Problems of Outlining a Scientific Plan of Graduate Research by Iraqi EFL College Students

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Abstract:

This paper is an analytical study of the Iraqi EFL college students' capacities to prepare a scientific outline of a graduate research in English. It investigates the problems that they face in outlining a scientific research. As Arabic is the first language for Iraqi students and English is a second or foreign language for them, problems arise because of the differences between the two systems of organizing the outlines according to the criteria of languages. However, language barrier and challenges such as grammar and composition are not within the domain of this study. The problem of this study resides in the need to investigate the proper outline by using a scientific plan of graduation research by EFL learners of Iraqi EFL college students. It questions the problems that the Iraqi EFL students have in preparing a scientific outline of a graduation research and probes their deficiencies in writing an introduction, literature review and conclusion in addition to some of the important issues of preparing the outline of a research paper such as: reference citing, dots placing, and so on.

The study is a primary data analysis of two questionnaires set for two samples of students and lecturers chosen from the University of Thi-Qar. There are two questionnaires prepared for collecting data for this paper. The first one is a test done on a sample of ٣٠ students to probe their abilities to write a scientific outline of a research paper in English. This test consists of two parts: theoretical and practical. The practical part takes about two hours. The other questionnaire is set for chosen sample of ٣٠ Iraqi lecturers to check the problems of their students face in preparing the required outline. The results of the study on the samples reveal that Iraqi students face a lot of problems and have so many weaknesses in scientific writings. Solutions have been suggested by the lecturers in the sample according to their experience and views. Those will be presented in the findings of the study.

Keywords: (problems, outlining, scientific plan, Iraqi students).

مشاكل وضع خطة علمية لأبحاث الخريجين من قبل طلاب كلية اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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الملخّص:

تشكّل هذه الورقة البحثيّة دراسةً تحليليّةً لقدرات الطّلبة العراقيّين في الكليّات التي تعتمد اللّغة الانكليزيّة كلغةٍ أجنبيّةٍ لإعداد مخطّطٍ علميٍّ لورقةٍ بحثيّةٍ باللّغة الانكليزيّة. كما تبحث الدّراسةُ في المشاكل التي يواجهها الطّلبة أثناء وضع مخطّطٍ للورقة البحثيّة باللّغة الانكليزيّة. وبما أنّ اللّغة العربيّة هي اللّغة الأولى للطّلبة العراقيّين واللّغة الانكليزيّة هي لغة أجنبيّةٌ، تنبثقُ المشكلات نتيجة اختلاف نظاميّ اللّغتين في تنظيم المخطّطات تبعاً لمعايير اللّغةِ. بيد أنّ حاجز اللّغة وتحدّياتها كالقواعد والإنشاء لا تدخل ضمن مجال هذه الدّراسة. وتكمن مشكلة هذه الدّراسة في الحاجة لتقصّي المخطّط المناسب باعتماد خطّةٍ علميّةٍ لبحث التخرّج الذي يعدّه الطّلبة العراقيّون من متعلّمي اللّغة الانكليزيّة كلغةٍ أجنبيّةٍ. كما تسبرُ الدّراسة المشاكل التي يواجهها الطّلّاب العراقيّين في تلك الكليّات أثناء إعداد مخطّط بحث علميٍّ للتّخرّج ومواطن الضّعف عند الطّلبة في كتابة المقدّمة والدّراسة المرجعيّة إضافةً إلى بعض القضايا الهامّة في إعداد مخطّطٍ للورقة البحثيّى كالاقتباس المرجعيّ ووضع النّقاط وما إلى ذلك. وتعدّ الدّراسةُ تحليلاً لبياناتٍ ثانويّةٍ من عيّنتين مختارتين من جامعة ذي قار. ولقد تمّ إعداد استبيانين لجمع المعلومات من أجل هذه الورقة البحثيّة، فالاستبيانُ الأوّل أُعدّ على شكل اختبارٍ لعيّنةٍ تشمل ثلاثين طالباً لفحص مقدراتهم في كتابة مخطّطٍ علميٍّ للورقة البحثيّة باللّغة الانكليزيّة. ويتألّف هذا الاختبارُ من قسمين: قسمٌ نظريٌّ وقسمٌ عمليٌّ استغرق ساعتين. وأُعدَّ الاستبيان الآخرُ ليشمل مجموعةً مختارةً من ثلاثين محاضرٍ عراقيٍّ بغية استقصاء المشاكل التي يواجهها الطّلّاب أثناء تحضير المخطّط. وتُظهرُ نتائجُ الدّراسة أنّ الطّلبة العراقيّين يواجهون الكثير من المشاكل ويعانون من ضعفٍ في الكتابة العلميّة.وقد تمّ اقتراحُ حلولٍ من قبل المحاضرين في عيّنة الدّراسة تبعاً لتجربتهم وآرائهم. وتعتبرُ هذه الدّراسةُ ابتكاريّةً وجديدةً، إذ إنّها تبحثُ في الخطّة العلميّة لوضع مخطّط ورقة البحث العلميّ وفقاً للطّريقة الأكاديميّة في تنظيمها، وليس بناءً على مهارات اللّغة الانكليزيّة.

الكلمات المفتاحيّة: (مشاكل، وضع مخطّطٍ،، خطّةٌ علميّةٌ، الطّلاب العراقيّون).

١. Introduction

First of all, it is good to identify some of the terms pivotal to this study. The "research paper" is "a written and published report describing original research results." (Okoduwa, ٢٠١٦: ١). Outlining is the basic stage of writing any research, be it graduate or post-graduate. If we check the definition of the word, "outline" is defined in *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* as: a "rough draft", "summary", or a "sketch consisting of only contour lines." (Thompson, ١٩٩٣, p. ٦٣٠) In an article published in the official website of the University of Washington under the title "How to Make an Outline", a research outline is defined as "a formal system used to think about and organize your paper." It is necessary for the researcher to make an outline to be able to clarify the whole picture of the research (Outline, n. d.).

However, the academic outline of any research paper cannot be done arbitrarily. It should follow a certain format and adhere to certain unified instructions. That is to say, the research paper outline should "identify the topic" by summarizing the main points of the paper in a sentence, clause or phrase, "identify the main category" which means the first thing the researcher or student wants to identify, it might be a definition, a clarification of a term, etc., and "create subcategories" which are listed under each main category according to the information that the author wants to cover (Outline, n.d.).

The basics of the research outline as cited in the previously quoted study in the University of Washington are listed as: title, introduction, main topics and subtitles. The research problem and methodology should be clarified in the outline as in the research paper (Outline, n.d.). However, there are so many important details that need to be followed such as the placement of dots, how to cite quotations, how to use numbers, be they Roman, Arabic numbers or even letters. These details need a special attention from the student as well as the supervisor or even the researcher in the

academic writing according to the style of the paper, be it APA, MLA or whatsoever required in the paper.

As this paper questions the problems faced by Iraqi students in EFL colleges in preparing the graduation research and fathoms their abilities in that process. There are certain issues that should be taken into consideration regarding this special case. It is worth mentioning that the first language in Iraq is Arabic and the system of this language is totally different from English language system, unlike the European languages which might have some points in common with English. Thus, the Iraqi students have to overcome the language barrier, system barrier and even lack of a good reference, a guide or ability to understand some points. Hence, this paper sheds light on these problems that are related to the content of the research paper outline and its format. The study analyzes data collected directly from the tests made for the Iraqi EFL college students and views of the lecturers and supervisors. The primary data collected, their due analysis and the original findings endow this study its originality and importance.

٢. Literature Review

Previous studies tackled the problems of Arabic- speaking students of EFL, and Iraqi students in particular. However, those studies would dwell on the skills of language acquisition such as speaking, reading, and writing. They attributed the weakness of the students in academic and research writing to their weakness in English and their inability to use the language skillfully to organize and arrange their thoughts.

A study on a sample of ٤٩ Iraqi graduate students from University of Kufa shows that the students have problems on "individual level" and "institutional level" and most of the challenges they face are related to writing due to linguistic incompetence (Abu-Shnein, ٢٠٢٠: ٢٣). Students depend on their first language and

word by word translation (p. ٣٢). The lack of "critical thinking" and focus on memorization are major factors that lead to the problems of writing for Iraqi EFL in addition to the scarcity in "effective" and motivated learners among the students. The skills in writing are to be stirred through competition, focus on the "targeted culture" with its abundant vocabulary and linguistic rules and critical thinking that sustains imagination (p. ٣٣ - ٣٤).

The challenges that EFL students face in writing are related to pedagogy, cognition, linguistics and psychology (Hyland, ٢٠٠٣). The students face difficulties in the sources of information, in adaption to the proper academic writing and adhering to the right style. Besides, the gap between learners and educators due to the insufficient time of classes in the educational system and lack of visual aids would result in problems of academic writing. Hence, the students have less confidence in their writing capacities (Fareed, Ashraf & Bilal, ٢٠١٦). Students also face challenges because of first language interference, deficiency in reading and lack of motivation (Haider, ٢٠١٢). Therefore, the Iraqi students encounter diverse hardships in the academic writing. They are related to school system, cognition, pedagogy and psychology.

In research done on the difficulties of academic writing that Iraqi post-graduate students in Malaysia face, a primary data analysis was done for a survey and interview made for a sample of Iraqi students studying in Malaysia. The "lack of competency" in academic writing in English was clear in the Iraqi students due to their educational background in addition to the change of system as the Iraqi system is "course-based". The lack of skills in writing in English was to be attributed to their undergraduate system (Keong & Mussa, ٢٠١٥). That is to say, English is considered as only one subject of many in the Arab countries and have few classes which lack the

proper method of teaching. Hence, students in English speaking countries face challenges in doing academic assignments, paraphrasing or writing theses that need higher skills in language (Rabab'ah, ٢٠٠١).

A paper that fathomed the problems of academic writing in English faced by Arab students tackled a sample of post-graduate students in King Saud University. The paper classified the problems that Arab students face in academic writing in English into four sorts: the gap that students have between spoken and written English, their inability to prepare an outline before writing a draft paper, lack of knowledge in the proper skills of writing and the vagueness in their use of the words and phrases (AlFadda, ٢٠١٢: ١٢٣).

A paper entitled "Investigating the Relative Difficulties of Iraqi EFL Learners in Academic Writing", the researcher, Naseer Shukur Hussein chose a random sample of ٥٠ students at the department of English in Al-Kadhum University College to explore the difficulties that those students face in academic writing. The findings show that the text-books should be reconsidered in order to meet the students' needs with consideration of the linguistic and non-linguistic elements that the students need for academic writing. The study reveals that the students have problems in vocabularies, grammar and reading in addition to the need that they should have more "language exposure" (Hussein, ٢٠٢٢: ١٦-١٧)

In fact, writing a good and right way in English proves to be a great challenge for "non-native" students. Nasser's research paper that was applied on EFL Iraqi students in the university of Baghdad, investigates the students' problems in writing in English. It finds out that students lack a lot of skills related to writing in English. (Nasser, ٢٠١٩) Tuan (٢٠١٠) emphasizes the importance of practice in enhancing the writing skills for the students. According to the researcher the students lack the skills of writing as well as the confidence needed to write. Actually, the writing skills, as

Pangaribuan and Manik (٢٠٠١٨) confirm, needs proficiency in grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, etc. which are the fundamental basics of language.

In fact, writing a scientific-research needs not only mastering the skills of language, but also the style and elements necessary for the academic writing. Thus, the literature review reveals that the previous studies mostly concentrate on the linguistic problems as well as the difficulties of communication in English for non-speakers of English, be they from Iraq or other countries. However, these problems are to be considered in academic writing and enhancing effective methods of teaching research writing.

٣. Methods & Methodology

This is an analytical research paper of the problems that EFL Iraqi students in EFL colleges face. It depends on primary data analysis of select samples of Iraqi EFL college students at the University of Thi-Qar. The study explores the problems and challenges that the Iraqi students face while preparing a scientific graduation paper. It dwells on their incompetency in mastering the academic style and lack of reference in addition to the mistakes they commit in quoting or reference indexing. Data are collected from two questionnaires, the first is test that is made for ٣٠ students from EFL Colleges at the University to assess their abilities in outlining a scientific research paper and their deficiencies. This test has theoretical and practical questions to evaluate the students' performance in research outlining. The second questionnaire is set for ٣٠ lecturers and supervisors of the same university to check their views and assessments of the students' performance.

٣.١ **Discussion & Findings**

In each one of the two questionnaires prepared for this study, ٣٠ individuals have been selected, i. e., ٣٠ students of EFL colleges at the University of Thi-Qar. The percentage of respondents for each question is ١٠٠٪, the thing which endows reliability to these questionnaires, as Waters put it, in order to assess the consistency of the answers (Waters, ٢٠٠٢). The questions and responses to the questionnaires as well as the results and percentages of the choices are revealed in details in this section.

Questionnaire No.١:

This questionnaire which is composed of theoretical and practical parts was made to evaluate the Iraqi EFL College students' abilities and check their weaknesses in outlining a scientific plan of graduate research paper. The questions and results are exposed as follows:

**Q١.** Read the following passage carefully and then do what is required:

" Online education is beneficial for low-income students because it gives them a better access to education resources, trains their online learning skills, and eliminates the need to travel abroad"

A. Define the thesis statement

B. Put a title for a suitable topic of graduation research

Table ١: Students' performance of the first question

Students (Responses) No.	Statement NO.	Right	%	wrong	%
٣٠	A	٢	٦.٧	٢٨	٩٣.٣
	B	١١	٣٦.٧	١٩	٦٣.٣
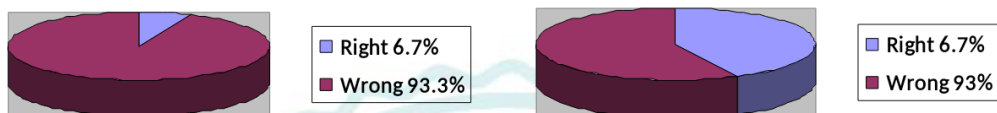
Results of Statement (A)   Results of Statement (B)

The results show that the majority of Iraqi students in EFL colleges can hardly define thesis statement. Only ٢ students out of ٣٠ could define it. Less than half of the students could put a suitable title to the topic of graduation research. However, the number of students who could put a title exceeded the number of those who could define a thesis statement. Hence, we can conclude that the students face great challenges of defining the thesis statement of research which results in a failure in outlining the plan of the research.

Q٢. Write (true) or (false) next to the following statements:

A. The use of the three periods as (…) is to denote stopping.

B. Long citation with more than three lines can be included between inverted commas ("").

C. The et al. is an abbreviation used in reference indicating the work of four or five authors.

Table٢: Students' performance of the second question

Students (Responses) No. ٣٠	Statement No.	Right	%	wrong	%
	A	٢٧	٩٠	٣	١٠
	B	٢٠	٦٦.٦٧	١٠	٣٣.٣٣
	C	١٣	٤٣.٣٣	١٧	٥٦.٦٧
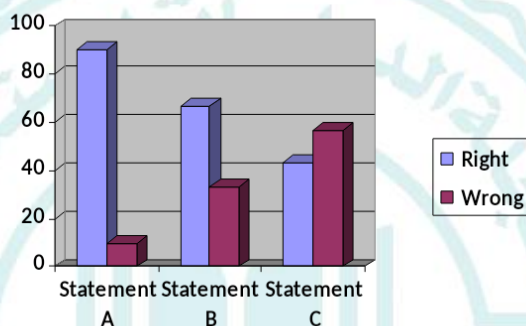
Students answers to this question were better than the previous question due to the students' good theoretical knowledge of research and literature. So, ٩٠٪ of the answers were right to statement no. A, and more than half of the students chose the correct answer to statement B. But more the majority, with ٥٦.٦٧٪, had the wrong choice for statement C. This indicates that the students can master the theoretical capacity due to the theory-based courses but commit mistakes in some sensitive points due to the less practice they have in research writing.
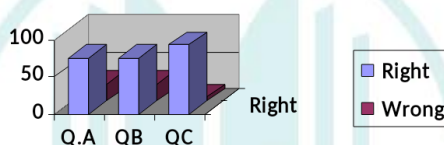
Q٣. Answer the following questions:

A. How do we cite a reference for two authors?

B What is the gap in the problem that the research deals with?

C. If you put a quotation without citation, what do we call this?

Table٣: Students' performance of the third question

| Students (Responses) No. ٣٠	Question No.	Right	*%*	wrong	%
	A	٢٣	٧٦.٦٧	٧	٢٣.٣٣
	B	٢٣	٧٦.٦٦	٧	٢٣.٣٣
	C	٢٨	٩٣.٣٣	٢	٦.٦٧

Question no. ٣ depends on the theoretical study of research methodology in English. Hence, the results of the sample show that students lack knowledge in the terms used in research methodology, such as "plagiarism" in QC., needs a better comprehension of the research parts as well as practice.

Q٤. Correct the following reference citation according to APA style:

DeSpain, Jessica, and Jennifer Travis, ed. *Digital Humanities: Tools and Methods for Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, ٢٠١٨.

Table٤: Students' performance of the fourth question

| Students (Responses) No. ٣٠	Right	%	wrong	%
	٢١	٧٠	٩	٣٠
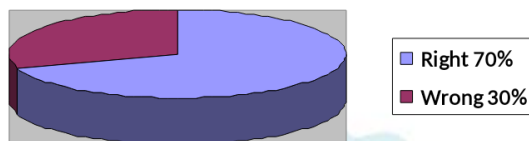
In Question no. ٤, the majority of the students of ٧٠٪ of them gave correct answers. This reveals that the students study the APA style and have knowledge about reference citation in bibliography. Hence, the students can perform duly according to the explanation and practice they get in classes. In fact, indexing the reference can be done by the students as they can check the internet and find the answers easily. Thus, the performance in this question cannot give truthful information about the students competency in research style unless they do it in front of the supervisor without depending on any external source.

Q٥. Outline the following research topic according to what you have studied in your textbook ' *Writing Research Papers: A Practical Guide'* taking into consideration your supervisor's instructions:

" Difficulties in Using punctuation by Iraqi EFL Learners in writing"

Table٥: Students' performance of the fifth question

Students (Responses)	V. Good	%	Good	%	Fair	%	poor	%
No.٣٠	٠	٠	٢	٦.٦٧	٧	٢٣.٣٣	٢١	٧٠
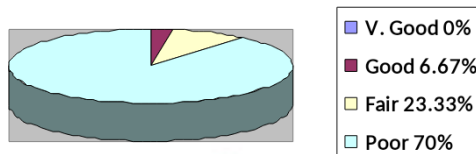
This question is a complete test of the students' abilities to write an outline of the graduation research according to their textbook. However, the outlines of the students reveal that the students have very poor competency in making a successful outline of the research paper. That is to say, the majority of the students, ٧٠٪ of them, have poor performance and no one of them has a very good performance. Hence, we can conclude that supervisors have to give more instructions to the students and check their outlines till they are able to write a good outline of the research.

Questionnaire No.٢:

This questionnaire is made as a survey to assess the lecturers and supervisors' assessments of the Iraqi students' abilities to prepare a graduation research outline. It also assesses the lecturers' competency in guiding the students in research outline. The sample consists of ٣٠ lecturers of EFL colleges from the University of Thi-Qar. The questionnaire is set as follows:

As a lecturer in Iraqi universities and supervisor of graduate students' research, please answer the following questions by tagging the choice you state:

Q١. Is *Writing Research Papers: A Practical Guide* by Bailey Powell &Shuttle a good reference that caters to the requirements for preparing research writing?

YES/ NO/ Not Familiar

Table ١: Results of the first question

| Respondents' No.	Question No.	YES	%	NO	%	Not Familiar	%
٣٠	١	١٠	٣٣.٣٣	٦	٢٠	١٤	٤٦.٦٧
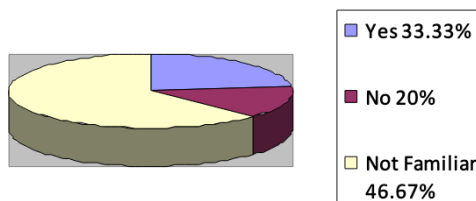
The results reveal that the majority of the lecturers in the sample have no idea about Powell and Shuttle's reference which is important to read in research methodology. Hence, the insufficient knowledge can be deduced in the responses of the lecturers to the first question.

Q٢. Is it suitable for the purpose of enhancing understanding and awareness in the Iraqi EFL College students to prepare them for the graduation research writing stage?

YES/ NO/ Not Familiar

Table ٢: Results of the second question

Respondents' No.	Question No.	YES	%	NO	%	Not Familiar	%
٣٠	٢	٥	١٦.٦٧	١١	٣٦.٦٧	١٤	٤٦.٦٦
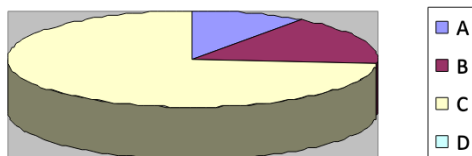
As contrary to the requirements of graduation research in most of the international universities, many lecturers, ٣٦.٦٧٪ of them suggested not to prepare the students to the writing stages of preparing research. Very few lecturers confirmed the necessity of these stages, while the majority of them had no certain answer about this.
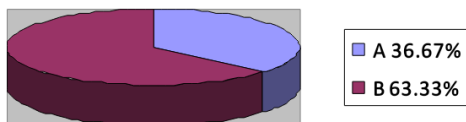
Q٣. What are the most noticeable problems in preparing a graduation research plan by your students?

A. A complete failure of outlining a scientific plan of the research

B. A partial failure of outlining a scientific plan of the research

Table٣: Results of the third question

Respondents' No.	Question No	Item No.	Answers No.	%
٣٠	٣	A	١١	٣٦.٦٧
		B	١٩	٦٣.٣٣

The majority of the answers asserted that the students' problem is their partial failure of outlining a scientific plan of the research which means that the students have some information and practice but need more guidance.
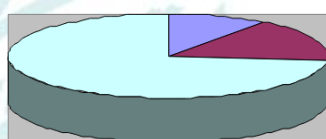
Q٤. What are the most common challenges for the students in the research writing stage?

- introduction
- literature review
- conclusion
- all of the previous items

Table ٤: Results of the fourth question

Respondents' No.	Question No	Item No.	Answers No.	%
٣٠	٤	A	٣	١٠

|		B	٥	١٦.٦٧
		C	٠	٠
		D	٢٢	٧٣.٣٣

Most of the responses show that the students have challenges in all the three parts of the research, i.e., introduction, literature review and conclusion.

Q٥. What is the percentage of plagiarism in your students' research?

- A very large percentage
- Quite a proportion for the purpose of quotation only

Table ٥: Results of the fifth question

| Respondents' No.	Question No.	Item No.	Answers No.	%
٣٠	٥	A	٢١	٧٠
		B	٩	٣٠
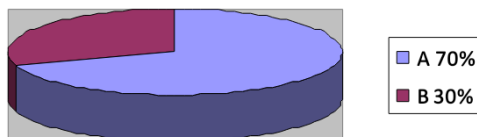
Accordingly, students have a lot of plagiarism in their writings and this is a threatening percentage that show students' inadequacy of writing a research paper on their own without stealing from sources.

Q٦. What types of research do you often select for your students?

- A type of report

- A type of persuasive (applied and practical research)

- Both types

Table ٦: Results of the sixth question

| Respondents' No.	Question No.	Item No.	Answers No.	%
٣٠	٦	A	١٧	٥٦.٦٧
		B	٤	١٣.٣٣
		C	٩	٣٠.
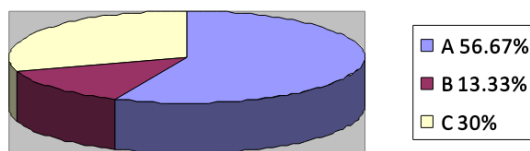
Most of the responses to this question reveal that lecturers would choose the type of report for the students and very few would prefer the applied and practical research, while ٣٠٪ choose both types of research. Actually, the report is easier for the students to understand than practical research that needs special skills and comprehension abilities from the student.

Q٧. Do your students have knowledge of analytical and statistical methods?

YES/   NO

Table ٧: Results of the seventh question

| Respondent No.	Question No.	YES	%	NO	%
٣٠	٧	١٢	٤٠	١٨	٦٠
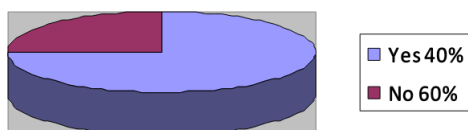
The majority of the lecturers in the sample answered that their students did not have knowledge of analytical and statistical methods which are necessary for every researcher or graduate students. Only ١٢ of the ٣٠ lecturers answered by "Yes". This is an indication that there is a gap in research methodology of EFL for Iraqi college students. It might be ascribed to the difficulty that the student faces in comprehending the basics of statistics and analytical methods in research.

Q٨. How would you evaluate the using of indentation and punctuation by your students in their research writing?

Very Good   - Good - Quite Average   - Poor

Table ٨: Results of the eighth question

Respondents' No.	Question No.	Item	Answers No.	%
٣٠	٨	Very Good	٤	١٣.٣٣
		Good	٦	٢٠
		Quite Average	٩	٣٠
		Poor	١١	٣٦.٦٧

- Very Good 13.33%
- Good 20%
- Quite Average 30%
- Poor 36.67%
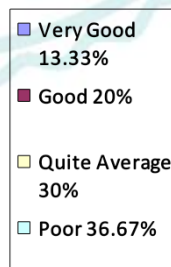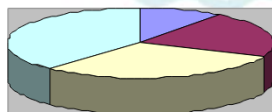
The majority answered that students were poor in using indentation and punctuation with ٣٦.٦٧٪, while the average level got ٣٠٪, with few responses for very good and good. Hence, punctuation and the right use of indentation arise as a challenge for Iraqi students in EFL colleges.

Q٩. What recommendations do you find necessary to improve the level of the student in the graduation research stage?

A. Changing the textbook to a more appropriate and comprehensive modern source

B. Taking training courses annually from the first semester of the stage of the graduation research project

C. There is no benefit from both of the previous ways because the big responsibility rests with the supervisor and his/ her duties to follow up and modify research

Table ٩: Results of the ninth question

Respondents' No.	Question No.	Item No.	Answers No.	%
٣٠	٩	A	٢	٦.٦٧
		B	١٦	٥٣.٣٣
		C	١٢	٤٠
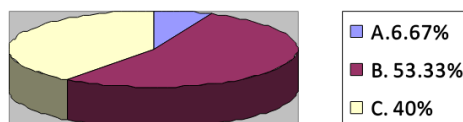
The majority of ٥٣.٣٣٪, recommended training courses for the students, while ٤٠٪ asserted that it was the supervisor's responsibility to follow up and modify research for the students. Very few, ٦.٦٧٪ suggested to change the textbook.

Thus, this questionnaire clarifies that the Iraqi students of EFL colleges face many problems in research such as identification of the basics of research, inability to write on their own, and lack of knowledge in the research methodology. However, this might be attributed to many factors as the questionnaire reveals such as the educational system which is theory-based mostly, the lecturers' insufficient knowledge and wrong choice of the style that caters to the students' needs, and the students face inclination to take the easiest way even by depending on plagiarism that strips the scientific research of its worth.

٤. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the study proves beyond any shadow of doubt that the Iraqi students of EFL colleges face a lot of challenges in preparing and outline of the scientific research plan. These challenges can be attributed to the type of system in education that is theory-based, lack of practice on the part of the students, insufficient knowledge of research methodology and lack of lecturers' proficiency in teaching and guiding the students. Training courses might be a good solution for the lecturers first

then for the students. The students show partial failure in outlining a research plan. Thus, they miss the right knowledge for preparing the outline of the research and guided practice. This study is culminated by highlighting the necessity to reconsider the courses and to support the Iraqi students with the textbooks, guidance and practical means that cater to their needs. Yet, this study is limited to the EFL students of EFL colleges at the University of Thi-Qar. The sample is restricted to one university. It does not extend to have samples from different samples of Iraqi EFL students. However, it paves the way for more comprehensive future studies that might include more samples from other Iraqi EFL colleges and elaborate on the findings of this study.

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