



A Phenomenological Exploration of Cognitive- Behavioral Strategies and Psychological Resilience in Dissertation Writing: EFL Master's Students' Experiences and Perceptions

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences and perceptions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) master's students in using cognitive-behavioral strategies to promote psychological resilience during the dissertation writing process. Many students face a high level of stress, anxiety, academic burnout, low motivation, time mismanagement, and procrastination. These factors affect their mental health and hinder their ability to meet the demands of academic writing. The current study adopts a phenomenological approach to investigate participants' experiences and challenges in completing their master's dissertations. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. The findings reveal that cognitive-behavioral strategies such as planning, self-reflection, and breaking down tasks were not consistently used by participants to manage stress and overcome psychological and academic adversities. This inadequate and often unconscious use of strategies negatively affected their ability to effectively cope with academic pressure. However, a consistent application of these strategies plays a critical role in fostering psychological resilience and improving students' coping mechanisms. The study underscores the relevance of psychological interventions and counseling services to address students' needs and challenges.

Keywords: Cognitive-behavioral strategies, dissertation writing, psychological resilience, stress

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1. Introduction

Psychological resilience is a crucial component in helping English as a Foreign Language master's (EFL) students navigate the complex demands of academic writing. In an academic context, resilience is commonly defined as the ability of individuals to successfully adapt in challenging situations (Ebersöhn, 2012). For EFL students, this involves regulating emotions and persisting through linguistic challenges, anxiety, and academic pressure.

University students often experience an accumulation of stress across academic, personal, and social domains, which can undermine their overall well-being, learning behaviour, and academic productivity. Significant research demonstrates that elevated academic stress can impair cognitive and affective processes such as attention and memory and decrease motivation, ultimately affecting academic performance. Chemutai and Catherine (2021) highlight the prevalence of academic stress among university students and advocate for a comprehensive investigation into its effects on academic performance.

Emotional regulation is subsequently recognized as a crucial dimension of psychological resilience in academic writing. Using effective emotional regulation strategies enables students to concentrate, manage stress, and adapt to challenging situations. Clinical and experimental research indicate that emotional regulation is a key predictor of resilience (Balzarotti et al., 2016). This study emphasizes the mediating role of cognitive behavioral strategies in managing stress and fostering resilience among EFL students, particularly during dissertation writing. It explores how resilience operates dynamically in students' psychological performance throughout the dissertation writing process.

Despite extensive literature supporting academic stress and coping mechanisms in higher education, little research has focused on the pivotal role of psychological and emotional support required during dissertation writing. A comprehensive investigation is therefore necessary to explore how psychological resilience and coping mechanisms help students persist and succeed in their academic work.

Addressing this gap can enable educational institutions to implement psychological interventions and foster enabling environments to promote students' well-being and their academic performance. Building on this foundation, First, the present research has two main objectives. First, it aims to explore the relationship between psychological resilience and the academic challenges that EFL master's students encounter during dissertation writing. Second, to identify how cognitive-behavioral strategies help these students manage academic and psychological barriers throughout the dissertation writing process.

Accordingly, this study seeks to provide answers to the following research questions:

- What psychological factors undermine resilience in EFL Master's students during dissertation writing?
- How do cognitive behavioral strategies promote psychological resilience in EFL master's students during dissertation writing?

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Psychological Challenges in Dissertation Writing

It is widely acknowledged that dissertation writing is a fundamental yet challenging activity for postgraduate students. According to Hardling (2004), being involved in thesis writing is associated with conducting research and writing an account of that research activity. In line with this, students frequently encounter several difficulties that hinder their writing performance (Graham & Harris, 2021). These obstacles often stem from cultural, linguistic, and psychological factors. The current study places particular emphasis on the psychological dimension of these difficulties.

Brown (2007) argues that the psychological status of students is often affected by affective factors, including low self-esteem, anxiety, lack of empathy, and lack of motivation. All of which affect the desire and ability of students to complete their dissertations effectively. For EFL master's students, another challenge lies in mastering the conventions and organizational strategies of academic writing. This task can be daunting, as it demands advanced academic writing skills, critical thinking, significant time, and effort to produce qualitative pieces of academic dissertations. These psychological pressures often lead to procrastination, where students delay cognitively demanding, and engage in pleasurable or non-essential activities (Gröpel and Steel 2008).

Students who can manage to succeed and adapt despite these challenges are considered psychologically resilient. In this context, understanding the level of psychological resilience among university students is a significant area of interest. Therefore, it is crucial to critically investigate the psychological difficulties encountered by EFL master's students during dissertation writing. By addressing these challenges, educational institutions can foster psychologically resilient students and healthier future generations.

2.2. Psychological Resilience in Higher Education

The concept of psychological resilience has been extensively defined by various scholars across a range of disciplines. Recently, the concept of resilience has gained significant attention in academia. In the field of behavioral science, psychological resilience is often defined as a personality trait that reduces stress and supports the ability to cope with events (Judkins & Rind, 2005; Klag & Bradley, 2004). In this framework, the American Psychological Association (2014) defines resilience as the ability of individuals to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, or other related sources of stress.

Correspondingly, Psychological resilience has been defined as a dynamic psychosocial process through which individuals exposed to sustained adversity or potentially traumatic events experience positive psychological adaptation over time (Graber et al.2015). Additionally, Bonanno (2004) asserted that resilience refers to the ability to maintain a stable equilibrium (p. 20). These definitions suggest that resilience is not a fixed personality trait, but rather a dynamic state derived from multiple and complex processes of adaptation that develop over stages of life.

In the flow of life, students experience academic challenges and stressful situations that affect them directly or indirectly, often making their lives harder. It is natural for learners to encounter difficulties in their academic journey. However, not all students cope with these situations in the same way. For instance, the shift from one institution to another requires adaptation to a new social environment. Similarly, the demanding process of academic writing can create an overwhelming feeling of stress and hardship. In turn, excessive levels of stress can provoke negative thoughts, emotional instability, procrastination, and disengagement from studies.

Consequently, maintaining psychological resilience and emotional regulation is critical for students to thrive in the face of adversity. As noted by Durso, Afonso, and Beltman (2021), stress and adversity represent threats to positive adaptation in higher education (Cox et al., 2016; Wilks & Spivey, 2010). Therefore, it is significant for EFL master's students to learn how to coexist with real-life adversities and confront challenges effectively.

2.3 Cognitive Behavioral Strategies

Psychological interventions in the educational context are key contributing factors in promoting resilience, managing stress, and maintaining emotional and psychological regulation. Correspondingly, the implementation of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can be an effective approach to addressing negative thoughts and stress related to educational outcomes and performance in higher education.

For Willert et al. (2009), cognitive behavior therapy is behavior-oriented, helping students develop self-awareness, reduce negative thoughts, increase self-esteem, and develop stress management skills to be more effective. Similarly, several scholars argue that CBS emphasizes primarily changing negative thought patterns, promoting self-regulation, and enhancing coping mechanisms (Hofmann, Asnaani, Vonk, Sawyer, & Fang, 2012). Following the same line of thought, several studies in educational psychology reveal the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy in supporting individuals to overcome stress and anxiety and fostering a sense of self-regulation during dissertation writing.

According to Teater (2010), cognitive behavioral therapy involves three fundamental steps: assessment, intervention, and evaluation. The assessment step emphasizes individuals' problems, feelings, and thoughts. This is frequently achieved by applying an A-B-C model to detect the activating event(A), the individual's attitudes towards the emerging event (B), and the behavioral and emotional reactions (C).

These insights highlight the most relevant intervention to be adopted. These interventions include cognitive restructuring (Frojan-Parga et al., 2009), relaxation techniques (Payne et al., 2010), social skills training (Sheldon, 1998), and problem-solving skills (O'Donohue, 2003). The final step is to evaluate the resulting change and the degree to which the presenting problem has been reduced from pre- to post-intervention. As a consequence, cognitive-behavioral interventions can increase educational quality by strengthening their academic commitment, increasing learners' motivation and self-efficacy, and therefore improving their lives in general.

3. Research Methodology

This research examines the phenomenon of academic resilience in the context of dissertation writing. A phenomenological approach is used to capture the essence of the lived experiences of a specific population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The chosen paradigm underpinning the present study is interpretivism, as it aligns with the research objective of gathering data about the participants' social world and lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

3.1. Instruments

For this study, the researcher used two research instruments deemed suitable for investigating the postulated research questions. First, semi-structured interviews were used as a primary data collection tool, enabling the researcher to closely approach the participants and capture their individual challenges, perspectives, and cognitive and emotional experiences. The interview revolves around six constructs: psychological resilience, cognitive-behavioral strategies, the dissertation writing context, stress and academic challenges, and participants' perceptions and experiences. Second, reflective writing was employed, a commonly used tool in the qualitative approach. Reflective journals allow students to mention their lived experiences, particularly their cognitive and emotional processes during dissertation writing. In addition to providing descriptive insights and methodological rigor to the study.

3.2. Participants

The target population is composed of 79 EFL Master's students (Didactics). The present study relied on a sample of thirty students due to several factors. First, phenomenological research requires a qualitative approach to data collection. This sampling method enables a detailed exploration of participants' insights and experiences. Second, the objective of the study aligns with this sample size, ensuring that the data is controllable for in-depth examination. Third, purposive sampling was used to select participants who had encountered psychological challenges during their academic journey. Accordingly, while the sample size is deemed practically relevant for the study, it may not be representative due to its limited scope.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis involves the systematic process of inspecting, transforming, and interpreting the raw data to explore relationships and generate meaningful insights. In this study, it is crucial to ensure data quality, particularly the relevance, timeliness, completeness, and accuracy of input, as this maintains a solid foundation for the reliability and validity of the analysis. All interview recordings and reflective journals were carefully transcribed and transformed into a more structured and usable format. These data sources were anonymized using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and stored in separate files.

To analyze the data, a thematic analysis was used as a common qualitative analytic method within educational psychology. It provides an accessible and theoretical foundation to analyze qualitative data in a deliberate and rigorous way. Additionally, the figure below clearly demonstrates the basic steps of thematic analysis employed in this study to identify, analyze, and report themes and concepts embedded throughout the collected data. First, the researcher immersed himself deeply in the dataset to become familiar with the overall content. This required actively reading and carefully reviewing all the interview transcripts and reflective journal entries. During this phase, the researcher noted preliminary ideas for generating initial codes. Thereafter, the coding process was conducted manually, and the researcher assigned codes to capture the meaning of important segments reflecting participants' experiences of academic stress, resilience, academic writing, and other relevant constructs. Next, once all data had been initially coded and collated, similar codes were grouped and categorized into themes. Finally, individual themes were clearly explained, and the links between the data and research questions were identified.

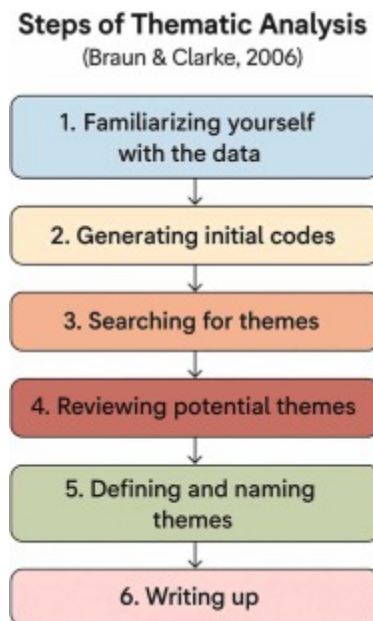


Figure 1. Steps of thematic analysis (adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006)

4. Results

Following the data analysis procedures outlined in the previous section, this section presents the main themes emerging from thematic analysis. The themes were structured through data familiarization, coding, categorization, and reviewing. The results reflect the common psychological and emotional challenges faced by the participants, as well as the strategies and coping mechanisms they employed to balance academic stress, well-being, and performance.

4.1. The Psychological and Emotional Challenges

The analysis indicated that many EFL master's students experienced significant psychological and emotional challenges throughout their academic journey. The most common factors were fear, emotional hurdles, and dissatisfaction with writing a dissertation, stemming from students' difficulties in adapting to academic writing norms. Initial codes, such as fear of academic writing, cognitive load, and tiredness, mirrored students' perspectives on dissertation writing as a daunting and complex academic task. This difficulty often becomes a real handicap to their academic progress.

Participants reported that fear and the overall burden of writing a dissertation were among the most prevalent challenges negatively affecting their academic writing performance. The psychological burdens of academic writing influenced their well-being and created cognitive overload. Another major source of stress and adversity was the persistent pressure to meet academic standards and institutional requirements. In their reflective journals, participants expressed emotional experiences of stress, anxiety, and burnout during various stages of writing. These factors negatively affected their mental health, empathy, and motivation, and might have influenced their academic progress. These emotional burdens were clearly reflected in the participants' responses:

'I felt mentally exhausted, not able to organize ideas due to stress.' (Participant 7)

Notably, these expressions illustrate how stress affects cognitive processes, particularly in complex tasks, which require concentration and higher-order cognitive thinking. These results align with previous studies emphasizing the complex link between stress and academic writing. Another emerging theme was time-management problems, identified through codes such as deadlines, goal-setting, procrastination, and other related codes. The participants revealed that they frequently postponed writing tasks due to their inability to plan and schedule their workload effectively.

Participant 2 reported, '*I delayed working on my dissertation because I don't know how to do it.*'

Participant 3 stated, '*I couldn't strike a balance between my academic and personal responsibilities.*

participant 4 stated, '*I am responsible for my family, and I work. This causes me to delay my academic writing and encounter various difficulties.*'

These statements indicate that both internal and external factors shape the emotional and psychological well-being of students. The findings suggest that academic writing challenges are closely associated with psychological factors.

4.2. Psychological Resilience and Coping Mechanisms

Although the participants conveyed significant challenges, they also maintained prominent psychological resilience, which generated another central theme. Specific codes, such as persistence, internal motivation, self-reflection, and seeking support, revealed how students developed emotional adversity and coping mechanisms to overcome emotional adversity in their academic journey. Despite stressful situations, academic pressure, and time constraints, the participants described how they managed to succeed through frequent trial and error learning, reflective thinking, and seeking support from supervisors, former master's students, and AI-powered tools.

Emotional encouragement and supportive feedback were also considered crucial factors that stimulated students' reflective thinking, enhanced confidence, and academic performance. Correspondingly, many participants highlighted that psychological resilience and self-reflection increased gradually through recurring attempts, effective management, and experiential learning. As two participants illustrated, '*Dissertation writing is an exhausting period, but if we persist and collaborate from the beginning, we will achieve effective results.*'

Another participant added, *'I believe that the support of the supervisor is necessary to understand the steps of the research and to avoid confusion and time-consuming tasks.'*

These findings support theoretical perspectives and confirm the significance of developing psychological resilience, which is a dynamic process. They also validate the significant role of coping mechanisms in supporting students to navigate academic adversities through reflection, experience, and enabling academic environments. Overall, the academic supporting environment is a key factor in students' success.

4.3 Cognitive Behavioral Interventions

The third main theme highlighted was the application of cognitive-behavioral strategies in the academic writing context. Codes were initially identified, such as planning, organizing, managing, task breakdown, and social support. These codes were then collated to explore the participants' perspectives and experiences regarding the effectiveness of developing protective mechanisms to manage emotional and academic challenges. In the table below, a few participants' experiences and feedback on cognitive-behavioral strategies were clearly described.

Table 1. Participants' experiences with cognitive-behavioral strategies

Cognitive behavioral strategies	Recorded examples	Description
Breaking down tasks	'I divided my literature review into stages: searching relevant sources, selecting appropriate ones, and then writing.'	Dividing complex tasks into manageable stages or sections reduces stress and fosters improvement.
Planning and organisation	'I used to make a list on my phone to plan what should be accomplished daily.'	Creating a well-structured plan enables students to overcome procrastination and remain focused.
Social support	I contacted previous postgraduate students to help me, as they had gone through the dissertation process, to guide me.	Seeking support to gain guidance and feel emotionally comfortable.

While some students employed cognitive-behavioral strategies, the analysis indicated that these strategies were not consistently and consciously applied. Identified codes, such as lack of awareness, irregular time management, negative thoughts, and difficulty maintaining coping mechanisms, revealed that most participants did not apply CB strategies systematically. Overall, these findings underscore that limited awareness and a lack of training may have prevented students from using these strategies effectively. This aligns with the focus of the study, which explores the interplay between psychological challenges, cognitive behavioral strategies, and dissertation writing among undergraduate students.

The results indicate a clear gap between students' emotional needs during the dissertation writing process, including motivation, self-reflection, stress management, and emotional regulation, and their ability to apply effective cognitive-behavioral strategies to address those needs and manage their psychological dimensions. Put simply, participants often relied on technological means to overcome their challenges rather than structured CB approaches, which would empower them with effective tools to regulate stress, maintain focus, cognitive restructuring, develop resilience, and consequently improve the dissertation writing process. To sum up, the current section has described and reported the most common psychological challenges, resilience patterns, and cognitive-behavioral strategies identified among EFL master's students in the academic writing context. The subsequent discussion interprets these emerging themes in relation to the existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

5. Discussion

The present study highlights the emotional, psychological, and cognitive experiences of EFL master's students during the academic dissertation writing process. Building on the results presented in the previous section, the findings clearly demonstrate that dissertation writing extends beyond linguistic or academic challenges and constitutes a complex psychological process.

Discussing the first theme, emotional and psychological challenges, participants reported their academic writing journey and combined it with academic and psychological issues such as stress, anxiety, fear of writing, procrastination, and time management, which affected their well-being and reduced their academic performance. The results directly relate to previous studies emphasizing the complex relationship that exists between stress and academic achievement, which has wide-ranging effects on students' cognitive, emotional, and physical health (Cassidy, 2022). The findings demonstrate that stress is higher among non-native English speakers due to language proficiency, academic discourse, and an inadequate foundation in academic writing norms. Additionally, a strong accumulation of emotional distress can be clearly expressed through tiredness, cognitive overload, and burnout.

Moving to the second theme, psychological resilience and coping mechanisms, despite the significant challenges outlined, the results displayed remarkable indications of psychological resilience among the participants during the dissertation writing process. Students maintained resilience through self-reflection, internal motivation, and persistence within the academic context. Many students unconsciously developed a set of coping mechanisms to set their goals, manage their stress, and boost their self-confidence. They also expressed a willingness to develop new skills related to emotional regulation and time management to navigate academic adversities. Furthermore, students' reflections suggested that motivation and encouragement play a fundamental role in promoting resilience and enhancing productivity in an academic context. In this respect, these findings confirm that resilience is not a static personality trait but a dynamic process that can be cultivated through positive adaptation and lived experience (Brewer et al., 2020).

Following the discussion of resilience and coping mechanisms, the third theme focuses on cognitive-behavioral strategies. The current findings indicate that CB strategies, such as positive reframing, effective planning, social support, and task breakdown, can serve as effective tools for reducing stress, managing academic tasks, and enhancing performance. These findings support cognitive-behavioural theory, which suggests that reframing negative thought patterns enhances emotional and behavioural outcomes (Hofmann et al., 2012). However, the inconsistent application of these strategies among participants highlights the need for greater awareness and more practical training. Building on the results, this discussion suggests that structured workshops, conferences on the strategic and effective implementation of cognitive-behavioural practices in the academic context could empower students' psychological resilience, self-regulation, and overall well-being.

6. Conclusion

The present study highlights the critical relationship between the psychological dimension of master's students and their academic dissertation writing. Students at universities are required to complete their academic dissertations; therefore, they are expected to adapt their learning strategies to new ways of learning, thinking, interpreting, and organizing. Additionally, academic success is associated with the ability to build psychological resilience to confront the difficulties and produce a well-structured dissertation; however, some EFL postgraduate students at Ibn Khaldoun University encounter persistent difficulties in adapting to meet academic writing requirements, managing stress, and maintaining focus. In this vein, applying a cognitive-behavioral intervention can reduce stress and negative thought patterns. Additionally, the results

of the current study contribute to the existing literature on the target phenomenon and suggest innovative psychological interventions in educational contexts to promote psychological resilience and enhance the dissertation writing process.

- Planning workshops, study days, or modules emphasizing cognitive behavioral strategies, including cognitive restructuring, self-instruction, time management, mindfulness, and stress management. These interventions enable students to develop protective mechanisms in response to academic adversity.
- Higher education institutions should provide psychological counseling services to address students' needs and challenges and help them bounce back during difficult periods in their academic lives.
- University teachers should establish supportive relationships with their students. Thus, showing interest in learners encourages them to thrive.

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