

## **An English Learner's Agency in Writing a Senior Thesis in English: a Qualitative Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

This case study explores an EFL learner's agency in writing his senior thesis in English. The research questions are: (1) What challenges does a learner face in writing his senior thesis in English? (2) What agentic behaviors and strategies are used to cope with the challenges? The study focuses on a senior student enrolled at a liberal arts university where English and Japanese are the official languages. The researcher interviewed him five times during his senior year at the beginning of the study, about every two months, and after submitting his senior thesis. The interview data and the journal were analyzed using the Modified Grounded Theory Approach (Kinoshita, 2003). The findings revealed that this learner faced three types of challenges: 1) Challenges from the content, 2) Challenges from the language, and 3) Challenges from his personal life. The learner exercised agency and utilized various resources to overcome these challenges, including study skills, support networks, digital tools, and language learning strategies. The findings may have implications for language instructors, thesis advisors, and universities who support students in preparing to write their senior thesis in English.

Thesis writing is a culminating project at university and a complex task (Zhang & Pramoolsook, 2019); simultaneously, the difficulties students face are daunting. Writing a thesis is challenging for native English-speaking students, and therefore, it is even more demanding for non-native learners (Mbato & Cendra, 2019; Odena & Burgess, 2017; Paltridge & Starfield, 2019; Tomei & Aden, 2014). It is also an individual project that extends several months. Thesis advisors may hold thesis classes regularly, and writers may have chances to communicate with other students. However, learners mainly have to take the initiative to make progress, and it can be isolating. Therefore, this study focuses on the agency since it can play a critical role in driving people to act in a particular manner. This study explores how senior thesis writers exercise learner agency in the face of challenges and what strategies are used during the process of writing their senior thesis.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Research on Undergraduate Thesis Writing Among English Learners**

"Englishization" has been a current trend not only in Europe (Soler-Carbonell, 2014) but also in non-anglophone countries, including those in East Asia (Bradford, 2019; Rose & McKinley, 2018). The trend impacted East Asian countries' language education policies in such countries as Japan and China and pressured colleges to teach and use English (Kimura et al., 2022). Since English is used as a prevalent language to reach a larger readership of academic research papers (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Montgomery, 2013), the "publish *in English* or perish" mentality is becoming predominant in Ph.D. theses and post-doctoral research (Soler-Carbonell, 2014) in disciplines such as natural sciences and economics (Alberg, 2022). Therefore, undergraduate programs in Japan have begun to promote using English in writing a senior thesis (International Christian University, n.d.; The Institute for International Business Communication, 2019). Notably, an increasing number of non-Japanese instructors have been asked to supervise senior students' thesis writing since the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) launched programs such as the "Top Global University Project" (Noguchi & Adamson, 2023).

There is a vast literature on postgraduate and doctoral EFL learners' thesis and dissertation writing (e.g., Paltridge & Starfield, 2022; Soler-Carbonell, 2014). Odena and Burgess (2017) interviewed doctoral and graduate students, half of whom were ESL learners, to examine facilitating experiences and strategies. Their study revealed three critical themes in thesis writing: advisors' feedback, personal organization, and ESL learning strategies. First, receiving feedback from advisors about content and language was useful for ESL students. Second, personal organization refers to the criticality of time management, including dealing with tight deadlines, handling job and family responsibilities while writing, having regular writing practices, and taking breaks between writing periods. Third, difficulties concerning ESL learning strategies included cultural differences in rhetorical styles, developing a voice as an author, their perception of feeling less capable due to the lower quality of their writing in a foreign language, and slow writing pace. Paltridge and Starfield (2019) identified four issues when EFL PhD students write their thesis and dissertation in English: emotional issues, behavioral issues, rhetorical issues, and social issues. Emotional issues include imposter syndrome, anxiety, and feeling less competent regarding their writing ability. Student anxiety intensifies when the due dates of submission approach because of their perfectionistic desires. Behavioral issues involve time constraints caused by multiple roles as they study, work, and have family commitments. Rhetorical issues include cultural differences in the rhetorics of writing, challenges in expressing ideas in English, developing an academically critical voice, and imagining the audience. Social issues mean isolation when writing.

Meanwhile, research on EFL learners' senior thesis writing has been gaining attention. Much literature in Japan focuses on supervisors' perspectives based on teaching experiences in graduation seminars (*zemi*) (Hawkes & Adamson, 2023; Bartlett, 2023). They refer to issues such as plagiarism (Noguchi & Anderson, 2017), students' unreadiness to write long academic papers (Tomei & Aden, 2014), or irrelevance to students' future lives (Furmanovsky, 2001). Among the research primarily focusing on senior thesis writing in English, past studies tended to discuss course development, EFL writers' language aspects (e.g., Jiang and Yan, 2020), or difficulties (e.g., Lestari, 2020; Nurkamto et al., 2022). Regarding course development, Lambacher (2011) describes the overview of an undergraduate thesis writing course for EFL learners at a Japanese university, primarily focusing on the writing process, and discusses difficulties that learners face, such as finding a topic, creating research questions, avoiding plagiarism, maintaining motivation, and understanding instructors' written comments. Brooks and Kershaw (2018) present the development of the senior thesis science writing course for EFL learners at a Japanese

university based on students' needs. They examined student difficulties, including writing the results and discussion sections. On the other hand, little research has been conducted to examine EFL writers' experiences. Mbato and Cendra (2019) revealed the difficulties undergraduate thesis writers coped with at an Indonesian university and presented the significance of self-regulation, help-seeking, and motivation-regulation in thesis writing. Though these findings help increase knowledge about effective teaching on thesis writing for non-native English learners, more research is necessary to discover undergraduate learners' experience in thesis writing in English.

### **Agency, Strategy Use, and Learning**

In order to investigate thesis writers' experiences, this study focuses on learner agency. Learner agency can be defined as the capacity for learners to control or self-regulate their thoughts and behaviors (Nitta, 2022). In this study, the complexity perspective proposed by Larsen-Freeman (2019) is pertinent. Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) captures learner agency as a complex and dynamic construct that optimizes "conditions for one's own learning" and chooses "to deploy one's semiotic resources to position oneself as one would wish in a multilingual world" (Larsen-Freeman, 2019, p.62). It regards agency as a relational system, and learners interact with the environment while the relationship between them changes constantly, evolving in many directions. Among various features, the following four characteristics may be relevant for this case study: being relational, emergent, temporarily and spatially situated, and able to be achieved. First, learner agency is relational for its dynamic interaction with learners' internal and external factors. Agency develops as they interact with contexts. Second, learner agency is emergent. The emergence of agency can be observed when learners take spontaneous actions that cause the environment to change. They also realize their sense of control and the effects of their actions. Third, learner agency is temporarily and spatially situated. Learner agency is spatiotemporal, owing to the influence of the past, the present, and the future. Fourth, learner agency can be achieved. Learners can achieve agency "by means of an environment" through the interplay between learners' efforts and available cultural and social resources in an environment (Larsen-Freeman, 2019, p.66).

In order to find learner agency, this study focuses on a learner's experience and strategies because a learner's agency seems to be the source of the emergence of strategies. Thus, identifying strategies can help us discover the manifestation of a learner's agency. According to Gao (2010), "strategy use is related to learners' exercise of agency as it reveals their self-consciousness, reflexivity, intentionality, cognition, emotionality" (3). Mishima (2019) describes the manifestation of a learner's agency as a learner realizes the goal of writing, and the agency has led to the emergence of strategies.

Concerning strategies, one of the difficulties is the overlapping layers of this study between language learning and thesis writing. The primary goal of thesis writing is completing a thesis. Language learning is necessary for the process, but it is not the ultimate goal. Therefore, focusing only on language learning strategies in this study is difficult.

## **Methodology**

### **The Study**

## An English Learner's Agency in Writing a Senior Thesis in English

This study aims to present a holistic picture of an EFL thesis writer's experiences by showing dynamic relationships among a learner as an agent, their strategies, and their learning contexts. The following questions will be focused on: (1) What challenges did the participant face in writing his senior thesis in English? (2) What agentic behaviors and strategies are used to cope with the challenges?

### **Institutional Context**

This case study focuses on a senior student enrolled at a liberal arts university in Tokyo, where learning a second or more languages is promoted and becoming at least bilingual is strongly encouraged. In this university, all senior students must write a senior thesis and are encouraged to use English to showcase the achievements of English learning throughout their undergraduate years (Alberg, 2022). Since this university has a trimester system, they will register for a senior thesis writing course over three terms. They can choose the language of their senior thesis unless their thesis advisors or majors designate it. The researcher has an advantage by knowing the learning environment as an instructor of English as a foreign language and having experience of being an EFL learner at the same Japanese university and writing a senior thesis in English as an EFL learner in the past.

### **Participant Background**

This study is part of a larger study that researched experiences of writing a senior thesis in English, and the participant is one of the four senior students who volunteered in response to the call for the research. To maintain anonymity, a pseudonym, Koji, is used in this paper. He was an advanced learner of English based on the TOEFL score (ITP, 577), though he expressed his lack of confidence in writing in English. He received formal education at Japanese junior and senior high schools and did not have much experience in writing paragraphs in English before entering university. After entering university, he went through an intensive English program in his first year and felt his writing skills might have improved. Koji's major is related to the humanities, and he has the freedom to choose the language to write his senior thesis. He had no contact with the researcher except for the research, so the participant could honestly disclose information. This study obtained permission from the university's Ethics Committee and received consent forms from the participant and his advisor, who is in charge of his senior thesis, though the participant's name was not revealed to the advisor.

### **Methods**

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with Koji five times in his senior year at the beginning of the study, after the spring term, after summer break, after the autumn break, and after submitting his senior thesis. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes and was conducted in Japanese. These interviews were transcribed. Also, he kept a weekly journal shared with the researcher, which lasted about nine months. He could write freely about his thoughts and feelings related to his senior thesis writing, and the researcher responded to the journal occasionally only to encourage the participant to keep writing with care to avoid imposing her interpretations consciously. The interview data and the journal were analyzed using the Modified Grounded Theory Approach (Kinoshita, 2003). The researcher first created concepts based on the data. Then, categories emerged based on the list of concepts to reveal the

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process or mechanism behind the data. The researcher identified 47 concepts in the data, and four areas emerged based on the list of concepts (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Concepts Emerging From the Data*

Areas	Challenges	Coping strategies
1. The content	1. Sources 1) Past literature/secondary sources 2) Primary source 3) References 2. Research questions 3. Organization 1) Thesis chapter production 2) Revising/restructuring 3) Audience	1. Past literature/secondary sources 2. Narrowing a theme 3. Creating an outline of their thesis 4. Audience 5. Organizing ideas 6. Support network 7. Digital tools
2. Language	1. Reading 2. Writing	1. Writing strategies 2. Support network 3. Reading/Comprehension 4. Digital tools
3. His personal life	Busy schedule	1. Starting early 2. Time management 3. Digital tools
4. Language choice		

The quoted data in the next sections were translated by the researcher. A qualitative approach was adopted because it would be more plausible to reveal individuals' patterns that are unique and dynamic than quantitative methods since individuals are surrounded by distinctive contexts, including their environment, life history, and learning history (Mercer, 2011). It should be noted that engaging in a conversation during interviews might have helped the participant become aware of beliefs that are not easily accessible to conscious reflection through questions and probing by the interviewer. This phenomenon comes from the researcher's reflexivity, pointed out as an intersubjective reflection of qualitative researchers (Finlay, 2002) and their role to "draw out what the participants wish to express" (Watanabe, 2017, p. 113). Among the four identified areas, this paper discusses three areas relevant to the research questions: the content, the language, and his personal life.

### Findings and Discussion

Koji's agentive efforts were revealed in the face of multiple challenges, and his creative strategies have emerged.

### **Challenges From the Content**

This theme derives from the arduous task of writing a thesis regardless of the language. First, Koji expressed difficulty understanding previous research articles and primary sources. There was an enormous amount of research to review, and finding suitable articles for his thesis was strenuous. Moreover, Koji stated that those articles were primarily written for professional scholars and included many technical terms. The terminology was hard to understand even after being translated into Japanese. He stated, "It is not the matter of which language it is written. Even when I read a book on the same topic in Japanese, I also get stuck." The concepts and themes were complicated and wide-ranging in primary sources as well. These difficulties with sources at the input stage influenced those at the output stage. When he wrote his thesis, he was concerned about the audience. He wondered how much explanation he needed to provide in the thesis. "If I write long explanations, it would be easier, but if I write concisely, the audience will not understand." Generating research questions was also challenging since he needed to continue revising them as he read past research findings. Moreover, thesis chapter production was highly challenging because he needed to keep revising the outline as he read more previous research articles. He made many comments on this issue throughout multiple interview periods. This complicated process of revising and returning to previous stages of writing is consistent with research findings about the complexity of the writing process (Atkinson & Curtis, 1998) and echoes PhD writers' issues (Paltridge & Starfield, 2019).

To cope with these challenges, Koji adopted various types of strategies. He decided to read related articles after reading one since the amount of past research is overwhelming. In order to organize his ideas, he used paper notebooks to write his thoughts down. He also actively asked for advice from advisors in person and through receiving comments digitally and attended various gatherings to receive comments from peers. To identify his audience, he began to identify the imagined audience based on his advisor's advice. Koji received advice from his advisor about using paper cards to organize his ideas and create chapter outlines. He preferred a non-digital tool. The help he received from advisors had a significant impact on his progress. This significance of advisors' support corresponds with PhD writers' experiences (Odena & Burgess, 2017).

Koji exercised his agency when he faced challenges and utilized strategies. To tackle the issue of the audience, in the early stage of his thesis writing, he wrote a rough draft and had questions about how much detail should be included and who would be the audience. His advisor commented on the draft that his paper was abstract and difficult to follow. Then, he realized that he only wrote what he understood from previous research.

I began to wonder who my audience would be ... Then I received feedback from [one of my advisors] ..., which said, "As I read further, I could not follow your argument, though it could be my fault." These comments made me realize that it would only satisfy me if I wrote what I understood.

He continued to pursue the same questions in his mind and attended another meeting held by a graduate student; however, he was not satisfied with his answer. Then, he asked another advisor for advice, which led the advisor to use it as a learning opportunity for other students.

[A few weeks later] I attended a Senior Thesis class led by my advisor ... and asked who my audience would be ... My advisor told the whole class, "This is a good question. You all want to think about it," and said, "You might become a specialist of [this



philosopher] in the future... and I might introduce you to future students, so ...it will be better if you focus on juniors in the university who might be interested in the philosopher." This was a more concrete suggestion.

This struggle with identifying the audience shows that an EFL undergraduate writer also finds it challenging, which is different from the assumption made by Paltridge and Starfield (2019) that they would not have the issue compared with EFL PhD writers. To deal with this issue, this participant was persistent and showed his agentive efforts by pursuing answers to his questions. His agency was influenced by an advisor's and a graduate student's comments and eventually influenced another advisor and his students. He was finally able to find answers. Thus, agency is relational, and social support contributed to the emergence of his agency. It is important to note that interpersonal strategies were necessary to cope with this challenge. Indeed, one strategy in predicting the audience was to imagine the likely readership, while other strategies concerning peers and advisors require contact with them in person or online. These phenomena can mean that learners may need strategies that depend on others, although thesis writing is often regarded as a solitary task. His active search for opportunities to ask questions and receive feedback not only succeeded in gaining responses from peers and advisors but also positively influenced them. The relational dimension of this learner's agency might show that this learner's agency is encouraged by others, including significant others (Nitta, 2020).

Furthermore, he authored his agency to organize his ideas using digital tools as affordances. Affordances can be defined as tangible and intangible objects and their attributes that make particular actions possible (Aronin & Singleton, 2012). Koji's behavior corroborates Larsen-Freeman (2019), who claimed, "Agency is always related to the affordances in the context, and thus inseparable from them" (65). In the final term, he experienced enormous stress writing his first draft, and his agency fluctuated. This situation is similar to EFL PhD writers' increased depressive feelings (Odena & Burgess, 2017; Paltridge & Starfield, 2022). He could not respond to the feedback he received when the draft was returned. Although the commenting function in a digital document is often helpful in giving comments and receiving them immediately, it can lead to exhaustion.

Based on the comments and suggestions from advisors, I revised mechanical errors, including grammar and in-text citations of my first draft. However, I could not revise the content for a while because I was emotionally worn out when writing the first draft during the winter break.

He, however, harnessed his agency and managed to begin to work because the time limit was approaching.

Though I was drained, I created a plan to submit the final draft. I will submit the second draft by [10 days before the deadline] and the final draft by [2 to 3 days before the deadline]. I could not revise the content of the first draft well, but I got back to basics and again wrote my ideas about evidence for my argument in my notebook.

He was able to achieve his agency in a desperate situation through his effort and time management. This example indicates that agency is temporarily and spatially situated (Larsen-Freeman, 2019). Also, agency is achieved amid the dynamics of his life history (Larsen-Freeman, 2019). Even though this learner succeeded in submitting his thesis in English in the end, he faced fluctuation in his agency. Responding to advisors' comments to revise the first draft was so intellectually demanding that this participant was driven to the point of exhaustion and demotivation. He experienced enormous stress when he submitted the first draft (the past); however, the realization of the goal and approaching deadlines in the future led him to take steps to make progress in the present and began to plan for the final submission. With the help of tools such as notebooks he had been creating, he began to regenerate agency.

### Challenges From Language

Besides the content, Koji faced language challenges since he was an English learner. One cause of this difficulty was understanding the sources. For instance, the student pointed out that difficult words, especially adjectives and adverbs, hindered his understanding:

There are, once in a while, words I have never seen before, and they are not technical terms, but especially mostly adverbs and adjectives. ... For example, if I find three to four of those words on one page, they can be important to understand the article. So, I often stop reading and look them up.

Another cause of difficulty is finding appropriate expressions when writing his thoughts. English is not my native language, so it takes a long time to write one sentence in English with a similar nuance I want to express in Japanese. ... In Japanese, what I want to say is clear, but when I want to express it in English, there will be twists and turns until I finally find the exact expressions. That makes me feel uneasy because it is laborious.

Slow writing processes confirm previous findings (Odena & Burgess, 2017).

In order to tackle these issues, he used several strategies. First, to deepen his understanding of reading materials and articles, he searched for nuances of words, background information, or assumptions included in the articles. He sometimes skipped difficult parts or spent a long time until he could guess the meaning of the text. Second, he used one writing strategy of marking useful expressions in English articles and reusing them in his paper. He expressed his uncertainty about finding appropriate English expressions in the first term. However, while he was reading English articles, his agency emerged. He began to mark useful expressions in English articles as he read previous research. In the third term, he articulated this strategy in the interview. Gathering useful expressions and words is also mentioned by ESL doctoral thesis writers (Odena & Burgess, 2017; Paltridge & Starfield, 2019).

While writing in the [third] term, I had an extremely hard time writing. If I were writing in Japanese, it would have been tough. In order to write in English, [it would be much tougher, so] the only thing I found useful was highlighting expressions that looked good and useful in English articles I had already read. I was able to use them as great resources. The third strategy was to ask for help from his support network, such as advisors, to give comments on his English. Advisors' language help being essential is consistent with the needs mentioned in previous studies (e.g., Odena & Burgess, 2017; Jiang & Yan, 2020). Notably, Koji seemed to have acquired academic literacy before becoming a senior. He did not mention the difficulty of different academic expectations in English-speaking writing conventions. This lack might show that this participant had already been socialized into the English academic cultural context, including students' initiating research independently (Mbato & Cendra, 2019; Odena & Burgess, 2017), the necessity of critical thinking (Emilia, 2010; Odena & Burgess, 2017), and the necessity of paraphrasing (Lambacher, 2011). This result shares a similarity with Mbato and Cendra's (2019) study, where they conjecture that the learning culture in their university helped students adjust to the expectations of English thesis writing. Similarly, it might be possible to reason that this participant has already learned them in an intensive English program and EMI courses at the university.

### Challenges From Personal Life



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Like many students, Koji also had jobs and classes besides senior thesis research and writing, and managing time was stressful. He took 15 credit hours in the second term besides senior thesis courses. He expressed his concerns about his unproductivity for not making much progress in his thesis writing while realizing the class assignments were more time-consuming than he had expected. This stagnation was derived not only from assignments but also from work responsibilities. He had multiple jobs, including his part-time job and his own business.

I had goals to accomplish in the [second] term ... but I had to take care of my business in many ways, and also, I had jobs to deal with for the company I work for now. I could not achieve the goals I set earlier at all.

A similar tendency regarding time management is observed in previous research among doctoral thesis writers (Odena & Burgess, 2017; Paltridge & Starfield, 2019).

To manage his time and personal responsibilities, Koji used several strategies. The first strategy was starting early. He consulted advisors and asked several questions about how to proceed with his thesis writing before the first term in his senior year started. Another strategy concerning time management was writing his ideas in his notebooks whenever he felt like doing it. As he realized his time was limited, he decided to add his ideas to his notebook, even for a short time. A regular writing habit is also mentioned as a common strategy by ESL PhD thesis writers (Odena & Burgess, 2017; Paltridge & Starfield, 2019). The use of notes to write down ideas was first mentioned in the interview after the second term. Though he was busy, he continued to write down his ideas in his thesis notebook whenever they came up, and he had time to write them down. In the last interview after submitting his thesis, he elaborated on the notebooks' usefulness.

I had three "Senior thesis notebooks" to write my senior thesis in English. I continued to write down whatever came to mind casually without worrying about grammar, and now I found it useful. ... Up to summer, I was writing ideas mainly in Japanese, but after summer vacation, the amount of English increased. During the [third] term and winter vacation, I added my thoughts mainly in English in the notebooks.

His use of notebooks developed dramatically toward the end. He exercised his agency to stimulate his creativity and establish his way of organizing his thoughts and expressing them. Notebooks served as efficient tools in promoting his agency.

I wrote three kinds of ideas in my notebooks. ... One was to write keywords in a chapter or a paragraph [in primary sources]. I typed them in a Word document later on. ... The second one was my ideas that came out after I casually read books and previous research articles without paying attention to grammar. The third one was something between the first one and the second one. I wrote ideas that were expanded in the dialogue process between primary sources, secondary sources, and myself.

In addition, he used his notebook in planning and scheduling as well. After the ideas were finalized in a notebook, he used a digital document. It is noteworthy that non-digital methods were favorable for brainstorming. He wrote a table in his notebook for his weekly schedule and then created a monthly schedule in a digital spreadsheet.

Juggling multiple responsibilities in his personal life and making time for thesis writing was taxing; however, his use of strategies shows his agentive efforts to address this challenge.

## Conclusion

## An English Learner's Agency in Writing a Senior Thesis in English

This study explored a senior EFL learner's agency in thesis writing and his strategy use. Findings in this study appear to indicate that EFL senior thesis writers face the same challenges as EFL doctoral students. However, they are inexperienced in researching and writing a thesis, which causes more severe challenges than EFL PhD writers. Also, identifying the audience may not be as easy as Paltridge and Starfield (2019) assume, as this participant struggled to identify a target audience. This learner's strategies to cope with the challenges are similar to those PhD writers employ. Many struggles are shared regardless of language background. Nevertheless, we should pay attention to the unique experiences of L2 writers and their agency. The participant exercised his agency and utilized numerous strategies to overcome the issues until he finally completed the thesis.

This case study focuses on one learner; therefore, the findings cannot be easily generalized. Also, coding was conducted by one researcher, and other researchers might categorize some themes or concepts differently. However, this study conceivably contributed to revealing one senior EFL learner's experiences. The wide-ranging view of challenges from thesis writing can provide a holistic scope of a learner's overlapping challenges, and the participant authored his agency to address them, adopting diverse strategies. The present findings might have important implications for pedagogy and supportive environments. From the pedagogical perspective, universities and advisors need to be aware of senior students being novice thesis writers and facing challenges from content. To encourage their learner agency, especially to respond to its relational dimension, EFL senior thesis writers may need opportunities to receive feedback from advisors and peers formally and informally. Advisors or universities may need to provide social support through those opportunities. To deal with their language challenges, instructors and advisors need to realize their language needs and create opportunities to learn about academic English writing expectations and the iterative process of writing and present useful tools to EFL learners, such as a collection of useful phrases. Concerning their personal challenges, universities can provide emotional support by creating opportunities to learn about emotional risks and time management strategies (Paltridge & Starfield, 2019). Further work is necessary to discover other learners' experiences to support various learners' needs. As Odena and Burgess (2017) suggested, it will be necessary to conduct studies that investigate students who are poor at their thesis writing strategies to detect hindrances and provide appropriate support for various senior thesis writers.

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