



Bridging Skill Gaps In Academic Research: Researchers' Challenges In Conducting Literature Reviews

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Abstract

Conducting a literature review is a significant and crucial step in any academic research. It has a systematic process for drafting, which is often considered challenging, as it requires careful reading, energy, and paraphrasing or summarising strategies. A rigorous literature review is a cornerstone of academic research, yet it poses significant difficulties for postgraduate and undergraduate EFL learners. Challenges include linguistic limitations, a lack of methodological understanding, and the uncritical use of artificial intelligence. This article explores these issues, differentiates between narrative and systematic review methodologies, and provides a framework for improvement. Key recommendations include adopting a concept-centric approach and structured protocols to enhance critical evaluation and ethical scholarship. The paper serves as a guide for educators and students to develop more coherent and contribution-oriented literature reviews.

Keywords: academic, challenges, postgraduate, research, review literature writing, skills.

Introduction

The overarching aim of each research study is to bring to light the truth (Robbins, Judge, & Vohra, 2012, p. 576, as cited in Isah & Murtala, 2019). Writing a literature review is a thorny and challenging process for academics, particularly for novice researchers. Nevertheless, these challenges were not considered in the past, as researchers had only to recite and paraphrase old works, but in recent times, conducting the review of literature has taken the lion's share, where researchers are evaluated according to how much they master the target language, i.e., how they have conducted research, how they have used paraphrasing techniques, and most importantly, how they have tackled gap identification. Based on what has been mentioned earlier, the study has several research objectives, which can be summarised as follows:

- **To highlight the significance of the literature review** as an essential and foundational component of academic research at postgraduate and doctoral levels.
- **To identify the major challenges** that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students—particularly at Saida University—face when conducting a literature review, such as lack of critical thinking, overreliance on AI tools, and insufficient writing and paraphrasing skills.
- **To clarify the concepts and types of literature reviews**, distinguishing between narrative (traditional) and systematic reviews, and outlining their characteristics, purposes, and methodologies.
- **To provide practical guidance and strategies** for writing an effective, cohesive, and critical literature review, including steps for planning, selecting, evaluating, and synthesising sources.

- **To promote academic integrity and discourage plagiarism**, especially the unethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) platforms in writing literature reviews.
- **To emphasise the importance of critical reading, analytical writing, and research gap identification** as key academic skills for producing credible and original scholarly work.
- **To offer solutions and recommendations** that help students and novice researchers improve the quality, coherence, and credibility of their literature reviews through proper methodology, critical engagement, and revision practices.

Statement of the Problem

Academic writing and reading for conducting a literature review are complex tasks for postgraduate or undergraduate students because they require multiple engagements, such as ample energy, time, looking for adequate data from different sources, selecting relevant information, and critical thinking skills. English as a Foreign Language Learners (EFL) find the literature review difficult, as they have, first and foremost, writing deficiencies, and do not know what relevant data to select because they do not have opportunities for summarizing or paraphrasing what scholars in various resources reported, and most importantly, EFL students consider reviewing the literature challenging because they are novice in the field of research who have just commenced their scientific journey.

It is relevant to recognise that undergraduate students often fall into the trap of plagiarism, primarily due to a failure to properly acknowledge sources, thereby undermining the validity and credibility of their work. At the master's level, students frequently regurgitate the findings of other scholars without conducting a comparative analysis of data. Consequently, many master's theses consist of descriptive summaries rather than a critical evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of existing literature. More significantly, these students often struggle to identify research gaps—a crucial component of any scientific study, as it defines the problems the research intends to solve. Compounding these issues, EFL students, in particular, frequently lack the skills to critically scrutinise diverse source materials, using both soft and critical thinking.

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming increasingly prevalent among EFL students, particularly at Saida University, where there is a notable over-reliance on tools like ChatGPT. For instance, when assigned tasks, students in the Department of English Language and Literature at Dr. Moulay Tahar Saida University frequently turn to their smartphones for immediate AI assistance rather than engaging in independent reflection. This trend is evident even when the assignments match cognitive abilities. Consequently, critical thinking skills are diminishing, and the development of problem-solving competencies among EFL learners is declining. This situation compels university instructors to address these challenges and implement concrete measures to counter the over-dependence on AI.

Review of Related Literature

Defining the Review of Literature

According to Alzahrani (2020), writing a literature review is a cornerstone in any academic work because it unravels what is perceived and experienced about a particular subject and engages other contributions to the field. In the view of Machi and McEvoy (2016), a literature review is an argumentative document that uses a logical synthesis of previous research to establish its fundamental tenets. Similarly, Cresswell (2012) defines

a literature review as a “written summary of journal articles, books, and other documents that describe the past and current state of information on the topic of your research study”. In other words, literature is centred on what has already been depicted previously and written down.

A literature review debates published works in a certain field of research, within a particular period. A well-constructed review of the literature engages the author in beneficial and constructive criticism (Ramdhani et al., 2014, p. 47). It is a survey taken from various articles, books, and other sources related to a field of research or theory, or a particular issue. It entails a description, summary, and critical evaluation of different studies. Reviewing the literature is designed to provide an overview of sources that the researcher has investigated within a particular subject area and to explain to the audience how the study fits into the larger field of research (p. 48).

Despite the availability of numerous definitions and strategies for writing a literature review (e.g., paraphrasing, summarizing, synthesizing), many second-year EFL master's students demonstrate significant difficulties in constructing one. Likewise, Chigbu et al. (2023) report that a few individuals possess the knack or a clear understanding of conducting a thorough literature review. A lack of necessary skills and knowledge for reviewing the related literature may lead to presenting false and inappropriate, or biased inferences. Frequently, EFL instruction prioritizes theoretical knowledge over practical application, leaving students underprepared for the demands of this task. It is crucial to note that this deficit often stems from insufficient training in critical reading and synthesis, challenges that are exacerbated by time constraints and overloaded syllabi.

The review of literature is placed in the first chapter, where the researcher starts with a brief introductory paragraph for the entire chapter. Then, s/he starts reviewing the literature. This part is essential because it proves that the researcher has done much reading on the topic. It critically analyzes, evaluates, and synthesizes theories, research findings, and practices that scholars and researchers have achieved. When reviewing the literature, the investigator should explore and present a coherent, accurate, comprehensive, and critical understanding of the current state of knowledge (Efron & Ravid, 2019, p. 2). More importantly, Khalifa & Albadawy (2024) report that academic writing requires handling huge amounts of information, “complex ideas, theories, and empirical data” with profound comprehension and “clarity”. This entails “not only a deep understanding of the subject but also the ability to simplify complex ideas for the reader” (p. 1). Nonetheless, the ability to decipher difficult thoughts is not an easy task for EFL master students.

A literature review requires profound analysis, comparison, and contrast of prior research, demanding considerable time, effort, and intellectual energy. It is a distinct scholarly exercise. As Cantero (2019, p. 1) clarifies, a literature review is “not an essay, report, or research paper, as it does not state, prove, or develop main points. A literature review does not answer a question, nor is it a list of summarized articles.” Instead, it evaluates existing ideas within a research area, providing a holistic picture of the current state of knowledge and identifying relationships among studies. Ultimately, its purpose is to determine gaps in the existing research. Along the same lines, Bueno & Mariano (2024) align with other scholars' views that the literature review is a pivotal component of the tertiary level, providing students with a deep understanding of prior knowledge and research gaps in a particular area. It permits “students to critically appraise and synthesize information from various sources”, such as peer-reviewed journals, books, conferences, and credible e-platforms.

Consequently, when tasked with writing a literature review for their master's theses, students face tremendous challenges. It is worth noting that the process engages them in extensive reading, critical thinking, and the careful selection of relevant information, which is axiomatically complex for undergraduate students. After identifying pertinent sources, they must accurately integrate and acknowledge these works to avoid plagiarism. Successfully navigating this process demonstrates a researcher's ability to employ advanced academic strategies and writing techniques, making the literature review a crucial demonstration of scholarly competence.

Why Do We Write a Review of Literature?

A literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of a specific research domain. Its primary function is to equip researchers with sufficient data to proceed to analysis and interpretation. In master's and doctoral dissertations, chapters are interdependent; as noted by Rocco and Plakhotnik (2009, as cited in Bey Boumezrag, 2022, p. 403), the literature review often informs the research methodology. Conducting a literature review is indispensable across disciplines, as it demonstrates the researcher's scholarly competence.

When composing an article or dissertation, researchers synthesise existing scholarship to contextualise their study, justify its objectives and significance, and rationalise research questions or hypotheses (Snyder, 2019). This process involves critically evaluating numerous academic sources to select the most relevant and significant information. In the same vein, Isah & Murtala (2019, p. 15) claim that reviewing the literature enables the researcher to determine the strengths and weaknesses of prior studies.

Conducting a literature review is a challenging task; therefore, the topic should be of interest to both the researcher and the reader (Snyder, 2019, p. 336). The primary aim of the review is to investigate and summarise evidence and theory (p. 336). It can also be used to identify research gaps, develop theory, and assess the enhancement of a particular study field over time (Ebidor & Ikhida, 2024). A rigorous literature review is fundamental to research, as its quality—determined by the methodology, findings, and clarity of reporting—depends on meticulous procedures to ensure accuracy, validity, and reliability. As noted by Booth et al. (2021, cited in Ebidor & Ikhida, 2024, p. 212), the choice of strategies and guidelines should align with the review's specific objective.

Types of Literature Reviews

Literature reviews could be published as a book, a master/doctoral dissertation, a book chapter, or a review article. Bacha (2019) states that researchers and scholars in English for academic purposes (EAP) report that each discipline in academia requires a type of review (genre). There are different types of literature reviews; however, this study will explore two prominent kinds:

Traditional or Narrative Literature Reviews

A narrative literature review provides a qualitative summary and critical assessment of a body of literature. Its primary functions are to synthesize existing knowledge, draw overarching conclusions, and pinpoint gaps in the research. Narrative reviews provide a broad overview of a topic. It summarizes prior knowledge and theories, usually to introduce a new research paper or offer a general background on a subject. The question is often much vague (e.g., "An overview of lessening students' anxiety" Coughlan, et.al., 2008). Conducting a rigorous narrative review requires:

- **Clear Focus:** Well-defined research questions to guide the inquiry (Dudovskiy, 2024).
- **Purposeful Selection:** A deliberate and justified choice of studies, which may include criteria like a specific publication timeframe.
- **Critical Appraisal:** An evaluation of the credibility and quality of the selected sources.

When executed effectively, this method is invaluable for synthesising a vast amount of literature within a field, offering readers a thorough foundational understanding and highlighting the relevance of both past and present research (Coughlan et al., 2008, p. 38).

Systematic Reviews

Systematic reviews are highly rigorous research methods structured to answer a certain question by finding and synthesising all the available data on a subject area. Its primary objective is to provide a summary that is as balanced and unbiased as possible (Nightingale, 2009). A systematic review does not start with an indefinite or unclear question but starts with a determined and well-defined question. It is highly designed and a pre-planned review to find and evaluate significant research. Its main aim is to summarise data that is as objective, unbiased and credible as possible (Guillaume, 2019).

Peterson et.al. (2024) clarify that systematic reviews employ a rigid, step-by-step method to find all significant works, not just a convenient selection. This reduces bias and errors.

- **Answer Certain Questions:** It is structured to answer coherent questions, like "How effective is the Task-Based Language Teaching?" or "How could it be applied?"
- **Standard Process:** The process often encompasses:
 1. Determining a clear question.
 2. Finding and choosing relevant sources.
 3. Critically evaluating research.
 4. Combining and synthesizing the findings.
 5. Drawing conclusions.

In a nutshell, a systematic review is the most credible and valid method to summarize what scientific works state about a subject area. The following table sums up the differences between narrative and systematic reviews:

Table 1. The Differences between Narrative and Systematic Reviews

Aspect	Narrative Literature Review	Systematic Literature Review
Definition	Provides a qualitative summary and critical assessment of a body of literature.	A highly rigorous research method designed to find and synthesize all available data on a specific question.
Purpose/aim	To synthesize existing knowledge, draw broad conclusions, and	To provide a balanced, objective, and unbiased summary of evidence on a

	identify research gaps.	specific, well-defined question
Nature of Question	Usually broad or vague, e.g., “An overview of lessening students’ anxiety.”	Begins with a specific, well-defined research question, e.g., “How effective is Task-Based Language Teaching?”
Approach	Descriptive and interpretive — summarizes and critiques existing studies.	Structured and pre-planned — follows a step-by-step process to minimize bias.
Selection of studies	Purposeful — researcher chooses studies based on relevance or interest.	Comprehensive and exhaustive — aims to include all significant works to reduce bias.
Usefulness	Ideal for introducing topics, summarizing theories, or highlighting research gaps	Best for answering specific research questions and informing evidence-based practice.

How to Begin Reviewing the Literature

Initiating research is fundamentally challenging, as researchers must determine where to find resources and how to begin. Although a valid literature review is essential, the starting point is often daunting, particularly for those uncertain of the first steps. The research process demands extensive reading on a given topic. Fortunately, numerous tools facilitate this exploration. The Internet and other electronic resources provide rapid access to articles, journals, conference proceedings, and e-books, making it easier to survey a field (Machi & McEvoy, 2012, as cited in Terry & Terry, 2013, p. 37). Similarly, online bibliographic databases are invaluable for locating journal references.

For guidance, students often consult supervisors, a practice supported by Levy and Ellis (2006), who advise both undergraduate and postgraduate students to seek academic counsel and review established research methodologies (p. 34). While some students turn to Wikipedia for preliminary information, its content is often unreliable because it lacks credentialed authorship and verifiable publication dates. Crucially, Wikipedia frequently fails to cite its sources. Therefore, researchers must consult authoritative sources that provide reliable, referenced information.

It is important to note that many EFL students rely heavily on AI platforms to write their literature reviews—an unethical practice that constitutes plagiarism. Furthermore, this over-reliance on tools like ChatGPT can hamper the development of their critical thinking skills. Reading the literature review chapters as examiners and supervisors,

unravel the students' laziness, and reveal that the work is not the students' but AI's job. Different learners depend heavily on such platforms because they do not start working on their dissertations earlier, and they view generating the review of literature as "hard and tedious work" (Mozelius & Humble, 2024). It is tedious and hard because it entails reading, note-taking, synthesizing, clarifying, comparing, and contrasting studies, and citing.

On the contrary, a wide range of qualified researchers use AI as an assistant. To put it differently, research and academic writing are supported by various AI instruments, and each is designed to meet certain wants and needs. According to Khalifa & Albadawy (2024) view that "Tools like Zotero, Mendeley, and EndNote" are pivotal for organizing the literature and generating citations. They added that enhancing writing quality, Grammarly, and OpenAI's ChatGPT are fundamental, offering AI-driven grammar checks, plagiarism detection, and text generation capabilities, which are necessary for drafting flawless and original academic production (p.3). Further, Turnitin and Copyscape are meant for plagiarism detection, utilising extensive databases to verify the originality of works.

To wrap up, the use of AI is tailored according to the needs of the researcher, as it makes the world of academia easy. Most importantly, using AI platforms for writing the review of literature is plagiarism and, therefore, unethical work, but employing it for checking grammar or verifying the rate of literary theft is often advisable. Nevertheless, human intelligence is always cherished.

Doctoral studies often begin with a daunting challenge: the literature review. New PhD candidates frequently struggle with how to start and what to include. A common and essential piece of advice from supervisors is to begin by reading extensively, taking careful notes on key findings, and meticulously citing all sources. As a supervisor and teacher-researcher, I emphasize two further critical points. First, students should use the present tense when discussing the literature. In this regard, Webster and Watson (2002) clarify that using the present tense when reporting is logical when mentioning concepts, as they are always present and relevant in the here and now. Further, they added that "the present tense is terser and thus faster for the reader to process" (p. xviii). An additional crucial piece of advice is that students must bridge the gap between simply reporting other scholars' work and connecting it directly to their own research project.

Strategies for a Cohesive and Contributory Literature Review

According to Webster & Watson (2002), conducting an efficient and high-quality literature review is centred around the concept of a "centric approach" rather than a chronological or author-centric approach. In other words, a credible literature review ought to be built upon key concepts, themes, and thoughts (the centric approach), and should not only involve a list of publications and what others have stated. In this regard, Bem (1995) illustrates that writers of literature reviews rely on listing citations and findings that match a phone book; numerous numbers, but not a plot (cited in Levy and Ellis, 2006, p. 173).

Therefore, authors must frequently pose questions when reviewing the literature and when writing the review of literature, and whether the work is relevant to the study. Researchers must bond the literature to their field of investigation, providing airtight arguments for the study. More importantly, the literature review must significantly contribute to the research questions' relevance and importance (Barnes 2005, cited in Levy and Ellis, 2006). It is worth noting that authors also need to demonstrate how their works add something new to the field of knowledge (p. 174). The latter, however, is a

notably common area of weakness that is underdeveloped among researchers, particularly EFL master's students.

Typical Solutions for Better Review of Literature

Literature review is a significant and integral part of scientific studies. Thereby, any researcher would go through this section. Nevertheless, many undergraduate and graduate students fail to write this part, and struggle, and therefore, fail in reviewing a purposeful literature (Chigbu, et.al, 2023). The following are tips that may assist students and researchers in mitigating some common hurdles when dealing with the literature part. These claims are relevant, practical solutions for a better review of the literature:

- Conducting a literature review must follow a pre-defined plan, which would lead to a rigorous evaluation of scientific works.
- A planned protocol for reviewing the literature, which determines the steps for undertaking research, selecting relevant sources, evaluating, and summarizing critically the studies. This would therefore guarantee the literature's robustness and credibility.
- Authors must do thorough research to collect significant data to construct an airtight comprehension of the subject being investigated (Chigbu, et.al., 2023, p. 13).
- The selection of literature should be limited to relevant, peer-reviewed, and formally published academic works.
- Selecting the appropriate methodology for conducting a literature review helps authors synthesize the advantages and disadvantages of prior studies (Ibrahim & Jusoh, 2003).
- Writing properly and critically is vital, where the researcher is urged to highlight areas of strength and weaknesses, providing a fair analysis, and adding the author's own interpretations and insights (Ibrahim & Jusoh, 2024).
- Thoughts must be clearly explained to engage the audience in reading and benefit from the literature review (p.4).
- Revise and refine the literature after finishing writing the first draft is a crucial part of the research. This phase is fundamental to guarantee the quality and clarity of the work. This entails considering the wording format, clarity of ideas, proper argumentation, and consistency in citations and referencing (p.4).

Conclusions

Although the literature review is fundamental to research, inexperienced scholars frequently face challenges because they lack practice and understanding of its core principles. This study addresses this issue by presenting clear methods and a step-by-step process for conducting a rigorous and credible literature review. Furthermore, this study calls on researchers to produce unbiased academic reviews grounded in rigorous, verifiable sources, thereby enriching the scholarly landscape. It underscores the critical importance of identifying research gaps and demonstrates how scientific work contributes new evidence to the existing literature.

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the process, purpose, and challenges of conducting a literature review, particularly in the context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) postgraduate and undergraduate students. It concludes that writing a literature review is a complex but indispensable part of academic research that requires mastery of critical reading, synthesis, and analytical skills. The study stresses that

students must move beyond merely summarising existing studies to critically engaging with the literature, identifying gaps, and contributing new insights to their field.

One of the major conclusions drawn is that EFL students face significant challenges in producing effective literature reviews due to limited academic writing proficiency, insufficient training in critical thinking, and over-reliance on artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT. While AI can support organisation and citation management through programs like Zotero and Grammarly, its misuse as a writing substitute undermines academic integrity and stifles intellectual growth. Therefore, the article concludes that AI should be used ethically and purposefully to enhance, not replace, human reasoning and creativity in research.

Furthermore, the review underscores that a strong literature review must follow a structured and strategic process. This includes planning, selecting credible peer-reviewed sources, evaluating studies critically, synthesising findings, and revising drafts for clarity and coherence. A well-crafted review does not merely describe what previous scholars have argued but builds a conceptual framework that situates the current study within existing knowledge and demonstrates its originality.

Finally, the study concludes that improving students' performance in literature reviews requires systematic training and mentorship. Instructors should guide learners through the stages of reviewing literature, from defining a research focus to developing analytical writing skills. Emphasis should be placed on identifying research gaps and fostering an understanding of how each study contributes to the broader academic conversation. By adhering to these principles, postgraduate students can produce literature reviews that are not only rigorous and credible but also significant contributions to scholarly discourse.

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