



Doctoral Students Research Trends and Practices: Implications for Curriculum Design in Higher Education

Yenus Nurie

Abstract

This study analyzed sixteen dissertations of students who completed their doctoral degree between 2014 and 2018 in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. Data was analyzed quantitatively pertaining to the dissertations' research areas, research methods, and research contexts using descriptive statistics. The results of this study revealed evidence on four major research trends. It was found that language

Yenus Nurie

The researcher is an assistant professor at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. His research interests include EFL Written Feedback, Scaffolding in Reading, Supervisory Practices and Interpersonal

skills were most favorable research areas where quantitative was the most prevalent research method used by the doctoral students. The result of this study also revealed that quasi-experimental was the most utilized research design, and doctoral students directed their research toward tertiary level education. Implications for higher education curriculum designers and future research directions are then presented.

Keywords: Research Trends, Dissertations, Research Design, Methods, Context

Carrying out a doctorate is a 'special experience (Kumar & Stracke, 2007). Writing a dissertation is the most challenging aspects of the teaching profession in higher education. This is partly because writing research requires the student's linguistic competence to adequately address each aspect of the research. As a result, there is a growing demand for improvement in research in doctoral programs, specifically the quality and quantity of academic writing products (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). The other challenge that potentially hampers student success is the students' limited capacity to use the range of relevant research skills. In this respect, a plethora of research has reported that in both native and non-native English language settings, tertiary level students are often regarded as neophytes of their academic discourse communities (Harwood & Hadley, 2004; Li, 2006).

It is a curious paradox that many universities assume that their doctoral students begin graduate school as proficient writers and despite the report that revealed post graduate students' immense difficulties with

academic writing (Bitchener, Basturkmen, East, & Meyer, 2011; Can & Walker, 2011). The problem is further compounded by the little or no research experience of doctoral students who need training in the competent use skills necessary to undertake and report research findings. As a result, numerous researchers have pointed out that there are a high proportion of PhD students who fail to complete their studies in the UK (Abiddin, Hassan, & Ahmad, 2009).

In order to help understand potential problems in post graduate thesis writing, it is vital to examine the overall trends and practices of research projects in tertiary education. Despite the fact that numerous studies have investigated the various aspects of post graduate research, and a plethora of research has attracted considerable interest in the literature (Kamler & Thomson, 2006), little or no empirical research has devoted to study doctoral students' trends when carrying out their research.

Research has examined what aspects of English language have received more attention. Ozmen et al. (2016) analyzed dissertations and revealed that teaching English as a foreign language was found to be the most investigated area in Turkey with 90 dissertations on various topics, such as teaching language skills and components. The result of this study which showed that reading as the most studied area of the language skills with 6 dissertations (37.5 % of them) is reminiscent of previous doctoral research findings. For instance, after analyzing doctoral studies in Turkey, Ozmen et al (2016) similarly reported that reading is the most studied area of the language skills with 7 dissertations. On the other hand, the doctoral students' little or no interest in

examining listening and speaking skills in their dissertations was in marked contrasts to the recent research reports.

In the literature, two prominent research methods have been highlighted: qualitative and quantitative.

Qualitative research or naturalistic approach can be used when observing and interpreting reality with the aim of developing an explanation of what was experienced; an explanation might be considered a “theory.” Research has revealed that non-native graduate students generally avoid exploiting qualitative methodologies due to the challenge of building up a text based on a personalized way of writing and expression (Belcher & Hirvela, 2005).

With respect to quantitative studies, Goktas et al (2012) found out that quantitative research predominated within educational research in Turkey.

The third most recent emerging approach is using both quantitative and qualitative approaches together. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) asserted that an examination of recent social and behavioral research reveals that mixed methods are being used extensively to solve practical research problems (As cited in Ngulube, 2013). Taken together, mixed methods studies are particularly important as they combine quantitative and qualitative studies to produce solutions for identified educational problems and issues (Goktas et al., 2012).

Yin (2003) posits that a case study design should be considered pertaining to the focus of the study whether the study seeks to answer “how” and “why” questions, or the researcher cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study and wants to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the

phenomenon under study, or the boundaries are unclear between the phenomenon and context. A case study may be understood as the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is – at least in part – to shed light on a larger class of cases (a population). Case study research may incorporate several cases, that is, multiple case studies (Gerring, 2007).

Experimental method of inquiry is also one of the most scientific research types designed to test the effect of an intervention. In experimental or quasi- experimental studies, an intervention (e.g., new teaching practice, prevention program for HIV/AIDS, nutritional supplements, free contraceptives) is called an independent variable. The dependent variable is that aspect of the participants that the researcher or evaluator hypothesizes will change as a result of being exposed to the intervention (e.g., knowledge, skills, attitudes, income, health) (Mertens, 2009).

A quasi-experimental design (QED) is an approach to data analysis that exploits fortuitous characteristics of the data that allow the equivalent of experimental control or randomization (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

Mertens (2009) illustrated that generally survey designs are descriptive, cross- sectional, or longitudinal.

Descriptive surveys give a snapshot in time of the variables being studied. Survey data can be used as descriptive data, as a basis for group comparisons, or as an indicator of the relative strength and direction of two variables. In the former case, the example given above, comparing third- and sixth-grade students would be a causal- comparative approach.

Erdogan (2017) investigated the research trends in Master and Doctorate dissertations on problem based

learning from 2002 to 2015 in Turkey. It was found that researchers favored experimental design (90.1%) more than the others. The result of the meta-analysis also revealed that 6 studies (5.94 % of the papers) were found to be survey research and only one study was a case study. Another issue that requires a close examination of the doctoral dissertation is the context of the studies. The study of Ozmen (2016) revealed that Turkish educational researchers mostly directed their research toward the tertiary (undergraduate) level.

In a mixed methods approach, Zewdu (2012) investigates the research culture and identifies factors contributing to this culture of the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) PhD program of Addis Ababa University from 1993–2010. Most of the PhD researches from 1993–2010 and also the ongoing ones concentrate around certain themes, contexts, and employed almost similar methods. Further, the study indicates that the most common context given focus in the collected PhD dissertations was tertiary level education followed by secondary education. While primary education is given far lesser attention in the studies, pre-primary and adult/non-formal education are totally neglected.

Amare (2000) assessed the major characteristics of the educational researches published in the Ethiopian Journal of Education (EJE) from 1967-1999. He found that educational research in Ethiopia had more coverage of tertiary and secondary levels than primary and pre-primary. He also concluded that descriptive designs govern most educational researches and even descriptive designs have been used in simplified ways involving surveys and secondary sources. This indicates the importance of developing an established body of

literature to bolster the postgraduate and doctoral studies in the higher education. In light of these, the present research was aimed at understanding how the doctoral research trends at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia are shaped in line with the related literature reviewed for this study.

Research Questions

1. On which aspects of the pedagogical process have TEFL doctoral students most frequently studied in the selected theses from 2014-2018?
2. What research methods and designs and research contexts were employed to these studies?

Methods

Research Design

The research design is guided by a meta-synthesis methodology which focuses on an integrative and expansionistic approach to data analysis based on qualitative and quantitative research studies (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). First, the research design employs quantitative data obtained from the students' dissertations pertaining to the utilizations of research focus, research methods and design and research contexts. In order to interpret the research trends of doctoral students, this meta-analysis research employs available sampling method of data selection and descriptive method research design. Further, the qualitative method of data analysis utilizes content analysis to examine the students' research trends in their doctoral dissertations so as to summarize and report written data – the main contents of data and their messages (Cohen, et al., 2007).

Research Procedures

The data was collected from dissertations of 16 doctoral students who graduated from TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) from 2014 (the first batch) to 2018. It is important to note that the university launched TEFL doctoral program in 2011 and 1 student graduated in 2014. 12 dissertations were available from the postgraduate library at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. Moreover, 4 dissertations were collected through personal networking with their authors. To classify the categories pertaining to the purposes of the study, a research theme category form was developed by the researcher and two experienced educational experts who help the researcher revise the form till the final version. The typology form was initially inspired by a previously developed classification form (Özmen, Cephe, & Kinik, 2016), which was later adapted to suit the purpose of this study. A total of 16 doctoral dissertations in TEFL between 2014 and 2018 at Bahir Dar University were analyzed in terms of their focus on various aspects of the pedagogical processes, research methods, research designs and research settings. These dissertations were analyzed using descriptive statistics pertaining to the research questions.

Results

A total of 16 dissertations were analyzed in terms of the focus of their studies within English language, the types of research design and data collection instrument used in each study. Writing is the most studied domain of the language skills. Three dissertations investigated various aspects of writing skills over the last five years. Of the five dissertations on writing skills, two of them focused on examining effects of the process approach on student writings.

Two studies devoted in exploring needs analysis. In a quantitative research method of needs analysis survey study, Aklilu (2018) employed a questionnaire and focused group discussion to analyze the present and target situation English language communicative needs of third year engineering students. The findings of his study show that the students considered writing skill the most important macro skill as it got 65% of propositions in the technical report writing course.

Six dissertations have devoted in examining reading comprehension. In a quasi-experimental design, Yenus (2018) investigated effects of meta-cognitive reading strategy instruction on the strategy use and comprehension of university accounting students. The study employed a mixed Quasi-experimental design. A survey questionnaire and pre- and post-reading comprehension tests and the Think aloud protocol were also used to collect quantitative data. The results of this study showed that the students are moderately aware of meta-cognitive strategy use in reading comprehension, which they favored global, problem solving and support reading strategy in order of priority.

Relatively few studies investigated vocabulary related aspects of the English language. Mandante (2018) conducted a pre-test post-test comparison group quasi-experimental study to investigate the effects of vocabulary games on primary school EFL students' vocabulary learning motivation, peer interaction and achievement. In the convergent parallel type of mixed methods design, the study employed tests, questionnaires, interviews and observations to collect data. The findings of the study showed that after the intervention the experimental group significantly

excelled the control group in overall vocabulary learning. Nevertheless, this comparison was found to be significant on vocabulary learning, motivation and achievement ($p < 0.05$) while peer-interaction remained non-significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 1. Specific research areas commonly investigated by TEFL doctoral students

Subject Areas	Year				Total	
	2014	2016	2017	2018	Frequency	%
Writing	1	1	-	1	3	18.75
Reading	-	3	-	3	6	37.5
Speaking	-	2	-	-	2	12.5
Listening	-	-	-	-	-	-
Vocabulary	-	-	-	1	1	6.25
Needs Analysis	-	-	1	-	2	12.5
Testing/Assessment	-	-	-	-	1	6.25
Psychological Variables	-	-	-	-	-	-
Others	-	-	1	-	1	6.25
Total	1	6	2	7	16	100

12 out of 16 papers (75 % of the dissertations) were found to be focusing on language skills aspects of research. The distribution of different the pedagogical aspect category and sub-categories of research is summarized in Table 1. Reading and writing skills were often focused where

reading skill, which accounts 37.5 %) of the total papers collected for this study, was the most frequently studied subject area, whereas doctoral students' total disinterest in examining listening skill was clearly observed as none of the participants examined anything related to the skill in their dissertations. The researchers showed little interest in needs analysis research, (only 12.5 % of the doctoral students' research projects). Similarly, a skill that received less attention than reading and writing was speaking (12.5 %). Testing and vocabulary related aspects of language teaching and learning were studied much less than the three language skills.

The data obtained from the dissertations suggest that no study was conducted on teacher education and various psychological learner variables, such as learner Motivation, attitude, beliefs, learning styles and learning Strategies and teacher education which includes the study of teachers' professional development, reflective teaching, pre-service teacher education and in-service training. The researchers seemed to take no notice of issues like teacher education and psychological variables. Taken together, it was evident that the researchers showed similarities in trends in that they were mostly obsessed with the English language skills as these areas seemed to be themes that interested TEFL researchers under study. On the contrary, the research trends revealed that no study touched teacher education and psychological variables, indicating that they seemed to have overlooked the most important parts of foreign language pedagogy.

Table 2. Research methods most commonly used by TEFL doctoral students

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Research Method	<i>Frequency</i>	%
Quantitative	4	25
Qualitative	-	-
Quantitative and Quantitative	12	75
Total	16	100

The data indicated that the most common research methodology utilized by TEFL doctoral students is mixed methodology, which was used by 12 papers (both qualitative and quantitative), which is followed by the quantitative approach (4 papers). The data also exhibits that no study has yet been conducted utilizing either only qualitative approach to collect and analyze data in the research projects collected from 2014-2018 doctoral studies at the university of Bahir Dar.

Table 3. Research designs most commonly used by TEFL doctoral students

Research Design	<i>Frequency</i>	%
Case study	-	-
Experimental	14	87.5
Survey	2	12.5
Total	16	100

The data in Table 3 shows that most of the doctoral studies under investigation were experimental studies utilizing quasi-experimental designs. 14 studies out of 16 dissertations were experimental studies with mixed research design (quantitative and qualitative approach).

Two survey studies employing qualitative and quantitative research methods are also observed in the doctoral research, indicating that no study was purely analyzed qualitatively. Taken together, the results of this study also showed that experimental (quasi-experimental design), which was followed by survey studies, were the most frequent research design used by the students for their respective dissertations. However, no case study has yet been utilized by the researchers in their doctoral studies.

Table 4. Research settings where TEFL doctoral students most commonly conducted

Level	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Primary	5	31.25
Secondary(junior and senior high schools)	3	18.75
Tertiary (colleges, universities and post graduate levels)	8	50
Total	16	100

Table 4 above exhibits the distribution of the research context of the doctoral students' dissertations. Research projects that were done on tertiary level and discussed university issues were the most frequent in the data. The data shows that 8 out of the 16 doctoral studies (50 % of the papers) for the last four years were conducted at tertiary levels of education settings. Most of the research sites that were carried out in tertiary levels might be due to proximity of tertiary level of education to the doctoral students, and hence is more feasible to undertake their

study. The second most frequent context that 5 out of the 16 research projects conducted was in primary education. Compared to tertiary level foci, there were only few studies (3 papers) that focused on the teaching learning process at secondary levels of education.

Discussion

Based on the analyses of the major areas that doctoral students frequently focus on their dissertations, the result of this study showed that language skills aspects of research was the most favorable research area that the researchers put much emphasis on. Language skills aspects of research were found to be the most studied area with 11 dissertations (68.75 % of the total doctoral papers collected) focused on the four sub-skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Similarly, teaching English as a foreign language was found to be the most investigated area in Turkey with 90 dissertations on various topics, such as teaching language skills and components (Ozmen et al., 2016). The result of this study which showed that reading as the most studied area of the language skills with 6 dissertations (37.5 % of them) is reminiscent of previous doctoral research findings. For instance, after analyzing doctoral studies in Turkey, Ozmen et al (2016) similarly reported that reading is the most studied area of the language skills with 7 dissertations. On the other hand, the doctoral students' little or no interest in examining listening and speaking skills in their dissertations was in marked contrasts to the recent research reports.

The second theme of the present research was to explore the the most frequent research method the doctoral students utilized when they conducted their research projects. Based on the results of this study, mixed

approach research designs were the most dominant research methods that the TEFL doctoral students employed for the last four years. Among 16 doctoral dissertations, 4 studies (25 % of them) were conducted based on pure quantitative research designs and 12 research papers (75 % of them) were conducted based on mixed method designs. Regarding the research methods, the results of this study were partially consistent with the study of Goktas et al (2012) which found out that quantitative studies predominated within educational research in Turkey. The data obtained from the analysis of the students' dissertations revealed that no qualitative doctoral study has been designed to address research problems. This result is, therefore, in sharp contrast with the results of previous research which revealed that non-native graduate students generally avoid exploiting qualitative methodologies due to the challenge of building up a text based on a personalized way of writing and expression (Belcher & Hirvela, 2005).

Regarding the research designs utilized in the dissertations, all of the studies except for two survey studies were experimental designs. The results on research design showed that quasi-experimental design was more prevalent among the doctoral studies. A close examination of the dissertations with respect to the research design utilized by the doctoral students revealed that among the 16 studies that utilized only quantitative and both quantitative and qualitative research methods, 14 doctoral studies were based on quasi-experimental research design. While there were only 2 survey research projects, no case study design was observed from a total of the dissertations collected for this meta-analysis research. Concomitant with the result of this study, Erdogan (2017) investigated the research trends in

Master and Doctorate dissertations on problem based learning from 2002 to 2015 in Turkey. It was found that researchers favored experimental design (90.1%) more than the others. The result of the meta-analysis also revealed that 6 studies (5.94 % of the papers) were found to be survey research and only one study was a case study.

The most frequently investigated research area in terms of educational level was found to be tertiary level. With respect to this, the data shows that 60 % of the studies were conducted in tertiary education settings. The result of this study that showed doctoral students' interest in investigating in the higher education contexts is consistent with the research evidence which revealed that Turkish educational researchers mostly directed their research toward the tertiary (undergraduate) level (Ozmen, 2016).

Conclusion

Several fascinating issues concerning supervision have been addressed in this study. The results revealed that language skills were the focus of the studies, which reading skill was the most investigated area. The result of this study also showed that quantitative was the most prevalent research method used by the doctoral students. It was also found that quasi-experimental was the most favored research design. Finally, it was indicated that most of the doctoral students directed their research toward tertiary level education.

Given the fact that mixed methods studies are particularly important as they combine quantitative and qualitative methods to produce solutions for identified educational problems and issues (Goktas et al., 2012),

the results of this study may have implications for higher education curriculum designers and doctoral students to fully understand, design and properly apply research methods in their dissertations. The findings of this research have great contributions for the improvement of the pedagogical landscape of higher education. The fact that these doctoral students offer English courses for different groups of students from all disciplines in the university indicate that this research has implications for EFL instructors to help understand students' needs from various colleges, apply different pedagogical approaches and address various written feedback preferences when teaching the different groups of students, which help reinforce cross-departmental understanding by reporting the various writing concerns of students who study different fields in the university.

Nevertheless, it is quite imperative that doctoral students in other Ethiopian universities may conduct their studies in various aspects of the teaching learning processes in different research contexts indicating that conclusions based on the research trends of these students need to take a cautious approach to this finding. Thus, future educational studies should be done extending this meta-analysis study by examining more diversified and large number of dissertations to yield more valid and reliable results.

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