review with interpretation selection of real problem (p. 378). Similarly, Baako (2022) holds that master thesis is expected to address a research gap identified in the literature, to make scientific contribution of knowledge to the field of research (p.549). In the same vein, Ounis & Amrani (2022) stressed the importance of newness of knowledge in carrying out a research (p. 1032).

Theme 2 : To what extent is finding a research gap essential in theses and dissertations?

As for the importance of research gap in theses and dissertations, it was unanimously stated by the lecturers that research gap is considered as a pre-requisite for research. For example, one supervisor said:

Lecturer-E

Finding a research gap is extremely essential in theses and dissertations writing; your project should address a research gap which you identify in the literature, a research question or problem that has not been answered in your research area of interest. This shows that you have developed expertise in the body of knowledge and theoretical issues in your chosen research area.

Other lecturers also stated:

Lecturer-A

It is of central importance to any research, be it a thesis, a dissertation or else. First of all, finding an interesting research gap means directly that one will have interesting findings. These findings will be a positive contribution to research in the investigated area.

Lecturer-C

The research gap is quite essential for science; it develops through the consecutive accumulation of knowledge. This process operates via researching gaps within science, which orients research towards valuable generation of knowledge instead of non-sense repetition and duplication of others' work.

From the above views, it is clear that research gap is of central importance to any research, be it a thesis, a dissertation or else. Thus, finding an interesting research gap means that the research paper will be of great value. According to Sandberg & Alvesson (2011)

“Gap-spotting is uncontroversial and safe. Gap-spotting represents a relatively safe way of constructing research questions. Locating an empty space for an additional study may appeal to consensus and may be read as non-political and harmless”.

(Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011, p. 35)

Shah (2021) also stated that one of the most fundamental and challenging tasks of a researcher is to identify gaps and challenges in literature and quickly start their research studies (p.203).

Therefore, research gap is the most common starter for journal papers, proposals and theses. According to lecturers, one of the best ways to increase your true understanding of a topic is to actively seek to identify your knowledge gaps.

Theme 3: How does the advisor evaluate his advisees' awareness and identification of the research gap in their theses?

Lecturers reported a range of applicable methods to identify gaps. They reported that:

Lecturer-D

This takes place when evaluating the extent to which they can add new knowledge to a given field. When reading one of my learners' research proposals, I can tell whether they are aware of a research gap through checking the way they can relate previous areas of study to their own research problem and research questions.

Lecturer-B

The advisor evaluates his/her advisee's awareness and identification of the research gap through making a detailed research about the selected topic, checking the keywords, and reviewing the literature.

Lecturer-A

First of all, to identify a research gap, one needs to go through a process of reading relevant sources of research, especially research articles, new and old. Gap identification in a given research area requires months, if not years. This also requires that the person should be knowledgeable enough in the investigated area and this is specific to advanced researchers who are, maybe, in the doctoral phase of research since they have already been through Master research and some years in the doctoral research. They are well-prepared and equipped with knowledge and skills to find research gaps and know how to proceed in research. Despite being specialized in a specific area (s) of research, and even in teaching, the research advisor or supervisor is required to have enough knowledge in different related areas of research to be able to judge what is new or what is not well-investigated: research gap. When the advisor or supervisor finds that the candidate (s) found a research gap, this will add value to the quality of the research paper, and will have positive effect on the overall evaluation and marking of the research.

Thus, as stated by Mullins & Kiley (2002) 'the outstanding PhDs have beautifully conceived ideas that open up a new area or really answer an important question, and are critical of previous work in the area or make a critical assessment of their own work' (p. 380). Similar remark made by Farooq (2017) who claimed that meta-analysis and systematic reviews of previous studies, future research and limitations are important predictor of research gap which leads to problem identification(pp. 72-74).

Theme 04: How do the advisees identify the research gap?

In regard to how advisees identify the research gap, lecturers mentioned different ways. The following comments highlight this:

Lecturer-A

Candidates who read a lot will surely find interesting research gap in the literature of a given topic. Supervisors can also suggest topics of great importance to their candidates, especially that the former possess more knowledge and read a lot and made research in different, but related, research areas.

Lecturer-D

Identifying a research gap can only take place when learners consult literature relevant to their area of interest and detect any pieces of knowledge they find insufficient, inconsistent, or not fully covered. Obviously, learners cannot read each and every product, but reading some abstracts and bibliographies can sometimes do. I generally advise my learners to look at a rubric named "Suggestions for Further Research", for it includes areas that have not been tackled by researchers before.

Lecturer-C

I have noticed through my many years in advising theses that the students like to do the already-done research because they care more about doing easy research and duplicating others' works. We are not yet there to the point where to discuss

the mechanisms of research gap identification since they do not even know about it.

From the above, lecturers agreed that systematic review of existing literature relevant to students' area of research, recommendations for future research, and limitation sections are best ways for research gap identification. Thus, areas that have scope for further research are worth to investigate.

Theme 05: Are the Master's theses actually scientifically valuable and significant? Or just repetition and recycling of previous research?

Most lecturers reported that most of master theses and PhD dissertations are duplication and copies of previous research. Lecturers said it was not surprising that a lot of students had the same work. They reported that:

Lecturer-B

Actually, most of the master dissertations are based on existing research topics, though the students do not work through the same research procedure. In other words, some candidates repeat the research topic, but they work it differently and for their own perspective; they end up with a scientifically valuable and significant research.

In addition, another respondent stated:

Lecturer-C

Most of it is duplication and copies of previous research. A glance at the list of theses defended at our department so far would show how most of the dissertations add nothing to knowledge but are more repetitions of previous works, and I believe this due to the students' unawareness about the importance of research gaps and its identification mechanisms.

Lecturer-D

To avoid overgeneralizations, I would say that most of the research papers I have supervised or examined lack the so-called "genuineness in research making". Neither teachers nor students are now interested in being innovative. The same titles are repeated time and time again with few modifications in the case studies.

From the above, it can be reiterated that most of it is duplication and copies of previous research. Same remark made by Ssempala (2020) who found in his study that most postgraduate students plagiarize the research topics and dissertations of other scholars as a result of inability to engage in critical and analytical thinking (p. 4).

Conclusion

The present study was carried out to explore the importance of research gap in master thesis among students at the department of English at the University of Khenchela. The main objectives were to explore lecturers' views towards the importance of finding research gap in scientific research and to characterise methods used for identifying gaps in research. Qualitative data from lecturers' interview were collected to answer the research questions. The findings revealed that all lecturers consider finding a research gap as the most important criterion in judging the value of research as it contributes and adds quality and scientific value. In addition, they hold that extensive reading of previous studies, recommendation and limitations of the studies sections in theses and research articles are important predictor of research gap and contribute to the enhancing and enrichment of the scientific research. Therefore, we believe that research needs to be relevant and address the critical issues affecting education. Well-established criteria for quality evaluation of research to enhance the quality of research in terms of its scientific rigour. A well-planned research project will address only unanswered questions, and prevents duplication of unnecessary research. Finally, one of the limitations of this study is the sample size; the power of our findings might increase if we conducted more interviews. Future researchers may need to conduct further studies with large samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

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