

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A THESIS WRITING SEMINAR FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS AT HO CHI MINH CITY OPEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay was to investigate whether the seminar was necessary and effective in terms of helping graduate students in TESOL program at Ho Chi Minh City Open University (HCMC OU) conduct their thesis. Fifty-six questionnaire papers were collected out of 100 deliveries. Descriptive statistics of SPSS vs. 19 was employed to analyze the data. In terms of qualitative data, some suggestions from the students at the last part of the questionnaire were analyzed. The study revealed that the seminar was found to be essential and have great effects on graduate students at HCMC OU. In addition, the students requested to hold seminars for them not only during the course-work periods but also during the time they were conducting their thesis.

Keywords: seminar, research, conducting thesis, thesis writing, graduate students.

Introduction

Ho Chi Minh City Open University (HCMC OU) has run the Master program in TESOL since 2006. The students who have been taking courses at HCMC OU have come from different parts of the country. The first MA course (TESOL 1) in Academic year 2006 - 2009 included 48 students. Of which 38 students successfully passed their thesis defenses. The second MA course (TESOL2) in 2007 – 2010 included 50 students; successfully passed thesis defenses were only 22 out of 50. The third MA course in 2008 – 2011 included 45 students (TESOL3), and a humble number of them who have passed their thesis defenses were 29. The fourth MA course 2009 – 2012 consisted of 49 students (TESOL4). Three of them successfully passed their thesis defenses: one at the end of the second year and two at the end of the third year. Other students are expected to defend their thesis

between September 2012 and September 2013. TESOL5 (2010 – 2013) course, 45 students, have been in the process of writing up their thesis, and TESOL6 (2011 – 2014) with 49 students are now taking their coursework on HCMC OU campus. As a matter of fact, the number of students who successfully passed their thesis defenses was not equivalent to those who engaged their studies at HCMC OU. One of the biggest problems that the students have had was relating to conducting their thesis. Although thesis consisted of only 10 credits, one-fifth in total of the whole program, those who failed to conduct it would be terminated. Understanding the issues, a seminar was offered to support students to supplement their knowledge of doing research thesis.

Conducting a thesis is always “a disaster” for students everywhere in the world. There have always been problems during the period of writing up their

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thesis such as disagreements between supervisors and students, limitations of meeting times between both, lack of knowledge in research methodology, limits of instruction, etc. The students sometimes find nowhere to go with their writing. This has been an issue occurring everywhere in any institute where higher education is part of the training. Students at HCMC OU are not exceptions.

In order to help students at HCMC OU partly overcome the obstacles on their ways to success, I organized a seminar to meet their needs. The purpose of the seminar was to disseminate our academic and research experiences at HCMC OU in order to upgrade student's knowledge in conducting their thesis. Howard (2011) defined a seminar as a conference, a lecture or presentation delivered on a particular topic to a like-minded audience. This essay was to explore the effectiveness of the first seminar held at HCMC OU in order to support their studies.

At most universities which offered higher education, seminars or conferences have been frequently provided to help graduate students write up their thesis or to do research. Depaul University (2010), as an example, offered research seminars which introduced its graduate students to the process of developing the skills they needed to read and evaluate the previous research studies. Also, the research seminar helped students get used to reading of other scholars' research articles, learned research design and the selection of research methods, and helped them to get through the development of a research proposal. This indicates that the students from other contexts also need some kind of seminar to upgrade their knowledge to conduct their thesis apart from the coursework in research methodology modules.

Also, Gordon Research Conferences

(GRC) (2012) regularly provided research seminars to graduate students, post-doctorates, and other scientists to come to share their research. In addition, the seminar provided students and other participants a platform to engage in discussions of their research field. In fact, these seminars were organized by young investigators with the support of leading scientists from GRC. In the context of graduate learning programs at HCMC OU, lecturers should be leading the seminars to help students with broad knowledge to do their thesis because MA students were not confident enough to do so.

Another example is at Berkeley, University of California (2012) which regularly provides graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, faculty, and staff series of seminars to be aware of established professional norms and ethical principles for responsible scholarly conduct and learn how to apply them to their own work and conduct their research with integrity. Each session of the seminar would be presented by an expert on the seminar's topic and would include case studies and time for discussion. Though limited literature was reviewed, as a matter of fact, seminars are essential to students and researchers in most of universities and schools around the world. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to investigate the effectiveness of the first seminar held at HCMC Open University with two following research questions in the section below.

In order to help graduate students improve their Academic writing skill, Haas (2011) evaluated the effectiveness of a workshop and its activities that the researcher designed, found that the activities in the workshops seemed to help the participants consider themselves as writers, and help them improve their quality of written products. The students perceived the workshop as beneficial and

successful in helping them to improve their writing in graduate levels. However, this was just a workshop of a module of Academic writing of a graduate program, the evaluation of a seminar for graduate students should be conducted. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the effectiveness of a thesis writing seminar for graduate students at HCMC Open University in helping them to write their thesis.

Research Questions

1. Is the seminar necessary and effective to the graduate students in helping them conduct their thesis?

2. To what extent does the seminar effectively meet the graduate students' needs in the process of writing up their thesis?

Methodology

Pedagogical setting and sampling

Each year, HCMC OU recruited from 45 to 50 students to train for an MA program in TESOL under the policy of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). The students spent most of the weekends to take part in course-works for approximately one year. Each module required students to participate at least 80% of class meetings, took part in classroom discussions, activities, and composed assignments or reflective papers for around 2000 words. After they completed their course-works and other requirements, they could come back to their working place to work and conduct their thesis. They had other two years for doing so; otherwise, they had to ask for another year extension (4th year). This was often a hard time for the students because they not only did experiments, administered the questionnaire, collected data for their thesis, but also kept their duty for their professions. The professional duties might keep students away from their learning duties. Hence, what they had learned in

their courses might not activate smoothly. Therefore, seminars or conferences to support students were essential in this case.

Approximately 100 students came to this seminar from TESOL3, TESOL4, TESOL5, and TESOL6 courses, and some from HCMC University of Social Sciences and Humanities. The students of TESOL 6 only participated in the morning session because they had to attend a course in the afternoon. However, they were asked to check the questionnaire of the morning session. They were told to leave the seminar in the afternoon because this kind of seminar might be conducted again for them when they completed their course-work.

Content delivery

The content of the seminar was to cover three first chapters (1, 2, and 3) in the process of writing up thesis. The first part of Chapter 1 included the introduction which set the scene and provided the readers with background of the research, the general issues which needed to be investigated as well as an outline of the purpose of the research (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Also, the background of the study discussed the developments and changes in the society that made the problem seem important. It related to the professional background which contributed to the knowledge base in the researcher's field that made the problem seem worth studying. The second part of this chapter was the statement of the problem which was very crucial because it helped the readers catch up the main purpose of their study. Wiersma (1995) stated that the problem statement described the context for the study. The problem might be defined as the issue that existed in the literature, theory, or practice that led to a need for the study (Creswell, 1994). The problem statement should be presented within a context, and that context should be provided and briefly

explained, including a discussion of the conceptual or theoretical framework in which it was embedded. Normally, many problem statements included hypotheses which were the researcher's predictions or expectations of what the result would show (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005). Furthermore, the students were also trained in how to write the purposes/ objectives of the study which informed the readers the research method and the variables being studied. Three types of research questions such as difference, associational or causal relationship, and descriptive questions were also presented. The final part of Chapter 1 was to help students know how to write the significance of their study. In order to meet the significance of the study, they needed to provide responses to the questions such as why they need to conduct their research studies, or what value their research would contribute to the professional knowledge (Glatthorn & Joyner).

The second session of the seminar presentation relating to Chapter 2, review of related literature included twofold: review of theoretical literature and review of empirical studies. Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) stated that a theory is a series of concepts organized into assumptions and generalizations that lead to hypotheses about a phenomenon. Broad reading was emphasized in the process of doing research. The students were announced that the theories they reviewed should relate to their research problem and provide a basis for the empirical review that followed. Then based on the selected theories, they should develop a conceptual framework if possible for their thesis. In addition, review of empirical research studies was presented to the students. An empirical review was a section in a research study that reviewed the major research studies about the selected topic in order to give readers a broad picture of what has been done by

previous studies. It linked the students' research with the prior research studies. The students were provided a model for summarizing previous research studies as follows: (1) Author (Year of publication), (2) Purpose of the study, (3) Setting and participants, (4) Methods, (5) Data collection, (6) Findings, and (7) Research gap. One of the biggest "disasters" for students who started doing research was trying to find research gap in literature. Hence, the students were suggested some ways to seek for research gaps. First, the most difficult way the students had to find research gap was what hadn't been done in literature. Second, the research gaps could be found by mixed previous empirical results. Third, different research settings were also considered as a research gap. Finally, that different research designs yield to different results was also regarded as a research gap for their studies.

The third session of the seminar was to present the methodology of conducting research in Chapter 3. Pedagogical setting, sampling methods, and design of studies were presented and explained apparently. Each part was presented with theories, examples, discussion, and problem solving. In addition, instruments or tools were presented to help students was out to collect and analyze data. Yet, the final part of the presentation was to make students known the importance of conducting pilot studies. According to Rudestam and Newton (2007), the researcher should pilot test any instruments he uses, whether the researcher makes them up himself or adapts them from standard research tools because every person can misread or misunderstand something different. Brause (2000) also states if the researcher plans to develop an instrument or an interview protocol, he needs to determine its usefulness by pilot testing with a smaller number of participants who share the same

characteristics with the participants of the study. After that he will be able to revise and refine parts to create an ideal instrument for his study. The students were advised to do the same process as they would have done with their primary studies; then they should modify any instruments to meet the requirement for their studies.

Data collection

At the end of seminar, a 30-item questionnaire was administered to all participants who attended to seminar (See appendix A). 100 questionnaire papers were sent to the attendants from the beginning of the seminar. They were sent at the start of the seminar in order that the attendants were evaluated the effects of the seminar part by part when they followed the presentation. The purpose of it was to explore the students' ideas in full awareness. However, at the end of the seminar when the questionnaires were collected, only 56 questionnaire papers were returned due to some following reasons. Some attendants did not fully participate. They had to leave the session sometimes during the seminar for their classes. Other attendants came from other universities and they did not attend the seminar fully either, etc.

Of the 30-item questionnaire, items 1 – 9 investigated the students' evaluations of the necessity of organizing the seminar and the effects of its activities. Items 10 – 14 were employed to explore the participants' attitudes on the effects of the presentation on step-by-step helping students to conduct their introduction to their thesis. Items 15 – 20 obtained participants' expressions on the effects of

related review of literature presentation (Chapter 2) of the seminar. Items 21- 30 examined the effects of research method design presentation of the seminar (Chapter 3). In addition, the questionnaire included one part for "further suggestions" in which the students could tell anything they wanted to for the seminar. This item was qualitatively analyzed.

Findings

Fifty-six questionnaires were collected and analyzed with the support of SPSS vs. 19 for mean scores. The reliability of the questionnaire items reaches at .906 Cronbach's Alpha. With regards to the quantitative analysis, the primary data sources to respond to this question were from the questionnaire obtained right after the presentation in the seminar. With regards to the qualitative analysis, data obtained from one last item "further suggestions" were analyzed and interpreted based on open-suggested opinions from the graduate students instead of close ended questions.

The criteria for the Likert-type scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) and was set as following: low evaluation: 1 – 2.66; medium evaluation: 2.67 – 4.33; and high evaluation: 4.34 – 6.

Research Question 1: "Is the seminar necessary and effective to the graduate students in helping them conduct their thesis?"

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics of the necessity of organizing seminar and the effects of its activities in the seminar.

Table 1: Necessity of organizing seminar and effects of its activities

Descriptive Statistics				
No.	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Seminar and its activities				
1	Organizing such seminar to compensate knowledge to write up your thesis is necessary.	56	5.84	0.417
2	You come to this seminar because it is really essential to upgrade your knowledge.	56	5.79	0.456
3	This seminar helps you understand more how to conduct a research study.	56	5.46	0.713
4	You feel more confident to conduct your thesis for your graduate study program.	56	4.73	0.842
5	The discussion sessions with guiding questions help you review what you have learned previously in order to understand more about doing research.	56	4.68	0.917
6	The examples attached in the handouts help you understand more the presentations.	56	5.20	0.796
7	The discussion sessions about “Problem-solvings” help you know thoroughly the content of the presentation.	55	4.71	0.956
8	Most of the problems presented in the “Problem-solvings” are practical and appropriate to the aspects that you are searching for your studies.	54	4.72	1.071
9	The “problem-solvings” help you find ways for the next steps that you have to do in your research.	54	4.80	1.088

As can be seen from the data in Table 1, most of the graduate students at HCMC OU highly evaluated the necessity and effects of the seminar. The mean scores from Items 1 – 9 ranged from 4.68 to 5.84. Most of them strongly agreed that (1) organizing such seminar to compensate knowledge to help them write up their thesis is necessary ($M = 5.84$; $SD = .41$). This might come from the fact that the course of research methodology was first introduced to students at the beginning of the course, so they might forget much of their knowledge of this module after one-year-long learning course-work. Then when the students started writing up their thesis, they felt hard to do. This was certified by the second item when the students asserted that (2) they came to the seminar because it was really essential to upgrade their knowledge in research methodology ($M = 5.79$; $SD = .45$).

In order to meet the students' expectancy in this field, (3) the presentation and the content delivered in the seminar helped them understand more how to conduct a research study ($M = 5.46$; $SD = .71$). (4) As a result, they felt more confident to conduct their thesis for their graduate study program after attending the seminar ($M = 4.73$; $SD = .84$). This was interpreted the effects of the seminar to help students somehow remove their “anxiety” for conducting thesis or at least to help students feel confident in what they would be doing. Actually, the seminar was not something totally new to the students, but it was to help students review what they had learned during the course-work periods. Most of the students confirmed that (5) the discussion sessions with guiding questions in the seminar helped them review what they had learned previously in order to understand more

about doing research ($M = 4.68$; $SD = .91$).

With regards to the activities in the seminar to improve the effects of it, the students in high agreement confirmed that (6) the examples attached in the handouts helped them understand more the [content of] presentations ($M = 5.20$; $SD = .79$), and (7) the discussion sessions about “Problem-solvings” helped them know thoroughly the content of the presentation ($M = 4.71$; $SD = .95$). Particularly, as highly evaluated, the students agreed that (8) most of the problems presented in the “Problem-solvings” were practical and appropriate to the aspects that they were searching for their studies ($M = 4.72$; $SD = 1.07$). Especially, (9) the “problem-solvings” helped students find ways to

the next steps that they had to do in their research ($M = 4.80$; $SD = 1.08$). This once more confirmed the necessity and the effects of the seminar to help students at HCMC OU to enhance their knowledge in their higher education, especially in conducting their thesis.

Research Question 2: “To what extent does the seminar effectively meet the graduate students’ needs and interests?”

To respond to this research question, Items 10 – 30 which relate to the knowledge of research methodology in writing up thesis from Chapters 1 to 3 were analyzed. Mean scores of descriptive statistics were calculated. Table 2 presents the questionnaire items relating to chapter 1 in doing thesis.

Table 2: Steps to write up Chapter 1

Chapter 1		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
10	The seminar helps you know how to write up an abstract of your study	56	5.34	0.581
11	Based on what have been presented in this seminar, you know how to write up an introduction, a background of the study for your thesis research.	55	5.09	0.646
12	After attending the seminar, you know how to write the “Statement of the Problem” in your thesis.	55	4.89	0.875
13	After attending the seminar, you know how to write the “Research Questions” for your thesis.	55	4.98	0.871
14	You found that the information delivered in the “Writing-up the Introduction” provides you enough knowledge to write up your introduction (Chapter 1) in your thesis.	55	4.71	0.762

As shown in Table 2, most of students strongly agreed that the seminar provided students with supplementary knowledge to write up their Chapter 1 in conducting their thesis. (10) First, they agreed that The seminar helped them know how to write an abstract of their study ($M = 5.34$; $SD = .58$); actually, this provided students brief and condense knowledge of how each “move” of each sentence in the abstract included. In addition, most students agreed that based on what was presented in the seminar, (11) they knew how to write up an introduction, a

background of the study ($M = 5.09$; $SD = .64$), (12) how to write the statement of the problem ($M = 4.89$; $SD = .87$), especially (13) how to write research questions ($M = 4.98$; $SD = .87$) for their thesis studies. In short, the students confirmed that (14) the information delivered in the “writing-up the introduction” provided them with enough supplementary knowledge to write up their introduction (Chapter 1) in their thesis studies ($M = 4.71$; $SD = .76$). Table 3 presents the data analysis of steps to write up Chapter 2 for students’ thesis.

Table 3: Steps to write up Chapter 2

Chapter 2	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
15 Literature Review is a really hard part to be conducted.	49	5.37	1.055
16 After listening to the presentation about “Literature review”, you know how to write the “Review of Theoretical Literature” for your thesis.	46	4.54	0.78
17 After listening to the presentation about “Literature review”, you know how to write the “Review of Empirical Literature” for your thesis.	46	4.57	0.779
18 After listening to the presentation about “Literature review”, you know how to summarize previous empirical research for your chapter 2.	46	4.54	0.78
19 After attending the seminar, you know how to search for and write up the “Research gap” for your thesis.	46	4.76	0.848
20 You found that in the “Literature Review”, the “Research gap” is very important for your thesis.	45	5.38	0.65

As presented in Table 3, most students strongly agreed that (15) review of related literature was a really hard part to be conducted (M = 5.37; SD = 1.05). This was a common problem for many graduate students around the world because it required students to do broad readings including critical abilities in their readings. In addition, this part required great efforts from students to work out the heart problem for their thesis studies. Thanks to the information presented in the seminar, the students stated that after listening to the presentation about “literature review”, (16) they knew how to write the “Review of Theoretical Literature” (M = 4.54; SD = .78), (17) how to write the “Review of Empirical Literature” (M = 4.57; SD = .77) for their thesis studies. In addition, students were also helped to know how to summarize previous empirical research (M = 4.54; SD = .78), how to search for and write the research gap (M = 4.76; SD = .84) for their thesis. The students also found that “research gap” was very important for their studies (M = 5.38; SD = .65). This indicates that the seminar provide students with clear guidelines for each part of Chapter 2 in the thesis that the students have to do. In other words, the thesis guidelines of the School of Graduates of HCMC OU were clarified and explained in detail to students on the campus.

Table 4: Steps to write up Chapter 3

Chapter 3	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
21 After listening to the presentation of chapter 3, you know how to write up the “Pedagogical context” of the topic that you are pursuing.	46	5.2	0.833
22 You know more how to select samples for your research study.	45	5.09	0.763
23 You found that selecting samples is very essential because it determines the effects of the findings of your research.	46	5.35	0.674
24 After attending the seminar, you know the method to conduct your “Research design.”	46	4.96	0.842
25 You understand how to write and conduct the “Procedure of the study” for your thesis.	46	5	0.816
26 The presentation of instruments or tools to collect data is practical and appropriate to your research study.	46	5.09	0.784

Chapter 3		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
27	Thanks to the presentation in the seminar, you are aware of the importance of the method of “Triangulation.”	45	5.09	0.9
28	The content of the seminar helps you understand the procedure of data collection for your research.	44	4.84	0.861
29	You understand which kind of data will be analyzed qualitatively or quantitatively.	45	5.07	0.863
30	After attending the seminar, you are aware of the importance of conducting “Pilot study” to fix or modify the instruments or tools employing to collect data for your research.	45	4.87	0.894
Valid N (listwise).		39		

With regards to research methodology as revealed in Table 4, the students strongly agreed that the presentation in the seminar provided them explicit information to upgrade their knowledge to write up their Chapter 3 for their thesis. Specifically, (21) the students agreed that after listening to the presentation of Chapter 3, they knew how to write up the “Pedagogical context” or research site of the topic that were pursuing ($M = 5.20$; $SD = .83$), (22) how to select samples for their research study ($M = 5.09$; $SD = .76$); also, (23) they realized that selecting samples was very essential ($M = 5.35$; $SD = .67$). This is an important factor in conducting research studies because it determines the effects of the findings of research. In addition, students also understood and knew (24) how to design their research based on their purposes of studies ($M = 4.96$; $SD = .84$), (25) how to write and conduct the procedure of the study for their thesis ($M = 5.00$; $SD = .81$). Particularly, most of the students confirmed that (26) the presentation of instruments or tools to collect data was practical and appropriate to their thesis ($M = 5.09$; $SD = .78$); (27) they were aware of the importance of the method of “triangulation” in order to validate their responses to their research questions ($M = 5.09$; $SD = .90$). (28) The students agreed that they understood the procedure of data collection ($M = 4.84$; $SD = .86$) as well as (29) which kind of

data would be analyzed qualitatively or quantitatively ($M = 5.07$; $SD = .86$). (30) Finally, the students confirmed that after attending the seminar, they were aware of the importance of conducting pilot study to fix or modify the instruments or tools employed to collect data for their research ($M = 4.87$; $SD = .89$). This indicates that the students at HCMC OU were well informed step-by-step to conduct their research methods to write up their thesis. The thesis guidelines posted on the website of School of Graduates of HCMC OU at <http://www.ou.edu.vn/sdh/Pages/tieng-anh.aspx> were well - clarified to graduate students.

In terms of qualitative analysis (See appendix B), some students gave some of their opinions in the “further suggestions” part at the end of the questionnaire. One of them suggested that this kind of seminar should be one of the regular activities for their first year leaning (course-work) in order that the students could master its theory to apply well to their thesis later on. Likewise, one student suggested holding more similar seminars at HCMC OU, and each seminar should be presented by a different lecturer. Another student stated that how to find out research gap was a hard job for students, so it should be explained much more, and how to choose a topic for researching appropriate to teaching profession but not out-of-date was also a hard job for them. One participant stated that after the seminar, he/she knew how to

write up his/her thesis in terms of theory; however, the capacity to keep the right track depended on many other factors. He/she needed supervision during the period of writing up his/her thesis. Also, he/she confirmed that the explanation skills of the presenter were simple and understandable. Finally, one participant asserted that the presenter of this seminar was enthusiastic and spreading “fire” to the students while another expressed thanks for a great presentation.

Conclusion

With clear explanations and effective activities, the seminar was found to be necessary and have great effects on graduate students at HCMC OU. The students needed regular seminars during their course-work learning and the time they conduct their thesis. They also confirmed that the content of the seminar

provided them somehow supplementary knowledge to conduct their thesis. Particularly, each part of the thesis from Chapters 1 – 3 was effectively guided to the students in order that they could take this chance to consolidate their existing knowledge to write up their thesis. However, thesis seminar was limited to three first chapters of graduate thesis of which the students were only guided to write up their proposals for their studies. In other words, methods of analyzing data, interpretations of data analyses, and discussion of research findings should be conducted in another seminar to help students with complete guidelines for their knowledge of doing thesis. The next seminar should be implemented at the time after the students completed their data collection.

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